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# COVID-19. Critique in Sick Times

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## 1. Philosophy at a Time of Crisis

It becomes impossible to think when COVID-19 turns into a synonym for one's own death or, worse, for the death of a loved one or the hundreds of thousands of strangers, which is also painful. Uncertainty and anxiety cloud understanding and stifle speech. In spite of this, it is essential to think and to listen.

Like any pressing subject, the one we are dealing with now is complex and requires a moment of unhurried reflection to try to get a glimpse of the many perspectives and situations involved. A moment, however, that will come later. The present time oozes urgency. And haste is no help to philosophy. In spite of this, there is a need to make an effort to produce unfinished, hesitating thoughts, since it is philosophy's duty to produce senses and concepts, to name things, to show ways. Besides, we must put other voices and other viewpoints on the table which, up to now, has been mainly occupied by European, North American and masculine reflections.

Among the many things that have been said in recent weeks, there are many clichés which would seem to deal with themes and approximations supposedly legitimised by current philosophy:

biopolitics and necropolitics as necessary horizons of reflection, as handy concepts for thinking about what exists and what is happening; technology and its ubiquitousness as elements which have completely transformed the contemporary world; science fiction and its almost prophetic dystopias that fill social imaginaries, its fears and emotions; capitalism, neoliberalism, communism are invoked everywhere as both guilty and redeeming; politics, migration, racism, social classes as things to be denounced, time and again; the state's total surveillance of its citizens via technology, webcams, drones, smartphones, facial recognition cameras, that is to say: all the new surveillance tools that can even include biometrics; the fantasies that this crisis will mean a radical transformation in the world, in the global order, that when all this ends, there will be a new reality (but when he woke up, the dinosaur was still there[1]). But an event, like a trauma, has two outcomes: to open up new horizons or set off a compulsive repetition. Which way will this pandemic turn us?

These philosophical reflections take place, most of the time, in insignificant and privileged places, making their claim to be global interpretations of the pandemic questionable. The voice of philosophy, inasmuch as it represents humanity, with the ability and right to speak for others, must be assumed to be problematic.

It is our duty to think with humility as a starting point, assuming our imagination limited, because the circumstances of the pandemic, the way it behaves in different corners of the world, remains incalculable and unimaginable. Today we are obliged to be critical of our spoiled epistemic position, our excessive credibility, we can't be lazy and we must exercise the open-mindedness that, in this case, will account for the humility of not writing in the place of the other. Being open means, in this context, leaving a space open for the other to speak and narrate their micro-non-

experience. We say ‘non-experience’ because in moments of crisis it is timely to recall Cathy Caruth's studies on trauma and its quality of non-experience. In this sense, we cannot cite and, therefore, cannot say much about this pandemic as an experience, since it has not yet been. We have scarcely been immersed in the wave of a tragedy that has already claimed too many lives and exercised violence against populations with specific characteristics, such as those over the age of sixty or those suffering from hypertension and/or diabetes. We have also heard speeches and witnessed practices that consider the old to be disposable. We have read about doctors who have been forced to decide that which no one should have to decide: who will live and who will die, a practice that we should not endow with any logic because it lacks all logic. The sovereign decision on life and death is incomprehensible and it is imperative to resist its normalisation and we must simultaneously demand that the authorities ensure that medical services be sufficient for all who fall ill, since the world either already has what is needed or has the energy needed to build it: it is merely a matter of distributing it in a fair and caring manner, that is, with global solidarity.

There are philosophical positions, for example, scandalously that of Giorgio Agamben[2], written from the point of view of an irresponsible epistemological arrogance. The excess of credibility of their discourses has as a consequence, in addition to disdain for the suffering of many others, the effect of inflicting invisibility on many for whom social distancing has been or will be impossible and who, consequently, are terrified that either they or one of their loved ones should become ill. It is closed-minded and Eurocentric to assume that the lockdown experienced in Spain, Italy or France is due only to the coercion of the State, without even stopping to imagine that in other latitudes, such as Mexico, for instance, this

has been the privilege of the few. The interpretations that philosophy must produce have to be more plural, more sensible, and more respectful of differences.

In these times of the coronavirus, it is not the same thing to contemplate European countries whose health systems have been overwhelmed and whose economies anticipate a crisis, as it is to think about Latin American countries whose health systems were already saturated and short of supplies, with economies for which this will be one more crisis.

