

Living, Learning, Imagining in the Middle of the Crisis¹

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Abstract: The present work deals with the effects of the COVID 19 in relation to a specific feature of our current experience, with its contingent singular dimension. It is roughly divided into three parts. The first will regard the political emerging through the crisis, as it is revealed—quite unexpectedly—by the global resonance of the “Black Lives Matter” demonstrations in the U.S. The second part will regard the renewed importance of the “Public Services.” The third one will regard the incipient economic crisis, and the correlated debate about the future of the so-called “neoliberal” form of capitalism. At the end, I outline three issues for reflection, in the spirit of post-Marxism.

Keywords: crisis, Black Lives Matters, State, the Commons, neoliberalism

It is quite disturbing for us all, and it is frustrating, that we can't be together in the same place, in a good old auditorium, listening and talking to each other. My hope is that this situation, which is just the normalization of the abnormal, doesn't become “the new normal”. On the other hand, quite obviously, if our summer school had been taking place in its original format, I would have chosen a different topic for my classes, and I would have missed something, namely the opportunity to think, or, as I propose in my title: to live, to learn, and to imagine in the middle of the great crisis—perhaps the first of the coming crises of our century. This is something which, like many of us, I thought was absolutely necessary. And I could think of no better place and circumstance to make this attempt than this summer school, where I have been coming for many years now. Nothing that I will say is more than experimental. It simply represents my state of thought at this date. I am writing on June 27, and we will be discussing the lecture on July 3rd, in just a few days. I expect many questions, objections, and critiques.

I speak of crisis. This is the obvious name for what we are experiencing in this moment. But what does it mean? And does it, could it mean *the same* for everybody, regardless of our profession, age, gender or race, our country, and in fact our place in the world? Does it mean the same as in previous uses of this category—and there have been so many of them since it was coined in its original language by medical and political thinkers of ancient Greece? Nothing is less sure; although it is interesting to note that—exceptionally—the two sides of this traditional meaning (the medical and the political) are now intimately linked to one another within a single event. One of the aims of this lecture is to begin

¹The Lecture was delivered online on July 3rd, 2020. I am very grateful to the Directors of the School, Profs. Esther Leslie and Jacqueline Rose, for inviting me and authorizing this publication. An expanded version was published in French on the Journal *Analyse Opinion Critique*, July 15, 16 and 17, 2020 (<https://aoc.media/opinion/2020/07/16/fin-du-capitalisme-neoliberal-mi-temps-de-la-crise-3-3/>).

discussing afresh what it is that we call a “crisis”, from the vantage point of its *unfinished experience*. But I don’t want to address this question immediately, i.e., abstractly. On the contrary, I want to reach it through a detour, in fact several detours, which reveal its determinations.

I want to address three main points, each combining a general question and a specific aspect of our current experience, with its contingent singular dimensions. The first will regard the becoming of the political in the crisis, as it is revealed—quite unexpectedly—by the global resonance of the “Black Lives Matter” demonstrations in the U.S. The second will regard the renewed importance of the “Public Services” (particularly of course the National Health Services), as it is revealed by the sanitary crisis, a revival which seems to involve a strong opposition of principles and norms between the idea of the State and the idea of the Commons. The third will regard the incipient economic crisis—as a crisis which is all the more violent because it is not, precisely, purely economic—and the correlated debate about the future of the so-called “neoliberal” form of capitalism, which in circles of critical thought give rise to completely antithetic prognoses. Of course each of these questions *per se* deserves a complex discussion for which I have neither the time, nor perhaps the required expertise. I will have to limit myself to suggesting frames of interpretation, including a few sketchy analyses. Nevertheless, even with no time to waste, I must begin with a preliminary reflection on the position in which I find myself and I am trying to embark you with me.

