

In Difficult Times: A Crossroads in the Era of the Coronavirus

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To my students

I

In the city streets, a chance encounter with social distancing lines at the door of one of the few shops still open, faces are worried, suspicious and suddenly more hostile. Lest their neighbors in misfortune transmit to them the virus which, through the mouths of officials, commands that everyone stay away from *all* others, all outings beyond the walls of our place of confinement exposes those of us who risk it to an injunction, through the gaze or a word that rings like a warning: "Don't approach! Keep your distance! ». Must we hold these stunned passers-by accountable for having relegated amiability, benevolence, and perhaps even the faint smiles, the glance that acknowledges, if only fleetingly, companionship in misfortune, to the bin of useless accessories? "Fear drives people crazy," some tell themselves. Soon, an unexpected sneeze, a step too many in the line, and a closed face expresses hatred.

It is true that this fear is likely to make us collectively lose reason. We are used to distinguishing the anxiety that ignores its object from the fear that knows how to identify it, even if it dreads its irruption. The singularity of a pandemic, however, is that it renders this distinction obsolete. The feeling that the contagion provokes has all the features of fear. We know its object, which occupies all our thoughts, to the point that we can no longer speak of anything else. The virus is on everyone's mind. The danger, however, remains invisible. It is prone to wait for and find us literally anywhere: on the guardrail, door handles, coins, bills, merchandise still on the shelf that someone else might have handled, a garment a hand has passed, books that have become unreasonable to exchange. There is no longer a single object of daily life that we can be sure is not deadly — bearer of an indefinitely communicable disaster. It is then that fear, related to a concrete object, an identifiable source of evil, becomes anxiety. We no longer know where illness and death could come from. *Any other* (any living being — humans, animals, plants — and even objects) is likely to bring them to us.

II

Nevertheless, fear and anxiety are not as spontaneous as it might seem, however legitimate they may be. They have powerful media and government relays at their disposal, who most likely have their reasons, but whose psychological impact on the subjects it targets — the last impact to be accounted for — ought to be taken into consideration. It is right to warn, to advise, and to insist tirelessly on the health precautions that protect and save us; but when, for months at a time, almost all the news that comes to us reminds us of the omnipresence of the deadly virus, the persistence of the threat, the necessity of the deprivations that the menace imposes, and the inadequacy of those deprivations, it is inevitable that an inexorable "culture of fear" develops and becomes the dominant "culture". Its effects are first manifested in the various practices and comportments we submit to, even though, not so long ago, we never would have imagined that we could accept them. In the past we could have said that such a "culture" always mutates, whatever

the forces that orchestrate the mutation, into an inexorable "sedimentation of the unacceptable." This is how, it was pointed out, it "colonizes" us, pushing us to act, speak, and judge in ways that, until then, we would have thought impossible. This time around, the health emergency makes that colonization brutal. Overnight, we consent to restrictions of freedom and prohibitions we never thought we could tolerate, starting with the ability to approach, find, meet, and touch who we wish to, according to the direction of our desires, from the closest to the most distant.

We can, and probably should, understand it. There are good reasons to accept it. The dead are not imaginary. The virulence of the virus and its speed of propagation are not the invention of shadowy powers. It would have been unacceptable, as was long the case in the United States, Brazil, Mexico, and elsewhere, to turn a blind eye to certain death in order not to disturb the day by day march of the world, however ruthless it might be, and in so doing consent to save an unjust economy, and consent to the mass death of the weakest and most destitute among us, who are the last to know how and be able to protect themselves. Those who wished to adopt such a logic made the cynical calculation to sacrifice a few tens of thousands of dead to their own interests, and to escape the necessity of questioning the balance of power, economic and social, that benefits them. It remains to be hoped that justice will do its work and that one day they will be held accountable for those they have abandoned to the vagaries of the contagion, depriving them of this first exercise of responsibility that is prevention. Their speeches, as vehement as they are ignorant, will have boosted those to whom they are used to granting a few crumbs of "prosperity," their supporters, and helped consolidate their power. Persuading them that it was up to each individual to protect *themselves* as they see fit, minimizing the considerable risks of a disorganized response to the pandemic, they will have swapped the shared exercise of a collective responsibility—organized, directed and controlled by competent authorities—for a competition of personal strategies, no matter how ignorant, for ensuring one's own survival, and at

the risk that such strategies might be negligent, inappropriate, and therefore insufficient to protect others.

