

COVID-19 and the “Subject Supposed to Know”

Zahi Zalloua

In Mathieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine*, Hubert recounts, more than once, a story about a man who falls from the roof of a skyscraper and, to reassure himself on the way down, repeats over and over: “*jusqu’ici tout va bien* [so far, so good].”¹ But we are told, “it’s not the fall that matters, it’s the landing.”² The social and political implications of this individual’s story is rendered explicit by the end the film, when it becomes the story of a society falling, heading for the same crash-landing insofar as it is preoccupied exclusively with the fall. Does *La Haine*’s story not capture the current predicament of COVID-19? Is every society not in the process of falling? And who is uttering “so far, so good” other than the “inner voice of liberal democracy,” the reassuring, authoritative voice of politicians, pundits, and medical experts invested in the virtues of private industry, in the ideological fantasy of free-market solutions to pandemics?³ In Lacanian terms, these reassuring speakers occupy the position of today’s “subject supposed to know” (*sujet supposé savoir*).⁴

In the analytic session, the “subject supposed to know,” argues Jacques Lacan, does not refer to the analyst as such but rather marks his function in the treatment, registering the patient’s view of the analyst as a representation of absolute certainty who holds knowledge of the patient’s secret meaning or unconscious desire (disclosing what had been hidden, what lay behind the speaker’s words): the analyst “is supposed to know that from which no one can escape, as soon as he formulates it—quite simply, signification.”⁵ Lacan foregrounds the difference in the function of the “subject supposed to know” in philosophy and psychoanalysis. René Descartes is a case in point. Lacan argues that Descartes’ God occupies the position of the “subject supposed

to know.” God is the big Other, the ultimate authority that guarantees the possibility of certainty—legitimizing, in turn, Descartes’ *desire* for certainty, securing his epistemic investment in his clear and distinct ideas, in the notion that these ideas do in fact correlate with the external world. Without the idea of the “subject supposed to know,” transference would be impossible. Transference is predicated on the patient’s (mis)identification of the analyst as a “subject supposed to know.” Endowed with “a certain infallibility,” the analyst is purported to penetrate the depths of his patient’s unconscious desire, deciphering at will the meaning of the latter’s hidden secrets and symptoms.⁶

The psychoanalytic scene is governed by a radically different hermeneutical logic. Rather than feeding the analyst’s phantasmatic status, the analytic session ironically seeks to *de-suppose* the analyst. The analyst eschews the hermeneutic powers readily attributed to him by the transference: “he is not God for his patient.”⁷ The analyst takes a different path, guiding the patient, through free association, to take stock that *there is no ultimate authority*. As Jason Glynos observes, “the whole psychoanalytic operation is aimed at deflating the analyst’s own status as Subject-Supposed-to-Know by making the patient him- or herself do the work, only intervening so as to facilitate the subject’s confrontation with his or her truth, namely, that there is no universal symbolic Guarantee.”⁸

Slavoj Žižek has made productive use of the “subject supposed to know,” expanding its critical reach. In accessing America’s racist libidinal economy, Žižek coins his own formulation of the “subject supposed to loot and rape.”⁹ Žižek turns to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when the stories about black criminality circulated like a virus. The “subject supposed to loot and rape” reflects the workings of ideology, and the enjoyment racists felt from having their speculation and paranoia about blackness “confirmed.” If the “subject supposed to know” refers

to the function of the analyst rather than the analyst as such, the “subject supposed to loot and rape” does not stand for black subjects and what they have actually done or not (evidence-based suspicion) but symbolizes, instead, the phantasmatically projected black body, that is, the unconscious mechanisms at play in the racialization of blacks through their identification with barbarity.¹⁰

We can detect a variant of “the subject supposed to loot and rape” in discourse early in the COVID-19 pandemic. Donald Trump, in an attempt to deflect responsibility for his handling of the health crisis, tried to appease his populist base by framing the coronavirus as a “Chinese virus,” a “foreign virus.”¹¹ Trump’s calculated words engendered a “subject supposed to infect,” an external enemy wreaking havoc on the United States and the other Western nations.

