

Notes on the Emergency

Dimitar Vatsov

Assoc. Prof. Dimitar Vatsov teaches philosophy at New Bulgarian University, Dept. of Philosophy and Sociology. Editor-in-chief of *Critique and Humanism*, as well as board chairman of the *Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences – Sofia*, Vatsov is the author of *This is true!* (Sofia: NBU, 2016); *Experiments on Power and Truth* (Sofia: NBU, 2009), *Freedom or Recognition: Interactive Sources of Identity* (Sofia: NBU, 2006); *Ontology of Affirmation: Nietzsche as a Task* (Sofia: East-West, 2003). Vatsov has many publications in Italian, Russian, French, Spanish, Polish and English periodicals. Political philosophy and post-analytical philosophy of language are the main foci of his work.

Correspondence address: New Bulgarian University, Department of Philosophy and Sociology, 21 Montevideo Blvd., Building 1, Office 110, Sofia 1618; email: dvatsov@gmail.com

Tabloidisation of life and country

The concern that the media are turning tabloid has worked itself through tons of paper. Extraordinary stuff – sensations, controversies – sells! In order to meet the market demand, increasing numbers of media are turning yellow. The last few decades have seen extraordinariness slowly creeping out of the woodworks and taking centre stage. Its reception has also mutated: the tickle of the piquancy has been crowded out by persistent anxiety. Suspicion becomes the rule: the cynicism driven by the reassuring belief that "Everyone is a crook!" masks a creeping paranoia. A collective sensation has been created that something nasty, unexpected, extraordinary, can still crop up out of nowhere! The networks are haunted by rumours and conspiracies.

And here it is! The extraordinary has cropped up: COVID-19!

Out of the darkest corner: out of China, out of an anteater, out of a bat!

Despite being invisible to the naked eye, COVID-19 plunks right in the eye of publicity. It is the breaking news, invariably: from morning to evening. The push of the market compels the media to keep track of it in case they lose audience, and they flood the audience into addiction: the consumer feels abstinent unless the daily dose of statistics is served (some would need several doses). Numbers of infected, dead, recovered, in our country and around the world! We count how many times the invisible enemy was seen (with the new special surveillance tools, the tests). And how many victims it left behind! Like a black hole, the topic either sucks in all the other news or at least sucks them colourless. The user is ready to stay at home and be submissive: sucked in by statistics, scared. Is the user still a citizen?

But here comes another paradox: the market, which until recently turned extraordinariness into a commercial product, is now losing control of it. In the past, the media used to scream, "Shock!", "Horror!", "Scandalous!", "Extraordinary!", "A Bomb!" with good reason and without. But now it is the language of the state that is turning tabloid! The Chief of the Bulgarian National Operational Headquarters, Gen. Mutafchiiski said: "an epidemic is brewing with unprecedented fury", and people "will be kicking the bucket in droves". And it wasn't just him. Globally, as well as in our country, political leaders have spoken of the emergency in military terms: "war against the virus", "invisible enemy", "on the front line", etc. The hottest metaphorical language, that of war, seamlessly blends with the coolest

jargon, that of statistical numbers. Michel Foucault might see this as a symptom of total biopolitics.

Vectors of biopolitics

But biopolitics does not have a total grasp (yet). Yes, the market is receding, civil society and individual rights are receding, while the government steps forward as a power centre whereby the epidemiological biopolitics is apparently consolidating. But not to the full extent: the new biopolitics still does not have a unified direction. There are still discrepancies between the military language deployed by the state and the professional language of experts like doctors and mathematicians. It is still unclear who speaks and who oversees the emergency – the politician or the expert? But even this uncertainty is not the most important thing. Because the politician is the one who always prevails, even by default, in this game, especially in the event of an emergency. The need to make the situation manageable implies that the military language must absorb expert languages. But politicians don't have it easy these days! Even the authoritarian ones among them like Putin or Xi Jinping.

Because expert languages that come into open conflict cannot be easily absorbed, and not just languages: it is a matter of data from reality. Soon we will witness a "war of statistics." We are still inundated with data about the epidemic. Yet, even before it is under control, politicians are already loosening the quarantine measures, because other data are already coming in – those about the economy. And this is not a war of expert communities, e.g. the doctors and the economists, fighting it out for supremacy. After all, both types of measurements – the rise or fall of the infected and the rise or fall of GDP – are equally reliable and matter-of-fact (with all the possible caveats of errors or misconceptions). However, these measurements dictate divergent policies. The divergence between policy lines is systemic and comes from the fact that the two types of measures, epidemiological and economic, are made in different reference systems, underpinned by different values. One reference system hinges on human life (the "naked", biological life), while the other one rests upon economic well-being. With COVID-19, suddenly, and unsuspectedly so far, social Darwinism has collided with neoliberalism. And so far there is no solution in sight. Politicians are in a situation where they don't know what to do – which is why they are taking "two steps forward, one step back". Their metaphor of "the hammer and the dance" epitomises this conundrum. However, both experts and intellectuals – ourselves! – don't know what to do either.

State of emergency, but not quite

It is this ignorance – and the insecurity it brings – that stops the dictatorship.

