

MARTINO ROSSI MONTI

IN THE NAME OF THE VIRUS.
INTELLECTUALS AND THE PANDEMIC

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MARTINO ROSSI MONTI

IN THE NAME OF THE VIRUS.
INTELLECTUALS AND THE PANDEMIC

May everything return to chaos, and out of chaos
may there emerge a new and regenerated world.¹

1. *Confined Thought*

The COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded in an atmosphere already charged with deep anxieties. Terrorist attacks, the great rise in immigration which culminated in the refugee crisis of 2015-2016, the financial crisis of 2007-2008, the populist challenge to liberal democracies, and the climate crisis have raised serious concerns in the West for the future of both the «liberal order»² and the planet. However, in those who were already deeply skeptical or hostile toward that order, these crises have also rekindled worn-out narratives about the decline of Western civilization, dreams of total regeneration, and a wide range of nihilistic, anti-capitalist and anti-modern sentiments. In fact, few intellectuals have resisted the temptation to turn the pandemic into a confirmation of their ideas, predictions, or grand theories. The paradoxical, if not comical, effect of these knee-jerk reactions has been emphasized by several commentators: the virus proves or symbolizes everything and its contrary.³ For the editor of «Libération», physical self-confinement has been paralleled by a *pensée confinée*, which locks itself up «in its four walls, brooding over its certainties».⁴ «If you gaze

¹ F.N. Babeuf quoted in J.H. BILLINGTON, *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith*, New York, Basic Books, 1980, p. 75.

² S. LUCARELLI, *Another Brick in the Wall: Covid-19 and the Crisis of the Liberal Order*, «Globus», May 22, 2020. <<https://www.globus.uio.no/resources/global-justice-blog/covid-19-series/another-brick-in-the-wall-covid-19-and-the-crisis.html>>. I relied on English translations of non-anglophone sources wherever possible; otherwise, translations are my own. All internet sources were last accessed on May 14, 2021.

³ G. VITIELLO, *Quant'è contagiosa la metafora del contagio!*, «Il Foglio», March 19, 2020. <<https://www.ilfoglio.it/il-bi-e-il-ba/2020/03/19/news/quant-e-contagiosa-la-metaforadel-contagio-306718/>>.

⁴ L. JOFFRIN, *La pensée confinée*, «Libération», March 26, 2020. For other analyses of

long into the abyss of a disease – a scholar has written – your own ideology gazes back at you». ⁵ The opportunism and sneering cynicism behind these «virological catechisms» have also been emphasized. ⁶

This essay will focus on a portion of the vast and proliferating (Western) literature dedicated to the COVID-19 pandemic. ⁷ I have surveyed a diverse range of (mostly online) sources ranging from national and international media to online magazines and journals, activist websites, social media, blogs and videos, covering roughly the period between February and October 2020 (the so-called ‘first wave’). ⁸ These texts have been written by authors whose disciplinary, professional, and political background is often very different. Their juxtaposition is surely bound to raise some eyebrows. However, my aim was to follow the path of ideas rather than to suggest unlikely equivalences between authors of different intellectual stature. Ideas tend to circulate and mix freely, independently of disciplinary partitions, po-

the role of intellectuals during the pandemic see E. CAPOZZI, «Niente sarà più come prima»: il Coronavirus come pretesto per attaccare l’Occidente, «L’Occidentale», May 12, 2020. <<https://loccidentale.it/niente-sara-piu-come-prima-il-coronavirus-come-pretesto-per-attaccare-loccidente/>>; J. RANCIÈRE, *Viralité/immunité: deux questions pour interroger la crise* (interviewed by A. Inzerillo), «Institut Français Italia», April 20, 2020. <<https://www.institutfrancais.it/fr/italie/2-jacques-ranciere-andrea-inzerillo>>; E. ALLOA, *La contingence du virus*, «Esprit», April 20, 2020. <<https://esprit.presse.fr/actualites/emmanuel-alloa/la-contingence-du-virus-42689>>; F. DEI, *La crisi del coronavirus. Psicoanalisi e antropologia in dialogo* (interviewed by A. Lombardozi), «SpiWeb», March 30, 2020. <<https://www.spiweb.it/cultura/la-crisi-del-coronavirus-psicoanalisi-e-antropologia-lombardozi-intervista-f-dei/>>.

⁵ A. LEVINOVITZ, *The Coronavirus Is Not Mother Nature’s Revenge*, «Foreign Policy», March 5, 2020. <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/05/virus-natural-animals-coronavirus-nature-revenge/>>.

⁶ B. HENRI-LEVY, *The Virus in the Age of Madness*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2020. Cfr. A. DAL LAGO, *La filosofia e il dolore degli altri*, «Aut-Aut», April 10, 2020. <<http://autaut.ilsaggiatore.com/2020/04/dolore-degli-altri/>>.

⁷ The literature on the coronavirus is expanding daily. A rich bibliography on the various aspects of the pandemic is provided by the librarians of the Aix-Marseille University: <<https://bu.univ-amu.libguides.com/c.php?g=679422&p=4843649>>. For a useful bibliography of philosophical texts on the pandemic see J. DELVAUX, *Covid-19 & Philosophy: Towards a Bibliography*. <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/quarantine-files-thinkers-self-isolation/>>. For some collections of essays see P. AMADEO (ed.), *Sopa de Wuhan*, ASPO, 2020; B. EVANS (ed.), *The Quarantine Files: Thinkers in Self-Isolation*, «Los Angeles Review of Books», April 14, 2020. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/quarantine-files-thinkers-self-isolation/#_ftn1>; J. KINDIG et alii (eds.), *There Is No Outside. COVID-19 Dispatches*, London, Verso Books, 2020; F. NOIVILLE et alii, *Andrà tutto bene. Gli scrittori al tempo della quarantena*, Milano, Garzanti, 2020. For some general, lucid remarks see F. ZAKARIA, *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*, New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 2020. For a first-person account of the disease from a top virologist, see P. PIOT, «Finally, a Virus Got Me». *Scientist Who Fought Ebola and HIV Reflects on Facing Death from COVID-19* (interviewed by D. Draulans), «Science Magazine», May 8, 2020. <<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/05/finally-virus-got-me-scientist-who-fought-ebola-and-hiv-reflects-facing-death-covid-19>>.

⁸ Most of the data comes from Italy, France and the United States, but the themes discussed have all been popular across the West.

litical divergences or narcissistic barriers, and to bypass clear-cut distinctions between higher and lower cultural productions. In this context, therefore, popularizers of ideas can become as important as creators of ideas. Moreover, these juxtapositions are also meant to emphasize that, on a number of important issues, the divergent opinions and perspectives of these authors do not exclude the presence of affinities or even convergences.

I have referred to these authors as ‘intellectuals’. ‘Intellectual’ is notoriously a vague and unstable term, not least due to the involvement of intellectuals themselves in their – usually emphatic – self-definitions. I use the term in a descriptive rather than honorific (or derogatory) sense. I find Stefan Collini’s clarification of what he calls the «cultural» sense of the term particularly useful for the present survey: «if a certain figure repeatedly succeeds, on the basis of a kind of creative or scholarly activity, in using a given medium of expression to reach a genuine public to express views on a general theme, then, by definition, that figure is, in that particular context, successfully functioning as an intellectual».⁹ I don’t know how many of those who expressed their views on the pandemic managed to achieve (or maintain) the status of successfully-functioning intellectuals – some surely did not – but it is certain that many of them at least attempted to present themselves as such. In fact, a particularly fertile combination of factors was in place: 1) the general, pressing theme of the pandemic; 2) the sudden availability, for many, of much more time to dedicate to creative activities thanks to the lockdown; 3) a widespread societal demand for answers and meaning; 4) the possibility to reach a great variety of audiences provided by the Internet. The abundance and heterogeneity of the contributions, the vitality of the discussions across a multiplicity of online platforms (from journals to social media to online conferences) and the readiness of many authors of all ages to rely on a variety of digital tools to disseminate their ideas is another demonstration of the vacuity of the recurrent lamentations over the «death of the intellectual».¹⁰

My aim was to identify some of the most widespread ideas and emotions conveyed by these texts – at least during the first phase of the pandemic – and to discuss the images of our time and societies disseminated

⁹ S. COLLINI, *Absent Minds. Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 53. Collini distinguishes three main senses of the (English) term ‘intellectual’: 1) a «sociological» or socio-professional sense (those whose «primary» occupation is to deal with ideas and culture); 2) a «subjective» one (those committed to a disinterested search for the truth); 3) a «cultural» one. To these, he also adds a «political» sense, in which political engagement is taken to be an essential part of the definition of an intellectual (*ivi*, pp. 46-50). For a masterly analysis of the self-romanticization, the political delusions and the irrational attitudes of many twentieth-century Western militant intellectuals see P. HOLLANDER, *Political Pilgrims*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981.

¹⁰ On intellectuals in the digital age see P. DAHLGREN, *Public Intellectuals, Online Media, and Public Spheres: Current Realignments*, «International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society», XXV, 2012, pp. 95-110.

or reverberated by their authors. The thematic sections under which I have grouped these texts, to be sure, cover only a fraction of the many issues addressed in the past few months, many of which have been left out. This, however, does not mean that the approaches discussed in this essay represent a fringe phenomenon. The essay is structured as follows. Since many have projected their political aspirations onto the virus, section 2 focuses on ideological infatuations with the virus' «revolutionary» power. Historically – one scholar has written – major crises are often experienced as the consequence of a «discordance» between humans and the natural world; in these circumstances, nature is invested with mythical meanings and is thought to encapsulate both the explanation and the solution of the crisis.¹¹ Given the several ramifications of this particular issue, two separate sections (3 and 6) are devoted to some of the images of nature emerged in the context of the pandemic. Section 4 addresses the discussions surrounding both the responses of ordinary people to the risk of being infected and, more generally, the attitudes toward life and death within secular and highly medicalized societies. Section 5 focuses on the sense of estrangement from life and society expressed by many intellectuals during home confinement. Finally, section 7 attempts to draw some general conclusions.

2. A Virtuous Pathogen

Many texts about the pandemic strike for their tone of overexcitement, rather than for their capacity to assess the situation critically. No doubt, this attitude stems from the frightening exceptionality of the circumstances. There is an «ambiguous charm» in these difficult days, a theologian has observed, so that «we are all afraid but at the same time we feel a kind of emotional tension, if not excitement. We are in the presence of the revelatory charge embedded in those borderline experiences that Jaspers called “limit situations”». ¹² «No one ever felt so alive as in this moment», a post-humanist philosopher confessed.¹³ Martial metaphors and metaphorical calls to

¹¹ S. VILLARET, *Covid-19 et retour à la nature: regard d'historien*, May 26, 2020 <<http://www.univ-lemans.fr/fr/recherche/decryptage-recherche/regards-de-chercheur-e-s-1/covid-19-et-retour-a-la-nature-regard-d-historien.html>>.

¹² V. MANCUSO, *Andare oltre la paura*, «La Repubblica», February 26, 2020. <<https://www.vitomancuso.it/2020/02/27/andare-oltre-la-paura/>>. Recalling Jaspers, another scholar has described a «liminal space» that is also a «luminal space»: «a time of unprecedented reckoning that exposes the collective imagination to the light of day» (S. EARLE, *Seizing the Unexpected Opportunities of COVID-19*, «Open Democracy», April 9, 2020. <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/seizing-unexpected-opportunities-covid-19/>>).

¹³ L. CAFFO, *Manifesto per un dopo che era un prima*, «minima & moralia», March, 2020 March 23, 2020. <<https://www.minimaetmoralia.it/wp/altro/manifesto-un-un/>>. With slight changes, this apocalyptic text has been translated into English (<https://www>

arms abounded too.¹⁴ However, this excitement also derives from the conviction – widespread in all times of crisis – that we are at the center of a decisive moment in history, one that, for some, will seal the fate of the Earth itself. This conviction is particularly strong among intellectuals, who often see themselves as uniquely skilled interpreters of their time.

The impression of having reached a turning point, a watershed, a crossroads, or even – in the apocalyptically-minded – a rupture in the ordinary fabric of time is shared by many commentators. Unsettled by the confusion, the unpredictability, and the «ground-zero empiricism» that inevitably accompany the onset of novel epidemics,¹⁵ they desperately strive to find an overarching meaning in the events, infusing the virus with a message or a mission that often coincides with their personal fears or aspirations. If present, the shock over the lethal march of the virus and the tail of human tragedies it leaves behind tends to fade into the background as the virus' revelatory or revolutionary power comes to the fore. Anguish and fear gradually leave room to wild expectations and various forms of vengeful or celebratory attitudes.

What is remarkable is that the virus' supposed capacity to subvert the hated world order or to disorient one's political opponents often elicits – at both extremes of the political spectrum – an ill-concealed admiration

neroeditions.com/covid-manifesto/) and enlarged (*Dopo il Covid-19*, Milano, Nottetempo, ebook, 2020). I quote from its earliest version because it better reflects the frenzied state of mind of its author.

