

# The Tragic Transparency of the Virus

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6 April 2020 – Today's cultural, political and ideological debates are imbued with a strange opacity, the result of their remove from the concrete day-to-day experience of the vast majority of people — ordinary citizens, or *la gente de a pie*, as they say in Latin America. That is especially the case with politics, which is supposed to be the mediator between ideologies and the needs and aspirations of citizens, but has been shirking that role instead. Whatever mediation is still left in it goes to the needs and aspirations of the market, that shapeless, monstrous mega-citizen no one has ever seen, touched or smelled, a strange citizen endowed with rights but bound by no obligations. It is as if we were blinded by its light. Then, all of a sudden, the pandemic breaks out, the light of the markets fades, and out of the darkness — the darkness with which we are always threatened if we do not pledge our allegiance to them — a novel clarity emerges: pandemic clarity and the apparitions it brings to light. The things it allows us to see and the way in which they are interpreted and assessed will determine the future of the civilization in which we live. Unlike other apparitions, these ones are real and are here to stay.

The pandemic is an allegory

The literal meaning of the coronavirus pandemic is widespread chaotic fear and boundless death caused by an invisible enemy, but in fact it says a lot more than that. Here are some of the meanings contained in it. The invisible almighty can be the infinitely large (the god of the religions of the book), or it can be the infinitely small (the virus). Another invisible all-powerful being, neither large nor small, for it is misshapen, has emerged in recent times: the market. Like the virus, it mutates in insidious and unpredictable ways, and, like god (Holy Trinity, incarnations), it is at once one and multiple. Although singular, it expresses itself in the plural. Unlike god, the markets is omnipresent in this world and not in the hereafter, and, unlike the virus, it is a blessing for the powerful and a curse for all the rest (the overwhelming majority of humans and the whole of non-human life). Although omnipresent, all these invisible beings fit in their own specific space: virus in bodies, god in temples, markets in stock exchanges. Outside of these spaces, the human being is a transcendental homeless being.

Subject to so many unpredictable and almighty beings, humans and the whole of non-human life on which humans depend are exceedingly fragile. In case all those invisible beings remain active, human life will soon be (and probably already is) in danger of extinction. It is subject to an eschatological order and its end is at hand. The fierce theology woven around this eschatology contains various levels of invisibility and unpredictability. God, virus and markets

are the formulations of the last kingdom, the most invisible and unpredictable one, the kingdom of heavenly glory or hellish perdition. Only those who are saved, the strongest of all (the saintliest, the strongest, the richest) shall ascend to it. Below that kingdom lies the kingdom of causes. It is the kingdom of mediations between the human and the non-human. Invisibility here is less rarefied, but it is created by intense lights that cast thick shadows on the kingdom. This kingdom is made of three unicorns. This is what Leonardo da Vinci had to say about the unicorn:

The unicorn, through its intemperance and not knowing how to control itself, for the love it bears to fair maidens forgets its ferocity and wildness; and laying aside all fear it will go up to a seated damsel and go to sleep in her lap, and thus the hunters take it.

In short, the unicorn is an almighty, as well as fierce and wild, but it has one weakness, in that it succumbs to the slyness of those who are able to spot it.

The three unicorns are, and have been since the 17th century, capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy — the principal modes of domination. In order to rule effectively, they, too, have to be intemperate, ferocious and prone to go out of control, as da Vinci warns. Despite being omnipresent in the lives of humans and of societies, they are essentially invisible, as is the essential interconnection between them. Such invisibility is the result of a common sense inculcated in human beings through education and permanent indoctrination. This common sense is self-evident and self-contradictory at one and the same time. All human beings are equal (so say capitalism); but given that there exist natural differences between them, equality between inferiors cannot be the same as equality between superiors (so say colonialism and patriarchy). This common sense has been around for a very long time and was once discussed by Aristotle, but it was not until the 17th century that it entered the lives of ordinary people, first in Europe and then throughout the world.

