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What is happening to us

Alain Brossat, in conversation with Cédric Cagnat

alainbrossat46@gmail.com

Translated by Julien Queennec

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國立交通大學文化研究國際中心

International Center for Cultural Studies

National Chiao Tung University

Rm.103 HA Building 2, 1001 University Road

Hsinchu, Taiwan

Tel: +886-3-5712121 Ext.58274, 58272

Fax: +886-3-5734450

Website: https://iccs.nctu.edu.tw/en/wps_list.php

Email: iccs.wps@gmail.com

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alainbrossat46@gmail.com

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An interview of Alain Brossat by Cédric Cagnat in two parts published the 19th of March 2020 on the website of the association “Ici et ailleurs” (<https://ici-et-ailleurs.org/>).

Then I went into the city, which I found fair, very strong, and seated in a good air; but at my entry the guard demanded of me my pass or ticket. Whereat I was much astonished, and asked them: My masters, is there any danger of the plague here? O Lord! they said, they die hard by here so fast that the cart runs about the streets. Good God! said I, and where? Whereunto they answered that it was in Larynx and Pharynx, which are two great cities such as Rouen and Nantes, rich and of great trading. And the cause of the plague was by a stinking and infectious exhalation which lately vapoured out of the abysms, whereof there have died above two and twenty hundred and threescore thousand and sixteen persons within this sevensnight. Then I considered, calculated, and found that it was a rank and unsavoury breathing which came out of Pantagruel’s stomach when he did eat so much garlic, as we have aforesaid.

François Rabelais, *Pantagruel*, Livre II, chapitre XXXII.

PART I : The unbreathable

***Cédric Cagnat:* Could the coronavirus event, if it is an event, give rise to a reflection which would not be limited to the repetitive and illusory discourses on the sudden governmental awareness of the importance of the Welfare State, or on the imminent death of the capitalist system? In other words, from which philosophical angle could we look at the health crisis we are currently facing?**

Alain Brossat: To talk about an event here is certainly justified. When we speak of an event it is not primarily because it is memorable, something which will leave a mark in the calendar,

but because it forces us to ask ourselves: *what is happening to us?* In other words, an event is when an irregularity or an exception occurs. Something unsettling takes place that loosens us from our ordinary condition, which is more or less a sleepwalking condition and is more or less distant from the real.

In that sense, the event is what makes us lose our sense of direction (disorientation) and thus what forces us to look urgently for a change of direction (reorientation). But it is also what brings us back, more or less brutally, to the real. The event always produces a concussion, a shock. It is not something we could simply watch as spectators, because it is embarking and transforming us. It hurts our subjectivities, even if this harm may well be a good thing.

It is precisely what is happening to us with the current epidemic crisis. It presents itself in many ways as a kind of natural disaster falling on us — even if, when we take another look at it, the *impression of natural disaster* might appear as a false pretence. Actually, we could even say that this major crisis has not only the power of bringing us back to the real (a certain state of the globalization, as an epoch), but it also opens up a breach which lets us glimpse at what is usually out of reach. Something which is like the elusive, the *hidden truth* of this real — the present reality of our finitude.

The “coronavirus event” is therefore what is awakening and compelling us to get out of the muck (of the glue) constituted by a series of denials chained to each other. I don’t want to draw a list of these denials now, we can talk about it later. Nevertheless we are awakening, all sweaty, in the middle of what Macron has called a state of “war” (he is not entirely wrong, but why didn’t he notice it sooner? Dummy...), and now we must face it. It implies changing our sense of direction (reorient ourselves) within the storm that is our present (Walter Benjamin time and again...). We must bifurcate and operate a radical turn. What could or should this turn be composed of? That is what we are going to discuss.

As to the other part of the question, I believe we must waive the model (*gimmick*) of the “consciousness rising”: governments are not becoming “aware” of anything. They react in a situation of emergency, without any strategy, to a disastrous event which has caught them off guard. The reason being that the possibility of such a catastrophic event was located in the blind spot of their “calculations”. The reasons behind this are ancient and deeply rooted. If we cannot

make a detailed genealogy of this deficiency here, we can at least say this (however brief and incomplete it is): In the democracy of the market, the only “health” which really matters in the long term for the rulers (“gouvernants” in French, that is those who are governing) is the “markets’ health” and not the populations’ health. This “government of the living’s” change of orientation towards the conduct of markets is a major turn within contemporary politics. It corresponds to the dismantling of the social State. During the past couple of years, the signs of neglect of the governed bodies has multiplied in France: peripheral areas have been discarded, ressources for public hospitals have been reduced, budget cuts to all the public and social services have increased. All these things, however are not necessarily the result of a *well-planned project* to end the positive features of the government of the living. It is not an active oversight of the positiveness of the “make live”. In fact, and which is most likely the case, what we see here are some induced consequences of neoliberal tyrannic rationalities. These rationalities are indeed characterized by the absolute priority of “economy” which implies that all programs set up to take care of the living (also known as biopower, the modern power if we follow Foucault) are subsumed in this economically-ridden regime of truth/power.

