

The Appointment in Samara: A New Use for Some Old Jokes

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On various occasions when writing previously I've recounted a joke about a man who believes himself to be a grain of seed and is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a seed but a human being. When they eventually succeed, he is allowed to leave the hospital. But he then returns immediately, trembling with fear. He reports that there is a chicken outside the entrance and he is terrified that it will eat him. "Dear fellow," says his doctor, "you know very well that you are not a seed but a man." "Of course, I know that," replies the patient, "but does the chicken know it?"

My Croat friend Dejan Kršić recently sent me a corona-version of this joke: “Hello, my friend!” “O, hello, professor! Why are you wearing a mask? Two weeks ago you were explaining all around that masks don’t protect against the virus?” “Yes, I know they don’t work, but does the virus know it?”

This virus version of the joke ignores a crucial fact: the virus doesn’t know anything (and also doesn’t NOT know anything) because it doesn’t dwell in the domain of knowledge at all, it is not an enemy trying to destroy us—it just self-reproduces with a blind automatism. Some Leftists evoke another parallel: is capital also not a virus acting as a parasite on us humans, is it also not a blind mechanism bent on expanded self-reproduction with total indifference to our suffering? There is, however, a key difference at work here: capital is a virtual entity which doesn’t exist in reality independently of us; it exists only insofar as we, humans, participate in the capitalist process. As such, capital is a spectral entity: if we stop acting as if we believe in it (or, say, if a state power nationalizes all productive forces and abolishes money), capital ceases to exist, while virus is part of reality that can be dealt with only through science.

This does not mean that there is no link between the different levels of viral entities: biological viruses, digital viruses, capital as a viral entity.

The coronavirus epidemic itself is clearly not just a biological phenomenon which affects humans: to understand its spread, one has to consider human cultural choices (such as our food habits), economy and global trade, the thick network of international relations, ideological mechanisms of fear and panic. To properly grasp this link, a new approach is needed. The path was shown by Bruno Latour¹ who was right to emphasize that the coronavirus crisis is a “dress rehearsal” for the forthcoming climate change which is “the next crisis, the one in which the reorientation of living conditions is going to be posed as a challenge to all of us, as will all the details of daily existence that we will have to learn to sort out carefully.” The coronavirus epidemic, as a moment of the global and lasting ecological crisis, brutally imposes on us:

. . . the sudden and painful realization that the classical definition of society—humans among themselves—makes no sense. The state of society depends at every moment on the associations between many actors, most of whom do not have human forms. This is true of microbes—as we have known since Pasteur—but also of the internet, the law, the organization of hospitals, the logistics of the state, as well as the climate.

There is, of course, as Latour is well aware, a key difference between the coronavirus epidemic and the ecological crisis: “in the health crisis, it may be true that humans as a whole are ‘fighting’ against

viruses—even if they have no interest in us and go their way from throat to throat killing us without meaning to. The situation is tragically reversed in ecological change: this time, the pathogen whose terrible virulence has changed the living conditions of all the inhabitants of the planet is not the virus at all, it is humanity!”

Although Latour immediately adds that “this does not apply to all humans, just those who make war on us without declaring war on us,” the agency which “makes war on us without declaring war on us” is not just a group of people but the existing global socio-economic system—in short, the existing global order in which we all (the entirety of humanity) participate. We can see now the truly subversive potential of the notion of assemblage: it becomes apparent when we apply it to a constellation that includes humans, but can be seen from an “inhuman” standpoint, so that humans appear as just one among a variety of actants. Recall Jane Bennett’s description of the way actants combine at a polluted trash site: how not only humans but also the rotting trash, worms, insects, abandoned machines, chemical poisons, and so on each play their (never purely passive) role.² There is an authentic theoretical and ethico-political insight in such an approach.

When the so-called New Materialists like Bennett oppose the reduction of matter to a passive mixture of mechanical parts, they are, of course, not asserting the old-fashioned direct teleology, but an aleatoric dynamics immanent to matter: *emerging properties* arise

out of non-predictable encounters between multiple kinds of actants, the agency for any particular act is distributed across a variety of different kinds of bodies. Agency thereby becomes a social phenomenon, where the limits of sociality are expanded to include all material bodies participating in the relevant assemblage. Say, an ecological public is a group of bodies, some human, most not, that are subjected to harm, defined as a diminished capacity for action. The ethical implication of such a stance is that we should recognize our entanglement within larger assemblages: we should become more sensitive to the demands of these publics and the reformulated sense of self-interest calls upon us to respond to their plight. Materiality, usually conceived as inert substance, should be rethought as a plethora of things that form assemblages of human and nonhuman actors (actants)—humans are but one force in a potentially unbounded network of forces.

