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Between catastrophes: God, nature and humanity

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The Coronavirus Pandemic has the nature of a genuine ‘event’ insofar as its reality is in excess of our attempts fully to account for it as to its origins, causes, extent or implications.

Nevertheless, just how epochal an event it will prove is not so certain. For some commentators it remains simply a temporary interruption, legitimately requiring an extraordinary but temporary response. For others, it is a sign of a much larger and ongoing ecological crisis. Both these groups tend to welcome a current return to greater levels of state action and public cooperation.

But for still others this extraordinary response is not to be regarded as either just provisional or benign, but as an intensification of existing and sinister political economic processes, tending to both surveillance and mutual isolation.²

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² See M. D’Eramo, *The philosopher’s epidemic*, „New Left Review” March–April 2020 nr 122, 25–28.

This contrast is somewhat echoed in terms of spiritual and religious assessments of our current predicament. For many people, the Pandemic is a warning of our disordered human relationship to life on earth; but for dissenters the response to it already implies an overvaluing of life as such which so excessively foregoes risk as to endanger our living of truly worthwhile and meaningful lives, perhaps in preparation for a greater life beyond death.

Let us briefly consider these three controversial dimensions of our current global situation: how truly significant is this crisis? Is it the end of neoliberalism or the intensification of tyranny in the name of emergency? And are we now putting life before money, or instead putting a calculus of death-limitation before the risky pursuit of a truly human existence?

1. Between catastrophes

First, is it true that ‘nothing will ever be the same again’, or is this just a long drawn-out hiatus, as Alain Badiou has argued?³ In a sense this is an old-fashioned occurrence: there have been many pandemics throughout history and this one is comparatively mild. They are just bolts from the blue, merely metaphorical ‘attacks’ by banal natural agents lacking in all meaning. Covid 19, or more properly Sars 2, is just the latest in a series of relatively mild modern plagues whose effect is indeed severe but nonetheless passing. It may intensify certain existing trends towards digitalisation and working from home, and increase the abasements endured by those workers who cannot do that – but that is all. No one seriously saw this coming and the measures taken against the pandemic are just pragmatic, akin to the measures taken in wartime. A political switch to Keynesian tactics does not therefore indicate any permanent alteration and these tactics have been deployed to defend local capitalism in the face of the suspension of some global linkages. The financial sector has still been prioritised and workers have only been assisted to the degree that the market cannot sustain a total collapse in demand beyond a certain level.

To a degree, Bruno Latour confirms this view by arguing that the Sars 2 crisis is not a ‘dress rehearsal’ for coming ecological apocalypse.⁴ Again, it is too old-fashioned for that, as we can see by the fact that it has reinvigorated the

3 A. Badiou, *On the epidemic situation*, „Verso”, <https://www.versobooks.com>.

4 B. Latour, *Is this a dress rehearsal*, „Critical Inquiry”, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/>.

role of the nation state and modes of ‘biopolitical’ control that Michel Foucault identified as being at work ever since the year 1800. Governments have deliberately sought to play the selectively medical role of extending some lives, while they have ‘economised’ the worth of others which are seen as sacrificially indispensable to the running of the economy and to the sustaining of human life in general. What is more, a typically modern duality of culture versus nature has also been re-invoked: we are supposedly in human solidarity against an alien natural force with which we are ‘at war’. But the deeper ecological crisis which we face is not like this: it is first of all a far more general threat which cannot be handled by national agencies alone. But secondly, in this instance it is as if human beings are the ‘virus’ threatening nature, although nature includes themselves. Just for this reason, meeting this more general threat (climate change, species-decline and so forth) requires a questioning of the nature versus culture divide.

On this view then, the crisis might not change things as much as we think, and it is not all that obviously in a continuum with ecological crisis in general.

There are reasons both to heed this double caution and somewhat to qualify it. It can be contradictory for Badiou to say *both* that no one saw this coming *and* that this is simply yet another in the series of Sars viruses. Just for the latter reason, although no one could have predicted this Pandemic in its precise instance, experts have in fact been warning about the likelihood of pandemics of this kind for years and governments have been variously preparing for them. And while one can compare the current crisis to the one occasioned by Spanish Flu around 1920, vastly increased globalisation and governmentality means that the level throughout the world of an organised suspension of normal life is without historical precedent.