Simultaneously, the Trump administration fully embraced the President’s assumed authority as the helmsman and commander-in-chief. True, a genuine aura of incompetence and ignorance of the law has dogged the Trump administration from the beginning (from its Muslim ban to its family separation policy, to the Ukraine fiasco, and so on), and the coronavirus is no exception. And yet Trump’s responses to the pandemic became increasingly sober in tone and predictable. He started to behave as would a president of any liberal-capitalist state. The federal government in the United States implemented, as did most of the world’s governments, strict guidelines (quarantines and travel bans) to curtail the spread of the coronavirus and protect human life.

In his polemical commentaries on such moves during the pandemic, Giorgio Agamben warns of the dangers of excessive state control and its intolerable regulation of life. He laments a society that “no longer believes in anything but bare life.”¹² He asks, “what is a society that has no value other than survival?”¹³ What is happening in the name of security is the normalization of the state of exception at the cost of sacrificing our shared humanity.¹⁴ Biopolitics—the

government's management of life, of a life reduced to its biological condition, emptied of its social, political, human, and affective traits—proves more effective in its deployment of martial rhetoric than outright xenophobia is. If Trump's effort to recycle the racist trope of the “yellow threat” failed to gain wide appeal (beyond his staunch, racist base), his biopolitical intervention was better received. Trump's and other leaders' “war on the coronavirus” produced a more insidious enemy—not a foreign enemy (the “Chinese” virus that could have been contained via travel bans), but a mutated enemy—an enemy dwelling within our midst, turning our neighbor into a potential source of infection: “fear thy neighbor” is substituted for “love thy neighbor.” As Agamben states, “it is not surprising that for the virus one speaks of war. The emergency measures obligate us in fact to life in conditions of curfew. But a war with an invisible enemy that can lurk in every other person is the most absurd of wars. It is, in reality, a civil war. The enemy is not outside, it is within us.”¹⁵

But what Agamben's negative biopolitics ignores is the actual threat of COVID-19; he reads the coronavirus much too myopically. His paranoia transforms the global menace of the virus into an instance of fake news, implying that states are treating the epidemic as a mere pretext for biopolitical expansion: more surveillance and control over their human population. And while many of the leftist objections to Agamben seek to rein in the philosopher's immoderate pessimism—pointing out, for instance, that coronavirus is not like the common flu, since there is no vaccine for this new disease and its mortality rate is much higher—Žižek's intervention is less sentimentalist and cuts deeper, revealing the limits of the biopolitical paradigm (the immanent fear of reducing human life to bare life). Informing Žižek's critique is the Lacanian insight that “*il n'y a pas de grand Autre*.”¹⁶ Politics begins with a *No!*, with an indefatigable alertness to “the inconsistency and/or non-existence of the big Other.”¹⁷ Without

the acknowledgement that “there is no Other of the Other, no ultimate guarantee of the field of meaning,” there is no politics proper.¹⁸ Žižek’s Lacanian politics takes the big Other’s non-existence (and thus the contingency of the established order) as axiomatic: the Symbolic is incomplete or “non-all” and could be otherwise, whence the necessity of critique, of insisting on the *gap* between what *is* and the ontological lack that bolsters it. Agamben’s negative biopolitics, by contrast, operates primarily at the level of the Symbolic, fueling a “politics of fear...fear of immigrants, fear of crime, fear of godless sexual depravity, fear of the excessive state itself, with its burden of high taxation, fear of ecological catastrophe, fear of harassment” and, we can add to the list, a fear of pandemics.¹⁹ This makes the paradigm post-political in its orientation: it is “a politics which renounces the very constitutive dimension of the political,” and for that reason, ill-equipped to take on the challenges of COVID-19.²⁰