¹⁴ A. SCURATI, *Coronavirus, prova di maturità per una generazione baciata dalla sorte*, «Corriere della Sera», March 11, 2020. <https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_marzo_11/coronavirus-prova-maturita-una-generazione-baciata-sorte-06b43d5a-6309-11ea-a693-c7191bf8b498.shtml>; B. MANVILLE, *Are We Really Fighting Coronavirus «Like A War»?*, «Forbes», April 2, 2020. <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/brookmanville/2020/04/02/are-we-really-fighting-coronavirus-like-a-war/?sh=1db62756d1b4>>.

¹⁵ L. DASTON, *Ground-Zero Empiricism*, «Critical Inquiry», April 10, 2020. <<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/711436>>. On the notion and history of «emerging diseases» see M.D. GRMEK, *Le concept de maladie émergente*, «History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences», XV, 3, 1993, pp. 281-296; B. FANTINI, *La storia delle epidemie, le politiche sanitarie e la sfida delle malattie emergenti*, «L'Idomeneo», XVII, 2014, pp. 9-42. On the «radical uncertainty», the «nonlinear» dynamics in a hyper-connected world, and on possible ways to manage them in the present crisis see N.N. TALEB *et alii*, *Systemic Risk of Pandemic via Novel Pathogens – Coronavirus: A Note*, «New England Complex Systems Institute», January 26, 2020. <<https://necsi.edu/systemic-risk-of-pandemic-via-novel-pathogens-coronavirus-a-note>>; J. KAY – M. KING, *The Radical Uncertainties of Coronavirus*, «Prospect Magazine», March 30, 2020. <<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/coronavirus-model-uncertainty-kay-king>>; P. COLLIER, *The Problem of Modelling: Public Policy and the Coronavirus*, «Times Literary Supplement», April 24, 2020. <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/problem-modelling-public-policy-coronavirus-paul-collier/>>. On the open-ended nature of the crisis see also B. MILANOVIĆ, *Coronavirus: Why Making Economic Predictions. Now is Useless*, «Brave New Europe», June 1, 2020. <<https://braveneweuropa.com/branko-milanovic-coronavirus-why-making-economic-predictions-now-is-useless>>.

or an open enthusiasm, if not a process of psychological identification. Were these reactions not so similar to some of the ones that followed each Islamist attack in the West since 9/11, one would find the current ones astonishing. Rather than viewed as a random occurrence tied to a multiplicity of factors, the pandemic is seen as the expression of a providential destiny. Therefore, what initially appeared as a threat or an enemy can be turned into a messenger or an ally in one's ideological battles. As one writer observes:

The coronavirus crisis dismantles the political ideology known as sovereignism, which is nothing but an outdated attempt to restore the lost sovereignty of both the state and the ego by erecting walls, drawing borders, closing ports, restoring the primacy of the Western white man over the different-other and the woman-other. Viruses know no borders, they are not stopped by walls or closed ports, they do not bow to the will of the sovereign state nor to the sovereign self's desire to know. They blur the boundaries between human and animal species, rebel against the devastating rule of man over nature, spread by contagion with a total disregard for national identity cards.¹⁶

Hastily re-dressed as a no-border activist or as an agent of deconstruction, de-colonization or anti-capitalism, the virus is welcomed as a force that shatters the status quo and the supposedly totalitarian domination of oppressive 'paradigms'. Typically, the imagination of many has been captured by the etymology of the term coronavirus – the 'crown-shaped' virus. The impulse to bow down or morally capitulate before this awe-inspiring 'crown' has been a common one among philosophers normally engaged in unmasking 'power' and 'oppression' in all their ramified manifestations. Nationalist and sovereignist illusions, we are assured by Michael Marder, are finally brought to their knees by the true and only «sovereign», the coronavirus, a «microscopic entity» on which «a crown is bestowed».¹⁷ Donatella di Cesare was particularly mesmerized by the crown's «suggestive and fearsome halo»; the virus, she writes, is «a sovereign [...] already in its name» and «scoffs at sovereignty» by traversing old borders.¹⁸

¹⁶ I. DOMINIJANNI, *The Sovereign Virus*, «Ara», March 13, 2020. <https://www.ara.cat/en/The-sovereign-virus_0_2415958482.html>.

¹⁷ M. MARDER, *The Coronavirus Is Us*, «The New York Times», March 3, 2020. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/opinion/the-coronavirus-is-us.html>>. Cfr. I. DOMINIJANNI, *The Sovereign Virus*, cit.: «if the sovereign, according to Carl Schmitt, is the one who decides on the state of exception, this time the sovereign is the virus, not the State or the government».

¹⁸ D. DI CESARE, *Virus sovrano? L'asfissia capitalistica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2020. It is not clear why the permeability of boundaries should be taken as an argument in favor of their dismantling. In any case, the virus' formidable trespassing skills seem to have suddenly become powerless against the walls within which these intellectuals wisely decided to confine themselves.

Some have even invested the pathogen with theological attributes. A philosopher has compared it to the inscrutable «God of apophatic theology», picturing its traumatic irruption as an apocalyptic «event» that «exceeds» history proper and belongs to its «eternal background». Less unfathomable appears instead what this author calls the «virtues» of the virus, which, among other positive transformations, has caused the «sudden disappearance of the ideology linked to “walls”». ¹⁹ After describing the virus as «an apocalypse in the etymological sense of “revelation”», another academic went so far as to qualify the virus as an «angel exterminator of people and economies» whose message is that global problems require global solutions. ²⁰ For a critic of neoliberal capitalism, this «painfully virtuous pathogen» triggers an eye-opening experience bordering on a spiritual conversion. ²¹ Another has seen in the pandemic a «terrifying affirmation of the “sublime”». ²²

Childish fantasies also run wild: Slavoj Žižek has compared the pandemic to a lethal martial arts blow administered by the virus to the «global capitalist system». ²³ Many appear galvanized at the prospect of a sudden reversal or disintegration of the ‘old’ globalized order. For Franco Berardi, «the hyper-excited organism that is humankind has finally been hit by a collapse: a sort of gerontomachia killing mostly octogenarians, has blocked the frantic global machine of the accumulation economy». ²⁴ For Mario Pezzella, the end of the «neoliberal system» is near and the alternative is again one between «socialism or barbarism». ²⁵ Others, instead, openly identify with the virus’ subversive power. ²⁶

¹⁹ R. RONCHI, *The Virtues of the Virus*, «Doppiozero», March 8, 2020. <<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/on-pandemics-nancy-esposito-nancy/>>; Id., *Teologia del virus*, «Doppiozero», April 6, 2020. <<https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/teologia-del-virus>>.

²⁰ S. LEVI DELLA TORRE, *Nove punti sul virus*, «Mondoperaio», March 24, 2020. <<https://www.mondoperaio.net/politica-e-diritto/nove-punti-sul-virus/>>.

²¹ Á.L. LARA, *Causalidad de la pandemia, cualidad de la catástrofe*, «El diario», March 29, 2020. <https://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/causalidad-pandemia-cualidad-catastrofe_132_1103363.html>.

²² J. CHAPMAN, *Four Weddings and a Mass Grave*, in B. EVANS (ed.), *The Quarantine Files*, cit.: «perhaps – he concludes – it is now possible to imagine the end of the world and the end of Capitalism, but do we have an appetite to act?».

²³ S. ŽIŽEK, *Coronavirus is «Kill Bill»-esque Blow to Capitalism and Could Lead to Reinvention of Communism*, «Russia Today», February 27, 2020. <<https://www.rt.com/op-ed/481831-coronavirus-kill-bill-capitalism-communism/>>.

²⁴ F. BERARDI, *Diary of the Psycho-Deflation*, «Verso Books». <<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4600-bifo-diary-of-the-psycho-deflation>>, reprinted in Id., *Fenomenologia della fine*, Roma, Nero, 2020.

²⁵ M. PEZZELLA, *Sarà un 8 settembre?*, «Le parole e le cose», March 11, 2020. <<http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=37917>>.

²⁶ F. PIPERNO, *Il virus del catastrofismo*, «Commonware», February 26, 2020. <<https://sinistrainrete.info/articoli-brevi/17092-franco-piperino-il-virus-del-catastrofismo.html>>:

A fascination with chaos and a gloating anticipation of an imminent collapse of the international order, however, are not confined to far-left circles. Conservative nationalists and ideologues of the European New Right are adamantly certain that the virus, rather than «dismantling» sovereignty, is in fact affirming it. For Alain de Benoist, this might be the end of globalization and the «hegemonic ideology of progress». His analysis is pervaded by a jeering satisfaction:

One was going to transform the earth into an enormous shopping center, suppress all obstacles to free exchange, dissolve borders, replace countries with «territories», and establish the «universal peace» that Kant had predicted. «Archaic» collective identities would be progressively eradicated, and sovereignty would become obsolete...The essence of the system was the end of limits: always more exchanges, always more goods, always more profits to permit money to feed on itself to transform into capital. [...] But now, on top of that, collapse!²⁷

A similar atmosphere of celebration for the end of the «globalist ideology» and the return of patriotism and national sovereignty transpires from other essays appeared in the journal «Telos» and its official blog («TELOScope»),²⁸ from the analyses of the Israeli political theorist Yoram Hazony²⁹ and the French philosopher Michel Onfray,³⁰ and from other right wing intellectuals such as Marcello Veneziani or Marco Gervasoni in Italy.³¹

«Viruses are the closest thing to what we are – opponents of the Western society in which we live. Our goal is to multiply antagonistic and saboteur viruses».

²⁷ A. DE BENOIST, *After COVID*, «TELOScope», April 10, 2020. <<http://www.telospress.com/after-covid/>>. For an even more aggressive tone cfr. F. BOUSQUET, *Biopolitique du coronavirus (3). Sale temps pour les «No border»*, «Éléments», April 15, 2020. <<https://www.revue-elements.com/biopolitique-du-coronavirus-3-sale-temps-pour-les-no-border/>>.

²⁸ R.A. BERMAN, *The Reemergence of the State in the Time of COVID-19*, «TELOScope», April 9, 2020. <<http://www.telospress.com/the-reemergence-of-the-state-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>>. Cfr. also P.-A. TAGUIEFF, *Beyond the Fears of the Pandemic: Reinventing the Nation-State?*, «Telos», 191, 2020, pp. 69-90 (this issue of «Telos» is entirely dedicated to the pandemic).

²⁹ Y. HAZONY, *Ecco perché il Nazionalismo può essere una virtù* (interviewed by V. Combattelli), «L'Occidentale», March 20, 2020. <<https://l'occidentale.it/ecco-perche-il-nazionalismo-puo-essere-una-virtu-intervista-a-yoram-hazony/>>.

³⁰ M. ONFRAY, *C'est ainsi que les régimes tombent* (interviewed by K. Boucaud-Victoire), «Marianne», March 28, 2020. Cfr. also M. MAFFESOLI, *La fin d'un monde n'est pas la fin du monde* (interviewed by S. Bied-Charreton), «Valeurs Actuelles», April 13, 2020. <<https://www.valeursactuelles.com/clubvaleurs/lincorrect/michel-maffesoli-la-fin-dun-monde-nest-pas-la-fin-du-monde-118021>>.

³¹ M. VENEZIANI, *E venne il tempo dell'ordine e della decisione*, «La Verità», March 12, 2020 (Veneziani's articles can be read on his personal website: <<http://www.marcelloveneziani.com/articoli/>>). M. GERVASONI, *La globalizzazione finisce col Covid-19*, «Centro Studi Machiavelli», April 8, 2020. <<https://www.centromachiavelli.com/2020/04/08/la-globalizzazione-finisce-col-covid-19-gervasoni/>>. Cfr. John Gray's view of the «post-liberal» future in: J. GRAY, *Why This Crisis is a Turning Point in History*, «New Statesman», April 1, 2020. <<https://www.newstatesman.com/international/2020/04/why-crisis-turning-point>>.

