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The Epidemic, the Sovereign, and the Age of (Mis)Information: Giorgio Agamben vs. Jean-Luc Nancy[1]

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Abstract

This essay discusses the recent works of Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben on the coronavirus. Quite some continental thinkers, such as Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Žižek, offered their take on the epidemic already, yet those of Nancy and Agamben gained the most traction in the field. In the first section we elaborate Agamben's somewhat formidable interpretation of "the invention" of the epidemic: Agamben apparently believed the epidemic to be one more biopolitical device deployed by governments to suit the masses. In the second section we present Nancy's account of the philosophical consequences of the epidemic. Nancy's work is, in large part, an oblique response to Agamben's position, insisting that science and medicine would be the least bad mode of procedure available to halt the epidemic. It is, furthermore, not a question of the free, unlimited ego against biopolitical systems but rather of recognizing our frailty since all egos, well before saying 'I', are bound to each other from the very outset. The third section considers the most important critiques of Agamben's work, which has caused quite the debate, in the secondary literature. The thesis of this article is that these, somehow, affirm the correctness of Nancy's account of the epidemic on a number of themes, such as the fate of the sovereign, and sovereignty in an age of (mis)information: even the sovereign is not absolute. Yet, even if true, I will wonder: if there is too much critique of our democratic institutions in Agamben, is there enough critique of democracy in Nancy's work? Are we satisfied with a spirituality alone?

Keywords: Coronavirus, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, sovereignty, information

Many of the major figures of today's continental philosophy have responded to the outbreak of the coronavirus. In 2020 and 2021 books of Slavoj Žižek, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Peter Sloterdijk and Bruno Latour on this topic saw the light of day. Though all of them use a certain aplomb—all of them find, in one way or another, that our global society needs to rethink all of its institutions and ways of being—it is safe to say that the works of Agamben and Nancy attracted the most attention in the current academic world.

1. Giorgio Agamben: Where Did we Land?

Quickly after the outbreak of the virus, Agamben posted brief contemplations on his blog. It is safe to say that these caused quite the stir.[2] These blogs, and later the book, continue to baffle their readers. Everything that unsettles the intellectual community since is present: one finds, for instance, that the virus is somewhat like an "ordinary flu"; at other times, Agamben is close to the most mediocre of conspiracy theories, attacks all forms of online education, and so on. This essay seeks first to present a nuanced, contextualized account of Agamben's position. It then portrays some of the major critiques of this position in the literature which all seems to focus on his mistaken account of sovereignty in an age of (mis)information. This will allow us to consider Nancy's work, not only as a response but also as a considerable correction to Agamben's thesis: what we see happening today is not an absolute sovereign (even in the guise of an authoritarian state) informing, instructing or misinforming its citizens, but a sense of fleeting sovereignty, of a passing of power into multiple singular and plural entities. In this way, one might argue that the vacating of the place of power, analyzed by Carl Schmitt, from the sovereign to the 'empty place' of power in democracy, is now extended into a fluid ontology of, ultimately, (our) passing within in the world.

Agamben's consistence in his blogs is, however, noteworthy. He does not, for that matter, apologize in later blogs for a former faulty interpretation. Agamben, moreover, regularly comments upon events happening in society. In his

Homo Sacer-series one finds elaborated interpretations of Guantánamo Bay and the events of 9/11. Provocation is not absent from Agamben's work either. Well-known is his phrase that Auschwitz is the hidden law of modernity.

Yet, let's not turn Agamben into the Bolsonaro of contemporary philosophy too quickly. On March 20, 2020, in response to the question what it means to live in a state of emergency, he writes:

> Surely, staying at home. [But also] remembering that our neighbor is not just […] a possible agent of contagion, but first of all our fellow to whom we owe our love and support […] It surely means staying at home, but also […] asking ourselves whether the militarized emergency that has been declared in this country is not , among other things, a way of burdening citizens with the very serious responsibility that governments bear for having dismantled our healthcare system. It surely means staying at home, but also making one's voice heard and urging that public hospitals be restituted the resources of which they have been deprived, and reminding judges that the destruction of the national healthcare system is a crime infinitely more serious than leaving one's home without a self-certification form (Agamben 2021, 20).

