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On the Epidemic Situation

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From the start, I thought that the current situation, characterised by a viral pandemic, was not particularly exceptional. From the (viral) pandemic of AIDS, and passing through the avian flu, the Ebola virus, and the SARS 1 virus – not to mention several flus, the appearance of strains of tuberculosis that antibiotics can no longer cure, or even the return of measles – we know that the world market, combined with the existence of vast under-medicalised zones and the lack of global discipline when it comes to the necessary vaccinations, inevitably produces serious and devastating epidemics (in the case of AIDS, several million deaths). Besides the fact that the current pandemic situation is having a huge impact on the rather comfortable so-called Western world – a fact in itself devoid of any novel significance, eliciting instead dubious laments and revolting idiocies on social media – I didn't see why, beyond the obvious protective measures and the time that the virus would take to disappear in the absence of new targets, it was necessary to climb on one's high horse.

What's more, the true name of the ongoing epidemic should suggest that in a sense we are dealing with 'nothing new under the contemporary sun'. This true name is SARS 2, that is 'Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome 2', a name that signals the 'second time' of this identification, after the SARS 1 epidemic, which spread around the world in Spring 2003. At the time, it was called 'the first unknown illness of the 21st century'. It is clear then that the current epidemic is by no means the emergence of something radically new or unprecedented. It is the second of its kind this century and can be situated as the first's descendant. So much so that the only serious criticism that can today be addressed to the authorities in matters of prediction is not to have funded, after SARS 1, the research that would have made available to the medical world genuine instruments of action against SARS 2.

So, I didn't think there was anything to be done other than try, like everyone else, to isolate myself at home, and nothing to be said other than to encourage everyone else to do the same. Adhering to a strict discipline on this point is all the more necessary

in that it provides support and fundamental protection for all those who are most exposed: all medical staff, of course, who are directly at the front, and who must be able to rely on a firm discipline, including on the part of the infected; but also all the most frail, like the elderly, especially those in care homes; as well as all those who have to go to work and run the risk of contagion. The discipline of those who can obey the imperative ‘stay home’ must also find and propose means for those who have barely any ‘home’ or none at all so that they may nevertheless find a secure shelter. One could envisage in this case a general commandeering of hotels.

It is true that these duties are increasingly urgent but, at least on initial examination, they do not require any great analytical efforts or the constitution of a new way of thinking.

But I am reading and hearing too many things, including in my immediate circles, that disconcert me both by the confusion they manifest and by their utter inadequacy to the – ultimately simple – situation in which we find ourselves.

These peremptory declarations, pathetic appeals and emphatic accusations take different forms, but they all share a curious contempt for the formidable simplicity, and the absence of novelty, of the current epidemic situation. Some are unnecessarily servile in the face of the powers that be, who are in fact simply doing what they are compelled to by the nature of the phenomenon. Others invoke the Planet and its mystique, which doesn’t do any good. Some blame everything on the unfortunate Macron, who is simply doing, and no worse than another, his job as head of state in times of war or epidemic. Others make a hue and cry about the founding event of an unprecedented revolution, whose relation to the extermination of a virus remains opaque – something for which our ‘revolutionaries’ are not proposing any new means whatsoever. Some sink into apocalyptic pessimism. Others are frustrated that ‘me first’, the golden rule of contemporary ideology, is in this case devoid of interest, provides no succour, and can even appear as the accomplice of an indefinite prolongation of the evil.

It seems that the challenge of the epidemic is everywhere dissipating the intrinsic activity of Reason, 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.

As a result, I feel somewhat compelled to bring together some simple ideas. I would happily call them Cartesian.

Let us begin then by defining the problem, which has elsewhere been so poorly defined and thus so poorly treated.

An epidemic is rendered complex by the fact that it is always a point of articulation between natural and social determinations. Its complete analysis is transversal : one must grasp the points at which the two determinations intersect and draw the consequences.

