**Notes for Lecture on the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020)**

**Introduction**

In this lecture, we will focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, framed and analysed as a global ***social*** problem. We will again structure the lecture around two main questions, in relation to a host of core readings on the topic. The two questions are:

1. How useful is the concept of “biopolitics” for understanding the social and political dynamics surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic? and
2. How should we evaluate the claim that COVID-19 is a plague of capitalism?

The core readings which we will review in order to bring these questions into focus include Michel Foucault’s classic 1976 lecture at the *Collège de France*, “Society Must Be Defended,” in which the eminent social theorist first introduced and analysed the concept of “bio-politics.” We will also pay attention to contemporary interpretations of the social dynamics induced by the pandemic that make use of the concept, including not only Giorgio Agamben’s rather infamous essay, “The Invention of an Epidemic,” but also Peter Szendy’s more careful “Viral Times,” as well as Achille Mbembe’s most moving and evocative, “The Universal Right to Breathe.”

We will also consider in some detail the arguments about the relationship between the pandemic, global capitalism, and climate catastrophe advanced by the social historian Mike Davis in *The Monster Enters. COVID-19, Avian Flu and the Plagues of Capitalism*; as well as by the always entertaining Slovenian psychoanalytic-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Zizek in his pamphlet, *Pandemic. COVID-19 Shakes the World*; and by the eminent postcolonial theorist and, more recently, scholar of climate change, Dipesh Chakrabarty, in an interview he gave back in June “On Zoonotic Pathogens, Human Life, and Pandemic in the Age of the Anthropocene.”

Finally, we will consider as well prominent feminist responses inspired by social reproduction theory and Arendtian political philosophy, respectively, by Alessandra Mezzadi, in her “A Crisis Like No Other: Social Reproduction and the Regeneration of Capitalist Life during the Pandemic;” and by Rita Gardiner and Katie Fulfer, in their collaborative essay, “Virus Interruptus: An Arendtian Exploration of Political World-Building in Pandemic Times.”

**COVID-19 and the Technique of Bio-politics**

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, author of the highly influential multi-volume project, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, created quite a controversy back in late February, when he publicly deplored what he considered “the ‘frantic, irrational, and absolutely unwarranted emergency measures adopted for a supposed epidemic of coronavirus’ which,” he claimed, “is just another version of flu,” before posing the question: ‘why do the media and the authorities do their utmost to create a climate of panic, thus provoking a true state of exception, with severe limitations on movement and the suspension of daily life and work activities for entire regions?’ He answered, most provocatively: “It is almost as if with terrorism exhausted as a cause for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic offered the ideal pretext for scaling them up beyond any limitation.” In other words, for Agamben, “the main reason for [the allegedly] ‘disproportionate response’” he would locate “in the ‘growing tendency to use the state of exception as a normal governing paradigm’. The measures imposed in the emergency,” he denounced, are but a conspiracy intended to “allow the government to limit seriously our freedoms by executive decree” (Zizek, p.74).

Agamben’s contention that “the virus was no more serious than the seasonal flu,” would be “challenged quickly,” and soon widely considered to have been “proven to be false.” Nevertheless, the connection he made between bio-politics and government responses to the coronavirus, his political concern “about government regulation of public and private life,” his articulation of the warning that “in the name of public health, restrictions imposed by … government[s]” could effectively constitute a further “extension of state power,” undermining civil liberties, and unlikely to “disappear when the pandemic ends,” all continue to resonate, among important factions on both the right and on the left (Gardiner and Fulfer, p.3).

Agamben’s theoretical framework is heavily indebted to the work of Michel Foucault. Indeed, in his multi-volume magnum opus, *Homo Sacer*, Agamben centers Foucault’s theory of bio-politics, which traces the ways in which bare “human life became the target of the organisational power of the State.” In the process, Agamben attempts to modify Foucault’s theory, by arguing “that there exists a 'hidden tie' between sovereign power and **bio-politics**, forged in the exceptional basis of State sovereignty” (<https://criticallegalthinking.com/2015/07/02/sovereign-exception-notes-on-the-thought-of-giorgio-agamben/#:~:text=Responding%20to%20Foucault's%20theory%20of,exceptional%20basis%20of%20State%20sovereignty>).

Does Agamben’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic reveal a certain paranoia, even irresponsibility, in the mistrust of medicine and science at the root of the Foucaultian paradigm? Or, to the contrary, does Agamben’s posture provide a perspicacious warning indicative of the urgently, continuing contemporary relevance of the Foucaultian bio-political analytic lens?

Let us first consider in more depth Foucault’s notion of bio-politics, before turning to assess how useful or appropriate the concept is for thinking critically about the social and political dynamics associated with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

In his famous 1976 lecture, “Society Must Be Defended,” Foucault draws a contrast between the “classical theory of sovereignty” and the technique of bio-politics. According to Foucault, “in the classical theory of sovereignty, the right of life and death was one of sovereignty’s basic attributes.” He poses the question: “What does having the right of life and death actually mean?” To which he answers, “[i]n one sense, to say that the sovereign has a right of life and death means that he can, basically, either have people put to death or let them live, or in any case that life and death are not natural or immediate phenomena which are primal or radical, and which fall outside the field of power.” In a word, for Foucault, the classical theory of sovereignty entails “the right to take life or let live” (pp.240-241).

By contrast, Foucault insists, over the course of the nineteenth century a “great transformation [of] political right” took place. The “old right” of sovereignty – “to take life or let live” – was not altogether “replaced”; however, “it came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it.” Foucault contends: “This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite right. It is the power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die. The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: to make live and to let die” (p.241).

The superimposition of this new right in the course of the nineteenth century comes on the heels of the previous introduction and establishment, in the course of the eighteenth century, of an “anatamo-politics of the human body,” primarily concerned with the disciplining of the individual subject.” However, Foucault insists, “the end of that century [would witness] the emergence of something that is no longer an anatamo-politics of the human body, but what [he] call[s] a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race” (p.243).

Foucault asks: “What does this new technology of power, this biopolitics, this bio-power that is beginning to establish itself, involve?” His answer: it involves “a set of processes such as the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population, and so on. It is these processes – the birth rate, the mortality rate, longevity, and so on – together with a whole series of related economic and political problems … which, in the second half of the eighteenth century, become biopolitics’ first objects of knowledge and targets it seeks to control” (p.243).