Agamben's resistance to what became quotidian globally is obvious: how come that, given that epidemics have took place in the past, this is the first time a lockdown and a restriction on the freedom of movement is now in place (Agamben 2021, 18 and 28). The question is legitimate. The philosopher, too, needs to ask whether other measures could not likewise, and with more democratic legitimacy, curtail the raging pandemic. Agamben does not eschew the hyperboles however: barbarism and fascism are just around the corner (Agamben 2021, 34 and 41). Yet here too, Agamben poses some thoughtworthy questions: why, he asks, was there so little resistance in Europe to sometimes draconic measures (Agamben 2021, 23)? It is surprising, indeed, that societies characterized by a lacking 'belief in politics' followed most of these measures without much ado.

Next to the restrictions on the freedom of movement, another event riled Agamben a bit more: the fact that in Italy during the first wave "our dear ones […] should not only die alone, but that their bodies should be burned without a funeral" (Agamben 2021, 35). Circumstances like these have made

Agamben think about the ethical and political consequences of the pandemic. Those consequences are multiple.

There is first of all no legal basis for the measures taken by most governments. Agamben regularly refers to the end of "bourgeois democracy" through executive power increasingly hollowing out legislative power. This ultimately entails the end of the separation of powers, in the process of which it becomes unclear whether we are dealing with democracy on its way to sheer despotism or, worse still, are already living in a totalitarian state (Agamben 2021, 36, 42 and 60). Sloterdijk, here, is largely sympathetic towards Agamben's approach and remarks similarly that we should stop this "unhealthy applause for these neo-authoritarian tendencies […] where the roads [from] to decision-making [to] execution have become unusually short" (Sloterdijk 2021, 67 and 107). It must be noted in effect that, in many countries in Europe, it is the word of leaders that have not even been elected, that becomes law. Agamben sardonically remarks that it has been since the Führer that such was the case (Agamben 2021, 36-7). Agamben, however, asks just how long one can maintain such a state of exception, especially when it is apparent that once such a state of exception settles in there is no way back to a previous situation—the state of exception is a state of exception precisely because it is entirely without *checks and balances* (Agamben 2021, 83).

The political consequences of the corona policies loom large, especially now the executive powers are aided by science in general and medicine in particular. A novel aspect in this health crisis is in effect that the word of the doctor (in a broad sense) has become law too. Agamben seems to react—in part—to the health hype raging through our societies. This would concern "a religion of health" because its main goal is not to recover, through a one-time medication or therapy, but rather to remain healthy always and everywhere (Agamben 2021, 18, 29 and 51). It is, however, one thing to point to the omnipresence of such a religion of health—the majority of lifestyle magazines testify to this indeed—it is something else entirely to interpret the measures against the transmission of the coronavirus solely from this perspective.

It is in effect too big a leap to jump from the omnipresence of a health hype to the impositions of corona measures in the entire world, even when these have the appearances of an obsessive compulsion towards sanitization (masks, alcohol gels, and so on). These measures can be interpreted otherwise than a society that would deliberately cut all social, political, and public bonds and so reduce itself to 'bare life', a life that is not worth living yet is perpetuated at all costs. This is, however, exactly what Agamben says is happening (Agamben 2021, 18). It can indeed be tempting to interpret the face mask duty, the curfew, or those restrictions that determine how many people one can meet as the dawn of an evil 'biopolitical' power that has no other intentions than to make the population increasingly obedient and passive. Such an "abolition of public space" (Agamben 2021, 19) needs to give rise to thought: is it legitimate at all? How long can such a state be maintained without losing its legitimacy at all; how to return to prior states? And so on.

Yet this abolition could mean something else than what Agamben focuses on, namely the extraction of vegetative life out of the surgery room and into the socio-cultural milieu (Agamben 2021, 35 and 64). Agamben's rigidity forces him to choose between *either* bare life *or* a completely politicized 'good life'. A transition from the one to another or the idea that the one has a bearing on the other is, for him at least, unthinkable. It is for this reason that Agamben cannot accept that at times bare life needs to be preserved simply in order for the good life to be able to resume.

One can conclude that in Agamben's case we are dealing with a sort of philosophical tunnel vision which prevents him from interpreting certain ideas, for instance the one stating that "the pandemic is […] first and foremost a political concept" (Agamben 2021, 53) otherwise than his (earlier) philosophy dictates. Already in his *The State of Exception*, for instance, Agamben shows that legislation by decrees, where executive power in a way sidetracks the legislative power of the parliament, is on the rise since World War I and has now become standard practice in most democracies. Agamben's remarks about the science of medicine seems to be new terrain,

however, although one can find in his *Homo Sacer* an intriguing discussion of an irreversible coma, in which a patient is kept alive only by technological means. Life and death, according to Agamben, are here no longer simply biological concepts but have become thoroughly political. Life and death, in this manner, become part and parcel of the biopolitical and sovereign execution of power.[3] It appears that it is exactly Agamben's philosophical system that hinders him to take sufficient distance from the event that the coronavirus affects governments as well as for citizens.

