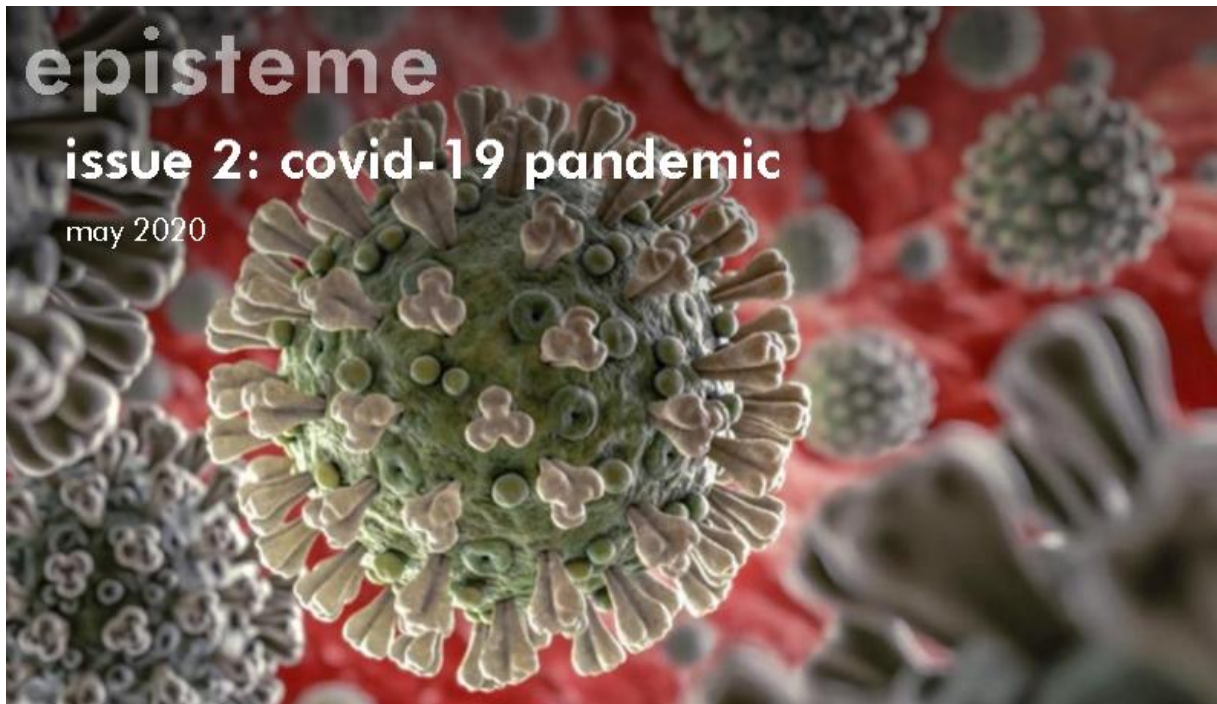


# episteme

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## [The Discreet Charm of Coronavirus](#)

Gavin Walker



I saw the sun  
Born from a great silence  
I saw the sun burning towards a great death  
I have walked above many deaths and much silence  
But I cannot describe the sun  
Too late to its waning  
Too early to its setting  
In a moment shorter than my entire life  
This single sun – newly born, newly dying  
Only disintegrates

太陽を見た  
おおきな沈黙から生れ  
おおきな死にむかって燃えている太陽をぼくは見た  
おおくの死とおおくの沈黙のうえを歩いてきたが  
ぼくは太陽を描写することができない  
落ちてゆくのに遅すぎる  
とどまっているのに速すぎる ぼくの全生活より短い瞬間に  
あたらしく生れあたらしく死ぬひとつの太陽は  
分解するだけだ

– Tamura Ryūichi, “Nichibotsu no shunkan” (1956)<sup>1</sup>

« Les non-dupes errent », dont je m’arme cette année.

