

Leszek Koczanowicz

ORCID: 0000-0002-4204-1674

SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities

“A picture held us captive...”: Or, on what the pandemic has changed and what it cannot change^{*}

Abstract: The article aims to establish how incisive the changes in social reality triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic are. The first part examines the distinctiveness of the current pandemic in comparison with other epidemics, and investigates responses to it from within the humanities. The second part focuses on defining the viable criteria of social change. Two such criteria are provided: change in the world-picture in terms of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy and change in the concept of the reality of reality as proposed by Luc Boltanski. In the following part, these criteria are applied to analyze the debate on the pandemic unfolding in the humanities and social sciences. In the concluding part, the notion of the apparatus (*dispositif*) is introduced as a useful tool for exploring and depicting the social consequences of the pandemic. When this notion is juxtaposed with the adopted criteria, the epidemic can be seen to change the operative trajectory and the structure of apparatuses and, consequently, to alter the world-picture and the reality of reality as it progresses. While what durable changes (if any) the pandemic will cause cannot be established with any certainty, it can definitely be expected to enhance the social and political processes which had commenced before its outbreak. In this regard, the epidemic has produced one crucial change; specifically, communitarians are clearly getting the upper hand over liberals in the long-standing dispute between the two.

Keywords: pandemic, Wittgenstein, Boltanski, apparatus, social change, politics

Introduction: The pandemic, politics, and everyday life

The coronavirus pandemic has changed our everyday lives in obvious ways and at a variety of levels, from our most elementary habits, through relationships with other people, to spiritual life and its reflections on the fundamental dimensions of

^{*} Research on this article was supported by the NCN grant “Wittgenstein and Democratic Politics” no. 2018/30/M/HS1/00781.

existence. This is evident to everybody. As is usually the case in tolerably similar circumstances, we are tempted to try and steal a glimpse behind the veil of the present and see what the future will be like when the epidemic is over. If we heed Hegel, philosophy should abstain from such predictive ventures. Its primary function should be to show new perspectives, new points of view on what is going on in the world; this is where it emphatically differs from the empirical sciences, the sole focus of which is the examination of phenomena. This Hegelian striving for yet unexplored intellectual angles is how I would like to approach the pandemic, which has put all of us at risk.

However, before doing this, it makes sense to consider the basic question of why philosophy should address the pandemic in the first place. Pandemics and epidemics have been around to intermittently plague humanity since its dawn, but they have barely ever been among the subjects of philosophical inquiry. Rather than being major philosophical concerns, they have either lingered somewhere in the background, as in Lucretius, or served as an illustration of philosophical theses, as in Camus's famous novel. While we can certainly come across hygienic advice in the works of utopian writers (e.g., Tommaso Campanella), who furnished the dwellers of their ideal worlds with disease-combating powers, we would look in vain for any mention of pestilence in the gigantic work of Hegel, who himself died of cholera.

The fact that now, even as the pandemic is still raging, a heated debate on its philosophical relevance is already underway, is the most explicit evidence imaginable of changes in the very notion of what philosophy is and of the radical redefinition of what can, or for that matter cannot, be a subject of philosophical discussion. Slightly less directly, this attests to transformations in our concept of politics and in our general approach to what can be referred to as everydayness. The debate predominantly revolves around biopolitics, and there is good reason for that too. In the wake of ever stricter sanitary regimes, questions about their legitimacy, limits, rules governing their implementation, etc. unsurprisingly proliferate. I will revisit these disputes further in this text. Social and economic changes resulting from the pandemic make up another major axis of the debate. It is already obvious that massive interventions of the state in the economy are inevitable. What long-term consequences will be produced by these forced decisions? This question is addressed not only by philosophers but also by economists and social scientists. Relevant and important as such discussions are, they also showcase the internal displacements within (and reconfigurations of) philosophy. Existential and ethical themes are basically absent. This seems rather surprising, given that the pandemic not only abounds in difficult ethical choices, especially for physicians, but also provokes questions about the meaning of human life. Another philosophical discipline which is conspicuously underrepresented in the current debates is the philosophy of science. This may raise eyebrows as well, for the pandemic and, even more so, the measures marshaled to fight it invite very fundamental questions central to this field. After all, the methods of formulating and testing hypotheses, the frameworks

for verifying notions and assertions, and the paradigms of knowledge production should all be widely discussed. And yet they are not. Analytical philosophers are also among those largely absent from the conversation. Inferably, the methods of the logical analysis of reality have either proved inadequate or are not mobilizable quickly enough.

If we were to assess the condition of philosophy judging from how the debate on the pandemic is unfolding, we would be inclined to conclude that broadly conceived political philosophy of non-analytical ilk is the most robust philosophical branch. Within this scope, biopolitics is obviously the most vibrant enterprise, but the intersections of philosophy and economy, dealing with the distribution of goods, employee relations, etc., come as a close second. While my reflections are, roughly speaking, inscribed in this field, my primary focus is on the relations between politics and everyday life in the context of the catastrophe-crisis of the pandemic. Before proceeding to more specific issues, let me formulate a handful of general assumptions about the pandemic to serve as a starting point for my further argument.