For example, the initial fulcrum of the current epidemic is very probably to be found in the markets of Wuhan province. Chinese markets are known for their dangerous dirtiness, and for their irrepressible taste for the open-air sale of all kinds of living animals, stacked on top of one another. Whence the fact that at a certain moment the virus found itself present, in an animal form itself inherited from bats, in a very dense popular milieu, and in conditions of rudimentary hygiene.

The natural trajectory of the virus from one species to another thereby transits towards the human species. How exactly ? We don't know yet, and only scientific studies will tell us. Let us, in passing, revile all those who circulate typically racist fables online, backed up by counterfeit images, according to which everything stems from the fact that the Chinese eat bats when they're still almost alive...

This local transit between animal species that eventually reaches human beings is the origin point of the whole affair. After which there simply operates a fundamental datum of the contemporary world : the rise of Chinese state capitalism to imperial rank, in other words an intense and universal presence on the world market. Whence innumerable networks of diffusion, evidently before the Chinese government was able to completely isolate the point of origin, namely an entire province with 40 million inhabitants – something it ultimately succeeded in doing, but too late to stop the epidemic from departing on the paths – and the planes, and the ships – of global existence.

Consider a revealing detail of what I call the double articulation of an epidemic: today, SARS 2 has been stifled in Wuhan but there are very many cases in Shanghai, in the main due to people, generally Chinese nationals, coming from abroad. China is thus a site in which one can observe the link – first for an archaic reason, then a modern one – between a nature-society intersection in ill-kept markets that followed older customs, on the one hand, and a planetary diffusion of this point of origin borne by the capitalist world market and its reliance on rapid and incessant mobility, on the other.

After which we enter the stage in which states try locally to stifle this diffusion. Let us remark in passing that this determination remains fundamentally local, while the epidemic is instead transversal. Despite the existence of some trans-national authorities, it is clear that it is local bourgeois states that are on the frontline.

We touch here on a major contradiction of the contemporary world. The economy, including the process of mass production of manufactured objects, comes under the aegis of the world market – we know that the simple assembly of a mobile phone mobilises work and resources, including mineral ones, in at least seven different states. And yet political powers remain essentially national in kind. And the rivalry between imperialisms, old (Europe and US) and new (China, Japan...) excludes any process leading to a capitalist world state. The epidemic is also a moment when the contradiction between economics and politics becomes flagrant. Even European countries are not managing promptly to adjust their policies in the face of the virus.

Prey to this contradiction, national states attempt to confront the epidemic situation by respecting as much as possible the mechanisms of Capital, even though the nature of the risk compels them to modify the style and the actions of power.

We've known for a long time that in the event of a war between countries, the state must impose, not only on the popular masses, as is to be expected, but on the bourgeoisie itself, considerable constraints, all in order to save local capitalism. Some industries are almost nationalised for the sake of an unbridled production of armaments that does not immediately generate any monetizable surplus value. Many bourgeois are mobilised as officers and exposed to death. Scientists work night and

day to invent new weapons. Numerous intellectuals and artists are compelled to supply national propaganda, etc.

Faced with an epidemic this kind of statist reflex is inevitable. That is why, contrary to what some say, the declarations by Macron or Prime Minister Edouard Philippe regarding the return of the 'welfare' state, spending to support people out of work, or to aid the self-employed whose shops have been shut, demanding 100 or 200 billions from the state coffers, and even the announcement of 'nationalisations' – none of this is surprising or paradoxical. It follows that Macron's metaphor, 'we are at war', is correct : in war or epidemic, the state is compelled, sometimes trespassing the normal run of its class nature, to undertake practices that are both more authoritarian and more generally targeted, in order to avoid a strategic catastrophe.

This is an entirely logical consequence of the situation, the aim of which is to stifle the epidemic – to win the war, to borrow once again Macron's metaphor – with the greatest certainty possible, while remaining within the established social order. This is no laughing matter, it is a necessity imposed by the diffusion of a lethal process that intersects nature (whence the preeminent role of scientists in the matter) and the social order (whence the authoritarian intervention, and it couldn't be otherwise, of the state).