Whereas the anatamo-politics that first emerged in the eighteenth century was concerned with the disciplining of individual bodies, the biopolitics that emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century and flourished in the nineteenth century was concerned with the control of the population as a whole. Things like fertility were its focus. But not only fertility. It also dealt with morbidity. In Foucault’s words, the new bio-politics dealt “with the problem of morbidity, but not simply, as had previously been the case, at the level of famous ***epidemics***, the threat of which had haunted political powers ever since the early Middle Ages.” Foucault remarks: “(these famous epidemics were temporary disasters that caused multiple deaths, times when everyone seemed to be in danger of imminent death).” He goes on to add: “At the end of the eighteenth century, it was not epidemics that were the issue, but something else – what might broadly be called ***endemics***, or in other words, the form, nature, extension, duration, and intensity of the illnesses prevalent in a population.” Foucault explains: “These were illnesses that were difficult to eradicate and that were not regarded as epidemics that caused more frequent deaths, but as permanent factors which – and that is how they were dealt with – sapped the population’s strength, shortened the working week, wasted energy, and cost money, both because they led to a fall in production and because treating them was expensive. In a word,” he concludes, “illness as a phenomenon affecting a population” (pp.243-244).

As Peter Szendy summarizes, Foucault thus “introduced a distinction between epidemics and ‘what might broadly be called endemics’.” And he “did so while identifying and relating to each other ‘two technologies of power which were established at different times and which were superimposed’: on the one hand ‘a disciplinary technology’ for which ‘the body is individualized’; on the other, ‘an insurancial [assuranciel] or regulatory technology’ relating to ‘the biological or bio-sociological processes characteristic of human masses’ – that is,  what he proposes to call a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race.”

According to Foucault, biopolitics “derive[s] its knowledge from, and define[s] its power’s field of intervention in terms of, the birth rate, the mortality rate, various biological disabilities, and the effects of the environment” (p.245). It deals not with individuals, but “with the population, with the population as political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem” (p.245). As such, in contrast to disciplinary mechanisms: “[t]he mechanisms introduced by biopolitics include forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures … In a word, security mechanisms have to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize a state of life” (p.246).

And so, as Foucault goes on to explain: “Beneath that great absolute power, beneath the dramatic and somber absolute power that was the power of sovereignty, and which consisted in the power to take life, we now have the emergence, with this technology of biopower, of this technology of power over ‘the’ population as such, over men insofar as they are living beings. It is continuous, scientific, and it is the power to make live. Sovereignty took life and let live. And now,” Foucault contends, “we have the emergence of a power that [he] call[s] the power of regularization, and it, in contrast, consists in making live and letting die” (p.247). In this vein, he makes the suggestive remark that “[p]ower has no control over death, but it can control mortality” (p.248).

And here he hones in on the technical knowledges of medicine and of hygiene, as perhaps uniquely capable of intervening at both the disciplinary and the bio-political levels. For, according to Foucault: “[Y]ou can understand how and why a technical knowledge such as medicine, or rather, the combination of medicine and hygiene, is in the nineteenth century, if not the most important element, an element of considerable importance because of the link it establishes between scientific knowledge of both biological and organic processes (or in other words, the population and the body), and because, at the same time, medicine becomes a political intervention-technique with specific power-effects.” Indeed, he insists: “Medicine is a power-knowledge that can be applied to both the body and the population, both the organism and biological processes, and it will therefore have both disciplinary effects and regulatory effects” (p.252).

Foucault, furthermore, glimpses the potential for biological warfare, which he conceives as an “excess of biopower,” and which “appears when it becomes technologically and politically possible for man not only to manage life but to make it proliferate, to create living matter, to build the monster, and, ultimately, to build viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive. This formidable extension of biopower,” he contends, “will put it beyond all human sovereignty” (p.254).

Foucault, finally, and crucially, relates the emergence of the technique of bio-power to the rise of state-sponsored racism. The argument is an original and thoughtful one, worth reproducing in some detail. He begins by asking: “How can the power of death, the function of death, be exercised in a political system centered upon biopower?” To which he answer: “It is, I think, at this point that racism intervenes.” He is careful to add, however, that: “I am certainly not saying that racism was invented at this time. It had already been in existence for a very long time.” Nevertheless, he contends: “But I think it functioned elsewhere. It is indeed the emergence of this biopower that inscribes it in the mechanisms of the State. It is at this moment that racism is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States.” From this, he concludes: “As a result, the modern State can scarcely function without becoming involved with racism at some point, within certain limits and subject to certain conditions.” As if an afterthought, he goes on to ask: “What in fact is racism?” And to this he answers: “It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die” (p.254). Or, to translate into contemporary parlance, racism is a means of deriving which lives matter.

In this vein, he emphasizes: “That is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower” (p.255). And he goes on to elaborate further: “[R]acism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and the death of the other that is not a military or warlike relationship of confrontation, but a biological-type relationship: ‘The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I – as species rather than individual – can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate’. The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier; healthier and purer” (p.255).

In sum, for Foucault: “Once the State functions in the biopower mode, racism alone can justify the murderous function of the State” (p.256).

We will return to consider this connection between bio-politics and racism in relation to the argument advanced by Achille Mbembe, in his essay, “The Universal Right to Breathe.” We would also suggest that it is well worth remembering this connection when it comes to interpreting racialized inequities in the distribution of COVID-related infection and mortality rates in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, about which we will have more to say below.

**Beyond the Control Society: COVID-19 as Pan-endemic**

Peter Szendy, for his part, attempts a less sensationalist appropriation of Foucaultian motifs than the one articulated by Agamben. Szendy begins his rather more cautious, let us say more scholastically Foucaultian essay, “Viral Times,” by remarking upon the radically different temporalities set in motion by the onset of the pandemic – temporalities which he labels “standstill” and “hypervelocity.” In recognition of the way in which the crisis of the pandemic takes place in the context of an already unfolding climate catastrophe, Szendy refers to the satellites which “show the sky cleansed of polluting emissions over China, Milan, or Paris.” A consequence of enforced immobility, no doubt. But at the same time, he also notes, “our immobility prompts a large mobilization” – and thus, the two extremes of “standstill” and “hypervelocity” somehow “belong together.”

Having made this initial point about temporalities, he proceeds to make an argument about neoliberalism and about the destruction of animal habitats – both of which have emerged as rather recurrent tropes in the more critical social scientific and political philosophical literature quite frantically produced in response to the pandemic, as we will have ample chance to witness. The point about neoliberalism, as expressed by Szendy, a French philosopher writing from Brown University in Rhode Island, is that “decades of neoliberal dismantling of health and research infrastructures, as we knew, could only lead to a foreseeable catastrophe.”

