

# Still Too Human

## Jean-Luc Nancy

Is it possible for us to take stock of what has transpired? Not, of course, so as to draw some final, definitive conclusion which would allow us to consider the matter closed; but, rather, in the hopes of establishing some points of reference, of taking note of some of the main landmarks we've encountered in the course of our voyage across the viral seas. Viral ocean, but a discursive one too—for we have also been carried away by that flow of discourse, the logorrhea, which accompanies every pandemic. There's too much of it; it swirls and shifts around us to such a degree that the word "philosophy" comes to resemble the twists of a grapevine or the rings slinking around the body of a hissing snake. It is human, all too human—but perhaps this is precisely what was needed. Perhaps we needed to be just slightly all too human in order to understand ourselves a bit less poorly (*moins mal nous comprendre...*).

Is such the case? has this maelstrom kicked up from its depths any curiosities, any flotsam worth lingering over? I think it has. Without calling them "discoveries," I think it is nevertheless possible for us to take note one or two beacons, a few signposts that might help us for the long haul we have in store.

There are at least five which come to mind, and which we can arrange under the following rubrics: 1) experience (*expérience*) – 2) self-sufficiency – 3) bioculture – 4) equality – 5) the point.

Let us see where they lead.

### 1. Experience.

We have experienced something on the order of an experiment, and still are (*nous faisons encore une expérience*).<sup>1</sup> And what is at stake in that experience, or experimentation, is the experience—the ordeal (*l'épreuve*)—of an unprecedented form of reality. Strictly speaking, that which will have constituted the unprecedented aspect of everything we've experienced is the emergence of a contagion which has spread virtually across the world—one which is also especially complex and reactive, liable to change in cunning and unpredictable ways. Every experience [experiment] is the experience of (an) uncertainty. Certainty, that is to say, knowledge sure *in and of* itself, is the distinguishing feature of what we call the Cartesian truth. Yet far from being the sole prerogative of the French, this (ideal) certainty structures all of our representations of knowledge, whether scientific, technological, societal, political, and even perhaps cultural. What is being put to test, in other words, is the entire order that allows us to experience certainty—our sense of assuredness or confidence in the reliability of (that) order. For this reason, one could say that we really are undergoing an experiment. Things are not going

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<sup>1</sup> Nota bene: in French, this syntagme can be read as suggesting that what is at stake is also potentially an experiment of sorts. *Nous faisons encore une expérience* could also be read as, "we have been, and continue to be, the subjects of an experiment," the outcome of which is as yet unclear.

according to plan, and here we are: thrust into uncharted territory.

None of this is new. Uncertainty has been stirring for several decades now, as the shape of the world has undergone a seemingly unending series of changes and our bumbling and self-inflicted disasters increasingly managed to catch us off-guard. Yet all those political, ecological, migratory/geopolitical and financial-economic warning -signs combined never managed to take on the strength or force of an experience in the way that a microscopic little parasite has – by endowing the uncertainty we are traversing or experiencing with the uncanny transmissibility, the virulence, of the unprecedented (*l'inouï*). The unprecedented (*l'inouï*), more often than not, is in fact something we are already well aware of—we've already heard about it<sup>2</sup>—without realizing or accepting it. Experience forces us to do so, to accept it.

To undergo an experience means being perpetually lost. One is at a loss (*On perd la maîtrise*). In a certain way, we are never really the subject of our own experience(s). Rather, it is experience which brings about a new subject. An other “we” is in the making. An experience either surpasses or exceeds us, or it is not in fact an experience. To comprehend it, to identify it, entails integrating an experience into a plan or programme for experimentation, which is all about *différends*, incommensurate outcomes. And when we are without a programme or agenda, we brush up against the unquantifiable, that which, by definition, is priceless; valuable in and of itself, absolutely.

## 2. Self-sufficiency.

Alongside our sense of certainty or assuredness, it will come as no surprise that our sense of self-sufficiency, of autonomy or self-reliance, has been shaken. And this is true whether we are concerned with the self-sufficiency of the individual, of the group, of the State or of any number of international institutions, of scientific or moral authorities. In any event, what we have seen is a revival of interdependence: that interdependence which is the hallmark of the virus as well as of solidarity, of physical distancing as well as of mutual consideration. It is interdependence that we see in both that sense of cohesion which consists in observing and obeying rules as well as in the anarchy that impels [us] towards complete reinvention.

