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Zsuzsa Baross

Philosophy in the Time of the Epidemic: Two Transcripts

“Philosopher en temps d’épidémie”: the syntagma serves as the title for the open series of critical reflections that Jérôme Lèbre (I suspect with the complicity of Jean-Luc Nancy) inaugurates on the first day of the confinement in France, on March 17. [1] It is difficult to render it in English, a language that (perhaps significantly?) lacks the verbal form for philosophy (“to philosophize” has altogether different, even negative connotations). Possible translations would need to rely on the mediation of an auxiliary verb (to do / to make philosophy) slowing down the impetus of the original—already an instance of (doing) philosophy, not an invitation or preparation for it. In place of a translation, I prefer to continue the thought and complete the sentence the syntagma launches: *“(philosopher en temps d’épidémie) so that there would be philosophy in the time of the epidemic.”* For nothing less than the continued presence of philosophy is at stake in the present, regarding our present, when the danger is, as Hannah Arendt told us long ago, that in disease and pain—to which conditions we should add panic and the fear of contamination—we would be thrown back upon our selves (our own body, the privation of the “private,” the home, the isolation of city, province, or even country...). Wittgenstein may have told us that it is a “fundamental misunderstanding” to try to understand the headache I have *now*, but this is precisely what is required of us today: to try to understand what is happening to us today, here and now. Such timeliness we know is not a simple matter of course for philosophy, belated as it is by virtue of structure. Yet it is precisely to this demand that Jérôme Lèbre responds (and he is not alone in taking on this responsibility [2]) when he sends out the invitation, indeed, issues the philosophical provocation to the “world” (that is, on the internet): *“philosopher en temps d’épidémie.”*

As for what philosophy should or could be in the time of the epidemic, the answer is developed in the course of the series itself: in the course of the practically daily postings of eighty video-recorded interventions, in several languages, arriving from all over the world ... each of which responds differently to the title, each proposing or rather inventing a possible response, possibly co-constituting—by virtue of its singular difference—the plurality that is proper to philosophy, or in other words, ensuring *that there would be philosophy in the time of the epidemic.*

The time of the epidemic? At once the time of an emergency and of an exceptional urgency, also in the sense of Agamben’s “exception(s)” —outside the law, yet held therein by the law. The emergency, a health crisis, is a condition, a facticity, imposed from the outside; the urgency, on the other hand, is interior to thought, philosophy, and writing.

In one of his several contributions to the series, Jean-Luc Nancy responds to the question *“Où est l’urgence?”*, Where is the urgency? [3] (in French emergency and urgency are the same vocable). He “makes” cinema: to a montage of borrowed images from a Western (*Stage Coach* I believe)—of horses, cowboys, “Indians,” wildly chasing, crashing against one another—he grafts his own words, in his own voice: *“Qui pousse?”* What pushes? What presses? What urges? he asks. Whence comes the “drive,” *“Trieb,”* “pulsion”? With regard, not to the world, the future of the world “after,” but with regard to philosophy, the drive, the pulsion

is that of “contemporaneity”—exceptionally, in the most literal sense possible of this term in the time of the epidemic. It expresses itself as the urgency to write, the urge of immediacy, to be on time, here and now; to address and to be addressed without delay, to think and write contemporaneously with this extraordinary “now” (whose time still needs to be thought) in the simultaneous, even if virtual, co-presence of others. Deleuze called it the “society of friends.”

As to the future, not of the world, but of this urgency itself, the question has not been—could not have been—asked before. For who would have thought that by June (this must be a short-hand designation, as such markers in the calendar say nothing in epidemic times) the *time* of the epidemic would have a “history.”

The shock of the early days, our sense that “*Die Welt ist fort*” (The world is gone), “the time is out of joint,” has dissipated. The exceptional and the exception (in Agamben’s sense) has installed itself for the duration (for how long?), become normal without being normalized. In recognition of this mutation, this Journal closes its two “tribunes,” sends out a new invitation for new reflections on the subject of *Enduring Pandemic: Further Transmissions from Psychoanalysts & Philosophers*. Even before that Jérôme Lèbre changes the title of the series he curates: philosophy “in the time of the epidemic” becomes “*philosopher au présent*,” philosophy “in the present.”

