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Interview with Mladen Dolar: Dialectic at a Standstill? Hegel at the Times of COVID

Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda

We would like to begin with the most obvious of all questions: how did you spend your time during the lockdown? Did you find any philosophically or even more broadly theoretically (or, if you prefer, even practically) interesting thing to say about it?

The lockdown was on the one hand like a sudden emergence of communism: we could be fishermen in the morning and the critical critics in the evening, there was suddenly a lot of free time at hand to devote oneself to hobbies (like playing piano), long walks in the nature (something I rarely have time to do, I fully experienced a true spring after many years) and reading the books one never manages (I reread e.g. Gogol's *Dead Souls* which is absolutely astounding, and equally astounding, for very different reasons, *Gulliver's Travels*; both have some strange oblique bearing on Covid). Even politically, there was an odd spectacle of conservative governments suddenly introducing 'communist' measures of serious social subsidies, state intervention, extolling public health service, even universal basic income, something deemed completely impossible a few weeks before. On the other hand this was like a sudden onset of nightmare. The class antagonism, gender, race and global contradictions became starkly apparent, Covid serving like a magnifying glass. The coincidence of the two, the (apparent) communism and the (very real) nightmare, spelled out in derailment, with no end in sight. If there is a notion that captures this state then perhaps Benjamin's idea of dialectic at a standstill, *Dialektik im Stillstand*, which seems to have been waiting, lying low, for this moment to make its coming out. The standstill involves the heightened tension which is at a crossroads – there was a lot of standstill, but where is the dialectic? The pervasive wish to go back to normalcy is the escape from this tension, which also offered, and continues to offer, a chance of a different path.

To continue with a further maybe naive or, at least, rather general question: What, if anything, is a virus? It appears at first sight to be a mere biological entity. But all kinds of things, it seems, can go "viral". Žižek recently even modified Hegel's famous infinite judgment ("spirit is a bone") such that it reads "spirit is a virus." Virality may not be some-thing, but rather a quality or characteristic that expounds a strange ontological or phenomenal status or maybe even capacity of certain entities? What are your thoughts on this?

At a certain point in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel himself uses the notion of contagion, infection, *Ansteckung* in relation to spirit. This is in the chapter that deals with the struggle of the Enlightenment against superstition: the enlightened pure insight, he says rather surprisingly,

spreads like a perfume or a penetrating infection, and the consciousness notices it only when it's too late. The infection is already widespread, "the struggle is too late, and every remedy adopted only aggravates the disease, for it has laid hold of the marrow of spiritual life." Spirit acts as "invisible and imperceptible", "it infiltrates the noble parts through and through and soon has taken complete possession of all the vitals and members of the unconscious idol; then 'one fine morning it gives its comrade a shove with the elbow, and bang! crash! the idol lies on the floor'." The last part is the quote from Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, it displays how the silent weaving of the spirit (*das stumme Fortweben des Geistes*) undermines the idols that the superstition was holding on to. Hegel further speaks of "the infection by the Enlightenment", implying, by extension, that reason is a virus. This image of spirit as contagion is striking, not only because it depicts the progress of spirit as an effortless viral spread, but more pointedly because this viral infectious quality was traditionally reserved for the powers of sensuality, passions, folly, 'irrational' behavior and beliefs (like superstition); ultimately, matter and the material. There was always the tacit or explicit fear that the material would contaminate the higher spiritual realms. The traditional image is rather that materiality is viral and spirit is there to restrain and contain this contamination. Matter as a disease, spirit as a cure – the spiritual path was paved by purification. Sin is an immunodeficiency syndrome. But here Hegel reverses this image and conceives one part of spiritual advancement as coterminous with the spread of a contagious disease. But only one part, one side – the necessary flip side, its counterpart, is "the action of the negative essence" which presents "sheer uproar and violent struggle". No way that we could simply rely on spirit as contagion.

The idea is tempting to see in the virus something that connects matter and spirit, something at their intersection, a common property they share, if properly conceived, and to construct from there a proposal of a 'viral ontology'. (Think also of a very elementary mechanism of mimesis which hinges on something like contagion (I wrote about it at some length). Virus appears as an external contingent peril, but at the same time it points to a dimension at the (extimate?) core of the human.

