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Six political philosophies in search of a virus: Critical perspectives on the coronavirus pandemic

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Six political philosophies in search of a virus: Critical perspectives on the coronavirus pandemic

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Abstract

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) poses interesting questions for social and political thought. These include the nature and limits of the ethical responsibility of the state, personal liberty and collective interests, human dignity, and state surveillance. As many countries throughout the world declared states of emergency, some of the major questions in political philosophy become suddenly highly relevant. Foucault's writings on biopolitical securitization and Agamben's notion of the state of exception take on a new reality, as do the classical arguments of utilitarianism and libertarianism. In this paper, I discuss six main philosophical responses to the pandemic, including provocative interventions made by Agamben, Badiou, and Zizek, Latour on the governance of life and death as well as the Kantian perspective of Habermas on human dignity.

Keywords: Agamben, Badiou, Utilitarianism, Habermas, libertarianism, Latour, nudge theory, Zizek,

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Major pandemics have brought about epochal change. The Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century killed more than half of Europe's population; the diseases (mostly Smallpox) brought by the Spanish to the Americas in the sixteenth century killed as much as 90% of the indigenous population; Cholera defined the nineteenth century; the 1918 Flu killed more than 50 to 100 million people world-wide; AIDS claimed c 32 million lives. It remains to be seen what the long-term impact of the current Coronavirus will be. It is clear that the scale of the pandemic at the moment (April 2020) requires some serious reflection on how societies deal with major infectious diseases. The economic, societal, and epidemiological implications are as yet unclear, due not least to insufficient information on the scale of the pandemic and when a vaccine will be available for mass distribution on a global level. This is also not likely to be the last such pandemic. It clearly is part of a new wave of cross-species global viruses since the 2003 SARS virus and Swine Flu in 2009-10, which killed more than 100,000 people. For these reasons, the current situation, despite its uncertainty, is very likely not to be exceptional. Indeed, the current exceptionality may become the new normality. It may transpire to be case that the social and political consequences will be greater than the direct epidemiological impact in terms of infections and deaths.

Virologists and epidemiologists are now not surprisingly in much demand and command considerable political influence. Already, within the space of a few months, many countries have declared states of emergency and have in several cases effectively

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shut down the economy, or large sectors of economic activity. Social life has been transformed, even militarized, by new regimes of social distancing, face masks, self-isolation, alternative handshakes etc. In this paper I would like to consider the implications from the perspective of political philosophy and social theory of the kinds of political epistemologies that follow from the current crisis and the dark arts of epidemiological governance. As governments are now beholden to epidemiologists, when they are not at war against them as is the Trump presidency, it is evident that major political implications follow from their often controversial advice as well as from the selective interpretations that governments make of such advice.¹ It would be naive not to see in the emerging kinds of governance political epistemology at work, glimpses of a dystopia future, but also counter discourses.

In terms of moral and political philosophy, I see six main responses to the current pandemic. My aim in this paper is to look at the current pandemic through the lens of these philosophies. The pandemic has already attracted the attention of several noted philosophers, who in the footsteps of Michel Foucault's pioneering analysis of plagues and surveillance in *Discipline and Punish*, see a new authoritarian regime of governance taking shape (Foucault 1977: 195-200). Most prominently, Agamben has highlighted the spectre of biopolitical securitization. However, there are other perspectives that need to be brought into the picture. As I shall try to show, while the pandemic raises fundamental philosophical questions concerning the political and ethical responsibility of the state, the way we look at these questions is very much influenced by philosophical positions themselves, since in many cases philosophical ideas have shaped the politics of the pandemic.

