

# LACANIAN REVIEW ONLINE

COVID-19 2020

#7 to #12

## The Bonfire of the Vanities

By Roger Litten (UK)

For some time now contemporary capitalism in the form of bio-politics has succeeded in colonising the domain of life in order on the one hand to extract maximum profit from the health market and on the other hand to introduce new strategies for the management of populations in the name of the dynamic between risk and security.



The onset of the corona virus pandemic has exposed a number of fault lines in the assumptions by which we live, in particular the casual assumption of a cost-free superimposition between health and wealth. The British government's initial response to the crisis provides a fairly crude demonstration of some of the calculations at stake.

Highly averse to introducing any measures that might impact on the well-being of the economy they have declared themselves quite prepared to sacrifice the lives of their citizens on the altar of business as usual. "Many of you will die. You will lose your loved ones before their time", words we have heard emerging quite brazenly from the mouth of a Prime Minister who imagines himself to be ventriloquising Churchill.

While the British government rapidly scrabbles around to reconsider the implications of their approach, the scorn heaped on the notion of 'herd immunity' reminds us of the lack of scientific basis for any reference to Darwinian principles to prop up the logic of capitalism. This government's response exposes in a particularly brutal way that a capitalist society organised around the principle of the survival of the fittest cannot escape the corollary principle of the sacrifice of the weakest.

What kind of society is prepared to contemplate the sacrifice of precisely its most vulnerable members to the supposed good of the whole? Should not the wealth of a society and the legitimacy of its government rather be measured by its ability to look after those most in need, loved ones or not? The kind of trade-off sold to us during a decade of austerity becomes a bit more difficult to sustain in the harsh light of the present crisis.

Capitalism thrives on the logic of competition, a competition in which there are inevitably winners and losers. Perhaps the stakes of this zero sum game have never been more apparent. Can competition co-habit with some kind of social cohesion and co-operation? One way for us to address this question might be to monitor the

outcomes for those countries in which there is still some kind of functioning social bond or sense of social solidarity and those countries already infected with the virus of the neo-liberal discourse, whose symptoms include aggravated individualisation, extreme disparities between rich and poor, and early death for some.

Despite widespread resort to emergency measures and a renewed appreciation of the advantages of centralised authoritarian rule, the irony is that this virus appears to be one of the most democratic agents imaginable. Despite Donald Trump's attempts to claim otherwise, it has no respect for race, nationality, origin, or for boundaries and trade barriers. Trump's obscene billion dollar bid for exclusive rights to the outcomes of anti-viral research shows that there will always be scope for buying protection and access to treatment. None of this will be news to the victims of the far more lethal Ebola virus that has been rampaging through African countries for some years now.

But let us also not overlook the fact that those with the resources to bid for privileged access to immunity from this latest threat are also those with the most to lose. All those trillions of dollars that have been wiped off the global stock exchanges in recent weeks: who do they belong to and where have they gone? And if they could disappear like smoke into thin air in the course of a few days, under what conditions did they exist in the first place? The recent calls by traders to suspend the markets during the crisis, to pause trading in order to avoid further losses, merely poses the question of the purpose served by these financial markets and the conditions under which they claim to generate wealth.

Here we might take our reference from Lacan's comments about the potlatch in *Seminar VII*.<sup>[1]</sup> He refers to the practice of the potlatch in non-capitalist societies as a practice "conceived to have a salutary function in the maintenance of inter-subjective relations". Considering the possibility that the destruction of goods might itself be expressive of value, he suggests that this practice serves to remind us that "not everything is caught up in the necessary dialectic of the competition for goods, of the conflict between goods, and of the necessary catastrophe that this gives rise to."

However paradoxical the notion of the celebration of destruction might appear, this reference to the potlatch could at least provide us with an angle from which to consider an alternative form of articulation between the death drive and the desire for life, one not already subsumed to the capitalist logic of accelerated wastage. If it comes to a choice between the destruction of goods and the preservation of life, should we not in fact be celebrating the destruction of false goods and taking every opportunity to affirm our desire for life?

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[1] Lacan, J., *The Seminar Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, transl. D. Porter, Norton, 1992, pp. 234-35.

## **Finding in the Very Impasse of a Situation the Vital Force of Desire**

By *Marie-Hélène Brousse* (France)

"It's war on the virus". "War", this was the quilting point in the address given by the President of the French Republic on Monday, March 16 at 8 p.m., just prior to the decision of confinement. From the point of view informed by scientific knowledge, it lagged fifteen days behind the real, but the possibility for the French to subjectivate this real had to be taken into account. The day before, in market places, streets and parks they gave themselves over to a bacchanal of contacts, as if nothing had changed. The routine of habits is strong and protects from incursions of the real. We can be heroic without knowing it.