Darker views surface from the intricate web of identitarian and far-right journals and media outlets stretching from Western Europe to Russia. For one author, this «convergence of catastrophes» is une *bonne nouvelle* because it marks the failure of our atomized «post-democracies» and the success of the «much more holistic» authoritarian societies.³² Inspired by the teachings of René Guénon and Julius Evola, traditionalists present the current crisis as «one of the last stages of Kali Yuga», namely the «iron age» where the world succumbs to matter and «the morbid reign of quantity».³³ «The present cosmic cycle is approaching its end», Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin has announced.³⁴ His anticipation of the approaching spiritual and geopolitical Golden Age exudes a fanatical joy:

One should not be deceived: the world coronavirus pandemic is a turning point in world history. Not only are stock indices and oil prices collapsing, the world order itself is falling. We are living in the period of the end of liberalism and its «obviousness» as global meta-narrative, the end of its measures and standards. Human societies will soon become free floating... Each pole will build its future on its own civilizational foundations. [...] What neither ideologies, nor wars, nor fierce economic battles, nor terror, nor religious movements have been able to do, has been accomplished by an invisible, yet deadly virus. It brought with it death, pain, horror, panic, sorrow... but also the future.³⁵

Given the ferocious resentment of anti-capitalists of all sorts against the undoubtedly naïve belief that, after 1989, there was going to be «no alternative» to capitalism and liberal democracy, it is no wonder that the

history». On conservative nationalist interpretations of the pandemic see P. BERMAN, *The Post-Pandemic Mind*, «Tablet Magazine», May 27, 2020 <<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/post-pandemic-mind-berman>>. For liberal perspectives on the return of the nation-state see Y. TAMIR, *How the Coronavirus Pandemic Resurrected the Nation-state*, «Haaretz», March 27, 2020. <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-how-the-coronavirus-pandemic-resurrected-the-nation-state-1.8716389>>. M. LILLA, *At a Time of Accelerating Globalization, We Need a Stronger and More Effective Government*, «Discourse Magazine», May 14, 2020. <<https://www.discoursemagazine.com/politics/2020/05/14/at-a-time-of-accelerating-globalization-we-need-a-stronger-and-more-effective-government/>>.

³² M. GEOFFROY, *Cinq premiers enseignements à tirer de l'épidémie de coronavirus*, «Polémia», March 24, 2020. <<https://www.polemia.com/cinq-premiers-enseignements-a-tirer-de-lepidemie-de-coronavirus/>>.

³³ S. DESPOT, *Pandémie et post-démocratie*, «Éléments», April 7, 2020. <<https://www.revuelements.com/pandemie-et-post-democratie/>>.

³⁴ Quoted in B. TEITELBAUM, *Covid-19 Is the Crisis Radical «Traditionalists» Have Been Waiting For*, «The Nation», April 8, 2020. <<https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/covid-traditionalist-bannon-putin/>>.

³⁵ A. DUGIN, *Coronavirus and the Horizons of a Multipolar World: The Geopolitical Possibilities of Epidemic*, «Geopolitika.ru», March 17, 2020. <<https://www.geopolitika.ru/en/article/coronavirus-and-horizons-multipolar-world-geopolitical-possibilities-epidemic?fbclid=IwAR-22P6U85lcDKJe2rBmXhGhKTjQPcMcXNs4NuIcWqKu5nE7ivLva0Heme80>>.

political and economic disruption brought by the lockdown has been experienced by many as an intoxicating confutation of that belief. The fact that these intellectuals propose wild-eyed, diverging ‘solutions’ – a world without borders, nations and selfishness or one rigidly divided along ethnic and cultural differences – should not make us blind to their shared enthusiasm for the awaited collapse of the ‘world order’. Their excitement, however, derives in large part from the fact that the virus appears to be doing all the revolutionary work by itself, thereby relieving their sense of impotence and disillusionment or dispensing them from the painful task of elaborating realistic alternatives.

Some radicals, instead, see the virus not as a political ally or a redeemer, but rather frame the pandemic as an opportunity for action, foreseeing tumultuous scenarios. A professor of English at University of California, Davis, for example, seems to have had enough of the academic left’s romance with hermetic theorizing: if we want to survive, he writes, we should «stop fucking around with theory» and «annihilate» the true «sovereign», capitalism.³⁶ Making no secret of the means necessary to achieve their end, others have revived the belief in the regenerative power of political violence: in one way or another, anarchists,³⁷ revolutionary socialists,³⁸ White nationalist «accelerationists»,³⁹ or advocates of rioting⁴⁰ all welcome the chaos created by the pandemic as a path to salvation.

³⁶ J. CLOVER, *The Rise and Fall of Biopolitics. A Response to Bruno Latour*, «Critical Inquiry», March 29, 2020. <<https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/29/the-rise-and-fall-of-biopolitics-a-response-to-bruno-latour/>>.

³⁷ G. SOTIROPOULOS – G. RAY, *Pandemic Dystopias: Biopolitical Emergency and Social Resistance*, «Theory/Void Network News», April 4, 2020. <<https://voidnetwork.gr/2020/04/04/pandemic-dystopias-biopolitical-emergency-and-social-resistance/>>. Cfr. *Surviving the Virus: An Anarchist Guide*, «CrimethInc.», March 18, 2020. <<https://crimethinc.com/2020/03/18/surviving-the-virus-an-anarchist-guide-capitalism-in-crisis-rising-totalitarianism-strategies-of-resistance>>.

³⁸ N. FLAKIN, *Despite Coronavirus, the Class Struggle Continues*, «Left Voice», March 22, 2020. <<https://www.leftvoice.org/despite-coronavirus-the-class-struggle-continues>> («as revolutionary socialists, we are not opposed to placing society on a war footing. [...] In other words, we need to combine the war against corona with a war against the capitalists»). See also S. SCHNEIDER, *#Coronarealität: Die prekäre Illusion des Neoliberalismus und die Ohnmacht des Postmodernismus*, «Klasse Gegen Klasse», August 4, 2020. <<https://www.klassegegenklasse.org/coronarealitaet-die-prekaere-illusion-des-neoliberalismus-und-die-ohnmacht-des-postmodernismus/>>.

³⁹ D. GARTENSTEIN-ROSS *et alii*, *The Growing Threat Posed by Accelerationism and Accelerationist Groups Worldwide*, «Foreign Policy Research Institute», April 20, 2020. <<https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/04/the-growing-threat-posed-by-accelerationism-and-accelerationist-groups-worldwide/>>. These far-right groups believe that acts of mass violence can accelerate racial conflict and lead to the downfall of pluralist societies, on whose ruins an ethno-state can be built.

⁴⁰ V. OSTERWEIL, *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action*, New York, Bold Type Books, 2020 (see p. 13: «riots are violent, extreme, and femme as fuck: they rip, tear, burn, and destroy to give birth to a new world»). Similarly, a cultural theorist – in an apocalyptic essay – has spoken of «protests that sought to destroy the world for the sake of life» (C. COLEBROOK, *Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence: Black Lives Matter and the 2020 Pandemic*, «Bioethical

3. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*

For some, the virtues of the virus go beyond the crossing or dismantling of political borders. Viruses, we are taught, also blur or bridge the boundaries between life and death, human and non-human animals, the self and the other, nature and culture, and society and the environment. The coronavirus is seen here as the harbinger of a regained unity with nature, the confutation of anthropocentrism and Cartesian dualism, and the evidence of the mystical interconnectedness of the whole. To sustain such claims, these authors, often arguing from post-humanist or eco-feminist positions, rely on improvised pastiches of various philosophical traditions – Neoplatonism, Romantic and neo-Romantic vitalism, Renaissance panpsychism, Spinozism – which they reshuffle with some Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger, and postmodernist thinking. They are also fond of the Gaia hypothesis and espouse some of the most radical interpretations of the theory of symbiogenesis as proposed by biologists such as Lynn Margulis and Scott I. Gilbert. Their image of nature emphasizes cooperation over competition and predation, and sees symbiosis, hybridization, and mutual ‘infection’ as essential processes to the origin and propagation of life. Individuals, species, genders, and national borders tend to dissolve into a cosmic, ultra-progressive phantasmagoria of mutual interactions and contaminations.

«Nature», according to philosopher Felice Cimatti, «has no use for our dualism. Nature is the life that lives. Period». In fact, he argues, nature as such «does not exist». What exists are «forms of life mutually infecting each other and living at the expense of other forms of life. It's life, that's why it's terrible».⁴¹ Like any other species of plant or animal, anthropologist Philippe Descola has said, viruses are «our dining companions in the sometimes tragic banquet of life».⁴² «All lives are connected», writes Catherine Price, and «we are now sharing our world with coronavirus». The idea of «human exceptionalism» should be discarded, she contends. What should be embraced, instead, are elusive attitudes and practices that Price – inspired by Donna Haraway – describes as «coming together», «co-evolving», or pursuing «entanglement». In other words, we should think of

Inquiry», 17, 2020, pp. 495-499. <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-020-10024-9>>. On riots as a way to usher in a new, messianic time see D. DI CESARE, *Il tempo della rivolta*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2020. These texts were written after the death of George Floyd and the subsequent series of protests and riots across the world.

⁴¹ F. CIMATTI, *Natura 2.0*, «Atlante», May 10, 2020. <http://www.treccani.it/magazine/atlante/cultura/Natura_2.0.html>.

⁴² P. DESCOLA, *Nous sommes devenus des virus pour la planète* (interviewed by N. Truong), «Le Monde», May 20, 2020. <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/05/20/philippe-descola-nous-sommes-devenus-des-virus-pour-la-planete_6040207_3232.html>.

COVID-19 «as kin».⁴³ Cimatti is convinced that the virus is asking us to «imagine» a world in which the contamination between species, places, and identities is no longer seen as an «exception» to contrast with «practices of immunization and sterilization».⁴⁴ An artist thinks that we should «succumb to the adjacency of being» and «submit» to «life (and love) as vectors of infection»: «identity», he assures, «is a metaphysics that coronavirus so effortlessly cures».⁴⁵

None of these musings seems to place the finding of a cure or a vaccine as a priority. Rather, the hypothesis that key subunits of the eukaryotic cell – like the mitochondrion and the nucleus – have bacterial and viral ancestors seems to be taken by some as an invitation to mystically embrace pathogens. In fact, the appropriate response to the pandemic, for the philosopher Emanuele Coccia, appears to consist in a mixture of wonder, gratitude, and cathartic abandonment to the messianic power of the virus:

The virus represents the way the future exists in the present. The virus, in fact, is a pure force of metamorphosis flowing from life to life without being limited by the boundaries of a body. Free, anarchic, almost immaterial, it does not belong to any individual, and has the capacity to transform all living things and allows them to achieve their singular form. Just think that part of our DNA, probably around 8%, is of viral origin! Viruses are a force for novelty, for modification, for transformation; their potential for invention has played a vital role in evolution. [...] One has to get sick, let oneself be infected, and possibly die, to let life take its course and give birth to the future.⁴⁶

Coccia's regressive enthusiasm for the pre-reflexive life of plants⁴⁷ seems to have temporarily given way to an infatuation with the anarchic transgressions of a «free-roaming aggregate of genetic material» that has brought the most advanced civilization of the history of the planet «to its knees». It is a «liberating» experience, he writes, to finally discard the illu-

⁴³ C. PRICE, *Covid-19: When Species and Data Meet*, «Postdigital Science and Education», August 13, 2020. <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00180-x>>. Cfr. also N.K. HAYLES, *Novel Corona: Posthuman Virus*, «Critical Inquiry», 47, 2021, pp. 68-72, for whom «the pandemic offers an opportunity to rethink the ways in which we can identify with each other and *with life forms radically different from us*» (my emphasis).

⁴⁴ F. CIMATTI, *L'infezione e la vita*, «Fata Morgana WEB», February 3, 2020. <<https://www.fatamorganaweb.it/linfezione-e-la-vita-coronavirus/>>.

⁴⁵ J. CHAPMAN, *Four Weddings*, cit.

⁴⁶ E. COCCIA, *Le virus est une force anarchique de métamorphose* (interviewed by O. Larmagnac-Matheron), «Philosophie Magazine», March 26, 2020. <<https://www.philomag.com/articles/emanuele-coccia-le-virus-est-une-force-anarchique-de-metamorphose>>.

⁴⁷ ID., *La vita delle piante: Metafisica della mescolanza*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2018. For other fashionable postmodernist romanticizations of the «non-conscious intentionality» of plants see M. MARDER, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013.

sory belief that the fate of the Earth depends solely on humans. In fact, «the Earth does not need us to impose novel configurations, invent new forms or change direction».⁴⁸ Luckily for us, the virus is taking charge of the future, thereby dispensing us from the burden of action. We are instead invited to reflect on the fact that the same life circulates among all living beings in a continuous process of metamorphosis in which death is not the end of everything, but the transmission of life to other beings.

While admitting that all necessary measures should be adopted to protect us from the disease, Coccia is also convinced that our societies tend to «suppress» death and to conceptualize «individual life in absolute terms». What solution a non-absolute conception of individual life would entail, we are not told. The same ambiguity surrounds the proposals laid down by Donna Haraway, who, in an esoteric online conversation with Bruno Latour, suggested that we should learn from the «indigenous people» left behind by «colonial capitalism» to «stay with the trouble» and to «live and die in a terrestrial way». Perhaps Haraway's latest book can help us decipher her words. Lest we want to be wiped out by Gaia for our environmental crimes – she writes – we should learn to «practice the arts of living and dying well in multispecies symbiosis», which means blissfully joining the tentacular feast of «metabolic transformations» of all living beings, who «become-with each other, compose and decompose each other [...] in sympoietic tangling».⁴⁹ It is hard to say how these ideas can find an application in the real world, especially during a pandemic. It is at least doubtful, in any case, that people, indigenous or not, are going to be willing to practice the art of «dying well» by «tangling» with lethal viruses or to accept them as «dining companions». To flirt with the

⁴⁸ E. COCCIA, *La Terre peut se débarrasser de nous avec la plus petite de ses créatures*, «Le Monde», April 3, 2020. <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/04/03/emanuele-coccia-la-terre-peut-se-debarrasser-de-nous-avec-la-plus-petite-de-ses-creatures_6035354_3232.html#:~:text=Nous%20avons%20r%C3%AAv%C3%A9%20d%C3%AAtre,plus%20petite%20de%20ses%20cr%C3%A9atures.&text=La%20Terre%20et%20sa%20vie,des%20formes%2C%20changer%20de%20direction>.