¹ See Jan Zielonka on some of the issues that arise when medical advisors are given new powers <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/who-should-be-charge-doctors-or-politicians/>

1). The first is surely utilitarianism. The initial response of the UK government to the outbreak of the Coronavirus reflected classical utilitarianism, namely how to maximise the collective interest. In this case, which could be mistaken for Social Darwinism but is closer to utilitarianism, the collective interest is to increase immunity even if significant numbers of people die. This is the now notorious doctrine of 'herd immunity'.² Now, while this has been much ridiculed and government policy has shifted (once it became apparent that the scale of deaths – possibly more than 200,000 – would be greater than what the health system could accommodate), utilitarian political theory has persuasive appeal. It is not to be equated with material gain, as is often thought. Its basic premise is that the greatest good should always be sought after. This may demand that the ends justify the means, but it is generally understood, as in the writings of Peter Singer, that one's interest is not greater than the interest of the greatest number. However, as a practical philosophy, it needs to be able to command the required means to achieve the desired end. This is where things get complicated. Is the desired end the elimination of the disease (which is impossible in the absence of a vaccine) or the best possible outcome for the majority of people, i.e. natural immunity? Herd immunity, it became quickly clear, could be both a means and an end, but the reality is that it does not work as a means to the end, due to the extent of the death rate that would have to be tolerated.

Utilitarianism always leads to disadvantages for some. If these disadvantages are not great, it may be the only way to achieve a desirable societal goal. It is conceivably possible that utilitarianism may have been adopted in the UK if the health system could accommodate the required numbers of infected patients. It briefly became a policy in the Netherlands before it was abandoned.³ Lockdown, self-isolation and social distancing are other means, but the end is now generally agreed to be the

² See <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-herd-immunity-uk-boris-johnson/608065/>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-52135814>

suppression of the disease rather than delaying the emergence of a peak (Taylor 2020). However, this 'end' is less a normative end than a means for a purpose that remains unclear. Utilitarianism works well when the collective good is easily identifiable and can be achieved by a means that does not produce major disadvantages. It also requires, what is not available in many instances, complete knowledge of the relevant facts, within a limited time frame (see Wagner 2000). This boils down to mass testing, the absence of which means decisions have to be made without complete knowledge. The failure of utilitarianism in the UK in March 2020 is less a failure of utilitarian philosophy than a failure of politics and science.

2). The Kantian alternative. What then is the alternative to utilitarianism? An influential body of thought that goes back to Immanuel Kant would posit the centrality of human dignity instead of the elusive common good. In a recent interview, Jürgen Habermas, the leading political philosopher in the world today, asserted the Kantian principle that 'the efforts of the state to save every single human life must have absolute priority over a utilitarian offsetting of the undesirable economic costs'.⁴ On this view, the dignity of the individual person is the over-riding normative force in determining concrete policies, even if in this case it is very unclear what these might be.⁵ This is generally too the standpoint of the political philosophy of John Rawls, for whom utilitarianism neglects too much the individual and the requirement for equality between individuals. According to *The Theory of Justice*, a just society should be organised on the basis of principles of justice that derive from the interests of the individual.

4 <https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/juergen-habermas-coronavirus-krise-covid19-interview-13642491.html>

5 See also a newspaper piece by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, a philosopher in the Frankfurt School tradition, who makes a strong case for the Kantian argument based on human dignity, <https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/corona-krise-wuerde-menschen-unverrechenbar-13636694.html>

The Kantian standpoint opposes the utilitarian position in not appealing to the common interest, the maxim that the end justifies the means, since this might not be compatible with respect for the individual. To take an extreme scenario, the Kantian position would require the state to save the lives of those who may be too ill to be saved even if this meant resources may be unavailable to those who could be saved. But it must try, even if treatment to those less infirm and with greater chances of recovery should be declined on the grounds of what can only be a first in the queue solution. In other words, the ethical obligation of the state is to save all lives and not to distinguish which ones are of greater value. The utilitarian position is not reducible to instrumentalism, as is perhaps suggested by Habermas's remark, in that it is not a matter of the instrumental interest in keeping the economy going but of maximising the common interest.