Disasters of any sort, whether related to climate or to public health, are exceptional. They cause mass casualties, and thus magnify the ethical and political necessity to bridge the gap between the theoretical definition of our responsibility and its practical application. While it is true that we can define our responsibility as the commitment to providing the attention, care, and relief to which the vulnerability and mortality of others appeal everywhere, any compromise with this appeal, any neglect of its requests, any refusal to respond to its demands, widens the gap I have called elsewhere "murderous consent". It is an understatement to say that the forms of irresponsibility just mentioned unite stupidity and ridicule with shameless cynicism in a way that can easily provoke a chuckle were its consequences not so tragic. Inversely, self-conscious willingness to submit to collective constraints aimed at stopping the spread of the virus is the first, minimal and vital, condition of this *shared* exercise as we confront the pandemic. It is not, in fact, fear alone (fear of sanctions or of contamination) that inspires us to respect the constraints, but the attending concern not to become, unaware, a carrier of illness and death. It observes, through this ordeal, and at the heart of living-together, an incredible and unimaginable responsibility that we never expected to bear: that of an *auto-hetero-protection*, in which we all find ourselves dependent, so as to ensure our own protection, on the protection we accord others, as much as on the protection that others (all and anyone) provide *themselves* on our own behalf.

III

We should not, however, minimize the negative effects, worrisome in other ways, of this "culture of fear," the first of which being our submission to increased governmental control, not only of our movements, but, more broadly, of our entire life insofar as it becomes digitalized and infinitely traceable. The supporters of an app making it possible to localize and identify carriers of the virus as they circulate

within the polis, will argue that it is temporary and that the data is not meant to be archived. Our historical and political culture should have taught us, however, that when a policy of identification and control is accepted by a population without resistance and without protest, when it grants those who govern it the extension of their power over the lives of each and everyone, individually and collectively, it is impossible to anticipate ahead of time its limits, duration, and future application. We should not, then, take at its word the promise that the data collected via these new technologies will not be used. Even less should we wager without concern on the government's virtue and benevolence to one day return what it has confiscated, thereby depriving *itself* of the tools of control and surveillance granted to it for these exceptional circumstances. No one knows of what files our future is made. No one can predict, either, in what hands the coming vicissitudes of political life might confide these formidable information tools. Who knows for whom the internet giants who massively collect the details of our intimate lives might be led to work, with what forces they could be made to cooperate, what blackmail could be exerted over them? Of what power could *what is known* about us become the hostage? It is unclear whether Michel Foucault, who almost forty years ago predicted the advent of "surveillance societies," foresaw their most nightmarish versions, which today are no longer confined to science fiction. Because this surveillance and the control that follows from it partake in the downward slide, long since evident, of contemporary governments—including democracies—it is, now more than ever, legitimate to worry about it. While it is true, as Bernard Harcourt reminds us, that "the movement was engaged long ago," as part of the "expository society" that he argues has become the norm, one is right to fear that the pandemic did nothing but explode the last walls and overcome the last obstacles, accelerating, within public opinion, the legitimation of its expansion.

The pandemic's collateral impact might be, in the near future, to function as a Trojan horse that introduces the electronic surveillance, social and sanitary, of the population as a whole, as is already the case in China. The terror engendered by the

virus, as the philosopher Byung-Chul Ha reminds us, has discredited all critical assessment.