Likewise, with the point about what he labels “the inexorable destruction of animal habitats,” which he contends “has for a long time increased the risk of zoonoses, those passages of a virus from one species to another.” For Szendy, this, too, is unsurprising. In his words: “Nothing new … befell us. Rather, a process we knew well without wanting to recognize it suddenly crystallizes before our eyes.” The pandemic thus arrives to jolt us out of a trance, to wake us up and shake us out of our state of collective denial.

Szendy then comes to explicitly address Foucault. He starts by tracing briefly how the rise of the technique of bio-politics was somehow associated with an increasing focus on endemics moreso than the concern, even obsession, in the Medieval era of classical sovereignty, with epidemics. Foucault taught us, Szendy contends, that “forms of disease and technologies of power are interrelated,” indeed, “co-implicated.” Which brings Szendy to a question which, he claims, “seems to be on everyone’s lips today, even in silent or unheard ways.” This question turns out to be rather complicated, and Szendy articulates it in four parts. He first asks: “What is the coronavirus contemporary with?” As if that weren’t difficult enough to understand, he then adds: “Or, rather, what is it the metonymy or synecdoche of?” Metonomy, by the way, means “the substitution of the name of an attribute or adjunct for that of the thing meant, for example *suit* for *business executive*, or *the turf* for *horse racing*.” Likewise, synecdoche means “a figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole or vice versa, as in *England lost by six wickets* (meaning ‘the English cricket team’).” So, in other words, Szendy is asking, what is the coronavirus an attribute of, what whole does it represent?

More specifically, Szendy goes on to pose the question: “That is to say, to what regime or to what technology of power does it attach itself with the spikes of its crown?” And finally, most precisely, he comes to the point: “What is the organism or organization of power—sovereign, disciplined, or biopolitical—that hosts it and is systemically related to it?”

In order to answer these inter-related questions, Szendy claims that we need to understand two further preliminary points about bio-politics and the birth of bio-power. “On the one hand,” he insists, “we … have to consider … that among the ‘domains’ or ‘fields of intervention’ that ‘appeared in the late eighteenth century’ with the birth of biopolitics, there is what Foucault calls the ‘control over the relations between . . . human beings insofar as they are a species, insofar as they are living beings, and their environment’ (p. 245).” Ecology, Szendy thus sums up, “is also contemporary with biopower.”

Having made this first preliminary point, Szendy proceeds to invoke, on the other hand, Gilles Deleuze, who in 1990 proposed an extension of the Foucaultian bio-political analysis in a famous “Postscript on Control Societies,” in which “he suggests setting up ‘a correspondence between any society and some kind of machine’.” According to Szendy, “[w]hat [Deleuze] calls ‘control societies’—a generalization of disciplines and biopower outside their institutional walls and even into the micropores of the social fabric—is for him the era of ‘viral contamination’ par excellence.”

Szendy is now ready to repose the question, this time phrased in three parts: “What about the coronavirus, then? What kind of society hosts it? And what nosologico-political paradigm would it belong to?” Nosology, by the way, means the branch of medical sciences dealing with the classification of diseases.

To which Szendy finally responds in full, by pointing out, first, that “epidemiologists expect Covid-19 to become a new seasonal disease,” which, for Szendy, should lead one to wonder, “according to the Foucauldian distinction, whether we are dealing with [an] epidemic or [an] endemic.” He then lays out a third option, in which we are “rather facing the resurgence of an epidemic temporality from the very heart of the endemic ‘homeostasis’,” or steady state, “regulated by biopolitics” (p. 246). What this means, according to Szendy, is that we are facing “a contamination that can no longer be contained within the distinction between epidemics and endemics—a contamination that contaminates these categories themselves, the one by the other.” As a result, Szendy argues, “[w]hat we could well witness … is a panendemic that would be contemporary neither with past societies of sovereignty, of course, nor with disciplinary societies and their biopolitical developments, nor even with the Deleuzian ‘forms of control’ (contrôlats) that prolong them.” A supersession of the Foucaultian paradigm, then, perhaps.

And one which brings him back to his point about neoliberal capitalism. For he insists: “After becoming pandemic, the epidemic could end up endemic, though still punctuated by epidemic peaks.” And he goes on to add, crucially: “[B]ut the reverse is also true: the endemic plague of healthcare systems under capitalism has exploded into a pandemic crisis. The latter is the subject of permanent statistical monitoring, of course, but it seems to thwart insurancial preparation and regulatory controls.”

The coronavirus pandemic thus puts the Foucaultian paradigm to rest, according to Szendy. Indeed, he adds, in an explicitly Derridean vein, “I would be inclined to say that these paradigms are put in crisis, if the event called coronavirus did not overflow even the category of crisis itself.” In a word, we are beyond crisis, Szendy contends. As he puts the point: “The very notion of crisis is still part of what it puts in crisis: by determining the threat as a crisis, ‘one tames it, domesticates it, neutralizes it’.” Here he is quoting the eminent deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, who responded along such lines when questioned back at the beginning of the neoliberal period, in 1983, whether the world was in crisis. The idea of crisis, Szendy suggests, leaves us with too much hope. Again, in Szendy’s formulation: “The crisis, especially when it is endemic, is already the horizon for a way out of the crisis. This is why Derrida could add: ‘In its turn in crisis, the concept of crisis would be the signature of a last symptom, the convulsive effort to save a ‘world’ that we no longer inhabit’.”

In sum, for Szendy, like Derrida, there would appear to be no way out of the present predicament. A point which should be read in relation to his very first observation about the parenthesis of the clean sky, as well of course as in relation to the related point about the co-implication of the rise of ecology with the birth of bio-power.

Then there is the matter of promises and commitments made by governments in response to the pandemic. Szendy registers clear scepticism on these fronts. He mentions, for example, the promise that, he admits, “would have been unthinkable a few months ago … of resuscitating a dying public health system,” only to quickly add, “[i]t remains to be seen whether these promises will be kept (the signs are not encouraging).” He also refers to what he calls the “[m]ore or less tacit commitments” that are being “made regularly, for example about the temporary and exceptional nature of the mass surveillance measures deployed or currently experimented with.” Only to, likewise, add: “Here too, everything is ready, and everything remains to come.”