What constitutes perhaps the most important point of reference, what perhaps most seriously forms a landmark in this rattling of our

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<sup>2</sup>The author in this passage is playing on the semantic and formal lability of the term in French, *l'inouï*. In its nominal form “*l'inouï*” could be rendered as “the unprecedented”, yet it in its adjectival form the term conjures to mind a quality of the astonishing or unbelievable, if not the uncanny, while also, strictly speaking in this case, evoking the question of hearing (*l'ouïe, ouïr*) and understanding (*entendre* → to hear, to understand). Thus, the “in-oui” could be taken here as the signature for a kind of unconscious event – something we are aware of having heard without understanding it, or of understanding without truly grasping the nature or implications of what it is we are hearing.

sense of “self-sufficiency” concerns the theme of the “auto”.<sup>3</sup> And indeed what more concrete emblem or figure—with all its breakdowns and emergencies, the formidable question of all its transformations and its role in society—could we hope to find for this theme than that of the automobile? The *auto-*, the “by one-self” (to return to yet another important Cartesian motif), autonomous will, consciousness of self, self-determination, automation, sovereign autonomy, each constitutes a sharp cornerstone in the (technological and self-proclaimed [*auto-proclamée* democratic) Occidentalo-Global fortress.

It is this fortress which is today in the midst of both breaking apart and reconfiguring itself. We had been expecting totalized man (*un homme total*). We find ourselves instead with a multitude totalized, rather, by an inhumanity, or at the very least by a serious concern about its ability to be self-sufficient. Whatever angle or approach we try to take, this multitude is either too much or too little: too amorphous and knowing too little, too numerous and too loosely or weakly bound together, too powerful and yet too incapable. Too autonomous, above all, and not self-regulated enough (*trop peu autorégulée*).

Self-sufficiency—which no philosopher, not even Descartes and not even Hegel, accepted and which all thought from Nietzsche onward has called into question—could very well be that against which modernity runs up hard. From “Know thyself” (Socrates) to “Affect thyself” (Schlegel), runs the ambiguity that leads us to forget that the “(self) same” is always an other. This is why appeals to altruism fall on deaf ears: they invoke an external, extrinsic other. But what structures and fuels any identity, whether that of a person, a people, or a species, is an intrinsic alterity.

And along with the “auto”, sufficiency in general finds itself called into question: for what is it that might suffice—satisfy or be enough—for that thing which is always at once too much and too little; that thing which, instead of being satisfied with being, content simply “to be,” becomes, desires and dies—that is to say, which lives and exists?

## 3. Bioculture.

By bioculture I do not mean the study of living tissues in a laboratory, but rather our culture in so far as the semi-signifier “bio” looms over it like a bright, flashing light. We have conferred upon this signifier, “bioculture,” a meaning close to “organic life” (as opposed to its ancient understanding as a “way of living/ of conducting oneself”), and placed it at the heart of our concerns and preoccupations ever since we began to endanger existence as such for the whole of living beings on earth. *Bios* needs to be protected, cared for, cultivated—whence the great store we set in

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<sup>3</sup>The play here manifestly concerns the prefix « auto » (Gr. → self, by oneself) in « *auto-suffisance* » (self-sufficiency).

the dangers posed to it by the “biopolitical” (a term generally used to call into disrepute any calculus of profitabilities and productivities of a given population). Yet here we find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic which offers nothing if not a prominent occasion for celebrating the management of public health (it matters little whether such management takes place in an autocratic or libertarian/liberal manner) and thus, in theory, of *the totality of the conditions of social, and, by extension, individual life as well*. Biopolitics—already a dubious concept to begin with—takes a tumble and falls short here, which may in turn help shed some light on the problem at hand.

In a certain sense, this reversal [**of critical fortunes?**] can be seen as part of a larger, much older move towards an ideal of health, the asymptotic goal of which would be—unsurprisingly—the limitless self-sustaining of human life (an open-ended self-perpetuation of human life that would offer, furthermore, a stark contrast with the conditions to which other forms of life are subjected). One might wonder, then, if it behooves us to place our expectations or hopes for a truly flourishing democracy in biological policy / **a politics of biologism**. Would a politics of life and of care correspond to the rule of “living well” (*eu zèn*) that Aristotle identifies as the ultimate goal of the *polis*?