What the writing of this new present will become is, paradoxically, an affair of the future, of writing yet to come. As for the writing dating from the past few months, “in the time of the epidemic,” it has not been, it cannot be, surpassed. Prodigious, intense, immediate, the rich corpus is not “symptomatic” but a living testimony of the times. As I propose in one of my own interventions in the series (#79)—the transcript is included here—this corpus composes a “disparate”: a productive discursive heterogeneity that philosophy has remained in the time of the epidemic; a corpus that is held together in the plurality of its internal differences, without yielding to the tension of dispersion. In other words, without yielding to the greatest danger of the time: panic, fear, confusion.

The two interventions transcribed here with minor modifications reflect this heterogeneity. The first (#79) has become, after the fact, a sort of epilogue to the series, not just by virtue of the timing of its posting, just before the change of title closing the first series. It also recuperates as task, as urgency, the reconstitution of the very condition(s) for there being philosophy in the time of the epidemic.

The second (#66), on the other hand, is purely conceptual. It approaches the concept of bare life from another direction than the essay published earlier in this journal did. [4] It speaks in defense of the dignity of life—against the assault of the virus, and its categorical / conceptual equivalent, “bare life.”

Transcript 1: “The title and its work(s)” #79, June 15, 2020 [5]

“*Philosopher en temps d’épidémie*” : I can attempt to answer this impossible challenge—invitation, incitation, or exhortation?—only indirectly, by way of a detour. Instead of addressing the title head on, I will turn here to the series of which this short video recording is itself a part: an open and open-ended chain of less than 15-minute-long video recordings of philosophy, in the same sense as one speaks of books of philosophy. Not works transposed or transferred to this medium after the fact, but works, miniatures really, created in and by and even for this medium. (Insofar as this writing here reverses this order and turns the “sayable” into something “readable,” *a posteriori*, it cannot but bear the awkward marks of this translation.) In particular, I want to pay close attention to the extraordinary work the title performs, in the linguistic sense of the term, from outside the series it engenders—in just four words of a “syntagma,” the fragment of a sentence.

First, it indexes the doing of philosophy for its time, raising the question of its contemporaneity, or even stronger, making a demand for it, for turning the contemporaneity of its discourse into a question of/for philosophy. If Alain Badiou asks, *of what time are we the living witnesses in philosophy?*, then Jérôme’s title here prompts me to ask, *not* how to do philosophy (*comment philosopher*) in the time of the epidemic, but rather how philosophy should or could let its discourse be marked by the living experience of this

epidemic *as its time*, without either thematizing it, turning it into its subject or topic, or letting itself be contaminated by it (by its fear, anxiety); without, that is, its discourse becoming either symptomatic or diagnostic of the epidemic. (For we recall what Heidegger said about diagnostic discourse: its time is of the eternal yesterday; its contemporaneity, entirely without us.)

Second, at the same time, and *in this same time* of the epidemic, the title opens a virtual plane on which to posit each contribution as one in a series of heterogeneous reflections, musings, mediations ... which *the title at once engenders* (I would like to say, invites, liberates, sets free) and holds together in their *disparity* (Blanchot's term): standing in a relation of irreducible, plural differences, without yielding to the forces of dispersion. A singular multiple, thus.

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When I chanced upon one of Jean-Luc Nancy's early contributions, and by consequence, learnt about the existence of this series and platform, I sent him a quick message: "I feel less alone." (I wonder if he recognized it as the same message that Jacques Derrida sent him after his (JLN) very first sending — a text, what else?) (Feeling) less alone? In relation to what? I've already asked this question regarding Derrida. Now it addresses me. Feeling less alone: in what manner does the *existence* of this platform (also in the sense of a forum) and series (and not the content of the contributions) attenuate, lessen, my solitude? Surely not in the same way that Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, etc., bring to millions around the world relief from isolation in confinement and quarantine by offering their platforms as a substitute medium (literally a medium) for real-time exchanges and encounters.

