



The return of the plague-spreader

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Written in lockdown amid the pandemic, this post speculates about the political and epistemological implications of ‘middle-class’ reactions to the present crisis. It is also a cry of ethical and political protest—a refusal to see my neighbour as plague-spreader.

(This post is part of Allegra Lab’s ongoing [#corona](#) thread)

Coronavirus COVID-19 has gone viral and already changed the world, though it remains to be seen exactly how and for whom. Governments around the globe are introducing draconian measures, supposedly to curb the spread of the pandemic,



including border closures, curfews, lockdowns, mass quarantine, restrictions on international and domestic travel, bans of public assembly, and geo-tracking of suspected carriers. Amid pervasive fear, which they stoke, these measures receive popular support. [Medical research](#) into the virus is still only budding, but disease presentation and speed of transmission appear comparable to those of familiar flu strains, and, according to [WHO](#), '80% of infections are mild or asymptomatic.' On the other hand, these same sources attest that the mortality rate is high—about 3-4%, though that greatly depends on the availability of adequate treatment. Arguably, it is not the biology of the virus itself that is creating the crisis, but rather the inefficiency and unpreparedness of healthcare systems desolated by decades of systemic neglect in the name of neoliberal austerity. Be that as it may, media reports of rising death tolls have effectively helped induce panic and legitimize constraints on basic freedoms.

Many commentators have noted that the political response to the pandemic appears disproportionate. Other, arguably more dramatic emergencies do not trigger anything near such a massive reaction—like the ongoing cataclysm in Syria or the fate of tens of thousands of refugees trapped in these very weeks between Turkey and Greece, let alone the estimated [nine million annual hunger deaths](#) worldwide. For [Giorgio Agamben](#), the present situation is another proof of the 'increasing tendency to use the state of exception as the normal paradigm of government' (also Agamben 2005). Some find ways to be optimistic, like [Slavoj Žižek](#), who believes the virus is a 'Kill Bill-esque' mortal blow to capitalism. [Naomi Klein](#) warns that disasters create the conditions for politically repressive and socially regressive policies. In this context, it comes to mind that the ruling elites, especially in Europe and North America, are using the pandemic as an opportunity to push the boundaries of the normal and, possibly, test scenarios for the future—for instance, for when the climate catastrophe leads (as it undoubtedly will) to economic breakdown, anomie, and insurrection.

Here, however, I wish to consider a neglected aspect of the present conjuncture: the responses by the kind of people I can broadly consider my peers—members of the Euro-American urban 'middle class' (however imprecise these terms are).



Universities, businesses, and private individuals self-impose restrictions that go beyond those imposed by the governments, creating paranoid cycles of self-reproducing fear.

While of course measures to protect those most at risk of acute illness and death—primarily seniors and patients with underlying conditions—are necessary, excesses in ‘doing what’s right’ might do more harm than good.

Among the recent flood of images, one juxtaposition captured my attention. On the left, there was a line of people queuing to a store, maintaining some two meters’ distance between one person and the next. They looked a bit like commuters at a Finnish bus stop. The image on the right, in contrast, showed a crowd storming a supermarket. ‘Contrasting approaches to social distancing among Polish shoppers,’ the caption said. This was supposed to be ironic, but at the same time pedagogical, commentary on social behaviour in the days of coronavirus. The ‘Finnish bus stop’ style was ‘right’, people elbowing their way into a shop was ‘wrong.’ I grasped that instantly, without even thinking about it. But wait: ‘social distancing’? Isn’t that an oxymoron? ‘Social,’ for all I know, comes from the Latin root for binding, relating, coming closer. ‘Social distancing’ was naturalized as soon as it appeared —both term and practice— and few noted its oxymoronic nature or pernicious implications. So what happens to what Durkheim would call *la conscience collective* when the scare takes hold? How to think in times of fear and paranoia? How to maintain the capacity of critique when every nonconformist thought is haunted by its own darkest implications?

We can take some cues from Agamben and other contemporary Italian philosophers who have commented on coronavirus. In a recent post, [Agamben](#) offers a useful figure for thinking about the present: the *untore*, plague-spreader. During the sixteenth century, when Italian cities were terrorized by the plague, authorities encouraged citizens to report on individuals suspected of smearing the gates, doors, and corner-stones across the city with contagious ointments. The odious figure of the plague-spreader, Agamben suggests, is resurrected today to



haunt our cities. It is also transmogrified to assume an even more dreadful, more elusive shape.

The plague-spreader is replaced today by the anonymous virus-carrier who shows no outward symptoms of disease yet is able to infect, unaware, anyone who happens to come near.

The plague-spreader, for all his spectral nature, was possessed of individuality. They could be identified and neutralized. In contrast, today's carrier has no face. Thus, the philosopher points out, much as the terrorist laws across 'the West' earlier in this century considered every individual a potential terrorist, so today each of us—me, you, every stranger we meet, and everyone we love—becomes a suspected plague-spreader.

