

**Renewing Universality:  
COVID-19 and Social Distancing Against the Biopolitical Critique<sup>1</sup>**

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Social distancing is society building. This may seem counterintuitive, but in the context of the COVID-19 breakout of 2020 we should see it as evidence for the emergence of a common humanity. Choosing to limit our personal freedoms in the interest of the public good produces a renewed universality. Universality is the grounds for emancipatory, ethical thinking. It is true that some of the most oppressive forms of violence in history have emerged in the name of universality. But I am inclined to agree with Susan Buck-Morss, who notes that this does not mean we have to throw out the clean baby of universality with the dirty bathwater of oppression. We should, instead, be mindful enough not to confuse bad particulars—such as Eurocentrism, phallocentrism, heterosexism, or even liberalism—with universals, such as truth and freedom. Quite the contrary, history shows us that whenever we encounter a bad particular, we need to use this as the ground upon which to reconstitute every new project for universal emancipation. We need to see that the project of universal freedom is simply reconstituted on new grounds in every historical scenario where the threat of *betraying* universality is brought to light.<sup>2</sup> This, I claim, is how we have to approach the discipline required for social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic.

Against the view that social distancing is merely a disciplinary, biopolitical mechanism of control, our current moment proves that it is a form of action that brings to light the very presence of *universal* freedom. To explore this theme, I suggest that the idea of limiting personal freedoms to bring about universal emancipation is one that is even present, although often

misunderstood, at the core of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which in its Lacanian variety demonstrates that we always already freely impose our own limits. This is the starting point for grasping the logic of freedom beyond the unceasing negations of imposed limitations, a perspective supported by the bulk of critical theory.

### **Heeding the Limits: Culture as a Condition of Freedom**

Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* is often read as a text about unnecessarily privileging the needs of the dominant culture and the society over those of the individual, a universality that forces a repression of our personal freedoms. The book describes how cooperation requires individuals to give up, or repress, their own immediate pleasures and desires. For theorists ranging from Herbert Marcuse to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, liberation depends upon casting off the demands of the overarching culture to liberate our desires.

This tie between an individual and a culture is one way to understand what psychoanalysis has to say about culture and society, more generally. Culture consists of (historically defined) rules and regulations to which we submit to forge social bonds that aid in our mutual survival. Culture provides the universal background against which we enact our personal freedoms. It is universal, not as a collection of particular individual differences but as the limit against which all individual differences relate. The need to rethink the universality underlying Freud's text becomes much clearer today against the background of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, creating the conditions for a renewed recognition of universality.

We have all, by now, watched online videos of American teenagers going to Ft. Lauderdale for Spring Break, boasting about their rejection of the new demands for social distancing and their raging desire to just go out and party. Many state openly that they have been

waiting all year for Spring Break and nothing, not even the coronavirus, is going to stop them from having fun. Some have posted videos on social media expressing their disappointment when, arriving in Ft. Lauderdale, all of the shops and bars were closed, barring them from all the fun they were promised.<sup>3</sup>

It appears that these kids are disobeying the general social obligation towards physical distancing during the crisis; but on second thought, are they not just obeying the dominant neoliberal and consumer culture commandment to enjoy? This form of apparent rebellion is a symptom of the neoliberal and consumer culture ethic of the past half century. They prove that there is nothing inherently emancipatory about a politics of transgression. In fact, they demonstrate above all that postmodern capitalism interpellates us, not as obedient subjects of ideology but as the basic form of perversion.

### **The Perverse Form of Ideology**

This is what Slavoj Žižek means when he says that “perversion is not subversion.”<sup>4</sup> In what he refers to as a “demise of symbolic efficiency,” or what Fredric Jameson refers to as the “breakdown of the signifying chain,” constitutive of postmodernity, perversion comes to fill the gap of the apparently absent gaze of the Symbolic order, or the big Other.<sup>5</sup> Whenever it appears that the agency of the Other is absent, for the subject to continue enjoying, it needs to force back into existence some agency of the Other that can be transgressed: a limit that the subject tries to leap over as the basic source of its enjoyment. This is how the subject preserves its desire from dissipation in the face of the absent agent of prohibition.