As I already said recently on some occasions, it seems to me that one of the most important elements that we must bear in mind is the absolute *uncertainty* characterizing the situation in which we are now, with no predictable end. This comes from the fact that—provided we see things from a global point of view, which is intrinsic to the pandemic as such—the development of the infection is not halted, it has not even reached its peak, but it remains dormant or becomes reactivated where it had been controlled (at a considerable price), and rapidly expanding elsewhere (which is the greatest part of the world). Remedies or vaccines are not in view immediately (although they elicit theatrical announcements and nasty rivalries). Internal and external borders are fragile obstacles with ambiguous effects. The uncertainty also comes from the fact that the economic crisis (which everybody agrees is inevitable or already hitting hard some parts of the world and some social groups) has only very partially revealed its characteristics. In Europe in particular (of which Britain remains a part as of today, and from which it will never be fully separated) it is being postponed through “exceptional” monetary and credit policies (to which I will return in my third part), but the conflict is already open about how to “sustain” and “compensate” for these policies, and the massive consequences of bankruptcies and interruptions in the commercial operations and the chains of production

are still to come. This also means that, for millions of people, life will become increasingly hazardous; a phenomenon whose moral and political effects cannot be measured in advance. For these reasons, I find myself extremely suspicious of what I would call “anticipated resolutions of the crisis”—an intellectual exercise actively fostered these days.

Second—which is but the other side of the same coin, expressed in more speculative terms—I am convinced that any interpretation of our critical situation *in tempore reali* must not erase the contradictory determinations which can be observed simultaneously. This comes from the fact that, observing the crisis while we are also affected by it, learning from it while we look for analytical elements in our intellectual repertory, we find ourselves continuously torn between *opposite positions*. For example we realize that a very ancient, often forgotten past is being reactivated, that of large epidemics forcing whole societies to hold on their activities and to confine their members, leading historians to compare our reactions with those of the contemporaries of the Black Pest or the “Spanish” Flu. At the same time, in the context of ecological disasters which are already affecting our present, and above all after the revelation that the pandemic originates in the diffusion of certain viruses across the “species barrier”, which is facilitated by the devastations of remaining wilderness, we suspect that we are already living in a world where the consequences of agricultural and industrial productivism will affect our daily life and make it very difficult. Such considerations, however, are inevitably biased when they draw their inspiration from purely European perceptions of the situation, which is a paradox in the case of a pandemic affecting the whole world. We would not have the same perception of the paradoxical combination of archaism and futurism if we took an African point-of-view, since murderous “zoonoses” have repeatedly occurred there in the last decades, but also, apparently, a greater collective skill at protecting the population has developed, despite poorer medical resources. The crisis certainly does not abolish local and cultural differences, but it is brutally combining a global dimension and a complex pattern of local effects. Nationalist and xenophobic reactions compete with intense feelings of *neighborhood*, in every sense of the term. Finally (and I hope to be able to return to this question in my conclusion), the crisis is deeply affecting the psychology of subjects, who experience affectively their vulnerability, their solidarity, their antagonisms; but it is also forces them to *objectivize their condition*, to perceive of themselves as natural beings living on the same planet, participating in the same economy made of impersonal forces, and above all belonging to the same *human species*: a notion which decidedly ceases only to indicate *sameness of the genetic characters*, but now points at the existence of a *single population*, although the “politics” and the “ethics” of that population, or the way it must either “govern” itself or become *governed* in its own interest, is far from easily defined.

It is with all these provisos in mind that I want now to come to the three critical points I had announced.

The importance of “Black Live Matters” and its relationship to the crisis.

Right away, let me suggest that the ongoing revolt against police brutality and criminality targeting the African-American population in the U.S., prompted by the killing of George Floyd and other similar cases before and after him, under the aegis of the movement “Black Lives Matter”, is not only one of the most significant emancipatory movements in the last weeks, but also one which affects our understanding of the sanitary crisis *in real time*, and is likely deeply modifying its political consequences. I call this movement an *insurrection* in the broad sense of the term, meaning a massive uprising of ordinary citizens who reject an established oppressive social order and call for a radical change in the “material” and the “moral” constitution of the society, so that the subjection of some its members to others is no longer accepted and incorporated into the practices of its governmentality (to borrow a Foucauldian category). This insurrection may be suppressed, or fail to reach its objective (which themselves become enriched and clarified as the movement goes on): this will depend *inter alia* of the conditions created by the development of the crisis itself, which it is much too early to anticipate, but it is clearly so powerful that it has forced a reversal of ingrained state policies, and will inevitably produce civilizational irreversible transformations. The participants are “insurgents” in the historical and civic sense of the term.