That power feeds on paranoia is not new, of course. Suffice it to think of the historic experience of terror in Stalin's USSR and other regimes—past and present—based on the spectre of ubiquitous informants (e.g., Bozzini 2015). But this time, it's the 'Western' liberal subject—for decades fed with feel-good fantasies of consumer capitalism and therefore unaccustomed to any of this—that is affected. At the heart of the paranoia lies the fear not only of the other but also the anxiety that the symptomless plague-spreader might be 'me.' In effect, we are witnessing the rise of a form of user-generated panopticism.

The hashtag #stayhome is one emblem of this. People post photos of themselves, smiling, under self-imposed lockdown and call upon others to follow suit. As Foucault repeatedly noted, there is a pleasure in performing whatever is considered, at a given historical juncture, the 'good' subject position. Hence, the fear of contagion blends with the self-congratulatory affect of 'acting responsibly' and 'protecting us all' by staying home. The hashtagging subject not only acts as his or her own guardian, as did the prisoners in Bentham's Panopticon (Foucault 1995), but does so with enthusiasm, expecting 'likes.'

Internalized fear is the new cool. This middle-class panic produces an auto-



immunological reaction on bourgeois lifestyles.

Anxious to preserve 'life as we know it,' citizens lock themselves down. Panicked hoarding puts a strain on capitalist distribution systems and leaves supermarket shelves desolate. It also leads to skyrocketing prices of food and hygiene products.

A very real danger is that the public orgy of 'responsibility' laced with paranoia sooner or later produces real victims. In many cities, the homeless are left without assistance. Pity they can't afford to #stayhome. Anecdotal evidence from conversations with physicians suggest that the concentration of effort on fighting coronavirus puts other patients at risk when they are refused treatment they would otherwise get. I know painfully well how the lockdowns also disrupt animal welfare and veterinary medicine.

Other consequences are more diffuse but no less significant—ethically, epistemologically, and politically. As Agamben remarks, the resurrection of the plague-spreader entails a degeneration of relations between people. 'Our neighbour is abolished,' he notes. We must not meet, we must not touch, we must maintain 'safe distance.' Even if the enthusiasm for displays of eager self-isolation passes in a week, as such social-media fads usually do, the habits of suspicion and separation for fear of contagion are likely to leave a durable mark on subjectivities. Agamben suggests this is what 'those who govern us' always wanted, but were unable fully to achieve. Panopticism 2.0 does not mean a realization of Orwellian dystopia, but it may mean coming one notch nearer to it. Protest becomes, if not entirely impossible, far less feasible (see, though, a hopeful [counterexample from Hong Kong](#)). Scared and separated, we follow the rules and do not question what we're told. We do not congregate to engage in critical reflection. Haunted by mutual suspicion, we are told to stay apart and we choose to stay apart. When universities shut down and social gatherings move online, human contact and exchange of ideas are immensely impoverished (*pace* [Sergio Benvenuto](#)). Communication is reduced to technical functions.



At the time of paranoia, self-imposed lockdown is therefore the greatest threat to critique.

Agamben's intuition here is broadly resonant with the thought of another political philosopher whose work is often juxtaposed to his: Roberto Esposito (even though, with regard specifically to the current 'war' on coronavirus, Esposito believes contra Agamben that it does [not pose a threat to democracy](#)). Esposito (2008) diagnoses what he calls the 'paradigm of immunization' in modern social and political life. For him, the liberal subject (the possessive individual) is 'an attempt to attain immunity from the contagion of the possibility of community' (Campbell 2006: 4-5). 'Community', according to Esposito, is premised on a partial renunciation of self. The term derives from *munus*, the gift one cannot keep but must pass on, give away. 'Immunity', then, is the individual's exemption from the obligation of reciprocity—the right, granted or usurped, to keep property to oneself. Immunopolitics—a form of power producing subjects whose primary disposition is self-protection from contagion—means nearing the dystopian (neo)liberal ideal of a world of atomized individuals, self-reliant and freed from mutual obligations, performing their functions of production and consumption.

As Olga Tokarczuk put it in her [Nobel Prize lecture](#), faced with the multiple interlocking crises of the present—ecological, political, and economic—we need 'tenderness.' Tenderness, in her sense, is far more than a vague sentimental feeling toward another. Rather, it is an ethical and epistemological practice that entails 'a way of looking that shows the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself.' But tenderness is extinguished in anaesthetic capsules. It is made unthinkable when the auto-immunological instinct to self-isolate takes over.

Cultivating tenderness becomes the essential political act in the age of fear.

Amid paranoia, critique may appear, as Benvenuto puts it, 'civically reprehensible.' Yet, as any crisis, the pandemic confronts us with ethical choices.



I can choose to indulge in the paranoid pleasures of hashtaggable ‘responsibility.’ Or, I may refuse to see my neighbour as the plague-spreader, and struggle instead to preserve a non-immunitary space for the spread of contagious ideas.

(This post is part of our ongoing #[corona](#) thread)

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