The Spring Break transgressors are, in this sense, *obeying* a perverse logic and the interpellative call of the postmodern-consumer culture, or what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the superego injunction to “enjoy!”<sup>6</sup> Whereas modern culture was organized around the patriarchal

*prohibition* to enjoy, postmodern-consumer culture is driven by a commandment/*obligation* to go out and enjoy. We are often, in consumer culture, made to feel guilty when we are not enjoying. The Spring Break transgressors are not, then, transgressing anything at all. They are, on the contrary, obeying the ideology of the postmodern and neoliberal order to be individuals mocking society by going out and having fun.

The same explanation helps us grasp the popularity of someone like Donald Trump. He kicks at the social and comes out looking like a transgressive punk hero. Likewise, the anti-lockdown protestors demanding to go back to work exemplify a rising form of right-wing extremism, a kind of reactionary accelerationist and social Darwinist tendency that advocates letting those impacted by COVID-19 die off to save those who remain. It is hard not to see in this attitude, the materialization of the survivalist rhetoric (i.e. “survival of the fittest”) so commonly applied to fundamentalist market ethics.

While they appear to be the poster children for libertarian freedom, the Spring Breakers exemplify the contradictions engrained into the demands of neoliberalism and consumer society, and particularly the cultural privileging of the individual over society. For their individual freedom to persist, they require the propping up of an Other whom they can transgress.

Transgression always requires some figure of authority needing to be negated. The kids on Spring Break, for instance, want to rebel against the parents who say: “no!” But to be a neoliberal individual today is to *transgress* the social, and in order to do so, the social needs to be built up as a form of authority. This is what propels its desire. A postmodern and neoliberal culture that enjoins us towards the pursuit of individual desires posits the social as a figure of domination needing to be transgressed. The demand to obey the commandment for social distancing is perceived, in this respect, as something akin to a parent assigning curfew.

This is similar to neoliberal rhetoric defending minimum state interference, chiding the big state apparatuses of a “planned” socialist economy in favour of the liberty of the individual. However, viewed from the opposite perspective, we can assert that there *is* no individuality without the existence of society. There is no pure individual, that is, without the support mechanisms or even the context of the broader society. The individual is only guaranteed its existence insofar as we create the conditions for the existence of society. The defence of social interests, however, helps *preserve* the individual. We cannot guarantee personal freedom without first privileging the public good. The best assurance for our mutual survival is to prioritize the social (the collective interests of the people) over the individual. To do this, rather than attempt to transgress a limit—what some might regard as an external prohibition—we need to start thinking about ways to universally impose our own *self*-limitations.

The desire produced in the fantasy of transgression is only possible insofar as there exists an exogenous Other who appears as an agent of prohibition. Neoliberalism has given them the exact form of this authoritative Other, and it is oddly, still, precisely the general form of the big Other as such: society as the form of the Symbolic. As I argue below, a Left political ethics bent on destroying limits, smashing forms and structures, exploding the tyranny of the despotic signifier, has much in common with the neoliberal ideology. It mirrors the neoliberal ethic to smash structures that are, nevertheless, required to operate in the background as its needed condition of possibility.

### **There is Nothing Inherently Oppressive About Biopolitics**

I am now in a position to explain what I find so problematic about a libertarian response from Giorgio Agamben to the COVID-19 crisis. As he put it, “what is once again manifest [during the novel coronavirus crisis] is the tendency to use a state of exception as a normal paradigm for

government.”<sup>7</sup> Drawing, as he does, on the Foucauldian conception of biopolitics, Agamben has argued that the ethics of social distancing are nothing more than state attempts at regulating bodies as bare life. According to him, in his initial response to the crisis, the reaction has been highly disproportionate for “something not too different from the normal flus that affect us every year.”<sup>8</sup> Comparing the crisis to the state of exception during a terrorist attack, or a time of war, he writes that the “invention” of the pandemic offers “the ideal pretext for scaling up [exceptional measures] beyond any limitation.”<sup>9</sup> He, thus, argued that we should be wary of commandments to regulate our bodies as this may result in ever more control from the capitalist state.

