

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Pandemic Dystopias

Biopolitical Emergency and Social Resistance

George Sotiropoulos & Gene Ray

George Sotiropoulos & Gene Ray
Pandemic Dystopias
Biopolitical Emergency and Social Resistance
April 4, 2020

Retrieved on 2020-04-05 from voidnetwork.gr

theanarchistlibrary.org

April 4, 2020

Contents

A brief sojourn in the epigenesis of a social crisis . .	6
The immunological Urstaat and the new normal . .	12
All (quiet) rise in the plebeian front.	24

environmental crisis. Given what was said at the start about the conditions fostering the outbreak of viral strains, the pandemic must be indeed seen as a “dress rehearsal”. More than one dystopian path is thereby opened up, one of them being what Christian Parenti has named the “politics of the armed lifeboat,” or climate fascism, which will complete the current trend of securitization and authoritarianism and establish its statist utopia, the *Urstaat* of the 21st century.

Yet, there is also the pathway of a radically different, sustainable form of symbiosis with the world and amongst us, which will transform the crisis laden and crisis ridden material environment of today. No system failure will bring such large-scale change automatically and even less does it make sense to think of SARS 2 as a political “ally” or even worse as a blessing. Still, the social contagion and social crisis generated unintentionally by the long journey of a microscopic pathogen have made the necessity of thinking and naming such an alternative form of symbiosis all the more urgent. Disaster communism? Yes please...

George Sotiropoulos is Doctor of Political Theory and author of *A Materialist Theory of Justice: the One, the Many, the Not-Yet*.

Gene Ray is Associate Professor of Critical Theory and author of *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11 and Beyond*.

cannot simply be “against the state”, still conceived as an 19th century Leviathan with high-tech gear, but about improving vital aspects of social reproduction that the state has integrated. How can this be done without fueling the political imaginary of the *Urstaat* and its looming authoritarianism? An answer would be to insist on the democratization of the state mechanism as a parallel process to the reconstruction of the social state. Yet, the last cycle of struggles suggests that current states, not to mention interstate and international institutions like those composing the EU, have become immune to democratic flows coming from below. Under conditions of expanding crisis and securitization the trend towards an entrenched authoritarianism should be expected to grow not recede its intensity, absorbing popular demands born out of the experience of the pandemic as a moment of its further consolidation.

In this context it seems all the more necessary to maintain the autonomy of grassroots forms of activity and strengthen them towards the direction of a real dual power, even if this entails articulating demands that require state mediation – broaching in turn the issue of the collective form(s) of transversal between these two political domains. Without pressing this point too far, the following seems a sensible strategy at the moment: cultivating collective forms that can intervene in the intermittent system failures that lie ahead, helping overcome their worst aspects while at the same time preparing for and being ready to carry the wave of systemic collapse.

Ultimately, the forms of struggle that are going to appear or more prescriptively need to be forged in the coming cycle of events cannot be separated by the broader question of what type of society and what type of world we want to live in. Massive as they sound, these questions are being forced upon us. The escalation of the economic dimension of the social contagion will tend to link even more clearly and painfully with the

“I didn’t think the Apocalypse would have this much admin”

– A teacher from Hastings

Setting aside the more technical and delicate issues of agency and intentionality, a virus, like the by now notorious Coronavirus (*aka* SARS-CoV-2), has a certain mode of being, with its peculiar rhythms and refrains. To a substantial extent, in a modernized society, the comprehension of the ontic structure of a virus, of its “being” or even better of its *becoming* (indeed quite a dynamic one, with a marked capacity to mutate) falls within the cognitive domain of the natural sciences. One of the lessons that the pandemic should have brought home to social and political theorists is that reducing scientific discourse to its aspects of power and control or to its formal structure as a “language-game” can become a recipe for a Black Death-level of disaster. This is not to deny the intricate and institutionalized links between scientific knowledge and capitalism or the modern state, which go much deeper than a simple misuse, nor their occasionally catastrophic consequences. Science, like any other system of knowledge, is a social practice, that cannot be entirely disembedded from the sociopolitical relations within which it operates. Nevertheless, the contents of scientific knowledge are not simply reducible to the wants and needs of capital, nor would the abolition of capitalist relations of production immediately make defunct quantum physics, thermodynamics, evolutionary biology etc. For the case at hand, that systems of scientific knowledge have developed a capacity (far from complete to be sure) to delineate the composition and behavior of pathogens is a major break through in terms of their containment and treatment. If a leftist politics is to challenge the dominant administration of the crisis, it must be able to take the “hard sciences” into consideration, and to build channels of cooperation and mutual feedback – which can be critical

and transformative in its scope – as well as provide spaces for their fruitful advancement.