There have been many responses to the pandemic. Some thought to excavate its "deeper", discursive, political, economic, or even ecological meaning. This often came with practical suggestions on how to deal with it and what kinds of perspectives or future potential it opens up. One of the most vocal commentators was Giorgio Agamben who published a whole series of texts/interventions that are now collected in the book *A Che Punto Siamo? L'epidemia come politica* (Quodlibet, 2020). As you certainly know, he put to work his entire philosophical apparatus to try to shed light on the current

crisis. Now, this obviously brings up some trivial points: 1) Is (t)his conceptual apparatus instructive and/or appropriate to make sense of the pandemic (and its political, economic, ideological and other diverse implications)? 2) It seems, with Agamben's position as with that of quite a few others, that the statements about the crisis do actually shed some surprising light and sometimes even bring out in surprisingly direct form some tendencies or implication of previous and earlier work. Do you think this is the case (we are thinking for example of the idea that we live in a generalized state of emergency)? Did the crisis become a kind of hermeneutical magnifying glass that allows us to re-read the positions of the respective commentators (as if the rule applies: tell me what you think about the crisis and I tell you what kind of philosophy you have)?

Pandemic in itself is not an event, not in anything like Badiou's sense. Neither were the plagues in the past, the Spanish flu, the natural disasters, tsunamis, comets, etc. There is no deeper meaning or truth to it – except in the very general sense that our social life along with our biological life are contingent and exposed to contingency. A hundred years ago, nobody really asked the question whether the relation to the Spanish flu, with dozens of millions of dead, presented a moment of truth of various philosophies. Did it leave any philosophical trace? Not that I know of, but perhaps because it was more or less taken as part and parcel of the disasters of WW1. In 1755 the earthquake in Lisbon strangely was an odd philosophical event which shattered the Enlightenment faith in a meaningful, rational law-like universe. It was perhaps the first time that the very modern idea of living in a senseless contingent world took hold – look at Voltaire's *Candide*, which, with all its naiveties, is a surprisingly radical manifesto. The pandemic presents a halt, a derailment of the capitalist economy, an opening, hence a possibility of an event, of a serious transformation, a bifurcation. Demonstrating that the present crisis shows how right we were all along in our philosophical stance (like this is the proof of the universal state of emergency, for instance, or to prove yet again how farsighted Lacan was) is obviously not enough. But it is very hard to produce a new turn, badly needed, to make a difference within the enormous avalanche of discourse that the crisis produced, with everybody called upon to comment. One speaks against great odds.

A follow up question: Agamben's position has created, at least the impression or the effect that the crisis brought out some rather strange political and ideological affiliations between parties that one otherwise would not throw into one bathtub (excuse this image) together. This could just

be the effect of a strange mutual misrecognition (which in its own right could open up a whole series of discussion about “philosophy’s politics” if there is any). Some of the so-called “truthers” identified Agamben’s critique of the pandemic measures (of the lockdown and other restrictions) as expression of a political ally. The more or less recent protests in Berlin (in August) showed a surprising liaison of libertarians, conservatives, and others who all aligned under the banner of individual freedom (and Agamben was repeatedly a reference point of this mixed “movement”, if one may misuse this term here). In our understanding this seems to indicate that in the contemporary world (although not necessarily limited to it) the signifier “freedom” and the defense of individual freedoms or the freedom of the individual often and effectively functions in a reactionary way. Clearly, also philosophers – whose task has often been self-defined as presenting and clarifying or determining the concept of freedom – have been prone to it (this had already been Marx’s point). What do you make of this?

Pandemic produced strange bedfellows, with divisions among the left and the right. It seems that both left and right are split along the lines of e.g. wearing masks and complying with the imposed rules, a large part of both poles thinking that stricter measures should be introduced to protect human lives, and the other part thinking that this is an infringement on human liberties and an inadmissible state control. Both left and right are split on how to think ‘bare life’ on the one hand and liberty on the other. The voices on both left and right expressed a lot of concern that the emergency measures could be indefinitely extended once in place (along the lines of Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine*), but there is also an inverse perspective: emergency measures involved a ‘communist’ hang (with many quotation marks), with enhanced public spending, investment in public health, social support, even universal basic income, ecological benefits, a tentative suspension of market economy, and one should strive to extend those, hold on to them, universalize some measures that governments were forced to introduce as temporary under duress. There is a good side to emergency, it showed that some insidious practices can be disrupted and that one can imagine a world where this could be sustained. Regarding the bare life, the dilemma imposed itself of stopping the economy in order to save lives. Either economy or the bare life? The whole world seemed to be caught up in this choice. But this is a false dilemma. Poverty kills far more people than Covid, lives of masses of people are far more endangered by the way that economy is run, and if we are to take ‘bare life’ seriously, than we first need a different kind of economy. Measures to protect human life in the pandemic only highlight

how human life is expandable in the ways that capitalist economy is normally run.

As to the defense of freedom and individual liberties being used for conservative agendas, I absolutely agree. As Slavoj Žižek put it, there is nothing emancipatory in not wearing a mask, it’s a false struggle.