Following this quilting point, "war", I read again Lacan's paper, *British Psychiatry and the War*.<sup>[1]</sup> Especially as the British solution, newly presented by the British PM, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, born in New York in 1964 into one of the great families of the cosmopolitan, English aristocracy – he is a descendent of George II – was radically different from that of the other European States. He decided on a "herd immunity" for the population, destined to avoid that "everyone end up having it very quickly, which would submerge the NHS" as declared by Patrick Vallance, the Chief Scientific Advisor to the UK Government. If we add that the NHS is not itself in the best of health since the Thatcher era, one can qualify this decision as Darwinian and realistic, given the paucity of available means. But we can also take interest in it according to the scientific method and make use of it as a "crucial experiment" according to Bacon, even if criticism of this concept, emblem of classical empiricism from Bacon to Popper, was definitively rolled out by Pierre Duhem who wrote: "the truth of a physical theory is not decided by heads or tails but the physicist is never sure he has exhausted all the imaginable assumptions."<sup>[2]</sup>

We find ourselves in the face of a difference in the English and French discourses; empiricism versus formalism: Darwinism versus Kantian universality. This difference repeats itself in various fields of the French and English master's discourse: epistemological, ethical, clinical and political.

Lacan's paper, *British psychiatry and the War*, is doubly essential since it begins by unfolding the difference between the French and English position during WWII: "unreality" on the French side, "intrepidity and realism" on the side of the English. After this comparison, the paper examines with precision the clinical work of two English psychoanalysts, Bion and Rickmann. Lacan evokes the necessity of "totally mobilizing the Nation's forces", a necessity that prevails for the Coronavirus as well, and the clinical solutions that Bion and Rickmann invented to integrate subjects little inclined to commit themselves to it. He touts "the creative flame" that shines forth in the article they later published, *Intra-Group Tensions in Therapy. Their Study as the Task of the Group*, which Lacan translates: "*Les tensions intérieures au groupe dans la thérapeutique. Leur étude proposée comme tâche au groupe*". He says he finds there "the miraculous feeling of the initial stages of the Freudian elaboration: that of finding in the very impasse of a situation the vital force of an intervention."

So, this Coronavirus, what is it showing us? On the English side there is little change, even if, in watching the evolution of political discourses since the blaring announcement of "herd immunization" we are witnessing a weakening, even an about-turn, of public authorities confronted with the disagreement of part of public opinion. And on the French side?

Since the end of February when measures were taken in Italy to contain the virus, several steps have been made in the face of the eruption of this piece of real that is the Coronavirus. Bringing it back to what is already known, and thereby banalizing it, the flu. Then, little by little, differentiating it from the flu, namely confronting the unknown, but while clinging to our modes of enjoyment. Perplexity, fear, time for not understanding, for lack of an instant of seeing. The moment of concluding came with this signifier war and the measures of confinement that wipe the slate clean of our modes of enjoyment. This is when the real imposed itself as such. It imposed itself indirectly via the measures of defense acted by government.

It is clear that the real does not constitute a limit: speaking-beings need interdiction to treat it. The real, because it is of an aleatory order (random) is never enough to create a limit for speaking-beings. It can kill them, but death is not a limit that can be lived. The law is necessary. Why? I will posit, saying that the law, founded on an activation of the function of interdiction, is the condition of desire. Desire is, strictly speaking, *vital* to the speaking-being. It is therefore the only tool that speaking bodies dispose of to treat the real. I qualify it as a tool because the way we make use of it depends on the sinthome of each of us. It results in an infinite number of ways of making, or not making, use of it, to bend without breaking. It is a choice for each of us: to change our way of functioning, shifting, postponing: as for example, the WAP Council's decision to postpone the Congress scheduled for April until December. Or, at a more modest level, to write a short paper on the coronavirus about which nothing is known! In short, it's about resourcing desire in so far as it implicates loss as its operational mode, but not all-loss, since it brings with it invention and thereby unprecedented knowledge.

[1] Jacques Lacan, *British Psychiatry and the War*, Psychoanalytical Notebooks, Issue 33, London Society of the NLS, 2019.

[2] Pierre Duhem, *The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory*, Chapter VI, "The Structure of Physical Theory", Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1991 for the paperback version.