Then again, from the perspective of critical theory this (if left to stand on its own) is an inadequate inference, since it tends to yield skinless and arbitrary comparisons between different social-historical periods, effectively reproducing a naïve liberal progressivism *a la* Steven Pinker, which amasses statistics and graphs to assert how much better things are today (whilst drowned and encamped bodies pile up at the borders of enlightened Europe). A virus' epidemiological journey is not only a biological process, it is a social phenomenon, which in fact, as the recent pandemic reveals, may well reach the status and intensity of an *event*. This generic proposition holds true whether the site of a virus' appearance is a local ecosystem somewhere in the Amazon or an industrial megacity like Wuhan. In fact, the distinction is mainly analytical, for "nature" as sentient materiality is already social, in that it contains structured forms of community as one of its main determinations, just like "society", from a hunter-gatherer tribe to the most technologically advanced social formation, never stops partaking in the physical strata of the world, the micro-biological substrata included – yet another painful reminder of the coronavirus pandemic. The task of critical theory therefore must be to sublate – which is not quite the same as to abolish – the distinction between the natural and the social in order to study the *material environment* within which SARS 2 has emerged and which the latter subsequently affects in its various dimensions.

A brief sojourn in the epigenesis of a social crisis

"The bug, whatever its point of origin, has long left the barn, quite literally."

fects. Second, horizontal self-organization offers a version of biopolitical emergency that makes the restriction of individual autonomy an occasion for fostering common responsibility, collective action and active participation in mutual well being. Which is to say, responding to the pandemic, a type of alternative biopolitics has emerged, which, instead of administering from above the well being of individual lives under a statistical concept of public health, proliferates activities from below that see in the active, mutual care for individual members of the community an essential facet of the collective good.

On account of their difference, this grassroots biopolitics has been politically invested with an antagonistic valence vis-à-vis the dominant management of the pandemic and its mix of sovereignty and governmentality. Could we indeed regard the practices and infrastructures of mutual aid in operation today as fulcrums of dual power, capable of breaking the spell of the *Urstaat* that encroaches societies? Unfortunately, affirming as much would be an exaggeration. All these infrastructures and practices quite simply lack the resources, know how and institutional means to adequately respond to the requirements of the pandemic on a mass, non-local, scale. Moreover, they lack representative power, which could allow them to issue effective calls and injunctions. Without such a capacity to mobilize the masses it is hard to see what "dual power" they have. To this extent, although they may provide an alternative diagrammatic form of operation to the vertical administration of the state, at present they can only be at best complementary to the latter. Thus, while their significance in breaking the state monologue should not be underestimated, their limitations testify at the same time to the necessity of demands directed at the state, such as those concerning healthcare and a basic income.

It should hardly be a surprise thus that many anarchist and far-left groups embrace these demands. Equally necessary though is not to shy away from the political inference such support implies: at the current conjuncture, social struggles

Such a unity is difficult and painstaking to achieve, requiring among other things a set of concrete demands that can be shared and a common political vision to bring them together. As far as practical demands are concerned two will stand out: universal healthcare for sure and possibly a basic income disconnected from market performance. These demands can be plausibly expected to contribute in a concerted challenge to the neoliberal gospel that has waxed lyrical in recent decades and lend support to a reconstruction of the social state, since without the latter it is hard to see how they can be realistically satisfied. But would they not then join the orchestra that signs of the state as the necessary guarantor of a well-ordered society? Which is to say, has the pandemic painfully revealed that, if we want today proper healthcare and decent living conditions for everyone, we need to depose the vision of a stateless society, which has fed the utopian imaginary at least since the 19th century, to the altar of the *Urstaat* and become the apostles of its left wing version?

If demands for large scale reforms seem to be irresistibly pulled towards the state, the other major form of grassroots activity to have emerged during the pandemic attempts to maintain a critical distance from centralized power and invest on the powers of social self-organization. Despite the objective difficulties that social distancing and extensive quarantine pose, a whole array of practices and infrastructures has been flourishing on the social basis, having as their common buzzword “mutual aid”.

Regardless of their specific content, these practices and infrastructures have a twofold valence: first, they resist the atomization that dominant forms of governmentality advance and negotiate with the acceptable forms of social distancing, beyond the familial bond. As such, apart from the concrete aid they offer to people in need, they provide outlets for an affective discharge of anxiety and depression as well as conduits for the development of more positive and politically fertile af-

– Robert Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu*

That the material environment of today’s world, hence the spread of the viral strains it breeds, is conditioned to an unprecedented scale by human agency, in particular by the systematic activity of the techno-industrial complex, is not a distinctly Marxist claim, being registered also by scientific research funded and conducted within mainstream institutional channels. Nor is there anything leftist or radical in asserting that the coronavirus pandemic would be impossible without the forms and processes of social and economic connectivity and integration that go by the term “globalization”. What critical theory can add (among other things) is a delineation of the social force that acts as a singular and potent determination of the material environment on a global scale, and which can consequently be legitimately considered a key catalyst both of macro-historical processes, like climate change, and short-term yet recurrent phenomena like epidemics; and this social force is none other than capital.