Following a wave of critical responses, Agamben reasserted his commitment to the biopolitical paradigm. Writing a few weeks after his initial response, he asserts somewhat differently, although still within the trajectory of his theory of the biopolitical, that the state seems to care for nothing other than “bare life.” What, he asks, “is a society that has no value other than survival?” He laments “closing universities and schools and doing lessons only online, putting a stop once and for all to meeting together and speaking for political or cultural reasons and exchanging only digital messages with each other, wherever possible substituting machines for every contact—every contagion—between human beings.”<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, no one is happy about social distancing. Many of us are absolutely bothered by the transfer of all of our social interactions onto digital platforms.<sup>11</sup> But what Agamben fails to acknowledge is the fact that the crisis has brought to a grinding halt all market activities that are part of the normal run of the capitalist economy. Agamben neglects the fact that the pandemic has led to an incredible slowdown of business as usual. In fact, the response from many reactionary voices on the Right, concerned about the impacts of social distancing, is that this will

overall be bad for the economy. In this way, it might not be completely wrong to claim that the crisis is proving, quite dramatically, that our emancipation depends upon a “communism” of some sort.

What I find difficult about a political ethics centred on biopolitics is that it only ever seems to treat power as something externally imposed. As Peter Dews once commented about Foucault, his view of power and emancipation is largely backwards-looking.<sup>12</sup> That is, it imagines emancipation based on a model not unlike the libertarian attitude of the subject completely free from state mechanism. Like the anti-vaxxer conspiracy theorist, Agamben comes off sounding, here, much like those who cry out for their personal freedoms, completely neglecting the broader social impact of the virus, especially upon high health risk segments of the population. It is tempting to view the crisis through the lens of biopower; our bodies, after all, are being regulated. This does not mean that the regulation of bodies is always and necessarily detrimental to our freedom. Perhaps we have to begin to realize that not everything biopolitical is inherently oppressive.

### **A Democratic Biopolitics**

Panagiotis Sotiris offers an alternative perspective on the biopolitical, one that he notes is present in the Foucauldian conception: a *democratic* biopolitics. In the context of the pandemic, for instance, we can conceive a democratic biopolitics as one that moves from discipline to responsibility. Rather than “suspending” sociality, he writes, the measures taken during the crisis imply the transformation of the social. Under the conditions we now face, “instead of a permanent individualized fear [of the cornerstone of biopower as the regulation of “bare life,” in Agamben’s meaning of the term], which can break down any sense of social cohesion, we move

towards the idea of collective effort, coordination and solidarity within a common struggle, elements that in such health emergencies can be equally important to medical interventions.”<sup>13</sup>

In the context of the current outbreak, we start to understand just how necessary it is for individuals to universally self-regulate their bodies as a sign of commonality with others. This is not merely a matter of self-imposition since it comes from a general discursive formula produced collectively by society and adopted by the state. That is, as Marx wrote in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, “freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it”; rather than eliminate the state mechanism, we need to subordinate it to the needs of the people.<sup>14</sup> We may recognize, in this moment, precisely how state mechanisms can enable a democratic socialist (or otherwise emancipatory) program that we have been told for decades is impossible.

As Žižek has recently put it, during the crisis, the state must “assume a much more active role, organizing the production of urgently needed things like masks, test kits and respirators, sequestering hotels and other resorts, guaranteeing the minimum of survival of all new unemployed, and so on, doing all of this by abandoning market mechanisms.”<sup>15</sup> This, he says, against Agamben, is what those who “deplore our obsession with survival miss...it is through our effort to save humanity from self-destruction that we are creating a new humanity. It is only through this mortal threat that we can envision a unified humanity.”<sup>16</sup> Through our collective, mutually constituted assurance towards survival we create a new social bond, the foundations of which is the stuff of cultural, or even ideological, transformation needed to create an emancipated society. The limits we are creating are not a sign of unfreedom; rather, we are seeing the very production of the social—a new universality—that can only be the building blocks of an emancipated humanity.