2. Jean-Luc Nancy's Response to Agamben

Nancy's *Un trop humain virus* (Nancy 2020), published in the very year the virus broke out, reads as a long response to Agamben' surprising statements about Italy's dealing with the coronavirus. Nancy's book, too, collects essays written for specific occasions. One cannot, however, begin describing Nancy's response without first pointing to an incident, if you like, between the two men that played out some time ago. It is well-known that Nancy has had a heart transplant—he relates this event in his essay *The Intruder* (Nancy 2008b, 161-170). Nancy now reports that Agamben was the only one who tried to talk him out of surgery. Even then, a life that could only be maintained through medical and technological interventions didn't seem worth living. Yet Nancy is very clear that without this intervention he would no longer live (Nancy 2021, 27).

Nancy mentions Agamben rather late in his book. It is clear from the outset that his stance is diametrically opposed to Agamben's. Whereas the latter reports that the corona measures reduce our existences to "bare life" and this "bare life, and the fear of losing it, is not something that unites people; rather, it blinds and separates them" because the other "must [be] avoided at all costs" (Agamben 2021, 18), Nancy describes the virus as a "communovirus"—in an essay dating from March 25 2020 immediately after the first lockdowns in Europe:

> The virus communizes us. It puts us all on equal footing […] and gathers us for a shared frontline. That this happens through the isolation of us all is but a paradoxical way to point to our community.

> One is only unique amidst all. This is what makes our most intimate community: the shared sense of unicity (Nancy 2020, 23).

The virus thus functions as a leveler through making visible, once again, the "sovereign right of death" (Nancy 2020, 30). It does this through introducing a death into the public realm "for which there is no protection" (Nancy 2020, 93), not at the time at least. In certain regions, death is suddenly everywhere whereas, in Europe, there have been efforts for decades to ban death from the center of public life. Cemeteries, for example, are most often at the outskirts of town.

Nancy too revisits his earlier philosophy to understand the contemporary crisis. In his last study of community, he points to camaraderie and companionship as the most noble aspect of human existence in society, a society that is no longer founded from without, be it through a divine government or by a utopian goal, as the moderns still believed.[4] It is on this plane, too, that Nancy's thought on sovereignty needs to be situated: no subject is, whether it be from without—a divine subject—or from within—a nation-state for instance—steering society or otherwise organizing the human community.

One cannot detect in Nancy, however, a (holistic) naiveté. Even though the virus "reminds" us of the "interdependency" (Nancy 2020, 23) of all with all, it reveals and accelerates tendencies that are present in our culture since modernity. The virus puts a "magnifying glass" on our history, a history in which "humans" permanently "do violence to the human" (Nancy 2020, 73 and 39).

Nancy does not shy away from bombast. Yet it is hard to deny that the virus did put the entire world on hold: schools closed, companies faced bankruptcy, and the economy and trade are no longer the sovereign rulers they used to be. Whereas before the crisis, some, echoing Margaret Thatcher, stated that 'There is no alternative' it is precisely the opposite that is true. Bruno Latour made this observation immediately after the outbreak (Latour 2020).

According to Nancy, we have to ask what world exactly is coming to a halt. Since modernity we are living in a world "where technical and political mastery appears to be its own goal. This turns the world into a tense force field, in which

these forces tend to come into conflict more and more, divested of all civilizing alibis that were operative before" (Nancy 2020, 17) to the point one should ask, even, whether we still want a civilization at all (Nancy 2012, 62n.). A few things are important here. First, science and technology serve no other end than themselves: it is the master of the world solely to master the world (and no longer to obtain an ultimate goal such as progress or liberation). Secondly, through science and technology the world is turned into a technical body. If there would still be something natural about this world, we have lost the ability to isolate and define such "naturalness". Everything is always and already interwoven with the human and with its artifacts. Nothing, then, is "natural", and certainly not when this would mean that one or the other institution or situation is deemed permanent or self-evident. What *appears* natural is a historical construction just as much as everything else. Here, too, Nancy's philosophy is descriptive of the fleetingness of all beings. In this way, Nancy points to the construction of sense and of meaning. Behind (or beyond) such meaning, there is no longer a "natural order" that would so be uncovered.

