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“Spirit is a Virus”: A Review of Pan(dem)ic!

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It is too easy not to take this book seriously. We are dissuaded from taking anything seriously by the absurdity of life during a global pandemic, and everything about the reception of the book encourages us to be disinterested. In the grand taxonomy of Žižek’s works, this text falls firmly in the camp of his “cultural critique”, along with *A Left that Dares to Speak its Name*, or *Against the Double Blackmail*, rather than with his more rigorous philosophical texts (*Less than Nothing* being the most obvious example). It is perhaps thought provoking, but not a very serious work, so we are led to believe. Put simply, in the chaos of our day-to-day lives it is quite hard to take a book seriously if seems to amount to a collection of column articles, and the talk surrounding the book gives this exact impression. And that’s not even the end of it! Žižek’s call for a “new form of communism” was ridiculed by many, from Facebook commenters and Guardian columnists to Alain Badiou and Byung-Chul Han (Žižek, 2020: 97). As readers approaching the book, we have too many opinions surrounding us to enjoy it for what it is, and what it does. We can too easily dismiss it for one of a host of reasons ranging from what we think it will say, to its position in Žižek’s bibliography. It is precisely because of these difficulties that I feel that a

different kind of review of the book is needed. Not simply to counter act the prevalent opinion of the book, but rather to explicate its central philosophical point, and thus to show its worth. It is my claim that the book is not just a call for this “new form of communism”, but actually entails within it a call for a philosophical project that is both revolutionary and necessary. In this regard, the most important line for understanding the book is Žižek’s claim that

We will have to change our entire stance to life, to our existence as living beings among other forms of life. In other words, if we understand “philosophy” as the name for our basic orientation in life, we will have to experience a *true philosophical revolution*. (Žižek, 2020: 78; my emphasis)

The book’s true value lies in its demand for this “true philosophical revolution”, and in its indication of what such a revolution might look like. Žižek’s advocacy for a supposedly ridiculed form of communism is to be understood strictly in the context of his philosophical revolution. It is my main goal here to describe Žižek’s revolution and so to defend the value of the book.

The philosophical project indicated in the book has the most properly Hegelian structure — that of a speculative judgement, a unity of the lowest with the highest. A speculative judgement, and hence also this book, has two parts which are foreign to one another, but are brought to bear on one another. In the book, Žižek takes two simultaneous paths which are finally brought together. Firstly, as the book begins, we find Žižek adopting Jesus’ dictum “touch me not”, together with one of Hegel’s early fragments on love, to argue that love and solidarity are to be found in absence. This is a call for solidarity in the age of isolation and social distancing. Secondly, Žižek identifies the need to accept the role of COVID-19 in our lives, as an undead, purely reproductive force. Finally, they are brought together in a speculative judgement: “Spirit is a virus”. Identifying the lowest form of life, that of almost not life — a virus — with the highest of form of life — Spirit. The solidarity of Jesus and Hegel is brought together with the undead force that is beyond and against solidarity.

In the manner of a speculative judgement, I will show how we move from the highest to the lowest, and how an *absolute recoil* leads us from the lowest back to the highest.

The Highest is the Lowest

The book begins with the formula “noli me tangere”, which Žižek renders (along with some translators of the new testament) “touch me not”. Jesus calls Mary Magdalene to have solidarity not with him, but rather with his brethren. In not touching him, she is at the highest point of solidarity with him: “do not touch me, touch and deal with other people in the spirit of love” (Žižek, 2020: 1). This is, for Žižek, our contemporary condition. We ought not to see social distancing and quarantines as something making solidarity and fraternity impossible, but rather the very life-blood of solidarity. Žižek then turns to Hegel, specifically, to a short fragment from his early writings on love. Hegel writes:

The beloved is not opposed to us, he is one with our own being; we see us only in him, but then again he is not a we anymore — a riddle, a miracle [ein Wunder], one that we cannot grasp. (Žižek, 2020: 2)

Thus positioning the object of love as the intangible. Something which remain untouchable despite its role in our own being. Together, these form a clear picture of how solidarity and love are to be conceptualised in their most human moment: as the absence of touch, as intangible, as a lack in our direct experience.