To be sure, “Capital” (especially when writ large) can be used in an entirely abstract manner, explaining everything and nothing, which can be at the same time a pretty vulgar and moralistic manner, which turns a complex process into the grand villain of history. Yet, there is nothing abstract, simplistic or moralizing when theoretical analysis attends to the ways the production and circulation of viruses is conditioned by the forms of mass production, circulation, exchange, and consumption through which capital actualizes itself today. Intensive monocultures and huge concentration of live-stock, systematic contacts between humans and other animals, unsanitary working and living conditions (chiefly in the industrial peripheries), expansive markets, incessant flows of goods and humans, crowded megacities; in brief, the real movement and spatialized actuality of capital valorization and accumulation, embedded as they are into distant social

formations and a world-market that brings them together, do not only facilitate zoonotic transfer and the rapid spread of viruses, they create evolutionary pressures for the development of its more virulent forms. To quote from the brilliant text of Chuang:

“the basic logic of capital helps to take previously isolated or harmless viral strains and place them in hyper-competitive environments that favor the specific traits which cause epidemics, such as rapid viral lifecycles, the capacity for zoonotic jumping between carrier species, and the capacity to quickly evolve new transmission vectors”.

Although much more unpacking is certainly required, the parallel with neoliberal forms of subjectification and financialization – which also require flexibility, adaptability, rapidness, transferability (and quite often virulence) as key capacities for thriving in the hyper-competitive environment of the world market – is too attractive not to be highlighted. Nor should we avoid drawing the provocative inference: the material environment of late capitalism fosters the development of highly self-assertive forms of individuation, which are potentially damaging to the communities that host them. How far this analogy can be drawn should be left open. It certainly must not be taken to mean that entrepreneurs are parasites or financialization a viral strain or conversely that viruses are driven by the “spirit of capitalism”, much less by anything like ambition. But it cannot go unnoticed how among different life-forms or, more generically, forms of being, homologous patterns of behavior are developed as a response to the pressures exercised and the opportunities provided by current socioeconomic conditions. To this extent, regardless how we tackle it theoretically and philosophically, we are not dealing here with a superficial resemblance but with a substantial analogy: similar to the way individual entrepreneurs or enterprises tend to stand out in the “free market” precisely because of their competitiveness, vi-

– Commune

The streets of Athens, as of so many other cities in the world, are empty, offering at times a truly post apocalyptic imagery, filled with silent fear, hidden trauma and sad beauty. And yet, behind this serene and terrifying stillness, there is movement on the social basis: much of it is unfolding in digital space, but a significant part erupts and flows in excepted institutional spaces: in prisons, camps and workplaces. It is no sign of Marxist stubbornness to insist on the significance of the strikes that are taking place in various countries after the pandemic broke out. Struggles in the workplace at a time such as this are crucial for a number of related reasons: they pierce the ideological crust of national unity to unveil a material reality of exploitation and the class nature of (a significant part of) the governmental measures; they mark out the essential role of labor for social reproduction in any given situation as well as the significance of the body as a source of social value; last but not least, they are practical reminders that a state of emergency does not suspend the class-struggle and that even during the Apocalypse justice will play out as a contentious practicality. Who must work? Why and for whom do we work? How long and where do we work? What is the value of work? Who is to decide on such issues and on what criteria? Ongoing working-class struggles block the reduction of these questions to their functional and technical aspects (real at these may be) and unveil their irreducible political character.

Working-class struggles will most likely intensify in the coming months. And there should be little doubt that if these struggles infringe seriously on the economic reboot underway, the biopolitical emergency can be invoked to quell them. In such a context, it will be vital to build bridges of solidarity between the different segments of the working class: the mobile precariat, the domesticated cognitariat and the proletarian mass of unemployed that is expected to skyrocket.

operating today will escalate its intensity: namely the tension between health and economy or in other words between the value of life and the objectified value that is capital. Even if the health crisis is overcome the tension will continue, because we can be certain that amidst an unraveling economic crisis the ruling class will attempt to shift the burden to the plebeian masses. Possibly this will entail a reaffirmation of neoliberal orthodoxy and a new round of austerity; perhaps a deeper re-composition and restructuration will have to transpire, even some revamped Keynesianism may have its window of opportunity. In either case, the first moment of the dialectic will be always operative, the *preservation* of the current order of things – for the Order that the state maintains concerns concrete social relations and their identifiable hierarchies and privileges. The wager here for the state will be to maintain the full initiative so that it can block experiences of injustice (along with the accompanying despair, anger and resentment) passing from the affective level to that of organized critique; repression of dissent and muting of criticism through the control of media outlets will be one means to this end, state benefits coupled with organized charity by the wealthy can be another. In all cases, the utopia of the *Urstaat*, that is, the apotheosis of the state-form as the embodiment of Order, will as much depend on the successful management of the crisis as it will be boosted by its escalation. In such a scenario, biopolitical emergency will frequently resume as a way to deal with another expression of the social contagion, which will be all the more likely to break out as the tension between the two other expressions, health and economy, grows to become a proper historical contradiction: mass insurgencies from below.