## Against Anarcho-Vitalism

The kind of push for a democratic biopolitics that Sotiris advocates, a vision of emancipation reliant on the limit form of the state, applies as well to a Lacanian political ethics. This is a perspective developed recently by Anna Kornbluh in her defence of political formalism. In her book, *The Order of Forms*, Kornbluh defends a political ethics of *building*. Theory, she concludes, must build up structures rather than place so much focus on tearing them down or destroying what exists. She, thus, defends what she calls “constituent power” against what Giorgio Agamben refers to as “destituent potential.”<sup>17</sup> Scholars like Agamben, she writes, conflate constituting (building) with forms of violence. Whatever is built up, whatever gives form and structure, must have done implicitly through a violent act of imposition. In opposition to constituent power, Agamben and others champion a kind of “anarcho-vitalist” politics bent on “unleashing the flows,” ringing in uninhibited freedom and chaos, and tearing down structures—because structures, after all, are “tyrannical.”<sup>18</sup> That may be the case for certain structures, such as liberalism, patriarchy, Eurocentrism, and so forth; but new structures are also needed for dismantling the tyrannical ones.

In this respect, anarcho-vitalism inherits lines from both the anti-humanist politics of French post-structuralism, as well as the aesthetic theory of the Frankfurt School; it is not hard to feel Adorno’s pressing glance somewhere in the background, interpellating us all in the mode of nonconformity. In fact, his negative dialectical push against the identification of subject and object must be read, in this vein, as a precursor to the splicing molecularization of object-oriented philosophy that aspires (or *conspires*) against anything resembling the Hegelian *Aufhebung*.<sup>19</sup> It prefers its own autopoietic self-autonomy to anything resembling the production of the new. In place of the new, it champions the splicing into the multiple, a

diffraction into the many instead of the production of the one. In this sense, these approaches are all, in different ways, resonant with a Deleuzo-Guattarian viewpoint that sees only tyranny in the formalization produced by the Lacanian signifier. But, as Kornbluh reminds us, formalization (or structuration) is precisely the project of psychoanalysis—that is, not as a practice of re-Oedipalization, as Deleuze scholars like Eugene Holland might suggest.<sup>20</sup> The ethics of psychoanalysis, we could say, is bent on the production of an instituting structure conceived as the very foundation for the *passé* of the subject.

As Kornbluh describes, psychoanalysis “uniquely prizes the instituting capacity of the material signifier.”<sup>21</sup> It takes formalization as its goal. We see this quite clearly through the prism of the analyst’s discourse, where the product of the analytical relationship is the production of a new master-signifier. It is in this sense that psychoanalysis proves what is true of any critical discourse, however unconsciously on the part of those who rail against it: that critique is always already the production of form—that is, of formalization of a (new) system or structure. As Reza Negarestani puts it, “one cannot assess norms without producing them.”<sup>22</sup> Viewed from this angle, we see the inherent performative contradiction of the anarcho-vitalist (and libertarian-neoliberal) approach, of the destituent politics aspired to by Agamben and others. Knowing this, we are able to read the latter’s recent biopolitical understanding and assessment of the responses to the COVID-19 outbreak and pandemic as a mere expression of the reigning neoliberal and postmodern capitalist ideologies of transgression and personal freedom that posits the public good as the enemy, but which is nevertheless universalizing in its positing of such a blatantly false dichotomy.