One thinker who was, maybe unsurprisingly, a constant point of reference was Michel Foucault (and *the* concept for this context was his concept of biopolitics). He was especially evoked to think through what was and still is going on with the strict measures that were imposed on the populations by the individual states in battling the virus. Let us put this as bluntly as possible: does the notion of biopolitics have the conceptual capacity to help to analyze instructively the present situation and our predicament? Or does it, as some show, display some structural, but also political weakness, especially in a situation like ours?

I am skeptical about the notion of biopolitics, particularly in the way it has become a buzzword, a passe-partout notion that lost any useful meaning (with Foucault, it definitely had the value of pointing to an extremely important historical shift, even if in many ways unsatisfactory). But let me take a different path and continue along the lines of the previous answer. There is another theoretical turn that seems to have been waiting for its moment and found a perfect opportunity with the pandemic, namely Lacan’s elaboration of alienation in *Seminar XI*, the *vel* of the forced choice, epitomized by ‘your money or your life’. As an aside, Jack Benny (the immortal Hamlet in Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not to Be*) used to do a famous gag where a mugger holds him up in a deserted street: ‘Your money or your life.’ When he doesn’t stir, the mugger gets impatient and aggressive, repeating ever more threatening ‘Your money or your life, buddy’. After an infinitely long pause Benny says: ‘Hmm... I am thinking it over.’ It seemed for some time, and it still does, that the world governments were largely saying ‘Hmm, we are thinking it over’. The point of Lacan’s demonstrational device is that if faced with this dilemma, one can only choose one’s life, the other alternative, choosing money, is void, an empty set, since one would thereby lose both life and money. And by choosing the only forced alternative, one retains life, but curtailed, *écorné*, life without money, the intersection of two circles, ‘life with money’, being lost anyway. But is the choice of life, indeed bare life, the only way to squeeze out of this predicament? I always thought that capitalism can be defined precisely as choosing the seemingly impossible circle of money, thereby not simply losing life, but keeping the life at the intersection, i.e., life as subservient to and encompassed by the circle of money. You can keep your money and your life, but only

with life expandable in relation to the accumulation of money. (For the historical underpinnings of that, cf. Jacques Le Goff's wonderful booklet *Your Money and Your Life*, 1986; oddly, the title of the English translation, *Your money or your life*, misses the point). The accumulation of money is fuelled by life, increasingly reduced to that function, as a cost to be reduced, and the other alternative, the choice of life without money, bare life, as it were, appears as an empty set. Thus capitalism is not simply alienation, but rather an attempt to circumvent alienation, to seemingly keep both life and money, but at the cost of an enormous curtailment. As for biopolitics, this provides a different entry point, not the relation of sovereignty to bare life (and this is the subtitle of Agamben's *Homo sacer*), but the political economy as the real of biopolitics. This seems to be the blind spot of Agamben's account; it's not that the state of emergency displays the real of politics, i.e., the reduction to bare life by stopping economy; it's rather that economy, in its normal run, is the politics of reduction to bare life.

With Agamben, it's rather strange, and I guess symptomatic, how the radical thought of biopolitics, sovereignty, bare life, state of emergency, etc. could be easily translated into the liberal defense of individual rights against the state infringement. Is this the prospect?

Some, maybe many, and especially on the left, perceive the state as an enemy. There is a widespread and profound distrust of the state and its actions, decisions, etc. And, of course, there are very good reasons for this distrust. But we wondered if the pandemic has not actually added another dimension or aspect to this discussion and we might best articulate it in the following question: Can the state have an emancipatory function (perhaps here the reference would be Hegel and not Marx), or is this as paradoxical as stating that we are in the situation where there is not the "state and (then the) revolution", but "the state as revolution"? How do you see the relevance of the state in our contemporary, viral present? That is to say, can the state be turned into a site of collective emancipation, rather than just serving as an apparatus that ensures the reproductive expansion of the anarchic movement of capital?

In 1917 Lenin wrote *State and Revolution*, a text leading up to and paving the way for revolution, with the prospect of revolution dismantling the state as an apparatus of class oppression; not just that particular oppressive and reactionary state, but state as such, as an instrument of oppression by its very concept. Curiously and by sheer coincidence, in 1917 Franz Rosenzweig discovered a short manuscript which became famous as 'the oldest systematic program of German idealism', co-