That's not all. As was said at the beginning: the pandemic transforms public space into a space of mistrust. The app we are told will locate carriers of the virus is not made to diminish or appease mistrust. How will "healthy people" look at those randomly encountered during their wanderings, after noticing them, should the difficulties imposed by the impossibility of eradicating the virus be extended or indefinitely repeated? What would happen if we were to enter a *longue durée* in which we are forced to integrate the fear of a return of the public health disaster as a permanent feature of existence? Of what discriminatory practices to come, what isolation or detention measures, what hostility toward the healthy and hearty, what future borders could public health safety justify? Today, the question that elicits the greatest anxiety is entering everyone's mind. Will this ever end? When and how will we escape it? It is then that fear becomes a hotbed for negative passions. Cupidity, resentment, vengeance, and, to top it all, hatred – they all benefit from a new breeding ground on which to flourish, as is always the case when the specter of violent death (to which death by contagion belongs) takes possession of bodies, hearts, and minds. What hatred, we might ask? First of all, hatred of the other's body, of its proximity, its gestures, its breath, perceived to be a deadly force. Hatred of those categories of the population whose ways of being and living, customs, rituals, and social practices we will find "good reasons" to stigmatize in the name of a normative and vindictive vision of public health safety. Once again, we must believe in history's lessons, we must know when to recall them: there is no "culture of fear" which is not articulated, in one way or another, with a "culture of the enemy."

One might think that we are simply evoking our worst nightmares, letting ourselves be caught by the horror scenes that haunt our literary and cinematographic imaginary: that of a struggle for survival in catastrophic times, when everything is scarce: foodstuff, medicine, masks to protect oneself, access to treatment, hospital

beds. In light of the past few weeks no one would dare ascribe this perspective to science fiction. Is it not already taking place in poor countries where the first consequence of the epidemic is to deprive those who have no other alternative of the various resources necessary to their survival? Will we see the time of famines and food riots return? Today, those who have always been left by the side of the road of economic and social progress, deprived of the basic vital conditions—even if it's merely access to running water—are being required to perform the sanitary measures recommended or demanded by governments without concern for their feasibility, and so are likely once again to become history's victims, meaning, here and now, the forgotten ones of care.

The public health catastrophe has forced states to close down their borders. In a matter of weeks, (almost) all the ingrained reflexes of a sovereignty possessively attached to its prerogatives, have reclaimed their rights, the first of which is to defend the interest (survival in this case) of one's "own" to the detriment of others, as painfully evidenced by the race to acquire masks, the rerouting of promised shipments following one last agitated bid on the tarmac. It must be feared that such practices will, in the long run, add to the list of "undesirables." When, here and elsewhere, will foreigners be hunted down and sent away? Because it is a *pandemic*, the situation compels *us all* to take ethical *and* political responsibility *for* us all.

This is why it demands, as is the case with nuclear proliferation and climate change, an ethi-cosmo-politics, guaranteed and advanced by international institutions whose reconstruction has never seemed more urgent. Societies are at a crossroads. As is always the case when they are under stress, it is both very tempting (and easy) to retrench defensively into the private self – an attitude which, one can already predict (it is always so sadly predictable), the partisans of an aggressive populist nationalism will champion unconditionally. The temptation will be even greater since the last several weeks have exposed the cracks, if not the bankruptcy, of a globalization whose financial logic and its industrial consequences, starting with the delocalization of production of the goods necessary to protect people's health, have

delayed essential measures (wearing masks, testing), threatened hospital supply chains, considerably facilitated contagion, put the treatment capacity of hospitals under stress, and, for all these reasons, have, in the end, increased the number of deaths. Which is to say that the alternative to a retreat into aggressive and exclusive nationalism cannot consist of a continuation or identical repetition of the same norms and practices as if the pandemic had only been a historical accident, a sad parenthesis in the saga of the world. New national and transnational solidarities will have to be invented; relationships freed from the bounds of belonging and the traps of identity, powered by the dream of a new kind of justice which will turn the care for the living into its directing principle.