The present pandemic is extraordinary in its unique relation to science. Specifically, the pandemic reveals the weakness of science and, at the same time, its power. This results from the fact that the pandemic is to a large degree scientifically "constructed." If we did not have the knowledge of viruses that we have and if we did not know the statistical equations modeling the development of epidemics, we could easily miss it or, ultimately, consider it just a variant of flu. This is how the risk was initially belittled until scientific research provided a certain set of data and, more importantly, extrapolated these data in ways that compelled governments to launch certain measures. Sophisticated scientific data serve to implement the most rudimentary strategy that has been repeatedly tried and tested over the centuries — quarantine-cum-isolation. Of course, these ancient techniques are vamped up by ultra-modern methods of social behavior modeling, but at their core they have remained intact, and they are basically applied in intuitive ways, as evinced by the differences in the extent and strictness of procedures launched by various countries. To use Husserl's late language, our lifeworlds (*Lebenswelten*) and the action-world (*Wirkwelt*) are deeply discordant.¹

This particular property of the pandemic inevitably affects the ways it is perceived in everyday life, above all because its visibility is limited or, if we may use the term, mediated. In his impressive description of emptied-out Rome, Stephen Greenblatt observes that the literary model for the current pandemic is to be found not in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* or Albert Camus's *The Plague*,

¹ E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. D. Carr, Chicago 1970.

but in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* with its depiction of beaches deserted because of an outbreak of cholera.²

What most of us see with our own eyes are forlorn streets and protective gear: face masks, disinfectants, gloves, etc. We can see more in the media, with this pandemic being perhaps the first medical event to be so widely — globally — broadcast and commented in real time. In this sense, the pandemic is an equivalent of the Gulf War, which was the first military conflict to invite such massive media coverage. There is, however, one key difference between the two: while the remote war could be watched by most of us from afar, the pandemic is changing the lives of nearly all the inhabitants of our globe. The glaring asymmetry between the direct (in)visibility of the epidemic and the severity of injunctions to alter our daily habits — which is imperative, as researchers and governments insist — breeds constant tensions, which are not likely to disappear in any country afflicted by the epidemic. This cognitive chasm becomes an avenue for all sundry phantasms, ranging from conspiracy theories, through the historically entrenched repertoire of sermons on the punishment for sins and the millenarian attitudes they breed, to the dreams of a better world to come when the pandemic is finally overcome.

I believe these insights help us outline the area in which to ask philosophical questions about the pandemic. To start with, the question whether the pandemic has changed our perception of the world implies a philosophical question of what it means that the perception of the world is changing. Answering this question entails raising a series of other issues, concerning, for example, the broadly debated limits of bioethics and the possibilities of a better world in the post-epidemic times to come.

This helps us focalize the issue whether the pandemic is altering the way we perceive and function in the world. In light of my considerations above, the question is whether living under the pandemic will trigger mechanisms yielding a new construction of reality, that is, to generating new rules of social life. As such, we deal with the query pertaining to two interrelated areas of social reality. One of them, as already mentioned, concerns biopower/biopolitics, while the other is related to the rules of social life, and above all to the emergence of new principles of the distribution of goods, i.e., of social justice.

Wittgenstein, Boltanski, and the (in)stability of the everyday world

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein notes: “A picture held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed

² S. Greenblatt, “The Strange Terror of Watching the Coronavirus Take Rome,” *New Yorker*, 4.03.2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-strange-terror-of-watching-coronavirus-take-rome> (accessed 27.03.2020).

only to repeat it to us inexorably."³ Davis Owen argues that this observation is deeply relevant to political philosophy in at least three ways:

First, it specifies a particular kind of problem: a nonphysical constraint on our capacity for self-government [...]. Second, it offers a medium for dissolving instances of this kind of problems [...] showing us how we can see things differently and thus enabling us to free ourselves from the despotic demand of the 'must' characteristic of our captivation by a given picture. Third, it exemplifies a case-oriented mode of philosophy that aims to let us free ourselves from [...] the craving for generality expressed in modes of philosophy modeled on the natural sciences.⁴

Wittgenstein's assertion and Owen's interpretation of it imply the difficulties involved in establishing whether the pandemic changes the way in which we perceive the world. It is obvious that the pandemic wreaks havoc in our world-perception, as developments proliferate which we would have deemed utterly impossible until recently, such as the isolation of entire societies, the closing of borders, and wide-ranging constraints on civil rights. Is that enough to conclude that we must necessarily revise our world-image? If, as already mentioned, past epidemics were neither triggers nor objects of philosophical reflection, it was not because their tragic dimension was not appreciated enough. On the contrary, since antiquity, epidemics have been the impetus for implementing the rules of hygienic life. Nevertheless, the various responses to epidemics were comfortably aligned with certain systems of thought and worldviews — religious in antiquity, and increasingly scientific during the Enlightenment.⁵

The same connection is espoused by Michel Foucault in his explorations of the genesis of modern state and population control, where the notion of biopower/biopolitics, pivotal to the current debates as it is, was forged. Foucault explicitly defines it in his series of lectures at the Collège de France:

By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is what I have called biopower.⁶

Foucault associates the emergence and domination of this form of power with the development of knowledge and also with the exigency to justify the position of the state anew. As state power can no longer be legitimized by reference to God, an alternative form of legitimization arises, including the protection and happiness

³ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.M.E. Anscombe, Oxford 1958, § 115.