written by Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling in the aftermath of French Revolution. There they expounded that there can be no idea of the state since it contradicts the very idea of an idea, it contradicts freedom, it treats human beings mechanically as cogwheels, therefore it must cease (*also soll er aufhören*). In the aftermath of the revolution, the three young lads entertained the idea of doing away with the state as such, and Lenin as if picked it up in view of another revolution. But Hegel's subsequent development could be rather summed up by "*Revolution and State*" – his problem was, particularly in his *Philosophy of Right*, how to conceive of a state that would capture the spirit of revolution and find a form that would make it endure, that could be an enduring social form of freedom. Revolution by its own logic could only run amok by the frenzy of its own negativity, hence the necessity of the state. So state as the result of the revolution, not revolution as the undoing of state. This is in line with Hegel's basic move that negativity must have a positive expression. I am in sympathy with this basic Hegelian move, and I think that there was a big deficiency on the left not to have come up with a theory of the state, merely seeing it as an opponent to be abolished. This came back with a vengeance, in Stalinism and all the 'really existing socialism', with the imposition of the worst kind of state as a monster. The point would be to see the state not simply as an enemy or an ally, but as a site, a site of political struggle, not simply conceiving politics as something that happens outside and against the state – indeed the oxymoronic 'state as revolution'. The agenda of undoing the state has in the meantime become the right-wing neoliberal agenda, where they managed to defuse state mechanisms far more successfully than any left wing politics, in order to give the alleged free reign to economy, while at the same time, when deregulation leads to disaster, imposing the biggest state intervention into economy in human history, with the colossal bail-outs in the wake of 2008 crisis.

The pandemic has produced effects on at least three levels: on that of public health, that of economy, but also the level of mental health. The statistics concerning the latter are worrying (depression, suicidal tendencies, anxiety, etc.). Do you see any specific (new, old or just renewed) function of psychoanalysis in the pandemic situation?

I am not a practitioner, so I have no direct experience of how the Covid crisis affected analytic practice. I hear from my analyst friends that a lot of it massively moved to Zoom, and I can't quite imagine how the basic simple parameters of the analytic situation that Freud proposed can be maintained, or adapted, and whether this is sustainable in a longer run. Even in the academic sphere, which suddenly largely happens through Zoom, I don't think this can be maintained without a huge loss; it's a

maimed surrogate, so this goes all the more for the analytic practice where this has far more intimate consequences.

I think psychoanalysis was in bad trouble before, in serious crisis in comparison to its heyday in the seventies and the eighties that I have a very vivid memory of. Partly because of the massive psycho-chemistry industry, with pills for every psychic disturbance (with anti-depressants at the top of the list), partly because of the rise of a vast variety of therapies, apparently efficient in the short run (from cognitivism to new-age), partly because of the sad sectarian in-fights among the analysts and their organizations (nothing sadder than Lacanians viciously fighting other Lacanians as to who is the true Lacanian, not noticing how they are becoming collectively irrelevant thereby), and above all because of the decline of the impact of critical thought in the neo-liberal times, which has multiple causes and where psychoanalysis shares the fate of others. One could hope against hope that this crisis may offer an occasion for a theoretical and practical renewal that psychoanalysis badly needs, as does the critical thought at large. One can be reminded that it was after WW1 that Freud wrote *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, one of his most far-reaching texts, occasioned also by a response to a catastrophic crisis brought by the war and its aftermath.

Crises always open the space for interventions, measures, and actions of different kinds (political, economic, ideological, etc.). In our current situation, it thus far seems that the right, in some parts of Europe, proved quite capable in hegemonising interpretations and interventions. In Germany, it was rather the conservative powers who did, at least in the beginning, quite a successful job in containing the situation (it remains to be seen how the situation in the US or India will evolve). But if a crisis can present an opportunity for a political intervention, did you see any relevant proposal from any European or International left? What is your view of the current political situation?

It seems nevertheless that some moderately left governments, like New Zealand, Scandinavian countries (with the strange exception of Sweden), etc. were the most successful in containing Covid, and that new right-wing leaders like Trump, Johnson, or Bolsonaro, were among the most pernicious and harmful for their populations. The epidemic gave rise to a lot of fear and anxiety, the breeding ground of populism, but they rather displayed sheer incompetence and disregard for people's lives. There are too many exceptions for this rule of thumb to quite hold, and the data for many countries (like India) are largely unreliable. But this is just judging from the available data, but facts are not quite the name of the game, there is indeed a battle for hegemony and ideological interpretation going

on where the right appears to have the upper hand, where disasters can be presented as victories. This is the time when what would be most dearly needed is an international association of the left, linked to the new rise of the green movement, with a common minimal agenda, like the boost of public health, the concerted protection of the most exposed and vulnerable, the radical ecological measures, universal income in some form etc. Where is it? Who will seize the moment? Varoufakis's Progressive International, conceived together with Sanders? I very much wish that such initiatives may gain momentum. But the situation is such that help may come from completely unexpected quarters, sparked by a contingent constellation; it's ripe for a spark.