There is then a clear difference between the utilitarian and the Kantian responses. Both indirectly are operative – if not explicitly – in current responses to the Coronavirus, either as policies or as critiques of policies. They are compelling arguments for either. Perhaps the advantage of the Kantian position is that it does not put a price on the life of a person or seek to give it a weighting in order to reach the higher goal of the common interest. On the other side, for the utilitarian saving some lives may not be enough, so why not try to save as many as possible.

In any case, I would argue that despite the rising death toll the appeal to human dignity on its own is not enough. There is also the question of human security. As declared in the UN General Assembly resolution 66/290, 'human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people'.⁶ The current approach to the pandemic, in so far as it is guided by human dignity, does not give sufficient recognition to the question of livelihoods and other problems that lockdown

⁶ <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/what-is-human-security/>

presents. Dignity without security is not a solution, as is evidenced by the shocking death rate in care homes, quite aside from other problems such as the neglect of patients with other serious illnesses, the rise in domestic abuse and mental health that lockdown has created, especially in countries such as Spain where it has been taken to an extreme level of confinement.

The conflict between these positions ultimately in practice will resolve around concrete policies on striking a balance between controlling the pandemic, managing the economic consequences and the social costs rather than the pursuit of abstract aspirations. Even if we disagree on the ends, we may agree on practical policies that could, if successfully applied, deliver satisfactory outcomes (for instance in slowing down the spread of the pandemic). But this is where another problem arises: the negative consequences arising from the means that many governments have decided on in order to achieve their aims. One set of policies revolves around social distancing and self-isolation and the other around lockdown. There is a third, which we can discount for now since the option no longer exists, namely population-wide testing, tracing and isolating, as embarked on by South Korea with considerable success. The problem with the first is that it is probably not adequate to curtail the spread of pandemic (except in cases where it is of limited threat – in which case the problem does not exist). The second, lockdown is more effective in suppressing the spread of the pandemic but presents problems of considerable concern to libertarians.

3) This, then, is a third philosophical position: libertarianism. The measures employed by many governments to combat the pandemic from a libertarian perspective encroach on personal freedom. For libertarians, there is nothing more sacred than the liberty of the individual. Enforced social distancing might be accommodated in this worldview but lockdown is a remedy worse than the disease. From even a moderate libertarian perspective, the reduction of the death rate does not justify extreme restrictions on freedom of the individual where these restrictions entail the removal of rights previously enjoyed. For extreme libertarians death is preferable to the loss of

freedom.⁷ Libertarians, not too surprisingly, feel uncomfortable with the current situation, which also forces them to face some of the unpalatable implications of their philosophy (which in practical terms is not much different than what radical right-wing groups in the US, including Trump, want, namely the cessation of all kinds of confinement). Here we find an interesting contradiction between the champions of liberty who are also the opponents of social justice.

Libertarians may be selfish and have nothing to contribute to collective solutions, but nonetheless they have a point in drawing attention to the problem of liberty and where the limits of state power should be drawn. Since the outbreak of the Coronavirus in China in December 2019, states throughout the world have imposed far-reaching curbs on the liberty of individuals. States of emergency have been declared in many leading democracies ostensibly to protect the elderly, despite creating a range of other problems. What at first seemed possible only in a dictatorship, has now become normalised in constitutional democracies everywhere. Several countries have imposed – Spain and Italy for example – severe lockdowns that require citizens to remain indoors for a period in excess of a month. In Spain children were locked indoors for six weeks. What is the aim here – fear of the virus or fear of the rise of the extreme right? In Spain, the extreme measures taken with the mobilization of the Civil Guard are in part a pre-emptive strike against the extreme right, so that the government cannot be criticised for standing idly by as large numbers of the elderly die. Ali Weiwei’s macabre depiction of Wuhan in March 2020 a month or so later became easily applied to many western cities.⁸ Weiwei sees the pandemic as a symptom of a deeper illness that is social and political. As far as the protection of the elderly is concerned,

7 For a discussion of some of these issues, see Alison Hills’ article <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/10/sunbathing-park-deep-moral-questions-philosophers-coronavirus-individual>.