All (quiet) rise in the plebeian front.

“It’s time to build the brigades”.

ral strains “tend to stand out precisely because of their virulence”.

Following this materialist line of thought, Chuang astutely conceives of the coronavirus pandemic as a *social contagion*, whose various contours need to be mapped out. The more immediate of these contours is of course the one that concerns health. That the outbreak is serious in an out-of-the-ordinary way cannot be measured simply by the death toll – even though, as numbers increase exponentially, the mortality rate of Covid-19 weighs heavily as a potent factor – but by the outbreak of a virus for which there is neither herd-immunity nor vaccines or medicine and which consequently has a high degree of penetrance. In this respect, as Wallace remarks, statistical comparisons with the influenza (when they are made for the purpose of explaining away the pandemic as an “exaggeration”, driven by ulterior motives and interests) are an entirely misplaced “rhetorical device”. Then again, that the epidemic journey of a viral strain morphed into a worldwide health crisis is not irrelevant to social context, specifically to the condition of health care systems in countries where the outbreak has spread. It is unlikely that any healthcare system would not be strained by a sudden and exponential increase of people in need of hospitalization. Yet, as it has been widely argued, e.g. by Mike Davis and David Harvey, neoliberal policies (with their consistent devaluation of public health care systems and their “just-in-time” management) combined with the near total domination of the pharmaceutical sector by corporations (driven by profit and underfunding research aimed at prevention) has made states ill-prepared for a potential pandemic, despite warnings to the contrary. Coupled with the initial underestimation of the threat by governing authorities, the lack of discipline on the social basis (again mainly at the early phases) and sprinkled with good doses of anti-Chinese propaganda and orientalism, many factors came together to ensure that a health crisis with global reach would break out.

Alain Badiou is adamant that, virulent as the viral strain may be, there is nothing novel or worthy of critical thought in the pandemic, save its spread to the “comfortable” West. Even this fact should not be underestimated though, for the outbreak of a lethal and rapidly transmitting viral strain to the center of today’s hyper-connected world, inevitably gave rise to the specter of a crisis that we have been accustomed to see on screens. Infecting our dystopian imaginary as much as our bodies, Covid-19 has elicited an affective mass transmission of vulnerability and insecurity.

Serious as the health-crisis may be (and it looks quite serious), what makes the social contagion sufficiently disruptive to pass the threshold of an “event” are its wider consequences. In these terms, it hardly takes a Marxist to realize that, having emerged within and circulated through the worldmarket, the coronavirus was bound to affect the extensive and intensive circuits of production, exchange and consumption that constitute today’s globalized economy. Some in fact have been quick to pinpoint in economic interests and calculations the true cause behind the façade of global epidemic, confidently exclaiming (in the words of an autonomist’s poster in Athens) that the coronavirus “is not a flu but a commercial war”. For sure, against vacuous invocations of an international community standing together in solidarity, it is sensible to expect that the pandemic will aggravate existing economic and geopolitical rivalries. Reductions of the pandemic to economic interests however actually mar this issue by soaking it in a conspiratorial logic, which assumes an impossible intentionality and control over a torrent of events – even more so, events involving nonhuman factors. Factories, businesses, shops, industries have ceased operating or started operating far below their usual velocity, while, receiving the vibes of the shutdown, the stock market commenced its own free fall; the overall result has been a major shockwave affecting all the key domains of the capitalist market: supply, demand and finance. This surely

contagion, are connected even in terms of their administration. For the chief response of states and relevant agents, notably the EU, is to pour large sums of money in order to halt the effects of the great deceleration, whilst allowing systematic social distancing to continue. In the long run however, this tactic is unviable and bound to aggravate the economic crisis, by soaring deficits and turning private insolvency into a huge public debt. Simplistic as it sounds, at some point some will be called to pay the bill.