⁴ D. Owen, "Genealogy as Perspicuous Representation," [in:] *Grammar of Politics: Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy*, ed. C.J. Heyes, Ithaca 2003, p. 88.

⁵ D. Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times*, London 1999.

⁶ M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*, trans. D. Burchell, London 2007, p. 1.

of individuals, which consequently leads to enhanced interference of the state in individual lives:

From the idea that the state has its own nature and its own finality to the idea of man as living individual or man as a part of a population in relation to an environment, we can see the increasing intervention of the state in the life of individuals, the increasing importance of life problems for political power, and the development of possible fields for social and human sciences insofar as they take into account those problems of individual behavior inside the population and the relations between a living population and its environment.⁷

I recapitulate Foucault's views to return to the question whether the pandemic stirs us to "see things differently," as Owen averred in the passage quoted above. This question can be made more specific by relying on the notion of biopower/biopolitics, popularized by Foucault. The fundamental issue is then whether the spreading pandemic radically transforms the way in which this notion works — whether it extends its meaning with a different content than that defined by Foucault as a practical application of the rational rules of the Enlightenment state to population. To establish that, we must analyze philosophical discourse on the pandemic, which I will further on in this paper.

However, at this point, let us spare a moment to look into another concept concerning the normality and abnormality of everyday reality. I mean specifically the notions of the "normalcy" of the social world which have been proposed and developed in French sociology. I believe that sociological concepts can to some extent complement Wittgenstein's insights into the cognitive power of images. The affinity of the two is well conveyed, for example, in Pierre Bourdieu's definition of symbolic power:

Symbolic power is a power of constructing reality, and one which tends to establish a gnoseological order: the immediate meaning of the world (and in particular of the social world) depends on what Durkheim calls logical conformism, that is, "homogeneous conception of time, space, number and cause, one which makes it possible for different intellects to reach agreement." Durkheim [...] has the merit of designating the social function [...] of symbolism in an explicit way: it is an authentic political function which cannot be reduced to the structuralists' function of communication.⁸

Similarly to Wittgenstein, Bourdieu places emphasis on the direct perception of the world and asserts that meanings produced in this perception are notoriously resistant to questioning. With their stability guaranteed by logical conformism, the world, which is constructed in this way, cannot be put in doubt without risking the breakdown of the entire cognitive order. Unlike Wittgenstein, Bourdieu, whose work was anchored in the Marxist tradition, bound the direct perception of

⁷ M. Foucault, *Technologies of The Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. L.H. Martin, H. Gutman, P.H. Hutton, Amherst 1988, pp. 160–161.

⁸ P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. G. Raymond, Cambridge 1991, p. 166.

the world with the position of the dominant group, which imposed this image on entire society in ways benefitting its own purposes.

Nevertheless, the model outlined by Bourdieu has a flaw which, I believe, it shares with Wittgenstein's concept. Specifically, neither of them suggests any ways in which the transition from one conceptual system or image to another may happen. They imply that such a transition, though challenging, is possible, but they do not state what mechanisms are at work then and how the changes come to pass. While this was not exactly a major problem for Wittgenstein, because he pursued a rather different goal, it can be a serious objection to sociological theory. This is a key issue in my argument, since it is only if and when we are able to recognize whether such mechanisms have or have not been launched that we can foresee how profound the pandemic-triggered changes will be.

This is why I draw on the concept of the French sociologist Luc Boltanski, whose critique of Bourdieu is informed by the idea that people are not only objects of the reproduction of social structures but also are capable of developing critical attitudes to the social order in place, drawing on their own everyday experiences. Boltanski labels his project a pragmatic sociology of critique, as opposed to Bourdieu's proposal of critical sociology. He stresses that

The *actors* whom these works have made possible were very different from the *agents* who feature in critical sociology of domination [...]. They made their demands, denounced injustices, produced evidence in support of their complaints, or constructed arguments to justify themselves in the face of critiques to which they were themselves subjected. Envisaged thus, the social world does not appear to be the site of domination endured passively and unconsciously, but instead as a space shot through by a multiplicity of disputes, critiques, disagreements and attempts to re-establish locally agreements that are always fragile.⁹

In Boltanski's view, any effective concept of social critique must build upon individuals' experiences and the ways they feel the injustice of their social systems.

A starting point for such a critique is often provided by people's personal experiences, which underpin what Boltanski calls an "existential test" of social reality, which is based on "experiences, like those of injustice or humiliation, sometimes with the shame that accompanies them, but also, in other cases, the joy created by transgression when it affords access to some forms of authenticity."¹⁰ However, "these experiences are difficult to formulate or thematize because there exists no pre-established format to frame them, or even because, considered from the standpoint of the existing order, they have an aberrant character."¹¹ Given this, a critique leveled from this perspective has certain specific features. Namely, as Boltanski explains, since people's originary experiences

⁹ L. Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, trans. G. Elliott, Cambridge 2011, pp. 26–27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 107–108.

are situated on the margins of *reality* — reality as it is “constructed” in a certain social order — these existential tests open up a path to the *world*. Hence, they are one of the sources from which a form of critique can emerge that might be called *radical*, in order to distinguish it from *reformist* critiques intended to improve existing reality tests.¹²

In this framework, changes in the picture of reality are effected in and through a series of existential tests whose outcomes indicate that the currently existing reality does not meet the norms that people tacitly presuppose when engaging in action. In this sense, Boltanski’s concept can be regarded as sociologically picking up and elaborating on Wittgenstein’s observation in *Philosophical Investigations*:

We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball like this: starting various existing games, but playing several without finishing them, and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball, throwing it at one another for a joke, and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and therefore are following definite rules at every throw. And is there not also the case where we play and — make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them — as we go along.¹³

In both cases, we are faced with situations in which action leads to change: in Wittgenstein, to the minting of new rules, and in Boltanski, to the emergence of a new construction of reality. Most importantly, in both cases the changes occur in passing, so to speak, without any prior planning or conscious decision involved.