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## I am waiting, but not hoping

By Rosa López (Spain)

*Question: what do you make of the contradictory hullabaloo that's been going on for a few years in China?*

*Lacan: I've been waiting, but I don't hope for anything.* [1]

We must recognize that Lacan reached the point at which being open to the contingent did not give rise to any hope. The real, this concept to which he dedicated his last years without backing away from the consequences, was his response to the subversion introduced by Freud: "What I call the real... I invented, because it imposed itself on me... the real is my symptomatic response... The true real implies the absence of law." [2]



But human beings, including Lacanians, continue to maintain hope. That which allows us to project ourselves into a future full of appointments and commitments (personal and institutional), without imagining that it is only a montage that could collapse like a house of cards. Aware though we are that we are living in a world of semblants that conceal the existence of the real, we nevertheless resort to a sort of denegation: we know it, but we do not believe it.

"What a crazy idea!" – exclaimed the Austrian Stefan Zweig when talking to his Belgian colleagues a few days before the declaration of the First World War. "You can hang me from this lamppost if the Germans enter Belgium!" Even now – he says in his memoirs – I am grateful to my friends for not taking me at my word. [3] The lucidity of a man like Zweig was not sufficient to conceive the unthinkable that war was part of the representations in play in the summer of 1914.

A few years later many Jews called to the appointment that would take them to the "labour camps" attended voluntarily because they found incredible the rumours about the Nazi will to extermination. Primo Levi, in his book *If This Is a Man* tells us how he arrived in Auschwitz exhausted and thirsty after the long train journey. He attempted to pluck an icicle from the ice at hand only for a guard to brutally snatch it away.

"*Warum?*" ("Why?"), the prisoner asks. "*Hier ist kein warum*" ("Here there is no why"), answers the guard. This anecdote shows us that there is nothing more devastating than a space without whys. To abolish questions is to confront the subject with the non-meaning of the real, without any defence. The eradication of why launches the path of subjective destruction even before touching the body.

That a global epidemic can put a stop to the arrogant machinery of our time is more unlikely even than war, which does not mean that it is more damaging.

Current events are precipitated with the force of a triggering. The scenario that was inconceivable yesterday is the one into which we are thrown today. Like a bad dream we have become part of the images from Wuhan that on the screen seemed so distant to us. Those "others" who barely awoke a slight feeling of compassion are already "us". Now it is the images of our streets and our hospitals that are broadcast to the world. Poetic justice, say those who see the threat in the West as a well-deserved lesson. But, let's not forget that the real of science (the virus) has no meaning, let alone justice.

There are facts so strange that they can only be imagined as science fiction. Today one of those events has broken into the life of EVERYONE (this is the most cinematic), disrupting our habits and turning the always illusory construction of our world upside down.

Unlike what happened to Primo Levi, we are allowed to ask questions. And after such an irruption of the unexpected, we see a proliferation of all kinds of responses, closer to subjective fiction than to the knowledge of science. It seems that until now nobody knows how this new virus is going to “behave” (curious euphemism). It is the lack of knowledge that calls for multiple explanations, some of which try to explain the cause with conspiracy theories, others using humour as a way to react to the absurd. These are defences that complement each other and allow us to do something extraordinary: quickly to adjust to the initially inconceivable.

We go from denial to adaptation without solution of continuity, but it is not certain that this prepares us to take another position in the face of existence, the one that Lacan arrived at when he realised that the cause is lost because the Other does not exist, except in the transference.

The new virus is a real with a law on which science acts in order to extract knowledge. This is absolutely necessary, but it is not sufficient because it leaves out that other virus that turned us into speaking beings, the one that only psychoanalysis deals with.

*Translated by Roger Litten*

[1] Lacan, J., *The Seminar, Book XXIII, The Sinthome*, Polity, 2016, p. 118.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 113.

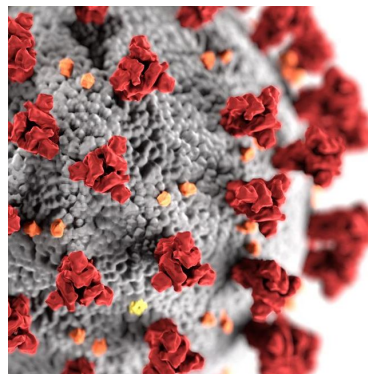
[3] Zweig, S., *The World of Yesterday*, Pushkin Press, 2011.

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## # 23312

By *Marco Focchi* (Italy)

There is a particular image, originally distributed by Reuters, the British news agency, and created by Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgings, which is circulating on the internet. It is easily retrievable on the web by entering its code on Google: # 23312. It was created for the US agency Center for Disease Control (CDC). On January 30th the Italian “Corriere della Sera” presents it with the title: “Coronavirus, the real shape of the 2019-nCoV virus revealed”.