## Conclusion

As Astra Taylor, Naomi Klein, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor have recently argued, what we are seeing, in the midst of the crisis, is that everything we had been previously told about the impossibility of the state mechanism to meet the social needs of the people can be thrown completely out the window.<sup>23</sup> Now we know that the state can and should be used to provide for the equitable needs of the people, rather than those of capital, and not only in times of crisis. We should reverse the “shock doctrine” described by Klein and use this moment to push even further toward the building of socialism. Instead of criticizing the biopower of social distancing, what we should be doing is continuing our struggle towards emancipation from capitalism. In other words, using the state mechanism that is being applied to the crisis as a model for a socialism for the twenty-first century.

As Kornbluh writes, “we are everywhere, right and left, exhorted to oppose and transcend the state. But the materialism of the signifier, the formalism of the political, offer a counter to this orthodoxy, a path to embracing the state as limit, embracing the space of the political as the only and proper sphere of life (and death), a path to embracing limits as the condition of freedom.”<sup>24</sup> It is in this way, then, that we can see how a text like Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*—far from being one about the restrictions imposed by a dominant culture—might, in fact, be one of the most emancipatory texts we can read today. It testifies to the fact that the limits of culture, however contingent and limiting of *personal* freedoms, provide the necessary conditions for universal social freedom, which after all is the condition required for the *realization* of a liveable, personal freedom that is worth living.

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- <sup>1</sup> Here, I am adapting and expanding upon ideas first presented in my article, “Social Distancing and Its Discontents,” *The Philosophical Salon*, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/social-distancing-and-its-discontents/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 75.
- <sup>3</sup> See, for instance, “Coronavirus outbreak: Miami spring breakers vow to keep partying amid pandemic,” viewed March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkYRI48bXRw>.
- <sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999). Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* I 146 (1984): 53–92.
- <sup>5</sup> For more on my approach to the conception of the “demise of symbolic efficiency,” see Matthew Flisfeder, “Postmodern Marxism Today: Jameson, Žižek, and the Demise of Symbolic Efficiency,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 13.1 (2019): 22–56.
- <sup>6</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (New York: Verso, 2002).
- <sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “The Invention of an Epidemic,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “Clarifications,” *An und für sich*, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/>.
- <sup>11</sup> See Matthew Flisfeder, “Who’s Zooming who? How the coronavirus crisis is finally putting the ‘social’ into social media,” *The Conversation Canada*, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/whos-zoomin-who-how-the-coronavirus-crisis-is-finally-putting-the-social-into-social-media-136109>.
- <sup>12</sup> Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (New York: Verso, 1987).
- <sup>13</sup> Panagiotis Sotiris, “Against Agamben: Is a Democratic Biopolitics Possible?” *Viewpoint Magazine*, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2020/03/20/against-agamben-democratic-biopolitics/>.
- <sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* (n.d.), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch04.htm>.
- <sup>15</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *PANDEMIC!: COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020).
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 2.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. Kornbluh applies the term “anarcho-vitalism” to a reading of Agamben’s *The Uses of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).
- <sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, (Ann Arbor, MI: 2011); Graham Harman, *Art + Objects*, (Medford, MA: Polity, 2020).
- <sup>20</sup> Eugene Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus: Introduction to Schizoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- <sup>21</sup> Kornbluh, 140.
- <sup>22</sup> Reza Negarestani, “The Labor of the Inhuman, Part I: Human,” *e-flux* 52 (2014), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/52/59920/the-labor-of-the-inhuman-part-i-human/>.
- <sup>23</sup> Astra Taylor, “Cancelling student debt was always the right thing to do. Now it’s imperative,” *The Guardian*, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/07/cancel-student-debt-coronavirus>; Naomi Klein, “Coronavirus Capitalism – And How to Defeat It,” *The Intercept*, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/16/coronavirus-capitalism/>; Amber Colón Núñez, “The Coronavirus Crisis is Capitalism in Action. Here’s How the Left Can Respond,” *In These Times*, March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/22416/coronavirus-crisis-disaster-capitalism-naomi-klein-covid-19>.
- <sup>24</sup> Kornbluh, 154.