Of course it wouldn't. We know this. The pandemic has amply shown that the well-being of an individual or collective life is not defined by avoiding viruses. *Bios* does not suffice for us to obtain the *eu zèn*. But if we refuse at the same time to allow ourselves to be carried away by the spiraling cycles of production and consumption, it then encumbers upon us to redefine what it means “to live well”. And this redefinition cannot elude the question of death, or of illness and, more generally speaking, of the accidents and unforeseeable events that are an intrinsic (to come back to this word) part of life. Put a little differently, given that our society no longer provides space for the representation of an “other life,” we need to be able to think life beyond the question of *bios*. We are going to have to continue to grapple with the polysemia, the overdetermination that Derrida touched upon, of the word “sur-vival”.

At stake, here, is also something that exceeds politics, provided we are willing to stop abusing this latter term by forcing it to name some vague semantic totality in which we are no longer able to discern between governance and existence.

*Bios, polis*, life and the city have come to rank amongst the murkiest of our signifiers—and no algorithm is going to come up with new meanings for them. We are going to have to come up with another language, give up on our rusty Greek.

#### 4. Equality.

All of the preceding has been leading up to this point. Thrown together into an experience in which we encounter the limits of our autonomy as

well as those of our lives, we also find ourselves confronting the question of an equality that we all claim to believe in and adhere to, but which, in reality, is being fundamentally tested and—violently—undermined everywhere around us everyday. The reactions that we saw in countries throughout the developed world related to freedom (*la liberté*)—for instance, our little everyday freedom to take a walk—were, for that matter, much more intense than any related to the inequalities that the pandemic forced into view in those same countries, especially where social and sanitary protections were concerned. At no point did anyone appeal to Balibar's concept of “equaliberty.”

And yet we know all too well that inequality has never been as acute as it is today. That is to say, never before have the forces of inequality been as widespread and powerful, nor as intolerable. For there was inequality structurally built into the social hierarchies of bygone eras that have not been replaced—quite to the contrary—by the real, symbolic and imaginary hierarchies of the technological-financial epoch [**regime?**].

Our civilization takes as one of its basic principles a form of equality that it imagines as founded in the equal worth/value (or dignity) of every human life (let us leave to one side the otherwise necessary and important question of what it does with other forms of life). In sum, life is what produces, imparts or bestows equality. “Men are born free and equal,” as the 1789 Declaration affirms. The verb “to be born,” in that statement, is carrying a great deal of weight. Is “being born” not a biological phenomenon? If it is not, what is at stake in the (f)act of being born? I won't linger longer with such questions—except to note that they apply also to the question of death, to the verb “to die”.

Today, one thing has become abundantly clear: we do not know what it is that makes us equal. This is surely why, more often than not, we content ourselves with simply proclaiming our equality, or projecting it off onto the horizon of some “better world”. Yet more and more, real inequality, the reality of inequality, requires us to no longer be satisfied with a delayed or deferred response to inequality. While today it no longer formally or schematically corresponds to the logic of class struggle, the impetus, the pressure, behind this response is no less compelling or powerful: there is no reason that there should be a category of the “wretched of the earth” (and therefore, no excuse for there to be a life of misery, lives defined by being stuck in a kind of “hell on earth” [*des vies de damnés*]) if the purpose or point [*raison d'être*] of life is to be born and to die rather than to accumulate things, commodities, forms of power and knowledge, capacities. Or rather: if our reason for living can only be found(ed) in the reasonlessness of a kind of surplus-life (*plus-que-vivre*) comparable to that of Angelus Silesius' rose: “The rose is without why, / Flourishing because it flourishes, / Not worried about self, / Not seeking to see if it is seen.”

Is this not precisely what it is to be human? All too human? yet who could give the measure of [the verbs] to be born and to die, of appearance and disappearance?

**The point.**

I would like to be brief, and simply underscore that what's important here is not the endpoint at which one sums up and takes stock. The point here is a dimensionless, non-situatable one. Simply a tipping point; a point of rupture, or of revolution.

Is it possible for us to take the point of "why-lessness" [*le sans pourquoi*] as the measure for our civilisation? If we are unable to, it strikes me as unlikely or uncertain that we will get very much further along in our—already shaky—trajectory. All the rest is just viral commotion.

Could we be too human enough to do without the "why"? But is this not something that, deep down, we vaguely and confusedly grasp already as we go about in our daily lives? We unconsciously know, spontaneously, that the "for-no-reason" [*sans raison*] is more powerful, it is stronger than all reason and any ratio. Like the bloom of a flower, like a smile or a song.

Translated by Robert St.Clair

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