⁴⁹ The conversation with Latour was held on May 24, 2020 for «Critical Zones». <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-2r_vI2alg>. For the other quotes, see D.J. HARAWAY, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 56, 98. In Haraway's «speculative fabulation», a «newly habitable world» will follow the end of the Anthropocene and of «modern man» (a product of the «imperializing eighteenth century»): this world will be much less populated than ours and will be inhabited by small, «earthbound» interconnected communities which will also mingle with other creatures to the point of blurring the distinction between the human and the nonhuman (*ivi*, pp. 30-57, 134-168). Haraway's «fabulations» seem as much indebted to her juvenile experiences with the countercultural communes of the 1960s as to her conviction that the latest developments in the life sciences (together with a romanticized version of indigenous wisdom) can provide a *model* for the liberation of humanity from neoliberal individualism and all the evils brought by modern capitalist civilization. See also *A Giant Bumptious Litter: Donna Haraway on Truth, Technology, and Resisting Extinction*, «Logic», 9, December 7, 2019. <<https://logicmag.io/nature/a-giant-bumptious-litter/>>.

idea that they should, as these authors do, sounds to me more like the latest version of anti-humanism than a rejection of anthropocentrism.

4. *Freedom for Death*

Death has been another widespread topic of discussion among intellectuals. In the midst of the tragedy of COVID-19, many have rushed to identify yet another ‘virtue’ of the virus; this time, the argument is that the pandemic has finally forced the arrogant children of modernity – individualist, consumerist, materialist, and spoiled by medical progress – to rediscover their fragility and mortality. Presumably, the proponents of this argument take for granted that their personal encounter with vulnerability will happen in the comfort zone of their home rather than in an intensive care unit. The idea, in any case, is a familiar one: closeness with death has a pedagogic, spiritually transforming role. It is not surprising that this refrain was not confined to religious circles.⁵⁰ It seems, in fact, that what really bothers many lay intellectuals is not so much the concealment of death in our societies – an assumption that is usually taken as a self-evident truth⁵¹ – but its secularization.⁵² However, these reflections can easily take a more sinister turn:

Having severed the cord with the sacred has led to the absolutizing of the individual, and this explains why we behave like foolish children in the face of Coronavirus. [...] The true great epidemic here is our wild and desperate fear. During the plague of 1630 everybody knew that death was not the end of everything. [...] I was recently in India and some local physicians confirmed to me that Mother Teresa was right: the difference between an Easterner and a Westerner is the attitude in the face of death. We Westerners are terrified of it, we no longer know how to die.⁵³

Unfortunately, the author of these lines – a medieval historian – has chosen not to instruct those foolish children of the West on the correct

⁵⁰ For a Catholic perspective, see G. RAVASI, *Il timore genera impegno: sapremo uscirne migliori*, «Il Messaggero», March 12, 2020. <https://www.ilmessaggero.it/vaticano/coronavirus_ravasi_timore_genera_impegno_sapremo_uscirne_migliori_ultime_notizie-5105511.html>.

⁵¹ For a review of criticisms against the «denial of death» narrative see M. ROBERT – L. TRADII, *Do We Deny Death? II. Critiques of the Death-Denial Thesis*, «Mortality», XXIV, 3, 2019, pp. 247-260; T. WALTER, *Death in the Modern World*, London, Sage, 2020.

⁵² Cfr. U. GALIMBERTI, *Coronavirus: Avevamo rimosso il senso della morte, il virus ci costringe a doverlo ritrovare* (interviewed by F. Chiamulera), «Corriere del Veneto», April 5, 2020. <https://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/veneto/cronaca/20_aprile_05/avevamo-rimossoil-senso-morteil-virus-ci-costringea-doverlo-ritrovare-5e6c48a2-7728-11ea-9f8b-2d610433a11a.shtml>.

⁵³ F. CARDINI, *Un tempo contro le epidemie si pregava, oggi si chiudono le chiese* (interviewed by G. Galeazzi), «La Stampa», March 5, 2020. <<https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/it/2020/03/05/news/lo-storico-franco-cardini-un-tempo-contro-le-epidemie-si-pregava-oggi-si-chiudono-le-chiese-1.38553779>>.

way of dying during an epidemic. Many would have surely benefited from this wisdom, especially those who had not visited India recently.⁵⁴ What is certain is that the spectacle of masses of people intent on preserving their life by complying with the imposed restrictions has caused a certain disappointment in a number of intellectuals. This behavior has probably reinforced their belief that, unlike themselves, those masses are either intrinsically cowardly and prone to submission or have been rendered such by the ruling powers – a distinction that can easily become blurred.⁵⁵ Giorgio Agamben has expressed his horror at what he describes as a society that does not believe in anything but biological «survival» and the «naked life», a life that «must be saved at all costs».⁵⁶ He accuses his compatriots – a «rarefied» and «passive mass» – of having readily sacrificed all their freedoms out of fear of death. By doing so, however, they have played into the hands of a biopolitical alliance between the ruling powers and the medical establishment, which have «invented» an epidemic in order to impose unprecedented control measures over the population, thereby creating a permanent «state of exception».⁵⁷

A haughty contempt for people's basic desire to stay alive has emerged in authors of different, if not opposite, ideological backgrounds. There seems to be a growing convergence on this issue. These authors describe our societies either as «therapeutic»,⁵⁸ «cowardly»,⁵⁹ dominated by a «sur-

⁵⁴ For the fear, the mad despair and horrifying sufferings of those who experienced the plague of 1630 see for example C.M. CIPOLLA, *Cristofano e la peste*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1976, pp. 7-23. Childish foolishness goes a long way back, apparently. As for Mother Theresa's ambivalent attitudes toward the pain of others see S. LARIVÉE et alii, *Les côtés ténébreux de Mère Teresa*, «Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses», XLII, 2013, pp. 319-345.

⁵⁵ For examples of despise for the «voluntary servitude» of the masses see M. PEZZELLA, *Sarà un 8 settembre?*, cit.; R. MANZOTTI, *Una morte un po' peggiore*, «Doppiozero», July 15, 2020. <<https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/una-morte-un-po-pegiore>>.

⁵⁶ G. AGAMBEN, *Riflessioni sulla peste*, «Quodlibet», March 27, 2020. <<https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-riflessioni-sulla-peste>>. Agamben's essays on the pandemic can be read on his personal blog hosted by his publisher's website: <<https://www.quodlibet.it/una-voce-giorgio-agamben>>. Some of them have also been published in G. AGAMBEN, *A che punto siamo?*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2020.

⁵⁷ G. AGAMBEN, *L'invenzione di un'epidemia*, «Quodlibet», February 26, 2020. <<https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>> (also published in «Il Manifesto», February 25, 2020). Twentieth-century critics of mass society rarely stood out for their willingness to trace a clear distinction between democratic societies and totalitarian ones. This does not seem to be a specialty of «Italian Theory» either. This time, however, even some of Agamben's fellow travelers have openly dissociated themselves from his views: cfr. R. ESPOSITO, *Curati a oltranza*, «Antinomie», February 28, 2020. <<https://antinomie.it/index.php/2020/02/28/curati-a-oltranza/>>; S. FORTI, *Pandemonium*, «Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici», May 5, 2020.

⁵⁸ G. LEGHISSA, *Politiche della spiritualità*, «Doppiozero», May 10, 2020. <<https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/politiche-della-spiritualita>>.

⁵⁹ M. VENEZIANI, *Il virus della paura globale*, «Panorama», 7, 2020. <<https://www.marcelloveneziani.com/articoli/il-virus-della-paura-globale/>>.

vival hysteria»,⁶⁰ or as «gigantic sanitized hospital[s]». ⁶¹ They think that science and secularization have ushered in a materialistic «idolatry of life» and that life itself has been deprived of its spiritual component, robbed of its freedom and reduced to a biological condition – the «naked life». ⁶² They believe that this «animal»⁶³ life is enforced and controlled by the political powers and that «not to die»⁶⁴ has become the supreme value. Seeing the lockdown as the exacerbation of this dynamic, they assert that «survival is not true life»,⁶⁵ ask themselves if «this very long but empty life we are fighting for now is worth more than an intensely short life»,⁶⁶ or question the idea that we «must at all costs “save lives”». ⁶⁷ *Primum vivere?* they wonder.⁶⁸ In sum, they believe that we have accepted all the restricting measures precisely because our modern societies had already imposed or chosen biological existence over ‘true life’. This is usually seen as the culmination of a process of social, political, and spiritual decline caused by the eclipse of the sacred

⁶⁰ B.C. HAN, *La società del virus tra Stato di polizia e isteria della sopravvivenza*, «Avvenire», April 7, 2020. <<https://www.avvenire.it/agera/pagine/byung-chul-han-filosofo-coronavirus-cina-corea-stato-di-polizia>>.

⁶¹ F. Jullien, quoted in N. TRUONG, *La pandémie de Covid-19, une extraordinaire matière à penser qui bouleverse la philosophie politique*, «Le Monde», June 5, 2020. <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/06/05/la-pandemie-de-covid-19-une-extraordinaire-matiere-a-penser-qui-bouleverse-la-philosophie-politique_6041827_3232.html>. Usually, the fact that many of those in charge of the ‘therapy’ died or risked their lives to assist Covid-19 patients is conveniently left out of this narrative.

⁶² O. REY, *Pourquoi le coronavirus suscite-t-il notre effroi?* (interviewed by B. d’Otreppe), «La Libre», July 15, 2020. <<https://www.lalibre.be/debats/chronique-redaction/pourquoi-le-coronavirus-suscite-t-il-notre-effroi-5f0dcfc49978e246193f4239>>. Cfr. A. BIDAR, *Cesser d’exister pour rester en vie?*, «Libération», May 4, 2020. <https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/05/04/cesser-d-exister-pour-rester-en-vie_1787284>; F. BOUSQUET, *Biopolitique du coronavirus (1). La leçon de Michel Foucault*, «Éléments», April 9, 2020. <<https://www.revue-elements.com/biopolitique-du-coronavirus-1-la-lecon-de-michel-foucault/>>.

⁶³ M. VENEZIANI, *Gli italiani, animali spaventati*, «La Verità», May 8, 2020. <<http://www.marcelloveneziani.com/articoli/gli-italiani-animale-spaventati/>>.

⁶⁴ V. COSTA, *La società a zero morte*, «Facebook», May 23, 2020. <<https://www.facebook.com/vincenzo.costa.79025/posts/146557090326945>>. Cfr. M. TARCHI, *Una società di monadi*, «Diorama», 353, April 4, 2020. <<http://www.diorama.it/una-societa-di-monadi/>>.

⁶⁵ F. Jullien, quoted in TRUONG, *La pandémie de Covid-19*, cit.

⁶⁶ L. CAFFO, *Dopo il Covid-19. Punti per una discussione*, cit.. Cfr. ID., *Manifesto per un dopo che era un prima*, cit., where he distinguishes a life «worth living, even if short» – that of the coming new race of heroic post-humans – from the «unworthy and long survival» of ordinary modern humans. Cfr. G. LEGHISSA, *Politiche della spiritualità*, cit.: «Is a life truly worth living worth more than the naked life [...], than a life reduced to mere survival?».

⁶⁷ D. CAYLEY, *Questions About the Current Pandemic from the Point of View of Ivan Illich*, «Quodlibet», April 8, 2020. <<https://www.quodlibet.it/david-cayley-questions-about-the-current-pandemic-from-the-point>>. This article was hosted by Agamben on his blog.

⁶⁸ P. BECCHI, *Primum vivere?*, «Libero», April 2, 2020. <<https://paolococchi.wordpress.com/2020/04/02/primum-vivere/>>.

and the sanctification of science and technology and by the proliferation, within liberal societies, of individualism, materialism, and consumerism. The real illness, for these authors, is people's enslavement to their desire to stay alive, and the fear of death is the real pandemic.⁶⁹

But what does it mean to claim that we live in a «survival society»? Does it mean that its members no longer truly live, but only survive? Does this diagnosis imply that its allegedly anti-totalitarian proponents feel entitled to distinguish between what is true life and what is not? And on what basis? Are they also going to distinguish those who truly live from those who simply exist? And what is the value of «a life reduced to mere survival» for a critic of these societies? Is this kind of life worth saving at all? It is one thing to express concern over the social, economic, legal, political, and psychological consequences of the lockdown and a prolonged state of emergency. It is quite another to present as mere «survival» or even as a «living death»⁷⁰ any type of life that does not correspond to one's political or existential standards. But what are these critics proposing we should do, concretely, to break free from biopolitical control and live a full life? If fear of death is our true illness, then what is the cure?

