



Greta's Wrath; or *quédate en casa*, Agamben: COVID-19 and the (Non-)State of Exception

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Abstract. This essay examines the usefulness (or not) of Agamben's notion of the state of exception as a framework for understanding the drastic changes to social life brought on by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. It also considers a number of alternative interpretations – of metaphysical or divine inspiration. COVID-19 has brought on much confusion, and this essay might or might not contribute to dissipating some of it. As always, it's best to wash our hands.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; cleithrophobia; Genesis; Homo Sacer; *Stay-at-Home*; Voltaire.

[es] La ira de Greta; o *quédate en casa*, Agamben: COVID-19 y el (no-)estado de excepción

Resumen. Este ensayo examina la utilidad (o no) de la noción de Agamben del estado de excepción como un marco para comprender los cambios drásticos en la vida social provocados por la actual pandemia de coronavirus. También considera una serie de interpretaciones alternativas —de inspiración metafísica o divina—. La COVID-19 ha traído mucha confusión, y este ensayo podría o no contribuir a disipar parte de ella. Como siempre, es mejor lavarse las manos.

Palabras clave: pandemia de COVID-19; cleitrofobia; Génesis; Homo sacer; *Quédate en casa*; Voltaire.

[pt] A ira de Greta; ou *quédate en casa*, Agamben: COVID-19 e o (não-)estado de exceção

Resumo. Este ensaio examina a utilidade (ou não) da noção de estado de exceção de Agamben como uma estrutura para entender as mudanças drásticas na vida social provocadas pela atual pandemia de coronavírus. Também considera uma série de interpretações alternativas – de inspiração divina ou metafísica. A COVID-19 trouxe muita confusão, e este julgamento pode ou não ajudar a dissipar parte dela. Como sempre, é melhor lavar as mãos.

Palavras-chave: pandemia da COVID-19; cleitrofobia; Gênese; Homo sacer; *Fica em casa*; Voltai-re.

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Introduction: Protest like Voltaire

April 27, Day 40 of our “lockdown” – sitting on my balcony on a splendid Miami afternoon overlooking a blue, blue ocean, so calm it hurts. It hurts because we, the residents of this tiny barrier island of Miami Beach, have been told by a mayor, whose name I didn't know until a month ago, that the beaches are “closed”. What exactly does that mean, “to close a beach?,” you may ask. I asked myself that same question the day it was announced. Until then, I had thought, hell, I can sit this pandemic out. Not ideal, but at least I got the beach to read, the ocean to swim, and in a way, it might be the perfect moment to isolate and write that book that's been waiting to come out since forever ... But then reality kicks you in the butt, and they “close the beaches” among a general “lockdown” and tell you to “stay at home” – *quédate en casa. Bleib zu Hause.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a whole new vocabulary at us that has instantly become ingrained in our spatial understandings and practices. It has become ingrained in countless memes as well, spurning a frenzy of social media activity, flooding our cell phones with hilarious, outrageous and screamingly stupid images and GIFs, as we are frantically trying to laugh the coronacrisis nightmare all away. My favorite meme perhaps being a still from the film *The Shining*, in which a determined-looking Jack Nicholson is seen driving his car with his wife and young son on their way to the deserted Overlook Hotel in the mountains of Colorado, where they will be the only occupants during the winter; the caption being “A couple of weeks of isolation with the family. What can go wrong?” (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Jack Torrance on his way to taking up a job as winter caretaker at the isolated Overlook Hotel in the Colorado mountains



Source: <https://ifunny.co/picture/a-couple-of-weeks-of-isolation-with-the-family-what-VjanCyUV7>