IV

Why, now, should this politics *to come* be an ethico-politics? Generally speaking, it is the entire fabric of relationships making up our existence which has, without end in sight, been suddenly affected by the fear of contagion. It has no longer been possible to hold the hand, to hug those to whom we are used to giving signs of affection, gestures of care, signals of help which are the ordinary expression of the responsibility called forth by their vulnerability and mortality. Just as the latter increased exponentially because of a pandemic no one saw coming, the expression of these signs became impossible under conditions of distancing and isolation that felt, to all those who were affected by the disease or by the loss of a loved one, like a brutal renunciation and wrenching violence. It has no longer been possible to accompany the dying, to say goodbye to them, to assist them in their last breath, and to bury *one's* dead. The painful restrictions that have weighed upon the organization of funeral rites suddenly remind us that one of the pillars of the "living with" that binds us to one another, from birth to death, in a society we share, relies on the promise of the "last journey." We know full well that the dead will know nothing of our absence or presence on the day of their funerals, that our parting words will not echo and will remain unanswered. And yet, we owe it to *them* (and we

owe it to *ourselves* even more) to be present. No obligation binds us together more than this tacit commitment.

Thus, the impossibility to honor it is the common denominator of all the collective forms of violence that make up the fabric of history. Wars and their processions of “unknown soldiers,” mass murders, genocides, deportations, and disappearances orchestrated by totalitarian regimes—they all have in common the fact that they impose the double deprivation that results, in the darkest periods of history, from our inability to fulfill this fundamental obligation. The tragedy *deprives* the victims just as much as it does the survivors of the possibility of honoring the debt that they had mutually contracted, according to which the one who survives the other will not leave him or her alone on their “last journey.” This is the promise that, since last spring, the virulence of the pandemic has forced thousands of men and women, children, brothers, sisters, and friends to abandon. We will probably come out of confinement and these acts will once again become possible, but nothing will be the same, because we now know that these extreme measures can recur, that other public health emergencies, declared by future governments, will reinstate them. We must learn to live with the knowledge that the pillar that is “dying-with,” and the seemingly indestructible norms of attention, care, and help on which it rests and that make us bond and live together, can collapse. We must project ourselves into the future, knowing that the obligations that bind us together, living and dead, can be “dishonored” by public health emergencies that prohibit us from honoring them.

V

Every evening, at 8 pm in France, 6 pm in Italy, we find ourselves at our respective windows or balconies to applaud, thunderously, the medical personnel, doctors, nurses, assistant nurses and EMTs. In ordinary times, we salute the care they show to those whom we entrust to their expertise, precious because vital, while we, for our part, assume responsibility for the affection and comfort of the sick with appeasing word and signs of attention, to which they look forward between the visits

that bring us closer to them. Our task is to protect them from the feelings of abandonment and isolation that hospitalization and confrontation with the suffering body ineluctably promise. For them, we search for, we invent smiles, helpful words, we bring news, we tell stories that distract them, as much as possible, from the shrinking, the absence, and the distance that disease produces. The medical personnel, no doubt, is not lacking in this regard. These gestures, these words, this attention that lightens the burden are also theirs, when the organization of the shift gives them the time—but they are not the only ones to take on this responsibility. Most of the time, the loved ones (family, friends) of those in treatment share with them the essential task of comforting the sick.

This sharing is no longer possible in this pandemic. When we applaud at night, to show our gratitude to the “healers,” we not only salute their dedication, the risks they take to save the lives, while risking their own, of those who are dear to us, we thank them even more fundamentally for their *vicariousness*. In the ambulances, the hospital corridors, the rooms where the disease brought them, the medical personnel does more than perform gestures of care in the hope they heal, they replace *us* in supporting *our* sick loved ones, which the strict rules of confinement prevent us from doing ourselves. We have no other choice, no other means, than to rely on these people we don’t know, on their smiles, their kind words, their gestures of goodness and humanity, to provide *in our stead* all the help possible to those we *can* no longer accompany, as we would wish, through the disease and, for many, through the end of life. In the time of the coronavirus, they alleviate our absence, making it, for us and those we love, a little bit more bearable, a little bit less unlivable. All the testimonies concur just how exemplary this *vicariousness* is, leading doctors, nurses, and assistant nurses to assume like a heartfelt self-evidence the responsibility of attention, care, and assistance they feel they owe to the sick, the dying, and, indirectly, to their families, until their strength is exhausted.