As is often the case (with me), it is Deleuze who helps me to answer my own questions. He names the two conditions for there to be philosophy, for its birth (which is every time): "*Pour que la philosophie naisse*" an encounter was necessary, "*il a fallu une rencontre d'ami et de la pensée.*" For there to be philosophy an encounter was / is necessary between thought and friend. Against Hannah Arendt's *Life of the Mind* (thinking is a silent dialogue of the self with itself), Deleuze stages a *theatre* for thought; and in this theatre, philosophy does not give itself birth, either at its birth or later. It depends and continues to depend on a milieu. It passes in between: in the encounter between "thought" and (its) "friends," in the milieu of a "society of friends," with a taste for its discourse.

These conditions have never changed. My less than 15 minutes here also owe their possibility to a series of encounters—including the encounter with the title, with what the title engenders, but not the "content." For its milieu, it depends on what the platform (on Mediapart) actualizes: a "society of friends," of complicity, which is actual, makes itself present, presents itself, even if in a space that is virtual.

Although the series exists virtually and I am recoding this in my study, facing a camera that is looking at me without seeing me, this here is not a *substitute* for the real thing. It is not a *replacement* for the practice of philosophy but precisely a doing, or (for one needs to be modest) a sort of doing philosophy, in the time of the epidemic: fabricating a discourse that is marked by it, contemporaneous with it, in the most literal sense of this term.

Just as I would conclude, a terrible idea (a notion, not a thought, only an idea) installs itself in me: what if the time is not that of an epidemic, which will pass, but the first (which is not even the first) in a cascade of never-ending catastrophes (collapses) yet to pass? What then of philosophy? What is philosophy to be in the time that remains?

Transcript 2: "Bare life: the poverty of the concept" [6] #66, May 28, 2020

Apropos the virus, but without mentioning its name, I will speak about the poverty of the *concept* of bare life: *poor-in-life*, poor as Heidegger's animal (not the concept but the lizard basking in the sun) is "poor-in-world," is *weltarm*.

Poor (in life): means not flawed, weak, or impotent; that the concept would be powerless to conjure up a possible world (as Deleuze demands of a concept). On the contrary, it is twice implicated in a powerful *productive* operation with a long history, dating back to the Greeks, at least as far as Aristotle, which operation will permit Agamben to recast the whole history of the political of the west as the fabrication of bare life...

The first operation is the decision to cut (which as Derrida reminds us is the etymological root of decision); to insert the cut of a schism into life, which reconstitutes / reinvents it as life divided into two heterogeneous domains: two (domains), for to say "bare life" or "*zoe*" or "*blosse Leben*," etc., is to say—simultaneously and silently—"good," "qualified," or "just life." For this cut is also a measure. Like the scale of justice, it measures the relative value of what it has just created. So that Benjamin could write: it is ignoble to claim that the bare life in man is worth more than a just life; so that philosophy could refuse to reject the death penalty: there must be something worth dying for (see Derrida on this point); so that Agamben could show disdain for the Italians who willingly surrender every political value, cling onto mere life, in fear of infection, disease, or death.

Second, the concept "bare life" is itself a powerful operator. Across genealogical layers of history, of cultural, geographical, class, etc., differences, it gathers together into this one figure (called "*homo sacer*" in the book with the eponymous title): the migrant, the refugee, the "*sans abri*," the "black lives (that) matter," the terrorist, the addict-body abandoned in the back alley, the old and infirm dying in care homes, the body kneeling on Boulevard Saint Michel with a sign: "*j'ai faim*"; the Roma, the Rohingya, the inmates of Gulags, Auschwitz, Guantanamo...