Several aspects are worth emphasizing immediately. First, despite some violent episodes (where *of course* I don’t count looting or destruction of properties, as if these should be equated with assaults on *persons*), this is an essentially *non-violent* movement. Or better said it is a *civility* movement, in the sense that I tried to define some years ago, because it aims at neutralizing the systemic violence incarnated in the murderous daily practices of police forces against Black people, and more generally people of color. If following the analyses of Bernard Harcourt on “the American Counterrevolution”, then we observe that militarization has become an organic dimension of the police apparatus. In response, calls for the “dismantling” of the racist police forces is at the heart of the movement, with the broader meaning of targeting the structures of extreme violence that uphold inequalities in the whole social fabric. I submit that this kind of *anti-violent* politics is one of the clearest forms of revolutionary politics in today’s world, where structural violence is overwhelming. But there are other revolutionary aspects in the movement. It could be called a “cultural revolution” from below, echoing certain striking features of the movements that developed all around the world in the late 1960’s (allegorically called “68”), since it generates a deep (and, understandably, highly conflictual) reexamination of the historical

foundations of our post-slavery and post-colonial societies, challenging their official narratives, their educational symbols, and their established “silent” hierarchies (on a par with recent feminist movements). This leads to also emphasizing another two striking characteristics, intimately connected: one, the “popular” dimension of an insurrection that, specifically directed against racial oppression (and mainly conducted by members of the oppressed minority), nevertheless involves and unites individuals of all races, Whites and non-Whites, with many different social backgrounds, especially from the young generations; second the amazing fact (another similarity with the 68 conjuncture) that the insurrection proves “contagious” internationally, raising enthusiasm and generating echoes in other parts of the world where similar historical conditions exist (of course this is not universal, and I may be influenced by the fact that France, in a highly conflictual manner as well, is one of the examples, but I remain convinced that the “global” dimension exists).

Now you may ask: all this is undeniable, but why consider it a central determination for our understanding of the crisis which is prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic? Some auditors might say that this is a pure coincidence, because the racial conflict in the US and elsewhere has other independent causes, tracing back long before this pandemic; or they might say that the pandemic was a mere *opportunity* for the protests against police violence to acquire a special moral and political resonance... I think that we can establish a much more organic articulation, by invoking two correlative determinations:

First, we can say that what is revealed in this contemporaneity of the crisis and the insurrection is the deep *anthropological structure* of the crisis itself. It has been immediately observed (and repeated by several analysts) that the sanitary crisis doesn’t affect every social group in the same manner; it underlines and intensifies all sorts of inequalities, whether economic, urban, professional, or based on race and gender (which most of the time are not independent, but “intersect” in a systemic manner), for example because the virus is more aggressive and more lethal for individuals with co-morbidities (which are socially determined), or living in conditions of poverty, or performing functions of care and domestic service for others. And it has been observed that the prophylactic measures imposed to “control” and “suppress” the pandemic, however necessary they are, do not protect and target different social groups equally. On the contrary, they add new forms of discrimination to the already existing “structural” ones. I don’t think that this a purely “sociological” phenomenon, I’d rather say that is transforming, under our very eyes, different types and degrees of social inequality into a condition of “precarious life” (Judith Butler) which *divides the human condition* in its relationship towards illness, survival, and death – which is what I called elsewhere an *anthropological difference*. But what is also clear is that racial divides in our societies (or quasi-racial

divides: think of the Hindu-Muslim difference in India) are already “anthropological differences” in that sense. So the sanitary, economic, and anthropological dimensions of the crisis are “mediating” each other, as philosophers would say, to create a single reproducing process.