Let me take a moment to insist, the issue here is rationalities. We perceived it when the premises of the epidemic appeared in Europe. The first move of the morons governing us was not to protect and warn populations, even though they had some knowledge of the magnitude of the epidemic in China and then in East Asia. No, they first thought about protecting the markets. For them, it was better to avoid scaring people. This could have harmed the economy, impeded the circulation of goods, obstruct trades. So in order to avoid all these inconveniences, it was better to systematically play down the gravity of the coming threat in the eyes of the public...

And in that case, the short-sighted calculations of the rulers (given the current situation, let’s call them by their proper name: *criminal* calculations) met with the sleepwalking carelessness of the people who were certain that such kind of scourges only affected “others”, from Wuhan all the way to Kinshasa. This calculation met especially with our homemade planetary middle class looking at the world from the perspective of terraces and bars (much like the way they looked at the jihadist attacks). With them we find a great illustration of the confinement in one’s immune narcissism. Then, under the auspices of such providential confluence between the little calculations of the firsts (gouvernants) and of the arrogant casualness of the others, the great head-in-the-sand politics thrived, and we see its results today.

The worst thing regarding the little calculations of both sides (represented together in the “*jeuniste*” paradigm, the counterpoint of ageism in terms of discrimination, boosted by Macron’s coming to power) is the abject motive dwelling in their reptilian brains: if this nasty flu might cause some damages, it is the old people who will pay the price, and so, we, as young and healthy people, do not need to be unduly alarmed... Social networks have at least been useful for that: failing grasp the utility of the unsightly surgical masks (they hide my lipstick, oh the horror!), they have at least managed to make the foolish youth retain the detail which matters most, the fact that it is over 65 years old that the risks for one’s life becomes really important. The epidemic event exposes the *quality* of the “youthful” sacred egoism and its relation to the *broad immune tendency* constituting today’s democratic civility.

Sleepwalking narcissism, it is precisely this: what really matters is what exposes me to the risk, what does not matter is the fact that I could myself be a vector of contamination and therefore an agent of the disaster. The epidemics is a ruthless indicator of the present state of the democratic civilization.

C.C. : In an article published on the last 26th of February in the daily journal *Il Manifesto*, Giorgio Agamben says: “It seems that, as the terrorist source has been exhausted to justify exceptional measures, the invention of the epidemic can now provide the ideal pretence to extend them beyond limits”. Then, he suggests that there is a specific governmental strategy at work. It seems that you are also saying that, but both understandings of such rationality are very far from each other. What do you think about Agamben’s proposition ?

A.B. : You as well as I have both read “the invention of an epidemic” in Agamben’s text, which was published at a time when the epidemic had already caused hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths in Wuhan and the Hubei province... And so it seems to me that when a renowned philosopher transforms himself into a jackass and a public threat by publishing this kind of drivel, it is the duty and the honor of other philosophers to call him out and declare that there is sufficient evidence to ban this sleepwalker for at least the next half-century from further expressing anything related to public issues, and to rather permanently continue with the

etymological nitpicking of his recent works instead. Unfortunately, Agamben's article, which has been translated into many languages, has been spread around the planet like a virus, inspiring for example his little ultra-left group of admirers in France to speak without restraint on the topic of imaginary epidemics (in *Lundimatin* for example, a far left online weekly paper, and in other places). The epidemics would serve as a pretence for the States to further advance the state of exception... This was before the return of the real, right in their faces. Then, this little group stealthily tore up Agamben's page and went wisely back to its Foucauldian's basics... Ultra left maybe, but *journalists* before all. Experts in twisting and contorting. "Erase your traces!" said Brecht.

Agamben's article is really the illustration of the arrogance of the philosopher who knows it all, who judges everything. It is a typical example of the philosopher stuck in his political certainties, fixed within his conceptual constructions, and unable to face the unprecedented event, the event which escapes his ready-made conceptual grid...

