

CORONAVIRUS AND THE END OF THE WORLD

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Perhaps the pandemic seems to us like an end-of-the-world movie. Maybe all we want now is to get back to normal. It may be that we have not realized that normality is the real end of the world.

Normality is the devastation of everything by capitalism. It is the destruction of all life for the sake of capital accumulation. It is more and more inert money at the cost of all life in the world.

Normality is the disappearance, in the last 150 years, of almost half of the fertile soil on earth. It is the loss of an equivalent of 40 football fields of tropical forest every minute. It is the daily extinction of 150 species of animals and plants. All this is already the end of the world.

We are also witnessing the end of the world when we read that wildlife populations have fallen by more than two-thirds in less than 50 years, that land-based insects have been declining at nearly 1% per year, that annual rate of current desertification is more than 3 per cent. This global devastation is the normalcy to which many want to return.

The normal is that air pollution kills twenty thousand people per day in the world, that is, more than double of the total number of deaths from coronavirus at the peaks of the pandemic. This data allows us to understand a puzzling news that was spread in the beginning of the pandemic. The British tabloid *Daily Mail* reported that thousands of lives had been saved in China since the coronavirus appeared. The information was right: the interruption of industrial activities due to the pandemic drastically reduced the emission of gases, which, in turn, saved more lives than were lost by the pandemic itself.

We see that the coronavirus is much less lethal than just one of the many effects of capital. We also know that the functioning of capitalism has been affected by COVID-19, which makes us place our hope in this viral agent to cure us of the capitalist terminal illness. It is with this hope that Žižek, from the beginning of the pandemic, conceived the coronavirus as a possible deadly blow against capitalism.

It is obvious that the capitalist system will not die of coronavirus and that Žižek is not naive enough to think this. He knows what we all know, that the circumstances created by the coronavirus can help us, but that we are the ones who must free ourselves from capitalism. At this juncture, as in any other in which the space of uncertainty expands, the outcome will depend mainly on us as subjects, on the subjects that we are and that we will become.

If we want to avoid the end of the world we are living in, we need to transform ourselves. It is necessary to reverse our subjectification by the capitalist system. We must stop being

possessive and cumulative, competitive and destructive, compulsive consumers, white-collar murderers, ecocidal and ultimately suicidal individuals.

It is by shaking off capitalism that we will be other than who we are and thus avoid the worst and save ourselves. At the same time, as Žižek has said, “it is through our effort to save humanity from self-destruction that we are creating a new humanity”. All this is the same process of reinvention and salvation, of liberation and transformation, in which we do not distinguish what happens before or after, since everything has to happen at the same time.

Simultaneity requires a certain anticipation like that prescribed by Rosa Luxemburg at the time of the Second International. We have to save ourselves today in order to save ourselves tomorrow. We must anticipate our destiny, prefigure what we fight for, what is achieved through our own struggle, in its development and not only in its outcome. We have to understand that our time is up. We must get rid of capitalism now, at this precise moment, through each of the manifestations of our existence, because the next moment will be too late.

We have to reject a procrastination, such as that represented by Karl Kautsky in the Second International, which will only serve to let the current cataclysm continue to unfold until its final consequences. We cannot accept that the end of the world is, as Kautsky would say, “a necessary direction of evolution”, and that our only task is to “recognize it” and wait, without pretending to act as “revolutionaries at all costs”. What we need right now is precisely a revolution at all costs. There is no time to wait.

Instead of a typically neurotic Kautskian procrastination, we should opt for a Luxembourgian hysterical prefiguration in which we do not waste the only time we have left, the present. It has never been so pressing to learn from Rosa Luxemburg when she warns us against the “vicious circles” that condemn us to wait for something, whatever it is, “before we can make history”. The best thing for us, right now at the end of the world, is to decide once and for all to intervene in the catastrophe, thus making history, which is precisely, for Jacques Lacan, what we call “hysteria”.

No matter how much damage we cause, it will not be comparable to what is happening. The worst would be that everything remains the same until at the end there is nothing left. Any error is now preferable to the patience and supposed prudence of those who fear to rush and make mistakes. Currently, in the absence of time, the most prudent thing is the haste to anticipate the end. In Lacan’s terms, the “too early” of hysteria is better than the “always too late” to which the neurotic procrastination leads us.

Even when we behave like neurotically blameless citizens, we do not want the end of the world either. Death terrifies us and it is for this very reason that we prefer to wait, sometimes betting on the imminent collapse of capitalism. We thus play the neurotic role that Lacan associates with that of the slave in the Hegelian dialectic: that of the one who “yields to the risk of death”, since “he knows he is mortal”, but for the same reason “he also knows that the master has to die”, so that “he can accept to work for the master in the uncertainty of the moment when the master’s death will come”.

In the uncertainty, we continue to work for capitalism, for the end of the world. At least we are sure of staying alive. But perhaps we should not be so sure about it, because “while we wait, we are already dead”, as Lacan warns us. We are already dead like our gestures that

translate the functioning of the system, being repeated in a blind, neurotic and compulsive, mechanical way. We are already dead like puppets, like the gears of any machinery, like the zombies, who not by chance obsess us today.

We are already dead in the first place because we renounce our life, because we allow all of it to be possessed and sucked out by the vampire of capital, only hoping in vain that some of it is returned to us at the end of the day, on the weekend, in the next holidays, in retirement or in the collapse of capitalism, which obviously never happens, not only because we are already exhausted to live, but because the lost life is never recovered. But we are also already dead because the only life that is lived is that one that is risked, because there is only self-consciousness of life, as Hegel has explained, in “the fear of death, the absolute master”. We can only exist, as Heidegger confirms, in the anguish of being for death. We only live fully when we relate immediately to death, when we touch it, when we fight to the death against what threatens to kill us, which at this very moment is mainly capitalism. Being anti-capitalist is perhaps the only way to be truly alive, alive before death, in our current situation.

At the point we’ve reached, resigning ourselves to capitalism is abandoning ourselves to our death for the very fact of forgetting it. It is dying in the unconsciousness of dying. It is allowing oneself to be killed in the absence of what Marxism still calls “class consciousness”: consciousness that our life is being annihilated by capital. Lacking this consciousness is, in Lacan’s terms, depriving ourselves of the “knowledge” that should stop us, preferring “jouissance”, the enjoyment of capital that drags us into “progress marked by death”, into the inertia of “death drive”, on the “slope towards the inanimate”.

Instead of knowing that we could face death and thus avoid the worst, we indulge in the ideological fictions of capitalism that operate exactly like the neurotic’s excuses for Lacan. They only serve to keep death “at a distance”, away from us, distracting us from it, forgetting it while we abandon ourselves to it. This is what the cultural industry of capitalism is for, but also the demagoguery of those neoliberal and now neo-fascist politicians who dedicate their lives to supporting fictions such as green capitalism, inexhaustible resources, perpetual growth, responsible companies, consumerism favorable to prosperity, the invisible hand, the self-regulation of the market, the benefits of the competition of all against all, and the democratic character of bourgeois democracy and its rule of law.

As Jorge Alemán has well noted, the “constitutive fictions of capitalism” have been “stripped” by the pandemic. This global crisis offers us a chance to break through fantasy and see capitalism for what it is behind its fictions. This is what we discover in the rows of graves for the victims of coronavirus, in the corpses scattered through the streets of Ecuador and in other images that remind us of end-of-the-world movies.

You can see David deliver this address to the conference here:

<https://youtu.be/7q83VIPcC9g>