As Žižek claims, this is a most pertinent notion for our time. We cannot touch one another and cannot be grasped. Still, we must find solidarity in our collective condition. In urging for global cooperation, Žižek announces that “we are all in the same boat” (Žižek, 2020: 42). It is now more than ever that we need solidarity, and to love one another. However, for Žižek, we are now precisely in the moment to achieve solidarity, as it is now more than ever that we are intangible to one another. Put differently, the highest — human community, solidarity and love — is understood in the absence of touch, in intangibility, and essentially in a loneliness that besets us. The closeness of loneliness and solidarity is further emphasised in chapter 10. Pointing out the “deeply Christian idea”, that “when I feel alone, abandoned by God, at that point I am like Christ on the cross, in full solidarity with him” (Žižek, 2020: 98).

It is important to continue to pursue this point, and not simply to let it be. When is it that we are most alone? Why are we so separated from our lives and our comrades? Not because of the highest evil, but rather by a “life at its most stupid level of repetition and

multiplication” (Žižek, 2020: 78-9). We are kept alone because of the lowest form of life, by “*der nie aufhebbare Rest*” (Žižek, 2020: 79). We can discover the highest form of humanity, the Christian solidarity with the intangible lover, only through an undead, stupid and repetitious force, only by suffering the affliction of the lowest form of life. The highest is only made possible through the lowest.

Indeed, we may go further still. Is this lowest form of life not also embodied in the drive? Is our libido not the same stupid, repetitious, and untameable force? The drive plays the same role as I sketched above:

...it is the operator of the inhuman, the operator of dehumanisation or de-antropomorphisation... it is precisely the sexual as the operator of the inhuman that opens the path of the universal (Zupančič, 2008: p. 12).

The drive, just like the virus, is the inhumanity giving ground to our humanity, the lowest making the highest possible. This is quite easy to see in the mundane forms of shame one might have about one's sexual desires. We might feel shame for desiring this or that fetishistic activity, and in that, we feel that we are alone, that we are plagued by horrible desires which distance us from our fellow men. Is it not exactly at this point that we are at our most universal? Suffering for our individual desires, alone, in the way that we all suffer for our individual desires.

Put generally, we may say that as far as the highest universality of humanity can be achieved, it can be achieved through the lowest form of being, a stupid and repetitious form, that confines us to individuality.

The Lowest is the Highest

The speculative judgement “Spirit is a virus” requires two sides. Not only must the lowest be a predicate of the highest, but the highest must be a predicate of the lowest. Both must have their turn as subject. We *recoil* from notion that Spirit is predicated by the virus. After all, if we cannot think the highest solidarity of Spirit without virality, is it not the case that the virus is the subject? Would it not be better to posit “Virus is Spirit”? This possibility is explicitly considered by Žižek, exactly when postulating that “Spirit is a virus”. Žižek posits that “[h]uman spirit is a kind of virus that parasitizes on the human animal, exploits it for its own self-reproduction, and sometimes threatens to destroy it” (Žižek,

2020: 79). Immediately then endorsing Tolstoy's theory of art and man as an affective infection. In this framework, it is not that the lowest is a property of the highest, that the virus is a feature of our solidarity, something that aids it. Instead, our solidarity, our human community is seen as a feature of a virus. Communion itself is a self-reproducing parasite that uses human animals as hosts.

For Žižek this isn't a matter of pure intellectual fancy, but something necessary to living through the Corona crisis. Here he invokes Kübler-Ross' schema of the five stages of grief. To work-through grief, according to Kübler-Ross, we go through five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. Žižek observes that many of our cultural traumas go through exactly these stages. From the ecological catastrophe, to the threat of digital control. We can also clearly discern these stages in the case of COVID-19. Initially we hear that "nothing serious is going on, some irresponsible people are just spreading panic" (denial), then blaming the Chinese or the state (anger), accepting the seriousness of it but still underplaying it, saying that "its less serious than SARS" (bargaining), falling into nihilistic depression: "we are all doomed". And finally, accepting the crisis. But how can one accept such a crisis? What does it mean to accept a global pandemic? For Žižek this is expressed precisely in phrase "Spirit is a virus". To accept the virus we accept the undead and repetitive dimension of Spirit in general. This is a crucial undercurrent of the text. The notion of acceptance has so far been attributed to solidarity, to accepting our position as isolated and non-touching, and realising the manner in which this makes us beloved universals in the tradition of Hegel and Christ. Here, however, we find a new approach. We are not accepting our condition in isolation as universal, but rather a part of our lives that is constitutive of our condition: the "sub-layer of life, the undead, stupidly repetitive", the "pre-sexual life of viruses" (Žižek, 2020: 52).