Well, I say unprecedented, but this is not exactly true. We can find in our recent history all sorts of warning signals which Europe and the Global North (except, a little, in East Asia) have not taken seriously into account: SARS in 2003, the swine flu (H1N1) in 2009. I was in Taiwan in 2009. I saw the thing up close, and I was convinced that it had a very worrying future, which included us in Europe. I wrote about it, and I was looked at with compassion. H1N1 appeared to many as a kind of conspiracy aiming at the enrichment of pharmaceutical Companies, according to the common sense best shared at the time when Mme Bachelot was the Minister of Health in France. What is most appalling in our situation today is the intellectual tetany in the face of the extreme specificity of this epidemic phenomenon. It is even worse when it comes from people who have been fed with Foucault's analysis of biopolitics. Agamben's text (but what an inconsistency to put into circulation a text which has been written much too quickly, to say the least, especially when it deals with such matters) is entirely based on the idea that because local authorities are using excessive means to fight such a small infection, limited to districts, they must have *other (nasty) ideas in mind*... and so here we are, a little state of exception, just like Toinette's reasoning in Molière's play - « le poumon, vous dis-je... » (*Le Malade imaginaire* – Toinette claiming that all the other opinions on the cause of the sickness are wrong, and that each pain, each feeling, each symptom, all come from the lungs...).

One must be absolutely *incompetent* not to understand that an epidemic phenomenon is not a static object. On the contrary, an epidemic phenomenon is primarily characterized by the fact that when you perceive it, “see” it at the time *t*, it has already been projected into another time *t'*, etc... Epidemics are dynamic. They are constantly changing, if not mutating. It is the reason why those who try to reassure themselves by looking at it as something familiar (It’s just a flu. Why all the fuss ?) are idiots. And people who shared Agamben’s blindness in the early period of the epidemic are thus inexcusable, for the development of the situation in China was right in front of their eyes.

This way of thinking also means something quite simple. If they were convinced that the Chinese scenario could not be reproduced in the Western context, it is because they themselves were completely contaminated by the *presumption of being immune*, the thoughtless certainty that “these kinds of things” do not occur here, in our spaces, in our geographical areas. These catastrophic woes, more or less natural, periodically afflict other people, other countries, other human worlds, in other parts of the world. We will be spared thanks to the grace of some kind of invisible hand: our inherent immune condition. And this *immune sleepwalking* is shared by both the strong minds who “didn’t believe” in the existence of an epidemic and the global warming skeptics who do not believe in climate change and in its disastrous effects (see Trump when he talks about the “shit hole countries” doomed to suffer such kind of calamities). Both in the Trumpist and in the Agambist versions, this is nothing but a political theology for shabby minds: the epidemics as “invention”, imaginary threat, or artificial panic, not as disruptive event. The good Providence of our immune system is here and it protects our health. Us, people living in the global North...

C.C. : You are talking in a quite enigmatic way of the “hidden truth” of our present time which will re-emerge with the pandemic situation. What features of our time are revealed that we do not already know about: global circulation of goods, humans as employable material “at whatever the cost”, the relegation of the living in favor of the imperatives of the world economy, the carelessness and amateurism of neoliberal States regarding ecological and sanitary disasters they themselves bring about, etc.?

A.B. : Here we get to the point: well-known things, or supposedly-known things, if they are not rooted in nor alter people's conducts, if they do not inform and merge with their experience, then they are *nothing but a draught circulating in their heads*. People know everything. They are entirely connected to communication systems and information machines. And yet, they have been epidemic skeptics until the end, just as much as they are war skeptics and climate change skeptics *in practice*, in the way they conduct their lives, from the terraces to the planes they take to spend a weekend in Majorca, to the SUVs (4x4) invading Paris and Tapei's streets, to the loud kisses they exchange until the last minute... We must fully do the autopsy of the communication and information which manufactured "knowledge" whose purpose is not to awaken but to sedate, not to produce "awareness" but lethargy and sleepwalking states (the dominant regime of the being-in-the-world of our societies).

This is the terrible power of the epidemics (for we move into a regime of the *terrible* without any transition). It opens up a breach in the protective cover which separates reality sleepers. It is this intrusion which produces the truth-effects I was speaking about. Suddenly, Damocles sword (the epidemic crisis) is hanging over the sleepers' existences. It bears the mark of the disaster, and the sleepers have or feel something resembling the beginning of an intuition of what, in essence, characterizes our present. It is definitely *spectral*, in the sense that the world which we believe to *inhabit* has ceased to exist. It is not only that we live "on credit", as it is common to say now. In fact, the spiritual and material foundations of this world have already collapsed, and we keep living under the illusion of stability if not strength, *only momentum*, by a mere effect of inertia.