Second, we may observe a crucial *political* consequence of this process. The consequences of the sanitary crisis are diverse, not reaching the same degree depending on places: at one extreme, the “populist” or “illiberal” regimes in Europe, Latin America, the “theocracies” in the Middle East, the increasingly autocratic regime of Trump in the U.S.; at the other end the diverse cases of “disciplined” societies in East Asia, but also Germany. However, everywhere – with the possible exception of China, which remains enigmatic since its data is not completely known - it has revealed a failed governmentality in matters of public health and other social services (to which I return in my second part). This is largely perceived (and rightly so) as created or aggravated by the triumph over the last decades (precisely since the “68” moment) of the “neo-liberal” type of capitalism, with its aim of developing individualist and hypercompetitive “human capital”, and its correlated plan to dismantle systems of social security and social care where they existed, or prevent them from being created where they did not exist (remember Margaret Thatcher’s mantra, “There is no such thing as society.”). This creates in the critical conjuncture of the pandemic a necessary (if not sufficient) condition of possibility for “federations” of protest movements against the system (what Ernesto Laclau famously called “chains of equivalences”), which paradoxically recreate the need and the capacity for open political movements (or “re-politicization” of the society) in a society which had been deemed “post-democratic” or “depoliticized”. The current movement (which I called insurrectional) is one testimony of the fact that this possibility can materialize. And of course it is highly significant that it combines the anthropological dimensions linked to life and death uncertainties with social protests against a devalued existence and a quest for a different kind of governance and authority—which leads me to my second point.

Public services between the two logics: the State vs the Common.

I come now to what I am convinced is a strategic issue in our experience of the crisis, with far reaching consequences on our equipment for understanding the kind of conflicts and alternatives that will frame “the political” in the new sequence initiated by the crisis. I see it as a long *transition period*, whose starting point we are witnessing today, and whose future developments remain unknown. This is precisely why I find it so important to identify symptomatic points of “adversity” and “heresy” in the conjuncture, as they become revealed by the unfolding of the pandemic and its social consequences.

One such symptom is constituted by what I am tempted to call *the crisis within the crisis*, namely the fact that *public services* (first of all the health services, but also others) more than ever appear as essential conditions of possibility of our lives, individually and collectively, but at the same time as unstable, even contradictory institutions, whose working is torn between antithetic logics. These are *political* logics, in the broad sense of the term: the logic of State intervention, State funding and administration, State protection and therefore also disciplinary control of individuals by the State, and the logic of social solidarity, made of “horizontal” or “reciprocal” cooperation, for which I borrow the category that has been recently retrieved by neo-communist thinkers (such as, prominently, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri): the Common (or the Commonwealth). I want to summarily explain why I believe that this tension is not easily resolved, but also potentially pregnant with historical novelty.

A country like Britain (and—with some differences—this also holds for France) is proud of being home of a “National Health Service” that was designed after WWII, assembling and revamping preexisting institutions created by private actors and philanthropic associations. It includes universal coverage of medical expenses and hospital facilities, plus crucial research programs in biology and medicine. The general feeling today is that, although the capacity of the institution to actually “serve” the public in times of emergency had been severely damaged by neo-liberal policies of privatization, underfunding and the submission of medical programs to the principle of instant “profitability” (which, especially in the French case that I know better, have led to catastrophic shortages of beds, inhalators, virological tests, and face masks), the capacities of the public health service to stand the “shock” of the pandemic and assist the population has proved invaluable (not without dramatic exceptions, notably—again in the French case—for what concerns the care and protection of the elderly, which had been already largely privatized). However it is not clear whether this is due to the fact that the public service was a *State administration*, relatively isolated from the forces of the private market and foreign to the logic of competition, or to the fact that it draws its resilience and creativity from a synergy between its own *autonomous initiatives* and a trust and strong moral solidarity of the citizens around it. To discuss this point, let us introduce some prerequisites.