Moreover, recent novel viruses, including this one, cannot merely be seen as acts of God. To the contrary, they usually involve a jumping from wild animals to humans and this has been made more likely by human activity. Not merely a perhaps unavoidable further human penetration into the wild, but a corraling of the wild into more cramped spaces, a reduction of species diversity and of animal development of immunity.⁵ Additionally, as Badiou notes, globalisation renders far more likely the meeting of archaic practices

⁵ K. Jones, *Tip of the iceberg: is our destruction of nature responsible for Covid-19?*, „The Guardian”, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/18/tip-of-the-iceberg-is-our-destruction-of-nature-responsible-for-covid-19-aoe>.

like wet markets with ultra-modern communications. Old dangers are vastly compounded by new ones. Therefore, as Latour himself stresses, the Pandemic cannot without obfuscation be understood in terms of a nature versus culture duality. We are not really threatened just by a biological agent; it is only an aberrant agent because its agency is compounded by many levels of human agency both individual and accidental (the traders at Wuhan market?) and networked and habitual (various economic links and political systems, besides different human genetic potentials which have hugely effected the impact of the virus in different places and at different times). Our various human responses will unpredictably affect how long the virus endures and how far it mutates.

For this reason and also because there are likely to be other pandemics in the future, we cannot be sure, even at the merely 'natural' level, whether this crisis is here to stay or not. For the reasons we have outlined, it has indeed both features of a traditional plague and others related to a more recent disordering of human interactions with the natural world. What is more, even if more specifically ecological threats are somewhat different, the current crisis already presents some of the dilemmas that those threats will pose far more acutely: how to balance the need for collective action with the sustaining of human freedom? How to achieve at once a pragmatically needed devolution of action and responsibility to local level and at the same time increase an equally required global coordination and solidarity? What lives to protect and what lives to risk? How to integrate human dignity with natural equilibrium? How to balance survival with what survival is for?

2. Between politics

The second question is how are we to assess the political responses to the 'great pause' in our current lives? One is naturally inclined to agree with Slavoj Žižek that we should welcome the fact of an increase in human solidarity, even if or perhaps all the more because it has to be exercised sacrificially through human isolation.⁶ It is good that there proves to be a limit to the human tolerance of economism and utility: the stark exception of Sweden, one of the most modern and secular countries on earth, with households too weak to sustain

6 S. Žižek, *Pandemic! Covid 19 shakes the World*, Polity, Cambridge 2020.

a retreat, is a negative confirmation of this encouraging reality. In the end, even the current British Tories were obliged to back away from a policy of deliberately slaughtering the old and the sick in order to smoke, if not save, their Brexit Bacon.

Thus hardly anyone agrees with Giorgio Agamben's semi-conspiratorial view that Sars 2 was just a particularly virulent flu bug which has occasioned an excessive reaction designed to suspend all normal procedures in the name of a permanent rule by exception.⁷ Though nothing like as dangerous as some once thought, it is nonetheless sufficiently so as to justify the emergency measures taken, unless one has adopted a callous disregard for human existence. Nor is it plausible to think that the ruling powers could really have desired a situation which puts both their own wealth and their own power in all sorts of possible peril.

On the other hand, the view that the crisis indeed provides for both the State and for Capital a convenient suspension of the usual norms is far more plausible. In circumstances of lockdown, the power of the digital giants and of the rising online retailers has been greatly increased. The same applies to the reinforcement of home-working which, by isolating workers from shared solidarity tends to increase their controllability from afar. The apparent reversal of Fordism here should not disguise from us the way in which this can operate as a covert proletarianization of the professional and lower managerial classes: submitting them more and more to routine procedure. At the same time, the leverage of outdoor workers is not necessarily going to be increased: given the spur of much increased unemployment and the militarised disaggregation and de-unionisation also of these workers the very opposite may ensue.

What is more, despite arguments about the relative virtues of suppression versus herd immunity and of balancing immediately threatened lives versus sustaining the economy, in the end all governments are likely to adopt a mixing of both strategies and to attempt some sort of such balance. If we wanted instead to mitigate these difficult choices, we would have to switch to a totally different political and economic order.

We would at least require the degree of social trust and of central with local coordination that has allowed Democratic and largely Christian South

⁷ Cf. G. Agamben, *L'invenzione di un'epidemia*, <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>.