What kind of world does the virus show us exactly? A world in which growth is, perhaps for the first time, questioned and which collapses through the excesses it desired for itself. Even though the virus travels "via the routes and the rhythms of the global circulation of the goods of trade", it does not touch us all in an equal manner. On the contrary, it sheds "new light on the inequalities in the world today": how in effect does one wash one's hands regularly if there is no water at disposal? Nancy points to these inequalities on many levels: from the vulnerable families living in social housing who didn't have gardens during the lockdowns and small companies going bankrupt to Amazon whose profit during this crisis was bigger than ever. It is this gap which for Nancy is detestable and in the end no less than "obscene". Just because there is no one guiding this world, neither from beyond nor from within the world, equality for Nancy becomes no less than an "existential demand" (all these quotes (Nancy 2020, 31-2).[5] It is here that his stance against Agamben takes root: there is no liberating potential at all in Agamben's hyper-individualistic, neoliberal

and, as we will see, neoviral account (Cf. Nancy 2020, 61), it just plays into the hands of the already privileged.

Such inequality bothers Nancy on a metaphysical level too, however. In a world where death awaits us all, it is no less than our duty to let each and every one live a life that is as good as possible: "there is no reason why there would be 'wretched of life' (and so lives of the wretched) if the reason of our being is to live and to die, not the accumulation of goods, of power, or of knowledge" (Nancy 2020, 85). The accumulation of the latter may never be a goal in itself; it should always be at the service of those whose only fate it is to live and to die, those, Bruno Latour will write, "that recognize that they are born, that they are in need of care and that they have predecessors and successors" (Latour 2021, 51). The human being, for Nancy too, appears as a being that needs care before he or she is a consumer, a worker or, worse still, falls prey to an algorithm.

What causes this world to break down and how does the coronavirus show this precisely? Here Nancy indicates a peculiar metaphysical situation. Evil, Nancy notes, in the metaphysical tradition was always characterized as a privation: evil is the absence of the good, it is what lacks the good. Now, however, just that which we deemed as and desired to be the good fails us and causes trouble:

> It is the Good of our conquering the world that appears to be destructive—and for this reason makes clear it is autodestructive. Excess destroys excess, speed kills speed, health endangers health, riches in the end seems to ruin itself—without anything returning to the poor (Nancy 2020, 39).

Nancy so envisions the passage from modernity to postmodernity: we have come to the point at which the conquering of the world becomes a sheer *creation* of world. The discovery is no longer the encountering of something 'already there', we now create what will be factual and, as a consequence, think that we construct and control the world.

We need not uncritically assume that Nancy's apocalyptical stance over and against the mutation of our culture is correct (Schrijvers 2016, 72-82). For Nancy, however, our society suffers from a 'spiritual poverty': "the spirit suffocates in the computational" (Nancy 2020, 33) in algorithms of all kinds

and in the omnipresence of calculus. Commentators agree: for Nancy, "the pandemic is a symptom of our disequilibrated spiritual, not merely biological, life" (Horváth 2023, 145).

Meanwhile the virus literally takes our breath and it is not certain that we will ever find the space to breathe freely again. The sheer power of the virus is linked "to a complex of factors and agents [that] are also at stake in pollution, the disappearance of biodiversity, poisoning through pesticides, deforestation, famine [and] social and moral decomposition" (Nancy 2020, 37-8). In this regard, one can call the outbreak of the virus "deliberate [*délibéréé*]" (Nancy 2020, 37): we could have known—not in the least because the state of the art in virology is such that quite a few warnings about an outbreak had already been uttered. It is remarkable that Žižek, too, will focus on this 'not wanting to know' in his analysis of the corona- and climate crisis (Žižek 2020, 140).

When Nancy turns, to the deeper conditions of possibility of the coronavirus, he in effect turns against what he calls *neoviralism*, where each and everyone is free to protect oneself from the virus in a manner he or she chooses, and in which one may recognize Agamben's position. "The whole of crises," Nancy writes,

> to which we fall prey […] arises out of the unlimited extension of the free use of the available […] resources with an eye to a production that has no other finality than itself and its own power. The virus is an occasion for us to signal that there are in effect limits (Nancy 2020, 50).