There is barely any left government in Europe left (be it social-democratic, socialist, or whatever). Certainly, the traditional left proved incapacitated so many times already and so inapt to propose basic solutions to fundamental problems that it barely deserves the name (of the left) – which led Badiou to suggest that one should simply stop using the terms of left and right altogether. But on top of the absence of the “left” – whatever we mean by this – from positions of power, the EU seems to be totally out of sync with actual political decision making processes. Everything – maybe tragically – seems to point to its unavoidable dissolution (the ongoing refugee situation is not even mentioned in times of the virus). Is there any future for Europe in and after the virus?

There was a time in the nineties when the vast majority of European governments were left-wing, kind of, and this is the crucial time to consider in view of the present situation. Namely, the neoliberal hegemony that we witnessed in the past few decades could only succeed when the left actually largely espoused it as the platform within which they could parade as ‘the right with a human face’. People like Blair, Clinton, and Schröder made it possible that the neoliberal agenda could gain general currency and be presented as acceptable, even the only viable, while in the eighties Reagan and Thatcher still appeared as extremists and fundamentalists. The left then abandoned the agenda of a lasting social transformation, something that moderate social democrats like Brandt, Palme, and Kreisky still stood for in the seventies – they would be considered as dangerous leftists today, while we spurned them at the time as meek reformists. Today Piketty seems to be something like a reincarnation of their spirit. The left then adopted the neoliberal assumptions and shifted the terrain of the political strife to the question of the degree and shading – do we want a bit more or a bit less state intervention or deregulation or welfare state? The difference between the left and the right tends to be defined by cultural, not political, agendas,

increasingly so. Given that the left largely espoused the neoliberal agenda, and was only able to function as a reaction against rightest moves without having a project of its own, this also resulted in the absence of a serious response to the 2008 crisis, which should have been the wet dream of the left.

Despite the sad state that Europe currently presents, and which looks even sadder with the Covid crisis, I still think that fighting for Europe is absolutely necessary, and that abandoning EU as a hopeless case is no solution. In the global context where US, China, and Russia loom large as the biggest players, Europe stands for the possibility of a prospect of another political agenda, even if tentatively and modestly negatively defined against the three above. Perhaps not much, but something to hold on to; an incentive to desperately fight for solidarity, social justice, liberty and equality which are the essential European legacy, to be reinvented.

One of the characteristics of the self-declared left critique consists in reflecting on new, or at least specific and conjunctural phenomena (say, Bolsonaro, or Trump) by recourse to old categories or concepts (insinuating for instance, that they are fascist). We tend to disagree with this trend, since it does not only express a lack of historical specificity but even more so an unwillingness to be irritated by what is unpleasant to confront. If we take Bolsonaro as one case, we will see that Catholicism and neo-Pentecostalism were instances in Brazil that among other things played a determining structural influence in his election (so one should take into account the historically specific status of the Workers' Party, the nature of the populist left in Brazil, etc.). Of course, this election must also be comprehended against the background of the right assimilating nominally anti-corruption politics (from the left) – simply because when the corrupt are in power, they redefine what corruption is and in the specific case of Brazil against the background of Rousseff's corruption charges and the entire leftish politics of Lula (who learnt from the right and started handling corruption strategically). We do not think we live in a classically fascist period and find it even more absurd to seek to trace proto-fascist elements in contemporary discourses (as if before there is fascism, there are already traces of fascism). It is quite clear that if fascism is a name for a politics that classically included both economic and political directives, today's capitalism simply does not provide the economic basis for early 20th century fascism. So, our (very schematic) thesis is that what we are seeing with the alt-right

is something else; a reactionary or even obscure novelty, new obscurantism and reactionaries. This might certainly get much worse, but it deserves a new analysis and its logic needs explicitation. Would you agree that there is strangely something different, if not new going on on the right and the same does not hold true for the left? If this were the case, does this indicate an exhaustion or saturation of a certain logic or idea of the left?