Finally, Szendy ends his essay on a note of further scepticism. The best case scenario, he suggests, would be that the coronavirus “end[s] up being just one more crisis, perhaps more memorable than others.” But this, he contends, “remains to be seen, [a]nd above all to be decided.” A decision, he adds, ominously, that must be taken now, but also, subsequently, again, and again, and again. The moral of the story, in sum: we find ourselves trapped, even beyond the control society, now facing a scenario that eclipses the Foucaultian paradigm altogether, with the rise of the pan-endemic, in the age of the Anthropocene, immersed in a crisis of the very concept of crisis, very likely extinguished the very last glimmer of hope.

**Towards a Universal Right to Breathe?**

In his dense but very important 2003 essay, “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe had proposed his own extension of the Foucaultian paradigm of bio-politics – in which he built on, emphasised, and adapted the link between the emergence of bio-power and the rise of state racism. The notion of necro-politics that he coined was in reference to “the walking dead,” as Wikipedia summarizes the argument, Mbembe there proposed “a way of analysing how ‘contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death’ force some bodies to remain … located between life and death.”

Near the outset of the pandemic, back in March, Mbembe would pen, from South Africa, an eloquent essay explicitly articulating the demand for a universal right to breathe, while at the same time implicitly seeking to demonstrate, at least in part, the continuing relevance of the necro-political and bio-political interpretive lens.

Mbembe begins his essay by situating himself as a spokesperson for the global majority, while striking a distinctly prophetic chord about terrible times ahead. He writes: “[F]or most of us, especially those in parts of the world where health care systems have been devastated by years of organized neglect, the worst is yet to come. With no hospital beds, no respirators, no mass testing, no masks nor disinfectants nor arrangements for placing those who are infected in quarantine, unfortunately, many will not pass through the eye of the needle.”

It should be noted that, half a year later, though the situation is quickly deteriorating across India, and is quite bad in South Africa, not to mention Brazil, Mexico, and Peru, in many poorer countries the worst has yet to arrive. As the Oxford Political Scientist Simukai Chigudu has argued, contra Mbembe, the apocalyptic expectations for much of the postcolonial world were perhaps in part founded on lingering racist stereotypes, not only on epidemiological grounds. Time will, of course, tell, though it would certainly be misleading to suggest that Mbembe himself, one of the world’s foremost postcolonial critics, was somehow motivated or perhaps duped by racist stereotypes.

But back to Mbembe’s empassioned plea. He continues his argument by suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic “brings us back to the body.” In his words: “Try as we might to rid ourselves of it, in the end everything brings us back to the body. We tried to graft it onto other media, to turn it into an object body, a machine body, a digital body, an ontophanic body. It returns to us now as a horrifying, giant mandible, a vehicle for contamination, a vector for pollen, spores, and mold.”

The next move he makes is to link the inescapability of body politics to the question of ecology, and both of these in turn to the necro-political mechanisms of the delegation of death. As Mbembe puts the point: “[W]e have never learned to live with all living species, have never really worried about the damage we as humans wreak on the lungs of the earth and on its body. Thus, we have never learned how to die. With the advent of the New World and, several centuries later, the appearance of the ‘industrialized races’, we essentially chose to delegate our death to others …”

But there’s a slow train coming, up around the bend, at least according to Mbembe, who goes on to contend: “Soon, it will no longer be possible to delegate one’s death to others. It will no longer be possible for that person to die in our place.”

Mbembe speaks, along lines that are not all too dissimilar from Agamben, about the COVID-19 pandemic as portending the death of community, since, he insists, “there is no community worthy of its name in which saying one’s last farewell, that is, remembering the living at the moment of death, becomes impossible.”

And from this point, he proceeds to speak of the stranglehold, the chokehold – serendipitously, perhaps, since he wrote this months before the death of George Floyd. As he eloquently puts the point: “Caught in the stranglehold of injustice and inequality, much of humanity is threatened by a great chokehold as the sense that our world is in a state of reprieve spreads far and wide.”

Unlike Szendy, for whom there is no end in sight, Mbembe holds out hope that “a day after will come,” though he is quick to stress that it will only come “with a giant rupture, the result of radical imagination.”

The first step towards this rupture is to recognise the depth of the problem we face, which he associates with our unprecedented social isolation. Again, in Mbembe’s most evocative turn of phrase: “it is time to acknowledge that on all sides we are surrounded by rings of fire. To a great extent, the digital is the new gaping hole exploding Earth. Simultaneously a trench, a tunnel, a moonscape, it is the bunker where men and women are all invited to hide away, in isolation.” But as we shall see, the point is not just about social isolation, but also about the political economy of extractivism upon which the “cyberspace” infrastructure relies.

Even so, the point about social isolation is a serious one in its own right. According to Mbembe: “just as there is no humanity without bodies, likewise, humanity will never know freedom alone, outside of society and community,” to which he then emphatically adds, “and never can freedom come at the expense of the biosphere.”

Here again we see, as we saw already with Szendy and will see again with Chakrabarty and with Zizek, how closely connected ruminations about the COVID-19 pandemic are with reflections on the context of the unfolding climate catastrophe in which the pandemic is taking place. For, as Mbembe continues: “To survive, we must return to all living things – including the biosphere – the space and energy they need. In its dank underbelly, modernity has been an interminable war on life. And it is far from over. One of the primary modes of this war, leading straight to the impoverishment of the world and to the desiccation of entire swathes of the planet, is the subjection to the digital.”

Though radical rupture is not relegated to the realm of the impossible by Mbembe, war would still seem to be the order of the day, along with a retrenchment of borders, and the exacerbation of the brutal division of humanity, along necropolitical and biopolitical lines. As Mbembe foresees: “In the aftermath of this calamity there is a danger that rather than offering sanctuary to all living species, sadly the world will enter a new period of tension and brutality. In terms of geopolitics, the logic of power and might will continue to dominate. For lack of a common infrastructure, a vicious partitioning of the globe will intensify, and the dividing lines will become even more entrenched. Many states will seek to fortify their borders in the hope of protecting themselves from the outside. They will also seek to conceal the constitutive violence that they continue to habitually direct at the most vulnerable. Life behind screens and in gated communities will become the norm.”

Which brings him again to broach the subject of Africa, and of the Global South more generally, this time in explicit relation to the extractivist global political-economic regime in which, he contends, it is trapped. For, according to Mbembe: “In Africa especially, but in many places in the Global South, energy-intensive extraction, agricultural expansion, predatory sales of land and destruction of forests will continue unabated. The powering and cooling of computer chips and supercomputers depends on it.”