Whoever wants to curtail this virus cannot make an appeal to nature, as these neoviralists are prone to do when calling for a herd immunity in which the strong will survive, but will need to address "the techno-scientific [and] practical socio-economic conditions" that made this virus possible and which make for the fact that the problem is exactly "our concept itself of society, of its finality and its true stakes" (Nancy 2020, 49).

Yet the neoviralists complain that there is no longer any freedom. Our democracies, which should guarantee the freedom and equality of their citizens, would have reached the tipping-point of turning into a dictatorship. We need to realize, too, that Nancy did not have access to Agamben's book, but likely heard

about Agamben's blogs. Nancy too talks about health: it may well be the case that "health has become one more product of consumption and that a long life has become a value in itself," but even if this is the case "one does not answer to this situation by exposing the entire world to the risks that come from all sides in our techno-economical systems" (Nancy 2020, 46).

On the contrary, such a neoviralism simply rehashes the egoistic 'every man for himself' of neoliberalism. It is based on an abstract and modern idea of human freedom and autonomy that is in no way grounded in our thrownness in a *determinate*, indeed already technical and economical, world. It does not reckon with what Nancy calls our "inscription in a world" (Cf. Nancy 2020, 44), in which freedom and the concomitant independence always already has to take into account certain dependencies as well (from certain socio-economic and technical conditions). Freedom is not abstract and indeterminate. The freedom of the ones in a social housing quarter differs from those in villas with swimming pools. All these factors turn such neoviralism, where everyone is responsible only for him- or herself at the expense of "the useless and [the] unlucky elderly" (Nancy 2020, 49), into a repetition of neoliberalism where the unemployed, the deplorables and the retired sometimes seems to suffer a similar fate.

Nancy points to the fact that these neoviralists seem to have no other means to turn to than the so-called herd immunity in their respective response to the health crisis caused by corona. In this particular case, then, Nancy remarks, "it is about nature that the neoviralists speak without saying so: a clever natural disposition allows for the liquidation of the virus" (Nancy 2020, 46). Nancy's conclusion then, unsurprisingly, is harsh: the position of neoviralism is nothing less than the intellectual equivalent of violent rioters and the argument of an "abstract heroism," in which each and every one faces the danger of the virus publicly and courageously, that really does not know what to say (Nancy 2020, 50, 35 and 98).

Nancy does go a long way with Agamben's concerns for a "biopolitics," where life and death are always and already a matter of politics, however. Nancy is ready to subscribe to the thesis that the "good life" does not coincide with the simple

absence or avoidance of the virus (Nancy 2020, 82). At this juncture, in effect, one needs to note the reduction to naked life for which Agamben warns. Yet this does not mean that avoiding the political and cultural interference with public health would automatically entail the "good life": health care, too, is entwined in ever-changing technological and social conditions. We need to rethink what the "good life" today might mean, certainly, but one cannot do this without taking these altered conditions into account through, for instance, "not even caring about health" (Nancy 2020, 98). This is why some have argued that through biopolitics alone one, for Nancy, "does not grasp the situation in which we find ourselves" (Sugiera 2023, 240). Agamben's stubborn stance resembles Michel Foucault's position when the latter refused treatment for AIDS or Ivan Illich who rejected care for his cancer.

We, however, need to reckon with the facts that diseases are no longer "natural" or individual, but are always and already embedded in a social body. The illness of one always demanded the help of the other. The virus that plagued us demands that all connections and links of the social web come into play: science rapidly created vaccines, economics throve on working from home, and so on. The "good life" cannot *not* be related to the questions that arise out of these (new) connections and their technical conditions. What to expect from life, and from health care, now that people on average grow older than 75? Health care, too, is subject to change and encounters new questions for philosophy. For Nancy, we need to ask what exactly is at stake when technical and medical possibilities change over time. "When neurosis was not named as such yet, and was not yet present in societal debates, it was not yet the subject of medical care" (Nancy 2020, 97). It is from the moment that neurosis was coined and received treatment that an entirely new constellation of connections between technological, economical and societal conditions opened up which thinking just cannot dismiss. Diseases and viruses take place in a technical culture and through these technical conditions. It is precisely this culture that needs to bring a cure. Technology, in a sense, is at once the poison and the remedy but it makes no sense to try to separate these technical means

artificially from a pristine "natural state". It is this that makes for the difficulties surrounding the question of the human: the human being is "too much" and "too little" human at the same time: too much culture to be identical to nature and enough nature to not coincide with culture.