Korea to adopt a policy of wholesale track and tracing, together with selective isolation in order quickly to contain the virus altogether. To a lesser degree, more notably subsidiarist and federalist Germany has achieved this far better than the United Kingdom.

More fundamentally, we would have to revisit the entire question of what work is for and how the goals of personally fulfilling and socially beneficial work might require different balances of working alone and together in direct physical proximity. We would have to consider how comprehensively to minimise outdoor dangers, to compensate for them and to provide a real and generous bedrock of security for those threatened with a more precarious existence, including unemployment. Indeed, we would try to remove that precariousness and insecurity altogether by fully recognising the equal social importance and difficulty of more 'basic' tasks like building, transporting, serving and caring. We would come to see that these are 'arts' also and we would seek to render them more so.

Against these criteria one has to conclude after all that the Crisis will probably change little except to intensify existing negative tendencies.

3. Between philosophies

Behind the current tension on the secular Left as to whether we should welcome the new 'wartime' solidarity engendered by the crisis, or rather bewail the inhibition of liberty that it brings in its wake, one can detect far older disagreements as to whether we are to think of the more alien face of the modern and the negatively dialectical impact of enlightenment in terms of primarily the Marxist alienation of labour on the one hand (as with Badiou and Žižek) or of Weberian bureaucratic control on the other – variously and sometimes alternatively seen as 'Heideggerean' technocracy (Derrida, Nancy and Stiegler) or as Foucauldian biopolitics (Agamben and to a degree Latour). Is Capital the alienated human master agent which only the true agency of Labour can overthrow, or is it rather the case that the problem is the very fantasising in practice of a single agency of control termed the 'State' which attempts to suppress the inherent multiplicity of agency through systems of complex instrumentalisation, surveillance and intrusion into existential and vital levels of human reality? On this account, what we need to liberate is not really unified human labour as the non-alienated human subjectivity, but a multiplicity of interacting agencies, both human and otherwise. Either human

beings should suspend 'operation' and recover a mythical Edenic animality (Agamben) or else engage in a democratic constitutional negotiation with all other natural agents (Latour).

Depending on one's preference either for Marx or for 'the Weberian Left' one may see either promise or else menace in the current crisis.

Yet one could argue that it is possible to synthesize these two perspectives on the negative aspect of the modern. On the one hand, labour is alienated in part because, as Ruskin saw, materialism as such is unable to envisage a noble and spiritual end for work. On the other hand, the State does not just pursue power for its own sake, it also pursues an alienated power only defined as control because of the loss of a shared spiritual horizon. Within this perspective one can then try more to integrate the Weberian within a qualified version of the Marxist. Just as capitalism needs to render naturally available goods scarce, and to invent new goods in short supply, if it is to sustain competition and profitability, so likewise our entire politics tends to 'economise' both life and other natural realities by rendering them selectively rare and more precarious and by offering relatively exclusive remedies and 'solutions', subject at once to market forces and to bureaucratic regulation. In either case power is increased to the same measure as profit, just as capitalist profit is inseparable from power.

What is sought, in either case, is the empty and narcissistic *libido dominandi*, as diagnosed by Saint Augustine. This is the aim of liberalism in the precise sense of a philosophy predicated on the primacy of the individual will. Ultimately, it is the failure of secular thought to isolate the shared framework of liberalism as the real problem, that leads to the oscillation between alternatively money or power as the villain of modernity. Or else it is admitted that critique does *not* break with the liberal framework. Thus, inverting Victor Orban, Žižek roundly declares that 'Communists, are liberals with a diploma.'⁸ What this ultimately means for him (in a pure Hobbesian/Lockean lineage) is that the subject in her open freedom is dialectically identical with the open randomness of matter. Obviously this provides us, as Nietzsche saw, with no metaphysical grounds upon which to question the operations of pure power, nor of alienated labour, nor of a seduction by illusory spectacle (since there is no reality behind the Lacanian 'real' of the inaccessibly uncanny spectre

8 S. Žižek, *Pandemic*, 46.

of matter-subjectivity), nor yet of an ecological domination by human beings over nature, since this domination is, on this account itself the most natural thing of all.

The equally metacritical and metaphysical task would rather be to discover not a dialectical identity between the subject and nature (or *physis* as ‘character’ and so content) but a creative tension between them rooted in their shared participation in a transcendent order upholding the reality both of the spirit and of objectively desirable ends of spiritual expression through work upon matter and interaction with other natural (and to a degree spiritual) agencies.