We must bear in mind that vital Public Services are many, and very heterogeneous, owing to their specific functions and their singular histories (from one country to another and within each country). Some are decentralized (e.g. belonging to municipal administration), others are highly centralized, at least formally (such as the school system in France). They are in fact “serving” the public in different, almost antithetic senses of the term: providing support, or imposing norms and disciplinary

constraints, with a complementarity of these roles (typically illustrated in this crisis by the association of prophylactic rules and medical treatment). At one end, we have the police, at the other end, we have the educational system (both strained and challenged during the crisis). What makes the service of public health exemplary, if not unique, is the fact that it is not, in reality, composed of a single hierarchic administration. To perform its social task, rather, it must consist of a *network* of activities and functions, which are coextensive with the whole society. They are performed by a huge variety of professionals and agents, with very unequal prestige and salaries: from doctors to academics and researchers, from nurses to cleaning personnel, from ambulance drivers to home assistants, etc. And, as we know, the people who perform these tasks, relying on each other's capacity in the right place at the right moment, form a kind of "miniature image" of the society as a whole, in its professional, racial, gender composition, etc. A highly significant phenomenon at the peak of the crisis in France has been the sudden visibility of the women and the mass of underpaid precarious workers (including a great number of migrants, sometimes even undocumented) without whom the service would not work. They too emerged as essential parts of the public service. Another important aspect was the fact that the intense conflicts within the public service, in part resulting from a long history of internal class relations, overdetermined by gender and race, in part aggravated by the neo-liberal policies of "de-publicization", have been "mediated", or rather "suspended", in order for the medical emergency to come first. But at the same time a broad public or constituency of citizens, including patients and their relatives, could observe the devastating effects of the "crisis within the crisis", and more or less explicitly rallied around the demand of a better and different health service and social security system, particularly a more *egalitarian* one.

What has become visible, almost undeniable for many citizens, was on the one hand the fact that – at least in our advanced "post-industrial" societies, which experienced two successive "revolutions" in the last century, one instituting the welfare state in a national (and also most of the time imperial) framework (what I call the "national-social state") instead of the purely capitalist management of the labour-force, one "reversing" the social policies into an "adaptation" to the pure logic of market profitability—public services such as national health cannot dispense of state interventions, support and planning, ranging from public funding to the systematic construction of facilities which more or less effectively compensate for differences of incomes and unequal access to treatments. They also develop research capacities which are not immediately profitable but will prove necessary in some unpredictable future. This, in turn, requires relying on progressive taxation, long term public investment, guaranteed salaries in the public services, state control of the standards of care and cleanliness, etc. This runs directly

against the ideology and the practices of neoliberal policies (as they have been dominant in Europe and other parts of the world for two or three generations now), which as it were *turn the political power of the state against the social function of the state* and destroy the public from inside. But it also runs against the "pure" ideology (or utopia) of the commons, which often seems to believe that public services can become entirely subsumed under the scheme of "care", or the multitude taking care of itself, under the guidance of its own "general intellect", just displaying its unmediated capacity to think and organize cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid through democratic assemblies at every level, from the local to the national, perhaps even the global. On the other hand, however, what became visible was the fact that a society which confronts extreme perils (today a pandemic, tomorrow another one, or another type of environmental disaster) in a relatively egalitarian manner, i.e., without breaking into heterogeneous parts leading to violent conflicts, cannot purely rely on the state, or delegate its governing capacity to the absolute rule of the State and its own rulers. We are reminded here of the famous sentence issued by Marx in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, when discussing the issue of public education: "Who is going to educate the educators?". This becomes now: who is going to coerce the state into serving well its own public services, or elaborate the forms of their democratic control, associating professionals and beneficiaries, i.e., ordinary citizens? The answer in both cases is the same: it can be only a thinking and organized "multitude", which fuses the idea of the public with a practical elaboration of the *common interest*, being also the interest of the mass of *common people*. Is this not in fact the actual content of all the actions of solidarity and the collective agency that emerged during the crisis, ranging from joint initiatives of nurses and doctors in the hospitals in order to compensate for the contradictory injunctions of the government, to the setting up of food and medical subsidies by activists in the popular suburbs? These are all testimonies of a *community effect*, even I would say moments of practical "communism" emerging out of the crisis itself.