– J. Lacan, Télévision (1974)<sup>2</sup>

By mid-March 2020, it became eminently clear to anyone paying attention to world news that the emerging COVID-19 would quickly cease its status as a “Chinese problem” and rapidly become a global problem, and subsequently pandemic. From the outset of the virus’ global propagation, a flood of critical responses came forth, from epic pronouncements to social-media ‘thinkpieces’, the discursive function of coronavirus emerging almost in tandem, and with nearly as much impact, as the actual medical phenomenon itself. This has only continued in the ensuing weeks, to the extent that we now face an essential bifurcation of the question into an epidemiological phenomenon (COVID-19, its spread, treatment, and pathology) and another, more slippery phenomenon: the ideological system of signification anchored by the emblem ‘coronavirus’, and perhaps our perverse enjoyment of it, at least in the sense that it now serves as a shared locus of meaning for a vast multiplication of sociopolitical fantasies. Just as Buñuel’s hapless and easily-led characters in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* constantly believe in the performative importance – or secret truth – of each situation to which they are drawn (or in the protective force of their own ridiculous norms), only to discover they are stymied by its displacement, so are we constantly being drawn into ever more ludicrous narratives about coronavirus and the present crisis of global health, only for reality to plod on in its contentless devastation, full of displacements and mediocre transformations.

#### I. “They Love Their Symptom as They Love Themselves”

The pretension of cultural critique to make coherent comments on matters of epidemiology continues apace despite an inability to exceed the realm of doxa and amateur speculation, but thus far, we find a remarkable lack of reflection on the very operational categories of the ‘coronavirus ideology,’ if we can be permitted this unappealing formulation. In political terms, we already reach a near-universal state of hysterical magnification of this relatively indifferent signifier: from the right, there is a quasi-racial search for origins and conspiratorial-Orientalist obsession for the “Chinese virus,” Chinese plots, deviant laboratories, “wet markets,” “Wuhan soup,” the narrative structures of geopolitical thrillers. From the centre-left, on the other hand, a cascade of totemistic and fetishized hysteria has arisen, in which the polyvalent coronavirus-object has served as the conceptual vanishing-point of social crisis and political upheaval, perhaps best concretized in the headline “Coronavirus Unmasks Global Inequalities.”<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, the profound naïveté of this perspective, in which the inability of the working and popular classes to purchase means of subsistence in times of crisis is meant to signify “something broken in the system,” could not be more ideological. After all, capitalism’s “inequalities” are generated no more by not paying rent or not being able to buy basic goods than by precisely normal, timely payments of rents, smoothly purchasing basic commodities in times of supposed ‘non-exceptionality’. The time of coronavirus is no more an exception to capitalism’s functioning than it is a moment of conversion, when we will at last see the system for “what it is”; it is simply a moment of intense, critical suspension that throws us onto other problems: finitude, sheer survival, the social constitution of health, the function of the state, the primitive, nearly pre-historic level of our medical capacity when faced with a rapidly propagating ‘unknown’.

In this sense, the xenophobia of the right-wing 'coronavirus' and the fetish-talisman of 'correct ideas' that is the centre-left 'coronavirus' both insist on arrogating to this medical crisis an expository character of Revelation: now that coronavirus has suspended 'normality', we can truly see at last what the problem is! In 1973, Lacan famously "armed himself" with the peculiar formulation "les non-dupes errent." On the one hand a clever homonym for "le nom du père" (the name of the father), "le non du père" (the 'no' of the father), and so on, this phrase has been variously explicated by Lacanians for decades. Perhaps in the context of the present argument, I would simply say that when we emphasize that it is the "non-dupes" who are "in error" or aimlessly "wandering about," we are also stating that it is those who imagine themselves to not be "duped," to be suddenly aware of ideology, aware of the 'failures of the system', and so on who are in fact, most in error, or indeed most deeply embedded in ideology. The 'non-dupes' are precisely those who believe most in the 'normal function' of capitalism, this erasure of violence by means of violence that is the 'normality' of the liberal consensus, parliamentary democracy, and the social relation of capital.