See also <https://theweek.com/articles/901738/what-libertarians-response-coronavirus>

8 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/08/china-ill-not-only-coronavirus-communist-party-control>

there is also some selectivity in that care homes, which have witnessed the worst of the viral onslaught, have been relatively neglected if not abandoned sites of death in many countries.

The political and moral philosophies discussed in the foregoing, with their typical concern with the individual, do not seem adequate to understand the deeper social reality and political significance of the current crisis, which is difficult to see only in terms of liberty, the common good or human dignity. The Coronavirus is clearly not just one thing but takes many forms when it comes to politics and as a consequence it can serve different purposes. Hence the need for more critical approaches than the lament for lost liberty or the cry of human dignity.

4) The Allure of Foucault: Agamben on Biopolitical Securitization and States of Exception. From the perspective of political philosophy, current developments point in the direction of a new order of governance close to what the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, calls a permanent state of exception (Agamben 2005). The fourth response is thus the Foucauldian one of the surveillance of space that arose with modernity. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault introduced his famous concept of panopticism with a discussion of disciplinary mechanisms that were created in the late seventeenth century to control leprosy: 'If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects' (Foucault 1977: 198). The quarantine of the city by means of a 'lock up' marked the emergence of the disciplined society around 'a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal'.

The Foucauldian theme of biopolitical securitization⁹ has been taken up by Agamben in the context of state of emergency and has led to an interesting debate among Italian

⁹ See Phillip Sarasin's assessment relevance of Foucault's writings on biopolitics
<https://www.fsw.uzh.ch/foucaultblog/essays/254/understanding-corona-with-foucault>

and French philosophers.¹⁰ For Agamben, the use of a state of exception as a normal paradigm for government is deeply worrying. It leads to the militarization of the polity and indefinite extension of the state of exception. It also creates a generalised condition of fear and anxiety among individuals that 'translates into an authentic need for situations of collective panic for which the epidemic provides once again the ideal pretext. Therefore, in a perverse vicious circle, the limitations of freedom imposed by governments are accepted in the name of a desire for safety that was created by the same governments that are now intervening to satisfy it.'

Responses to Agamben, whose contribution in some ways is less than serious, have been quick to point out that this interpretation amounts to conspiracy theory. Is the state really using the pandemic to create a permanent state of exception? Probably not; the Italian state seems incapable of even basic governance, let alone a sanitary dictatorship. Europe's most extreme lockdown in Spain has been implemented by a socialist government. It is true too that many governments have resisted the opportunity to resort to extreme measures of biopolitical securitization that might follow from Foucault and Agamben. There is also the basic conflict between the state power and capitalism, since both are not compatible. However, there are clear trends that point to the rapid expansion of militarized forms of surveillance that cannot be fully accounted for as necessary measures to control the pandemic. While Agamben may have exaggerated the political instrumentalisation of the pandemic – as a case of an opportunity too good to lose – the important point he makes is that the state of exception is now becoming the new normal art of governance. In Hungary, Orban rules by decree¹¹; the UK government has been given exceptional powers; in the USA Trump claims to have 'total control'. The constant renewal of states of emergency with enforced lockdowns – not to be mistaken for requirements of social distancing – is

10 See the debate <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>

11 <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/crown-king-how-did-viktor-orban-turn-covid-19-political-weapon>

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unprecedented in democracies (even if according to Foucault such modes of discipline come with modernity). It is difficult to account for such decrees in terms of utilitarianism or in terms of the Kantian concern with human dignity. It is true that confinement imposed by a democratic order is different from that of a dictatorship, but democracies can be capable of authoritarianism, as examples such as Brexit demonstrate. The implications of perpetual lockdown also go beyond the concerns of libertarians with personal liberty, for they go to the core of democracy (libertarians are not normally concerned about democracy, only individual liberty). Democracy however understood is based on the centrality of the public and deliberation and cannot fare well in pandemic situations with emergency government the order of the day.