As a consequence, the "state" at the same time appears as a recourse, an agent of protection, and an object of critique and replacement, which is challenged by "counter-conducts" and "counter-powers", in a fragile and problematic equilibrium. But perhaps we are not, in fact, talking of the same "state"? Or perhaps the state itself, in the process of the crisis, becomes *divided* between antithetic logics? It seems to me that a theoretical solution for this riddle, provisionally at least, could reside in deciding that it is rather the "public service" that harbors a unity of opposites, a dialectics of conflict and cooperation between the two logics which are also two "concepts of the political", the logic of statist *authority* (rather than "sovereignty"), and the logic of horizontal *commonality*. The comprehensive notion of the "public"

ranging from public governance and property to the responsibility of institutions before the public as enlightened multitude appears at the same time as a site of encounter between these two logics, and a stake at play in their competition. This is of course not an entirely new pattern of social and political agency, especially in periods of historic crises. But in the current situation it remains to be seen which intensity it will acquire and where it will lead our societies. This will largely depend on how the crisis affects the evolution of the current form of capitalism.

Towards a termination of the “neoliberal” phase of capitalism?

This will be my final point. And I must warn: even more than before, I have to simplify and erase many difficulties and issues of open debate. However it is not possible not to address the question that was underlying since the beginning, namely in which sense the crisis we are experiencing is a “crisis”? In other terms, we need to ask *what is in crisis*, and *which antithesis* we choose for the idea of crisis among the classical possibilities (resolution, revolution, regulation, etc.). At the beginning I suggested that our understanding of the notion, which has been constructed over an analogy between the medical and the political field, now remarkably *collapses* the two registers. This is what gives credit to the notions of “biopolitics” and the “biopolitical”, systematized by Foucault one generation ago. But we are also told repeatedly that, because the sanitary crisis unleashed by the pandemic has also produced an almost unprecedented simultaneous collapsing of supply and demand, an economic crisis of gigantic magnitude, with geopolitical implications, is growing. It would call for radical “solutions” themselves unprecedented. There is broad agreement that the patterns of globalization as they have been erected in the last 30 years have had unacceptable negative consequences on the capacity of nation-states to fight the pandemic, e.g. because they concentrated the supply of pharmaceutical products in East and South East Asia, particularly China. And there is broad agreement that the implementation of the “capitalist” strategy to protect the capitalist economy from collapsing as it did in the 1930s (or even more brutally), namely the massive “quantitative easing” of liquidities, already has put into question the financial “orthodoxy” of neoliberalism, and will increasingly do so, by “rehabilitating” the economic agency of the state and the positive consequences of public debt. To which it is also frequently added that the impossibility to ignore any longer the rising of an ecological disaster will push in the same direction (although nobody agrees on which “revolutions” a green economy should impose). But—if for the sake of simplification we concentrate our attention on what interests us most, namely “critical” thought—there are absolutely antithetic views about whether or not this involves an existential threat for the so-called “neoliberal regime”,

broadly seen as incarnating a new “stage” of capitalism. In fact some critics explain that the crisis has made financial austerity and the restriction of social security systems economically and politically impossible, therefore “neoliberalism” is doomed, whereas others explain that—wanting a “socialist” or “communist” revolution whose political conditions may or may not emerge during the crisis—neoliberalism cannot be challenged as the “dominant” system, therefore the crisis will rather lead to its completion and intensification. To sum up, the debate has two correlated aspects: one which concerns the articulation of economic and non-economic aspects of the crisis, one which concerns its impact on the “stability” of the neoliberal regime.