I still wake up in the morning hopeful I just had a really bad dream. I mean, how on earth is it possible that a virus, one of the most primitive forms of life, should bring to a grinding halt the world created by one of the most complex (human) beings? It's ridiculous! And I want to protest at this outrageous manifestation of nature and the ludicrously put on display power of the virus (I mean, please, a fucking virus! Really?), like Voltaire did when facing the destruction of the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon, an event that literally shook the world, as we are shaken today. In his 180-line *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster* Voltaire's protest was geared above all at philosophical optimism and the affirmation of Leibniz that we live in the best of all possible worlds. He equally scoffed at Alexander Pope and his famous phrase "what is, is right." In the face of the utter destruction and loss of life in Lisbon (estimates range from between 10,000–60,000 dead) Voltaire just couldn't stomach 18th-century assumptions about a benevolent God and sinful mortals. Instead he saw the agony of the people of Lisbon as a meaningless atrocity:

Nature is so very cruel. It is almost impossible to imagine how the laws of motion in the 'best of all worlds' could trigger such horrible catastrophes. One hundred thousand ants, our fellow human beings, struck down in a single blow in our ant hill, and half of them, no doubt in indescribable agony, perishing in the rubble from which they cannot be pulled out anymore. What a deplorable gamble it is, the game of human existence!" (Voltaire; quoted in Weischedel, 1975, p.157).

Following the Lisbon earthquake Voltaire feverishly descends into a desperate search to solve the problem of Theodicy – first posed by Leibniz – the vindication of a benevolent God in such a world of agony and human suffering. As he admits, "this problem often gives me fever", only to reaffirm his own, personal – not clerical – faith and conviction that all the ills in our world can be reconciled with Divine Providence: "Should we deny God just because of a fever attack?" (quoted in Weischedel, 1975, p.158).

Enter COVID-19 – and I do wonder what Voltaire would have made of this calamity (and our collective response). Much of our protest seems less geared at a seemingly cruel God who allows for the beings "created in his own image" (Genesis, 1:27; 5:1; 9:6) to suffer from the terror spread by an invisible virus, than at the earthly powers that we blame for our cleithrophobia, which grabs the most hardened of souls after a prolonged lockdown. Maybe we should look a bit deeper though – in a Voltairean, albeit less feverish way – at the divine origins of creation, where no mention is made of our viral downfall. We were promised "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Genesis, 1:26), yet conspicuously absent from this amazingly generous list is the one dominion that we really could do with today: over the bloody coronavirus.

Maybe it is indeed time to turn to the Old Testament, realize that this scenario was left out of the divine providence on purpose, and interpret our coronacrisis as just one more plague that God sent down on us faithless and useless bunch, since we have not understood to look after the planet she left behind for us ...

Or maybe it is "Greta's wrath" after all, triggered by the fact that us old wimps didn't really listen to the young climate crisis warrior and her youthful troops (be-

yond patting them on their rebellious backs)... We didn't recognize Greta as the latest prophet, betrayed her and her ideals, scared of the implication of her juvenile demands for environmental justice, just as the Pharisees feared Jesus' revolutionary spirit and his challenges to their established world order. COVID-19 then, from this point of view, is the earthquake that Greta sent us to wake up, just as the earth shook as Jesus exhaled his last breath on the cross. Earthquake, Virus; it's all related. Yes, yes, that's it: Greta, conspiring with the Gods, sent us this corona plague, which, oddly enough, does not seem to affect the young quite as harshly.

The point is that there is an enduring human wish to make sense of everything, so even a cataclysm of nature – be it an earthquake or a virus outbreak – needs to be given some sort of moral meaning. The worst would be to remain speechless. And so we talk, and talk, and talk ... and send memes, and Insta, and talk, and meme ourselves into cataclysmic apoplectic hysteria. *Voilà* the conspiracy theories, hard-headedly affirming that COVID-19 is an act of Chinese biological warfare, as “they” let the virus escape on purpose from their laboratory in Wuhan, knowing full well they would be able to contain it within a couple of months, at the expense of a few thousand *homines sacri*, whose sacrifice would well be worth it, considering it would help bring down the U.S. economy. And so it goes...

1. COVID-19 and the (non-)state of exception

Shortly after the first lockdowns began in Italy's Lombardy region in February 2020, this country's arguably most famous contemporary philosopher took (digital) pen to paper (screen) admonishing the declared state of emergency as proof of his wider theory wherein states use all kinds of pretexts to declare an emergency that over time – since it never gets lifted – turns into the “new normal.” The result being a continued erosion of civil liberties and human rights. According to Agamben, we all run the risk of turning into *homines sacri* in the end.