When the epidemic starts tearing up lungs, it also tears up the illusion that we are living in a breathable world. Sloterdijk has shown it. The issue of *breathability* is haunting our world since the beginning of the 20th century, since the first day of the gas war in 1915. In our "normal" sleepwalking state, we consider that our ability to breathe is given, and we have a *right* to do so. However, the reality is that, on the contrary, this right is now revoked or at least subject to hazardous conditions. The virus comes and radically contests it. The authorities, the rulers, radically fail to defend it. What I say about the epidemic could be said about climate change. Migrants are partly victims of climate change making the air unbreathable in their homeland. The same could be said about nuclear weaponry which is hanging indefinitely above humanity, ready to carbonize lungs, like the Americans did in Hiroshima and Nagasaki with a sense of

exhilaration. This part of reality is showing itself with the epidemic. This is what is truer than the real itself. It is *only in your dreams*, in your sleepwalker dreams, that breathing freely and safely is the first and most fundamental right – a right in tune with our natural functions. When knowledge is absorbed by entertainment and drowned by the rumors on the news, this for the enjoyment of *the people of terraces* with their casual tone paired with a sense of infinite uselessness of the so-called public democracy, then it appears that, like in Camus' *Plague*, only disaster could eventually generate something resembling a form of experience : the experience of the irruption of the real in the enchanted world of activities, of the exchanges informed by the logic of the spectacle, of the fetishism of commodity, of the obsolescence of the historical condition. In these conditions, knowledge must not shrink away and renounce any kind of cruelty, because it is doomed to face knowledge which is paired to cultural and communication industries constituting the sluggish pillow on which the sleepers are resting (when they do not stride the streets around terraces like zombies in *Romero's style*). The cruelty will consist among other things in asking what is actually the condition of autonomy (condition of "majorité" of the *citizens* of our democracies) constantly claimed by our contemporaries in the global North. The citizen condition should less be the condition of a holder of a reserve of rights and of prerogatives (to vote, to open one's big mouth every time one feels like doing it, to circulate freely...), and more the condition *fiercely* manifested in the capacity to overcome hardships which appear like trials. What I am talking about in the context of today's hardship, the outlines having been drawn since the very beginning of 2020, is the capacity to perceive both individually and collectively a great danger happening right now, to analyze its characteristics (its singularity), to prepare for it: in short, *to stand up to* the disastrous event.

But what we saw until the virus made their world fall apart is that our contemporaries have largely failed the test. Because they were confined in their immune assumptions, they adopted a head-in-the-sand politics until their last breath. They are completely attuned in that respect with an identically off-ground authority. The municipal elections are a much bigger event than the "Chinese virus", aren't they? This is the hemorrhage of the real happening in the head of those people. The ex-minister Buzyn is a paradigm: she is a high-level medical doctor, a immunology specialist, minister of Health, and she is deserting (by order of...Jupiter I suppose) to fight an electoral battle which was lost anyway. Later on, she comes back and gives herself the role of the Pythias, claiming that she understood it all from the start. It is a severe condition:

these people have a huge problem with reality. It is more than time to operate a diagnostic and to draw consequences out of it...

But I digress. What matters is that we cannot, in spite of everything, put all the responsibility on their shoulders, that is, on politicians and the government. The people, a species supposedly composed of autonomous citizens, have a great responsibility too in the current disaster. The epidemic, as a major trial, cruelly reveals that market democracies are not populated by *autonomous subjects in the Kantian fashion*. They do not stand up to the event irrupting in the present topicality. A dialectical image to illustrate my point: when the announcement of the imminent confinement was laid down, the Parisians who had the means to do so have courageously jumped in their cars to go to a safe place, their vacation homes in the countryside. What immediately came to my mind is the memorable testimony of Léon Werth on the military fiasco of June 1940. It is called “33 days” (*33 jours*). Read it. It will remind you of the immediate present...

PART II: At war ?

Cédric Cagnat : Could you tell us something about the geopolitical dimension of the epidemic? In particular, how it can be seen in the context of the new cold war between China and the United States of America?

Alain Brossat: On a new YouTube channel (*“Philosopher en temps d’épidémie”*), Jean-Luc Nancy starts his fine intervention about the epidemic with an objectionable expression: “the virus imported from China”. It is an unfortunate expression because it tends to reinvigorate the orientalist discourse of 19th century Europe. This is a colonial and expansionist discourse which tends to make of East Asia, and especially the “Far East/*Extrême-Orient*” (do we talk of the “*Extrême-Occident*” for the United States with the same shady connotations attached to the term “extreme” ?) the anomic and overpopulated center where all epidemics and plagues are ready to invade our more civilized spaces – the microbial, bacteriological, viral version of the “yellow peril”.