In difficult and often tragic times, the risk to which societies are exposed is always that of discouragement. Nothing imperils fragile populations more than giving in to the worst, that retrenchment into the self that consists, through resignation, in the introduction and maintenance of violence as the ordinary regime of existence. This is true of war, dictatorships, political terror, and all forms of oppression against which it becomes crucial to invent new forms of resistance. Because these various catastrophes introduce a death-bearing culture, the resilience of societies is not only experienced *after the fact*, in their ability to rebuild, but also during the ordeal in their desire to resist the collapse of the values and principles to which they are attached. Resilience demands that people “hold on” through the renewal, the reinvention of this shared “being-against-death” which, in dark times, imposes itself as something obvious in order to provide our “living together” with a foundation that we can still believe in, individually and collectively. To hold on to it, as one does a life preserver, is one of life’s imperatives if we seek to escape the trap of nihilism, which always consists, as Camus knew, in our growing consent to violence.

VI

To say that the pandemic, which evolves according to a temporality whose end we cannot predict, does violence to *us* in a formidably cumulative manner is an understatement. First we discovered the virulence and seriousness with which the disease attacks our bodies. We began by minimizing it before realizing the obvious: no one was safe from being overtaken, often in a few days. As weeks went by, as the number of victims increased exponentially all over the world, our ears glued daily to the deadly statistics, it was no longer possible to ignore its extreme dangerousness except by exhibiting an untreatable combination of ignorance, stupidity, and malevolence. Then we experienced, at the very heart of ourselves and our affections, how the deprivations of confinement, the imposition of social distancing for an indefinite duration, threatened our psychic equilibrium and mental health. In silence, or in the verbal or visual exchanges with others made possible by

communication technologies, we are able to perceive, over the last several weeks and the course of these exchanges, in the hesitation of a voice that is weak with defeat, the syncopated retelling of empty days, a new kind of melancholia and sometimes the worrisome sign of a potential collapse. Finally, we perceive, day by day, the magnitude of the economic and social disaster that is still to come. The drop if not cessation of activity in numerous economic sectors raises the specter of precarity for millions of people, which, for many families already deprived of resources for weeks, promises insurmountable difficulties.

It is improbable that, tomorrow, *all* those who have temporarily lost their job will get it back. It is already announced as a fatality, and we are slowly but surely being prepared for it: companies will go bankrupt, shops and restaurants will not reopen their doors. How will those who lost the resources that maintain life, destroyed in the fight against the virus, recover? And the generation that was supposed to enter the job market in the months to come could not imagine more unfavorable circumstances. In the most worrisome manner, young people do not know how they will live tomorrow. Rarely has society entered such a visibly auto-immune process. In answering the absolutely vital necessity of protecting itself against the virus, it will have undermined, if not sacrificed, the already fractured immune response—so badly maintained for so many years — that is provided, somehow and in a profoundly inegalitarian manner, by the lacerated and mended fabric of the economy.

Each of these forms of violence calls for a specific exercise of our responsibility, which must be conceived as an individual and collective exit ramp to escape the spiral of murderous consent, which is the other name of nihilism. The spirit of its engagement is a refusal of violence. In an alarmist column, philosopher Giorgio Agamben ventured to write that “the threshold which separates humanity from barbarism [had been] crossed” as he described the confinement measures adopted in his country. It showed surprising haste. In fact, the contrary should have been argued. These draconian rules were necessary to escape unprecedented barbarism.

