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On the Viral Event

In 1755, an earthquake devastated the city of Lisbon, with the best estimates placing the death toll somewhere between 30,000 and 75,000. As with our current crisis, the disaster called forth a flurry of responses by the leading thinkers of the time, not least because the sheer scale of the disaster seemed to challenge the presuppositions of hegemonic philosophical paradigms. Where some used the catastrophe as an opportunity to press against prevalent concepts like the postulate of “optimism” and the theory of providence, others rallied to the defence of previous modes of thinking. In an open letter on the earthquake, Rousseau wrote the following:

it was not nature that piled up there twenty thousand houses of six or seven floors each; if the inhabitants of this city had been spread out more evenly and had lived in less massive buildings, the destruction would have been a lot less, and perhaps insignificant. Everyone would have run away at the first shock, and one would have found them the next day fifty miles away and just as happy as if nothing had happened. But they had to stay put, stubbornly remain on the Mazures, expose themselves to new shocks because what they would be leaving behind was worth far more than what they could carry away with them. How many poor creatures died in this disaster because one wanted to go back for his clothes, another for his papers, a third for his money?[1]

There is much to analyse here, from the reflex to save nature and blame the victims, to the moralistic focus of the criticism on the poor for desperately trying to save their things, to the typically Rousseauist idea that city life as such is the main problem. Of course, one can hear echoes of all these arguments in power’s attempt to blame various publics for the current crisis, whether those at the Wuhan “wet market” that has become an object of imaginary fascination for many Western observers, or those taking to the streets as part of the global wave of protests. But what is most striking about Rousseau’s text in the philosophical context of today is its small-mindedness, its refusal to countenance the possibility that the earthquake could also be the cause of a tremor for *thinking*, a genuine philosophical event that might shake the core presuppositions of the epoch.

Wading through the accounts of the current crisis by contemporary philosophers and critical theorists, I find myself wondering whether some of our responses will come to seem as narrow in their vision, as reactive and deferential to previous modes of thought as Rousseau’s does to us now. It is not difficult to understand why we would reflexively turn to familiar philosophemes to try to understand a crisis like this one: the pandemic has brought with it changes of such enormous significance within such a short timeframe that it seems an impossibly large task to keep the whole in view. Because it is still too soon to grasp the situation in its totality, there is always the fear that our partial thoughts, fears and desires are being secretly manipulated by those with hidden agendas seeking to exploit the crisis; above all else, we do not want to be deceived. But as Lacan’s formula “*les non-dupes errent*” reminds us, those who take the “tough” posture of never allowing themselves to be fooled by anything often turn out to be the easiest to con – think of the die-hard Trump supporter steadfastly refusing to wear a mask to a rally because she will not allow herself to be swindled by the “hoaxes” allegedly spread by mainstream media. One cannot definitively avoid the risk of

playing into someone's agenda; and anyway, it is hardly the worst thing that can happen. Cynicism is certainly worse, especially when it corrodes the capacity for critical thought.

A loose accounting of the crisis so far suggests, at the very least, the following major transformations, each of which looks to be seismic for thought:

- 1) A global geopolitical re-alignment away from the old centres of power, with great uncertainty about what comes next. I refer not only to the decaying of the American empire, but also to the increasingly fragile state of Europe. Old political dichotomies like liberal/conservative and democratic/authoritarian already mischaracterize a state like China, and will become increasingly unusable in the context of 21st century politics;
- 2) A widespread breakdown in trust in supra-national bodies such as the WHO, which has not risen above the appearance of politicking in its response to the crisis. This comes at a time when popular discontent with opaque, unaccountable organisations operating above the level of the nation-state was already near breaking point, from both the right and the left. New and more democratic global institutions are an urgent necessity;
- 3) An unprecedented economic emergency that has already left more people destitute than the last global financial crisis. Measures unthinkable just a few months ago are now a reality, often implemented by the unlikeliest of people: lifelong austerians are putting the UK on course for a 100% debt-to-GDP ratio as Republican party ideologues implement direct cash payments to households. But these responses, as extraordinary as they are in some respects, are clearly "rescue packages" that aim to prop up a collapsing, discredited system that has not significantly reformed itself since the last crisis;
- 4) A renewed battle between ecology and disaster capitalism, as the latter uses this shock to push for a roll-back of what few environmental protections we have left. This is taking place within a new normal of ongoing climate systems breakdown that sees terrifying new calamities each season, from plagues of locusts to swarms of killer hornets. Everybody knows that the pandemic is in some way related to the problems of climate change, but critical intellectuals have not yet settled on the best way to characterise that relationship. Is it most fundamentally a problem of historic carbon emissions creating the conditions for the emergence of new infectious diseases? Of globalised supply chains making its rapid spread all but inevitable? Of the dangerous labor conditions imposed by contemporary agribusiness that bring workers into close contact with potentially infected wildlife? We need clear, focused answers to these questions if we are to have any hope of steering the next phase in a positive direction;
- 5) The emergence of new forms of surveillance and control which will be administered not only by states but also by supra-national mega-corporations such as Google and Amazon. Top executives are itching to offer us the Faustian bargain of a quick fix to the pandemic problem in exchange for a surrendering of even more of our everyday lives to their data-collection machines. The situation is only made worse if, as looks likely, the track-and-trace programmes developed by these corporations prove to be more effective than those developed by dedicated healthcare providers with traditional commitments to privacy and patient confidentiality;
- 6) A new political sequence around questions of racism and police violence on a scale that has not been seen during my lifetime. While the immediate cause of this social unrest is all too familiar, its effects are not: an extraordinary rise in public support for these movements has been coupled with an *increase* in their militancy and radicalism, which gives the lie to the usual centrist strategies of triangulation and appeasement. As the political demand shifts from mandatory implicit bias tests and racial sensitivity training to "defund the police", Black Lives Matter have started to poll higher net favorability ratings than Joe Biden;
- 7) A re-evaluation of those forms of history whose memorialised "heroes" include the likes of Cecil Rhodes, King Leopold II, and Robert E. Lee. The statues are finally coming down. Whilst this is in itself primarily a symbolic act, this time it looks to be the index of a real change in historical consciousness,