To use the term “imported” is especially disastrous. It essentializes the location of the virus, even when the “narrative” of the original point of departure (Wuhan’s market, with its snakes, bats and amateurs of suspicious broths) has already been put into question by specialists for a while now. It is a purely Eurocentric presumption to state that this epidemic *had to* come from China, rather from North Italy or elsewhere. The crucial matter of the epidemic is not the alleged original location (where is patient zero?), but the density and intensity of circulations, especially by air. It is what transforms airports into ideal “clusters” for dormant epidemics in certain parts of the Northern hemisphere including Europe, North America, but also China and East Asia. By reanimating the grand narrative of Asian *imported plagues*, Jean-Luc Nancy is dangerously meeting with those who try to cynically and despicably use the epidemic configuration to make it a cold war weapon, to make it a tool to revive and intensify it: Trump and his gang insisting on using the term “Chinese virus”, *Wall Street Journal* propagandists publishing editorials on China as “the sick man of Asia”, the excited Taiwanese and Hongkongese independentists constantly speaking of a virus “made in China” on social networks.

We could have imagined that after the global expansion of the pandemic the gravity of the situation would have mitigated or at least suspended the tensions that have kept rising between China and the USA for the last couple of years (economical war, sovereignty issue in South China Sea, protests in Hong Kong, etc). These tensions have a global dimension. It is not simply two oversized Nation-States in opposition, but two large areas in increasing direct competition not just over the Asia-Pacific region, but on a global scale. The continuity of American hegemony is notably at stake. So we could have thought that the rulers of the concerned powers, as well as the opinion makers in the West, in the global North, would face the facts: the epidemic is too severe on a global scale, so a kind of ceasefire, a suspension of hostilities on the new cold war front must be made, thus taking a break from all the anti-Chinese sentiment. But it is precisely the opposite which has happened. This tells us a lot about the political and moral qualities of these elites, about the depth of their visions of the present and the future. It is true that the Chinese State launched its battle against the virus with a delay, because of cumbersome bureaucratic procedures (but we still have to prove that this is specific to China). But the battle has been conducted with determination, with rigorous organization, using means which managed to contain the epidemic in just a few weeks. All this has been the object of biased comments, of constant criticism, and even of resounding denial by Western

governing, mediatic and academic elites. The following was an argument played in a loop in the West (in France, it was saturating the press, from the *Figaro* to *Lundimatin*, that is from right-wing to far-left papers): the battle against the epidemic was carried out using freedom-destroying means, with the use of disciplinary measures proper to a police State and to an autocratic power.

But what do we see now that the people of the State have finally been informed of the severity of the situation, despite an infinite delay and general mismanagement? What is enforced by the mere force of a presidential discourse? An emergency state. An emergency state which looks more like a *state of siege* when we consider it in terms of the restrictions of public liberties. The apparatus taking shape seems to be adapted to circumstances of war (there is a reason behind Macron's repetition of the term during his speech). So means used in times of war are set up, put in motion and imposed on the population. I'm not saying that the confinement and as a result the restrictions on freedom were not necessary in view of the delayed battle against the epidemic. What I mean is that, when you constantly make references to the quintessential difference between "democracy" and "police dictatorship", the governing people should not turn their back so easily on the spirit of the Constitution, the division of power and all these fine principles. Therefore, the setting up of a kind of state of siege should at least be worth a vote in the Parliament, even during an emergency. In a democracy, juridical forms matter. The spirit of the law, as the saying goes, matters. But in these circumstances, much like when army forces are sent to crisis zones, legal ways are bypassed. External wars are conducted like police operations. The enemy is portrayed as a criminal, an *outlaw*. So we are starting a "war" against the virus in the perfect style of the police State. And it is only the beginning. *Wait a minute, you haven't seen everything, yet...*

For us to reach this point, we didn't really need the marvelous demonstrations of disingenuousness during the past weeks, stigmatizing again and again the *authoritarian* style by which the epidemic has been "repressed" in China...

The funny thing, if we dare to say so, is that the few wise constitutionalists who have raised their eyebrows have done so only to contest the form in which... the second round of the municipal elections has been postponed to June. The president can put the whole country under house arrest through a simple televised discourse, in a pure Bonapartist fashion, and this doesn't

take them out of their sleep. And what is even more amusing is that it is only after the exemplary Bonapartist performance that we hear the news that the implementation of a kind of state of emergency is already on its way... The perfect state of exception is achieved here: *carelessness with forms and procedures, a state which stems from the speech of the leader*. So we must call this regime by its proper name: a dictatorship (from the verb *dictare*) in the original Roman sense of the term... But then, what is the difference with the way the epidemic has been handled in China by “dictator” Xi? We do not see, we’re getting lost...

The fact that the state of emergency was set up afterwards, during a furtive vote in the Parliament, is the icing on the cake. In a democracy, or an alleged democracy, it is not in this order that things are supposed to happen. When the Japanese government declared war on the USA *after* the attack on Pearl Harbor, everybody screamed treason in Western democracies. It is the same principle at work here. If the vote in Parliament is just a way to put a stamp on the Master’s sovereign decision., then it is only another joke.

