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Original research article
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17234/WPAS.2021.2

Critique in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

After situating his commentary in the time of the pandemic, the author discusses the knee-jerk, immediate responses to the pandemic which he finds irritating. His reaction is triggered by what he believes are automatic responses that approach the times of COVID-19 with ready-made theoretical schemata. His immediate targets are the radical theorists who see capitalism as the culprit for the outbreak of the disease. In discussing this interpretative paradigm, the author argues for the need to make a distinction between capitalism and capital. In the conclusion, he offers the category of the uncanny as registering his own experience in confronting the time of the pandemic.

Key words: COVID-19, critique, capitalism, capital, hubris

1

Thinking back on the moment when I made the perhaps foolish decision to accept the invitation to deliver a plenary talk, which forms the nucleus of what follows, before an American studies gathering addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, I think it must have been on one of those days when the decrease in the number of people affected by the disease seemed to point to an overcoming of the affliction. Those were the days when one could almost believe that social policy, a caution we brought into our interaction with people and things, could deliver us from the pandemic. Since then, developments both in Croatia and elsewhere have proven that we were wrong. After

more than a year, the pandemic has not been contained. On the contrary, it has intensified to the extent that several newspapers have decided to insert a "coronavirus update" among their regular columns. Each abatement of the number of people who have been exposed to the disease is regularly followed by a surge. I have frequently felt the aptness of a metaphor used by a health specialist to describe pronouncements made by different people dealing with the pandemic: it is like judging marathon runners and their position after only thirty minutes of the race. One thing is for sure: we are still in the marathon, and I am writing this without a clear vision of its end.

Each day's coverage of the pandemic, the latest disarray attending the distribution of the vaccine, not to mention the prognostications that deadlier future pandemics lie in store for us, all contribute to a sense of disabling frustration. That sense of disablement springs from a derangement of routine which shows our modes of understanding to be ineffectual. The rhythm of social and private life has been thrown out of kilter. It is difficult to attend to the chores of the moment while plans are constantly postponed or simply cancelled. Whether we follow the news or still manage to indulge in human conversation, the pandemic has wrought tectonic disturbances into our bodily and intellectual practices. The longer it lasts, the more difficult it is to place it within our existing modes of knowledge. COVID-19 taxes our ability to know and explain. The bafflement I feel before its onslaught, the fear and anxiety of our everyday world – the new normalcy, as some euphemistically call it – is truly frustrating. As far as I am concerned, that frustrating disablement is irritating in itself but becomes even more so when we are provided with pat explanations of the genesis of the pandemic and with remedies that will restore the world to what it once was.

2

Let me immediately state that I am not referring here to quacks, conspiracy-mongers, or pandemic deniers, on the street or in high office. These

do not even irritate me. My quarrel is with theorists and critics who define and set the standards for what we call thinking. What I find irritating is the presumptuousness of theorists who stand with their schemata at the ready and unflinchingly address any challenge that might befall us. Nothing seems to be able to disempower their intellectual prowess. I will try to give a name to this presumptuous stance, show what I consider its shortcomings to be, and attempt not to delineate an alternative but merely suggest that one might exist.

It was almost to be expected that Slavoj Žižek would be among the first to address the pandemic. The book *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (2020) is informed by Žižek's recognizable style and by his revolutionary posture. He perceptively registers the changes wrought by the pandemic but cannot refrain from proposing that the new condition holds the potential of transformation to a new communism. He is rehearsing an argument that he has developed when addressing other topics. Richard Horton, it is worth noting, in the general medical journal *The Lancet*, acknowledges Žižek as the first to produce a volume of thoughts on COVID-19. He remarks: "Beyond health, Žižek sees the possibility of 'releasement' – the use of 'dead time', 'moments of withdrawal', 'for the revitalization of our life experience'. Lockdowns have enforced solitude time to 'think about the (non)sense of (our) predicament" (Horton). Taking into consideration all the brackets and their implications, one must pause and ponder about the kind of thinking involved here and ask whether Žižek performed an important service, as Horton has it, initiating "a global conversation about what we do with this moment." Žižek's engagement with the moment has been repeated by countless others. In an early review of the book, Yohann Koshy in *The Guardian* (April 23, 2020) asked "what reproduces itself more quickly, the coronavirus or the commentary?" (Koshy).