I won't say anything about Brazil, your question shows a much better grasp of the situation there than I have, so I can only largely agree. And I definitely agree about the use of the term fascism. I guess it shows a certain inertia of thought on the left, with all the new alarming phenomena being put under the heading of the avatars of old phenomena. Any excess or any display of authoritarian measures is quickly labeled as fascism, a handy and extreme marker that appears a bit like a black hole, and the fact that one uses it can function as the alibi of one's radical stance. There are several problems with that: first, the very term fascism stirs up immediate affective reaction and can be used as an easy trigger, and its message is most often: don't reflect, but react. The label calls for immediate and strong reaction. It also has an immediate effect of stigmatization, the opponent is stigmatized instead of being addressed, considered as stupid and blind, thus an occasion for proving our superiority. The use of this term is mostly not something that can change things, it often makes them worse. But the problem is not only with the way this term most often functions, but also with its content. The new populisms present surprising new facets that confound their critics. Terry Gilliam, of Monty Python fame, famously said that "not even the Pythons in their 1960s pomp could match the surreal madcap nature of the presidency. [...] The reality is funnier than anything one can do." Trump is a better parody of himself than any parodist can do. The new leaders are often designated as clowns and buffoons (Berlusconi was paving the way), which doesn't impede their political agenda, but enhances it. The obscene underside of power has come to the fore, in massive and incredible ways, which would have undone any previous power, but now functions as its asset. 17,000 lies and more can be told, all easily checked, without this having any consequences – which gives a whole new dimension to the paradox of the Cretan liar. It's not that now the usually hidden and repressed content has made its coming out, so that we could witness the concealed truth of power; it's rather that the repression itself has become repressed, I guess to an unprecedented degree, the more the obscenity is out in the open. The Emperor acts as if he takes off his clothes and enjoys displaying his nudity (I am following the cue of an excellent text by Yuval Kremenitzer, *The Emperor's New Nudity*, soon to be published), which coincides with utmost obfuscation. This shifts the very notion of ideology and its classic parameters. Furthermore,

there is the sheer inconsistency of statements and policies (cf. the array of Trump's contradictory lines about Covid), different in tenor and scope from the 'old right', and also following a different logic than fascism. The paradox is to pursue a consistent political line made of blatant inconsistencies, but a line that sticks and cannot be halted by debunking inconsistencies. And there is a new logic of transgression, in particular transgression of unwritten rules that form the texture of society, let's say the rules of common decency, civility, respect and dignity – a seemingly daring constant transgression that serves the preservation of the status quo and its enhancement. The populist politics is fuelled by a deep anti-establishment sentiment (deep state, swamp, etc.), which is immediately put into the service of the protection of the establishment. The specter of corrupt establishment is maintained for the rage to continue, so that the real establishment can remain intact.

I am enumerating a bit haphazardly some traits and paradoxes (there are more) of the new populism which cannot be covered or usefully dealt with by squeezing them under the label of fascism. The trouble with this is that the left (including myself) is pretty good at drawing up a gloomy picture, but there is the danger that this still betrays a fascination with it and fatefully allows it to occupy the center-stage and set the agenda. We spend our time in awestruck indignation, helplessly reacting to ever new horrors that one deemed impossible a week ago. I guess the only way out of this is, well, to start doing politics, instead of righteous indignation, not as a reaction, always some steps behind, but on our own terms – a promise of this could be sensed with Bernie Sanders, before the Democratic establishment opted for the return to the old normalcy which produced Trump in the first place.

To follow up: what is so seductive about identity politics, political correctness, populism, etc., that the left seems to have embraced? If against previous left wing rule-violations have been assimilated by the right (who are right now breaking all rules constantly) and forced the left into a political correct mode of operation, this seems to be a deadlock (as this makes for a left that can only insist and reiterate rules of behavior and rules of discourse and thus sounds rather quite conservative in the classical meaning of this denomination). Do you see anything emancipatory in any of this and if not, how to break this unhappy conundrum? Does the current pandemic offer a potential way out (since now it is the rather right wing forces governing that have to impose rules of behavior)?

Regarding identity politics I can make two brief general comments, from the psychoanalytic and the Hegelian perspective. Tellingly, the key term

in psychoanalysis is identification, not identity. Identification entails a contradictory process full of tension and with uncertain results. It's a process, not a state of identity that one would have to protect and perpetuate. Thus any sexual position is ridden with the impossibility of coming to terms with the sexual difference, which is not the difference masculine/feminine (if the sexual difference were reducible to this simple binary, there would be no need for psychoanalysis). There is a real of sexual difference irreducible to a binary opposition, ultimately to the signifier, and irreducible to a positive identity. Lacan has a great formulation for this: it is what doesn't cease not to be written, yet haunting any given oppositions, exceeding the binary logic. The multiplicity of sexual positions is the response to this impossibility, but the assertion of this multiplicity doesn't resolve its deadlock. Of course one should fully endorse the struggle of all sexual 'identities', their right for full recognition, but this is not enough – one should show fidelity to a kernel of antagonism that they all have at their core and which prevents us from ever simply inhabiting any sexual identity. This tends to get lost in the assertion of the multiplicity of positions which all have equal rights and entitlement. The sexual politics that psychoanalysis proposes is far more troubling, it doesn't aim only at the external proponents of oppression, but at the inner rift implied by sexuality. (I cannot do better but to refer to Alenka Zupančič's book *What is sex?*)

As for Hegel, one should just keep in mind the general caveat that any identity is premised on a split, and that any identity is subject to self-othering (*Sichanderswerden*), being itself only on condition of becoming other than itself, and measured against the other at its core. There can be no Hegelian identity politics.