Aside from neglecting the actual threat of the virus, Agamben also fails to appreciate the positive collective response that COVID-19 has ignited: “the threat of viral infection has also given a tremendous boost to new forms of local and global solidarity, and it has made more starkly clear the need for control over power itself.”²¹ The coronavirus clearly disabled the world’s population, hitting racial minorities and the socio-economically vulnerable most heavily, but it also enabled a rethinking of global health and community; it opened a horizon under which the question of the commons can be posed anew.²² But countering this desire for the commons—for global justice and solidarity with the Excluded of neoliberal capitalism—is the government’s willingness, if not eagerness, to occupy the position of the “subject supposed to know.” Unlike the Lacanian analyst who seeks to de-suppose himself in the analytic session, making the analysand come to grips with the painful realization that the big Other does not exist, the government works to uphold its authority by guiding us through the pandemic, projecting a

brighter future that is more or less a reproduction of the status quo—that is, a reproduction of how life operated prior to the “event” of the coronavirus. The solution to COVID-19, and to future pandemics, we thus hear, ought to come primarily from private industry. This sort of claim is emanating not only from Trump and pro-free market enthusiasts (Republican and Democratic politicians alike, not to mention pro-business mainstream media) but also from Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. More than any government figure, Dr. Fauci stands in for the capitalist big Other, perpetuating the ideological fantasy of a capitalism with a human face, a capitalism that cares for the health of its citizens. In an interview with The Daily Show host Trevor Noah, Dr. Fauci follows a neoliberal script for how to deal with pandemics:

Things are implemented at the state and local level, that’s the way this country works so well. The federal government is a facilitator, it’s a supplier, it’s a supporter and that’s the way things should be going, and that’s what we’re starting to see now as we’re catching up on things that weren’t done so well at the beginning. We now have many, many more tests. The private industry is getting involved. The government is not making the tests. The private industry is... So it really is a marriage between the federal government as the facilitator and supporter of where the real action is, at the state and local level.²³

While Dr. Fauci’s answer was prompted by Trevor Noah’s question about how the United States can work together as a unit to effectively tackle the coronavirus, his answer clearly exceeded his expertise in infectious diseases. His answer is comforting and clearly outlines the role of all the parties involved: the federal government, the states, and private industry. Dr. Fauci knows what we need (an understanding of how the coronavirus spreads) *and* what we desire (a reassurance that the system knows what it is doing, that it knows what we should do). The purported “marriage” between the federal government and the states, with private industry supplying a helping hand to the states—*the private sector is making the tests, not the government*—effectively legitimizes the role of the market in matters of national and global health. If Americans, in healthcare discussions (due in large part to Bernie Sanders who made Medicare

for all the major policy issue in his presidential runs), were beginning to take seriously the idea that healthcare is a human right rather than a profit-making industry, Dr. Fauci readily forecloses this line of inquiry when he minimizes the role of the federal government in the response to the pandemic. If the “adult in the room”²⁴ praises private industry—that is, market solutions—for its work in containing COVID-19, why should we look elsewhere for answers?²⁵ *So far, so good.* Dr. Fauci, the subject supposed to know, reassures us that our current pandemic, our global fall, is fixable from *within*. Why should we be suspicious of the stock market? Why should we doubt, for instance, Big Pharma’s commitment to finding cures for infectious diseases, even though their economic concerns about low profits and liability have limited their ventures in this area in the past?²⁶

Dr. Fauci’s marriage metaphor for the federal government’s relationship with the states distracts us from another marriage, the troubled marriage between democracy and capitalism. The idea of a “capitalism with a human face is, after all, predicated on the stability of this marriage. But for Žižek, this marriage has been deteriorating for some time now. His message is the opposite of Dr. Fauci’s: “we have to learn to think outside the coordinates of the stock market and profit and simply find another way to produce and allocate the necessary resources.”²⁷ Driven by an insatiable will to privatize and corporatize, neoliberalism has all but severed the link between the two.²⁸ Functioning like a virus, infiltrating all facets of public life, neoliberalism has transformed liberal-democratic citizens into “entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life.”²⁹ Its logic is to de-politicize by reducing political matters to questions of individual responsibility. But, in the case of COVID-19, “such a focus on individual responsibility, necessary as it is, functions as ideology the moment it serves to obfuscate the big question of how to change our entire economic and social system.”³⁰