C.C. : To stand up to the event, as you say, means to break out of our blindness and of our sleepwalker denials, of our “cocoons”, that is our immune bubbles, in order to *reorient* ourselves. First, I would like to know which “we” are you referring to. Obviously, Jupiter’s call for a national union (union which would have been recovered through this unprecedented situation) does not make us forget the essential political division which has become more and more visible during the last fourteen months of revolts and protests. There is no doubt that once the storm has passed the usual beneficiaries of hyper-capitalism will see to putting the neoliberal order back in its rightful place, as if nothing had happened. As for the mass of people who endure this order, the way you depict them does not allow us to hope for the necessary awakening, for something which could put the absorptive power of global capitalism into question. Meanwhile, the “*wishful thinking*” during these days of confinement has been working at full capacity: the inevitable Edgar Morin claims that “confinement could help us start a detoxification of our way of living” ; Lordon wonders in a rhetorical fashion if the coronavirus, “its *accusing* power, its scandalous potential, might be the unexpected agent of the monster’s fall”. The necessary bifurcation that you mentioned, this “radical turn”, do you think we can

already draw its outlines? And better yet, which exemplary figure, which “people” will support it?

A.B. : One of the few things that can still be credited to us, in France, is that almost everything can be very quickly and loudly *politicized*. Fights quickly appear when a problem emerges, especially in the case of a major crisis. The taste for speaking did not fade, especially among our elites who feel justified to express an opinion about everything. This pattern generates something like a “we”. It is a bit shapeless and shifting, but quite particular to our country. On the other hand, the rhetorical function of the “we” (necessary here, not decorative) is to refute the split between those who are supposed to know and those in need of being *pedagogically* explained how things are. This division is cultivated by the elites and those in power, and it is in that respect that we feel authorized to vent our anger (what I do in the first part of this text), without pretending to lecture anyone. The experts and governing rulers teach lessons to the people, and in the present case, we saw how successful it was. Where were they, these competent people, these natural pedagogues, on the 15th of February to speak clearly and prepare the appropriate response to the situation?

So I yell out. I’m angry. But I don’t see how I am lecturing anyone. I am *taking a stand* and I am doing my job. This is not “reacting” to the event, as it is now called in the “newspeak language” of social networks (“react to this article!”). This is to try to face the event (as I said earlier, to stand up to it) by the *work of thought* and by a certain style when it comes to articulating sentences. To try to put thoughts to work is always risky and perilous. You can miss the point, as Agamben did through his repeated rantings on *Covid19*. The only significance of such endeavour is when it manages to *carry someone on board*. The purpose is neither to indoctrinate nor to forcibly convince, but to *contaminate* (ahem...), that is to disseminate the *thought affect* in face of this disastrous event. Here we can largely build some “we”.

What needs to be shared is not only the right gestures and behaviors, the right discipline which is possible and salutary to adopt. *Thought must be shared too*. If we do not produce *our own thought* (“our” here is collective) in the face of this disaster, then we will remain subjected to the State – even though it has failed in face of this global event. Our task should be to find our own forms of responses, through resistances, struggles, organizations, rejecting then the

convenient protection of the State which has failed us. Therefore, it is not enough to think this breaking out only in terms of alternative conducts. There is a necessity to produce a thought proper to such crisis, a thought from *a people of the epidemic*. What I mean by that is a people of the living, against the promised death brought on by the virus. In much the same way, there has been a *people of the roundabouts* during the memorable moment of the Yellow Vests.

To think in this kind of configuration, and I mean to really think, should mean to pursue this thought to its end, to radically carry it *to its term*, which always implies as I said mobilizing an energy (a power) somehow characterized by a certain wickedness. In the French context for example, and this is a crucial point, we can think about the way governing people have abandoned (*exposed*) their population to the virus. To follow this through is to conceive that the neglect of populations, understood here as an individualized collective living body, is not related to any kind of absent-mindedness. This is something which *has to be organized*. And this organization which is produced over time is what, in the configuration of the epidemic, will take the form of *a pure and simple exposure of populations to death*.

When Foucault spoke of thanatopolitics (Achille Mbembé speaks of necropolitics) as the obscure and terrible reverse side of biopolitics, he uses the example of atomic power – the killing or the threat of killing hanging over the head of a group of people. Here, thanatopolitics is less obvious, more surreptitious, apparently less scandalous and brutal, but we should not be deceived: the gesture of exposure is the same, and we see it well enough today. Since the hospitals are overworked, wartime medicine is going to be practiced more and more. Facing the expansion of the contagion, medicine will consist first in doing a selection between those we can try to save (according to the estimated chance of survival) and those who are abandoned to death. And it is because *the conditions of their abandonment have been created* that they are left to die.