4. Between spiritualities

This brings me to the third tension, between those, like Žižek, who celebrate our current concern with life as such and those who, in various degrees like Agamben, warn of our now being reduced to ‘bare life’, which will eventually prove to be no sort of life whatsoever. Interestingly, this debate has its ecclesiastical and theological equivalent: overwhelmingly religious leaders have sanctified the new priority for the medical, but others, and most extremely Rusty Reno, have suggested that this is but an ultimate secular encouragement to see any old life as more important than a fulfilled spiritual one.⁹ Thus they have argued against the shutting of churches and the ending of public worship.

Once again, both sides have a point. It is hysterical to claim that measures adopted in the face of war or plague are really intended in all perpetuity. And because we are embodied creatures, mere living is indeed the basis of more exalted modes of existence. On the other hand, we know very well that wartime emergency measures often do survive, though for good as well as for ill. It is also worryingly evident that churches have often (and especially in the UK) been closed to an unnecessary degree and that they, along with other less utilitarian and more convivial public spaces (including libraries, clubs and pubs) are destined to be the last things to be re-opened, precisely because they are less about bare living and bare economic surviving.

In the longer term, just as we can see how the Pandemic bodes to increase human isolation and lack of real physical contact, thereby favouring a huge

⁹ R. R. Reno, *Coronavirus reality check*, „First Things”, April 27, 2020, <https://firstthings.com/coronavirus-reality-check/>.

increase of ‘divide and rule’, so also we can see how it bodes to increase an over-obsession with the avoidance of danger and an endless and self-internalised quantification of risk from minute to minute, as now much enabled by digital devices. In the cases of motion and transport—of walking, climbing, cycling and sailing—as also with human, including sexual interactions, it is obvious that we do as individuals regard certain risks as constantly worth running—or indeed worth staying at home for. We tend to become more inhibited by them when we look at averages and are provided with ‘solutions’ for their avoidance and minimisation. But all those things are provided through an impersonal aggregation of our lives by the state and the market. It is when we are persuaded to regard ourselves as objects through the gaze of the public spectacle that we cease to live with ourselves as self-posed subjects able spontaneously to sense which risks should be undergone and which avoided—all, of course according to inborn or acquired temperament, which is also part of ‘who we are’.

The reverse side of this alienation from natural risk is the implicit taking on of a massive and generalised risk by combined Capital and Power, which in reality exposes us all to exponentially increased risks of illness, both physical and mental and ultimately of death all the time. So just as ‘pure power’ in fact depends, like Capital, upon rendering the natural scarce, so also an apparently sanitised removal of individual risk really depends upon an alienation of risk which consolidates it into one collective peril, exactly like a nuclear bomb. Thus rule through the inhibition of risk (‘health and safety’) is really rule through the permanent suspension (in both senses) of a huge axe over all of our heads.

Thus we are only (as Agamben’s work sees) reduced to ‘bare life’ because this life can ultimately be discarded, like the excluded scapegoat outside the gates of the city. For the logic of valuing life as such without risk is not that we *really* value life, but that all life has been economised, subordinated to power and money – even and contradictorily the lives of the powerful and the rich themselves in the end. Liberalism is nihilism and inversion: if only negative freedom matters then this is only the disinhibition of material force and so it is identical with death.

In this context one can also note that Zizek is now after all at one with Agamben in warning against the global cult of ‘Humanitarian’ aid. The supposed purely human distress of the starving, the ecologically immiserated, of refugees and war-victims, is really the distress of human beings deprived

of that political succour which, according to Aristotle and Aquinas, is integral to our humanity. This distress is largely produced with their every-day right-hands by the very agents of globalised speculative digital capitalism, like Bill Gates and George Soros, who with their nocturnal left-hands then seek to placate it in a merely 'ethical' fashion. Their real aims are actually to suppress populist and local resistance to their own globalising regime.

The churches should not then have gone so quiet during this crisis, nor have so readily colluded in rendering sacred spaces invisible.