On this matter, if they address it all, they tend to become vague. My impression is that, for many of them, the capacity to truly live goes together with – or finds its culmination in – a capacity to *truly die*.⁷¹ The historical roots of this view are tangled. The ancient and immensely influential idea that to be a philosopher means to prepare for death certainly plays a role. An even more important role is played by the painful awareness, shared by many of these authors, of the demise, in our medicalized and thanatophobic societies, of the Christian *ars moriendi* and the values connected to it.⁷² However, there is more. Given their fascination with thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, and Martin Heidegger – whom they recombine with Michel Foucault and Ivan Illich – my sense is that some of these critics of «biopolitics» and «survival societies» have also readapted (and de-militarized) a number of ideas and attitudes that were

⁶⁹ For modern life as mere «survival» see G. AGAMBEN, *L'uso dei corpi*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2014, pp. 16, 267-268.

⁷⁰ V. COSTA, *La società a zero morte*, cit. For Han the lockdown is a «liberal version of the lager», while citizens risk ending up «being like the virus, this undead that just reproduces itself and survives without living» (B.C. HAN, *La società del virus*, cit.).

⁷¹ Cfr. S. CRITCHLEY, *To Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die*, «The New York Times», April 11, 2020: «A life lived well, a philosophical life, is one that welcomes death's approach». <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/opinion/covid-philosophy-anxiety-death.html>>.

⁷² Cfr. M. MAFFESOLI, *Big Brother: et le Coronavirus mit à nu la «populophobie» d'élites en faille*, «Atlantico», May 7, 2020. <<https://www.atlantico.fr/decryptage/3589397/big-brother-et-le-coronavirus-mit-a-nu-la-populophobie-d-elites-en-faillite-etat-citoyens-coronavirus-covid-19-confinement-masques-michel-maffesoli>>.

popular in Europe in the first decades of the 20th century (especially in the interwar period): the yearning for communal life, the attraction for «limit situations», the idea that it is only by facing one's death that «freedom» and «authenticity» are achieved, the nostalgia for heroism, the aversion to utilitarianism and to the «bourgeois utopia of security».⁷³

I tend to agree with Francescomaria Tedesco when he writes that Agamben's argument is not really a vitalistic call to rebellion, but «an aristocratic challenge that implies a beautiful death». By surrendering to the disease and to death, Agamben's imaginary martyr overcomes fear and re-appropriates his destiny. For Tedesco, this is a «reactionary» «neco-politics», where «reactionary» should not be «grossly misunderstood» as «right-wing», but as «antimodern».⁷⁴ I don't know if right-wing intellectuals like Marcello Veneziani «grossly misunderstood» Agamben's views, but they surely sensed an affinity with them. I believe this affinity has to do not so much with the idea of surrendering, but with a tragic-heroic conception of the human life, where only those who «learn how to die» in order to «unlearn how to serve»⁷⁵ can escape fear and the enslaving grip of «biopower». This conception emerges clearly in Veneziani's slogans, such as *amor fati*, «serene realism», «entrusting oneself to fate», «virile courage against viral fear» and «community».⁷⁶

Perhaps we should remind ourselves of the disquieting «genealogy» of these ideas when we hear citizens of liberal democracies defined as «docile bodies» enslaved to their biological needs and no longer able to truly live and die – and we should ask these critics how they plan to liberate them,

⁷³ Cfr. D. LOSURDO, *La comunità, la morte, l'Occidente: Heidegger e l'ideologia della guerra*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1991, pp. 3-23, 45-52.

⁷⁴ F. TEDESCO, «*Invocando di vivere, scopro che cerco di morire*». *Giorgio Agamben e la pandemia*, «MicroMega. Il rasoio di Occam», April 10, 2020. <<http://www.sifp.it/pdf/Tedesco.pdf>>. Agamben's model for this «sacrificial passion», for Tedesco, is the philosophy of Georges Bataille.

⁷⁵ Agamben has quoted Montaigne's words in G. AGAMBEN, *Distanziamento sociale*, «Quodlibet», April 6, 2020. <<https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-distanziamento-sociale>>. I think they should be interpreted in light of Agamben's Heideggerian reflections in *Id.*, *Che cos'è la paura?*, «Quodlibet», July 13, 2020.

⁷⁶ M. VENEZIANI, *Il virus della paura globale*, cit. Veneziani has also praised Agamben for elevating «spiritual life» above the biological one and for recalling Montaigne's words (*Id.*, *Dal Coronavirus alla dittatura sanitaria: il passo è stato breve*, «Barbadillo», August 2, 2020. <<https://www.barbadillo.it/92461-il-puntodim-veneziani-dal-coronavirus-alla-dittatura-sanitaria-il-passo-e-stato-breve/>>). To be sure, the identitarian and patriotic community envisaged by Veneziani has little to do with Agamben's «coming community» (cfr. G. AGAMBEN, *La comunità che viene*, Torino, Einaudi, 1990, pp. 42-44). The warm reception of Agamben's essays in right-wing circles has been rarely addressed. Other examples: F. BORGONOVO, *Manuale di resistenza al regime sanitario*, «La Verità», July 9, 2020. <<https://www.laverita.info/manuale-di-resistenza-al-regime-sanitario-2646368457.html>>; J.G. VUJIC, *Coronavirus: le retour de «la grande peur des bienpensants»*, «Polémia», April 5, 2020. <<https://www.polemia.com/coronavirus-le-retour-de-la-grande-peur-des-bien-pensants/>>. To be noted is also the fortune of the notion of biopolitics among European New Right ideologues (so far, the journal «Éléments» has dedicated 14 essays to the topic *biopolitique du coronavirus*, all written by the editor in chief F. Bousquet).

concretely, from this condition. Luckily, the critics do not seem to see war as a way to conquer «freedom for death», as those interwar intellectuals did. Apparently, a pandemic will work just as fine, especially if this heroic feat is accomplished in the domain of imagination.⁷⁷

5. *Estrangement*

In many interpreters of the pandemic, the conviction of having reached an epochal turning point has often been accompanied by feelings of estrangement from everyday reality, from their own societies, or even from their own bodies. The immobile and rarefied atmosphere of the lockdown has contributed – together with an increased reliance on digital technology – to a variety of impressions, including derealization, disorientation, dream, dematerialization, theatricality, duplications of reality, and a blending of truth and falsehood. To avoid contagion, a philosopher has observed, we had to «re-learn» how to perform self-consciously actions that, in our previous lives, used to flow automatically. The feeling, therefore, is one of acting on a stage, and the present life is experienced as a parody or a simulation of the previous one.⁷⁸ «To what extent am I really living my life? Is it still myself or are these just rituals and enforced behaviors?» novelist Olga Tokarczuk has wondered.⁷⁹ At the same time, the necessity of social distancing, the recourse to digital communication, and the wearing of face masks have triggered fears of disembodiment, self-absorption, loss of empathy, and social disintegration.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ There have been of course many cases – not discussed here – in which the restrictions were criticized or openly disobeyed by individuals, organized groups or high-profile politicians not out of a fascination with death but because of indifference, egoism, skepticism, libertarian beliefs or adherence to conspiracy theories. However, the interactions or the encounters between ‘high’ and ‘low’ conspiratorial narratives of various ideological provenance would deserve more attention: in Italy, for example, comedian Enrico Montesano’s Youtube reading of one of Agamben’s pandemic pieces has been viewed more than five thousand times. On the convergences between far-right and far-left protests and narratives (with reference to Agamben’s reception) see M. CHRISTOU, *COVID-19 Has Exposed the Odd Conspiracy Links Between Left and Right*, «Open Democracy», May 13, 2020. <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/covid-19-has-exposed-odd-conspiracy-links-between-left-and-right/>>; M. BAUMGÄRTNER *et alii*, *Protests in Germany See Fringe Mix with the Mainstream*, «Der Spiegel», May 14, 2020. <<https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-corona-conspiracy-theorists-protests-in-germany-see-fringe-mix-with-the-mainstream-a-8a9d5822-8944-407a-980a-d58e9d6b4aec>>.

⁷⁸ R. RONCHI, *Il teatro del virus*, «Doppiozero», May 15, 2020. <<https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/il-teatro-del-virus>>. From a conspiratorial perspective, instead, Maffesoli (M. MAFFESOLI, *Big Brother*, cit.) has defined mask-wearing and social distancing as a «pantomime» and a «masquerade» enforced by the political and economic elites in order to preserve their control.

⁷⁹ O. TOKARCZUK, *Greta, ora dovremo ascoltarci* (interviewed by M. Nogaś), «La Repubblica», April 28, 2020. <https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/robinson/2020/04/27/newsolga_tokarczuk_greta_ora_dovremo_ascoltarti_-254811705/>.

⁸⁰ Cfr. for example M. MARZANO, *Come possiamo ritrovare l’empatia anche senza sfiorarci*, «La

These feelings have taken various forms – not all of them extreme, to be sure – but the celerity and intensity with which they have been articulated suggest that they largely predated the crisis, which should be seen as the occasion for their intensification or re-emergence rather than as their real cause. When reading these texts, it soon becomes clear that these widespread impressions have often been experienced as the culmination of long-lasting processes or as an anticipation of the future life. Dematerialization, isolation, disembodiment, together with what the author of *The Elementary Particles* has called a growing «obsolescence» of human relations,⁸¹ are seen as the product of capitalism, the «society of spectacle», biopolitics, neoliberalism, or the diffusion of digital technology.⁸² «Entering quarantine», a psychiatrist has remarked, «has been relatively easy for our [...] semi-dematerialized bodies. Will it be just as easy to get out of it?».⁸³

It seems that to many of these intellectuals the life preceding the pandemic had already appeared as profoundly (if not irremediably) flawed and existentially unsatisfying – either false, unfair, fictional, disorienting, alienated, or a combination of these qualities. It is no wonder that the refrain that our normality was «the problem» or was «not normal at all» has become so popular. According to a young writer, for example, the quarantined life «eerily» resembles life before the pandemic, and is nothing but an «amplification» or a «caricature» of an «atomized» and «already-alienated form of life».⁸⁴ «Suddenly», a philosopher has written, the world we used to inhabit appears as the «utopia» that it always was, a «well-devised simulation» capable of appearing «more real than our miserable reality», but actually founded on our voracious consumerism, natural exploitation, and alienation.⁸⁵

Repubblica», May 12, 2020. <https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/commento/2020/05/12/news/michela_marzano_anaffettivita_e_coronavirus_mascherine_e_sguardi-256320163/>.

⁸¹ M. HOUELLEBECQ, *Je ne crois pas aux déclarations du genre «rien ne sera plus jamais comme avant»*, «France inter», May 4, 2020. <<https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/lettres-d-interieur/lettres-d-interieur-04-mai-2020>>.

⁸² Cfr. for example C. RIVERA GARZA, *Touching Is a Verb: The Hands of the Pandemic and the Inescapable Questions*, «3:AM Magazine», May 14, 2020. <<https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/touching-is-a-verb-the-hands-of-the-pandemic-and-the-inescapable-questions/>>; S. ORBACH, *Patterns of Pain: What Covid-19 Can Teach Us About How to Be Human*, «The Guardian», May 7, 2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/may/07/patterns-of-pain-covid-19-psychotherapy-susie-orbach-bodies>>.

⁸³ G. STANGHELLINI, *Streaming Bodies*, «Psychiatry Online», May 3, 2020. <<http://www.psychiatryonline.it/node/8654>>.

⁸⁴ A.J. HUSENBETH, *The Quarantine Subject and the Pandemic Spectacle*, «Critical Edges», April 11, 2020. <<https://criticaledges.com/2020/04/11/the-quarantine-subject/>>.

⁸⁵ G. CUOZZO, *La banalità virale. Quando interpretare il mondo risulta impossibile*, «Labont», April 7, 2020. <<https://labontblog.com/2020/04/07/la-banalita-virale-quando-interpretare-il-mondo-risulta-impossibile/>>.

These common perceptions, in fact, echo some of the most classic twentieth-century criticisms of modern industrial societies. Not surprisingly, panegyric references to Guy Debord's and Jean Baudrillard's prophetic insights – and to the movie *The Matrix* – have become common currency among commentators of all stripes. For some, the current crisis has finalized the merger between fiction and reality set in motion by the advent of the «society of spectacle».⁸⁶ Others, instead, while sharing a similar diagnosis of our present condition, think that the crisis has provided a chance to unmask the lie and rip through the veil of illusions. This «estrangement from everyday reality», a philosopher has argued, should be counted among the «virtues» of the virus, because it possesses a «revolutionary» potential.⁸⁷ For others, the greatest risk now is to be manipulated back into the old normality by politicians and corporations.⁸⁸ In other cases, a renewed consciousness of our fragility or increasing isolation has been presented as an awakening from a deep sleep or a «dogmatic slumber»;⁸⁹ on a similar line, many authors have emphasized how the 'great pause' has allowed them to finally see our societies, lifestyles and political-economic regime under a different light, namely as unsustainable, mad or absurd.