We will see later how Nancy's attempt to come up with a new image of the human leads him to quite the quietist position: it is as if one might see some sort of spiritual resignation over and against the questions of our day in Nancy's latest work. In every case, it is as if Nancy speaks from out of the stillness that we, sometimes literally, experienced at the beginnings of the first lockdowns, whereas Agamben speaks from out of the impatience, or indignation even, over some corona measures that some started to feel later. In conclusion we might now state that if Agamben fears for a life that is politicized from beginning to end, Nancy's thought is almost the mirror image when pleading for an existence that never can be politicized completely since it is, all things together, free from biopolitical intrusion (or at least never coincides with it completely) and never falls prey to a complete reduction to either a natural or culture phenomenon.

3. Sovereignty in The Age of (Mis)Information: Other Critics of Agamben

Needless to say, Agamben's writings have stirred up quite some debate. Nancy was surely not the only one who must have frowned when reading those blogs. What has less been noted, is that these critiques seem to play into the cards of Nancy's general philosophical response to Agamben. In conclusion to this essay, we will therefore point to two such critiques. First, there is what one could call Agamben's misjudgment when it comes to current age of information and, secondly, we will show how this misjudgment leads, through a reading of Agamben's critics, to a different account of sovereignty in the contemporary world.

It is indeed remarkable that commentators agreeing with Nancy, stating that it is precisely this "mixture of all beings" (Latour 2021, 31 and 103), as Latour has it, or this "interconnectedness" of all with all that needs to be analyzed

(Fishel and Agius 2024, 9), confirm exactly the point of some of Agamben's critics who argue that he underestimates the multilayered facets of contemporary society. This is most obvious in Christiaens' account of the "networked public sphere" (Christiaens 2022, 412-4) in which we find ourselves, as Nancy himself has it, in an "ocean of discourses" (Nancy 2020, 77). In such a "multitude of clustered opinions" and "chaotic proliferation of inconsistent communications" (resp. Christiaens 2022, 413 and 412), it is not the "the complacency of the public or the standardization of public opinion" (Christiaens 2022, 412) that, as Agamben does, ought to be criticized. On a more metaphysical level, one ought to say that at issue, here, is not a sovereign state that one-dimensionally seeks to push its civilians, through one or the other biopolitical hidden agenda, into servitude. On the contrary, in such an "age of information" (Cf. Heidegger 1991, 29), information always already is interconnected with misinformation and disinformation. Nancy, too, reflects on this overload of information: there is too much of it, we talk about it endlessly and this whirlwind sweeps us away (Nancy 2020, 77 and 36). As a result, information is not the transfer from the knower—the state—to those that ought to know but do not yet know—the public. There is, if you like, no sovereign transport of the law (nor of the exception) to all civilians. Rather, one could say, each of the civilians attempts to be its his or her own sovereign.

Nancy quite quickly saw that the state's measures against the coronavirus are not just, as Agamben argues, the expansion of the sovereign state of exception to contemporary COVID-ridden society (Agamben, 2021, 18). On the contrary, Agamben's tendency to see just such an expansion in the corona measures, that is, "the expansion of the state of exception to engulf the normal state itself, so that exception is […] is no longer distinct from it" (Prozorov 2023,68) reveals a general tendency of Agamben's thought. The tendency, in short, to see the sovereign exception of the law always and everywhere.

Nancy, however, begins his book by stating exactly the opposite: "The inevitable repetition of 'emergency measures' causes the ghost of Carl Schmitt to emerge, through a sort of hasty amalgam" (Nancy 2020, 15). The crisis the coronavirus

reveals, for Nancy, is not a biopolitical one, nor just a political one but rather takes on spiritual-ontological traits that concerns human civilization in general. For, just as one cannot separate a supposedly "natural" virus from all the societal and technical conditions causing it, so too one cannot set the works of the sovereign apart from the state in which these are executed. One might say: one knows about sovereignty only through its effects and not through its cause. This means that sovereignty, for Nancy, will have to oblige to the wider ontological condition that he names, early on, as "singular plural" (Nancy 1996, 89). One knows of the singular only through its plural taking place, just as one knows of the plural modes of existence through the existence of the singular. This means that one knows about *the* sovereign only through the sometimes very diverse sovereignties taking place, just as one catches a glimpse of this plurality through the idea of the one sovereign one already has. This logic, too, is present in Nancy's idea of the "communovirus" mentioned above: in the isolation caused by the lockdowns, one gathers that "one is only unique amidst all" (Nancy 2020, 23), it is in the multitudes, in the "plural" that one is alone and "singular". The idea of unicity therefore is always and already shared. The idea of sovereignty, of *the* sovereign therefore, always and already will need to be compared to other sovereignties and other sovereigns.