A year later, today we would stay clear of the implied jocular tone in Koshy's remark. The virus's speed of reproduction is hardly something to joke

about. However, if there will be a time after COVID-19 for scholarship, then those who choose to address the pandemic will not suffer from a dearth of material. Not only are we bombarded daily by coverage of its spread, statistics of people affected by or falling victim to it, explanations, prognostications, warnings, and fear mongering, but on top of all this, many prominent theoreticians have felt obliged to address the topic. Richard Horton's appreciation of Žižek shows how the Slovenian philosopher registers in certain medical quarters. As a rule, the channels of reception have taken a different route – that is, the pandemic as a medical issue has been addressed by humanistic-sociological knowledge. In his article "Six political philosophies in search of a virus," Gerard Delanty considers "the implications from the perspective of political philosophy and social theory of the kinds of political epistemology that follow from the current crisis and the dark arts of epidemiological governance" (2). He describes six philosophies that he believes underlie the different responses to the pandemic. I will enumerate and summarize their basic tenets. First, there is utilitarianism, which Delanty connects with the strategy of herd immunity and its focusing on the common good. Second, he mentions the Kantian alternative professing the worth of human dignity instead of the elusive common good. Third, there is the libertarian option, which celebrates the individual and condemns any kind of communitarian policy. Fourth, we have those who adhere to Foucault and the order of governance, which includes the notions of the state of exception and of biopolitical securitization. The fifth philosophy espouses a vision of post-capitalism and radical politics. Based on behavioral science, the sixth is named Nudge Theory; it is less stringent and advises gradual adaptation. I enumerate these political philosophies not because of their intrinsic worth but rather to illustrate how, as a rule, social thought has a need to subsume practice under one or another paradigm of thinking. Simply put, existing tools are retained and reused in new circumstances.

Thus, the Fall 2020 issue of *Philosophy Today* was devoted to the question of philosophy in a time of pandemic. In their introduction to the issue,

Peg Birmingham and Ian Alexander Moore summarize what contributors had to say about the relation and contend that "philosophy should question moral certainties and simple oppositions, without however being too quick to provide solutions, especially at the level of policy" (813). They underline that "the most important thing to be learned is that the pandemic should not be examined in isolation" (ibid.). The very title of Andrew Benjamin's contribution to the issue, "Solidarity, Populism and COVID-19: Working Notes," signalizes this approach. It is an approach that leads him to the insight that "the virus registers in sites that are themselves structured by discrimination and disequilibria of power." From this he derives a working hypothesis: "The relation between the non-discriminatory nature of the virus and sites of original discrimination opens up a range of possible responses" (834). Benjamin's response is to describe COVID-19 as bio-political "precisely because it exposes the current state of the political set up to which life now is subjected. At the heart of which there are, to recall Arendt's formulation, 'the oppressed and exploited'" (837). Needless to say, social differentiation is the insight which motivates the analyses of Delanty's radical politics group and its post-capitalist visions.

3

As can be expected, Marxist readings are at the forefront of the responses which explore the relation between the non-discriminatory nature of the virus and the sites of original discrimination. The latter can be provisionally defined as the capital relation. Consequently, critics who work within the Marxist tradition have a ready explanation of the pandemic as a byproduct of capitalism. Thus, John Bellamy Foster and Intan Suvandi in their article "Covid-19 and Catastrophe Capitalism: Commodity Chains and Ecological-Epidemological-Economic Crises" maintain that Marx's theoretical framework "allows us to perceive how the circuit of capital under late imperialism is tied to the etiology of disease via agribusiness, and how this has generated the COVID-19 pandemic." Registering a development in health policy, they write: "As the revolutionary development in epidemiology rep-

resented by One Health and Structural One Health have suggested, the etiology of the new pandemics can be traced to the overall problem of ecological destruction brought on by capitalism" (Foster and Suvandi). In my opinion, these generalizations fall short of a satisfying explanation. The reason for this is that they designate a specific historical period as the breeding ground for the pandemic and do not realize or, to say it better, do not accept the fact that the problem of ecological destruction antedates capitalism and that the dynamic which impels capitalism is not contained within it. More will be said concerning this below.

As is to be expected, when Marxist critique discusses the handling of the pandemic crisis, it reverts to class analysis and the manifold social inequalities. Much of this argument gives a convincing description of the fit between, using Benjamin's phrasing, the non-discriminatory nature of the virus and the sites of original discrimination. The resultant spatial discrimination of the pandemic can be mapped onto all social geographies, from the family habitat to the city, from the differences between states and regions to the severity of the pandemic on different continents. These differences are great fodder not only for the daily news but also for the prevailing politics of blame. The last year has seen the political use of the pandemic on different meridians. What I feel needs emphasizing is that the politics of the pandemic presupposes that COVID-19 is manageable, that it can be attended to by resources and know-how that are or will be at our disposal. At the moment of writing, I do not share these assumptions. Let me quote J. L. Nancy as Michael A. Peters references him in the article "Philosophy and Pandemic in the Postdigital Era: Foucault, Agamben, Žižek":

> We must be careful not to hit the wrong target: an entire civilization is in question, there is no doubt about it. There is a sort of viral exception – biological, computer-scientific, cultural – which is pandemic. Governments are nothing more than grim exceptions, and taking it out on them seems more like a diversionary maneuver than a political reflection. (qtd. in Peters)

Observers who "take it out" on politicians or governments underplay the severity of the pandemic, its ungraspable power, and its spread. In a paradoxical fashion, critical thought, blaming this or that policy, duplicates the positioning of politicians toward the pandemic. Both deem it something that can be handled. Neither one party nor the other puts to question their characteristic hubris.