Democracy, biopower, and social justice

As stated earlier in this paper, the current pandemic is the first epidemic to be watched, commented on, and discussed in real time as it happens. The debate addresses the two spheres which I have defined above. In all probability, any attempt to sum it up conclusively would be premature at the moment, but the major positions which are taken in it can certainly be identified now. It is also possible to assess how far the discussants are convinced that the pandemic is making fundamental changes in our perception of social reality and biopower.

A sizeable group of commentators views the epidemic as corroborating the worst fears about the future of humankind. On this take, the pandemic is a prism or a magnifying glass which reveals with an extraordinary clarity tendencies which have so far entirely or partly eluded experts’ eyes. Such views permeate the philosophical discussion unfolding in the Internet edition of the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* (published as a special edition entitled *Coronavirus and Philosophers: A Tribune*)¹⁴. The discussion opens with Giorgio Agamben’s text on “The

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹³ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §83.

¹⁴ At the date of publication of this paper, many of the articles included in the “tribune” that were previously available at the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*’s website have either been

Invention of the Epidemic,"¹⁵ which cites medical data to argue that there is hardly any difference between coronavirus and seasonal flu. Consequently, utilizing his concept of the state of exception, Agamben insists that the epidemic is, practically speaking, an excuse for governments to institute such a state without any attempts to disguise it any longer. The text was dated on 26th February 2020, but three weeks later, on 17th March 2020, despite increasing knowledge about the effects of the epidemic, Agamben defends his earlier reasoning in "Clarifications,"¹⁶ where he buttressed his argument by evoking naked life, another of his signature concepts. The epidemic, Agamben argues, is evidence that people have been reduced to naked life, that they are only preoccupied with bodily security, and that all spiritual issues practically vanish in the face of physical threat.

The pandemic has also revealed the worst traits of modern society:

There have been more serious epidemics in the past, but no one ever thought of declaring a state of emergency like today, one that forbids us even to move. Men have become so used to living in conditions of permanent crisis and emergency that they don't seem to notice that their lives have been reduced to a purely biological condition, one that has lost not only any social and political dimension, but even any compassionate and emotional one. A society that lives in a permanent state of emergency cannot be a free one. We effectively live in a society that has sacrificed freedom to so-called "security reasons" and as a consequence has condemned itself to living in a permanent state of fear and insecurity.¹⁷

What is more, Agamben argues that the measures of social control and the means for isolating individuals from each other introduced during the epidemic will continue beyond it and become a permanent feature of our lives even when the pandemic subsides. While Agamben's position is indeed rather extreme and incendiary, it cannot be denied some valid insights. The pandemic is constructed by science and certainly offers governments an opportunity to bolster their power. An excellent case in point is Poland, in which the rather authoritarian governing party decided — in defiance of common sense, the advice of most physicians, and concerted protests from the entire opposition — to hold a presidential election

removed or transferred to a different section of the site. Giorgio Agamben's and Sergio Benvenuto's polemic (Agamben's "The Invention of the Epidemic" and "Clarifications" and Benvenuto's "Forget about Agamben") can now be accessed at an aggregate page: <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>, while others have been included in a book published by Routledge: *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics and Society*, (including J.-L. Nancy's „A Viral Exception" and R. Esposito's „Cured to the Bitter End"). References to said articles have been modified accordingly.

¹⁵ G. Agamben, "The Invention of the Epidemic," *European Journal of Psychoanalysis (Coronavirus and Philosophers)*, 26.02.2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/coronavirus-and-philosophers/> (accessed 18.01.2023).

¹⁶ G. Agamben, "Clarifications," *European Journal of Psychoanalysis (Coronavirus and Philosophers)*, 17.03.2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/coronavirus-and-philosophers/> (accessed 18.01.2023).

¹⁷ Ibid.

in May in order to keep the current president, who is politically aligned with the government, in office.

Nevertheless, Agamben's dismissive approach to the pandemic as an enormous peril in its own right and his accusations of caring only about biological security leveled at people *en masse* have spurred scathing polemics. Jean-Luc Nancy in "A Viral Exception" questions Agamben's assertions that coronavirus is not more dangerous than common flu, insisting that, on the contrary, it poses a serious hazard to entire societies. Therefore, what we are faced with is viral exception rather than the state of exception voluntarily imposed by governments. Themselves taken by surprise by the course of events, governments cannot be blamed for responding to the developments at hand:

We must be careful not to hit the wrong target: an entire civilization is in question, there is no doubt about it. There is a sort of viral exception — biological, computer-scientific, cultural — which is pandemic. Governments are nothing more than grim executioners and taking it out on them seems more like a diversionary manoeuvre than a political reflection.¹⁸

Rather than regarding the pandemic as a prism or an amplifier of the tendencies in place, Nancy views it as an independent actor and an agent in the unfolding events. The closing lines of Nancy's text reverberate with some private sentiments: Agamben strongly advised Nancy against the heart transplant, a surgery which has since helped Nancy enjoy years of productive life. We would be hard pressed to find a more personally-inflected polemic and a more resounding demystification of the beliefs voiced by Agamben, who seems unable to abandon his dogmatic views, or rather obsessions, even if this puts the lives of others at risk.