That some massive lacunae appear in the midst of this effort is inevitable. Consider the lack of protective masks or the unpreparedness in terms of the duration of hospital isolation. But who can really boast of having 'predicted' this kind of thing ? In certain regards, the state did not prevent the current situation, it's true. We can even say that by weakening, decade after decade, the national health system, along with all the sectors of the state serving the general interest, it acted instead as though nothing akin to a devastating pandemic could affect our country. To this extent the state is very culpable, not only in its Macron guise, but in that of all who have come before him for at least the past thirty years.

But it is nonetheless correct to note here that no one had predicted, or even imagined, the emergence in France of a pandemic of this type, except perhaps for a few isolated scientists. Many probably thought that this kind of thing was good for dark Africa or totalitarian China, but not for democratic Europe. And it is surely not leftists –

or *gilets jaunes* or even trade-unionists – who enjoy a particular right to hold forth on this point, and to continue to make a fuss about Macron, their derisory target for the last while. They too had absolutely not envisaged this. On the contrary, as the epidemic was already on its way from China, they multiplied, until very recently, uncontrolled assemblies and noisy demonstrations, which should disqualify them today, whoever they may be, from loudly condemning the delays taken by the powers that be in taking the full measure of what was happening. Truth be told, no political force in France really took this measure before the Macronian state.

On the side of this state, the situation is of the kind in which the bourgeois state must explicitly, publicly, make prevail interests that are in some sense more general than those of the bourgeoisie alone, while strategically preserving, in the future, the primacy of the class interests of which this state represents the general form. In other words, the conjuncture compels the state to manage the situation by integrating the interest of the class whose authorised representative it is with more general interests, on account of the internal existence of an ‘enemy’ that is itself general – in times of war this may be a foreign invader, while in the present situation it is the virus SARS 2.

This kind of situation (world war or world epidemic) is especially ‘neutral’ at the political level. The wars of the past have only triggered revolutions in two cases, which may be termed outliers with regard to the imperial powers of the time : Russia and China. In the Russian case, this was because Tsarist power was in every sense, and had been for a long time, retrograde, including as a power potentially adapted to the birth of a genuine capitalism in that immense country. And against it there existed, in the shape of the Bolsheviki, a modern political vanguard, strongly structured by remarkable leaders. In the Chinese case, internal revolutionary war preceded the world war, and the Chinese Communist Party was already, in 1940, at the head of a popular army that had been tried and tested. By contrast, in no Western power did the war trigger a victorious revolution. Even in the country that had been defeated in 1918, Germany, the Spartacist insurrection was quickly crushed.

The lesson to be drawn from this is clear : the ongoing epidemic will not have, *qua* epidemic, any noteworthy political consequences in a country like France. Even supposing that our bourgeoisie – in light of the inchoate grumbling and flimsy

if widespread slogans – believes that the moment has come to get rid of Macron, that will in no way represent any change worthy of note. The ‘politically correct’ candidates are already waiting in the wings, as are the advocates of the most mildewed form of a ‘nationalism’ as obsolete as it is repugnant.

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.

We will also need to pass through a stringent critique of every perspective according to which phenomena like epidemics can work *by themselves* in the direction of something that is politically innovative. Over and above the general transmission of scientific data about the epidemic, a political charge will only be carried by new affirmations and convictions concerning hospitals and public health, schools and egalitarian education, the care of the elderly, and other questions of this kind. Only these might possibly be articulated with a balance-sheet of the dangerous weaknesses on which the current situation has shed light.

In passing, one will need to show publicly and dauntlessly that so-called ‘social media’ have once again demonstrated that they are above all – besides their role in fattening the pockets of billionaires – a place for the propagation of the mental paralysis of braggarts, uncontrolled rumours, the discovery of antediluvian ‘novelties’, or even fascistic obscurantism.

Let us not give credence, even and especially in our isolation, except to truths that are controllable by science and to the grounded perspectives of a new politics, of its localised experiences as well as its strategic aims.

Translated by Alberto Toscano