While Žižek takes Tolstoy as the exemplar of this view, is Burroughs not its true champion? In his *Electronic Revolution*, he writes:

My basis theory is that the written word was literally a virus that made spoken word possible. The word has not been recognised as a virus because it has achieved a state of stable symbiosis with the host. (Burroughs, 1986)

Burroughs posits that speaking, and thus thinking communally is the result of a literal virus that infected our forefathers. We are merely infected monkeys. But this is not only

true of Burroughs' "word virus", but of viruses in general. In using an animal as vehicle for their self-reproduction, they propagate something common among animals. They prey on the connections made between animals — on their notions of universality. It is precisely this that we feel as the great crisis of COVID-19, that we lose our humanity in losing our ability to safely touch each other, to infect one another. Our community has become dangerous. This is why the point Žižek's book is so crucial: the virus produces our universal solidarity not in infecting us, but rather by confining us to solidarity — to the place of Christ — in our most lonesome moments. Our loneliest times are the times when we are most conscious of our universal humanity. In avoiding a virus we recognise the necessity of virality to human life, precisely because it is so difficult to avoid the virus. This is the paradox of our situation: "the more our world is connected, the more a local disaster can trigger global fear and eventually a catastrophe" (Žižek, 2020: 55). The more connected we are, the more dangerous we are to each other. Only in recognising that our tangibility is a danger to one another can we reach a true solidarity in mutual intangibility.

It seems to me that the elaboration of "Spirit is a virus", that lies dormant in this book, is an indication of the "philosophical revolution" that Žižek calls for (as opposed to the thirst for a "return to normal"). We, as readers of this book, are invited to a new philosophical world, in which Spirit is not the totality of humanity, and Hegel is not the great figure of humanist thinking, but rather in which Spirit is a viral infection that overtakes and besets our animality, and in which Hegel is the epidemiologist — the thinker of the infectious nature of humanity. In this world we can no longer maintain our category of humanity, as we would now see ourselves as infections among infections. In a line similar to that of Haraway, we would see ourselves as always-already inhuman, and even more importantly, as always-already infected. It is this reading of Hegel which places Freud as Hegel's greatest devotee. Freud is nothing if not *the* theorist of the viral foundation of humanity — the libido. From the virus, another speculative judgement emerges: "Spirit is a drive".

"A New Boost of Life to Communism"

I do not mean to pretend that the more obvious parts of this book do not exist. It is certainly more occupied with arguing for the need of communism in the form of global cooperation, then it is concerned with arguing for a revolutionary reading of Hegel. In fact, *Less than Nothing* and *Absolute Recoil* are dedicated to a revolutionary reading of Hegel that is quite different from the one outlined above. My claim here is that this book is much

more philosophically charged than we (the readers) have given it credit. And indeed, that the book harbours a philosophical revolution. It may not be the revolutionary reading of Hegel that Žižek has put forth in the past couple of years, but it is a fascinating philosophical response to our contemporary condition in the Corona crisis.

We should read Žižek's call for a new form of communism as strictly derived from the acceptance of "Spirit is a virus". The global cooperation of humanity in the attempt to deal with the coronavirus epidemic would be the acceptance of the unity of the lowest and the highest. To have solidarity with each other we must understand the loneliness brought about by the virus, and so to accept that the intangibility of the threat is our greatest union. We are united by our escape from the lowest form of life. This is not a matter of choice. Rather, we are already responding in this way, from the recently nationalised railways in the UK to the nationalisation of areas of production in the US (both of which would have been unthinkable before the crisis). The choice we have is of whether we remain in the loneliness of confinement, or whether we learn to recognise this as a universal condition. Žižek's demand here amounts to a call against barbarism because we are in the same condition. We should no longer put "America first" (as the slogan goes).

The book does not, as one reading the responses to it would expect, contain a collection of recycled column articles that one could easily ignore. Rather, I argue, the book provides the basis for a "true philosophical revolution", in the form of a reading of Hegel as the philosopher of virality. The major contribution of the book is its demand for a philosophical revolution, and its speculative judgement — "Spirit is a virus". In the wake of the Corona crisis, we can only think of ourselves as already viral in our libidinality, and thus as finding the highest solidarity in our greatest shames, our greatest togetherness in our greatest loneliness.

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