These epiphanies, however, have rarely developed into lucid assessments, well-aimed criticisms, or feasible proposals.⁹⁰ More often, the flip side of this alleged new awareness is a propensity to update one's version of cultural pessimism and engage in rancorous tirades against modern civilization as a whole or against major aspects of it. To many, the pandemic appeared as the latest catastrophic consequence of the development of modern science, capitalism, liberalism or the Enlightenment (painted as monolithic and undifferentiated entities). Whether modernity is conceived as intrinsically evil or as doomed to dialectically pervert its foundational liberating values (but these two views can easily merge), the final diagnosis is the same: thanks to globalization, the West is dragging the rest of the planet in its self-destructive decline. Thus, different voices have intoned

⁸⁶ Cfr. A. RABBITO, *Storie virali. Le immagini, l'infodemia e l'incertezza*, «Atlante», May 5, 2020. <http://www.treccani.it/magazine/atlante/cultura/Storie_virali_immagini_infodemia.html>.

⁸⁷ R. RONCHI, *Il teatro del virus*, cit.

⁸⁸ J.V. GAMBUTO, *Prepare for the Ultimate Gaslighting*, «Medium», April 10, 2020. <<https://forge.medium.com/prepare-for-the-ultimate-gaslighting-6a8ce3f0a0e0>>. According to «Medium», this essay was read by over 20 million people.

⁸⁹ P.A. ROVATTI, *In Virus Veritas*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2020, p. 7.

⁹⁰ For some exceptions, see – from different angles – F. ZAKARIA, *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*, cit.; F. DEI, *Quando siamo scesi dal mondo per un momento*, «Testimonianze», DXXX-II-DXXXIII, 2020, pp. 22-27; D. RODRIK, *Globalisation After Covid-19: My Plan for a Rewired Planet*, «Prospect Magazine», May 4, 2020. <<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/dani-rodrik-globalisation-trade-coronavirus-who-imf-world-bank>>.

very similar choruses, in which modern humans are described as victims of their Promethean ambitions, their «distorted Cartesian relationship with nature»,⁹¹ their «suicidal globalization»,⁹² and their predatory anthropocentrism. «Icarus», a sociologist has remarked, is «the avatar of Prometheus».⁹³ For another author, the heirs of the Enlightenment, with their naïve faith in scientific and technological progress, have «placed a rope» around their necks.⁹⁴ «Modernity – for another – has been an interminable war on life».⁹⁵ The forces that dominate this world appear inescapable: consumerism is the «totalitarianism of our times»,⁹⁶ and the «commodification of the world» is «passively accepted by the beguiled and submissive masses».⁹⁷

Conspiratorial narratives abound: a philosopher has the «distinct feeling» that we are dominated by a «handful of elites», who hide «behind the scenes of an apparently democratic theatrical set» and blindly pursue growth just to stay afloat.⁹⁸ From the opposite side of the political spectrum, a novelist claims that these elites, in order to mask the impending catastrophe, have built, in cahoots with the digital powers and the entertainment industry, «a parallel universe, an immense “Potemkin village” with sedative purposes».⁹⁹ Others go even further and – following the usual Foucauldian script – describe practices like hand-washing, social distancing, the wearing of face masks and online meetings as «only the superficial marks of a deeper, more insidious, and thoroughgoing process of organization and control».¹⁰⁰

⁹¹ E. PULCINI, *Cinque domande sullo scenario futuro*, «Doppiozero», May 13, 2020. <<https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/cinque-domande-sullo-scenario-futuro-4>>.

⁹² M. GABRIEL, *We Need a Metaphysical Pandemic*, March 26, 2020. <<https://www.uni-bonn.de/news/we-need-a-metaphysical-pandemic>>.

⁹³ M. MAFFESOLI, *La fin d'un monde*, cit.

⁹⁴ M. FINI, *Virus, la decrescita «infelice» e necessaria*, «Il Fatto Quotidiano», March 5, 2020. <<https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/in-edicola/articoli/2020/03/05/virus-la-decrescita-infelice-e-necessaria/5726178/>>; cfr. also P. ERCOLANI, *Il virus ci ha dichiarato guerra, svelando un Occidente smidollato*, «L'Espresso», March 25, 2020. <<http://lurtodelpensiero.blogautore.espresso.repubblica.it/2020/03/25/un-virus-ci-ha-dichiarato-guerra-svelando-un-occidente-smidollato/>>.

⁹⁵ A. MBEMBE, *The Universal Right to Breathe*, «Critical Inquiry», April 13, 2020. <<https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/>>.

⁹⁶ F.V. TOMMASI, *La libertà come cura*, «L'osservatore romano», April 3, 2020. <<https://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/2020-04/la-liberta-come-cura.html>>.

⁹⁷ S. LATOUCHE, *Sogno un mondo che impari dalla decrescita* (interviewed by A. Gnoli), «Robinson – La Repubblica», March 21, 2020. <<https://www.c3dem.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/sogno-un-mondo-che-impari-dalla-DECRESITA-INT-S.-LATOUCHE-ROBINSON.pdf>>.

⁹⁸ E. PULCINI, *Cinque domande*, cit. Cfr. F. SCHEIDLER, *Il faut démonter le capitalisme mondial*, «France culture», October 23, 2020. <<https://www.franceculture.fr/societe/fabian-scheidler-il-faut-demonter-le-capitalisme-mondial>>.

⁹⁹ S. DESPOT, *Pandémie et post-démocratie*, cit. Cfr. E. CAMURRI, *Controllati dalla paura*, «Il Foglio», March 27, 2020. <<https://www.ilfoglio.it/2666/2020/02/27/news/controllati-dalla-paura-303769/>>.

¹⁰⁰ D.L. COUCH *et alii*, *COVID-19-Extending Surveillance and the Panopticon*, «Bioeth-

Life in capitalist societies is painted nihilistically as a «comforting recycling of crowded days» and a «relentless urge of suicidal self-destruction»,¹⁰¹ a «desolate» and «endless circularity»,¹⁰² a blinding «whirlwind» spinning around an all-devouring and enslaving «furnace». ¹⁰³ No wonder that the quarantine has been experienced by many as a liberation from this senseless drama:

We have learned, apparently, to appreciate silence and solitude after a long hang-over of exteriority; we have plunged into our inner regions, which were mostly sacrificed to our hedonism and compulsive drive to appear; we have rediscovered the existence of the 'other' with an amazement and even a somewhat rhetorical euphoria, as always happens with the return of the repressed. But now the question is: how long will this awakening last?¹⁰⁴

Penitential or mystical retreats from a reality experienced as disorienting, materialistic and alienating have been a common temptation during the quarantine. «This terrible disaster», an MIT physicist has written, «has freed us from the prison of our time-driven lives». It is a precious opportunity for a «restoration of our inner selves». ¹⁰⁵ Another has likened social distancing to «what the mystics used to call “Khalvat” – contemplative solitude, a solitary confinement within our own souls». ¹⁰⁶ «We have to become our own shaman», an anthropologist has written. ¹⁰⁷ For Dugin, the «plague» is a call to stay with «our immortal soul» and to shut ourselves off from our constant absorption in «pleasure-seeking and constant swarming around material goods». ¹⁰⁸ For a literary critic, the lockdown is a chance to rediscover what a

ical Inquiry», 17, 2020, pp. 809-814. This analysis applies to both democratic and authoritarian countries.

¹⁰¹ H. DABASHI, *One Day and One Dream in the Life of a Self-Isolating New Yorker*, «Aljazeera», April 15, 2020. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/day-dream-life-isolating-yorker-200415174525565.html>>.

¹⁰² A. FINKIELKRAUT, *Le nihilisme n'a pas encore vaincu, nous demeurons une civilisation* (interviewed by E. Bastié), «Le Figaro», March 26, 2020. <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/alain-finkelkraut-le-nihilisme-n-a-pas-encore-vaincu-nous-demeurons-une-civilisation-20200326>>.

¹⁰³ A. ZHOK, *L'homo oeconomicus può ancora imparare qualcosa dalle catastrofi?*, «L'Elzeviro», March 5, 2020. <<https://www.elzeviro.eu/elzeviro/lhomo-oeconomicus-puo-ancora-imparare-qualcosa-dalle-catastrofi.html/amp>>.

¹⁰⁴ E. PULCINI, *Cinque domande*, cit. As I review the proofs of this essay, I am saddened to learn that on April 9, 2021 Elena Pulcini has died from COVID-19.

¹⁰⁵ A. LIGHTMAN, *The Virus Is a Reminder of Something Lost Long Ago*, «The Atlantic», April 1, 2020. <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/coronavirus-is-changing-habits-of-mind/609181/>>.

¹⁰⁶ H. DABASHI, *One Day*, cit.

¹⁰⁷ M. TAUSSIG, *Would a Shaman Help?*, «Critical Inquiry», March 30, 2020. <<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/711430>>.

¹⁰⁸ A. DUGIN, *Thoughts During the Plague*, cit.

truly «ritual articulation of time» feels like.¹⁰⁹ A neo-monastic zeal and a nostalgia for the sacred seem to have conquered the minds of many. It is often hard to tell secular from religious voices. Perhaps Daniel Bell was right when he wrote that «the real problem of modernity is the problem of belief».¹¹⁰

6. *Nature is Healing*¹¹¹

«A sense of justice», historian of medicine Mirko Grmek has written, «prevented men of old from believing that diseases had afflicted mankind from the start. Such a terrible prerequisite of the human condition could only be due to a moral error committed by man himself».¹¹² Even a cursory exploration of the COVID-19 literature reveals that this belief is not confined to «men of old». A widespread tendency is to identify in the disease a meaning, a message, a warning, or a punishment directed specifically at us humans. Typically, these kinds of explanations are put forth – sometimes in a very aggressive tone – by religious leaders or extremists who think that the virus is a god-sent punishment directed at a sinful humanity or at specific groups of people (homosexuals, unbelievers, pro-abortionists, blasphemers, Jews, Western «crusaders», etc.). But this tendency is not only a reflex of the religiously minded.¹¹³ Others have simply replaced God with nature – an all-powerful entity that, like the God of the monotheistic religions, oscillates between love and fury, between forgiveness and implacable revenge. In some cases, this idea has been explicitly theorized: «What a reactionary political theology viewed as God’s scourge could be also interpreted, in secular terms, as a punishment ordered by nature», an historian has remarked.¹¹⁴

«Nature is sending us a message», UN environment chief Inger Andersen has said. «We need to hear what nature is trying to tell us», echoed Aaron Bernstein of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. What «Mother Nature [...] is telling us», according to virologist Ilaria Capua, is that «we

¹⁰⁹ A. ERCOLANI, *Pandemia e sacralità* (interviewed by F. Bove), «Nazione indiana», April 30, 2020. <<https://www.nazioneindiana.com/2020/04/30/intervista-ercolani/>>.

¹¹⁰ D. BELL, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, New York, Basic Books, 1978, p. 28.

¹¹¹ A longer version of this section originally appeared in Croatian on the web page of the Zagreb Institute of Philosophy on May 18, 2020, with the title *Advokati virusa*. <https://www.ifzg.hr/2020/05/18/advokati_virusa-martino_rossi_monti/>.

¹¹² M.D. GRMEK, *Diseases in the Ancient Greek World*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, pp. 4-5.

¹¹³ Nor is it shared by all religious people of course. For a criticism of these attitudes from a Catholic perspective, see E. BIANCHI, *Dio ci è accanto, ma spetta a noi lottare col virus*, «La Stampa», May 17, 2020.

¹¹⁴ E. TRAVERSO, *Home Thoughts for New Times*, «Verso Books», May 8, 2020. <<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4699-home-thoughts-for-new-times>>.

can't go on like this». ¹¹⁵ Others have spoken of a «revolt of nature». ¹¹⁶ «This current pandemic», proclaimed filmmaker Michael Moore, «is simply mother nature giving us a gentle warning»: if we don't stop trying to «choke» Earth to death, we will soon taste her «awful revenge». ¹¹⁷ «The earth does not forgive», Pope Francis has said on Earth Day, and «if we have despoiled the earth, its response will be very ugly». ¹¹⁸ The perspectives from which statements like these are made can vary greatly, but the general assumption seems to be that at the root of recent events lies not only a complex of empirical factors and human responsibilities that we need to disentangle and tackle, but also a sort of collective guilt that must be expiated. ¹¹⁹ The «most disturbing» lesson of the pandemic, for Slavoj Žižek, is that «when nature is attacking us with viruses, it is in a way sending our own message back to us. The message is: what you did to me, I am now doing to you». ¹²⁰

The theme allows for a number of variations. Some have acquired quasi-prophetic skills: «He who reads much recognizes, or think he can recognize, symbols and paradigms in the events», writes novelist and poet Erri De Luca, ¹²¹ who has been spending his mornings translating passages of the Old Testament about the life of the prophet Elijah. ¹²² This immersion in the Book of Kings seems to have triggered a process of identification.