Practically all over the world, including in democratic countries, the response to the pandemic took the form of emergency measures. In some cases, as in our country, a "state of emergency" was imposed by law. The good thing is that instead of being escalated to the full, the "state of emergency" was somehow half-heartedly applied; at least formally, in our country, it was quickly taken down to a softer version dubbed 'emergency measures'.

The fact that it has not worked anywhere in the world Is a good thing! Because the state of emergency and the dictatorship are functionally the same. Not only because historically a "dictator" in Roman republican law is one who, in an emergency, receives temporarily absolute and unlimited power (*imperium*) - and this status becomes permanent when absolute and extraordinary power is given to the Emperor without time limits. The pure concept of the functional connection between the two was worked out by Carl Schmitt, an intellectual genius and political villain who legitimised Hitler's dictatorship. Schmidt defined sovereignty through a state of emergency: a sovereign is one who has the absolute power to repeal the existing order and law and, accordingly, to impose emergency law single-handedly, in a decisionist way.

All the principles of liberal democracy, slowly and painfully forged in the modern age, were designed to resist and restrain sovereignty: they intended to block extraordinary rule by decree. Such is the rule of law in general terms, civil and human rights in more particular terms, publicity and accountability, the separation of powers and even the division of labour. The introduction of a state of emergency, both by conceptual design and by its practical implications, suspends or weakens all these principles.

The good thing is that in the current situation no one wants to govern through a state of emergency: there are no contenders for real sovereignty, i.e. for an official Dictator. And this is not only the way things are in our country, where, in an officially declared state of emergency, we just about derogated from the European Convention on Human Rights, but we didn't; we almost dissolved parliament, but we didn't; we released courts into a forced quarantine recess, but soon lifted the state of emergency and put them back in operation; etc. This is the way it has been across the democratic world: back and forth. But more curiously, even autocrats like Putin have been reluctant to instrumentalise the state of emergency and get an even firmer grip on their respective country: on the contrary, Putin has shied away

from this opportunity like from a hot potato and has instead been tossing sovereign powers about to governors and parts of the government.

Kind of, absolute power is rolling down the street, but no one wants to grab it. Ignorance and uncertainty in the current pandemic crisis are prompting us to declare a state of emergency in a panic and at the same time not dare to put it into full practice. Because the war of statistics – epidemiological and economic – cannot be stopped. There is no self-evident decision when it comes to the best policy, and therefore no one knows what to do with extraordinary power, e.g. have it consolidated going forward. And although the instruments of sovereignty are local – we are now back to the nation-state's motherly embrace – the scene is no less global, and everything is out for everyone to see. If we indulge in a power grab, the risk of everyone laughing at us and of getting stoned is very high. Uncertainty is so far a guarantee for preserving democracy.

But it also creates a risk. Politically, the two-steps-forward, one-step-backwards dance further waters down the rules. "Fish is best caught in muddy water" – this is what local thieves all over the world know very well! And in countries like ours, where local thieves have largely chewed hollow democracy's façade, extraordinary interventions on its skeleton are even more dangerous.

The crisis as an opportunity?

Right-wing experts and politicians indulge in a blithe prognostication: the crisis will give a further boost to the digitalisation and automation of production – and will push the economy to new technological heights. The leftists tend to disagree: but so many people will lose their jobs and become surplus to requirements. And they are pleading for state intervention in establishing either an "unconditional basic income" or "job guarantees". The lefties again, including some of my personal friends, are rejoicing: the COVID-19 crisis has shown that people are not just resources; they are not just commodities – they have their own intrinsic value. And they add: working from home has shown that workers are sufficiently responsible and innovative even when they are not subject to direct supervision by the employer. This feeds into the argument that not only the polity (the state) needs to be democratic – so do businesses, and they must have their workers involved in management.

I dare say that we are going to see all these things materialising soon. It will not happen without dramas and battles, of course. Hygiene measures will become more intelligent and prone to technology controls, i.e. the economy will develop them, and they

will develop the economy back. Incidentally, this has taken place many times in history: hygiene and economy do boost one another. New energy sources might also come into the picture at some point. Manufacturing will become so digital and automated as to exceed consumption dramatically. And not only poverty and hunger, but also inequalities will almost fade away. Political authoritarianism will not be the only one to be wiped out: either succumbing to outside pressure or because of a sudden surge of solidarity, business owners will loosen the grip over their property (or even give up on it in a Marxist fashion) and will allow workers access to management. From tedious duty, work will reinvent itself as a joyful game: it will only be played by whoever wants it; others will stay in front of their screens with a guaranteed basic income. COVID-19 will end up as the virus that took the presumptive role of the proletarian revolution by bloodlessly, surreptitiously, and from within compelling states and economies to adapt: capitalism will have then become humanism. And every kind of governance, state or business, will be conducted in the name of the life and prosperity of everybody.

There is a single thing that worries me in this future: they will not allow me to bury my mother or, God forbid, my child if they have died of coronavirus. If I do, I will be prosecuted for it. In the name of life. The bare life of the species. Well, this is the kind of life I am unwilling to live!