Until recently, the state has been widely seen as impotent in the face of globalization. The pandemic underscores this, but we have seen that in fact the state now holds near total control over populations thanks to the virus. Unlike Muslims, this is an Other than is within everyone. It thus presents the perfect opportunity for a new kind of securitization, bio-security. As Agamben says in a clarification to his original intervention: 'A society that lives in a permanent state of emergency cannot be a free one. We effectively live in a society that has sacrificed freedom to so-called "security reasons" and as a consequence has condemned itself to living in a permanent state of fear and insecurity.' This condition will outlive the state of emergency. Drawing on his notion of bare life,¹² he writes: 'It is evident that Italians are prepared to sacrifice practically everything – normal living conditions, social relations, work, even friendships and religious or political beliefs – to avoid the danger of falling ill. The naked life, and the fear of losing it, is not something that brings men and women together, but something that blinds and separates them'.

In western societies, it may be the case that the virus is the new Other. But it is more complicated. In India, the Coronavirus is explicitly being used to further communal

¹² See Agamben (1998).

tensions. The state is more aggressively testing Muslims for the virus (on the pretext of a large Muslim gathering which occurred pre-Lockdown), but not Hindus (despite a preponderance of large Hindu-gatherings *after* lockdown). This furthers racialised narratives of the Other as ‘unclean’. So at a biological level, the virus is within everyone, sociologically this is not the case in many societies – distribution, surveillance and narratives circulate and attach to certain communities far more than others. In India, for many people, this is understood as a further development of the underlying ‘Muslim problem’ and has even been peddled as being a ‘Muslim conspiracy’.¹³

I do believe Agamben has an important critical point to make, even if he has no concrete proposal to make on what an appropriate response to the pandemic should be. There is certainly an excess of control and as always the less well-off fare worse. Governments are now employing digital programmes for mobile data tracking, apps to record personal contacts, CCTV networks equipped with facial recognition, the proposal of the UK government to use “back-end” access into Bluetooth connections to enable contact tracing. These new technologies are creating lucrative new markets for the extraction, sale and analysis of private data.¹⁴ The state of emergencies will come to an end, we can assume, but these technologies will continue and state surveillance will also be given a tremendous boost by the current crisis. But what is the alternative? Hardly the proposal of Jair Bolsonaro, the extreme-right wing President of Brazil, to do nothing and see the pandemic as a hoax, which is effectively

13 My thanks to Neal Harris and Priya Raghavan for this perspective

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/coronavirus-outbreak-india-blamed-muslims-200418143252362.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-targeting-muslims-spread-in-india>

14 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/14/growth-in-surveillance-may-be-hard-to-scale-back-after-coronavirus-pandemic-experts-say>

what Agamben has said in what was perhaps an infelicitous formulation in calling the pandemic 'an invention'.

In addition to surveillance administered by the state, there is also the societal implications of social distancing. In another contribution, Agamben refers to 'social distancing' as a pointing to a new kind of social order: 'the current health emergency can be considered as the laboratory in which the new political and social devices that await humanity are prepared'.¹⁵ In sum, Agamben draws attention to a range of issues that the current crisis raises for democracy. Many of these go back to Foucault's notion of the self as constructed in relations of power, such as those that are now evidenced in the new technologies of subjectification, namely social distancing, face-masks and self-isolation. The desire for safety creates even greater dangers that are internalised as freedom and perpetuated by fear. While Agamben underplays the need to find solutions to the pandemic, he offers a compelling account of the implications for democracy and social life of some of the measures being taken to deal with the pandemic. Agamben's account is perhaps more compelling when applied to non-Western contexts; for example, in Nigeria more people have been killed by police violence to ensure lockdown than have been killed by the Coronavirus (on latest figures).¹⁶ There is also the question of whether the home is really a sanctuary of safety from the contagion of the public realm. One thinks here of how relative these distinctions are in many cases, for example the favela in Brazilian cities where the home is not a place of refuge due to dense populations or the situation approaching the decimation of indigenous people in the Amazon regions.

