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Epidemic Philosophy

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By Warwick Anderson

Can a virus ever prompt good philosophy? Within weeks of its emergence, SARS-CoV-2 was galvanizing celebrity European philosophers and social theorists, most of them men in a vulnerable age demographic, to reflect publicly and plentifully on the meaning of the pandemic. These days, it seems, an epidemic demands urgent philosophical inquiry, and lots of it—personal protective equipment for the mind, perhaps. But like much rushed PPE, it can turn out shoddy and defective.

Past epidemics frequently forced philosophers into productive, quiet self-isolation; some sickened, and a few even died. But in modern times, the disease outbreak itself has become raw material for metaphysical speculation. Leaping barriers between the sciences and the humanities, epidemics increasingly have come to offer a rich vocabulary and an attractive conceptual framework for elevated discussion of human identity and sociality. Accordingly, some cultural studies scholars regarded AIDS as an ‘epidemic of signification’, generating all sorts of theoretical insight in the humanities.^[1] Sometimes the process has involved creative misreading of science. Thus, Jacques Derrida avidly took up notions of autoimmunity, having initially mistaken this as the cause of AIDS. ‘We feel ourselves authorized to speak of a sort of general logic of autoimmunization’, the philosopher declared in 1996. ‘It seems indispensable to us today for thinking the relations between faith and knowledge, religion and science, as well as the duplicity of sources in general.’^[2] Indeed, Derrida believed autoimmunity should substitute for ‘deconstruction’.^[3]

Almost from the start, Covid-19 has been providing grist to the philosophical mill. In late February 2020, distinguished Italian social theorist [Giorgio Agamben \(aged 77\) publicly condemned](#) the ‘frenetic, irrational and entirely unfounded emergency measures adopted against an alleged epidemic of coronavirus’. With the authority of Donald Trump, he argued that the Covid-19 epidemic was no worse than seasonal influenza, and social distancing was a deep state conspiracy. The supposed pandemic was an excuse for the government to impose a ‘state of exception’ on everyone, reducing lives to a purely biological condition, lacking any social, political, and emotional dimensions. By mid-March, Agamben was less sceptical about the gravity of the disease outbreak, but

even more concerned about what might become of human relations. He regretted that Italian society [‘no longer believes in anything but naked life’](#); other humans had been reduced to ‘potential contaminators to be avoided at all costs’. Last I heard, Agamben is self-isolating.

Other Continental philosophers have been quick to distance themselves from the Italian sage’s paranoia and pessimism. His compatriot [Roberto Esposito \(aged 69\) told followers](#) that Covid-19 was demonstrating again the contemporary validity of Michel Foucault’s notion of ‘biopolitics’, the necessary co-constitution of the biological and the political. But unlike Agamben, Esposito believed the pandemic was leading to the loosening of public authority rather than the tightening of a totalitarian grip. French philosopher [Jean-Luc Nancy \(aged 79\) chided his ‘friend’ Agamben for epidemic denial](#); he went on to suggest that pandemic responses were as likely to generate new social solidarities as to make us mere isolates of bare life. ‘The viral magnifying glass’, he mused enigmatically, ‘enlarges the characteristics of our contradictions and our limitations.’

Never to be outdone, the wild man of European philosophy, Slovenian [Slavoj Zizek \(aged 71\) pondered](#) what world order might emerge after the pandemic. It was causing him sleepless nights. He feared ‘barbarism with a human face—ruthless survivalist measures enforced with regret and even sympathy, but legitimized by expert opinions’. Yet he also hoped, like Nancy, that new forms of social connection might rise Phoenix-like from the ashes, maybe even a fresh version of communism. To no one’s surprise, his Covid-19-inspired book will be released soon.

For Bruno Latour (aged 72), in contrast to Esposito, the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the impoverished humanistic logic of biopolitics. ‘We are collectively playing’, [he wrote in *Le Monde* on March 25, 2020](#), ‘a caricatured form of the figure of *biopolitics* that seems to have come straight out of a Michel Foucault lecture.’ Clearly this was not meant as a compliment. Latour called for a more thoroughly ecological analysis of the outbreak, one less focussed on contagion. That way, he hoped, ‘the health crisis prepares, induces, incites us to prepare for climate change’.

‘It seems that the challenge of the epidemic is everywhere dissipating the intrinsic activity of Reason’, [observed philosopher Alain Badiou \(aged 83\) late in March 2020](#), ‘obliging subjects to return to those sad effects—mysticism, fabulation, prayer, prophecy and malediction—that were customary in the Middle Ages when plague swept the land.’ No doubt many contemporary philosophers in a time of plague have felt an urgent need to clarify our thinking, to offer a philosophical diagnosis and prognosis of our current predicament. But in the haste to manufacture mental personal protective equipment against the Coronascene, it is all too easy to make mistakes, to mass produce instead fatuity, guesswork,

and irrelevance. Perhaps those previous generations of less entitled, less celebrated, philosophers were prudent to sit out their epidemics, and to reflect in tranquillity. As the late, great Ludwig Wittgenstein said: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'^[4]

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^[1]Treichler P. AIDS, homophobia and biomedical discourse: An epidemic of signification. *Cultural Studies*1987;1:263-305.

^[2]Derrida J. Faith and knowledge: Two sources of 'religion' at the limits of reason alone [1996]. In *Religion*, edited by J Derrida and G Vattimo, 1-17. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

^[3]Anderson W, Mackay I. *Intolerant Bodies: A Short History of Autoimmunity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

^[4]Wittgenstein L. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922.

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