¹¹⁵ I. CAPUA, *La natura potrà salvarci* (interviewed by G.L. Bauzano), «Corriere della Sera», May 21, 2020. <https://www.corriere.it/sette/attualita/20_maggio_21/su-7-parla-virologia-ilaria-capua-la-natura-potra-salvarci-c87c623a-9ad3-11ea-b9b1-0c64bed81692.shtml>.

¹¹⁶ E. LIOTTA – M. CLEMENTI, *La rivolta della natura*, Milano, La Nave di Teseo, 2020.

¹¹⁷ M. MOORE, *We Are in a Planetary Emergency*, «Facebook», May 5, 2020. <<https://www.facebook.com/mmflint/posts/10156865580936857>>.

¹¹⁸ POPE FRANCIS, *General Audience*, «Library of the Apostolic Palace», April 22, 2020. <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200422_udienza-generale.html>.

¹¹⁹ The absolute confidence with which these arguments have been propounded starkly contrasts with the enduring uncertainty surrounding the origin of the virus. As of May 2021, the issue still remains unresolved, especially due to the lack of transparency by the Chinese authorities. Calls for further investigation have increased following the patchy and rather inconclusive China-WHO joint study. The US, the UK, the European Union and other nations have all demanded more clarity on the matter. For a group of distinguished COVID-19 researchers, «we must take hypotheses about both natural and laboratory spillovers seriously until we have sufficient data» (J.D. BLOOM *et alii*, *Investigate the origins of COVID-19*, letter published in «Science», 372, 6543, p. 694, May 14, 2021).

¹²⁰ S. ŽIŽEK, *Monitor and Punish? Yes, Please!*, «The Philosophical Salon», March 16, 2020. <<http://thephilosophicalsalon.com/monitor-and-punish-yes-please/>>.

¹²¹ E. DE LUCA, *Perché la natura ci soffoca*, «La Repubblica», March 18, 2020. <https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/commento/2020/03/17/news/perche_la_natura_ci_soffoca-251569264/>.

¹²² ID., *Le confinement nous ouvre les yeux sur un printemps précoce* (interviewed by F. Cheyrou), «La Croix», March 28, 2020. <<https://www.la-croix.com/Culture/Erri-Luca-Le-confinement-nous-ouvre-yeux-printemps-precoce-2020-03-28-1201086580>>.

«The deadly pneumonia that suffocates our breath», De Luca warns, «mirrors the human expansion that suffocates the environment. The sick person asks for air and help on behalf of himself and the whole planet». Our «obsession» with economic growth has led us to «trample on» the tradition of the «Shabbat», which had been originally established to let the earth «breathe». As a result, the quarantine becomes a «Shabbat of the earth» forced on us due to our disobedience and greed.¹²³ In a non-astonishing development, the radical leftist has morphed into the devout atheist.

In some cases, it is not so much specific sins or vices that are blamed, but the bare fact of our existence as a species, which appears to be a disturbance in the otherwise supposedly idyllic domain of nature. In a piece revealingly entitled *What Use Are We Exactly?* the writer and journalist Michele Serra could not hide his jubilation before a world finally restored to its original glory: the skies are blue, the waters are transparent, the stars and the planets finally shine. He writes: «Man's retreat, along with his sumptuous residue of dejections, reinvigorates nature; it took only a few weeks (in cosmic terms, less than an instant) for Gea to celebrate our stasis, our illness. Impressive are the immediacy and candor with which the world is showing us that it can do without us».¹²⁴

It is but a small step from here to what may be called the pathogenization of the human race: what the virus is doing to us – argues novelist Sandro Veronesi – many of us are doing to the planet. «We are a virus», he remarks; our civilization has lost a sense of «harmony» and has become «aggressive like a virus», so much so that nature is now «rebelling» against us.¹²⁵ While during pandemics humans fight against viruses, Bruno Latour has written, the situation is 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!».¹²⁶ A post-humanist philosopher had a similar epiphany: «Think about the virus from the perspective of the earth, of nature, and of the ecosystems. Think about it and ponder: what if we ourselves were a virus?».¹²⁷ Musings such

¹²³ ID., *Perché la natura ci soffoca*, cit.

¹²⁴ M. SERRA, *A cosa serviamo esattamente?*, «La Repubblica», April 3, 2020. <https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/rubrica/2020/04/03/news/l_amaca_a_cosa_serviamo_esattamente_-253055986/>. On the proliferation of similar post-apocalyptic narratives, see A. HESS, *The Rise of the Coronavirus Nature Genre*, «The New York Times», April 17, 2020. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/arts/coronavirus-nature-genre.html>>.

¹²⁵ S. VERONESI, *Il virus siamo noi* (interviewed by M. Fontana), «Affari italiani», April 11, 2020. <<https://www.affaritaliani.it/politica/palazzo-potere/il-virus-siamo-noi--intervista-al-premio-strega-sandro-veronesi-665468.html>>.

¹²⁶ B. LATOUR, *Is This a Dress Rehearsal?*, «Critical Inquiry», March 26, 2020. <<https://critinquiry.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/>>. Cfr. P. DESCOLA, *Nous sommes devenus des virus pour la planète*, cit.

¹²⁷ L. CAFFO, «Facebook», March 2, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/leonardocaffofanpage/photos/a.2127296434166205/2618793751683135/?type=3&comment_id=2618873541675156>.

as these, often skillfully presented as profound and original, actually reflect and intercept widespread sentiments, which explains their popularity. A great number of pictures and videos (often fabricated) circulating on social media and featuring wild animals reclaiming deserted cities have been accompanied by captions such as «nature is healing, we are the virus», or «Coronavirus is Earth's vaccine». ¹²⁸ Moved to tears by dolphins and deer, this category of nature lovers had no problem presenting the coronavirus as a welcome agent of mass disinfection or disinfestation, thereby providing a classic justification to its genocidal mission – the equation of the enemy with a pathogen or a pest. «I urge a new environmental zest / Or I'll need to rid myself of the human pest», Mother Earth had already warned in a popular vegan poem. ¹²⁹

Sometimes, the apocalyptic nature of this way of thinking has appeared in full view. One of the most striking examples comes from a professor of Iranian Studies at Columbia University, who has presented Greta Thunberg as the «last messenger» sent by «Mother Earth» just before the pandemic to warn us: «Get your acts together! I'm coming for you! [...] the apocalypse is here – respect and obey the Mother Earth: restore her inner rhythm and logic, cut on consumption, reduce the ravages of fossil fuel – put an end to deforestation». ¹³⁰ According to another prophet, the Argentinian philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel, «Nature is challenging us today: “either you respect me or I will annihilate you!”». The pandemic is «a sign of the end of Modernity» and «an announcement of a new World Age», which will follow «this arrogant modern civilization that has become suicidal». ¹³¹

Not all commentators, however, share this aggressive tone. Others have presented their thoughts with a poetic or mystical language. They have seen suffering as a «blessing» and as an opportunity for spiritual transformation. They have spoken of the pandemic as nature's way of «healing» ¹³² or «rebalancing» every species «with the sweep of death». ¹³³ Like Renaissance magi

¹²⁸ E. CUMMINS, *The Dark Search for a «Silver Lining» to the Coronavirus*, «The New Republic», May 4, 2020. <<https://newrepublic.com/article/157583/dark-search-silver-lining-coronavirus>>.

¹²⁹ M. BUTTERFLIES KATZ, *Mother Earth's Plea*, «Vegan Muse». <<https://veganmuse.wordpress.com/2007/12/19/holistic-plea/>>.

¹³⁰ H. DABASHI, «Facebook», March 29, 2020 (this post has been deleted).

¹³¹ E. DUSSEL, *Cuando la naturaleza jaquea a la orgullosa modernidad*, «Council on Hemispheric Affairs», April 3, 2020. <<https://www.coha.org/cuando-la-naturaleza-jaquea-a-la-orgullosa-modernidad/>>.

¹³² E. NICOLAU, *Kitty O'Meara, Author of «And the People Stayed Home», Opens Up About Writing That Viral Poem*, «The Oprah Magazine», March 19, 2020. <<https://www.oprahmag.com/entertainment/a31747557/and-the-people-stayed-home-poem-kitty-omeara-interview/>>.

¹³³ M. GUALTIERI, *March the Ninth Twenty Twenty*, translated by L. Rand and C. Botsford. <<https://lithub.com/march-the-ninth-twenty-twenty/>>. For a more aggressive and vengeful tone, see the hugely popular poem *An Imagined Letter from COVID-19 to Humans*, written in

or Romantic enthusiasts, they have described the earth or the cosmos as a living organism that keeps all things tied together in a loving embrace. Typically, our confinement at home has been transfigured into a providential opportunity to rediscover the warmth and tenderness of simple things, or to re-awaken to the beauty and wisdom of the natural world. Some have even transposed themselves into a distant, redeemed future from where they have reminisced about the pandemic as the tragedy that made us better.¹³⁴ One wonders what providential chance has been provided to the dying, apart from that of being wiped out for the benefit and the balance of the whole.¹³⁵

Quotes reflecting such sentiments are abundant. Some of these writings exude self-hatred, misanthropy, and even a wish for death. These characteristics, however, should not blind us to the desperate narcissism underpinning them: the erratic behavior of a pathogen is invested with moral meaning, and the virus becomes the bearer of a special message directed to us. Moreover, as in all apocalyptic messages, the infliction of guilt and fear goes together with the indication of a salvific way out; this usually entails a period of pain and tribulations culminating in the collapse of a social, economic, and political system deemed as intrinsically evil and in the establishment of some radical utopia. Fantasies of total regeneration often take a regressive and primitivistic form, picturing a future that has all the characteristics of a romanticized, pre-modern past. «The future of *Homo Sapiens* is more similar to his distant past than to all the ideologies we had filled our pseudo-certainties with», as one author put it.¹³⁶

March by eco-feminist writer Kristin Flyntz, translated into many languages and turned into an animation; here the virus itself is made to speak to humanity: «We will help you / We will bring the firestorms to your body / We will bring the fever to your body / We will bring the burning, searing, and flooding to your lungs / that you might hear: / We are not well. / Despite what you might think or feel, we are not the enemy. / We are Messenger. We are Ally. We are a balancing force». The text can now be read in the online magazine «Dark Matter: Women Witnessing» (K. FLYNTZ, *An Imagined Letter from COVID-19 to Humans*, «Dark Matter: Women Witnessing», 11, October 2020. <http://darkmatterwomenwitnessing.com/issues/Oct2020/articles/Kristin-Flyntz_Imagined-Letter-from-COVID-19.html>).

¹³⁴ See TOMOS ROBERTS' poem *The Great Realization*, performed online on April 29, 2020 and viewed more than 60 million times. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nw5KQMXDiM4>>.

¹³⁵ The idea of an innate 'balance' of nature, however, is a myth (every state of equilibrium in nature is dynamic and provisional), and so is the notion that pre-modern people respected nature and lived in harmony with the environment. In fact, while the transformation or the disruption of an ecosystem can be both a natural and a cultural occurrence, its 'conservation' can only be a *cultural* one. In any case, no ecosystem can be maintained 'intact'. Cfr. J. KRICHER, *The Balance of Nature. Ecology's Enduring Myth*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009; J. DIAMOND, *Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, New York, Viking, 2005; R.B. EDGERTON, *Sick Societies. Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony*, New York, The Free Press, 1992. For a masterly study of modern ideas about a providential «economy» of nature based on pain, death and mutual destruction (and their post-Darwinian endurance) see A. LA VERGATA, *L'equilibrio e la guerra della natura*, Napoli, Morano, 1990.

¹³⁶ L. CAFFO, *Manifesto per un dopo che era un prima*, cit.

7. *After Utopia?*

The texts surveyed in this essay often tell us much more about the ideas, the unshakeable certainties, the fears and the aspirations of their authors than about the situation they claim to describe. In the majority of cases, the enormous problems that we face – medical, scientific, environmental, economic, social, legal and geopolitical – are not analyzed in their complexities, but subjected to appalling simplifications and quickly turned into tools of ideological combat. The pandemic functions mainly as a pretext to voice a pre-existent set of thoughts and sentiments. Do these thoughts and sentiments have something in common, despite the ideological differences of their proponents?

