

How to Think Post-Planet Lockdown

The times call for acting as poets instead of politicians

By [Pepe Escobar](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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Between unaccountability of elites and total fragmentation of civil society, Covid-19 as a circuit breaker is showing how the king – systemic design – is naked.

We are being sucked into a [danse macabre](#) of multiple complex systems “colliding into one another,” producing all kinds of mostly negative feedback loops.

What we already know for sure, as Shoshana Zuboff detailed in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, is that “industrial capitalism followed its own logic of shock and awe” to conquer nature. But now surveillance capitalism “has human nature in its sights.”

In *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*, analyzing the explosion in population growth, increasing energy consumption and a tsunami of information “driven by the positive feedback loops of reinvestment and profit,” Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin of University College, London, suggest that our current mode of living is the “least probable” among several options. “A collapse or a switch to a new mode of living is more likely.”

With dystopia and mass paranoia seemingly the law of the (bewildered) land, Michel Foucault’s analyses of [biopolitics](#) have never been so timely, as states across the world [take over biopower](#) – the control of people’s life and bodies.

David Harvey, once again, shows how [prophetic](#) was Marx, not only in his analyses of industrial capitalism but somehow – in *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* – even forecasting the mechanics of digital capitalism:

Marx, Harvey writes, “talks about the way that new technologies and knowledge become embedded in the machine: they’re no longer in the laborer’s brain, and the laborer is pushed to one side to become an appendage of the machine, a mere machine-minder. All of the intelligence and all of the knowledge, which used to belong to the laborers, and which conferred upon them a certain monopoly power vis-à-vis capital, disappear.”

Thus, adds Harvey, “the capitalist who once needed the skills of the laborer is now freed from that constraint, and the skill is embodied in the machine. The knowledge produced through science and technology flows into the machine, and the machine becomes ‘the soul’ of capitalist dynamism.”

Living in ‘psycho-deflation’

An immediate – economic – effect of the collision of complex systems is the approaching New Great Depression. Meanwhile, very few are attempting to understand Planet Lockdown in depth – and that goes, most of all, for post-Planet Lockdown. Yet a few concepts already

stand out. State of exception. Necropolitics. A new brutalism. And, as we will see, the new viral paradigm.

So let's review some of the best and the brightest at the forefront of Covid-19 thinking. An excellent road map is provided by [Sopa de Wuhan](#) ("Wuhan Soup"), an independent collection assembled in Spanish, featuring essays by, among others, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, David Harvey, South Korean Byung-Chul Han and Spaniard Paul Preciado.

The last two, along with Agamben, were referenced in previous essays in this running series, on the [Stoics](#), [Heraclitus](#), [Confucius](#), [Buddha and Lao Tzu](#), and contemporary philosophy examining [The City under The Plague](#).

Franco Berardi, a 1968 student icon now professor of philosophy in Bologna, offers the concept of "psycho-deflation" to explain our current predicament. We are living a "psychic epidemic ... generated by a virus as the Earth has reached a stage of extreme irritation, and society's collective body suffers for quite a while a state of intolerable stress: the illness manifests itself at this stage, devastating in the social and psychic spheres, as a self-defense reaction of the planetary body."

Thus, as Berardi argues, a "semiotic virus in the psycho-sphere blocks the abstract functioning of the economy, subtracting bodies from it." Only a virus would be able to stop accumulation of capital dead in its tracks: "Capitalism is axiomatic, works on a non-verified premise (the necessity of unlimited growth which makes possible capital accumulation).

Every logical and economic concatenation is coherent with this axiom, and nothing can be tried outside of this axiom. There is no political way out of axiomatic Capital, there's no possibility of destroying the system," because even language is a hostage of this axiom and does not allow the possibility of anything "efficiently extra-systemic."

So what's left? "The only way out is death, as we learned from Baudrillard". The late, great grandmaster of simulacrum was already forecasting a systemic stall back in the post-modernist 1980s.

Croatian philosopher [Srećko Horvat](#), in contrast, offers a less conceptual and more realist hypothesis about the immediate future: "The fear of a pandemic is more dangerous than the virus itself. The apocalyptic images of the mass media hide a deep nexus between the extreme right and the capitalist economy. Like a virus that needs a living cell to reproduce itself, capitalism will adapt itself to the new 21st century biopolitics."