In a short piece titled “The invention of an epidemic”, published on 26 February 2020 and subtitled “The fear to get contaminated by others, as another way of curtailing freedoms,” he heaps scorn on “the frenetic, irrational, and completely unjustified emergency measures against a supposed coronavirus epidemic” (Agamben, 2020a, p.17). He further writes: “The disproportionate response faced with what the CNR calls a normal flu, not very different from the ones that happen every year, is surprising. It would seem that having exhausted terrorism as cause for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic can offer the perfect pretext to extend them beyond all limits” (Agamben, 2020a, p.19).²

Two weeks later, with the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic clearer to most, Agamben would still ride the same horse: “the recent [governmental] dispositions ... transform in fact each individual into a potential spreader, in the same way that those dealing with terrorism consider each citizen as a potential terrorist” (Agamben, 2020b, pp.32-33).³ By the same token it has of course been said that every

² CNR is the acronym for the National Council of Investigation in Italy (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche).

³ Stuart Elden (2007) has examined in more detail the links between terrorism and Agamben's notion of “state of exception,” especially in relation to “terrorist” training camps and the absence of sovereign power over territory in particular places.

man is a potential rapist. The central point of comparison for Agamben, however, is another one. He sees everywhere – behind every burning bush – “a growing tendency to use the state of exception as normal paradigm of government” (Agamben 2020a, p.18). He is so absorbed by his own theoretical framework of the “state of exception” (Agamben, 2005) that he seems quite incapable of seeing that it is not governments that “transform each individual into a potential spreader” of the coronavirus, but in fact the medical scientific community. It’s a scientific fact, and given the prevalence of asymptomatic cases in the COVID-19 pandemic, by which what may appear to be a perfectly healthy individual can transmit the virus, this seems to be a rather significant scientific fact. It has nothing to do with the desire of the state to extend its power over the individual.

Moreover, the current global pandemic conjuncture does not seem to reflect Agamben’s own definition of the “state of exception.” According to Agamben’s (2005) original formulation, the declaration of the state of exception is a key strategy in government, in which a sovereign power declares the suspension of the rule of law, whether by a judicial tactic enshrined within law, or by an extra-judicial declaration of the temporary annulment of law. Such a legal suspension of law appears as a paradox in that “the law attempts to encompass its own absence” (Agamben, 2005, p.51). The state of exception is therefore “a space devoid of law”, a “zone of anomie”, which is nevertheless “essential to the juridical order ... as if in order to ground itself the juridical order necessarily had to maintain itself in relation with an anomie” (Agamben, 2005, p.50-51).

How can this thinking be applied to our current political conjuncture? To begin with, I do not see a “suspension of the rule of law.” For sure, most national governments declared a “state of emergency” in one way or another, which resulted in various degrees of restrictions of citizens’ mobility. Stay-at-home orders were passed, residents encouraged (in Miami) or forced (in parts of Italy and Spain) to not leave their homes in order to stop the spread of COVID-19. Night-time curfews were set up, lockdowns declared. These are the “frenetic, irrational, and completely unjustified emergency measures” that drove Agamben (2020a, p.17) – and others – nuts. Yet these measures were decided upon within a carefully laid out legal framework, as Agamben (2020a, p.18) himself acknowledges. If something was indeed suspended, then it was citizen’s free mobility – on advice and pressure from the medical scientific community – but it wasn’t the rule of law.

In fact, there was so little appetite in political circles to establish these emergency measures that in hindsight – and again, from a medical perspective – it appears that those countries whose political leaders hesitated and acted later bear the brunt of COVID-19 deaths now. Both the U.S. and the U.K. are examples of the latter, while even a country like Sweden, which initially was lauded for apparently managing the coronacrisis without draconian lockdown measures, has since been overtaken by reality posting some of the highest death tolls by total population.