Expectedly, a growing number of voices, even in more tactful ways than Trump and the republican Right of the United States, begin to openly state that the economy needs to start running again in more regular velocities, which in capitalism of course can only mean constant acceleration. The trouble here is that a relaxation of social distancing in order to re-stimulate economic activity will most likely lead to another spike in viral infections. No clearly worked out plan exists for this quandary, and it is more than likely that states will adopt different policies, depending also on the political outlook of their government and the configuration of social powers reflected therein. Whatever its details though, the response will have to amount to nothing less than a reboot. As a matter of fact, the latter may have already been initiated and current configurations could move from being exceptional to become a component of the new normal: a working-force of “connected/domesticated” subjects working from home while another mass of “mobile/disposable” subjects working to provide for them, the result being a division of labor where roles are complementary but the immediate interests antagonistic. Point granted, many more sectors of the economy need to resume their regular velocities in order for the global market to be back on its feet; amidst a pandemic which may have not yet peaked this is far from easy. To an even greater extent probably than the health crisis, the climax of the economic crisis lays ahead of us. In this context, the tension that is already

relation of codependence is thus formed, yet the relation never reaches a full identity, either logical or historical; there remains an excess from the side of capital, whose global spatiality puts pressures to the territoriality of states (even the most powerful ones), and an autonomy from the side of the state, which allows it to take initiatives – even if these are to serve the interests of capitalists, as it happens in Greece currently with many of the measures taken by the government, aiming to ensure that businesses will not simply remain viable but will sustain or quickly recapture their profitability.

What all these points concretely mean is that the (re)composition and (re)structuration of a new normal is necessarily mediated by the effective immunological management of the spreading social contagion, in its twofold valence as a health and economic crisis. As far as the first is concerned, policies more sophisticated and targeted than the current quarantine should be expected to appear sooner or later. Nevertheless, as long as a vaccine is not available and no herd-immunity exists, Covid-19 will carry on being a haunting presence, a threat to public health and a source of anxiety and insecurity affecting social relations. It is hard for a state, even more so states evoking human rights and popular sovereignty as key legitimizing principles, to totally disregard the affective imprint of mass insecurity, anxiety, fear or the pain of regular loss that a pandemic brings. Moreover, irrespective of whether we use biopolitics as a catchword, no state can ignore public health, since it is a necessary feature of order hence a potential source of disorder; what will indeed happen if healthcare systems collapse? Panic, fear and insecurity can creep into the state machine as much as to the individual psyche, hindering its calculating rationality. Yet it increasingly becomes clear that the looming economic crisis starts to preoccupy authorities as much as the health crisis, nay it becomes their center of concern. To be sure, the two crises, being precisely the salient expressions of a social

does not stop individual enterprises, even entire economic sectors, from profiting or profiteering (the line between the two being blurred as the mechanism of “supply and demand” receives input from the spreading social contagion). There is nothing novel here: in all major social crises, be it wars, natural disasters or even popular uprisings, some find an opportunity to make “big bucks”. Yet, just like the fact that during the Second World War some companies profited does not alter the equally recorded fact of widespread economic devastation in whole continents, neither the increased profit of individual companies nor even the accelerated activity of economic sectors to day excludes the occurrence of an unexpected “great deceleration”.

“Unexpected” does not mean “out of the blue” or “*ex nihilo*”. Pretty much like national healthcare systems, even the more robust economy would be put to the test by a shutdown of such scale, much more so a global economy that was having enough troubles to allow predictions of a new cycle of recession and crisis to achieve wide circulation. In this respect, even though multiple scenarios can still be made, depending on the standpoint of the speaker, SARS 2, a true “agent of chaos”, is going to reveal and aggravate the chronic problems and systemic weaknesses of the current economic system, both on a global/international and on a national level – something that clearly allows for diversity in form and intensity. Granting the open nature of the events and the different outcomes they may yield, the salient point is that, along with a health crisis, the social contagion the coronavirus has spurred takes the shape of an economic crisis of potentially gigantic proportions. And since by “economy” we refer not only to some figures on a balance sheet but to the social (re)production of life, just like “health” refers not only to the well being of individual bodies but to the smooth operation of a structured yet vulnerable collective assemblage, we can ultimately grasp why the unfolding social contagion marks the epigenesis of a general-

ized social crisis. Expectedly, faced with the reality and, no less important, the *specter* of disruption that such an extensive crisis necessarily entails, the state as ultimate guarantor of the smooth and proper functioning of contemporary societies has been called upon.

The immunological Urstaat and the new normal

“Build Babylon, the task you have sought. Let bricks for it be moulded and raise the shrine”

– Enuma Elish, 57–58

There is a veritable assumption – a true “myth” in the Barthian sense – among advocates of the free market that the forms of competitive interaction composing this institution are structured by a mechanism of self-regulation, capable of achieving and maintaining in the long-run a certain homeostatic balance. The committed evangelists of this idea are willing to embrace the “creative destruction” necessarily entailed in the process – after all they are rarely affected personally by it. Moreover, with the exception of the true zealots, free-market advocates (those widely regarded as apostles of neoliberalism included) acknowledge the need of public law as a safeguard to property and capital accumulation, as well as some form of state regulation and intervention, which may not be restricted to the role of a “watchdog”, as it extends to institutional and legal facilitation, but which, if need be, can become considerably intensive and repressive, e.g. establish a military dictatorship that makes “commies” disappear. Why should the principle change when the threat posed to the market comes not from communists and unruly workers but from a viral strain? After all, historically, communism has been depicted as a “bacillus”, leading a century ago to the establishment of

of disorder, the plague fed into a “political dream”, “the utopia of the perfectly governed city”.