For the Catalan chemist and philosopher Santiago Lopez Petit, coronavirus can be seen as a declaration of war: "Neoliberalism unabashedly dresses up as a war state. Capital is scared," even as "uncertainty and insecurity invalidate the necessity of the same state." Yet there may be creative possibilities when "obscure and paroxysmic life, incalculable in its ambivalence, escapes algorithm."

Our normalized exception

Giorgio Agamben caused immense controversy in Italy and across Europe when he published a [column](#) in late February on "the invention of an epidemic." He later had

to [explain](#) what he meant. But his main insight remains valid: The state of exception has been completely normalized.

And it gets [worse](#): “A new despotism, which in terms of pervasive controls and cessation of every political activity, will be worse than the totalitarianisms we have known so far.”

Agamben redoubles his analyses of science as the religion of our time: “The analogy with religion is taken literally; theologians declared that they could not clearly define what is God, but in his name they dictated rules of conduct to men and did not hesitate to burn heretics. Virologists admit they don’t know exactly what is a virus, but in its name they pretend to decide how human beings shall live.”

Cameroonian philosopher and historian Achille Mbembe, author of two indispensable books, *Necropolitics* and *Brutalisme*, has identified [the paradox of our time](#): “The abyss between the increasing globalization of problems of human existence and the retreat of states inside their own, old-fashioned borders.”

Mbembe delves into the end of a certain world, “dominated by giant calculation devices,” a “mobile world in the most polymorphous, viral and near cinematic sense,” referring to the ubiquity of screens (Baudrillard again, already in the 1980s) and the lexicography, “which reveals not only a change of language but the end of the word.”

Here we have Mbembe dialoguing with Berardi – but Mbembe takes it much farther: “This end of the word, this definitive triumph of the gesture and artificial organs over the word, the fact that the history of the word ends under our eyes, that for me is the historical development par excellence, the one that Covid-19 unveils.”

The political consequences are, inevitably, dire: “Part of the power politics of great nations does not lie in the dream of an automated organization of the world thanks to the manufacturing of a New Man that would be the product of physiological assemblage, a synthetic and electronic assemblage and a biological assemblage? Let’s call it techno-libertarianism.”

This is not exclusive to the West: “China is also on it, vertiginously.”

This new paradigm of a plethora of automated systems and algorithmic decisions “where history and the word don’t exist anymore is in frontal shock with the reality of bodies in flesh and bones, microbes, bacteria and liquids of all sorts, blood included.”

The West, argues Mbembe, chose a long time ago to “imprint a Dionysiac course to its history and take the rest of the world with it, even if it doesn’t understand it. The West does not know anymore the difference between beginning and ending. China is also on it. The world has been plunged into a vast process of dilaceration where no one can predict the consequences.”

Mbembe is terrified by the proliferation of “live manifestations of the bestial and viral part of humanity,” including racism and tribalism.

This, he adds, conforms our new viral paradigm.

His analysis certainly dovetails with Agamben’s: “I have a feeling that brutalism is going to intensify under the techno-libertarianism drive, be it under China or hidden under the

accoutrements of liberal democracy. Just like 9/11 opened the way to a generalized state of exception, and its normalization, the fight against Covid-19 will be used as a pretext to move the political even more towards the domain of security.”

“But this time”, Mbembe adds, “it will be a security almost biological, bearing with new forms of segregation between the ‘immunity bodies’ and ‘viral bodies’. Viralism will become the new theatre for fractioning populations, now identified as distinct species.”

It does feel like neo-medievalism, a digital re-enacting of the fabulous [Triumph of Death](#) fresco in Palermo.

Poets, not politicians

It’s useful to contrast such doom and gloom with the perspective of a geographer. Christian Grataloup, who excels in [geo-history](#), insists on the common destiny of humanity (here he’s echoing Xi Jinping and the Chinese concept of “community of shared destiny”): “There’s an unprecedented feeling of identity. The world is not simply an economic and demographic spatial system, it becomes a territory. Since the Great Discoveries, what was global was shrinking, solving a lot of contradictions; now we must learn to build it up again, give it more consistence as we run the risk of letting it rot under international tensions.”

It’s not the Covid-19 crisis that will lead to another world – but society’s reaction to the crisis. There won’t be a magical night – complete with performances by “international community” pop stars – when “victory” will be announced to the former Planet Lockdown.