Neoliberalism's hegemony seems to make a divorce between democracy and capitalism a fait accompli. And yet, as Žižek points out, we can detect a weakening of neoliberalism's hold in the recent policies taken by the Trump administration. American-style capitalism, purified under the age of neoliberalism, is faltering and misbehaving, acting in ways deeply at odds with its free-market ethos: "as the saying goes: in a crisis we are all Socialists. Even Trump is now considering a form of Universal Basic Income—a check for \$1,000 to every adult citizen. Trillions will be spent violating all conventional market rules."³¹ We are, in this respect, living in exceptional times, a time governed by exceptions to neoliberal capitalism. But what exactly follows from neoliberalism's apparent retreat? Is it socialism to come? If so, what kind of socialism will it be? Žižek asks: "will this enforced Socialism be the Socialism for the rich as it was with the bailing out of the banks in 2008 while millions of ordinary people lost their small savings? Will the epidemic be reduced to another chapter in the long sad story of what Naomi Klein called 'disaster capitalism,' or will a new better balanced, if perhaps more modest, world order emerge from it?"³² What is at stake, here, is two versions of socialism: a socialism of the post-political era and a socialism triggered by politics as such, a taste of the contingent, a dissatisfaction with liberal democracy's "subjects supposed to know." It is a socialism that seeks to render the *impossible possible*, that treats COVID-19 precisely as an "event." I share, here, Rocco Ronchi's perspective in emphasizing the full force of the term "event":

If it is true that the virus displays the characteristic of an event..., then it must also possess its "virtue." Events are such not because they "happen" or, at least, not only because of this. Events are not "facts." Unlike simple facts, events possess a "virtue," a force, a property, a *vis*, that is, they do something. For this reason, an event is always traumatic to the point we may say that if there is no trauma there is no event, that if there is no trauma, literally nothing has happened. What exactly do events do? Events produce transformations that prior to their taking place were not even possible. In fact, they only begin to be "after" the event has taken place. In short, an event is such because it generates "real" possibility. The "virtue" of an event thus consists in rendering

operational methods possible, methods that “before” were simply impossible, unthinkable.³³

If the forces of global capitalism are eager to return matters back to normal, a leftist politics worthy of its name must actively reconfigure the terms of the debate, and decline the blackmail of a choice between liberal capitalism or the Gulag (if you are not for liberal democracy, your position leads to the Gulag, or the Holocaust).³⁴

It is undeniable that COVID-19 shocked the market, deroutinized our way of life, and generated exceptional measures across the world, but it is we, as a global community, who must decide which exceptions we want to be permanently adopted. Working from within the coordinates set by neoliberal capitalism (and yes, neoliberalism will likely return, blaming the viral crisis on excessive regulations, crony capitalism, and a failure to truly abide by free-market principles), adhering to its “subjects supposed to know” will do little to attenuate the next pandemic. Worse. Market expansions, environmental encroachments in the name of profit and power, got us into our current predicament in the first place: they bear a large responsibility for zoonotic disease, having created the prime conditions for the spread of infection from wildlife to humans.³⁵ Market solutions to viral pandemics should thus give us pause, if not strike us as cruel and deadly fantasies.

No, the market will not save us. On the contrary, market solutions ensure that our fall will end in a crash landing. What could prevent such catastrophes, however, is what we might tentatively call a *de-neoliberalization of the mind*. A first step in this demystifying process, in liberating oneself from the internalized, controlling image of *homo economicus*, will be to usher in a new sense of the commons, the stuff of solidarity: becoming subjects who “care about the commons, the commons of nature, of knowledge, which are threatened by the system” and, of course, by viral pandemics.³⁶ A commitment to the commons will provide the grounds for

international cooperation and organizing against neoliberalism, stimulating solidarity and resistance. If politics begins with a *No!*, its negativity can only be sustained by an uncompromised and uncompromising passion for the commons.

¹ *La Haine*, directed by Mathieu Kassovitz (1995), 01:16.

² *La Haine*, (01:25–01:28).

³ Sanjay Sharma and Ashwani Sharma, “‘So Far So Good...’: *La Haine* and the Poetics of the Everyday,” *Theory Culture & Society* 17, 3 (2000): 105.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar: Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977), 233.

⁵ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 233.

⁶ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 234.

⁷ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 230.

