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THE PHILOSOPHER'S EPIDEMIC

'There will be no recovery. There will be social unrest. There will be violence. There will be socio-economic consequences: dramatic unemployment. Citizens will suffer dramatically: some will die, others will feel awful.'[1] This is no eschatologist speaking but Jacob Wallenberg, scion of one of global capitalism's most powerful dynasties, envisaging a world-economic contraction of 30 per cent and sky-high unemployment as a result of the coronavirus lockdowns. While philosophers worry that our rulers are exploiting the epidemic to enforce biopolitical discipline, the ruling class itself seems to have the opposite concern: 'I am dead scared of the consequences to society . . . We have to weigh the risks of the medicine affecting the patient drastically'. Here the Swedish tycoon echoes Trump's prognosis that the therapy will kill the patient. While the philosophers view anti-contagion measures—curfews, closed borders, restrictions on public gatherings—as a sinister control mechanism, the rulers fear the lockdowns will *loosen* their control.

In assessing the impact of COVID-19, the philosophers in question have cited the extraordinary pages on the plague in *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault describes the new forms of surveillance and regulation occasioned by the outbreak in the late-seventeenth century.[2] The thinker who has taken the most clear-cut position on the pandemic is Giorgio Agamben, in a series of combative articles starting with 'The invention of an epidemic', published by *il manifesto* on 26 February 2020. In this piece, Agamben describes the emergency measures implemented in Italy to stop the spread of the virus as 'frenetic, irrational and completely unfounded'. 'The fear of the epidemic gives vent to panic', he writes, 'and

in the name of security we accept measures that severely restrict freedom, justifying the state of exception.' For Agamben, the coronavirus response demonstrates a 'tendency to use the state of exception as a normal paradigm of government'—'It is almost as if, with terrorism exhausted as the cause for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic offered the ideal pretext to uphold them beyond any limitation'. Agamben reasserted these ideas in two other texts that appeared on the website of the Italian publishing house Quodlibet in mid-March.[3]

Now, Agamben is both wrong and right; or rather, drastically wrong and somewhat right. He is wrong because the basic facts contradict him. Even great thinkers can die of contagion—Hegel perished from cholera in 1831—and philosophers have a duty to revise their views when circumstances call for it: if coronavirus denialism was faintly possible in February, it is no longer reasonable in late March. However, Agamben is right that our rulers will use every opportunity to consolidate their power, especially in times of crisis. That coronavirus is being exploited to strengthen mass-surveillance infrastructure is no secret. The South Korean government has analysed the spread of infection by tracking the location of its citizens via their mobile phones—a policy that caused uproar when it exposed a number of extra-marital affairs. In Israel, Mossad will soon implement its own version of this tracker, while the Chinese government has doubled down on video surveillance and facial-recognition devices (not that the world's intelligence agencies were waiting for the excuse of an epidemic to start digitally shadowing us). Many European governments are currently deciding whether to imitate South Korean and Chinese digital-monitoring programmes, with Britain's Information Commissioner's Office rubber-stamping this measure in late March. Agamben is not the first to argue that one of the goals of social domination is to atomize the dominated; Guy Debord

[1] 'Coronavirus "medicine" could trigger social breakdown', *Financial Times*, 26 March 2020.

[2] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, London 1995, pp. 195–228.

[3] Agamben's *il manifesto* article, and the following discussion in the Italian online journal *antinomie*—with contributions by Jean-Luc Nancy, Sergio Benvenuto and Roberto Esposito, among others—are collected on the website of the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*. Further interventions include Alain Badiou, 'On the Pandemic Situation', *MicroMega*, 25 March 2020, and Paolo Flores d'Arcais, 'Philosophy and the Virus: Giorgio Agamben's Ravings', *MicroMega*, 16 March 2020.

wrote in *The Society of the Spectacle* that the development of capitalist-commodity utopias would isolate us together in 'perfect separation'.

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By the end of this crisis, then, the surveillance powers of governments will have increased tenfold. But, *contra* Agamben, the contagion remains real, deadly and destructive despite this fact. That security services are likely to benefit from the pandemic does not justify a leap to paranoid conspiricism: the Bush Administration did not need to destroy the Twin Towers itself in order to pass the Patriot Act; Cheney and Rumsfeld could legitimize kidnapping and torture simply by seizing the opportunities that 9/11 presented.

I mention the World Trade Center attack because it reveals a second flaw in Agamben's work, which explains all techniques of societal control using the model of state repression against an armed insurrectionary struggle. In the late 1970s and early 80s, several European countries imposed a state of exception allegedly to combat terrorism—a trend that directly affected Agamben's generation and its offspring. But not all states of exception are the same. As Aristotle teaches, if all cats are mammals, not all mammals are cats. The state of exception imposed in the name of terrorism is similar to the policy designed to contain leprosy: that is, the division of society into two separate groups, with lepers/terrorists excluded from the community of healthy/law-abiding citizens. By contrast, the current state of exception reproduces, in principle, the one that Foucault theorizes for the plague, based on the control, immobilization and isolation of the entire population.[4] Unlike the leprosy model, this regime makes no distinction between good and bad citizens. Everyone is potentially bad; all of us must be monitored and supervised. The panopticon encompasses the whole of society, not just the prison or the clinic.