Reading Agamben's reflections, one is struck by the realization that what we are witnessing is a lethal anti-liberal pathogen eating through the fabric of social life and of democracy. The social bond is itself the danger. Habermas's Kantian appeal to human dignity offers little respite, not least as it is fully compatible with a state of

¹⁵ In Spanish: <https://ficciondelarazon.org/tag/coronavirus/>

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-52317196>

exception if that is what is required to protect life itself. Is there an alternative position to what could be taken to be 'right-wing postmodernism', to use a term to describe extreme scepticism of any political programme or normative position on the grounds that it always represents someone's interest?¹⁷

To answer this question it seems to me to be essential to bring in the perspective of social agency. Agamben inherited Foucault's weakness in reducing social agency to domination. Populations under lockdown conditions may be the image of what Foucault initially characterised as the disciplined condition of modernity. But social actors are also active in contesting domination and seeking to subvert control. This perspective is entirely missing in Agamben's account. Could the Coronavirus open up an alternative social order? It is not only the Alt-Right who are mobilising against state surveillance. Foucault – in later writings – after all held that power entails resistance.

5) Post-Capitalism and Radical Politics: Slavoj Žižek (2020), the prominent Slovenian Lacanian philosopher, who perhaps reflects a left-wing postmodernism, offers a different and more radical response to Agamben's emphasis on biopolitical subjection. For him, in a recent book, *Pandemic! Covid-19 shakes the world* the choice, after the pandemic, is 'barbarism or some form of reinvented communism'.¹⁸ Žižek sees an opportunity for the reinvention of communism. The pandemic reveals the virus of capitalism. The current crisis is a call to free ourselves from the tyranny of the market. Governments are suddenly engaging in what looks like a major attack on capitalism with state sponsored employment for millions of people and a world-wide suspension of consumerism. In the UK, the hard right-wing government of Johnson that brought

17 See <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/the-coronavirus-and-right-wing-postmodernism/>

18 See also debate with contributions by Judith Butler and Byund-Chul Han in Spanish <https://www.lahaine.org/mundo.php/la-filosofia-y-el-coronavirus>

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us Brexit had to commit, however much reluctantly, to state spending on a scale unimaginable by any left-wing government. Neoliberalism is dead as a political project, even if it lives on in other forms (e.g. Brexit). Capitalism seems to be on hold for now. But for how long? And who will benefit in the end?

While there is much that Žižek agrees on with Agamben, his conclusions are different. The desire for survival, he claims, will create new bonds of solidarity. However, it is very unclear how this will happen. As the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han has commented, the nature of a virus is to separate people. This, after all, is what social distancing and self-isolation is supposed to do. It is difficult to see in these developments signs of an alternative political order based on solidarity. It is true that in the past major pandemics did lead to progressive change. The 1918 Flu led to the creation of national health care systems, for instance (Spinney 2017). The Black Death, which reduced the supply of labour, led to improved conditions for workers, at least in Europe. It is therefore not impossible that out of the current crisis will come some improvements in public policy and a more humanised kind of capitalism. However, it is unlikely that something like communism will emerge, even if some kinds of predatory capitalism will be much reduced (Airbnb, Deliveroo for example). Others, such as Amazon, will survive and prosper. This is also the conclusion of the French philosopher Alain Badiou, who is generally identified as a Maoist, in an inspiring essay 'On the Epidemic Condition'.¹⁹ Nonetheless, self-isolation offers a moment for reflection on the future: 'As for those of us who desire a real change in the political conditions of this country, we must take advantage of this epidemic interlude, and even of the – entirely necessary – isolation, to work on new figures of politics, on the project of new political sites, and on the trans-national progress of a third stage of communism after the brilliant one of its invention and the – interesting but ultimately defeated – stage of its statist experimentation'.