What seems to be forgotten by radical critique is that capitalism is a specific historical configuration whose time is not correspondent with the time of viruses. In *Capital* Marx wrote: "World trade and the world market date from the sixteenth century, and from then on the modern history of Capital starts to unfold" (247). Put otherwise, the "modern history of Capital" as the epoch of capitalism is only one of its realizations. In Moishe Postone's book *History and Heteronomy: Critical Essays*, I find an apposite remark:

> the category of capital delineates a historical dynamic process that is associated with a number of historical forms. That dynamic is a core feature of the modern world. It entails an ongoing transformation of all aspects of social and cultural life that can be grasped neither in terms of the state, nor in terms of civil society. Rather, that dynamic exists 'behind' them, as it were, a socially-constituted compulsion that transforms the conditions of people's lives in ways that seem beyond their control. (60 – 61)

Postone's distinction between the category of capital and the historical forms it takes has a conceptual significance if our focus is on the compulsion which cannot be restricted to one historical phase. I propose this compulsion as a dynamic which antedates and survives capitalism. I do so because it helps us put the question of viruses in a broader context. Without that broader context, viruses and pandemics are viewed without their proper temporality. This broadening of our horizon is provided by a conception of time which is much more encompassing than the time of capitalism and which David Christian

has designated "big history."

4

Christian's book *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (2004) poignantly shows how partial any political, military, economic, let alone national history is and how much it leaves out of its account. Of relevance to my argument, it is indicative that David Christian registers the presence of diseases in chronicling "big time." More specifically, viruses, "which are so simplified that they cannot even reproduce without hijacking the metabolic systems of other organisms" (121), are in this mapping of time actants which significantly impact evolutionary developments. Christian also quotes Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan: "In the long run, the most vicious predators, like the most dread disease-causing microbes bring about their own ruin by killing their victims. Restrained predation – the attack that doesn't quite kill or does kill only slowly – is a recurring theme in evolution" (250). Christian comments: "But just as disease viruses often evolve less virulent strains that can exploit their prey without killing them, so human rulers eventually learned to protect the farmers they exploited (much as farmers protected their own herds of livestock)" (ibid.). The way that viruses develop accordingly provides a parallel to the behavior of human beings.

However, viruses and diseases in Christian's book are not only used as epistemological models but are shown to have had a more immediate impact on historical development. For example, regarding Silk Roads and sea routes linking the Mediterranean and South and East Asia, Christian remarks: "Disease bacteria travelled these routes as well as people, goods and techniques causing massive and recurring plagues as each region faced new diseases for which its populations lacked biological and cultural antibodies" (315). Christian quotes William H. McNeill's observation: "In the first Christian centuries . . . Europe and China, the two least disease-experienced civilizations of the Old World, were in an epidemiological position analogous

to that of Amerindians in the later age: vulnerable to socially disruptive attack by new infectious diseases" (316). Maps of diseases and the spread of viruses are of course not stable "[b]ut increasing commercial activity, like the state, could also undercut growth, and it did so primarily by affecting pattern of disease" (330). The connection between commerce and disease patterns is particularly telling: "As regional populations came into contact with each other, they swapped diseases in exchanges that sometimes led to catastrophic epidemics that undermined state power and led to regional declines" (331). How this has intensified during the last phase of globalization is not difficult to surmise.

If we look at the age of exploration and conquest, the actant role Christian assigns to diseases is blatantly revealed. Christian observes:

> But animal domesticates also swapped diseases with their human owners; thus cohabitation with domesticates, combined with the efficient systems of communication they provided, ensured that the populations of Afro-Eurasia were more disease-hardened than those of the other world zones. And the diseases of Afro-Eurasians may have been more useful to them in their attempts at conquest than their advanced naval and military technologies. For example, smallpox, as Alfred Crosby writes "played as essential a role in the advance of white imperialism overseas as gunpowder – perhaps a more important role, because the indigenes did turn the musket and the rifle against the intruders, but smallpox very rarely fought on the side of the indigenes." (365)

In the following excerpt, Christian points to a specific historical period and shows how the registering of disease as a causal factor forces us to rethink its contours:

> The swapping of diseases ensured that global integration was a destructive process for all the smaller world zones. By 1500 CE, exchanges of diseases within the more densely settled parts of Afro-Asia had increased overall im-

> munities throughout Afro-Eurasia. But no such toughening had occurred in the Americas or even more isolated communities of the Australasian and Pacific world zones. (381 – 82)

These remarks are particularly pertinent to the story of the Americas, but it does not surprise, for example, that the use of disease in the genocide of the American native peoples is rarely mentioned in mainstream histories of the New World. A critique of those histories would have to address this oversight, but a critique suited to the exigency of our times will recognize how today's circumstances are different in both scope and intensity. Words like immunity or isolation take on different connotations amidst today's pandemic, while the geographies of the above description are outdated and out of sync with today's world.