It is true that we are witnessing a gigantic and unprecedented experiment in social discipline, with three billion people currently ordered

[4] For a historical-reality check, however, it's worth consulting Daniel Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year* [1722], which describes the innumerable ways plague-stricken Londoners found to dodge or bribe the watchmen and escape from the infected houses in which they'd been shut up—the agency missing from Foucault's account.

to remain at home, most of whom have accepted these restrictions on their freedom, with little active resistance. Forty years ago, this would have been unthinkable. In many cases this experiment proceeds blindly and haphazardly, as with India, where Modi has instructed the entire country to stay at home, despite the presence of 120 million floating migrant workers who are often forced to live on the streets. In much of the world, confinement to the home is only conceivable for the wealthiest stratum, while for most it leads directly to joblessness and hunger. India is an extreme case, but a class-inflected response to the epidemic is visible in every country. This is a 'white-collar quarantine', as the *New York Times* has it.[5] The privileged lock themselves in houses with fast internet and full fridges, while the rest continue to travel on crowded subways and work elbow-to-elbow in contaminated environments. The food industry, energy sector, transport services and telecommunications hubs must continue to operate, along with the production of vital medicine and hospital equipment. Physical separation is a luxury that many cannot afford, and rules for 'social distancing' are serving to widen the gulf between classes.

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Which brings us to the main point that Agamben misses: domination is not one-dimensional. It is not just control and surveillance; it is also exploitation and extraction. (A bit of Marx, on top of Schmitt, would not hurt his analysis.) The serious damage that this epidemic threatens to inflict on capital explains politicians' reluctance to enforce isolation and quarantine: Boris Johnson (initially) and Trump are the most striking examples: they resisted announcing a quarantine for as long as they could and wish to lift it as soon as possible, even at the cost of a few hundred thousand deaths. In this instance, the sluggish pace of public-health policy must be contrasted with the rapidity of the financial response. Naturally, the 'generous' budgetary measures partially reflect Wallenberg's concerns: they aim to avoid major social upheaval by giving workers enough to live on for the time being. No capitalist wanted to be forced into this Keynesian position. But, as Obama's chief of staff Rahm Emanuel remarked, 'You never let a serious crisis go to waste'. So,

[5] Noam Scheiber, Nelson Schwartz, Tiffany Hsu, '"White-Collar Quarantine" Over Virus Spotlights Class Divide', NYT, 27 March 2020; Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Denise Lu, Gabriel Dance, 'Location Data Says It All: Staying at Home During Coronavirus Is a Luxury', NYT, 3 April 2020.

while meagre extensions are made to statutory sick pay, states have also taken extraordinary steps to shore up their financial sectors, or 'foam the runway for the banks', in the words of former US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner. So far, OECD governments have pledged more than $5 trillion, and that figure is set to rise.

Rulers are also taking advantage of the pandemic to push through policies that would cause outrage in normal times. Trump has given American industry a free pass to break pollution laws during the emergency, while Macron has dismantled one of the main achievements of the labour movement by extending the maximum working week to 60 hours.[6] Yet, in a way, the pettiness of these legislative tricks—too localized and limited to rescue an ailing neoliberal order—shows that the pandemic has caught the ruling classes off guard: they have not yet grasped the recession that awaits us, and its capacity to upend economic orthodoxies. Just as Agamben views all emergencies as anti-terrorist, our rulers see this systemic crisis as a mere financial one: they respond to the pandemic as if it were a new 2008, imitating Bernanke and prescribing Friedmanite monetary expansion. Prisoners of monetarist orthodoxy, they do not understand that this time the demand shock will entail more than a simple liquidity crisis.

Soon enough, entire fortunes will be lost as capitalists watch their business ventures (airlines, construction companies, car factories, tourist circuits, film productions) go down the drain. But in this context, Friedman's 'helicopter drop of money'—the injection of astronomic amounts of liquidity into the economy—will initiate a large-scale destruction of capital, since this newly issued currency does not correspond to any real value. During wartime, both financial and material capital is demolished: infrastructures, factories, bridges, ports, stations, airports, buildings. But once the war is over a period of reconstruction begins, and it is this reconstruction that triggers an economic rebound. However, the current epidemic looks more like a neutrino bomb, which kills humans and leaves buildings, roads and factories intact (if empty). So, when the epidemic is over, there will be nothing to rebuild—and no consequent recovery.

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[6] Oliver Milman and Emily Holden, 'Trump Administration allows companies to break pollution laws during coronavirus pandemic', *The Guardian*, 27 March 2020; Le Macronomètre, 'Coronavirus: 60 heures de travail par semaine dans les secteurs essentiels, la bonne décision', *Le Figaro*, 25 March 2020.

After the quarantine is lifted, people will not simply return to buying cars and plane tickets on a pre-crisis scale. Many will lose their jobs, while those that keep them will struggle to find customers and clients in a cash-strapped economy. Meanwhile, someone will have to foot the bill for massive virus-related spending, especially once the ensuing debt pile saps investor confidence, at which point Wallenberg's fear of social unrest may turn out to be justified: whatever shock treatment is dispensed after the crisis—when, in the name of economic necessity, the public is made to pay for this 'generosity'—may indeed serve to push people into revolt. The epidemic will increase top-down control and surveillance; it will remake society as a laboratory for disciplinary techniques. But in this situation, the role of our rulers will be to ride the tiger: those who want to supervise and control us would prefer to do so by less expensive means. In the end, revoking quarantine will be easy. Restarting the economy will be more problematic.

Rome, 4 April 2020