However, questions about the limits to philosophical argumentation persistently offer themselves at this point. If philosophy by nature flees into abstractions and generalizations, to what extent is it equipped to face up to an event as palpable as the pandemic? What is philosophy's potency when people are actually dying? In a sense, such issues are addressed by Roberto Esposito in "Cured to the Bitter End," where he polemicizes with Agamben on the one hand and Nancy on the other. Esposito's charge against Nancy is that he fails to appreciate the significance of biopolitics, which has basically determined the trajectory of politics over the last two hundred years. Hence his mistaken belief that the "viral event" is separable from the nexus of politics and biology which is referred to as biopolitics. Esposito's objection to Agamben is that he confounds long-standing tendencies with a singular development and, worse even, wrongly interprets this event. What is going on in Italy, Esposito observes, "has more the character of a breakdown of public authorities than that of a dramatic totalitarian grip."¹⁹

¹⁸ J.-L. Nancy, "A Viral Exception," [in:] *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics and Society*, eds. F. Castrillón, T. Marchevsky, Oxon 2021, p. 27.

¹⁹ R. Esposito, "Cured to the Bitter End," [in:] *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy...*, pp. 28–29.

The three positions outlined above revolve around biopolitics/biopower, even if Jean-Luc Nancy repudiates the notion. They can also be said to embody three fundamental views of the pandemic crisis: (1) the pandemic only (or as much as) reinforces the totalitarian tendencies inherent in modern biopolitics; (2) the pandemic is an event which exceeds biopolitics, for example by affording opportunities for people to show commitment and solidarity; (3) the pandemic is a unique even which confirms biopolitics, rather than undermining it, but biopolitics as such is not necessarily totalitarian and can foster community.

In my view, the relationship between the pandemic and the building or the destruction of community is the most important axis of this debate. It is a multifaceted issue, with its various dimensions actually overlapping. One of them is the survival of humanity as a planetary community. In this perspective, the pandemic sounds an alarm as a reminder of the impending catastrophe caused first and foremost by the Anthropocene with its rampant climate change. This position is embraced by Bruno Latour in "Is This a Dress Rehearsal." Latour interprets the pandemic, or more precisely, all the administrative restrictions it involves as "a caricatured form of the figure of *biopolitics* that seems to have come straight out of a Michel Foucault lecture." The French anthropologist suggests that the current counter-pandemic measures are inadequate to the threat and effectively divert people's attention from the central threat posed climate change, which can annihilate the entirety of humankind. While the current extraordinary social mobilization is not likely to be durable enough to overcome this other imminent and more dangerous menace, the period of isolation does offer such a chance:

But finally, you never know; a time of Lent, whether secular or republican, can lead to spectacular conversions. For the first time in years, a billion people, stuck at home, find this forgotten luxury: time to reflect and thereby discern that which usually and unnecessarily agitates them in all directions. Let's respect this long, painful, and unexpected fast.²⁰

The Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe develops a similar, though far more complex, argument in "The Universal Right to Breathe." Starting from the fact that coronavirus causes grave respiratory problems, which may end in death, Mbembe analyzes the enforcement of the right to breathe in the modern world. He shows that this right has been systematically undermined by privileged groups, which have dispatched death to others by the regular and multidimensional devastation of peripheral areas. The pandemic, however, powerfully shows that this attitude is no longer tenable, as communal solidarity on the global scale has been virtually imposed on us. This is a decisive moment, Mbembe insists in the conclusion to his text: "Humankind and biosphere are one. Alone, humanity has no future. Are we capable of rediscovering that each of us belongs to the same species,

²⁰ B. Latour, "Is This a Dress Rehearsal?," *Critical Inquiry*, 26.03.2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/> (accessed 10.04.2020).

that we have an indivisible bond with all life? Perhaps that is the question — the very last — before we draw our last dying breath.”²¹

In emphasizing that the pandemic has acutely revealed the exigency of collective action and solidarity, Latour and Mbembe hope that this realization will lead to a refashioning of human relationships. This idea surfaces in several papers as an important communal dimension of the epidemic. The call for solidarity is in a sense inherently paradoxical. Namely, the pandemic makes physical isolation requisite, but at the same time it demands spiritual solidarity. Thereby, it puts into question, or even inverts, the classic link between gesture and intention. As Sergio Benvenuto writes: “Today I display my love for the other by keeping her or him at a distance. This is the paradox that collapses all the lazy ideological frameworks [...] of the left and right, not to mention of the populists.”²² While I am not quite sure that all ideological distinctions are indeed crumbling, it is clear that the very idea of solidarity needs rethinking. On the one hand, we daily witness the often self-sacrificing dedication of physicians, nurses, firefighters, police officers, and other service workers whose efforts keep the life of the public going, but on the other millions of people are exhorted to display quite a different kind of solidarity, encapsulated in the hashtagged behests to #stayathome and #beonline.