5. The interruption of the interruption

If liberalism is ultimately the problem of a degenerate modernity and the lack of the excess of sacred indicators conserving the 'extra' of Spirit, then how are we to understand the release of locked-up energy with Black Lives Matter and the counter protests it has incited in Europe? However valid the cause (especially with regard to the utter scandal of US policing, welfare and social services) a critical inquiry has to ask whether liberal opinion has turned to this in relief both from the unfathomable cultural/natural of the Pandemic event and from its challenge to the hold of both economic liberalism and cultural hedonism. Here, supposedly, is a merely human and identifiable cause with supposedly clear and available solutions.

The invocations of links to the crisis in terms of the greater susceptibility of the BAME community to the virus are to a degree tenuous, as this is rooted in wider social and likely genetic factors. More esoteric and yet more striking would seem to be the covert switch from one 'biological' topic to another more manageable one, just because it is only quasi-biological and so apparently more 'fixable'. Equally the calls (again however sometimes valid) for sudden and immediate change in all our Western habits everywhere and with regard to everything (especially in Europe and most of all in Britain) would appear to parody the Pandemic requirement for exceptional and manageable emergency. With the difference that *this* sovereign exception seems to be something not exercised over against us but rather by all of us. Once more, this diverts us from something problematically meta-human with which liberalism is complicit, to something more comfortably intra-human which liberalism can readily (it supposes) alter. It is not that racism is not a scourge: it obviously is; but there is an implicit and distracting danger of momentarily thinking that it is *the* scourge.

Thus the ‘grotesque’ irruption of masked massed protest and some ensuing violence under social distancing should forewarn us about the likely future human capacity to divert itself even from apocalypse by lesser troubles. Nor may the evolution of a more justified statue-smashing in the direction of a more general iconoclasm (at least in the British Isles) be unrelated to the downgrading of all sacred spaces safeguarding the spirit, of which memory composes a large part, in the course of the lockdown. Indeed, an inflated ‘anti-racism’ seems to proffer itself as the newly sacral iconoclastic counter-religion, the ultimate Protestantism of the West refusing the West as an ancient moulderidol from start to finish.

Should this current start to become complicit with politicised Islam (and arguably it already is) and should the latter make further incursions into Africa which lies on Europe’s southern border, and China make use of all this in the face of a United States reduced to crisis, then the implications for Europe are dire indeed. President Macron is exactly right to see that in the face of these threats Europe must unite to resist radical Islam, prevent excessive demographic incursion from Africa into Europe and intervene politically but helpfully in Africa herself to assist her towards a more constitutional and tolerant future.

6. Conclusion — after Covid-19

How might our current situation and the above reflections relate to our wider current and future ecological crisis?

Many, including me, have noted how nature seems to flourish more without us: birds sing louder, fish return to canals, deer wander more freely and right into the heart of our towns. Others, however, have pointed out how this is in part misleading.¹⁰ Red Kites miss road-kill, and many more domesticated animals and plants languish without our tending. It is not actually ecological to think in terms of humans over against a single unified natural world: no, we are one of many natural agents and as natural we have a good (even perhaps Biblical and superintending) natural role to play. The point is not

¹⁰ A. Searle, ‘*Resurgent Natures? More than Human perspectives on Covid 19*’, „*Dialogues in Human Geography*“ 10 (2020) no 2, 291–295, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620933859>. The renowned Cambridge nature writer Robert Macfarlane has supported this perspective on Twitter.

the liberal alternative of either dominating or liberating nature, but the communitarian one of getting the right balance between different natural actors and between an open human subjectivity and relatively more fixed natural agencies or 'characters'. They need our free and adaptable nurture; we need their stimulus and content if we are to fulfil ourselves.

A good relationship to nature requires us to get into more immediate personal and non-virtual contact with our local environment which needs to be more self-governing and self-sufficient in both ecological and political terms. At the same time, we cannot ignore our essential humanly specific and planetary unity which requires far better international coordination if we are to survive, let alone flourish. This should not be and is unlikely to be some sort of literal world government, directed by personal rulers. On the other hand, global coordination is required and this cannot be just 'impersonal' or a matter of fixed rules and procedures if it is to work. There seems to be something here in terms of shared sovereignty and mutual international self-government that is still to be invented, although the EU, for all its imperfections has already gone some way in this direction. But for certain this requires an emergent sense of a global metaphysical culture, a sense of shared global sacrality that alone can secure the place of Spirit and so the dignity of human labour and of all other natural agencies.