That similar measures are taken currently by states may well have to do with their instrumentality for an effective containment of epidemics; yet, in its very necessity, the biopolitical emergency of today may nourish a similar political imaginary, of a well-ordered, hence rational, society in which the state ensures that we all stay where we must and only act for identifiable reasons. From this point of view, the specific set of measures taken by governments and their debatable character is secondary – though far from unimportant; what chiefly matters is that the state appears as the necessary guarantor of order, hence, as the absolute condition of justice and right: “I the State, I am Order, I am Justice”. At a time of intensive securitization and growing authoritarianism, a flaring up of such a political imaginary is considerably dangerous, since at its endpoint stands the fantasy of total territorialization – the most potent historical form of which in modern times is none other than fascism.

It is necessary to insist here that the *Urstaat*, in its historical actuality as well as utopian proclivity, does not concern the realization of a homogeneous substance, but the reterritorialization of heterogeneous externalities in a hierarchical field of interiority, externalities which serve to give to the state its historical form.

Yet another thing that the coronavirus pandemic has served to remind is that even at the time of the so-called “Anthropocene”, where humankind is supposed to have become the chief macro-historical agent, there are numerous nonhuman externalities, from the climatic to the microbiological levels, invading states, affecting their civic body, subverting their stability, creating leaks and short-circuits. Point granted, equally arguable is that, today, the most powerful and potent externality is capital, which the state needs to integrate, regulate and ensure its valorization as a condition for its own stability. A

these biopolitical spatializations are evoking political images and landscapes that are age-old and that, moreover, are not figments of a dystopian imagination but expressions of a veritable, utopian imaginary.

The notion of the *Urstaat*, proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, is possibly problematic as a genetic account of state-formation, but grasps compactly a key characteristic of the state-form, highlighted also by other, more historically nuanced, analyses: states may be structures of domination, yet from its earliest appearance the state-form and, more specifically, the cities that stand as its political, administrative, economic, cultural and ideological epicenter have a markedly utopian dimension, not standing as an ideological superstructure but overcoding the state's everyday activities. At the heart of this utopia –every state's essence, dream and fetish, is Order: in distributing rights and duties, in keeping records, in setting boundaries and limits, in caring for the needy and punishing trespassers, state is *ordering* a territory to assume its proper form. Needless to say, there is hardly any state that has lived up to its self-image, with phenomena like corruption, nepotism and clientelism being typical of states, past and present; so typical indeed that they can be considered endemic to the hierarchical structures and mechanisms of the state-form. Yet even the most corrupt and ruthless state needs to maintain at least the institutional skeleton of a normative order. It follows that, although states will tolerate their own corruption (always promising to improve), they need to eliminate or at least contain and control every autonomous source of disorder, either internal or external. But while every state loathes disorder, it also requires it and invites it as a condition for its consolidation; which is to say, states see reflected in disorder not only their Other, but the reason and righteousness of their own being. This is precisely what Foucault has grasped in his analysis of the disciplinary measures taken on the occasion of a plague outbreak in the 17th century; as an embodiment

a “sanitary zone” meant to contain the epidemic in Russia, which had already fallen victim to the disease. “Biopolitics”, and the intermingling of medical and political discourse that it entails, can be a component of international relations and foreign policy as much as of domestic policies directed to the population living inside a given territory.

The inference to be drawn from all these is that the extensive state intervention which we are witnessing, and which seems to follow the exponential growth rates of Covid-19, in no way spells the sudden “death” of neoliberalism, even less so of capitalism. In sharp contrast, even if it is accepted that the “normal” political form of a capitalist society is that of a liberal state (a contested claim), highly authoritarian forms of statism are still not just a digression but a condition for the reproduction of the capitalist market, either at a national or even at a “world-system” level. To put it schematically, the crisis of reproduction of capitalist social relations, and by extension of parliamentarism as a form of political mediation, generates an objective tendency towards authoritarian regimes of regulation. Moreover, since we are dealing with mutations of the state form, a formal antithesis between authoritarianism and democracy can be misleading, for it fails to comprehend how the two intermingle and morph into each other. The transition from a liberal democracy to an authoritarian regime (or vice versa) is usually crisis-laden, yet it still takes place within the state form; which is to say, the latter absorbs the interplay between the two as moments of its own reproduction and history. There is thus a certain duality or to be more precise a *two-in-one* operating in times of crises of social reproduction: what from one perspective is an act of *preservation*, of dominant social relations, constitutes also an act of *re-composition*, unified in a singular process of *restructuration*, where the dissolution of identity is prevented only through its self-differentiation – thus, self-negation.