This dynamic, in turn, is related to the retrenchment of the regime of global apartheid, in which the mobility of the vast majority of humanity remains severely restricted. Again, in Mbembe’s eloquent articulation: “The purveying and supplying of the resources and energy necessary for the global computing infrastructure will require further restrictions on human mobility.”

Which leads him to his plea about breath. He makes a most brilliant observation, effectively connecting what might seem at first blush a rather disparate set of subjects. He writes: “All these wars on life begin by taking away breath. Likewise, as it impedes breathing and blocks the resuscitation of human bodies and tissues, Covid-19 shares this same tendency.”

He continues, by now coming close to a crescendo, striking an unabashed Foucaultian bio-political and necro-political chord, but somehow articulating at the same time a decolonised but still distinctly neo-Kantian twist. In his memorable words, with his distinctive, albeit translated, voice and cadence: “Before this virus, humanity was already threatened with suffocation. If war there must be, it cannot so much be against a specific virus as against everything that condemns the majority of humankind to a premature cessation of breathing, everything that fundamentally attacks the respiratory tract, everything that, in the long reign of capitalism, has constrained entire segments of the world population, entire races, to a difficult, panting breath and life of oppression. To come through this constriction would mean that we conceive of breathing beyond its purely biological aspect, and instead as that which we hold in-common, that which, by definition, eludes all calculation. By which I mean, the universal right to breath.”

Here his attempt to effect the “giant rupture,” to provoke a radical re-imagining,” along full-throated cosmopolitan lines. For, he insists, such a universal right to breathe “cannot be confiscated and thereby eludes all sovereignty, symbolizing the sovereign principle par excellence. Moreover, it is an originary right to living on Earth, a right that belongs to the universal community of earthly inhabitants, human and other.”

A plea that is as urgent as its visionary author is desperate. He insists: “the dangers faced by humanity are increasingly existential.” Hu further warns, again along bio-political and necropolitical lines: “[t]he eugenicist temptation has not dissipated. Far from it, in fact, since it is at the root of recent advances in science and technology.”

Though he glimpses an opening, a possibility, for radical rupture in the linings of the cessation that the pandemic has imposed. He argues: “what we need is a voluntary cessation, a conscious and fully consensual interruption. Without which there will be no tomorrow.”

Which brings him to a most emphatic conclusion: “If, indeed, Covid-19 is the spectacular expression of the planetary impasse in which humanity finds itself today, then it is a matter of no less than reconstructing a habitable Earth to give all of us the breath of life.”

**COVID-19 and the Rebirth of Communism?**

A significantly more optimistic chord is struck by the Slovenian psycho-analytic philosopher Slavoj Zizek, whose spring pamphlet, *Pandemic. CVID-19 Shakes the World* includes a direct response to Agamben’s talk about “the invention of an epidemic” as a “pretext for scaling up” the state of exception. Zizek poses for Agamben a series of tough questions. He asks: “[W]hy would state power be interested in promoting such a panic which is accompanied by distrust in state power (‘they are helpless, they are not doing enough …’) and which disturbs the smooth reproduction of capital? Is it really in the interest of capital and state power to trigger a global economic crisis in order to renovate its reign? Are the clear signs that state power itself, not just ordinary people, is also in panic, aware of not being able to control the situation – are these signs really just a stratagem?” (pp.74-75).

Whereas latter-day Foucaultians from Agamben to Szendy to Mbembe all lament, to varying degrees, the restrictions on communal life imposed by government authorities in response to the pandemic, Zizek, by contrast, waxes enthusiastic. According to him: “[T]he threat of viral infection has also given a tremendous boost to new forms of local and global solidarity, and it has made more starkly clear the need for control over power itself” (p.75). This before pronouncing: “[T]he measures necessitated by the epidemic should not be automatically reduced to the usual paradigm of surveillance and control propagated by thinkers like Foucault” (p.76).

Zizek contends that “[b]oth Alt-Right and fake Left refuse to accept the full reality of the epidemic, each watering it down into an exercise of social-constructivist reduction, i.e. denouncing it on behalf of social meaning” (p.76).

Indeed, contra Agamben’s, and for that matter Foucault’s anti-statist and anti-science inclinations, Zizek instead insists: “[A]ll the dictatorial powers that the state apparatuses are amassing simply makes their basic impotence all the more palpable. We should resist here the temptation of celebrating this disintegration of trust as an opening for people to self-organize locally outside the state apparatuses: an efficient state which ‘delivers’ and can be trusted, at least to some degree, is today needed more than ever. Self-organization of local communities can only work in combination with the state apparatus, and with science. We are now forced to admit that modern science, in spite of all its hidden biases, is the predominant form of trans-cultural universality. The epidemic provides a welcome opportunity for science to assert itself in this role” (p.125).

Moreover, in response to lamentations about social distancing as allegedly mandating an end to solidarity, Zizek insists, to the contrary, that “not to shake hands and isolate when needed IS today’s form of solidarity” (p.76).

Zizek goes on to quote Agamben at some length in order to refute him. He writes: “I respectfully disagree with Giorgio Agamben who sees in the ongoing crisis as a sign that ‘our society no longer believes in anything but bare life. It is obvious that Italians are disposed to sacrifice practically everything – the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions - to the danger of getting sick. Bare life – and the danger of losing it – is not something that unites people, but blinds and separates them’.

To this, Zizek replies: “Things are much more ambiguous. The threat of death does also unite them – to maintain a corporeal distance is to show respect to the other since I also might be a virus bearer” (pp.87-88). And even more emphatically, he contends: “[O]ur desperate wish to survive does not imply the stance of ‘forget about changes, let’s just keep safe the existing state of things, let’s save our bare lives’. In fact the opposite is true: it is through our effort to save humanity from self-destruction that we are creating a new humanity. It is only through this mortal threat that we can envision a unified humanity” (p.105).

Zizek thus glimpses the possibility of an emergent vision of a unified humanity as a response to the global pandemic – not altogether different from Mbembe’s plea for the universal right to breathe. But in striking contrast to Mbembe, he links this emergent vision of unity to the highly implausible claim, in his words, that “[a]s Martin Luther King put it more than half a century ago: ‘We may have all come on different ships, but we’re [all] in the same boat now” (p.15).

Also unlike Mbembe, Zizek is decidedly optimistic about the “hope that corporal distancing will even strengthen the intensity of our links with others.” In this vein, he claims: “It is only now, when I have to avoid many of those who are close to me, that I fully experience their presence, their importance to me” (p.3).