It does not help, Nancy thus argues, to see 'the state of exception' just about everywhere to face this crisis. This, however, is exactly what, according to Prozorov, Agamben does. The corona measures are not where we catch the sovereign in the act, as Agamben is prone to think, in order to argue that there is no line of demarcation between our democracies and totalitarianism. Rather, the "trope of indistinction" (Prozorov 2023, 69), through which all (empirical) emergency measures are *but* the actualization of a transcendental and sovereign claim to power, causes Agamben to miss the differences between the phenomena playing out in the coronacrisis. In this regard, not all perpetuation of health is, simply, a reduction to bare life, just as not all subsidies to the working class are a means to keep it docile. In its stead, Agamben can only see in these measures the transition of a free and open democracy to a

totalitarian state: every difference between them eventually collapses.

It is this point that the critics of Agamben adopt in unison: the emergency measures are not the acts of an omnipotent sovereign who would, always and everywhere, decree the same exceptions to the law. With Nancy, these critics seem to agree that there is no such thing as an absolute sovereign. If anything, this absoluteness of the one sovereign would always be divided, and divested to other sovereignties. This was obvious already from Agamben's misjudgment of the media, and the topic of medicine in the media: there is no one single transfer from an omnipotent state to its subservient citizens. Quite a few of these critics critique Agamben's account of the sovereign in corona times similarly and point to Walter Benjamin's account of the sovereign who is, in any case, unable to decide on the state of exception (Benjamin 2003, 71). As Prozorov argues: "given the initial [and] ongoing uncertainty and lack of knowledge regarding the origins and effects of the coronavirus, the states of exception introduced by governments worldwide can hardly appear as signs of their omnipotence but rather reflect their impotence in the face of the situation that is genuinely exceptional, not as a result of any sovereign decision but largely irrespective of it" (Prozorov 2023, 71).[6]

Nancy's writings on sovereignty are not many. Yet they are to be framed into his larger framework of transcendence, of the event of the world (as the sole place of transcendence). Sovereignty, for Nancy, is therefore the question of the "summit" and its "relation to the base" (Nancy 2002, 155). Sovereignty has to do with "height", with "altitude in itself", with transcend*ing* rather than the transcendent one used to call God.

From these writings on sovereignty, it becomes clear that Nancy, too, sides with Benjamin. This explains his stance against Agamben. Nancy, however, would less than Benjamin focus on the ultimate undecidability that haunts the sovereign but all the more on "the exercise of sovereignty" (Nancy 2002, 151) which, in the end, eludes the sovereign too: he or she "is the subject of the exercise to which [he or she] is subjected" (Nancy 2002, 152)

This is the case because for Nancy, sovereignty, is not a property of one or the other subject, but rather a quality, as the medievals would have called it, of reality. If, here or there, a sovereign decision would need to be made, then this sovereign too would be subjected to the transcending taking place in the (metaphysical) event of world in which this decision would need to be compared to other sovereignties happening on the very same plane—of world that is. No matter how high this sovereign would like to place him- or herself, the execution of his or her power is subjected still to its happening within in the world. Contra Agamben, then, there is no sovereign to be caught in the act, there is just the act of sovereignty and even then, just only for a little while, just long enough for the sovereign to realize that he, or she, too is subject to what happens to him or her in a sovereign manner. With Schmitt, Nancy believes that there are sovereign decisions that suspend the law and enforce decisions from the summit to the base. With Benjamin, however, Nancy would contend that these decisions and whatever program the sovereign wants to execute, whatever goal he (or she) wants to attain, these goals and programs, and their execution by the sovereign are in the end subjected to the sovereign happening of world all the same.

Here Nancy is in effect close once again to Benjamin since the sovereign operates in the terrain carved out by the catastrophe that forces him or her to decide. The sovereign is in no way whatsoever outside the event of world. Whereas Agamben is closer here to Carl Schmitt, Nancy sides with Benjamin: if for Schmitt, the sovereign, when facing an event (such as the corona crisis) needs to decide upon a course of action and will enforce this decision on its citizens, for Benjamin, the sovereign operates in all cases after the event, following the event. It is the event that will have made the sovereign decide so and so and is so forced upon the sovereign and its citizens.