Such an approach which locates a phenomenon in its ever-changing assemblage enables us to account for some unexpected cases of trans-functionalization (where a phenomenon, all of a sudden, begins to function in a totally different way). Among the unexpected occurrences of solidarity, one might, for instance, look at the gangs in Rio de Janeiro that are usually engaged in brutal struggles for the control of their favelas, but who concluded peace for the duration of the COVID-19 epidemic and decided to collaborate in providing help to the old and weak.³ This sudden change was possible because street gangs were already in themselves an assemblage of different

aspects: not just a form of criminal behavior, but also a form of solidarity and resistance to institutional power by groups of youth.

Another example of trans-functionalization is when the spending of trillions to help not only companies but also individuals (some such measures come close to Universal Basic Income) is justified as an extreme measure to keep the economy running and to prevent extreme poverty and starvation, but there is effectively something much more radical going on: with such measures, money no longer functions in a traditional capitalist way; it becomes a voucher to allocate available resources so that society can go on functioning, outside the constraints of the law of value.

Let's imagine another weird reversal along these lines. It was widely reported in our media how a collateral effect of the coronavirus epidemic was a much better quality of air above central China and now even above northern Italy. But what if weather patterns in these regions were already accustomed to polluted air, so that one of the effects of cleaner air turns out to be more destructive patterns of weather (more drought, or more flooding . . .)? To confront the forthcoming ecological crisis, a radical philosophical change is thus needed, much more radical than the usual platitude of emphasizing how we, humans, are part of nature, just one of the natural species on Earth, i.e., of how our productive processes (our metabolism with nature, as Marx put it) is part of the metabolism within nature itself. The challenge is to describe this complex interaction in its detailed

texture: coronavirus is not an exception or a disturbing intrusion, it is a particular version of a virus that was operative beneath the threshold of our perception for decades., Viruses and bacteria are ever present, sometimes even with a crucial positive function (our digestion works only through the bacteria in our stomach). It is not enough to introduce here the notion of different ontological strata (as bodies, we are organisms which act as hosts for bacteria and viruses; as producers, we collectively change the nature around us; as political beings, we organize our social life and engage in struggles in it; as spiritual beings, we find fulfilment in science, art and religion; etc.) “Assemblage” means that one has to make a step further here towards a kind of flat ontology and recognize how these different levels can interact at the same level: viruses as actants are mediated by our productive activities, by our cultural tastes, by our social commerce. This is why, for Latour:

Politics should become material, a *Dingpolitik* revolving around things and issues of concern, rather than around values and beliefs. Stem cells, mobile phones, genetically modified organisms, pathogens, new infrastructure and new reproductive technologies bring concerned publics into being that creates diverse forms of knowledge about these matters and diverse forms of action—beyond institutions, political interests or ideologies that delimit the traditional domain of politics.⁴

The coronavirus epidemic can be seen as an assemblage of a (potentially) pathogenic viral mechanism, industrialized agriculture, fast global economic development, cultural habits, exploding international communication, and so on. The epidemic is a mixture in which natural, economic and cultural processes are inextricably bound together. As an unabashed philosopher of subjectivity, I want to add two further points here: First, as humans, we are one among the actants in a complex assemblage; however, it is only and precisely as subjects that we are able to adopt the “inhuman view” from which we can (partially, at least) grasp the assemblage of actants of which we are part.

Second, “values and beliefs” should not be simply ignored: they play an important role and should be treated as a specific mode of assemblage. Religion is a complex texture of dogmas, institutions, social and individual practices, and intimate experiences where what is said and what remains unsaid is intertwined in often unexpected ways. Perhaps, a full scientific proof that god exists would be of the greatest surprise for the believer her/himself. A similar complexity (or, rather, a rift) helps us to understand the belatedness of our reaction to the coronavirus spread—our knowledge was out of sync with our spontaneous beliefs.

Recall the second murder (of the detective Arbogast) in Alfred Hitchcock’s movie *Psycho*: this murder is a surprise, even more than the notorious shower scene. The stabbing in the shower is a totally

unexpected surprise, while, with the detective, we know something shocking is about to happen, indeed the whole scene is shot to indicate it, but we are still surprised when it actually does. Why? How can the greatest surprise occur when what we are told will happen really occurs? The obvious answer is: because we didn't really believe it would happen. And did not something similar take place with the spread of coronavirus? Epidemiologists warned us about the virus, they actually gave quite precise predictions that have now been proven accurate. Greta Thunberg was right when she claimed that politicians should listen to science, but we were more inclined to put our trust in "hunches" (Trump used this specific word), and it is easy to understand why. What is now going on is something we till now considered impossible, the basic coordinates of our normal lives are disappearing. Our first reaction to the virus was to regard it as just a nightmare from which we would soon awaken. Now we know this will not happen, we will have to learn to live in a viral world, a new way of living will have to be painfully reconstructed.