The headline is typically sensationalist: since we have revealed its real shape, and we know a little part of it, we have exposed what previously was an invisible enemy. In fact, with a diameter from 20 to 300 nano-meters (one millionth of a millimetre), the particle that currently undermines our lives and modifies our habits remains essentially invisible, unless we have that indispensable electron microscope that not all of us usually have in our toolbox.

However, this image is not a photo, it's a CGI (Computer Generated Image); a semblance, in short. It's a digital illustration, and it's a bit like the images of fairy tales we read when we were kids. We had never seen the Ogre in flesh, but his picture was in the book: having him on a page that could be opened, but also closed, somehow reassured us.

This virus cancels our dates and forces us to stay physically away from each other (although, it's true, we sing together from the balconies, but it's not quite the same) but we have an invented image of it, created to comfort our fairytale imagination, and we have also an abstruse abbreviation, a signifier to give it a place in the

symbolic order. Is there anything real? Not that nano-metric corpuscle acting as a reference for the image and for the signifier and, even if invisible to the naked eye, it is nevertheless an empirical entity, something that belongs to reality in its interweaving of imaginary and symbolic, the reality we need to orient ourselves in everyday life, but it tells us nothing about the Real that concerns each of us.

We can say that it belongs to the real of science, like the Hertzian waves to which Lacan refers in *Seminar XVII* and of which no phenomenology of perception has ever given us an idea. The real of psychoanalysis, as we know, is different. How does it affect us in this moment? In the relationship with others and with the world. We can no longer enjoy what sustained the social fabric, and we know that probably this strict lockdown will be prolonged so much that it will be difficult to resume everything as before, as if it were just a bad parenthesis.

Real in our sense, is affected by the effects that the microorganism produces on the rhythm of our lives, in the blade that separates those who live and those who die, in the catastrophe of the world economy.

Let's say, citing Lacan, that the Real is lawless. This crisis clearly shows this. Something unknown presents itself in the world, which science is not able to dominate (not yet) and disruption appears. The Real emerges in this lack of parameters, of guidelines, which forces administrations to improvise, which makes virologists grope in the dark, which throws medicine into chaos, devoid of safe and proven means to react to the attack.

The plan to dominate the "entity", which from Parmenides to Einstein was the common thread of Western thought, and which with modern technology has reached its maximum fulfillment, evidently has in itself some insurmountable limits that psychoanalysis has brought to light by means of its practice, and which now appears at the magnifying glass of an entity without an image suitable for our imaginary, with a signifier filled up only with the meaning of our anxieties, and with a reference that vehemently makes its way into a real that it did not contemplate and for which it was not suited to.

We will of course overcome this moment, *#andratuttobene* (*#everythingwillbefine*), but when it happens, there will be an important reconfiguration of our way of life mostly as regards politics, whose emerging lines are already visible, in civil society, whose existence asserts itself contrary to what Margaret Thatcher said a few years ago, in the institutions, and in the practice of our clinic, which is already dealing with perspectives that go beyond the new symptoms.

*Translated by Micol Martinez*

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## **Where is the money? *Coping with the 21st Century Corona Epidemic***

By *Paz Chaiat* (Israel)

In the year of 1848, a phenomenon called the Gold-Rush occurred in the world. The rumors of gold found by James W. Marshall in California, followed by masses of people coming from across the United States and beyond, straight to California. Everyone came to look for the gold.

In these troubled days, the word "Rush" received a new and formidable pairing, namely "Corona". Only a few days passed, since the time when we were tried to hold with the wanted hope that Corona would pass us by. In that era, television broadcasters in Israel produced a new phrase: "Corona-Rush" (or Corona-Panic). This expression drew a thin and dull line between panic or hysteria and personal responsibility or preparation. It was not long ago before "Corona-Rush" was once again got a



replacement in the form of "Toilet Paper Rush" (when people stormed the supermarkets buying products, most notably, the toilet paper).

If so, what is actually the gold of the present age, and where is it localized now? Also, what does this Rush/Panic signify, beyond the different periods?

The new virus that attacked humanity two months ago, beginning in China, was given the name: COVID-19, and in addition it got nickname: The Corona Virus (meaning, "Crown"). As an epidemic, The Corona is a strange kind of natural disaster for the human race. This is a disaster that cannot be seen. We can only acknowledge of its consequences on the body, in retrospect. It requires us to prepare - in advance. The invisible virus spreads through human body encounters. Thus, reminds us of human stickiness in its threatening sense. The contagion of something destructive that goes from one body to another produces a feeling that involves the *Unheimliche*. When the basic assumption of separation is shaken, it becomes more difficult to maintain human connections.