At this point, we are approaching what Wittgenstein could define as “making up rules as we go along,” and Boltanski, as the “disintegration of the reality of reality.” Of course, we cannot predict with any certainty what principles will emerge from this abrupt change of the rules which have for centuries regulated our social life at the most rudimentary level of intimate relations with our loved ones. Practices and behaviors popular on the Internet and in virtual reality have become commonly espoused.²³ Yet value vectors have suddenly shifted: what until recently was censured as a moral vice — isolation from others, avoidance of direct contact, and some measure of egocentricity — has become a lauded virtue. Naturally, we assume that the same practices and behavior can be infused with a different interpretation and different emotions. However, if this is the case, we must resume the philosophy which puts consciousness or intention at the center of our actions, which is what Wittgenstein expressly sought to avoid. Still, perhaps the situation is even more complex, and the same actions make quite a different sense in another context or against another backdrop. To extend Wittgenstein’s metaphor, the shape of the pitch, the weight of the ball, and/or the players in the

²¹ A. Mbembe, “The Universal Right to Breathe,” *Critical Inquiry*, 13.04.2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/> (accessed 20.04.2020).

²² S. Benvenuto, “Forget about Agamben,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis (Coronavirus and Philosophers)*, 20.03.2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/coronavirus-and-philosophers/> (accessed 18.01.2023).

²³ L. Koczanowicz, *Anxiety and Lucidity: Reflections on Culture in Times of Unrest*, London 2020.

teams are different. Under such circumstances, the same movements would make up different rules "as we went along."

Can the emergence of such new rules of solidarity bring about transformations in politics and economy as the institutions which regulate social life? In answering this question, we touch upon the third dimension of the community-pandemic relationship. In this regard, the epidemic has produced one crucial change; specifically, communitarians are clearly getting the upper hand over liberals in the long-standing dispute between the two. In times of the pandemic, people seek identification with a group, with a community, whereby the nation and/or religion are the most obvious candidates for such an identification. It may be largely illusory, because the community that is being formed in this way is first and foremost a community of suffering, but political ideologies translate it into easily available and articulable values, such as the nation or religion.

Notably, this communal engagement replicates the paradox evoked above. The sense of belonging to a community is combined with purely individualistic practices. In isolation, people are separate individuals who are bonded by law-imposed restrictions. As such, they can be viewed as a paradigmatic example of the most fundamentalist liberal theory. However, this situation is at least partly surmounted by the reliance on new media, including social media, and by an array of performative, solidarity-informed pursuits, iconically epitomized by Italians singing together from their windows and balconies. Still, except for such anecdotal examples, communal thinking is predominantly driven by fear of both the pandemic itself and of its economic and social fallout.

A considerable majority of countries affected by lockdowns realize that the consequences of the pandemic can only be alleviated by joint action. At the political level, this intensified sense of belonging to a community may manifest in multiple ways, which are often correlated with particular positions in the political spectrum. At the economic level, it is obvious that massive interventions of states in the economy are inevitable. It looks that the extremely popular economic recipes touted by neoliberals have lost their efficacy. David Harvey points out that the pandemic inexorably forces the capitalist economy to adopt more pro-social solutions:

The spiral form of endless capital accumulation is collapsing inward from one part of the world to every other. The only thing that can save it is a government funded and inspired mass consumerism conjured out of nothing. This will require socializing the whole of the economy in the United States, for example, without calling it socialism.²⁴

Thus the effects of the epidemic may be similar to those that World War II had on the European economy. The experience of the war laid the foundation for the welfare state, with the state based on the citizens' common agreement that social

²⁴ D. Harvey, "Anti-Capitalist Politics in the Time of COVID-19," *Jacobin Magazine*, 20.03.2020, <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/03/david-harvey-coronavirus-political-economy-disruptions> (accessed 16.04.2020).

inequalities should be mitigated by transfers from the rich to the less monied. The transfers were admittedly not direct, but, as Thomas Piketty explains:

[Redistribution — L.K.] consists rather in financing public services and replacement incomes that are more or less equal for everyone, especially in the areas of health, education, and pensions. In the latter case, the principle of equality often takes the form of a quasi-proportionality between replacement income and lifetime earnings. For education and health, there is real equality of access for everyone regardless of income (or parents' income), at least in principle. Modern redistribution is built around a logic of rights and a principle of equal access to a certain number of goods deemed to be fundamental.²⁵

There is basically no doubting that obvious neglects in public services, particularly in healthcare, which the pandemic has brought into relief, will have to be compensated for, and handsomely too. Biopolitics will be interwoven with social policies. Healthcare for citizens must be associated with actions promoting equal opportunity and assuaging inequalities. It is not clear, however, how long such effects of the pandemic will endure. The historical data indicates that the Black Death, i.e. the outbreak of plague which decimated the population in the mid-14th century, brought about a levelling of economic differences, but when it subsided, they rapidly soared again.²⁶