In Mexico City, the topic under discussion has not been just the lockdown, but also, and perhaps even more urgently, the economy. But not the macroeconomy, the stock markets and the crash, nor loans from the IMF and the World Bank, nor attempts at European Union, G7, or G20 agreements, nor the United States' billionaire budget – it has been personal and family finances, unfair working conditions, insecurity of employment, the absence of competent health systems (neither public systems because of their scarcity and corruption, nor the private ones because of their immoral and predatory prices).

Little is said about the many deaths to come. It is whispered about, but there is no open discourse about who will die as a result of this pandemic.

## 2. Life (and death). Between Biology and Culture

Of the many questions that have appeared in philosophy articles in recent weeks, of particular relevance is an understanding of the category of life outside or opposed to culture. Above all, this is because it corresponds to a certain paradigm and biological way of thinking of the twentieth century, which insists on separating what

is alive, on studying it and determining it in mechanistic terms, with its many consequences from the discourse on transgenics, to medicine, passing through bioinformatics and the mathematization and modelling of living phenomena. This separate understanding touches human life, other life forms, and what lies at the limit of life, in this case, the virus.

We ask, in opposition: how can we speak of biological life, bare life, when human life always appears under social, cultural, economic, political and familial conditions of difference? When does human life appear simply as is? Neither human life nor the pathogen that now threatens it appear in isolation. It is ontologically untenable to pretend that this pandemic puts us in the position of having to choose between biological and social life. Human life is always qualified and it appears under certain conditions, culturally marked, from its gestation, as nobody is gestated in neutrality. The biological is political and affective. Pregnant bodies are well aware of this, since in too many places the right to interrupt a pregnancy safely is still being discussed. The actions needed to support life biologically always take place in a political context and, in this patriarchal world, these actions extend to the biological tissues which are potentially a human life and grow in a singular body.

Human life is marked by the history of those who came before us, not only as a cultural identity but also biologically, as research in epigenetics shows. If human life is always qualified, always determined in terms of something, how could one think that what affects it can do so without any differences? How can we talk of a virus that “attacks” everybody equally, that knows neither distinctions, nor nationalities, nor social classes? How can we make a clean biological cut to make a decision about what corresponds to the neutral “attack” of the virus as a fact of life and what part of the

illness and related hospital care correspond to cultural facts? There are 8 million diabetics in Mexico who will be more seriously affected if they got COVID-19, and their diabetes has to do with social and economic conditions of life and food insecurity. This is merely one example of how cultural aspects affect biological phenomena.

An ontological autonomy of biology cannot be sustained epistemologically; it is impossible or perversely delusional to make clear cuts between matter and ideas.  But, in addition, from the point of view of the human condition, this ontological autonomy is a chimaera, since the pathogen is not bare - like the absurdly "pretended" bare life – and neither are the conditions from which it emerged.

This virus has demonstrated implacably that borders do not exist when it comes to the transmission of disease, nevertheless, we must ask ourselves if walls are nothing more than an allegory of the neoliberal, individualistic policies, when it comes to communication of other phenomena. Many believe that what we are experiencing is exclusive to a period of abnormality, when in fact we are just at a critical moment of our biological, ethical and ontological interdependence.

In these terms, this crisis is nothing more than a contrast dye that dramatically makes visible how our life depends on and is sustained by others and by all other living things and non-living forms of nature (for example, water, air, and stones). This crisis only closes up the space of disavowal of reality and does not allow us to postpone the recognition of our ontological quality of radical interdependence.

The pandemic shows us in an undeniable manner that caring for others is caring for oneself, that it is our moral duty to ensure that every human being in the world has access to health (and now, more than ever, this must be understood not only for healthcare, but also for safe housing and basic services such as sanitation), to education, to a universal minimum wage, to the enjoyment of nature, to a life worth living.

In Mexico, as in many parts of the world, those of us who are staying at home have not opted for "biological" survival, renouncing social life. Whether we know it or not, staying at home has been an act of radical socialization, subsequent to planning designed for the public good. This health, economic and ethical crisis makes it clear to us that life is never bare, never outside the public space, nor does it take place outside politics.

### 3. Towards a Critical Philosophy

We must think of the conditions in which the pandemic emerged critically. Before this broke out, the discussion was about climate change and gender violence. We had – finally – managed, in a historic moment for Mexico, to gather together hundreds of thousands in the streets of the country and shout "Not one less!" as loud as we could. (What will we shout from our windows now?)