The spread of Corona confronts us with our helplessness against the threat of the Real. According to Freud, when the child turns a painful experience into a game (like in the "Fort-da"), he transforms a passive position he had at the time of the mother's disappearance, into a position in which he has an active role when he repeats the game, even though it was unfortunate<sup>1</sup>. When reality strikes hard and exposes us to an imminent encounter with the traumatic, Repetition rises up with the purpose to achieve control. Watching epidemic movies for example, seems to allow an experience of some control, as the viewer makes himself with active role. At the same time, the current Reality summons us an opportunity for subjective learning while facing the Real and trying to delimit it. Usually, we experience pain as consequence from the lost Real which the word has "killed". Nowadays, we can rediscover the vitality of words and life embodied in it. Instead of the hysteric habit to doubt the Symbolic order, there are more attempts now, to build and re-sew the Symbolic. Writing, as well as use of humor, are good examples for this.

The Ministry of Health defines two measures to deal with the epidemic: 1.containment policy; 2.Social distance; Both of this stages implying on attempt to isolate something. Paradoxically, attempts to isolate relates to attempts for re-sew social order in light of the viral Real threat that emerged with its senseless. Corona virus is not subject to any director, nor the most powerful dictator. And yet, there is something we can do as society. The attempt to isolate people is for now, the effective way to try control the plague. Still, there is hesitation about deciding on economic downturn. The discussions on the economy, of course, are important. However, it may be assumed that their importance is now secondary to the health emergency. So, in the Rush of Corona, and the Gold Rush, it is worth asking again- Where is the money? If we maintain functioning economic over decision of disable it temporarily (in favor to build a dam against the spread of the virus), this is like choosing money over life. The Symbolic economic system must be reassessed in such times. In every day that this decision is delayed, the Corona increases its gap on us, and slides forward. Only when we acknowledge the anxiety and dread, as well as the unreasonable spread of the virus, only then we will be able to take the necessary steps to deal with this epidemic. We must give up something in order to preserve life. Paradoxically, isolation is a modest human strategy for preserving Symbolic order, while creating separation where the virus does not separate.

Finally, where the slope is slippery at the grocery shops and the animalistic chase after toilet papers is exposed, there is still an element of subjective choice In favor of the Symbolic, that can be manifested in isolation and separation, to delimit the Real.

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Freud, S. (1955). Beyond the pleasure principle. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920-1922)*, pp. 1-64.

## Overexcitation

By *Andreas Steininger* (Austria)

Recently, there has been an increasing number of pictures in the media that show us that the earth is being overexcited with Covid-19. On Sunday, March 15<sup>th</sup>, Austrians were exposed to an impact of a great Other, a government closely linked to science taking strong measures which drastically limit the possibilities of interpersonal contact. What hit us on March 15<sup>th</sup> was Covid-19 as a signifier. The exponential speed at which the virus is growing is now being represented in the flood of massive signifiers. The force of the signifiers, as well as their high speed, causes fear and stimulates excessive imaginative activity in various directions.



The Austrian Government is determined to achieve a level of infection control that will ensure that the demand for intensive care beds and related medical staff is more or less covered by existing resources. By means of such a balance model, the Austrian Government intends to gradually approach the time of an available vaccine or the state of herd immunity.

What is currently still more in the form of a sprint of accelerated measures will probably turn into a protracted marathon if the measures taken actually take effect in the intended manner.

This approach makes me think of the beginning of Freud's *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, of a system in which unrest is constitutional. A system that cannot succeed in keeping itself unexcited, must put up with a permanent supply of stimulus. It tries to keep the surplus of stimuli as low as possible, to defend itself against it, to keep it at least constant.

On May 15<sup>th</sup>, many Austrians suddenly realized that the burdensome increase in stimulus is not only one that has to do with the exponential spread of a virus, but that the imperative signifiers brought to the people by the government are doing their part. In the final analysis, who can be sure that our government is capable of realising that even in a state of national emergency not every means of control, surveillance and punishment is appropriate?

In this respect, our government relies on the mass psychological instrument of identification with an ideal. Chancellor Kurz provides an additional signifier, a *surplus-signifier*, in parallel to the measures taken. He conjures up a social bond to which he gives the name *Team Austria*.

This is a vague term that can absorb a great deal. From the idea of a bond of love, to the idea of a successful sports team that is ahead in the European Covid-19 containment championship, to simple nationalist ideas...

It is not unimportant to see that the term *Team* is etymologically related to the word *bridle*, *Zaum* in German. For the reverse side of this *Team* signifier is indeed a bridle that warns us: if you don't obey voluntarily, things will get more violent.

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