How far have we moved towards such a direction of regime change today? The recent self-suspension of Parliament in Hungary is certainly something to take note of, as it shows how the social contagion enables an immunological re-composition of the state towards more authoritarian forms. Nevertheless, talk about a “new totalitarianism” or “fascism” may look premature or even forced by a gaze predisposed to see them. What can be said with certainty is that most affected states have responded to social contagion by declaring a state of emergency and since then managing it through a varied mix of sovereignty and governmentality. The aspect of sovereign power is not hard to grasp, it is the very capacity to declare emergency and any measures that follow thereafter. This is the key point of Carl Schmitt’s infamous definition: no matter if the emergency is “real” or simply a fabrication, sovereignty is the *power to declare* it and thus assume the responsibility of its administration and resolution. That said, even sovereign power, insofar as it is exercised, has a dimension of relationality; and although its form is vertical and mainly defined by imposition, the exercise of sovereign power still requires a degree of acceptance. Therefore, while during an emergency the normative aspects of the state recede in favor of its prerogative dimension, normativity does not disappear, it is rather invested in the sovereign, who does not simply do what is “needed” but also what *ought to be done* e.g. save lives, businesses and jobs. The obvious problem here, highlighted virtually by everyone who has engaged with the phenomenon, is that in the process the forms of sovereign power that appeared during the state of emergency can be entrenched, completing the dialectic of preservation/ re-composition/ restructuring highlighted above.

Picking up on this fact, at an earlier phase of the pandemic, commentators on the left, like Giorgio Agamben, have criticized the emergency declared as a disproportionate, hence unwarranted, act, whose real purpose was to enhance the grip of

outsource their customer service, which have been allowed to operate without even ensuring that they keep the necessary measures of protection for workers. Moreover, the point here is not to dispute that people do have a responsibility to practice social distancing or that the latter is actually an act of solidarity towards other people, rather than an expression of petty bourgeois survivalism. Nevertheless, the consistency of the discourse of personal responsibility *as a governmental policy*, alongside the unspecified time horizon of the quarantine, carries a long-term dynamic of *adaptation* that can act as a catalyst for the systematization of a state of affairs where tracking and surveillance are not experienced as infringements but as a civic duty and a condition for the exercise of individual freedom, the boundaries of which will have been of course determined in advance.

While important to recall that we are mapping out tendencies, not finalized actualities, an overall picture still emerges: the biopolitical emergency that the unfolding crisis has generated raises the specter of a “new normal”, which among other features will contain recurrent restrictions to movement and association, partly imposed from above partly accepted as an act of self-responsibility. While the regime that will embody this new normality will surely be authoritarian, there is much more involved than an increase in the levels of state repression, that is, a quantitative change; there is rather a qualitative re-composition underway (tentative, open and still fragile, to be sure) through which the spatial domains of the state and of individual autonomy are reconfigured. From a left wing perspective there is something unsettlingly dystopian in this path, heading towards a future that only science-fiction has visualized: a fully administered society that has effectively collapsed the distinction between heteronomy and autonomy, servitude and freedom, that is, the key distinctions upon which our politics has been premised. Yet this is not entirely accurate as a critical anatomy; for in their very novelty,

The overall process is buttressed by the second facet of the biopolitical emergency currently in operation, which pertains to governmentality. Alongside a staggering show of sovereign power, all affected states have in one way or another incorporated personal responsibility in their policy, stressing the duty of citizens to perform social distancing and “#stay home”. There is no need again to evoke a masterplan devised and executed by an omnipresent Power in order to grasp the tendency at work and the wider process it is embedded. The whole idea of “governmentality” was to conceptually grasp forms of power that do not operate through the vertical diagrammatic lines of a sovereign power that commands, but in a more diffused and horizontal way, integrated to the autonomous activity of individuals. Towards this end, a key mediating role has been played by new digital technologies, which individuals carry as an integral part of their own social and personal identity: cards and their pins, mobile phones and their tracking devices (either physical or preference tracking), social media and their accounts; these are only the more obvious manifestations of a technology that, the very same moment it is said to facilitate individual autonomy, enhances the capacity of political power to keep individuals accountable – by *making them (keep an) account* – of their actions. Recognizing the role of technology, we must still not be carried away by the dystopian version of techno-fetish, since even in states like Greece where biopolitical emergency is not as high-tech, similar (if less effective) patterns and forms of governmentality have emerged, blurring the boundaries between discipline, control and autonomy. For sure, the insistent stress on the role of personal responsibility in the “battle” against the coronavirus, may well be a policy calculated to displace discussion from the shortages of national healthcare systems or from other governmental policies – e.g. the scandalous tolerance shown to heavy industry in Italy and big call centers in Greece where all major tech-companies