⁸ Jason Glynos, “Psychoanalysis Operates Upon the Subject of Science: Lacan Between Science and Ethics,” in *Lacan and Science*, eds. Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis (New York: Karnac Books, 2002), 60.

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape Reality and Fantasy in New Orleans,” *In These Times* October 20, 2005, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/the-subject-supposed-to-loot-and-rape>.

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 99–100.

¹¹ “Call It ‘Coronavirus,’” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2020, accessed September 6, 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/opinion/china-coronavirus-racism.html>.

¹² Giorgio Agamben, “Clarifications,” trans. Adam Kotsko, March 17, 2020, accessed April 11, 2020,

https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/?fbclid=IwAR0ILFuLGompYdf7cY1WJowe_Jag00pu3azcEQw6R8jUdGaWiyk-RyTDq5M.

¹³ Agamben, “Clarifications.”

¹⁴ Agamben, “The Invention of an Epidemic,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, February 2, 2020, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.

¹⁵ Agamben, “Clarifications.”

¹⁶ Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 167.

¹⁷ Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (New York: Verso, 1994), 200.

¹⁸ Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, 200.

¹⁹ Žižek, *Violence*, 40–1.

²⁰ Žižek, *Violence*, 40.

²¹ Žižek, *PANDEMIC!: COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020), 75.

²² For Žižek, COVID-19 should not be isolated but seen as symptomatic of structural global problems: “We are not dealing only with viral threats—other catastrophes are looming on the horizon or already taking place: droughts, heatwaves, killer storms, the list is long. In all these cases, the answer is not panic but the hard and urgent work to establish some kind of efficient global coordination” (Žižek, *PANDEMIC!*, 42).

²³ “Dr. Fauci Answers Trevor’s Questions About Coronavirus,” *The Daily Social Distancing Show*, March 26, 2020, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8A3jiM2FNr8>.

²⁴ This is the way many progressives and liberals refer to him since he embodies the voice of reason on the Trump team.

²⁵ See Jeet Heer, “Dr. Anthony Fauci Has a Target on His Back,” *The Nation*, April 6, 2020, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/fauci-target-coronavirus-trump/>.

²⁶ Gerald Posner, “Big Pharma May Pose an Obstacle to Vaccine Development,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2020, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/02/opinion/contributors/pharma-vaccines.html>.

²⁷ Žižek, *PANDEMIC!*, 90–1.

²⁸ Žižek sees also the rise of authoritarian capitalism or capitalism with Asian values as further signaling the demise of the marriage between capitalism and democracy: “Market-based economics has no problem accommodating local

religions, cultures or traditions. It is easily reconciled with the primacy of an authoritarian state. No longer wedded to western cultural values, it is arguably divorced from them; critically reinterpreted, many of the ideas that westerners hold dear—egalitarianism, fundamental rights, a generous and universal welfare-state—can be deployed as weapons against capitalism” (Žižek, “Capitalism Has Broken Free of the Shackles of Democracy,” *Financial Times*, February 1, 2015, Accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/088ee78e-7597-11e4-a1a9-00144feabdc0>).

²⁹ Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 42.

³⁰ Žižek, *PANDEMIC!*, 88.

³¹ Žižek, *PANDEMIC!*, 93.

³² Žižek, *PANDEMIC!*, 93–4.

³³ Rocco Ronchi, “The Virtues of the Virus,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, March 14, 2020, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.

³⁴ “The moment one shows a minimal sign of engaging in political projects that aim to seriously challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: ‘Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag’” (Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, ed. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek [New York: Verso, 2000],” 127).

³⁵ Žižek, *PANDEMIC!*, 88–9. Similarly, David Quammen, author of *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, asserts, quite insightfully, that “we invade tropical forests and other wild landscapes, which harbor so many species of animals and plants—and within those creatures, so many unknown viruses. We cut the trees; we kill the animals or cage them and send them to markets. We disrupt ecosystems, and we shake viruses loose from their natural hosts. When that happens, they need a new host. Often, we are it” (David Quammen, “We Made the Coronavirus Epidemic,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2020, accessed April 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/opinion/coronavirus-china.html?smtyp=cur&smid=tw-nytopinion>).

³⁶ Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (New York: Verso, 2012), 83.