Is “humanity,” to take him at his words, letting the pandemic do its work, striking first and foremost those less able to find solutions to protect themselves? Is it letting hospitals become even more overwhelmed, bloated, submerged by the influx of patients at the risk of having to choose, even more than has been the case, between those who should be treated and those who will have to be abandoned to the disease and left to die? Did the sacrifices, the devotion of the doctors risking their lives merit the word “barbarism,” as blindly and hastily as the philosopher ventured to proclaim? Violence would have been to do nothing, to declare no emergency, to impose no rules. In the name of what should we have refrained from organizing social distancing? Of a *laissez-faire* that would have tasted like resignation in the death of the weakest? Of the right of individuals to give free reign to their selfishness and sovereign individualism as, in the United State and elsewhere, they demand with disgraceful and indecent brutality, as citizens drunk on pseudo-freedom who ignore that their supposedly “free” existence has long been preyed upon by the unjust system that enslaves them?

This is why, against the disease, the spirit of the rules imposed on everyone (the restriction of movements and even the ban on visits to the dying) was a refusal of violence in opposition to the murderous consent that letting the disease gain ground would have meant. Actions everywhere were multiplied so as to give this refusal the shape of what poet Paul Celan called “the testimony of the human”: those of the healers, to begin with, to make the *substitution* evoked earlier as soft and loving as possible; those of the restaurant workers who provided them with the comfort of a meal, those of countless others, animated by the same willingness, who produced masks, overalls etc. This takes nothing away from the necessity to criticize the state in which an intransigent liberal dogma concerned with profitability left European health systems unattended for decades. States and their citizens will have paid dearly, over the last several months, for the ideology that imposed this doctrine. But this fact renders even more admirable the way in which the hospital personnel that was its first victim—protesting for years against the growing difficulties they,

across the board, encounter in pursuing their vocation to the degree of responsibility it demands—listened, during the emergency, to no other voice than the one—intimate, and visceral—that enjoined them to save the greatest number of lives.

VII

The pandemic is a trauma insofar as it separates the living from one another and all of them from the dying. The hardest part of the confinement will have been to live with isolation anxiety, a separation that would not allow us, should the worst happen, to accompany loved ones in their last moments, to meet and see them one last time, to gather in order to keep their last breath or their last words—and which, for many, means enduring a painful final separation, receiving only the guilt of absence as a goodbye. For many, reduced to powerlessness, it will also have been difficult to see the time fly and weeks go by without being able to carry one's projects to term, to have let oneself be overcome by the weight of wasted time, with the [irremissible] impression of having, despite oneself, let one's life fall away. Finally, it would be pointless to deny that social distancing is suffering. We need to see each other without the mediation of screens, to hold each other's hand, to brush, to touch, to hug each other. Despite having, over these last few months, multiplied subterfuges, invented new rituals, solicited and struggled with the apps of these prostheses that our cell phones and computers have become— now more than ever in a society under confinement— it only fills the absence of those we want to live with very imperfectly. To *live with* cannot mean to live at a distance for very long. In this way, we can only agree with Giorgio Agamben when he maintains that he does not believe that “a community built upon social distancing is humanly and politically viable.”

During confinement—as we just recalled—we invented calls and links as a means to pay attention to one another. Shadowed by weariness or the form of inattention proper to melancholy, we found in them a shared source of vigilance so as not to let ourselves sink. Our concern was to not sever the thousand and one threads that link

us to others and make life livable. As the day lingered, the gestures, the signs that tied these threads together had the ethical charge of the refusal of these insidious forms of violence that are the abandonment of others, the exclusive protection of the self, the retreating back to one's own defenses, indifference or silence. What are the stakes of deconfinement? ...to keep in mind the always singular fragilities that the catastrophe engendered. The page will not easily be turned and its effects will not disappear with the sweep of a magic wand, with the progressive recovery of freedom. The specific markers of attention, care, and help each will need to invent will retain for a long time the strength of an appeal that our sense of responsibility bids us not to shirk.

Assuming we want to continue talking about “barbarism,” we must recognize that, in such circumstances, its risks have less to do with the remainders of the “public health state of emergency” whose constraints might linger, than it does with the supposedly necessary willingness to forcefully put society back on track. It will manifest itself less in the exception itself than in the infringement, in the name of this forced march, of the recognition of the “exceptional” character of this trauma, of the patient consideration of its physical and psychological effects. “Exceptional,” the weeks of confinement certainly were —and the greatest deception would be to minimize or ignore it in the name of an unwarranted ethical stance demanding that we confront mass death with courage and without fear. The emergency will be, from that point on, to not rush anything, to leave everyone, starting with those most affected by the epidemic, the time to recover, to not impose, in other words, any norm of resilience.