Is that enough though to refute Agamben’s framework, which is based on the assumption that there is “a growing tendency to use the state of exception as normal paradigm of government” (Agamben, 2020a, p.18)? On the surface, the COVID-19 pandemic seems the perfect pretext for letting such an “exception” turn into the new normal, a tone struck by many others, including the British journalist and increasingly popular public intellectual Afua Hirsch. In her Opinion piece for the British broadsheet paper *The Guardian* she writes on 19 March 2020: “There’s

the potential for a kind of tyranny of the majority ... and then there are the new, established but upgraded, tyrannies of the state” (Hirsch, 2020). Reference is made to China which “has developed an app of remarkably intrusive proportions, using facial recognition to track both your movements and those of everyone in your proximity, so that they can be tested in the event you become infectious” (*ibid.*). Hirsch could have mentioned South Korea perhaps, too, where people in Seoul receive emergency text alerts on their phones with information on where groups of people and individuals are known to be infected, often including embarrassing revelations about infected people’s private lives, which has raised privacy concerns and fuelled social stigma and accusations of extra-marital affairs; but then, South Korea hardly qualifies as an “upgraded tyranny of the state.”

There is an underlying Agamben-style assumption in Hirsch’s comment – she is a lawyer, too – that these emergency measures will create a lasting state of exception leading to potential tyranny. “But once we see newly troubling scenes – people arrested for resisting isolation or treatment – we will be reminded why this could become a crisis of rights, as much as it is one of disease” (*ibid.*). This almost angst-ridden vision completely ignores the fact that most politicians “in the free world” hesitated – and many, such as Boris Johnson in the U.K., arguably far too long – to implement lockdown measures. And now, six weeks of lockdown and counting, most can’t seem to wait any longer and are anxious to “re-open” the economy, to return to the previous normal, *not* the new normal that Hirsch, Agamben *et al* are so afraid of as dominating us from here onward as a lasting juridical and tyrannical hangover from the coronavirus pandemic.

I wonder if civil society, victimized in such a state-of-exception caricature, is not stronger than that? At least in our liberal Western democracies. Sure, there has been frightening overreach of power of the state and its intelligence agencies in the past with lasting repercussions – we can think perhaps of the NSA mass surveillance scandal uncovered and exposed by Edward Snowden. The sheer audacity and scale of this surveillance apparatus shocked the world in 2013 and to many even surpassed the Orwellian dystopia depicted in ‘1984’. But while Winston Smith gets broken in the end, Edward Snowden did anything but. While still escaping the U.S (in)justice system in Russia seven years (!) later, he is still, in the words of his lawyer Wolfgang Kaleck (2018, p.4), “a beacon for millions of young people around the world ... [as] the mass surveillance provided by the Snowden revelations is now firmly fixed in the public consciousness. People think of the time before and after Snowden. For all of us, use of the Internet and social media has forever lost its innocence.” Meaning civil society is fighting back, not simply being overrun by dominant power (as in ‘1984’). We have put democratic checks in place that challenge national governments for overreach and for failing to abide by the country’s constitution.

One such example is the Constitutional Court in Colombia, which has confronted the government on a number of occasions over its handling of the national displacement crisis. Among others it issued a ground-breaking ruling in 2004 – known as T-025 – in which the Court affirmed that the state of affairs for internally displaced people (or IDPs) in Colombia was “unconstitutional.” Since then the Constitutional Court has issued several orders making specific demands of the national government to rectify this situation, such as Decree 005 of 2009, which has become a crucial reference point for NGOs and Afro-Colombian activists demanding

a differentiated approach to displacement that would value sufficiently the specific needs of displaced Afro-Colombians (Oslander, 2016). The Constitutional Court makes sure that Afro-Colombians and other marginalized sectors in society are not turned into *homines sacri* a la Agamben, but remain citizens with rights.

The point is things are rarely just black and white. Rather we are operating within a diverse range of shades of grey. Agamben's sophisticated theory of the state of exception is conceptually elegantly expressed. However, it is less useful when applied to empirical testing. It certainly remains aloof when deploying it – as Agamben (2020a,b) does – in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic. As Malcolm Bull (2004) noted in his review of Agamben's 2005 book on the state of exception: “Agamben ... is hostile to all forms of sociological explanation.”