5

Nevertheless, the notion of "swapping" between humans and the surrounding world continues to figure prominently in accounting for the genealogy of COVID-19. In the Report of the Rockefeller Foundation, we read that, years before the outbreak of the pandemic, scientists had warned about the "increased risk of zoonotic disease transmission" (Whitmee et al.). Particularly relevant are the following findings: "Nearly all of the most important human pathogens are either zoonotic or originated as zoonoses before adapting to human beings and more than three-quarters of emerging infectious diseases are estimated to be directly transmitted" (Whitmee et al.). The broader environment in which this transmission takes place points to what happens to nature subsumed by economic interests:

> Half of the global emerging infectious disease events of zoonotic origin between 1940 and 2005 are estimated to result from changes in land use, in agricultural practices and in food production practices. The highest risk areas for the emergence of infectious zoonotic diseases occur where human population growth is high, ecologically disruptive development is under way, and human and wildlife populations overlap substantially. (Whitmee et al.)

If we keep in mind the notion of "big history," we will not restrict the diagnosis to the second part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the present one but remember that land use, ecologically disruptive development, and production processes have been perennial features of the human relationship to the environment. That relationship has always been characterized by the above-mentioned compulsion. Put otherwise, capitalism is not the only culprit when it comes to assigning guilt for the degradation of our habitat that has spawned the latest pandemic. In my opinion, the issue is much more complex and disturbing in several ways.

The pandemic is disturbing in terms of critique, because many of the tenets of critique do not seem to show great concern or even sufficient attention to the fact that the pandemic may be creating a state wherein the very conditions that critics take for granted in their thinking may very well become a thing of the past. Much of critique irritatingly seems to be doing its work as though nothing out of the ordinary is happening. Klaus Benesch's observation about the humanities in general is to the point here: "the humanities have ceased to be critical at all and instead have championed knee-jerk responses ('power, society, discourse') for almost every social and cultural issue there is" (Benesch). Using Benesch's metaphor, I have come to the conclusion that capitalism has become a knee-jerk response to a vast and ever-expanding number of problems that theory and critique have taken up as issues that they can have a say in addressing. In an article in which he asks, "why has critique run out of steam," Bruno Latour makes the following confession: "The mistake we made, the mistake I made, was to believe that there was no efficient way to criticize matters of fact except by moving away from them, and diverting one's attention toward the conditions that made them possible" (Latour 251). Focusing on conditions of possibility tames the challenge of the matters of fact. If the latter are a cause of worry and dread, then explanations which might even be able to expose the conditions that made these matters possible offer but little consolation.

6

I will conclude by briefly referencing the notion of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), as Kevin Aho uses it in his article "The Uncanny in the Time of Pandemics: Heideggerian Reflections on the Coronavirus." Aho writes that the uncanny emerges "when this tacit sense of familiarity ruptures and things begin to reveal themselves as eerie and unsettled" (2). According to him, this "means the secure feeling of familiarity that we embodied prior to the pandemic was an illusion all along, that we are not and never have been at-home in the world" (3). Working with these Heideggerian notions, Aho provides a diagnosis: "In the midst of the pandemic, we are living through a kind of world-collapse, and this is altering the very structures that constitute our existence" (5). Quoting Heidegger, he writes: "With the uncanny, we are living through our own dying by experiencing '*the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all*'" (7). Amongst the different readings of the pandemic that I have perused, Aho's use of Heidegger seems to me the most suitable for registering the moment of the pandemic in which I write and the doom-laden forecasts for the future. Neither one nor the other are cause for any kind of upbeat assessment.

It is from this psycho-emotional state that I have tried to piece together a commentary on the pandemic. In this state, extant protocols of critique prove to be useless. However, I hold that the making-sense power of critique should be employed even if it registers the incapacity to make sense. In the time of the pandemic, this might be its only procedure. Staying always open to the emergent and the new, authentic critique must acknowledge the possibility of being defeated by this emergence. Epistemological humility, therefore, must be a compulsory antidote to the epistemological hubris which, compulsively subsuming reality to its tenets, can miss the urgency at hand.

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