Yet the poverty of the concept is of a different order than that of its referents. It is structural. Something other than existence escapes it, something other than what can be *extracted* / *wrenched away* from life. Except that "escape" may not be the right term here. In any case, not in the same sense that the virus escapes *from* captivity *to* the "wild," both the real (space) and the concept: leaps over the divide human / animal, deterritorializes from nature / reterritorializes itself on the World. It would be more precise to say that something other than *existence* (for life is an encounter of forces, of intensities, whereas existence is static, as it were "lifeless") does not escape the concept, but falls outside the plane or field of its operation. Here Heidegger's animal (again, the lizard and not the concept) is instructive: the lizard does not *suffer* from a lack in World, it itself is the absence of any possible relation to the World. With regard to life, this something, which I cannot yet name, but whose name I know is neither *zoe* nor qualified life, is not simply missing / missed after the great division / decision. Instead, its very place falls away.

Ironically, it is Aristotle, the great divider, who designates it with great precision, even if he prefaces it with the qualifier "as if":

If there is no great difficulty as to the way of life [*kata ton bion*], clearly most men will tolerate much suffering and hold onto life (*zoe*) as if it were a kind of serenity [*euemereia*, beautiful day] and a natural sweetness. [7]

If we disregard this "as if"—not read it as if it were casting doubt upon the reality of the "beautiful day" and "natural sweetness," or upon what Glenn Gould characterized in Bach's method of composition — in its endless detours, delays, and refusal to reach the end—as what matters (in music): the "joyous essence of being"—then Aristotle points to what is excluded by the founding gesture, what remains after the great division of the life-world unaccounted for: namely, the "beautiful day" that neither register—neither *bios*

(qualified life) nor *zoe* (bare life)—can accommodate.

Today, more than ever it seems, we need to return to this unaccounted-for remainder; especially today, in the time of this epidemic. We need to recuperate it from its exile underground, as we—not just the Italians but the whole world—tremble in the face of a globalizing threat to life in each and every one of us.

The question then is how to rescue what necessarily falls in between, exists in the gap between life's nakedness and its full qualification (person, personality, the singularity of its quality), between political life and bare life? How to rescue by way of a concept or concepts the sweetness Aristotle spoke of, and rescue it as irreducible to fear (of death), to instinct (for survival), clinging onto life at any cost (which earns Agamben's contempt and Benjamin's characterization as ignoble)? How to rescue that element or dimension—but then what is the right word here? Is it not *sense*?—the *sense* (in every sense of this word) of life, whose “non-existence would be something more terrible” (says Benjamin) than any “attained” condition of man?

The body clinging onto the side of an overcrowded inflatable, the body that makes one last effort to cross the desert, is bare life: standing in a relation, even in its absolute solitude and abandonment. It is a creation, a product manufactured by the machinery of a political that expelled it precisely from the world into which it was born. In fact, from the World itself. Outside the law but held by the law outside the World. On the other hand, what *Aquarius* and the other rescue ships are searching for in the open sea, what the volunteers combing the desert of Texas for refugees hope to save, is a third category of living existence. Deleuze gave it the simple name: *a* life.

No one has described better what a life is than Charles Dickens ... A disreputable man, a rogue, held in contempt by everyone, is found as he lies dying. Suddenly those taking care of him manifest an eagerness, respect, even love, for his slightest sign of life. Everybody bustles about to save him, to the point, where, in the deepest coma, this wicked man senses something soft and sweet penetrating him [Aristotle's “beautiful day”?] ... Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of a life playing with death. [8]

Even in animals, or rather, in our relation to animals, we distinguish between bare life and *a* life: animals are killed on mass, think of mass fishing, without committing a crime. But when residents along a coastline rush to save a few whales that have beached themselves—pushing and pulling them, watering their skin against the heat of the sun until the next tide comes in—what they respond to in each instance is *a* life, a single and singular life passing through this or that body of a giant animal.

The patient lying on the hospital bed, gasping for air, doctors bustling about him, is a patient-body, a sick-body wherein *a* life is combatting death. “The life of an individual gives way to an impersonal yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life ... : ‘Homo tantum.’” The life of an individuality (what Benjamin called “qualities” and “attributes”) “fades away in favor of a singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name” (Deleuze 2005, pp. 28-29).