Contrary to what da Vinci thinks, the ferocity of the three unicorns does not stem from brute force alone. It also stems from the slyness that allows them to self-efface while remaining alive, or look weak when still strong. The first form of slyness is displayed through a multiplicity of wiles. Thus, for instance, capitalism seemed to have disappeared from a whole part of the world after the triumph of the Russian Revolution, but it turned out that it just went into hibernation inside the Soviet Union and went on controlling it from the outside (financial capitalism, counter-insurgency). Nowadays, capitalism's vitality has peaked in the very bosom of its all-time greatest enemy, communism, in a country — China — that is soon to become the world's largest economy. As to colonialism, it faked its own disappearance after the European colonies became independent, but it actually lived on, now metamorphosed into

neocolonialism, imperialism, dependence, xenophobia, racism, expulsion of indigenous peoples and peasants from their ancestral lands to build megaprojects, etc. Finally, patriarchy gives off the idea that it is dying or weakened in the wake of the significant triumph of the feminist movements in recent decades, but the truth of the matter is that domestic violence, sex discrimination and femicide have been constantly on the rise. The second display of slyness consists in making capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy seem to be separate entities having nothing to do with one another. The truth is that none of the unicorns has the power to rule alone. It takes the three to make them almighty. In other words, as long as there is capitalism, there will be colonialism and patriarchy.

The third kingdom is the kingdom of consequences. This is the kingdom where the three almighty powers show their true face. This is the layer the vast majority of people are able to see, even if with some difficulty. At present, this kingdom possesses two main landscapes where it shows itself at its most visible and most cruel: the scandalous concentration of wealth / extreme social inequality; the destruction of life on the planet / imminent ecological catastrophe. With these two brutal landscapes, the three almighty beings and their mediations offer a glimpse of where we're heading if we persist in viewing them as almighty. But are they really all-powerful? or is it the case that their omnipotence is just the mirror of the induced incapacity of human beings to fight them? That's the question.

Reality on the loose and the exceptionality of exception

The pandemic lends a chaotic freedom to reality, and any attempt to capture it analytically is doomed to fail, because reality is always one step ahead of whatever we think or feel about it. To theorize or write about it is to lay our categories and our language on the edge of the abyss. It is to conceive of contemporary society and its dominant culture as *mise en abyme*, as André Gide would put it. Intellectuals should fear this situation more than anybody else. As is the case with politicians, intellectuals in general are no longer the mediators between ideologies and the needs and aspirations of ordinary citizens. They do all the mediation among themselves, they with their little-big ideological differences. They write about the world, but not with the world. There are few public intellectuals, and those, too, fail to escape our present abyss. The generation that was born or grew up during the post-WWII period accustomed itself to thinking exceptionally in normal times. Faced with the pandemic crisis, they find it difficult to think the exception in exceptional times. The problem is that our shifty, chaotic day-to-day praxis eludes all theorizing and demands to be understood in sub-theorization mode. It is as if the pandemic's clarity generated so much transparency that we found ourselves incapable of reading, let alone rewriting what we wrote on a screen or on paper. Let me offer two illustrations.

At the very outset of the pandemic crisis, Giorgio Agamben protested against the danger of a state of exception being declared. By implementing surveillance measures and restricting mobility under the pretext of fighting the pandemic, the state would accumulate excessive powers, thereby jeopardizing democracy itself. His warning makes sense and was prescient with regard to some countries, notably Hungary. But it was written at a time when the panic-stricken citizens were awakening to the fact that the national health services were not prepared to fight the pandemic and demanding that the state take effective measures to stop the spread of the virus. Reaction was immediate and Agamben had to backpedal. In other words, the exceptionality of this exception did not let him think that there are exceptions and then there are exceptions, and that therefore in the future we shall have to distinguish not only between the democratic state and the state of exception, but also between the democratic and the undemocratic state of exception.

The second case in point has to do with Slavoj Žižek, who, at around the same time, foresaw that the pandemic pointed to “global communism” as the sole future solution. The proposal was in line with his normal-times theories, but was entirely inconsequential in times of exceptional exception. So he, too, had to backpedal. I have been arguing, based on numerous reasons, that the time of vanguard intellectuals is over. Intellectuals must see themselves as rearguard intellectuals, must heed the needs and aspirations of ordinary citizens and find out how to use that as a foundation for their theories. Otherwise, citizens will be defenseless before those who alone can speak their language and understand their deep concerns. In many countries these would be the conservative evangelical pastors or the radical Muslim imams, who stand for capitalist, colonialist and patriarchal domination.

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