Which is not to say that he sees only good things lying ahead. Indeed, he foresees economic destruction. According to him: “[T]he virus will shatter the very foundations of our lives, causing not only an immense amount of suffering but also economic havoc conceivably worse than the Great Recession. There is no return to normal, the new ‘normal’ will have to be constructed on the ruins of our old lives, or we will find ourselves in a new barbarism whose signs are already clearly discernible” (p.3).

But out of the ashes, he contends, there is a distinct chance that an alternative just might emerge. An alternative which begins, as with Mbembe, with a rupture caused by radical imagination. But for Zizek, such radical rupture, the birth of a new consciousness, begins with a simple question that we will be forced to ask - namely: “What is wrong with our system that we were caught unprepared by the catastrophe despite scientists warning us about it for years?” (p.4).

In the midst of the crisis, Zizek laments “the triumphant return of capitalist animism, of treating social phenomena such as markets or financial capital as living entities.” He notes: “If one reads our big media, the impression one gets is that what we should really worry about are not the thousands who have already died and the many more who will, but the fact that ‘markets are panicking’ – coronavirus is ever more disturbing the smooth functioning of the world market.” But from here, he proceeds to pose the radical anti-capitalist question: “Does all this not clearly signal the urgent need for reorganization of global economy which will no longer be at the mercy of market mechanisms?” (p.44).

Characteristically enough, Zizek emphasises the way in which the response to the pandemic is working to exacerbate class divisions in the capitalist political economy. He writes, from lockdown: “[C]lass divisions have acquired a new dimension in the coronavirus panic. We are bombarded by calls to work from home, in safe isolation. But which groups can do this? Precarious intellectual workers and managers who are able to cooperate through email and teleconferencing, so that even when they are quarantined their work goes on more or less smoothly. They may gain even more time to ‘exploit ourselves’. But what about those whose work has to take place outside, in factories and fields, in stores, hospitals and public transport? Many things have to take place in the unsafe outside so that others can survive in their private quarantine” (p.26).

Even more characteristically, Zizek makes use of references to popular culture, in this case to Quentin Tarantino’s film *Kill Bill*, which featured the so-called ‘Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique’, allegedly “the deadliest blow in all of martial arts.” According to Zizek: “The coronavirus epidemic is a kind of ‘Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique’ on the global capitalist system – a signal that we cannot go on the way we have till now, that a radical change is needed” (pp.40-41). Indeed, he concludes, “we need a catastrophe to be able to rethink the very basic features of the society in which we live” (p.41).

As we say before with both Szendy and Mbembe, Zizek, too, is quick to connect the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic to the context of unfolding climate catastrophe in which it is taking place. He quotes the new materialist social theorist Bruno Latour to this end, insisting that Latour “was right to emphasize that the coronavirus crisis is a ‘dress rehearsal’ for the forthcoming climate change which is ‘the next crisis, the one in which the reorientation of living conditions is going to be posed as a challenge to all of us, as will all the details of a daily existence that we will have to learn to sort out carefully’” (p.111).

From this Latourian point, Zizek, again characteristically, goes on to make the case for the link between both these crisis and the system of global capitalism. In his words: “The agency which ‘makes war on us without declaring war on us’ is not just a group of people but the existing global socio-economic system – in short, the existing global order in which we all (the entirety of humanity) participate.” Zizek concludes, indeed, subversively: “We can see now the truly subversive potential of the notion of assemblage” (p.112).

And yet, Zizek also cautions against “the temptation to treat the ongoing epidemic as something that has a deeper meaning.” He writes: “We should of course analyse in detail the social conditions which made the coronavirus epidemic possible … The usual suspects are waiting in line to be questioned: globalization, the capitalist market, the transcience of the rich. However, we should resist the temptation to treat the ongoing epidemic as something that has a deeper meaning: the cruel but just punishment of humanity for the ruthless exploitation of life on earth.” The reason for this? According to Zizek, an unapologetic and unabashed modernist: “If we search for such a hidden message, we remain premodern.” He concludes: “The really 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” (pp.13-14).

**COVID-19 as a Plague of Capitalism**

If Zizek thus registers his hope that the social and political dynamics triggered by the pandemic could lead to a rebirth of the communist ideal, of sorts, the American social historian Mike Davis is perhaps the most meticulous in making the case that the outbreak of the pandemic itself can be blamed on global capitalism. He does so in his spring update of his 2005 book *The Monster at our Door*, which had focused on the avian flu. The new version is titled, even more evocatively, *The Monster Enters. COVID-19, Avian Flu and the Plagues of Capitalism*. In it, he “sets the current crisis in the context of previous viral catastrophes, notably the 1918 influenza disaster that, in just three months, killed at least 40 million people, and the Avian flu of a decade and a half ago that sounded a tocsin, disastrously ignored by those in power, for today’s devastating outbreak.” As his publishers boast, Davis’s book “exposes the key roles of agribusiness and the fast-food industries, abetted by corrupt governments and a capitalist global system careening out of control, in creating the ecological pre-conditions for a plague that has brought much of human existence to a juddering halt.”

Davis makes the argument that our “new age of plagues, like previous pandemics, is directly the result of economic globalization.” He points out that “[t]he Black Death, for instance, was the inadvertent consequence of the Mongol conquest of inner Eurasia, which allowed Chinese rodents to hitchhike along the trade routes from Northern China to Central Europe and the Mediterranean.” Likewise, he insists: “Today … multinational capital has been the driver of disease evolution through” a variety of processes, which he analyses in some depth, including “the burning or logging out of tropical forests, the proliferation of factory farming, the explosive growth of slums and concomitantly of ‘informal employment’, and the failure of the pharmaceutical industry to find profit in mass-producing lifeline antivirals, new generation antibiotics, and universal vaccines” (p.17).

In his analysis of the avian flu threat, he emphasizes how “a mutant influenza of nightmarish virulence – evolved and now entrenched in ecological niches recently created by agro-capitalism – is searching for the new gene or two that will enable it to travel at pandemic velocity through a densely urbanized and mostly poor humanity … Human-induced environmental shocks,” he notes, such as “overseas tourism, wetland destruction, a corporate ‘Livestock Revolution’, and Third World urbanization with the attendant growth of megaslums – are responsible for turning influenza’s extraordinary Darwinian mutability into one of the most dangerous biological forces on our besieged planet. Likewise,” he adds, “our terrifying vulnerability to this and other emergent diseases has been shaped by concentrated urban poverty, the neglect of vaccine developments by a pharmaceutical industry that find infectious disease ‘unprofitable’, and the deterioration, even collapse, of public-health infrastructures in some rich, as well as poor countries” (pp.51-52).