government on citizens, taking one more (big) step towards an authoritarian state. In retrospect, it is easy to say that this was a very hasty assessment of the Covid-19 epidemic. In fact, such an indictment is not enough; what needs to be added, going back to a point made at the beginning, is a deeply worrying tendency in critical theory to undermine as a matter of principle the veracity of scientific discourse, or worse the materiality of the physical world, in the name of a sweeping critique of power and a vulgar social constructivism, which end up seeing everywhere domination and machinations meant to entrench it. As suggested earlier, this attitude can lead to dangerous paths, which start from seemingly innocuous claims that Covid-19 is simply a “heavy flu” and all that is needed is to wash your hands(!) but which can then arrive at a total disregard for science under a pose of radical resistance. On the other hand, this “critique of the critique” also risks missing a key point, which concerns the political effects and affects of the pandemic, namely the affirmation and justification (in a substantial sense) of the state’s capacity to adopt authoritarian measures and hence assume more authoritarian shapes.

Although it is quite unclear when the pandemic will end, we can be relatively assured that the more severe emergency measures will not outlive it, since no state can possibly aim at empty cities with highly reduced economic activity as the norm. Whatever valid critique can be made on the curfews that states have imposed, and there are criticisms even from the World Health Organization about their efficacy, it is exceedingly naïve to reduce all such measures taken to a sinister ploy by “state and capital”. One is hard-pressed to seriously imagine any collective form that would not have to implement some restrictions in face of an epidemic, which politically means to give its invested powers an authoritarian twist. Equally difficult is to see how hierarchy can be entirely replaced with horizontality, on an institutional level, without at the same time reducing scientific knowledge to opinion. This is not to say that

people lack the capacity to discipline themselves without patronizing or appreciate expertise without imposition (though in our era of social media it is astonishing how much obscurantism if not plain idiocy circulate asknowledge). It is only to stress that in times of emergency the institutional forms mediating communal existence are pressed to adopt and develop more authoritarian lines of operation. Yelling “power” or “state of emergency” does not constitute a political event and the axiomatic assumption that “horizontality” is preferable in all possible situations, along with its underside assumption that hierarchy is on principle an expression of injustice, are ideologies that can be as dogmatic and damaging as authoritarianism. How would it be possible to respond to the epidemic and stop the rapid escalation of the viral strain if some institutional organs (either composed by scientists or receiving input by scientific committees) were not invested with a real power to swiftly decide and act, but instead such power was diffused in a meshwork of local assemblies in thrall of voices declaring with passionate conviction that the virus is a heavy flu or a commercial war (not to mention assemblies in thrall of other voices declaring that the holy communion does not disseminate the virus)?

Yet from a materialist viewpoint, it is precisely the objectivity of authoritarian measures in times of crises which makes them more dangerous, for it creates an affectively fertile situation for the suspension of critique and the immunization of sovereign power. To assert that not everything can be decided during an emergency – perhaps also in ordinary times, but this is another issue – through mass popular assemblies requiring unanimity or consensus is one thing; to claim that democracy is a luxury and, instead of fostering public dialogue and accountability of representative organs, to join calls from the right for uncritical public obedience is wholly another. Moreover, no matter how deeply periods of emergency suspend the normal temporality and spatiality of a community, they always leave

traces on collective memory and the institutional forms that retain it and manage it. The administration of the unfolding social contagion is not going to be washed away like an antiseptic, it instead produces a certain experience, upon which states will be able to build in case of another emergency. This is no dystopian speculation, for states always (try to) absorb a crisis as a moment of their history, so that even when a re-composition is performed, the continuity of the state-form will be affirmed. The administration of the unfolding social contagion itself, no matter how exceptional some of the measures may be, falls within a well-established process of securitization, that has been defining of state policy for decades. Riots, mass migration flows, extreme climatic phenomena, financial bubbles, indebtedness, epidemics and now a global pandemic; from the perspective of the existing capitalist order, hence of the state that sustains it, these phenomena share a key feature, they are sources of instability and factors of disruption to the smooth functioning of society; hence they are necessarily experienced as security threats – “security” being precisely the condition whereby a being can feel comfortable persevering in its current state. This is the backbone of the shift from the rule of law to a state of security, which takes it upon itself to constantly declare emergencies and suspend rights that are constitutional, hence theoretically part of a state’s normative structure. Security also provides the necessary affective basis for social acceptance and mass support, as it leads individuals or entire social groups affected by insecurity to desire the presence of more state, even in full militarized form. From this angle, the coronavirus pandemic may radicalize the historical trend of securitization that has been underway, and the authoritarianism it breeds. Given that the duration of the social contagion is indefinite, the critical notion of a state of emergency becoming the norm needs to be taken seriously, although its contours require further unpacking.