

Get Used to the Virus (and Forest Fires, and...)? No, Thanks!

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Abstract: This short text is a critical intervention and discussion of the on-going perception and understanding of the pandemic Covid-19, forest fires and other crisis. It criticizes the ideological moralisms and “false exits”, while at the same time, it attempts to propose an way out of the present situation.

Keywords: virus, pandemic, crisis, false exits, ideology

The final words of the dying Big Boss from Hideo Kojima's legendary video game *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* are today more relevant than ever: “It's not about changing the world. It's about doing our best to leave the world the way it is.”¹ They are relevant, but with a new twist added: with draughts, forests burning, and the virus destroying our daily lives, with poverty as the result of the new riches, we have to change the world radically if we want to have at least a chance of leaving it the way it is. If we do nothing, our world will soon become unrecognizable to its inhabitants. And what we are doing is close to nothing - all the talk agreements on the measures against global warming just masks this nothing: “The world has failed to meet a single target to stem the destruction of wildlife and life-sustaining ecosystems in the last decade, according to a devastating new report from the UN on the state of nature.”² To mention just one obvious example analyzed by Mike Davis: the fires destroying vegetation in the West of the US:

“In the late 1940s the ruins of Berlin became a laboratory where natural scientists studied plant succession in the wake of three years of incessant fire bombing. The expectation was that the original vegetation of the region—oak woodlands and their shrubs—would soon reestablish itself. To their horror this was not the case. Instead escaped exotics, most of them alien to Germany, established themselves as the new dominants. The persistence of this dead-zone vegetation and the failure of the plants of the Pomeranian woodlands to reestablish themselves prompted a debate about “Nature II.” The contention was that the extreme heat of incendiaries and the pulverization of brick structures had created a new soil type that invited colonization by plants such as the “tree of heaven” (*Ailanthus*) that had evolved on the moraines of Pleistocene ice sheets. An all-out nuclear war, they warned, might reproduce these conditions!!” on a vast scale. / In the aftermath of Victoria's Black Saturday fires in early 2009, Australian scientists

1 Available at: <https://www.quotes.net/mquote/1040531>

2 Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/15/every-global-target-to-stem-destruction-of-nature-by-2020-missed-un-report-aoe>.

calculated that their released energy equaled the explosion of 1,500 Hiroshima-sized bombs. The current firestorms in the Pacific states are many times larger, and we should compare their destructive power to the mega-tonnage of hundreds of hydrogen bombs. A new, profoundly sinister nature is rapidly emerging from our fire rubble at the expense of landscapes we once considered sacred. Our imaginations can barely encompass the speed or scale of the catastrophe.”³

We (“humanity,” which means: our mode of production and commerce) are not just “destroying nature,” we are setting in motion the rise of a new nature in which there will be no place for us. And is the ongoing pandemic also not an exemplary case of a “new, profoundly sinister nature”? So we shouldn’t worry too much about the survival of nature, of natural forms of life, on the Earth – nature will survive, just changed beyond OUR recognition. So let’s raise the Leninist question: what is to be done? There are four false exits, four things that we should avoid like a vampire avoids garlic.

First, we should NOT use the fact that we are dealing with a combination of many crises as a reason to treat these crises one by one and to engage in particular interventions, even at the expense of others, like those who claim that in our struggle against the epidemic we have the right to neglect a little bit the ecological crisis, or that maintaining law and order is more important than stemming the pandemic. Black Lives Matter protests react not only to police brutality but also to economic on justices; the ongoing pandemic is rooted in our distorted relationship with our natural environment; etc. So when a Trump health official said “biology /is/ independent of politics”⁴ (in order to account for the 200.000 dead in the pandemic as something the US government is not responsible for), he was for certain wrong.

Second, we should NOT conclude that, since we live in a dark time and face a many- dimensional global crisis, some kind of moral progress is needed. Those in power always like such calls for a new ethics as the way out of a crisis, they love to conceive a crisis as an ethical one. When the financial meltdown of 2008 exploded, public figures from the Pope downward bombarded us with injunctions to fight the culture of excessive greed and consummation – this disgusting spectacle of cheap moralization was an ideological operation, if there ever was one: the compulsion (to expand) inscribed into the system itself is translated into personal sin, into a private psychological propensity, or, as one of the theologians close to the pope put it: “The present crisis is not a crisis

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3 Davis 2020

4 Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/20/us-nears-200000-covid-deaths-senior-trump-health-official-biology-independent-of-politics>.

of capitalism but the crisis of morality.” Today, again, similar voices are heard: particular economic and political interventions are not enough, only a new global ethics can show us the way out...

The third false exit is the fake wisdom often heard in our media: there is no easy way out, viral infections and global warming are facts of life and we will simply have to learn to live with them, which ultimately means getting used to the “new, profoundly sinister nature.” This wisdom is false since infections, global warming, etc., are not simple facts of life, they arise out of our interaction with nature and among ourselves - just remember how our air pollution changed during the lockdown in March and April.

Fourth false exit. What is needed today is a clear perception of all the dimensions of the crisis we are in, and a well-coordinated multiple radical social change imposed by such perception. Acting comes after thinking, it should follow thinking. But our enemies also think, although in their own way – the link they see between different crises is best exemplified by dangerous metaphoric short-circuits; say, in parallel with “Covid-free zones,” the Polish conservatives talk about “LGBT-free zones” (or “LGBT ideology-free zones”) which are already declared in one third of the country. Similarly, the pandemic is associated with multicultural mixtures, so that a strong national identity is seen as a form of defense.

So which is the right way to act? We should not wait for one big global Act, we should fully engage in particular struggles and coordinate them with other struggles: to fight global warming and pollution we need Assanges, to fight the pandemic we need a form of global healthcare, to fight racism and sexism we need economic changes. And the form of this struggle?

In his *Logique des mondes*, Alain Badiou⁵ elaborated the Idea of the politics of revolutionary justice at work from the ancient Chinese “legists” through Jacobins to Lenin and Mao - it consists of four moments: *voluntarism* (the belief that one can “move mountains,” ignoring “objective” laws and obstacles), *terror* (a ruthless will to crush the enemy), *egalitarian justice* (its immediate brutal imposition, with no understanding for the “complex circumstances” which allegedly compel us to proceed gradually), and, last but not least, *trust in the people*.

Does the ongoing pandemic not impose on us a necessity to invent a new version of these four features? Voluntarism: even in countries where conservative forces are in power, decisions are taken which clearly violate “objective” laws of the market, like the state directly intervening into industry, distributing billions to prevent hunger or for healthcare measures. Terror: liberals are right in their fear, not only are states forced to enact new modes of social control and regulation but

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5 Badiou 2006

people are even solicited to denounce to the medical authorities family members and neighbors who hide their infection. Egalitarian justice: it is commonly accepted (although it is and will be violated in social reality) that the eventual vaccine should be accessible to everybody, and that no part of the world population should be sacrificed to the virus – the cure is either global or inefficient. Trust in the people: we all know that most of the measures against the pandemic only work if people follow the recommendations – no state control can do the work here.

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