The “hospital crisis” and more generally of the public health system, the effect of which is the practice of such wartime medicine, is the result of an insidious erosive politics successively led by governments converted by neoliberal doctrines. The neglect of populations is not the unfortunate result of a series of oversights and failures, *it is a certain politics*. When a wide scale phenomenon like the current epidemic happens, it is possible to name it: thanatopolitics as the reverse side of biopolitics.

In the last decades, the way governing people (and more broadly the elites in general) have perceived their relation to their population has deeply changed. Traditional notions (since the end of the Second World War at least) of care, of the right to life, of protection, in short of everything which registers the betterment of the living in the space of human pastorate, have been erased for the benefit of the optimisation and generalization of the entrepreneurial and managerial model. With this change, the population tends to become an *attribute of the market*, that is of the current “impassable horizon” of all governmentality. Conversely, the horizon of the “make live” becomes unclear in the eyes of those who are governing. That’s the reason why they keep relentlessly organizing the collapse of the hospital, of the public support to the most vulnerable, to mental patients, to old people, etc. They do not only lose sight of the goal of maintaining and improving the populations health and well-being, they mostly look at all these things as something belonging to an “archaism” which needs to be eliminated. At the end of the day, the wreck occurring with the arrival of the epidemic is nothing but the magnifying mirror in which this policy of destruction, this governmental nihilism is displayed.

One only needs to look at it comparatively. If the epidemic has so far been contained in Taiwan (knock on wood), it is because, when the first signs appeared, mostly with the increasing risks emerging in Wuhan, public powers immediately took the necessary steps which notably included a rigorous control of the circulation of people, the systematization of tests, the *individual monitoring* of the contaminated or likely to be contaminated persons, and the setting up of a suitable quarantine system. At once, a state of *alert* (rather than emergency) was established with a qualified Health Minister in control, daily press conferences, a constant individualized follow-up of the sick people and their acquaintances. Each time a new case was detected, a hunt against the virus was launched among the persons they had been in contact with. Every effort has been made to dry the swamp of contagion. At the same time, public information campaigns and incentives to adopt the most appropriate behavior to contain the epidemic were carried out. These campaigns did not use the tone of a police State (threats and sanctions first), but rather of a State as a pilot in a storm. It is not a “sacred union” which is then called for. The lower profile but more efficient tone used by the State was one of a consensual rally against the virus. The approach has been successful with few deaths and until now a little more than a hundred persons infected (population of the island: 23 million, with a density of 652 persons per square meter, when it is 205 in Italy).

Yet the people who led this struggle against the epidemic are ultraliberal too, and on other issues (international politics) they can be quite dreadful. But it is from such small and large observations that we can realize that the epidemic is scrambling reference points and disrupting our navigation systems. The condition for such general apparatus to be deployed and enacted efficiently in Taiwan is that authorities actually *care about the integrity of their population* and feel accountable for it. In France, and by contrast, the way governing people have eluded the tasks required by the progression of the virus demonstrates that they do not have such kind of disposition, especially after the *Covid* had built its nest in the north of Italy and when it became clear that it was stateless. The result now is that people do not always have masks to protect themselves, that they cannot be tested if they have symptoms, that respiratory equipments are scarce. This kind of shortage needs to be organized too. There must be a name for this in criminal law...

Masks are arriving in massive numbers, the *Taipei Times* writes, as a generous gift from the Mainland. But while this aid is taking shape, the cold war is not weakening: the title of the article is “China showers EU with virus aid”, and this help is belittled in the article as “propaganda push”, “soft power”...

This is where things are now...

C.C. : What is exactly your position regarding the “we are at war” repeated on television by the “army chief” and which has induced so many comments? This expression, if I understood you well, is acceptable. But what kind of war are we talking about? Against who, or against what, is it waged?

A.B. : It seems to me that to focus on this point is futile. It is a non-issue. If the purpose is to say that the virus is neither a human figure nor a foreign sovereign, then we cannot wage against it what the European classic tradition calls a “war”. So in this manner, yes, the expression is improper. But what is the point of stating the obvious? Besides, it has been a long time now that this form of war has been replaced by what Carl Schmitt called “discriminatory wars”, that is wars in which the enemy is treated as a criminal, wars which are police operations. In this

regard, it is a bit more interesting. The war against the virus is a “total” war to exterminate it, as much as possible. And this war is no different than an operation of the “global police”. After all, when the army is patrolling the streets, when curfews multiply, when the population is put under house arrest, it is indeed with a state of war or of siege that we are dealing. Whenever war apparatuses and means are implemented, we can speak of a kind of war.