Perhaps it is better for us, "armed this year with the formula 'les non-dupes errent'," to say that it is concretely our 'non-dupes' — those for whom the supposed "secrets" behind the virus have at last been revealed — of the coronavirus who are in error. Apparently, the only unsayable, truly prohibited statement is to emphasize: this is an epidemiological crisis whose 'meaning' is thus far quite opaque, and which has no inherent tendencies for development. Our obsessive drive to 'enjoy' this moment through relentless consumption of news, hysterical attributions of signification to this crisis, fixations on the Dickensian horrors of the hospital, the care-home, and the operating room neither "reveals" anything politically meaningful, nor produces any affirmative figure of thought: it merely continues in a more hysterical key the death-drive of global liberal, parliamentary culture whose lodestar is "the American way of life." The pandemic's 'meaning' is nothing more than the ubiquity, mediocrity, and impotence of death in a cultural moment devoid even of an idea.

## II. The Three Necessities

But if the right and centre-left paradigms tend to form a mutually beneficial circular reinforcement, the radical left has been just as hysterical in its rush to see behind this moment of the suspension of the 'normal' functioning of the dominant order a sign of impending revolution: "This Pandemic Will Lead to Social Revolutions," states a text in the august pages of the Financial Times, widely circulated and cited in the socialist media, while The Nation provides the slogan "The Coronavirus Strike Wave Could Shift Power to Workers—for Good," not to mention the remarkable text of Aleksandr Buzgalin for the Rosa-Luxemburg Stiftung, "The Coronavirus Is Stirring the Impulse to Communism," an admirable and forceful, if anachronistic piece. Since the Second International, Marxism has struggled with the nature and characteristics of the specifically political character of crises.<sup>4</sup> The diagnosis of economic crisis and its historical becoming never posed a theoretical obstacle for the scientism and mechanistic reasoning of the Second International and its chief theoreticians (principally Kautsky) — it was rather the attempt to scientifically derive both a political 'line of march' and a premonition of general political trends that stymied their efforts. This is in part due to their underestimation of the unique dynamics of the political itself, but also their confusion of levels of analysis — after all, economic

'crisis' is a cyclical, permanent feature of a capitalist commodity economy, but social 'crisis' in general obeys a wholly different dynamic, one that is neither cyclical nor repetitive, but eruptive, punctual, and contingent. Over 60 years ago, surveying the theoretical question of how to understand crisis within Marxian political economy, Uno Kozo emphasized the clear logical divergence between three separate 'necessities' for capitalist society:

When we speak of the necessity of crisis, the necessity of war, the necessity of revolution, and so on, we utilize this same identical word "necessity" (*hitsuzensei*), but these three formulations cannot be proven or legitimated through identical, or even similar methods, because the content of this word "necessity" differs in each case.<sup>5</sup>

The necessity of crisis is a logical question of the principles of political economy, a question that attempts to scientifically understand why and how crisis cyclically occurs in a relatively purified theoretical circuit of capitalist production; the necessity of war is a historical question, linked to the geopolitical and developmental analysis of a global world constituted by independent nation-states and characterized by the specific stage of imperialism as a regime of accumulation; the necessity of revolution is a political question, a question that emerges from the strategy and tactics, the organized subjective practice of the socialist movement, a task that is based on forming revolutionary subjects, in other words, communists. It is a task for communists of making communists by means of communist political action. But unlike the necessity of crisis, or even the necessity of war, the "necessity" of revolution is only made into a necessity through the subjective development of figures of the political, of political ideas, and modes of common sense that in turn make revolution into a social necessity. It is a necessity only insofar as we actively, affirmatively, passionately make it one. And this depends principally on the capacity of creation, the instauration of something that did not previously exist as a support of the status quo or even within the accepted field of thought, but something that comes from the outside. In Uno's scheme, capital faces the necessity of crisis, and states face the necessity of conflict, but there is no direct automatic pathway from this to the necessity of revolution.