Indeed, Davis’s scorn for the role of Big Pharma is quite intense. In a denunciatory vein, he insists: “Products that actually cure or prevent disease, like vaccines and antibiotics, are less profitable, so infectious disease has largely become an orphan market.” To this end, he quotes “*Nature* writer Martin Leeb, [who] points out, ‘from a marketing standpoint, antibiotics are the worst sort of pharmaceutical because they cure the disease’.” In sum, Davis concludes, “[t]he giants prefer to invest in marketing rather than research, in rebranded old products rather than new ones, and in treatment rather than prevention” (pp.153-154).

Towards the end of his book, Davis summarizes the main political-economic factors that together provide the preconditions for a new age of pandemic disasters as follows: “[T]he two global changes that have most favoured the accelerated cross-species evolution of novel influenza subtypes and their global transmission have been the Livestock Revolution of the 1980s and 1990s (part of the larger world conquest of agriculture by large-scale agro-capitalism) and the industrial revolution in South China (the historical crucible of human influenzas), which has exponentially increased the region’s commercial and human intercourse with the rest of the world. The emergence of Third World ‘supercities’ and their slums, then, would constitute a third global condition ... for potential pandemic spread and virulence evolution. But there is also a fourth, negative element that closes the ominous circle of influenza ecology: the absence of an international public-health system corresponding to the scale and impact of economic globalization” (pp.168-169).

The absence of an adequate global public-health infrastructure as a problem is compounded by the capture of the U.S. political system by nefarious vested interests, including not only Big Pharma but also the military0industrial complex with its Orwellian “War on Terror” priorities. In this vein, Davis quips that the U.S. is “better equipped to deal with imaginary anthrax and Ebola attacks than with an avian flu influenza pandemic. Meanwhile, not the slightest effort has been made to protect the truly poor countries of Asia and Africa from the return of history’s greatest killer” (p.179).

Along lines that would seem to concretise Mbembe’s plea for a universal right to breathe, Davis advocates that “[a]ccess to lifeline medicines, including vaccines, antibiotics and antivirals, should be a human right, universally available at no cost.” And echoing Zizek, he adds: “If markets can’t provide incentives to cheaply produce such drugs, then governments and non-profits should take responsibility for their manufacture and distribution.” In an unabashedly normative, even utopian vein, he emphasizes: “The survival of the poor must at all times be accounted a higher priority than the profits of Big Pharma.” (p.13).

But he doesn’t leave it there; instead, he takes up the question of anticapitalist tactics and strategy for the current conjuncture. He argues: “capitalist globalization now appears to be biologically unsustainable in the absence of a truly international public-health infrastructure. But such an infrastructure will never exist until social movements break the power of Big Pharma and for-profit healthcare.” He continues: “This requires an independent socialist design for human survival that goes beyond an updated New Deal. Since the days of Occupy, socialists have put the struggle against income and wealth inequality on Page One: a great achievement to be sure. But now we must take the next step of advocating social ownership and the democratization of economic power, with the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries as immediate targets” (p.14).

To this end, he cautions against the widespread virus of US nationalism, its contamination of the priorities and objectives of the US left. In his words: “The left must also make an honest evaluation of our political and moral weaknesses. As excited as I have been about the leftward evolution of a new generation and the return of the word ‘socialism’ to political discourse, there’s a disturbing element of national solipsism in the US progressive movement that is symmetrical with the new nationalism. We tend to talk only about the American working class and American radical history (perhaps forgetting that Debs was an internationalist to the core), in what sometimes veers close to a left version of America Firstism” (p.14).

What is needed, according to Davis, is a new internationalism on the left. He writes: “In addressing the pandemic, then, socialists should stress the urgency of international solidarism at every possible occasion. Concretely, we need to agitate our progressive friends and their political idols to demand a massive scaling up of the production of test kits, protective supplies and lifeline drugs for free distribution to poor countries. It’s up to us to ensure that Medicare for All becomes foreign as well as domestic policy” (p.14).

Davis realizes, of course, that such a course of events will be very difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, he warns, the alternative is dystopian, indeed, not far from Agamben’s concerns. In his words: “[I]t’s inevitable that the rightwing leaders in the White House, Downing Street, Beit Aghion, and elsewhere will seize every opportunity, as they did with 9/11, to appropriate new authoritarian powers, exploiting the consequences of their own inaction and disastrous leadership to set more precedents for closing public spaces, banning assemblies, and even suspending elections” (p.44).

For this very reason, he insists, a decidedly left-wing mobilization against the new era of pandemics is an urgent task for social movements. He contends, in a message somehow echoing Zizek’s: “That’s why we need to be debating democratic models of effective response to present and future plagues, ones that mobilize popular courage, put science in command, and use the resources of a comprehensive system of universal health coverage and public medicine. Otherwise we cede leadership in this age of constant emergency to our tyrants” (p.44).

**On Zoonotic Pathogens in the Age of the Anthropocene**

In an interview he gave in June, the eminent postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty would highlight, as had Davis, the very close relationship between deforestation, the destruction of wildlife habitat, and the rise of the threat of new pandemics. According to Chakrabarty: “the moment the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic, United Nations (UN) officials in their section on Environment immediately drew a connection between deforestation, destruction of wildlife habitat, growing human affluence, and the pandemic. Some of them even went so far as to describe the pandemic as nature’s “warning” to humans. They pointed out—and others have too—that in the last twenty or so years, seventy-five per cent of the new infectious diseases for humans have been of the zoonotic kind, i.e. they originated when a virus or bacteria jumped species, moving from wild animals to humans. This movement of viruses and bacteria from animal or bird bodies to humans has been hastened by the destruction of wildlife habitat, thanks to the increasing pace of deforestation due to mining, logging, road building, conversion of forests to farmland, expansion of human habitations, illegal trade in wildlife products, and so on.”