This pure event is beyond the reach (re-territorialization) of every economy, calculation, measure, or comparison. It is something the political, biopolitical or not, cannot possibly grasp or touch, even if the medical personages, its agents or actors, respond to it instantaneously, intuitively, without necessarily understanding it. And when the political does touch it, when its relative value—relative to another life, to its utility or the life years it still has left to live—is measured on the scale of a point system of “last resort guidelines,” then this pure event of *a* life is instantaneously converted into nothing more than bare life. When the ventilator is removed (or not) to help another patient survive, *both* become nothing more than bare life, more or less deserving to live according to a measured and measurable “merit.”

Notes:

[1] *Philosopher en temps d'épidémie*. Une chaîne proposée par Jérôme Lèbre. Avec le soutien de la Maison des Écrivains et de la Littérature. Announcement of the series on March 17, 2020,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vycLdnQGhjk&t=73s>.

[2] The European Journal of Psychoanalysis, on whose virtual pages this text appears, opens two “tribunes” with the aim of immediate publication dedicated to the “global Coronavirus pandemic, considered along the axes of psychoanalysis and philosophy”: Psychoanalysts Facing Coronavirus and Coronavirus & Philosophers. Joseph Cohen opens his video communications, in the form of interviews, under the heading “Antivirus philosophiques” from Monaco. Some daily papers and popular publications (Le Monde, Libération, the Italian Quodlibet, where Agamben’s provocative interventions first appear) also open their pages to philosophical reflections or at least reflections by philosophers.

[3] “*Où est l’urgence?* (1)”: “Video in 3 parts broadcast starting from May 11, 2020, the day when in France and in other countries strict confinement was partially lifted.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hf1fjM5VO8>.

[4] Zsuzsa Baross, “Agamben, the Virus, and the Biopolitical: a Riposte,” EJP, posted May 12, 2020,

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/agamben-the-virus-and-the-biopolitical-a-riposte>.

[5] Zsuzsa Baross, “Le titre et son travail / The title and its works(s),” intervention #79.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqOKcQjVBiw>

[6] Zsuzsa Baross, “Vie nue: la pauvreté du concept / Bare life: the poverty of the concept,” intervention #66. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oh2Tq1NtIAw>

[7] Editor’s note: (Aristotle, 1278b, as cited in Agamben 1998)

[8] Editor’s note: (Deleuze 2005, p. 28)

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<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/agamben-the-virus-and-the-biopolitical-a-riposte>

– (2020b, June 15) “Le titre et son travail / The title and its works(s)”[Video], intervention #79 in *Philosopher en temps d’épidémie*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgOKcQjVBiw>

– (2020c, May 28) “Vie nue: la pauvreté du concept / Bare life: the poverty of the concept” [Video], intervention # 66, in *Philosopher en temps d’épidémie*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oh2Tq1NtIAw>

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Philosopher au présent (2020, May 13) “Où est l’urgence? (1)”, in *Philosopher en temps d’épidémie*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hf1fjM5VO8>.

Bio:

Zsuzsa Baross, retired professor from Trent University, Canada. Her work on temporality, memory, history; the image and the imaginary; the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard; the ethics of writing... appeared in numerous anthologies and journals; held seminars (“Le Cinéma selon Jean-Luc Godard,” “Il y a du rapport sexuel”) at the Collège International de Philosophie. Paris; has been collaborating and published with the group on Artistic Research at Orpheus Institute, Ghent, Belgium. She is the author of *The Scandal of Disease* (University of Amsterdam, 1989), *Posthumously, for Jacques Derrida* (SAP, 2011) *Encounters: Gerard-Titus Carmel, Jean-Luc Nancy, Claire Denis* (SAP, 2015); “*On Contemporaneity, after Agamben: the concept and its times Vol. I*”(SAO, 2020). The second volume of *On Contemporaneity, after Agamben: Art in the Time that Remains* is forthcoming by Sussex Academic Press.