### III. The Rarity of Politics

In late March, when Alain Badiou noted that "the ongoing epidemic as such will have no notable political consequences in a country like France,"<sup>6</sup> he immediately received a dose of invective and hostility from a segment of the socialist left, determined to see in every social, political, medical, and economic crisis the automatic emergence of a figure of revolt. But we have to agree with Badiou as to the necessity of "a close critique of any idea that phenomena such as an epidemic open by themselves to anything politically innovative."<sup>7</sup> Not only is the present pandemic a mediocre moment of mere suspension of the dominant order, it is one in which there is no affirmative political response that has yet emerged. It is a situation of defense, of waiting, of adjournment, of deferral. Our global moment is one in which politics appears to be everywhere: in our personal lives, in our increasing capacities to participate in supposedly political processes (polls, questionnaires, the interactive space of online news, the massification of opinion via social media, and so forth).

Our tendency today therefore is to imagine that politics is something ubiquitous: always available, easily accessible, a question of simply "choosing" or "thinking" within a field of immediacy, a direct plane of outcomes that lies in our proximate horizon. But is this thesis not in fact the death of politics as such? What specificity could we even accord to politics if every social-historical – or epidemiological – instance was considered "political"? The concept of ubiquity presupposes that everything is political, that politics suffuses our situation. In a sense, this concept of politics is one that conceives of it as a continuity, as a constantly present field of instances that emerge in and through everything. But what if instead we were to say that politics is rare? In other words, what if we were to state that politics is not what is included throughout the social-historical world, but rather what is excluded? The argument for the rarity of politics is one that suggests something quite different from the thesis of ubiquity. Here instead, politics would be conceived as a specific, concrete, historical and practical figure, something with specific moments of institution, something that emerges in and through a specific conjuncture, rather than an immanent and universally accessible field that is presupposed.

Such a concept of politics could be said to have a certain genealogy of recent and contemporary thinkers associated to it: Sylvain Lazarus, who emphasizes the rarity not only of politics, but even of thought, the moment of eruption that seizes a name and carries through its simple, direct consequences; Foucault, who rejected the ubiquity of politics, and instead spoke of the possibility of politicization, the "making-political" of social instances through practical interventions; Badiou, who insists on the event, which punctures the seemingly smooth and closed situation by introducing new and inventive contradictions, grounding a political sequence and thus retroactively convoking a political subject through a fidelity; Rancière, in whose work we find an emphasis on the strong intervention of an egalitarian proposal that suspends the representations possible in the dominant order, an opposition that he names the antagonism between "politics" and "police."

In essence, all these thinkers oppose the basic thesis that "everything is political," insisting instead that, strictly speaking, if everything is political, then in truth nothing is political, because politics here would be indistinguishable from the situation of its emergence, eliminating entirely any element of contestation or novelty. If everything were political, the very act of politicization would be meaningless. There would be no need for political analyses or political interventions that above all introduce an element of exteriority into the situation, exposing it to new limits, boundaries, and combinations rather than simply accepting the status quo as a set of rigid givens. In such an optic, contestation itself would merely be enclosed within an economy of inclusion, such that any force of the outside would itself already be presupposed as internal to the all-encompassing, entirely immanent situation. Here, of course, there would be no need to speak of politics as such, because if politics is anything, it is precisely the rare moment when the existing social and historical arrangement is called into question by means of novel and inventive acts of contestation, the creation of new antagonisms that previously could not be represented in the conjuncture.<sup>8</sup>

Crisis has never automatically produced a politics of emancipation, which must be produced positively, and never simply inherited negatively from the given situation, like a photographic negative. If anything, we must admit that the politics that is more likely to emerge from this moment is a politics of the radical right, just

as the crises of the beginning of the twentieth century produced a global fascism whose defeat was never inevitable, but only the product of enormous sacrifices and devastating warfare.

The radical right possesses a greater organizational awareness and far more capacity to think and enact situations of 'dual power' than the global left today. Among other lessons of the pandemic, there should be intense reflection on the importance of political creation in the service of emancipation: if we expect the crisis to give us a politics, it will be nothing more than a politics founded on the terrain of the status quo, in which there is no foothold of a serious character for communists, in part because we have no new political innovations of a communist type to offer, merely incantatory spells and rituals to invoke the hoped-for passage from destitution to rebellion.