This is why barbarism, if there is any, must be feared in all the forms of brutality the political will and social desire to “return to normality” are likely to accommodate. Just as the time of grief cannot be compressed and imposed by fiat, the individual and collective after-effects of trauma cannot be erased on command.

And this is the case in economic and social affairs more than anywhere else. Already, within the ranks of liberalism and capitalism's boosters who want nothing to be put into question or to change, a faint tune can be heard which proposes that de-confinement be synonymous with an immediate return to work and that the viability of companies be ensured whatever the cost. It didn't take long for the progressive reduction of partial unemployment coverage, the reduction of the tax burden on companies, and especially the lengthening of working hours to be presented as necessary "antibodies" to resist the economic and social effects of the virus—as if we were prohibited as a matter of principle from challenging a system that can produce disastrous consequences, and are told that we must save it. One already imagines the "sacrifices" this world will demand to make the "return to normal" possible. One guesses how much pressure will be applied on the government to impose them. Having become inured to the social drama experienced by those whom it sacrifices on the altar of competitiveness and profitability, we can only fear that it will use the pandemic as yet another excuse to sacrifice even more. At the end of the day, maybe this is the most fearsome kind of "barbarism," the most insidious modern form of a murderous consent that hides its true nature.

Such measures, demanded by the most conservative voices, would lead, in the end, to piling violence on top of violence. It would then be the collective and individual political responsibility of all of us to manifest our intransigent refusal. It would indeed be disastrous if the pandemic *passed* without awakening consciences to the fact that the health emergency is not the only facet of the crisis. Once the daily fight to save lives is behind us, other struggles oriented toward the future will have to be invented; another world will have to be *imagined* and the means to impose it will have to be found. It has recently been observed that the way governments addressed people, however necessary the measures taken to *force* them to protect themselves may have been, denied their capacity to *take charge* of themselves by themselves. The word "infantilization" has been used. It is not an exaggeration. Treated like a bunch of undisciplined children that must be warned, threatened,

watched, controlled, admonished, and punished, it is in fact an infantilizing force that is exerted upon the population, imposing constraints, restrictions, and privations, even as it undercuts the possibility of debate, discussion, and opposition, probably judging it to be a waste of time. The *state of emergency* has no other meaning.

Because the state has directly impacted our conditions of existence by suppressing dialogue, leaving *us* with no means to combat and defend *ourselves* against it, we should ask whether its power, as wielded by public health and political authorities, shouldn't also be recognized as a form of violence, thereby demanding of us what power in all its forms demands: to critically interrogate its destiny. If there is violence, it is a kind of violence which saves lives. This is the paradox. And it has been enough to legitimize it. As long as it is necessary for their survival, the authorities have good reasons to maintain these exceptional measures. But the longer they last, in the name of precaution and risk prevention, the more we ought to question their guiding spirit. To what should we allow ourselves to become habituated? What does the state of emergency predict? A new kind of society based on greater forms of control and surveillance? A biopolitics freed from the burden of conscience and respect for freedom? The triumph of a new political, industrial, and health complex? This is why health imperatives open the door to a political emergency: for people to reclaim, while renewing and reinventing it, the space of democracy.

From that point forward, we enter the world of dreams. A catastrophe's balance sheet is always an object lesson in what is missing. It reveals everything that was lacking to overcome hardship at a lesser cost, calculated in terms of lost lives. It reveals the handicaps, the cracks that made it worse, and it denounces past political decisions, the imposed doctrines whose legacy, when the moment came, was not helpful or was even harmful. To dream is to endow ourselves with the right to imagine. All willingness to put society back on its old tracks would end up confiscating the imagination, as if the pandemic was only a parenthesis to close as

quickly as possible, like a bad memory, so as to return to our previous world, however unjust and unequal it may be. What, then, could we imagine? The pandemic is similar to climate change in that it does not heed borders. The time it takes to manifest itself, it is already too late. The virus has already circulated and its progression cannot be limited to the territorial margins. States can only face the emergency *collectively*, with their various strengths and weaknesses.

