



BIOLEGALITIES

# The Viral Politics of COVID-19

Nature, Home, and Planetary Health

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# Ideologies of Contagion and Communities of Life

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## Abstract

This chapter offers a critical discussion of the first reactions of philosophers and public intellectuals to the pandemic from the rise of a new communism to the hope for new Enlightenment. It questions the humanist and religious underpinnings of ideologies of contagion and points toward the possibility of communities of life that are immune against these ideologies.

## Keywords

- **Contagion**
- **Community of life**
- **Hope**
- **Humanism**
- **Religion**
- **Cynics**

This chapter is based on a conference paper ‘Contagion and Community of Life’ that I presented at the international workshop *Aesthetic & Critique III: Thinking in Pandemic Times: Contagion as Metaphor*, 27–28 May 2021, at the Université de Fribourg. I thank the organizers Emmanuel Alloa and Christoph Haffter and the audience for their questions and suggestions.

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## Notes

1. See, for example, Fernando Castrillón and Thomas Marchevsky (2021) who describe the pandemic as a ‘supreme catastrophe’ which presents ‘a grand opportunity to change the course of things’ (5–6). Their hope is that the ‘pandemic-induced enormous pause to life’ (due to lockdowns and the like) (ibid., 5) may ‘come to brake

open the closed, fateful, and guilt-laden box of the historicist's homogenous empty-time, allowing us a Messianic moment of disruption, rupture, discontinuity à la Benjamin' (ibid.): 'If there is such a thing that we can call Hope, it may come to arise from the unruly ashes of our current experience and not from an orderly return to what we had before' (ibid., 6).

2. 2.  
For examples of 'optimistic hope,' see Lisa Herzog who writes: 'In the "world after Corona," the task that lies ahead of our societies is to transform the dependencies that Corona has revealed into truly solidary and epistemologically just structures. The optimistic hope is that some long-outdated thought patterns, especially competitive hyper-individualism, can finally be put aside' (2020, 114); and Gert Scobel (2020). Scobel interprets the pandemic as a '*relevantes Geschichtszeichen*' (a relevant sign of history) à la Kant (2020, 167). See also Vera King for a critical engagement with the hope for an 'after' of the pandemic (2020, 124). All translations from German and Spanish sources in this chapter are mine.
3. 3.  
On contagion as a 'principal of "cultural reproduction,"' see also Krämer (2020), especially 34–36.
4. 4.  
For Nancy, what is at stake in this revolution is nothing less than the potential for our liberation, that is, 'the possibility of a disarticulation of capitalist values and therefore the possibility of a movement from the accumulation of capital to the transcendence of the individual' (2021b, 90).
5. 5.  
See also Krämer: 'The pandemic has enlightened us' (2020, 39).
6. 6.  
This is why he holds that 'human life cannot be reduced to simple survival'—to 'bare life': 'Having been established from the very beginning, our life never coincides with the mere biological matter—even when it is crushed against it' (2021, 88).
7. 7.  
Esposito insists that instead 'what gives [human life] this formal character—something other than mere biology—is its belonging to a historical context, constituted by social, political and symbolic relations. What establishes us from the beginning, what we ourselves continuously establish, is this symbolic pattern within which everything we do acquire meaning and significance for us and for others' (2021, 87). The virus entrusts us, says Esposito, not only with the challenge of staying alive, protecting first life, but also, and more importantly, of protecting the second 'type of life,' that is 'the social character of our relationship with others' (ibid.). Human sociability, the common fabric between humans, is the center piece of Esposito's new humanism. During a pandemic, we need to protect our humanity at a distance: 'united by a common distance' (ibid.).
8. 8.  
See also Roitman (2021).
9. 9.  
For a different perspective on this point, see Chadarevian and Raffaetà (2021).
10. 10.  
See also Karl-Heinz Leven, a medical historian, who argues that 'the belief in the corona vaccination as a solution to the problem is for a medical historian as realistic as the belief in the existence of the Holy Grail' (2020, 96).
11. 11.

See also Žižek on this point: ‘The real difficult thing to accept is the fact that the ongoing epidemic is a result of natural contingency at its purest, that it just happened and hides no deeper meaning. In the larger order of things, we are just a species with no special importance’ (2020, 14). And he continues further down: ‘What we should accept and reconcile ourselves to, is that there is a sub-layer of life, the undead, stupidly repetitive, pre-sexual life of viruses, which has always been there and which will always be with us as a dark shadow, posing a threat to our very survival, exploding when we least expect it. And at an even more general level, viral epidemics remind us of the ultimate contingency and meaninglessness of our lives: no matter how magnificent the spiritual edifices we, humanity, construct, a stupid natural contingency like a virus or an asteroid can end it all ... not to mention the lesson of ecology, which is that we, humanity, can also unknowingly contribute to this end’ (ibid., 52).

12. 12.

See also Benvenuto (2021b, 96) and, on the need to designate culprits, see Alloa (2021).

13. 13.

‘Maybe this is the most disturbing this we can learn from the ongoing viral epidemics: when nature is attacking us with viruses, it is in a way returning to us our own message. The message is: what you did to me, I am now doing to you.’

14. 14.

I would therefore disagree with Nancy’s claims that the ‘virus confirms the absence of the divine’ or that we no longer understand pandemics as ‘divine punishment’ (Nancy 2021a, 65). In light of Benvenuto’s critique of religion, we may find that Nancy’s own analysis of Europe’s self-produced sickness betrays an oddly superstitious undertone: ‘Death that we [Europe] exported with wars, famines, and devastation, that we thought we confined to few other viruses and to cancers, now awaits for us around the corner’ (2021a, 65). Is Nancy suggesting that the virus is taking revenge against Europe for all the evils Europe has committed against humanity?

15. 15.

I thank Miguel Vatter for referring me to this citation. See also Vatter (2021).

16. 16.

See my extended argument in Lemm (2020).

17. 17.

‘A virus is alive in its drive to replicate, but it is a kind of zero-level life, a biological creature not so much of death-drive as of life at its most stupid level of repetition and multiplication. However, viruses are not the elementary form of life out of which more complex developed: they are purely parasitic, they replicate themselves through infecting more developed organisms (when a virus infects us, we simply serve as its copying-machine). ... a remainder of the lowest form of life that emerges as a product of malfunctioning of higher mechanisms of multiplication and continues to haunt (infect) them, a remainder that cannot ever be re-integrated into the subordinate moment of a higher level life.’

18. 18.

On the meaning of the formula ‘ $n + One$ ’ in Derrida, see Naas (2012), Vatter (2020).

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