But there is another combination of speech and reality at work in the ongoing pandemics: there are material processes which can happen only if they are mediated through our knowledge. We are told a specific catastrophe will happen to us, we try to avoid it, and through our very attempts to avoid it, it happens. Recall the old Arab story about the "appointment in Samara" retold by W. Somerset Maugham: a servant on an errand in the busy market of Baghdad meets Death there; terrified by its gaze, he runs home to his master and asks

him to give him a horse, so that he can ride all the day and reach Samara, where Death will not find him, in the evening. The good master not only provides the servant with a horse, but goes himself to the market, looks for Death and reproaches it for scaring his faithful servant. Death replies: "But I didn't want to scare your servant. I was just surprised to see him in the market here when I have an appointment with him in Samara tonight . . ." What if the message of this story is not that a man's demise is impossible to avoid, that trying to twist free of it will only tighten its grip, but rather its exact opposite, namely that if one accepts fate as inevitable, one can break its grasp? It was foretold to Oedipus's parents that their son would kill his father and marry his mother, and the very steps they took to avoid this fate (exposing him to death in a deep forest) made sure that the prophecy would be fulfilled—without this attempt to avoid fate, fate could not have realized itself. Is this not a clear parable of the fate of the US intervention in Iraq? The US saw the signs of the fundamentalist threat, intervened to prevent it, and thereby strengthened it. Would it not have been much more effective to accept the threat, ignore it and thus break its grasp? So, back to our story: Imagine that, upon encountering Death on the market, the servant addressed it thus: "What's your problem with me? If you have something you want to do to me, just do it, otherwise beat it!" Perplexed, Death would probably have mumbled something like: "But . . . we were supposed to meet in Samara, I cannot kill you here!" and run away (probably to Samara). Therein resides the wager of the so-called herd immunity coronavirus plan:

The stated aim has been to achieve “herd immunity” in order to manage the outbreak and prevent a catastrophic “second wave” next winter [. . .]. A large proportion of the population is at lower risk of developing severe disease: roughly speaking anyone up to the age of 40. So the reasoning goes that even though in a perfect world we’d not want anyone to take the risk of infection, generating immunity in younger people is a way of protecting the population as a whole.⁵

The wager here is that, if we act as if we don’t know, i.e., if we ignore the threat, the actual damage might be smaller than if we act knowingly. This is what conservative populists try to convince us of: the Samara of our appointment is our economic order and entire way of life, so that if we follow the advice of the epidemiologists and react to it by attempting to minimize the impact of the virus through isolation and lockdown, we will merely summon a catastrophe of economic collapse and poverty much more severe than the relatively small percentage of deaths from the virus.

However, as Alenka Zupančič has pointed out,⁶ “let’s get back to work” is an exemplary case of the deceit in Trump’s apparent concern for workers: he addresses ordinary, poorly paid people for whom the pandemic is also an economic catastrophe, and who consequently cannot afford to isolate themselves. The catch here is double: First, Trump’s economic policies centered around

dismantling the welfare state are, to a large extent, responsible for the fact that many poorly paid workers find themselves in such a dire situation that, for them, poverty is a greater threat than the virus.

Second, those who will really “get back to work” are the poor, while the rich will persist in their comfortable isolation. There are those who cannot self-isolate so that the rest of us can—the healthcare workers, those responsible for producing and delivering food, those who make possible the continuing supply of electricity and water. And then there are the refugees and migrants who simply have no place they can call “home” in which to withdraw in self-isolation. How can you insist on social distancing among thousands confined to a refugee camp? Just recall the chaos in India when the government ordered a four-teen-day lockdown, with millions from the big cities trying to reach the countryside.

All these new divisions point to the fatal limitation of the Left-liberal worry that the enhanced social control triggered by the virus will continue after it has disappeared and constrain our freedom. Individuals reduced to the panic of mere survival are ideal subjects for the introduction of authoritarian power. The danger is very real: an extreme case is that of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who passed a law that enables him to rule by decree for an indefinite period of time. However, this worry misses what is actually occurring today, which is almost the exact opposite: although those in power are trying to make us responsible for the outcome of the

crisis, insisting that we are individually responsible for maintaining a proper distance from one another, washing our hands, wearing a mask and so on, the reality is exactly the opposite one. The message from us, the subjects, to state power is that we will gladly follow your orders, but they are YOUR orders, and there is no guarantee that our obeying them will fully work. Those in charge of the state are in a panic because they know not only that they are not in control of the situation, but also that we, their subjects, know this. The impotence of power is now laid bare.