It is this happening of the world, this event of the world, which for Nancy subjects us all and which ultimately makes him turn to what almost seems a spiritual vocabulary in his book on the coronavirus.

4. Conclusion: Toward A World Without (a) Sovereign

The event of world trumps all acts of sovereignty, and in this world all are connected to all. Nancy is not blind to the domination, today, of capitalism and consumerism—of one phenomenon overshadowing all the others. The "empty place of power," proper to democracy through "sharing out" sovereignty for only four years or so, today has been filled in completely through a "multitude [of] consumer goods" and through a society of the spectacle which absorbs and will potentially destroy our very freedom (Nancy 2020, 59). Each owner, each accumulator of goods, so seems to turn into its very own sovereign. Capitalism suffocates "the spirit of democracy [which] is the breath of the human being" (Nancy 2008, 31). All across the world one can detect a hardening and stifling of identity and its concomitant politics.

Nancy's message, if any, here is strangely spiritual: we again need "to learn to breathe and live" again (Nancy 2020, 33) in times when it is unclear what we still want is a civilization. Even if all programs, goals and anticipations are ultimately incomplete, because subjected to the finite event of world—and the virus is one forceful reminder of such finitude—relations still start and connections are made, "this is what is beautiful" (Nancy 2020, 74).

All this is very true. Yet it leaves this author, and probably some of his readers, to wonder: if there is too much of critique of our institutions in Agamben, to the point one asks whether for Agamben the measures, and the institutions itself, are ever justified, one could query whether in Nancy there is enough critique of our institutions, even the democratic ones. There seems to be no genuine political philosophy in Nancy. And though the critics of Agamben we discussed affirm Nancy's position—no one really knows what the virus, and the future of the event of the world, will bring—there is little, next to nothing discussion in Nancy about our current institutions. It is, perhaps, easy, to speak of the transcending that is the event of world, but it is necessary, too, to speak about the sedimented, and instituted, senses of transcendence within our very world.

In absence of this, Nancy risks to affirm the status quo much more than Agamben will ever do.

Yet, and again, we never know what is going to happen and, ultimately, Nancy is right when stating that the virus forced us to recognize our world as a world without a sovereign. Despite the attempts, always and everywhere, to consume more goods, gather more property and power, despite all instrumental rationality "we know spontaneously […] that the 'without reason', is stronger, more intense, than all reason. Like the blooming of a flower, a smile or a song" (Nancy 2020, 86).

Nancy here approaches the mysticism of Silesius: just as "the rose is without why," we need to accept that there is no standard for our appearing and disappearing in this world, that things in effect come to pass and that what we "share" is precisely this uncertainty, this coming to pass and tragic "foundering" (Nancy 2020, 110). "Can we turn this 'without reason' into a measure for our civilization?" (Nancy 2020, 85). This is the question that philosophy poses, but cannot answer, and though some might argue that with such a fluid account of sovereignty one loses sight of the true state of politics, it is, on the other hand, good to be reminded, first, that not a single one can lay claim permanently on sovereign power and that therefore no one can pretend to speak for the entire community once and for all and, secondly, that if a sovereign were to arise, he (or she) too will be subjected to…Sooner or later.

NOTES

[1] Parts of the first two sections of this essay have been published, in Dutch, as "De filosoof en het virus. Continentaalfilosofische reacties in op het coronavirus", in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 83 (2021) 517-543. I thank the publishers for their permission to reprint these here.

[2] A first response to these blogs is gathered in (Castillon and Marchevsky 2021).

[3] It is this power that can kill me *just by* keeping me alive and, vice versa, let me live while I am dead already. For these two anticipations in Agamben's thought, see (Agamben 2005, 12-13 and (Agamben 1998, 160-166).

[4] See (Nancy 2013, 121 and 141), where the "communion of companions" does not unite them before a shared project but is rather characterized through a certain fleetingness, a passing recognition which also plays in the greeting of

the other or in shared interests, as when one is delighted in the fact that the other has read the same novel.

[5] It would distract to show why equality for Nancy is a "principle of reality", see for this (Nancy 2008, 46-7).

[6] On this turn to Benjamin, see also (Salzani 2021). See also Agamben's discussion of these theses of Benjamin in (Agamben 2002, 52-64).

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