Certainly, there will be political consequences of this moment: it seems clear that the United States in particular will experience worsening forms of social breakdown, and perhaps this will clear the path for the 'beginning of the end' of the Pax Americana as the governing political logic of our world. For the 95% of the world's people who do not live in the United States, this can only be positive, particularly in East Asia, where the Pax Americana has been nothing more than the slow, political management of an unresolved wartime, ever since the Americans inherited the Japanese colonial system in August 1945 and became its managers. Of course, the coronavirus crisis and pandemic "reveal" to us the fragility of the state after neoliberalism, the interconnected world that is nevertheless suffused with borders, rendering our 'interconnected' relief efforts useless, the contradictions and contestations between the impulses directed by our global world towards cooperation in the division of labour while national states appeal to revanchist nationalisms to provide a politically expedient figure of interiority. Yet, no matter how much we recognize this reality, these contradictions, and the popular impulses that strain against this situation, this recognition does not itself lead inevitably to any new subjective figure of emancipation. We would do well to not easily and simplistically congratulate ourselves for being 'non-duped' by coronavirus, capable of cleverly seeing the 'essence' of things now that the contradictions of the dominant order are outlined as clearly as ever. In some ways, this kind of disclosure – as Lacan taught us – is itself another form of misrecognition or even delusion: the delusion that we simply know directly what the problem is, and therefore what to do. In fact, politics – and specifically emancipatory politics – relies on the act of creation, affirmation, and invention, something that is never given simply by the existing situation, but which must rather suspend our existing knowledge to produce a new point of departure.

There is no political content to the coronavirus as such, and the crisis of our moment is not even necessarily an exception. After all, as Canguilhem famously concluded in *The Normal and the Pathological*, "the threat of illness is one of the constituent parts of health."<sup>9</sup> This situation of exception may yet become simply the catalyst for a reorganization of capital's productive capacity, dynamic and flexible transformations of accumulation, and the state's domination of every sphere of human existence. Rather than the dialectical sublation of socio-epidemiological crisis and its generation of supposedly necessary pathways to rebellion, perhaps

our situation is more like the passionate non-dialectical destitution that the poetry of Tamura Ryūichi (see epigraph above) so ably signals: a suspension between the too-early and the too-late of the sun's waning, we live in an interregnum whose effects penetrate through to every pore of our lives and deaths, but whose character we cannot see, cannot describe. Such a situation, Tamura teaches us, leads not inherently to any resolution in a new and integral reversal, but to a simple and direct disintegration.

1. Tamura Ryūichi, "Nichibotsu no shunkan" in Tamura Ryūichi shishū (Tokyo: Shichōsha, 1968). My translation.
2. Jacques Lacan, *Télévision* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).
3. See the excellent piece of Cristina Soto van der Plas, "[El oportunismo del pensamiento crítico: sobre Sopa de Wuhan](#)" in *Tierra Adentro*, April 2020. As she astutely argues, the flood of opinion on the cultural moment is "a symptom of the opportunism and reductionism" of our moment: "It is neither the end nor the beginning, but a moment like any other that must be reflected upon, far from the reductionism that symptomatically signals guilt in the incomprehensible, the other." Soto van der Plas' text is a notable and refreshing exception to the wildly speculative and formulaic trends of current commentary on the coronavirus-situation.
4. See for example the excellent overview in Simon Clarke, "The Theory of Crisis in the Marxist Tradition" in *Marx's Theory of Crisis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), 14-76.
5. Uno, "Kyōkō no hitsuzensei wa ika ni shite ronshō sareru beki ka" [How Should the Necessity of Crisis be Proven?], originally published in the January 1959 issue of *Shisō* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten), reprinted in *Uno Kōzō chosakushū*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1973), here 143-144.
6. See the excerpts from Alain Badiou, *Sur la situation épidémique* (Tracts de crise, N°20) (Paris: Gallimard, 2020) in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, « L'épidémie n'aura aucune conséquence politique en France », 06 April 2020.
7. Badiou, op. cit.
8. For a longer development of this point see Gavin Walker, "The Regime of Translation and the Figure of Politics" in *Translation: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, no. 4 (Rimini: Raffaelli Editore, 2014), 30-52.
9. George Canguilhem, *Le normal et le pathologique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), 280.