I have no prefabricated solution for these debates, but—adopting a “post-Marxist” point of view, which includes at the same time a continuation of the critique of political economy and a potential revision of the Marxist definition of capitalism—I will submit three sensitive issues for further reflection:

First, there is the question of the consequences of the growth of public debt (or private debt that is warranted by either the State or supranational institutions, or transformed into long term public debt). It is well-known that neo-liberal capitalism involves a huge extension of credit, what Marx called “fictitious capital”, a total dependency on debt of both corporations and individual consumers, and a lifting of rules restricting the limitless creation of aleatory financial products... It is also widely supposed that neoliberalism is intrinsically a ferocious system of imposition of the burden of debts on the multitude of the poor (and the indebted countries of the Global South) through austerity policies. What is not predictable however are the consequences of a *lasting impossibility* to carry further the same type of austerity, both because it becomes politically explosive and because it presupposes a situation of relative “solvency” even for the poor, which means in particular that they are employed or have some other resources. What we hear now is that there is an alternative, already rampant in the policies of central banks: the “monetization of debt”. This is likely to become the cornerstone of economic regulation. But the continuous monetization of debt involves a change in the *definition of money* since it reverses the law of reproduction of the “general equivalent”. And this reproduction itself is a key structure on which the unity of the “social formation” relies. What comes *after* the law is reversed? Unchartered territory for capitalism...

Second, there is the question of the consequences of increasing poverty, the fall of masses of individuals and families, territories, neighborhoods, whole generational and professional groups below the line of extreme inequality, into the category of social *exclusion* and the reliance on philanthropy. In other terms, it is a question of qualitative change in the regime of *precariousness* for the society as a whole. Again, we know that increasing precariousness is a defining aspect of

neoliberalism: in particular we have realized that neoliberal capitalism multiplies precarious statuses of temporary employment and “self-entrepreneurship”, while also cynically exploiting migrant labour and “family values” (Melinda Cooper) in order to weaken the institutional resistance of wage-labour against higher levels of exploitation. What we don’t know is how a capitalist society (and a capitalist state) with its internal antagonisms reacts to the *normalization of the exception*, or the simultaneous development of precariousness and an interruption of the business cycle. Just as the changing status of the general equivalent was a destabilization from above, this is a destabilization from below. And, abstractly speaking, there are only two solutions, none of which is easy to imagine: either capitalism becomes “hyper-liberal”, recreating conditions of mass poverty whose victims are violently controlled by police operations (and probably also fostering xenophobia and racism, in clear becoming organically fascist, to neutralize or divert uprisings); or it allows for a new development in the history of “social security”, which goes beyond more or less effective safety nets for the excluded population, e.g. by establishing some variety of the “universal basic income” based on *citizenship*. But this is a revolution. In fact both solutions are “revolutionary”, albeit in opposite senses.

Let us note in passing (leaving it aside for further inquiry), that both destabilizations, from above and from below, transforming the articulation of money and credit, and the precarious articulation of labor and social security, involve a change in the “measurement” of *value*, whether defined in classical and Marxist “objective” terms, or in neo-classical and monetarist “subjective” terms. This will be the case even more with my last point:

Finally, what has to be discussed is the modality in which the “sanitary” crisis, the “economic” crisis, and the “moral” (or ethical) crisis are interfering. They develop at different rhythms, and they don’t affect the same people, the same places to the same degree. But they are so intricate that they force us to rethink what we call a crisis. Because of the striking extension of the pandemic and its brutal effects on the “regular”, “normal” course of life (which includes paradoxes, since it links a general lockdown to casualties that are relatively moderate, when compared to certain past epidemics), the path of intelligibility usually adopted follows the “logical” order of a biological *cause* and socio-economic or psychological *effects*. Given the dominant “economicist” representation of our social systems, I believe that it is more interesting to describe the critical conjuncture in terms of a *departure from the usual picture of a crisis* as an interruption between regimes of normality (called regulations, or dynamic equilibria by mainstream economists, phases of enlarged reproduction by Marxists): it would result from the “invasion” of the social processes by the biological pathologies which, like mega-viruses themselves, are now producing a chain of destructions