Does the pandemic have pre-eminence? Shall we suspend our other struggles? If we reflect on the conditions in which it emerged, it is clear that the issue is neither a pathogen nor the misnamed "war" against it. Capitalism and its limits are still the topic, as Judith Butler[3] has pointed out. Models of knowledge and their hegemonies are still the question. We get human against human in the context of COVID-19 and it is a horrifying reality. Thinking of

nature as a warehouse for supplying ourselves and as something we have to control and dominate is also problematic nowadays. Reducing the pandemic to numbers – pretending reality can be mathematized, because this fits a certain model of knowledge – prevents us from seeing and questioning earlier decisions and conditions that, in political, economic, ecological terms, etc., have generated the current state of the world. Much of this and other epidemics, recent and future, is related to eating habits, industrial agriculture, massive and increasing deforestation, the clandestine consumption of bushmeat, the loss of certain animals' habitat, industrial mass production of animals for human consumption; they all affect the relationships between pathogens and hosts, between immune systems and consumer habits[4]. Much of this too and other recent and future epidemics, is related to corruption in the control mechanisms for food production, to the sale of wild animals, to the commerce and trafficking of goods, to tourism, to shortages in health systems, to lack of basic hygiene conditions for a good part of the world's population, to vehicles and movement, etc.

And let's not talk about gender violence during isolation, domestic violence, child abuse, and abandonment of elderly people.

We still have all that to think about.

There is a great deal of fear and that makes thinking difficult, but there is also a lack of moderation. There is a great desire for hope and confidence in science, technology and medicine which makes us react as if this were a problem that we have to solve with an increase in and improvement to the instruments we have been producing in the last century and a half. (Fake) news of treatments and vaccines. Airs of hope. Patches on an incompetent system.

But this pandemic, with everything that it destroys, and everything that it reveals and exposes will not be an opportunity to build another possible world, nor to end patriarchy, capitalism nor neoliberalism. And all the questions about the meaning and the goodness of existence that are asked will be forgotten the moment the crisis passes. How poor we are in spirit if we think that this will make us better! Although this is not to deny that the crisis clarifies a political agenda of struggle and resistance for which we will have to redouble our efforts.

In societies where we experience crisis after crisis, and survive crisis after crisis, we know that these are not the threshold to better times, nor rebirths, nor deep, transforming learning. It is regrettable to believe that the time to change something is when we are up to our necks in fear, and when our inability to accept death makes us avoid ourselves, racing frantically in search of pharmaceutical, clinical, political, biological solutions...

The demands come down from long ago and we have to listen to them. Our critical capacity should not be blinded by our eagerness for novelty. That is why we can say, following Judith Butler, that the fact that the world has built a violent differential assignment of grievability, that is to say; that some lives are perceived as worthier of collective mourning than others, is not just a diagnosis, but an ethical vehicle that allows us to formulate a political imaginary of fairness. It is thus a normative aspiration. And from that same epistemological frame, we can understand the neoliberal abuse over other non-human forms of life and of non-living nature. The climate change that we are undergoing, the consequences of which will be increasingly dramatic and violent, is also the consequence of an unfair valuation of the different ways nature has of being. We must associate the effort to dismantle forms of knowledge, epistemological frameworks, linked to the reproduction of

objectionable practices of power, with projects of social transformation that aim to achieve substantial democratic goals such as freedom, equality and justice. It is not clear how this can be achieved, but everything points to its being associated with the ability, on the one hand, to construct history and, on the other, to imagine a better future. The critique must be an intervention in the course of history that fractures it, so that, in that crack, the horizon for a better future can open up.

In the face of the crisis caused by the appearance of the SARS-CoV-19 virus, humanity faces countless challenges. Nevertheless, as the pandemic advances, and even when, it runs its course and comes to its end, new and incalculable horizons for thought and collective action will appear. For the time being, the greatest challenge is that of building and acting from a position of global solidarity, even though we know that the richer countries are hoarding inputs, the ventilators, the medicines, even when staying at home is a privilege of high class all around the world.

If the virus can remind us of something we already knew and were reluctant to accept, it is that taking care of others is taking care of ourselves.

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[1] See Monterroso, A. El Dinosaurio. In: *Cuentos breves para leer en la cama*. Madrid: Santillana Ediciones Generales SL. 2009.

[2] See Giorgio Agamben, "The Invention of an Epidemic," *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, February 26, 2020, https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/ accessed: March 22, 2020

[3] See Judith Butler, “Capitalism has its Limits”, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits accessed: March 31, 2020.

[4] See Rob Wallace, Alex Liebman et al, “COVID-19 and Circuits of Capital”, *Monthly Review*, March 27, 2020, https://monthlyreview.org/2020/03/27/covid-19-and-circuits-of-capital/ accessed: March 31, 2020.