As to Macron’s declaration, the problem is rather that the sacred union of governing and governed people, of the State and the population as a kind of patriotic reunion, is in the present state of things in France nothing more than a mere flight of fancy. In China, it could work. It was the primordial condition of the true military-style campaign against the enemy from the inside, the virus. The population consented to it, whatever the Western propaganda says, from the *Figaro* to *Lundimatin*. In these kinds of configurations, it is always possible to find dissonant voices to feed the news, from the ultraliberal to the ultraleft side of the political spectrum. But in France, when we take into account the formation of the chasm separating the people and the State during these last couple of years (mediatic, economical, political elites on the one hand and the “folks” (“*les gens*”) on the other), such kind of reunion without debate cannot be enacted from the top. And it is not only because a part of the people at the top are or were skeptics of the epidemic. It is because there are still unsettled accounts. Knives haven’t been closed and put back in pockets. They cannot be fooled by the sacred union wiping the slate clean. In these conditions, the war on epidemics as decreed by Macron will inevitably transform itself into *a war against the population*, in the very tradition of the French State, republican or not, when it faces threats or disasters. The more the failure of our governing people will be obvious, the fact that they let the epidemic wave get over their heads becoming indisputable (even worse, let it over their population’s heads), and the more they will be committed to put the “blame” on their population. We are already observing it, and the medias are in collusion as never before: people do not respect instructions, people are irresponsible, people do nonsense, therefore fines must fall on them, curfew must be established, police must crack down more heavily, and soon will come the time of epidemic blunders. Some guy not having his outing note, tries to avoid being checked and the cops shoot, in self-defence and for the common good (maybe he was a virus carrier, this schmuck?).

The truth is that, by having left the situation to deteriorate beyond limits (we could do an anthology of 500 pages on the anti-masks literature which has flourished during the crucial

weeks, and which has not been countered by the governing people and their “experts” - maybe they did not have opinions on the issue), authorities are trying to mitigate the fall by setting up ultra-repressive measures which, by definition, remain inoperable in the current state of things, starting with the first: the confinement. Up to a certain point, moreover, (I mean besides the radical negligence), the implementation of inoperable measures is part of a calculation. It is the same “doctrine” that inspired the reduction of the speed limit to 80km/h on national roads or the pollution stickers on cars: and so, just like that, the car you drive to go to work no longer has the right to circulate... The impractical nature of these measures is what enables the waging of a permanent war of variable intensities against the population. It is a war of attrition, by bombing people with fines, prohibitions and threats, enabling repression and arbitrary police to flourish.

The longer the epidemic crisis lasts, the longer the war on the population will shroud the one waged against the virus.

But there is yet another aspect to this “war”. At first, what is striking when an epidemic appears is its “egalitarian” feature. The virus does not make any difference between the President and his driver. It does not care about races, genders, social conditions. This one has the particularity of not attacking children - while also mobilizing them as transmitters of the infection. But as the contagion spreads, settles down and wreaks havoc, inequalities come back to the forefront. The most vulnerable are the most exposed, those who do not have the means to shut themselves away, those who live in precarious shelters, those who are homeless, the migrants, the abandoned. I heard that in Lyon, a homeless person has been fined by a police patrol for violating the order of confinement. In this scene, in this brilliant action, I think we find a perfect miniature representation of how this war on epidemics turns into a war against the population. And one more thing: during this so-called “war”, class struggle is not only continuing, but is also taking one more step, a critical one. By declaring that the “vital” economical sectors must continue to run, that people employed in them must continue working against all odds, the executive branch and the congregation of bosses add to the structural forms of exploitation a *forced exposure* to contagion which is an absolute and discriminatory denial of the employees’ right to life. On this tipping point, we could come back to Agamben’s notion of naked life. People’s lives are hijacked, not in the public’s interest but to keep the economic machine running. In that sense, it is also a “war”: supermarket cashiers are sent to slaughter (of the

epidemic) like the infantry on the front line during an offensive attack in an all-out war. “Like in 1914”, we could say. This seizure operated on the living is by definition what absolutely exceeds any employment contract, no matter how unequal or rotten it is. Supermarket cashiers are not like the “liquidators” of Chernobyl. And yet, the reconditioning of the employee into naked life, the surreptitious and silent form of this war, is not less despicable. Here, the inequalities are not only statutory and of pay, they are vital: they thrive on the divide between those who have been called upon to dis-expose themselves (protecting themselves by confinement) and those who are requested, mobilized, to expose themselves (risking their lives) in the name of interests that are everything but those of the collective. Other supply channels can be imagined than the ones provided by mass retails, so that cashiers’ lives can be protected. And here by the way, we also notice the gendered character of the exposed naked life...