Many of these intellectuals express a profound dissatisfaction with their own societies. Their texts convey a variety of attitudes that range from mistrust, skepticism, disillusionment, and estrangement to furious hostility. Given this variety, it would be unfair to paint all these attitudes with the same brush. Not all the authors I have referred to, in fact, voice extreme views or embrace apocalyptic, primitivistic or anti-humanistic thinking. Some see the pandemic as an amplifier of the many problems and failures that afflict our societies both internally and in the context of an accelerating globalization. Despite the rhetorical tone, the oversimplifications and the propensity to wishful thinking that sometimes characterize their writing, it is hard to disagree with some of their criticisms. Other authors, however, go much further than this. Seeing the pandemic as the latest catastrophe inevitably brought by modern Western civilization and the increasingly global expansion of its social, political and (most of all) economic model, they believe that this civilization is either irremediably and deservedly set on a path to self-destruction or that it can tackle its own crises not by way of reforms or adjustments, but only by radically transforming itself. In these cases, with varying intensity, a deep-seated malaise emerges toward modernity and its main manifestations – capitalism, secularization, globalization, liberal democracy, science and technology – which are perceived not just as flawed, but as intrinsically corruptive or destructive. Material progress is equated with spiritual decline. A gloomy atmosphere of inevitability transpires from a widespread picture of history as a deterministic succession of cycles or ages («Kali Yuga», «Capitalocene», «Coronacene», etc.), as a process of decline, or as a 'fallen' state awaiting an apocalyptic resolution. A sense of dismay is conveyed by the various forms of conspiratorial, magical or religious thinking in which these intellectuals often engage and by a profound nostalgia for the communal warmth and the existential meaning once provided by the sacred. A need to re-enchanted nature, to «return» to it, to «cure» it, and to recover an «harmonious» relationship with it coexists or combines with a guilt-driven or nihilistic

wish to succumb to it, to be phagocytized by it, and to relinquish control to it.¹³⁷ The unsettling yearning for a total regeneration of humanity and society (either in a primitivistic, reactionary or progressive direction) gives rise to secular forms of apocalyptic millennialism, namely to visions of an imminent transformation of this world into one of perfection and justice¹³⁸ – where the sense of imminence is triggered by the unfolding of the pandemic. This yearning is usually linked to a strong mistrust toward liberal democracies, which are considered either as failed experiments, corrupt charades, or near-authoritarian (or totalitarian) regimes inhabited by atomized slaves, and which should be replaced by different, less materialistic, more cohesive and more spiritually fulfilling forms of social organization.

It is also worth noticing that, while the ills of the present world and their impending annihilation receive painstaking attention, the redeemed world meant to emerge from an imminent «leap of civilization» or from total destruction is only vaguely sketched. The same fog engulfs the concrete strategy and means with which this new reality is going to be built. We are invited to «fantasize»,¹³⁹ to unleash our «radical imagination»,¹⁴⁰ to engage in a collective «exorcism»,¹⁴¹ to embrace the immobility of the quarantine as an anticipation of the future condition («we must stop»),¹⁴² or to simply «surrender», because «the only way out is death».¹⁴³ Others prioritize «inner»¹⁴⁴ or even «domestic» revolutions.¹⁴⁵ For others, the solution is a new form of communism,¹⁴⁶

¹³⁷ One wonders if the litany «we thought we were in control, but we never were» also expresses a kind of relief: if only «mother nature» is in control, then there is nothing we can do but submit to it and surrender our human responsibilities.

¹³⁸ Cfr. R. LANDES, *Heaven on Earth. The Varieties of Millennial Experience*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 20-22.

¹³⁹ C. BESTEMAN *et alii*, *Post-Covid Fantasies: An Introduction*, «American Ethnologist», July 27, 2020. <<https://americanethnologist.org/features/pandemic-diaries/post-covid-fantasies/post-covid-fantasies-an-introduction>>.

¹⁴⁰ A. MBEMBE, *The Universal Right*, cit.

¹⁴¹ Á.L. LARA, *Causalidad de la pandemia*, cit.

¹⁴² I. DOMINIJANNI, *The Sovereign Virus*, cit.

¹⁴³ F. BERARDI, *Diary of the Psycho-Deflation*, cit.

¹⁴⁴ C. LAURENZI, *E se a salvare il pianeta nel Coronacene fosse una rivoluzione?*, «La Stampa», May 20, 2020. <<https://www.lastampa.it/tuttogreen/2020/05/20/news/e-se-a-salvare-il-pianeta-nel-coronacene-fosse-una-rivoluzione-1.38858179>>.

¹⁴⁵ E. COCCIA, *Reversing the New Global Monasticism*, «Fall Semester», April 21, 2020. <<https://fallsemester.org/2020-1/2020/4/17/emanuele-coccia-escaping-the-global-monasticism>>.

¹⁴⁶ S. ŽIŽEK, *Coronavirus is «Kill Bill»-esque blow to Capitalism*, cit.; A. BADIOU, *On the Epidemic Situation*, «Verso», March 23, 2020. <<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4608-on-the-epidemic-situation>>; G. VATTIMO, *La società non è libera, il lockdown ha esaltato le disuguaglianze* (interviewed by G. Laroni), «Il Riformista», June 2, 2020. <<https://www.ilriformista.it/intervista-a-gianni-vattimo-la-societa-non-e-libera-il-lockdown-ha-esaltato-le-disuguaglianze-108855/>>; T. NEGRI, *Post scriptum sull'epidemia*, «Dinamo Press», June 29, 2020. <<https://www.dinamopress.it/news/post-scriptum-sulla-quarantena/>>.

a «planetary parliament» of «vulnerable bodies»,¹⁴⁷ or an elusive «new way of being in the world» inspired by the example of indigenous people.¹⁴⁸ Others cultivate isolationist and nativist dreams.

Partial or total rejections of modernity have come in many forms and are as old as modernity itself. Much more should be said about the influence, on the current pessimistic views, of the various twentieth-century strands of cultural pessimism and of the well-documented interactions and cross-fertilizations, within those strands, between left- and right-wing versions of anti-modernism (especially during the 1960s and the 1970s).¹⁴⁹ Equally significant is the sharpening of these views – at least on the far left – after the erosion of Marxist ideology, the trauma of the failed revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, the transformations or the collapse of communist states and the ensuing acceleration of globalization.¹⁵⁰ The ideological vacuum, in these circles, explains the sense of disorientation, fear, rage, guilt or despair that often transpires from many of the ‘solutions’ proposed by these authors. No doubt, the revolutionary fervor triggered by the exacerbation of the environmental crisis is for many a powerful source of existential meaning, but its forward-looking momentum is haunted by the prospect of an apocalypse without redemption – human extinction.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ P. PRECIADO, *Aprendiendo del virus*, «El País», March 28, 2020. <https://elpais.com/elpais/2020/03/27/opinion/1585316952_026489.html>.

¹⁴⁸ F. REMOTTI, *Sospensione a causa di un virus*, «IISF», April 7, 2020. <<https://www.iisf.it/index.php/progetti/diario-della-crisi/francesco-remotti-sospensione-a-causa-di-un-virus.html>>. Cfr. POPE FRANCIS, *General Audience*, cit.: «The prophetic gift of contemplation is something that we can learn especially from indigenous peoples. They teach us that we cannot heal the earth unless we love and respect it. They have the wisdom of “living well”, not in the sense of having a good time, no, but of living in harmony with the earth». For an American philosopher, if this pandemic is to be a «true turning point», then we must take up «the tools that have sustained Indigenous peoples in the Americas and around the world», which necessarily implies the rejection of «the liberal democratic project» (described as the «master’s tool» imposed by the Western colonizers): S. PRATT, *To Survive Pandemics, Look to Indigenous Life*, «Dewey Studies» 4, 1, 2020, pp. 165-173.

¹⁴⁹ On the infatuation of large sectors of the academic and postmodern left with counter-enlightenment views and (particularly German) reactionary total critiques of modernity see at least P. ROSSI, *Paragone degli ingegni moderni e postmoderni*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2009²; R. WOLIN, *The Seduction of Unreason. The Intellectuals’ Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004; A. HERMAN, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, New York, The Free Press, 1997; and (with a militant approach) S. ROZA, *La gauche contre les Lumières?*, Paris, Fayard, 2020. As for Alain de Benoist’s frequent convergences with far-left positions see P.A. TAGUIEFF, *Sur la Nouvelle droite. Jalons d’une analyse critique*, Paris, Descartes & Cie, 1994.

¹⁵⁰ Cfr. R. CONQUEST, *The Dragons of Expectation. Reality and Delusion in the Course of History*, London, Duckworth, 2005, p. 45: «though the collapse of actual alternatives to a pluralist order is now generally accepted, detestation of it persists – as does (often enough) the lack of, indeed rejection of, any serious attempt to examine the probable defects any alternative might, or would, produce».

¹⁵¹ See for example M. Löwy, *Covid-19 Pandemic: «Only an Anti-Systemic Revolution, Breaking*

For some, the recurrence of these attacks and apocalyptic predictions and the fact that they were originally articulated not in response to the human tragedies and the environmental disasters of the 20th century, but well before them,¹⁵² point to a particular sensitivity of intellectuals to the discontents of modern life. As Paul Hollander has observed, despite the fact that the rise of secular intellectuals is closely linked to the emergence of modern, pluralistic societies, many of them – due to a combination of idealism and high expectations – have found «the growing meaninglessness and moral relativism» typical of those societies too «disturbing and difficult to tolerate».¹⁵³ This probably explains why their behaviors, their radical criticisms and their proposed solutions often reflect a set of religious-like emotional needs and aspirations (wholeness, meaning, community, self-fulfillment, etc.) rather than a willingness to cope with the inevitable shortcomings of reality and human existence. This is clearly visible in some of the texts discussed here.

However, we should not forget that, in our time, cultural pessimism is no longer a prerogative of small groups of aristocratic intellectuals, but has become a mass phenomenon, and many of the traditional attacks against modernity seem to have become a sort of ‘popular sense’ or ‘reflex’ that cuts across – or even bridges – cultural and political divides. It is on the causes, the extent and the cultural, social and political consequences of this phenomenon that we should reflect. Are intellectuals responsible for disseminating these pessimistic views or did they simply contribute to articulate a shared malaise? More importantly, is the uncompromising and totalizing character of these criticisms more likely to lead to constructive and meaningful changes or to induce paralysis, fatalism, regression or even destructive fury? Whatever the case, it is clear that, within this kind of mentality, each new crisis is bound to be experienced as a confirmation of one’s dark predictions. As for the present one, I am afraid I don’t have utopian or dystopian certainties to offer. However, faced with so many secular attempts at reviving father Paneloux’s wisdom in Camus’ *The Plague*¹⁵⁴ – «this same pestilence which is slaying you ennobles you and points your path» – I can only reiterate the

with the *Iron Laws of Capitalism Can Open the Way for a New Society*» (interview), «Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières», May 10, 2020. <<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article53308>>.

¹⁵² It goes without saying that these views were further exacerbated by those tragedies. However, Oswald Spengler, for example, began to write his *The Decline of the West* as early as 1912. For the catastrophic views of modernity during the *Belle Époque* see E. GENTILE, *L'apocalisse della modernità. La grande guerra per l'uomo nuovo*, Milano, Mondadori, 2008. For radical criticisms of modern civilization in the 1930s see the texts collected in M. NACCI, *Tecnica e cultura della crisi (1914-1939)*, Torino, Loescher, 1982. For many of these authors, the very essence of modernity was apocalyptic.

¹⁵³ P. HOLLANDER, *From Benito Mussolini to Hugo Chavez. Intellectuals and a Century of Political Hero Worship*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 294.

¹⁵⁴ For an attempt from the left see E. TRAVERSO, *Home Thoughts*, cit.

humble message of Monsieur Tarrou: «All I can say is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims – and as far as possible one must refuse to be on the side of the pestilence».¹⁵⁵

RIASSUNTO – SUMMARY

La letteratura dedicata alla pandemia di COVID-19 è in continua crescita. Questo saggio esplora un campione diversificato di testi scritti durante la prima fase della pandemia da intellettuali occidentali di diverso orientamento culturale e discute alcune delle idee e degli atteggiamenti emotivi maggiormente diffusi in quei testi. L'analisi si sofferma su quattro temi principali: 1) gli usi politici e ideologici del virus; 2) le immagini della natura e del rapporto dell'uomo con essa; 3) le discussioni sulla paura dell'infezione e della morte nelle società secolarizzate e medicalizzate; 4) il senso di estraneazione sperimentato da molti intellettuali durante la quarantena. Nella conclusione, queste tendenze sono discusse nel contesto della crescente diffusione, nelle nostre società, di varie forme di pessimismo culturale.

The literature on the COVID-19 pandemic is expanding daily. This essay explores a diverse range of texts written by Western intellectuals of different backgrounds during the first phase of the pandemic and discusses some of the most widespread ideas and emotions conveyed by these texts. Four major themes are addressed: 1) political and ideological uses of the virus; 2) conceptualizations of nature and of humanity's relationship to it; 3) discussions surrounding the fear of infection and death in secular and medicalized societies; 4) the sense of estrangement expressed by many intellectuals during home confinement. In the conclusion, these views are placed in the context of the increasing popularity, in our societies, of various forms of cultural pessimism.

¹⁵⁵ A. CAMUS, *The Plague*, New York, Vintage Books, 1991, pp. 98, 253-254 (with slight changes).

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