especially among young people. Right-wingers are right to worry: they know full well that this is just the first step in dismantling their version of history. When they ask: “will they be coming for Winston Churchill next?”, this is not an idle question – that moment may soon be upon us;

8) A transformation in our interpersonal relationships that has raised profound existential questions, and which has already necessitated the invention of new forms of sociality and intimacy that range from the sublime to the ridiculous. New York City’s public health authorities have been putting out materials recommending “sexy Zoom parties” and the avoidance of close contact by “having sex through holes in walls or other barriers”. Group sex is discouraged, that is, unless it takes place in “larger, more open, ventilated spaces”. [2] We are also having to re-learn basic norms of communication as we adjust to tele-technologies that disrupt the rhythms and non-verbal cues of ordinary conversation;

9) A devastation of culture and the arts, with little hope of reopening short of the arrival of a vaccine. Musicians have been particularly innovative in their use of technology to continue working through lockdown, but most new developments have proven impossible to monetise and so unworkable within contemporary capitalism, no matter how valuable they may be from a creative point of view;

10) A revolution in education towards an online model that has always been controversial, but which now seems to have public health considerations on its side. Educators of all stripes are understandably divided on this question, as it seems to pit their legitimate unease with these technologies against the safety of their students, themselves, and anyone connected to either group. For those without easy access to a reliable internet connection, things are looking very bleak indeed.

In the context of these and other transformations, whose effects we are all still trying to grasp in their enormity, it is quite shocking to see a philosopher of the caliber of Badiou arguing that there is really nothing to see here. The current situation, he argues, is “by no means the emergence of something radically new or unprecedented”; those who have written about it are merely “dissipating the intrinsic activity of Reason, obliging subjects to return to those sad effects – mysticism, fabulation, prayer, prophecy and malediction – that were customary in the Middle Ages when plague swept the land.” [3] Badiou reads the crisis in an avowedly “Cartesian” way according to a split between nature and capital-R Reason; because the coronavirus is fundamentally a creature of nature, the crisis it provoked does not require “any great analytical efforts or the constitution of a new way of thinking” on the part of philosophers; its analysis can safely be left to the scientists. Although some governments are certainly responding better and worse than others, this is fundamentally a technocratic, managerial question of no genuine political significance (he even offers some lukewarm words for Macron along these lines). Against the view presented above that the crisis is provoking a whole sequence of epochal global shifts, Badiou thinks that “the ongoing epidemic will not have, *qua* epidemic, any noteworthy political consequences in a country like France”. What makes this take even more surprising is that Badiou’s most famous concept, the “event” understood as a rupture so radical that it re-structures the very world from which it arises, seems to be one of the more promising candidates from recent philosophy for understanding the present situation, even if the theory would have to be modified in certain respects to fit today’s condition.

Even beyond the case of Badiou, it seems to me that other texts in wide circulation represent different ways of saying that the current situation is nothing genuinely new. I do not propose to enter into all the details of the controversy around Agamben’s recent blog posts, but I will suggest that part of the frustration of those texts is their insistent focus on just one aspect of the crisis. Agamben is surely right to say that states will use all of the moves from the infernal playbook of biopolitical governance he has analysed so well in the past; they have already begun to do so, and it is just as deplorable as it ever was. But the problematic of the state of exception is just one component of a vastly more complex global situation; what’s more, it is one of its features that was already familiar to us before the pandemic. If this is one’s diagnosis of the situation, then one is really saying that the viral event is no event at all, but instead a mere occasion for the continuation of processes that all existed before, and which we philosophers already understand perfectly well. This is what I mean when I say that some recent texts are reminiscent of Rousseau’s approach to the Lisbon earthquake:

the bare repetition of old critical tropes is just another way of protecting previous modes of thinking from having to change, while suggesting that the coronavirus does not pose any fundamental challenges to contemporary philosophy.

Notes:

[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Letter to Voltaire” in *Candide and Related Texts* ed. and trans. David Wootton, Indianapolis: Hackett, 110-111.

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/11/well/live/coronavirus-sex-dating-masks.html>

[3] <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4608-on-the-epidemic-situation>

Bio:

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