Like Davis and Zizek, Chakrabarty, too, draws implications for the global economic model of a decidedly anti-capitalist slant. He warns: “The really critical and fundamental question we have to ask is: do we, as humans, want to continue expanding an economy that keeps increasing for us the risk of zoonotic diseases?” He emphasizes: “most recent infections with the potential to cause epidemic or pandemic diseases have been due to increasing human contact with wild animals. Wild animals do not seek us out; we go and destroy their habitat, forcing them to come into contact with us. Many Earth system scientists, evolutionary biologists, and Anthropocene scholars have been reminding us that the global economy is destroying bio-diversity and that, on human scales of time, biodiversity is a non-renewable resource that is critical to the flourishing of all life, including ours.” Therefore, he concludes: “It is time we debated the kind of civilization humans would want to live in.” He admits that “[t]he Cold War battle between capitalism and socialism is well and truly dead.” But he insists nevertheless that “that does not mean that the question of debating capitalism has lost any of its importance.”

Like Zizek, or for that matter pretty much everybody on the left, Chakrabarty stops short of advocating a kind of Communism of old. He argues: “The alternative to present-day capitalism does not have to be Maoist or Leninist socialism.” What kind of socialism, then, does he have in mind? A “modern,” and “democratic” one, he contends. As he puts the point: “How to remain modern and democratic and yet not destroy or completely dominate the order of life on the planet remains a critical question as humans contemplate their future of a planet they have taken for granted for far too long.”

**Social Reproduction, World-Building, and the Pandemic**

Feminist scholars, for their part, have emphasized, in a way with Mbembe and against Zizek, that no, we are not all in the same boat. The social reproduction theorist Alssandra Mezzadri has emphasized how “the pandemic has shown the [centrality of life-making activities](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/social-reproduction-and-the-pandemic-with-tithi-bhattacharya) for the working of capitalism. Moreover, it has also shown the [value of care](https://discoversociety.org/2020/04/01/take-care-no-but-really-gender-labour-and-care-in-times-of-crisis/), as well as the stark ‘care inequalities’ experienced by different communities and individuals across the globe. By all means, this is a reproductive crisis like no other before.”

Mezzadri stresses, in an explicitly Mbembian vein, that “[e]ven more so than during business as usual, the [necropolitics of capitalism during this pandemic](https://africasacountry.com/2020/04/the-necropolitics-of-covid-19) establishes who lives and who dies. In the US, for instance, [black people are far more likely to die](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/its-a-racial-justice-issue-black-americans-are-dying-in-greater-numbers-from-covid-19) of COVID-19. They are poorer and sicker than the rest of the US population, more likely to have diabetes, hypertension, or heart-disease – all dangerous comorbidities – and to be turned away from hospitals for lacking private health insurance. The debate on pre-existing health conditions itself has been exclusionary, ableist and ageist. On the other hand, neoliberal care only interprets the right to live as the survival of the fittest and most ‘deserving’. High rates of death among older people were presented as unavoidable and due to pre-existing health conditions rather than the virus’ effects.”

Meanwhile, she warns, “[a]cross the Global South, evidence suggests that hunger and hardship, rather than the pandemic itself, risk killing thousands.”

Likewise, the Canadian feminist scholars Rita Gardiner and Katie Fulfer have stressed the generational disparities and gender dynamics at work in pandemic capitalism, so to speak. They note that “[i]n Canada, for example, in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, serious inequities have emerged concerning care in long-term homes. Close to 80 per cent of deaths from the pandemic are seniors in these homes.” They add that “[m]any of the homes where the deaths occurred are profit-making centres, rather than government-led spaces. Care and profit do not mix well, leading instead to structural injustices that affect those who are most vulnerable in society.” Which leads them to ask: “what is our collective responsibility to eradicate these inequities?” (p.6).

They note as well the gender dimension of this problem. In their words: “this is not just a health problem; this is also a gendered issue. Many of the older residents of these homes are women; similarly, most of the carers are women who work in poorly paid jobs, many of which are part-time” (p.6).

On this theme of the so-called “essential workers,” they further point out that “when we order food delivery, purchase meat, or utilize online businesses such as Amazon to get household necessities without leaving the house, we are staying at home. But we are also part of a web of relations whereby essential workers who work for these companies are often denied a safe working environment” (p.7).

Finally, Gardiner and Fulfer emphasize the way in which “the virus seems to have brought our existential vulnerability and interdependence to the fore.” They write: “Thus, it alerts us to a paradox; that is, our physical health is vulnerable to the new virus, while our mental wellbeing is vulnerable through increased isolation.” They urge, in this respect, attention to our social connections wih others. In their words: “While it seems that many are grappling with this paradox of vulnerability, our argument is that the virus and this paradox should also alert us to pay attention to our social connections with others, to take responsibility for structural injustices that occur in the workplace and to recognize how they affect diverse working lives.”

They stress, in this vein, and similar to Mbembe and Mezzadri, the way in which the virus exploits intersectional inequities. They contend: “In particular, what this pandemic has brought to the fore is the gender, race and other intersectional inequities that can be erased behind our politicians’ calls for a collective and dutiful response on the part of citizens. In this spirit,” they invoke the “legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw,” who has “critique[d] the language of ‘We’re all in this together’ for ignoring racial inequities in the United States. As she highlights, ‘majority-Black counties faced three times the COVID-19 infection rate, and nearly six times the mortality rate from the virus, than majority-white counties did’.

They therefore conclude: “When crises fail to take account of historical and existing power dynamics, solutions might ignore or worsen inequities, such as the US Congress’ legislative attempts to alleviate economic hardship during the pandemic.” To this end, they again invoke Crenshaw, who has “trace[d] the government’s ‘color blind’ pandemic response as stemming from intersectional racism in economic policy in the Great Depression, through the 1960s Civil Rights era, to responses to disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005.”

And they end on a call for solidarity, along Arendtian lines – a solidarity that “must move beyond compliance with government or public health directives.” For “togetherness,” they insist, “is not just a feeling of mutuality, but a call to action” (p.7).

**Conclusion**

Let us, therefore, conclude. In this lecture we began with an analysis of the strengths and limits of the Foucaultian paradigm of “bio-politics” for understanding the social and political dynamics associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, we analysed the concept and discussed contemporary invocations of it in interpretations of the dynamics unleashed by COVID, including essays by Giorgio Agamben, Peter Szendy, and Achille Mbembe. We then turned to analyse the claim that COIVD-19 is best construed as a “plague of capitalism.” To do so, we spent time working through arguments advanced by Slavoj Zizek, Mike Davis, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Finally, we considered social reproduction and Arendtian contributions to the social scientific debate about COVID-19 from feminist scholars such as Alessandra Mezzadri, Rita Kardiner, and Katie Fulfer.