and disturbances *from within* the social system. The usual name for contingent shocks not anticipated or accounted for in macro-economic models is *externality*. And the question of neglected externalities has been increasingly insistent since the ecological crisis has accelerated and grown in magnitude, and it has become clear that the destruction of environmental conditions which, albeit “external” to the processes formalized by economic theory and the theory of social relations, form their necessary prerequisite, are not even named or counted in the dominant discourse. As a consequence, the *internalization of externalities* can be considered the guiding thread of the intellectual reform needed to analyze contemporary crises of the capitalist world and seek social strategies inspired by new values. But the pandemic is a very strange kind of “externality” in fact, one which (although its origins lie in our relationship to the environment) is developing and affects us *from inside*, the inside of our organisms and the lively intercourse giving rise to “contagion”. An *internal externality* as it were. For that reason, the picture of the “shock” is largely inadequate, it ought to be replaced with an idea of an “auto-immunity” of our social and political system due to its more or less deliberate ignorance of its own life conditions.² Again, the category of “value” as it is used by the dominant economic discourse (including its “heretic” variety, the Marxist critique) must be rectified here, because it does not include *negative values* as well as *positive* (accumulated) values, not only in times of crisis, but in “normal” times.

But what are the normal times? We realize that, in its traditional definitions, a *crisis* was always defined in terms of the kind of *affirmation* that it is meant to suspend, or destroy, or “negate”, within a pattern of mutually exclusive poles. This is also why, beyond the initial philology of the name, the idea of crisis is intimately linked to a general idea of *life*: biological life, social life, economic life, moral life, because “life” normally connotes a *positive value*, or the prevalence of positive values (such as desire, conservation, reproduction, satisfaction) over negative values. It was reserved for radically critical thinkers, such as Walter Benjamin, to explain that the life we live in is a “normalized state of exception”, at the risk of identifying the overcoming of the crisis with a leap into the transcendence of another world. But it is well worth playing with this entire paradigm inherited from our philosophical tradition in order to accommodate the paradoxes of a “crisis” that combines objective and subjective uncertainty while blurring the temporal and institutional limits between different types of violence, opening a space where immediate *bifurcations* may result in radically incompatible forms of life, without revealing *ex ante* all their implications.

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2 I borrow this problematic notion from Derrida, who used it metaphorically in order to describe the self-destructive reactions of the U.S. government after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

I will stop here for today, although there are many questions which remain to be named and formulated. The next one, in my view, which we could try and address at some point in the discussion, regards the *cosmopolitical implications* of all that has been said. By definition, a pandemic is a global phenomenon, which affects mankind as a single *species*, and, in doing so makes our belonging as individuals to the same species a very material, perceptible phenomenon. This is even more the case if the common infection, as we are explained, results from the crossing of a “species barrier” between the human and some non-human animals. It seems to require something like a global government of the crisis, with adapted institutions and procedures of decision, well beyond exchanging information or even sharing vaccines if they are discovered. On the other hand, it should have been clear in what I said that a typical aspect of the crisis is exacerbating divisions based on anthropological differences and relations of domination, violently pitting some parts of mankind against others, and making the emergence of “the common” in practice a very difficult task. To which I should have added something that I almost entirely left aside, not because it was secondary in my eyes, but because I feared it would make my discussions too complicated. Therefore we should reintroduce it now: this is the fact that, although neoliberalism as a dominant regime of accumulation has some universal features, particularly its combining the exploitation of “human capital” with a destructive extraction of “natural capital”, there is no such thing as a *uniformity* of social, political, and ideological structures within the framework of globalization: on the contrary, as a “world-system” (Wallerstein) it is based on extreme polarities, between North and South, but also, equally decisive today, between East and West. They are not likely to wither away because of our common interest to fight this pandemic, to prevent others from catching us again by surprise, or to effectively confront the environmental crisis. Humankind, or the “Human race”, thus appears as objectively unified (by contagion; the circulation of commodities; by global warming) but also subjectively divided (by cultures and ideologies), or subjectively united (by some feelings of fear and hope) and objectively split among material interests (national, imperial, territorial, economic) that destroy every possibility of acting together. This deep contradiction of the idea of Mankind as a “subject-object” of history and politics might well emerge as the most insistent aporia generated and intensified by the current crisis.

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