Even if inequalities are indeed moderated, does it mean a return to the welfare state as it was before the neoliberal-conservative revolution? It is rather doubtful, because too much has happened in politics and social life since then. In recent years, populist and authoritarian trends have been on the rise in many countries, and there is no good reason to believe that they will disappear. In fact, the pandemic and its consequences may even enhance authoritarianism, as they furnish those in power with strong arguments for the centralized organization of the entirety of social life.²⁷ Critics of the welfare state have always argued that it gives governments too many possibilities to control citizens, but these possibilities have always resulted from deliberation and agreements among various political forces. The current situation, however, favors the Hobbesian exchange of freedom for security. Citizens consent to a radical curbing of their liberty in exchange for a more or less illusory safety. Attempts to use the epidemic to strengthen the power of governments are observable in many countries even at the early stage of the outbreak; while broadly discussed examples now include Poland and Hungary, such tendencies are also expected to show in the US and Italy.²⁸ The threat of an upsurge of authoritarianism

²⁵ T. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. A. Goldhammer, Cambridge 2014.

²⁶ W. Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton 2018, pp. 289–342.

²⁷ I. Krastev, “Seven Early Lessons from the Coronavirus,” European Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_seven_early_lessons_from_the_coronavirus (accessed 17.04.2020).

²⁸ D. Acemoğlu, “The Coronavirus Exposed America’s Authoritarian Turn,” *Foreign Affairs*, 23.03.2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-03-23/coronavirus-exposed-americas-authoritarian-turn> (accessed 17.04.2020).

is serious enough to envision "a new barbarity."²⁹ Symptomatically, the first, nearly instinctive response to the pandemic involved reverting to the nation-state, with closing the borders and separating citizens from migrants as standard measures in combating the disease. Practically all great achievements of the European Union, such as the free flow of people and goods across borders, have been rescinded. Solidarity seems to have returned to its original national or nationalist cradle. This represents another paradox, as the pandemic is obviously a global development, and it can only be effectively combated at the global level. It would be an irony of history if the pandemic resulted in the resurrection of strong nation states with their unified economies and homogeneous cultures, as depicted by Ernst Gellner:

So the economy needs both the new type of central culture and the central state; the culture needs the state; and the state probably needs the homogeneous cultural branding of its flock, in a situation in which it cannot rely on largely eroded sub-groups either to police its citizens, or to inspire them with that minimum of moral zeal and social identification without which social life becomes very difficult.³⁰

Dispositif: Or, what we expect and what we will get

What is it that determines that one image is replaced by another? How do we identify the moment when one concept of reality is ousted and another one takes its place? As any immense disaster, the pandemic is obviously unique, but if I were to find events of a similar scale in my own experience, I would be able to come up with at least two. One of them was the foundation of Solidarity in 1980 and the instituting of martial law that followed in 1981, and the other, the fall of communism in 1989.

That the pandemic most resembles the imposition of martial law on 13th December 1981 is mainly due to the sheer speed of the change and its immediate behavioral consequences. Virtually everything happened overnight. On that day, I woke up to a curfew, a ban on traveling, cut-down telephone lines, and — of course — military personnel in the streets everywhere. A new political reality and a new behavioral reality. We had to learn to navigate this new reality and construct it all anew. Yet, did it cause the image of the world to change? Not really, at least not in my memory. Those who cherished illusions about real socialism soon found them dispelled, and those who decided to stick by the system did not seem to mind that bare force was what was left of it. Martial law proved a magnifying glass that with full clarity brought before people's eyes the situation in which they

²⁹ S. Žižek, "Is Barbarism with a Human Face Our Fate?," *Critical Inquiry*, 18.03.2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/18/is-barbarism-with-a-human-face-our-fate/> (accessed 17.04.2020)

³⁰ E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford 1986.

found themselves, and thereby precipitated individual choices which, no doubt, would anyway have been made. The founding of Solidarity and martial law were rather symptoms of communism's ideological demise, rather than the causes of its collapse in 1989.

Obviously, these are quite different things, with the pandemic representing a global development and pitting a non-human enemy against us, as opposed to a group fighting to retain power in one country, as was the case in Poland in the 1980s. Nevertheless, the two events (disasters) share enough similarities to allow some sound comparison and meaningful speculation. The pandemic, especially regarding the speed of the outbreak, is a symptom of problems which have long frustrated our civilization, and above all democratic politics. Referring above to the debate which is already underway, I have identified the areas where the deficiencies of our social system have been revealed on the global scale. These problems had been there before the epidemic appeared, but since its onset they have been reconfigured, and their interconnections and hierarchies have been recast.

This feature of the pandemic can be effectively captured by using the concept of the *dispositif*, which was coined by Louis Althusser³¹ and then picked up and re-employed by Michel Foucault³² and Giorgio Agamben. Agamben lists three properties of the *dispositif*:

- a. It is a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and non-linguistic under the same heading: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions, and so on. The apparatus itself is the network that is established between these elements.
- b. The apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation.
- c. As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge.³³

The pandemic has redirected the trajectory of apparatuses, as well as the internal relationships among the elements of each particular apparatus. If both the construction of the world-image and the enforcement of some social behavior are essential components of an apparatus, we are obviously facing such a conglomerate now. In this sense, the criteria defined by Wittgenstein and Boltanski are of course met. This, however, does not yet mean that we know in what direction these changes will unfold and how durable they will be. To establish that, we must look beyond these criteria and characterize the *dispositif* as an element in power relations, specifically, in power-knowledge relations.