Following these two cues one can see that the deadlock of asserting the identity politics and political correctness on the one side, and following the path of daredevil transgression on the other is fatally misconceived. Asserting identity politics tends to betray what identities have at their core, the antagonistic inner edge (as opposed to external enemies), and seemingly daring transgression ultimately sustains the power structures that it is allegedly transgressing. It's a quid pro quo, indeed a conundrum hard to undo, the two strands often fuelling each other. As to what one can do – well, pursuing the Hegelian-Lacanian line at this particular intersection (concerning identity and transgression), but this then poses the larger question of what philosophy can do in these times.

During the lockdown, one of the claims spread everywhere was: "we are all in the same boat". But, we have seen the "emergence" or the new visibility of a fraction of the working class, so called essential workers. Would you say they can be accounted for in the terms of Marx's analysis? And if so, what does one do with the idea that there was a widespread

recognition of the achievements and efforts of the essential workers (of people whose work is so essential that without them the functioning of society would come to a halt) that immediately after the virus seem to have disappeared or lowered its impact were again forgotten and disappeared into the invisibility of the supermarket checkout counters and the like? First there was literal acclamation (in Italy people stood on their balconies and applauded the supermarket cashiers), then there was a demand for higher wages, and then all this disappeared with the objects of the acclamation. What does this mean for the idea of (the) essential work(ers)? Can Marx and the critique of political economy in general help the conditions of the pandemic?

If the pandemic showed anything, then that we are not in the same boat. The inequalities and antagonisms deepened and drastically came to the fore. There was a graffiti in Ljubljana 'Homeless, stay at home!' The drastic differences of those who have a home to stay at, and the people in appalling housing circumstances, the gender differences, with women being far more exposed in caring and medical professions, as salespersons, plus subjected to increased domestic violence, the carnage of the old (no countries for old men), the penury of the precarious workers, the looming poverty, the exposure of racial and ethnic minorities. The image of all being in the same boat has the further hidden implication that boats are hierarchical entities, there is a captain at the top and some officers in command, and the others are to obey the orders. It seems to proclaim equality, but it does the opposite, hence the boat is a propitious ground to introduce authoritarian measures under the cover of all being equally vulnerable. The message is: because we are all equal in regard to the virus you should concede 'our' unquestionable power for your own good.

The talk about essential workers rather obscures some things. First, such talk obscures the real problem of the role of the state and the public services. Only a well-organized public health service can deal with such an emergency situation (but not only that, also the health care freely available for all), and the general thrust for privatization and deregulation impoverished and depleted this service in the decades of neoliberal policies – the degree of it became glaring under the harsh light of the virus. There was a moment of consensus about that in the spring crisis (if unwilling and frail), but quickly forgotten once the peak danger seemed to be over. Nothing was seriously done in the past six months to avert and mitigate the current second crisis, with the looming new disasters. The 'essential' health workers are now even more exploited and poorly paid, and nobody applauds them any longer.

Second, the larger issues of the visibility of the working class – indeed it's invisible in the normal conditions, and this doesn't relate

merely to workers producing and distributing our food, the one thing we cannot do without even in the pandemic (plus electricity and internet providers, at the very opposite end of bodily needs, but they are not exposed) – it's the millions of invisible workers conveniently out of sight in faraway countries and their sweatshops. Capitalism is also a distribution of visibility, a politics of visibility, and with the sudden pandemic emergence of 'essential' workers some part of the invisible has become visible, only to be soon eclipsed. There is a class struggle in what you see or what you don't, and with the occurrence of 'essential' workers there is the impression, or rather the fantasy, that one suddenly somehow sees the essence – namely, that we all need to eat and to use the net, at the minimal. Stomach or fantasy, as Marx put it on the first page of *Capital*, but they always overlap.

The contradictions and antagonisms of capitalism are becoming even more irreconcilable than before, especially during the lockdown or during the pandemic as such. Rich people need working poor people, so that they do not get infected and can still command the poor people to deliver their food, etc. It seems like it is impossible to think that capitalism has the ability to overcome or sublimate them in any way in its own framework – and it seems increasingly unbelievable that it will not simply explode into many tiny pieces of structure (*zonages*, as Badiou would have it). On the other hand, capitalism never solved its problems, it only delayed them and transformed them so that they can be left unsolved. Where do you think we stand today, especially under the current intensified conditions? Does all this put an alternative, communism (whatever we precisely mean by this) on the agenda? Differently put, did the pandemic force us to consider a radical transformation of our economy, society, politics, etc., (in short: communism) or do you think the pandemic is separate from the insight into such an almost conceptual necessity?