What really matters is a long, arduous political combat to take us to the next level. Extreme conservatives and techno-libertarians have already taken the initiative – from refusal of any taxes on the wealthy to support the victims of the New Great Depression to the debt obsession that prevents more, necessary public spending.

In this framework, I propose to go one step beyond Foucault’s biopolitics. Gilles Deleuze can be the conceptualizer of a new, radical freedom. [Here](#) is a delightful British series that can be enjoyed as if it were a serious Monty Python-ish approach to Deleuze.

Foucault excelled in the description of how meaning and frames of social truth change over time, constituting new realities conditioned by power and knowledge.

Deleuze, on the other hand, focused on how things change. Movement. Nothing is stable. Nothing is eternal. He conceptualized flux – in a very Heraclitean way.

New species (even the new, AI-created *Urbemensch*) evolve in relation with their environment. It’s by using Deleuze that we can investigate how spaces between things create possibilities for The Shock of the New.

More than ever, we now know how everything is connected (thank you, Spinoza). The (digital) world is so complicated, connected and mysterious that this opens an infinite number of possibilities.

Already in the 1970s, Deleuze was saying the new map – the innate potentiality of newness – should be called “the virtual.” The more living matter gets more complex, the more it transforms this virtual into spontaneous action and unforeseen movements.

Deleuze posed a dilemma that now confronts us all in even starker terms. The choice is between “the poet, who speaks in the name of a creative power, capable of overturning all orders and representations in order to affirm difference in the state of permanent revolution which characterizes eternal return: and that of the politician, who is above all concerned to deny that which “differs,” so as to conserve or prolong an established historical order, or to establish a historical order which already calls forth in the world the forms of its representation.”

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The methodology may be offered by Deleuze and Guattari’s formidable [A Thousand Plateaus](#) – significantly subtitled “Capitalism and Schizophrenia,” where the drive is non-linear. We’re talking about philosophy, psychology, politics connected by ideas running at different speeds, a dizzying non-stop movement mingling lines of articulation, in different strata, directed into lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization.

The concept of “lines of flight” is essential for this new virtual landscape, because the virtual is conformed by lines of flight between differences, in a continual process of change and freedom.

All this frenzy, though, must have roots – as in the roots of a tree (of knowledge). And that brings us to Deleuze’s central metaphor; the rhizome, which is not just a root, but a mass of roots springing up in new directions.

Deleuze showed how the rhizome connects assemblies of linguistic codes, power relations, the arts – and, crucially, biology. The hyperlink is a rhizome. It used to represent a symbol of the delightful absence of order in the internet, until it became debased as Google started imposing its algorithms. Links, by definition, always should lead us to unexpected destinations.

Rhizomes are the antitheses of those Western liberal “democracy” standard traits – the parliament and the senate. By contrast, trails – as in the Ho Chi Minh trail – are rhizomes. There’s no masterplan. Multiple entryways and multiple possibilities. No beginning and no end. As Deleuze described it, “the rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoot.”

This can work out as the blueprint for a new form of political engagement –as the systemic design collapses. It does embody a methodology, an ideology, an epistemology and it’s also a metaphor. The rhizome is inherently progressive, while traditions are static. As a metaphor, the rhizome can replace our conception of history as linear and singular, offering different histories moving at different speeds. TINA (“There is no alternative”) is dead: there are multiple alternatives.

And that brings us back to David Harvey inspired by Marx. In order to embark onto a new, emancipatory path, we first have to emancipate ourselves to see that a new imaginary is possible, alongside a new complex systems reality.

So let’s chill – and deterritorialize. If we learn how to do it, the advent of the New Techno Man in voluntary servitude, remote-controlled by an all-powerful, all-seeing security state, won’t be a given.

Deleuze: a great writer is always like a foreigner in the language through which he

expresses himself, even if it's his native tongue. He does not mix another language with his own language; he carves out a non pre-existent foreign language within his own language. "He makes the language itself scream, stammer, murmur. A thought should shoot off rhizomatically – in many directions.

I have a cold. The virus is a rhizome.

Remember when Trump said this was a "foreign virus"?

All viruses are foreign – by definition.

But Trump, of course, never read *Naked Lunch* Grandmaster William Burroughs.

Burroughs: "The word is a virus."

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