We all know that classic scene from cartoons: the cat reaches a precipice, but it goes on walking, ignoring the fact that there is no ground under its feet; it starts to fall only when it looks down and sees the abyss. When it loses its authority, the regime is like a cat above the precipice: in order to fall, it only has to be reminded to look down. But the opposite also holds true: when an authoritarian regime approaches its final crisis, its dissolution as a rule follows two steps. Before its actual collapse, a mysterious rupture takes place. All of a sudden people know that the game is over, they are no longer afraid. It is not only that the regime loses its legitimacy, its exercise of power is itself perceived as an impotent panic reaction. In his celebrated book *Shah of Shabs*, an account of the Khomeini revolution in Iran, Ryszard Kapuscinski located the precise moment of this rupture: at a Tehran crossroad, a single demonstrator refused to budge when a policeman shouted instructions at him to move, and the embarrassed police- man

simply withdrew. In a couple of hours, all Tehran was talking about this incident, and although street fights continued for weeks, everyone somehow knew that the game was over . . . 7 There are indications that something similar is going on today: all the dictatorial powers that the state apparatuses are amassing simply makes their basic impotence all the more palpable.

We should resist here the temptation of celebrating this disintegration of trust as an opening for people to self-organize locally outside the state apparatuses: an efficient state which “delivers” and can be trusted, at least to some degree, is today needed more than ever. Self-organization of local communities can only work in combination with the state apparatus, and with science. We are now forced to admit that modern science, in spite of all its hidden biases, is the predominant form of trans-cultural universality. The epidemic provides a welcome opportunity for science to assert itself in this role.

Here, however, a new problem arises: in science also, there is no big Other, no subject on which we can fully rely, who can be unequivocally presumed to know. Different epidemiologists arrive at varying conclusions, offering different proposals about what to do. Even what is presented as data is obviously filtered by horizons of pre-understanding: How, for instance, can one determine if an old, weak person really died of the virus? The fact that many more people are still dying from other diseases than from

coronavirus should not be misused to alleviate the crisis, but it is true that the strict focus of our health-care system on coronavirus has led to the postponement of the treatment of diseases considered non-urgent (testing people for cancer, for liver diseases, etc.), so that our focus on Corona may cause more damage in the long term than the direct impact of the virus itself. And then, of course, there are the dire economic consequences of the lockdown: by the beginning of April, local food riots of the newly impoverished had already exploded in southern Italy, with police being called in to control food stores in Palermo. Is the only choice really the one between Chinese-style near-total top-down control, and the more lax “herd immunity” approach? Hard decisions are to be made here which cannot be grounded just in scientific knowledge. It is easy to warn that state power is using the epidemic as an excuse to impose a permanent state of emergency, but what alternative arrangements do those who sound such warnings propose?

The panic that accompanies our reaction to the epidemic is not simply something orchestrated by those in power for, after all, why would big capital risk a mega-crisis of this sort? Rather it is a genuine and well-grounded alarm. But the almost exclusive focus on the coronavirus in our media is not based on neutral facts, it clearly rests on an ideological choice. Maybe, here, one can perhaps allow oneself a modest conspiracy theory. What if the representatives of the existing global capitalist order are somehow aware of what critical Marxist analysts have been pointing out for some time: that

the system as we know it is in deep crisis, that it cannot go on in its existing liberal-permissive form. What if these representatives are ruthlessly exploiting the epidemic in order to impose a new form of governance? The most probable outcome of the epidemic is that a new barbarian capitalism will prevail; many old and weak people will be sacrificed and left to die; workers will have to accept a much lower standard of living; digital control of our lives will remain a permanent feature; class distinctions will increasingly become a matter of life and death. How much will remain of the Communist measures that those in power are now being compelled to introduce?

So we shouldn't lose too much time in New Age spiritualist meditations on how "the virus crisis will enable us to focus on what our lives are really about." The real struggle will be over what social form will replace the liberal-capitalist New World Order? This is our true appointment in Samara.

Notes.

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

2 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Durham: Duke University Press 2010, p. 4–6.

3 I got this information from Renata Avila, a human rights lawyer from Guatemala.

4 Martin Mueller, "Assemblages and Actor-networks: Rethinking Socio-material Power, Politics and Space," quoted from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gec3.12192/pdf>. It seems to me that the prevalent normative reading of Hegel a la Brandom ignores this intertwinement of normative stances and claims with a complex network

of material and immaterial life-processes.

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/15/epidemiologist-britain-herd-immunity-coronavirus-covid-19>.

6 Private conversation.

7 See Ryszard Kapuscinski, *Shah of Shahs*, New York: Vintage Books 1992.