2. Other exceptional readings of COVID-19

Of course, Agamben is not the only one who jumped into overdrive as he thought he saw his theories play out in front of his eyes in real time, as government after government declared a state of emergency and societies went into lockdown. Foucault's fabulously fanatic fierce fans also figuratively jumped in the air triumphantly digging up the biopower argument as overarching explanatory framework, before they were shot down by the unforgiving meme world (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Foucault, seeing how your biopolitics critique is dismantled and you surrender to medical power-knowledge while pleading with the State to be put in absolute confinement



Source: Image received by author via WhatsApp.

The one who nailed it for me, as he so often does, is Slovenian philosopher and enfant terrible Slavoj Žižek (2020) who declared the coronavirus to be a “Kill Bill-style blow to capitalism [which] could lead to the reinvention of communism.” God bless his soul, you may think, but Žižek quickly explains that he does not “talk

about an old-style communism, but about some type of global organization that can control and regulate the economy, as well as limit the sovereignty of nation-states when necessary” (Žižek, 2020, p.27). To him, COVID-19 also brings “an ideological virus ... much more beneficial [as it] hopefully might infect us: the virus of thinking about an alternative society, a society beyond the nation-state, a society that affirms itself in forms of global solidarity and cooperation” (*ibid.*, p.22).

There is a whiff of “workers of the world, unite!” in his enunciation, and it doesn’t smell bad at all. Clearly there is a widely felt need for alternatives to the world’s multiple crisis, and the pandemic, like a moment of reckoning, might open a path to explore those in more detail. The widely distributed manifest “It’s time to not resume” by the French collective of scientists *Atelier d’Ecologie Politique*, for example, argues that “the economic slowdown imposed by the crisis provides an opportunity to, at last, seriously tackle the ecological problems which, if left unaddressed, portend much more disastrous episodes. We may never again have the opportunity to reassess, all together thanks to the fierce focus brought by covid-19, how our system of production is organized, what we really care about, and above all to decide to alter our trajectory.”⁴ Meanwhile, a group of scholars coming together in the Great Transition Initiative (GTI) works on the challenge to catalyze a unified global movement of systemic solidarity for systemic change.⁵

In a related vein, the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2018) draws on living-systems theory as figuring prominently in “transition visions” and novel design frameworks. He has explored a diverse range of alternative life projects and their “transition imagination”, engaging with the experiences of local collectivities in Latin America to explore the possibility of a “transition from the hegemony of modernity’s one-world ontology to a pluriverse of socionatural configurations ... reimagining and reconstructing local worlds” (Escobar, 2018, p.4). The notion of the pluriverse has gained traction in the field of decolonial and post-development studies (Escobar, 2020; Kothari *et al.*, 2019; Oslender, 2019; Reiter, 2018), as it calls for a co-existence of many worlds as an acknowledgement of the entanglements of diverse cosmologies. It parts from an acknowledgement of different ways of being in the world, paving the way for an important shift in our understanding of modernity and allowing for a re-framing of modernity from below.

Perhaps the real state of exception – very different from the way Agamben postulates – an emancipatory exception, lies ahead of us in the ruins of post-COVID-19 neoliberalism, arising out of the ashes of a deflated and defeated late capitalism that has finally reckoned with its own mortality. Perhaps like Quentin Tarantino’s Bill, who was at the receiving end of the mortal blow delivered by Beatrix, capitalism is on its last five steps before its heart explodes. COVID-19 as capitalism’s gravedigger, so to speak, if we follow Žižek (2020). Perhaps.

Yet, in the meantime, make sure to wash your hands.

Manus manum lavat.

⁴ Manifest available here: <https://framaforms.org/il-est-temps-de-ne-pas-reprendre-e-tempo-di-non-riprendere-es-ist-zeit-nicht-einfach-weiter-zu>

⁵ See <https://greattransition.org>.

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