It is not forbidden — this is our first dream—to dream of a solidarity that would imply, for all states and as a priority, to not seek to take advantage of one another so as to increase their power to the detriment of other nations. Indeed, we know that this race's first impact has been to pile victims on top of victims, to lead states to adopt economic and social policies that, in the name of competition, require them to share in the maintenance of injustice and inequality. To not “do too much” for the most fragile and destitute, out of fear that others, in doing less, will rebound more quickly, becomes a tacit rule—each nation measuring its power according to the inequalities and injustices its government manages to make its population “swallow” within the limits of social contestation and “public disorders” that it could no longer absorb. Competition means calculating what minimum of justice and equality it must provide in order to avoid contestation and take advantage over others. What other form of solidarity might we try to dream of? Nothing less than the concerted refusal that the “health” of national economies fragilized during the health crisis be allowed to subvert, in the name of competition, as dogma, the conditions of existence of all those whose resources either fell or disappeared because of the pandemic. At the European level, this could lead to the instigation of a minimum subsistence level, decided collectively and guaranteed by each state with the support of the community. It would also mean not sacrificing the fate of precarious and poor populations to competition, but demand that European policymaking make the concern of one state's “poor” the responsibility of all states.

Along the same lines, the pandemic has revealed that public services should not be subject to competition and profitability in a way that undermines their efficiency. It

has revealed, at the heart of living-together, the necessity of satisfying collective needs—hospital, medical, pharmaceutical, etc. It is a vital priority, which was irresponsibly compromised for decades. Supply chain problems (masks, overalls, tests) have shown the limits of interdependence that the delocalization of production has engendered. It follows that the deconstruction of sovereignty, however necessary, should not be synonymous with the kind of submission to market imperatives, a kind of dependence that goes against the interests of peoples. We will have discovered that the globalization of trade should not constitute the privileged instrument of this deconstruction, insofar as, aside from the inequalities it generates, it creates an *interdependence of privation* that is detrimental to the population. If sovereignty needs to be interrogated, it must be done within the limits of an *independence* that is focused on the population's protection. This is a second dream: seeing all that is vital for our existence, beginning with care, escape the rules of the market. Freed from the rule of competition, the independence of our dreams cannot exist without the spirit of solidarity, understood as a vector of justice, which would transcend the calculation of interests.

A health emergency deprives us of speech and action. The most immediate impact of confinement on our individual and collective existence, in France as elsewhere, was the fact that, for several weeks, it undermined not only our freedom of movement but also our ability to act, thus confronting all initiative—and there was much—with insurmountable administrative constraints. We were deprived of initiative from one day to the next, without consultation. The privation was two-fold. At stake during de-confinement is the reinstatement of both the one (action) and the other (speech). We need to re-appropriate our lives—and this cannot be done without creating spaces that encourage the circulation and sharing of speech, in a way that meets the standards of that plurality whose organization is what politics should be about. And this is the third dream: a participative democracy. The stakes are immense. This is in the end the meaning of the crossroads of the subtitle of this essay. One road

designates the lasting commitment to the state of exception, the first effect of which is to validate this double privation of speech and action, including the infantilization mentioned above. Numerous troubling signs point in that direction. There are societies that are subjected to authoritarian, even dictatorial regimes, for whom the question cannot be asked. People deprived of freedom of expression generally do not have the opportunity to weigh in on their conditions of existence. To say that this path leaves little room for imagining the future, because it has been confiscated from the start by autocrats, is an understatement. The second path is that of utopia. It calls for writing, telling, and speaking. Only a renewed trust in the powers of language—describe, tell, analyze—can articulate, as part of an individual and collective rejection of violence, the three dreams that, oriented toward an uncertain future, will provisionally suffice to conclude these meditations...

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