In such terms, the question is how the embryonic, temporary, and contingent apparatuses which have been formed during the pandemic will develop. Are the imposed restrictions and newly centralized state power here to stay for long, as

³¹ L. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus", trans. B. Brewster, [in:] *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York 1971, pp. 127–187.

³² M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. C. Gordon, New York 1980, pp. 78–108.

³³ G. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. D. Kishik, S. Pedatella, Stanford 2009, pp. 2–3.

some fear, heralding new authoritarianism, isolationism, and the return of the nation state? Or will the changes in the consumption and distribution of goods pave the way to a new, more equitable economic — and thus also democratic — order? Or, perhaps, will consumer asceticism and political centralism merge to launch a more dramatic replay of real socialism? Such questions and scenarios can be multiplied almost ad infinitum. The only certain thing is that the pandemic is another iteration of the struggle for a new, democratic, and fairer society. How this clash, another in a series of similar ones, will end is anyone's guess for now.

Yet we had known all of that before COVID-19 even hit us.

Bibliography

- Acemoğlu D., "The Coronavirus Exposed America's Authoritarian Turn," *Foreign Affairs*, 23.03.2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-03-23/coronavirus-exposed-americas-authoritarian-turn> (accessed 17.04.2020).
- Agamben G., "The Invention of the Epidemic," *European Journal of Psychoanalysis (Coronavirus and Philosophers)*, 26.02.2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/coronavirus-and-philosophers/> (accessed 18.01.2023).
- Agamben G., "Clarifications," *European Journal of Psychoanalysis (Coronavirus and Philosophers)*, 17.03.2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/coronavirus-and-philosophers/> (accessed 18.01.2023).
- Agamben G., *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. D. Kishik, S. Pedatella, Stanford 2009.
- Althusser L., "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus," [in:] *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster, New York 1971.
- Baudrillard J., *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. P. Patton, Bloomington 1995.
- Benvenuto S., "Forget about Agamben," *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 20.03.2020, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/coronavirus-and-philosophers/> (accessed 18.01.2023).
- Boltanski L., *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, trans. G. Elliott, Cambridge 2011.
- Bourdieu P., *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. G. Raymond, Cambridge 1991.
- Espósito R., "Cured to the Bitter End," [in:] *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics and Society*, eds. F. Castrillón, T. Marchevsky, Oxon 2021.
- Foucault M., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. L.H. Martin, H. Gutman, P.H. Hutton, Amherst 1988.
- Foucault M., *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*, trans. D. Burchell, London 2007.
- Foucault M., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. C. Gordon, New York 1980.
- Gellner E., *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford 1986.
- Greenblatt S., "The Strange Terror of Watching the Coronavirus Take Rome," *New Yorker*, 4.03.2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-strange-terror-of-watching-coronavirus-take-rome> (accessed 27.03.2020).
- Harvey D., "Anti-Capitalist Politics in the Time of COVID-19," *Jacobin Magazine*, 20.03.2020, <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/03/david-harvey-coronavirus-political-economy-disruptions> (accessed 16.04.2020).
- Husserl E., *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. D. Carr, Chicago 1970.

- Koczanowicz L., *Anxiety and Lucidity: Reflections on Culture in Times of Unrest*, London 2020.
- Krastev I., "Seven Early Lessons from the Coronavirus," European Council on Foreign Relations, 18.03.2020, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_seven_early_lessons_from_the_coronavirus (accessed 17.04.2020).
- Latour B., "Is This a Dress Rehearsal?," *Critical Inquiry*, 26.03.2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/> (accessed 10.04.2020).
- Mbembe A., "The Universal Right to Breathe," *Critical Inquiry*, 13.04.2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/> (accessed 20.04.2020).
- Nancy J.-L., "A Viral Exception," [in:] *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics and Society*, eds. F. Castrillón, T. Marchevsky, Oxon 2021.
- Owen D., "Genealogy as Perspicuous Representation," [in:] *Grammar of Politics: Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy*, ed. C.J. Heys, Ithaca 2003.
- Piketty T., *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. A. Goldhammer, Cambridge 2014.
- Porter D., *Health, Civilization and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times*, London 1999.
- Scheidel W., *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton 2018.
- Wittgenstein L., *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.M.E. Anscombe, Oxford 1958.
- Žižek S., "Is Barbarism with a Human Face Our Fate?," *Critical Inquiry*, 18.03.2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/18/is-barbarism-with-a-human-face-our-fate/> (accessed 17.04.2020).

* * *

Leszek Koczanowicz — professor at the Department of Cultural Studies at SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities. He specializes in theory of culture, social theory, and cultural aspects of politics. His previous appointments include *inter alia* Wrocław University, SUNY/Buffalo (1998–1999 and 2000–2001), Columbia University (2004–2005), and SUNY/Geneseo (2013), Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (2015-2016). Author and editor of thirteen books and numerous articles in Polish and English. His last books to date are *Anxiety and Lucidity: Reflections on Culture in Times of Unrest* (2020) and *Niedokończone polityki. demokracja, populizm, autokracja* (2022).