One of the immediate consequences of Covid, I guess now prevailing, is the sense of fatigue. There was the crisis in the spring, and as it dragged on the sense of fatigue was already setting in, but that was still very limited as compared to its autumn repetition, this bad remake that we are facing now; this rehashing of a bad script is even more disastrous. Now we can't even muster the proper emotional response, as we did with the original shock, with horror or anxiety or cynicism. This isn't even frightening or an occasion for humor, not anymore, which makes it worse. Fatigue is the opposite of awakening, and when Benjamin brought up the dialectic at a standstill, it was meant as the state of maximum

tension which was to instigate awakening. The images of standstill, now again imposed on our cities under lockdown, seem to be oneiric, like the dreamlike Hollywood sequences (think of e.g. *Vanilla Sky*). But Benjamin's point is that dream doesn't pertain to the standstill, dream was what went before, i.e., capitalism and its business-as-usual, its reliance on progress etc., so that the standstill offers the chance to wake up from this protracted collective dream, the phantasmagoria. Now we seem to be at the point of excessive fatigue which rather instigates indifference and irritation. Can it bring us to some form of awakening? The accumulation of the quantity of exasperation and apathy leading to a 'dialectical overturn' into a new quality? I rather suspect that both the optimistic scenario of awakening and the pessimistic scenario of this dragging on into the bad infinity of dulled frustrated discontent may be off the mark. The accumulation of contradictions is such that this may explode in unpredictable ways. Of course I hope against hope and try to do what I can to keep the 'communist' scenario alive, in whatever incipient organizational forms it exists (also in Slovenia), and in the reliance on sparks that are in the air and may ignite anytime. It's a harsh uphill struggle against the incredible human capacity to learn nothing from even the starkest lessons and to delude oneself till the last possible moment (and beyond). After the 2008 crisis there was the general feeling that 'this can't go on', and now with the Covid and the concomitant intensification of antagonisms there is again 'this can't go on'. Come to think of it, given my age, this was the general feeling already in the aftermath of '68, so in retrospect our generation spent a lifetime in this temporality, the looming breakdown of capitalism in its present form, the accumulation of contradictions, the receding breaking point. And I guess this stretches back to Marx's time. But maybe when, after so many thwarted expectations, we all get resigned to the idea of the infinitely expandable capitalism and its temporality of infinite postponement, then a break may surprise us from some completely unexpected quarters. There is the danger of one delusion – of the infinite resilience of capitalism – being matched by another delusion – that of an imminent end. Capitalism is, perhaps since ever, the perspective of an end that doesn't end. I do believe that this nightmare of a never-ending end has a limit, but this is a paradoxical belief where radical fatalism, as proposed by Frank Ruda in *Abolishing Freedom*, meets revolutionary will.

The very existence of philosophy has been questioned for a very long time now, at least since Hegel himself, for whom there were only failed attempts to do philosophy and thus there was no proper philosophy, well, almost before Hegel. From Stephen Hawking to the average neuro-biologist, there are quite a few who'd argue that it is better if there was no philosophy at all (because it does not help and is a waste

of time anyhow). You belong to the kind of philosophers who passionately and rigorously defend the necessity of philosophy. Even, or precisely because it is for its own sake. How do you think of philosophy, perhaps with Hegel, in times of pandemic?

Defending philosophy, for its own sake, as a space of thought beyond any immediate utility and practical use, feels a bit, in these times, like a belief in magic. The magic that pure thought can have consequences, that persevering with it, as such and for its own sake, will make a difference – if thought is on the level of its task. There is, yet again, the peril of a delusion of grandeur that philosophy has been prone to throughout its history. We have such great ideas, if only people would heed them. But this idea, the idea of the idea, as it were, goes back to the origins of philosophy, to its basic stance stated first by Parmenides, of co-belonging of thought and being. That thought touches upon being, intersects with it, that it interrupts being (this is Hegel's wonderful formulation, thought is interruption of being, *Unterbrechung des Seins*, so that neither thought nor being 'exist' independent of this interruption, a break). So this is not about giving pure thought free reign apart from the troublesome dirty worldly business, but about the capacity of thought, if properly practiced, to stir being, in the juncture of its universality and the singularity of a historical moment it belongs to, including and especially its dirt. I guess this stance is in my case experientially based in the beginnings of my involvement with philosophy, in the late sixties and the early seventies, when there was a heyday of both serious thought going around and the political action, the intoxicating intersection of the two. This was the moment that inspired the proper enthusiasm, and here I am, fifty years later, trying to show fidelity to that moment, against great odds. But I am of course fully aware that this can be a very conservative stance, the mythification of a certain period when everything seemed possible, philosophically and politically, and then everything went downhill ever since. The thing is not that the glorious moment is gone and the world has radically changed, so that one is like a stranded relic of some other times, the thing is rather that that moment happens now, if it's worth anything.

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