¹⁹ See his blog <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4608-on-the-epidemic-situation>

A possibly more pertinent interpretation on the post-capitalist position, is Bruno Latour's suggest that the health crisis may be an early sign of a new age of Anthropocene politics: the current biopolitical securitization that we are witnessing is a 'dress rehearsal' for climate change.²⁰ It cannot be a coincidence that the health crisis is occurring at the same time as the ecological crisis has taken on a new urgency. As he also argued in another recent essay²¹, 'the time to fight is now so that the economic recovery, once the crisis is over, does not bring back the same old climate regime that we have been trying, quite vainly, to fight against so far.' It is true that the health crisis has brought out the best in people – solidarity, recognition of the importance of health care –, but it has also brought out the worst: an ultra Brexit by stealth; the Brazilian government's disguising the Coronavirus as a cover-up for the destruction of the Amazon; quarantine shaming; the stigmatism and xenophobia of social groups. .

6) Nudge-Theory. Badiou, and in a stronger form, Žižek, represent the left-wing response to the current crisis. There is perhaps another position, which is less a political philosophy than a very recent development in behavioural science, namely nudge theory (Sunstein and Thaler 2008). The UK was briefly the laboratory for this new social philosophy, in part following on from the failure of what I characterised as the utilitarian philosophy of herd immunity, which it also supported with the view that fatigue can quickly set in from a too early implementation of lockdown policies. According to this new and influential school of thought, people do not act rationally (Brexit is ample proof of this). What we need to understand is the nature of irrationality in order that it can be controlled.²² Now, such methods of control are not authoritarian

20 <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/>

21 In Opinion, 30 March, 2020

22 <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-how-the-uk-government-is-using-behavioural-science-134097>

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as such (as in lockdown policies) but ‘nudges’ and can be done with the support of people who believe that they are making their own choices without the heavy hand of the state forcing them. Nudge theory is in fact quite close to Foucault’s later notion of discipline as governmentality, which requires liberty for its effectiveness. The interesting thing is that in the case of the governance of the pandemic it was to be deemed have not worked, since it did not bring about major changes to behaviour within the time frame required, and was abandoned in favour of more stringent and fast-acting measures that do not rely on voluntary actions (such as voluntary self-isolation, handwashing etc). However, it does remain as an additional technology of governance and we are likely to hear more of it, especially when states of emergency are slowly lifted and ‘normal life’ returns. But as with all approaches that focus on only human behaviour, there is a total neglect of the structural context in which behaviour occurs.

All six political philosophies, which I have all too briefly characterised in the foregoing, have something to offer on the current situation. While Žižek sees in the present predicament, the seeds of radical change, Agamben draws attention to declarations of emergency as anti-democratic attempts to render populations docile and obedient. These theorists bring important critical perspectives to bear on the older political philosophies that are reflected in utilitarianism, Kantianism, and libertarianism. Clearly, governments need to control the spread of the virus, but more reflection is needed on the degree of militarization that is required to do this successfully and what is really acceptable to a democracy. Simple appeals to liberty are not enough for an alternative, not least as for now lockdowns etc have considerable public support (although there are signs, as the peak has now passed, of greater questioning). Perhaps therefore a more serious question is less liberty – which is almost always a question of individual liberty – than democracy. In any case, capitalism, as Foucault was well aware needs liberty, and cannot function in totally disciplined societies.

If there is a single conclusion to be drawn from these philosophies, it is that the Coronavirus is more than a pathogen that threatens the lives of many people, but

democracy is also in danger from the recent experiments with emergency government²³. These may not result in a permanent state of exception or the suspension of democracy – letting aside the Anthropocene scenario of extreme climate change requiring long-term states of exception – and the solution is not a simple restoration of individual liberty. Perhaps then more significant in the long-term will be new technologies of emergency governance that are now taking shape in large-scale societal experimentation with the technocratic management of populations in rapidly changing circumstances. Governments have acquired considerable technocratic power over their populations, which have been disciplined in the late Foucauldian sense of the term to desire safety over liberty.

23 For some accounts, see Fassin and Pandolfi (2003); Honnig (2009); White (2020).

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