

PANIC! 2

DEMO

CHRONICLES OF A TIME LOST

SLAVOJ

ŽIŽEK

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Introduction: Why a Philosopher Should Write about
Bringing In the Harvest](#)

[1. What We Don't Know, What We Don't Want to Know,
and What We Can Do](#)

[2. The First of May in the Viral World](#)

[3. Covid-19, Global Warming, Exploitation— The Same
Struggle](#)

[4. Why Destroying Monuments Is Not Radical Enough](#)

[5. Father or Worse](#)

[6. Sex in the Age of Social Distancing](#)

[7. The \(Not So\) Brave New World of Pigs and Men](#)

[8. A No-Touch Future? No, Thanks!](#)

[9. Where Are Greta and Bernie?](#)

[10. What Movie Is Now Playing Out in Real Life?](#)

[11. Deaths in Paradise](#)

[12. Now We Live in a Store of the Worlds](#)

[13. Yes, Red Pill but Which One?](#)

[14. Simple Things That Are Hard to Do](#)

[\(No Time\) to Conclude: The Will Not to Know](#)

[Appendix: Four Reflections on Power, Appearance, and
Obscenity](#)

[The New Obscene Master](#)

[Oppression, Repression, Depression](#)

[The New Populism Is Not Fascism](#)

[The Crisis of New Populism](#)

[About the Aauthor](#)

[End User License Agreement](#)

PANDEMIC! 2

Chronicles of a Time Lost

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

polity

This edition published by Polity Press, 2021

First published in the United States by OR Books LLC, New York, 2020

© Slavoj Žižek, 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher, except brief passages for review purposes.

9781509549085

Dedication

To all those whose daily lives are so miserable that they ignore Covid-19, regarding it as a comparatively minor threat.

INTRODUCTION

WHY A PHILOSOPHER SHOULD WRITE ABOUT BRINGING IN THE HARVEST

Something is rotten in north-by-northwest—and I don't mean Hitchcock's classic film but Gütersloh, a town in the north-by-northwest of Germany where in the middle of June 2020 more than 650 workers at the meat processing plant tested positive for Covid-19 and thousands are now quarantined. As usual, we are dealing with class division: imported foreign workers doing a dirty job in unsafe conditions.

The same bad smell is spreading all around the world. In late spring of 2020, something is rotting in the Southern state of Tennessee—tons and tons of unpicked fruits and vegetables. Why? Because 100 percent of the workforce at one farm in Tennessee, nearly 200 employees in total, tested positive for Covid-19 after one of the workers came down with the virus.^{[1](#)}

This is just one of many examples of the threat posed by the pandemic to food supplies: products that must be hand-picked rely on hundreds of thousands of seasonal, mostly immigrant, workers who are moved around in crowded buses and sleep in cramped dormitories—an ideal breeding ground for Covid-19 infections. Cases are sure to climb since harvesting has to be completed quickly in the short window of time when the produce is ripe. These seasonal workers are in a very vulnerable position: their work is hard and insecure, their earnings are modest, their healthcare is as a rule inadequate, the immigration status of many is illegal. This is another example of the pandemic

revealing class differences, the reality that we are not all in the same boat.

Cases like this abound all around world. There are not enough people to harvest fruits and vegetables in the south of Italy and Spain, tons of oranges are rotting in Florida, and similar problems are to be found in the UK, France, Germany, and Russia. Because of the pandemic, we are faced with a typically absurd capitalist crisis: thousands of eager workers cannot get work and sit idly by while tons of produce rots in the fields.

It is not just harvesting and distributing that are beset by difficulties—the growing of plants is also affected. Locusts are now ruining harvests from East Africa to the western parts of India, which are also threatened by droughts. Summing all this up: we are facing the prospect of considerable food shortages, if not outright hunger, and not only in Third World countries. The problem goes beyond we in the West having to pay a little bit more for our usual box of strawberries. The situation is not hopeless, but a fast and internationally coordinated response is needed—much more than calls for volunteers to help in the fields. Government organizations need to be involved in mobilizing people to avert the crisis.

At this point, I can hear the laughter of my critics (as well as some friends) who mockingly note how the pandemic means that my time as a philosopher is over: who cares about a Lacanian reading of Hegel when the foundations of our existence are threatened? Even Žižek now has to focus on how to bring in the harvest.

But these critics couldn't be more wrong. The ongoing pandemic hasn't just brought out social and economic conflicts that were raging beneath the surface all along; it hasn't just confronted us with immense political problems. More and more, it has become a genuine conflict of global

visions about society. At the beginning of the crisis, it looked as if a kind of basic global solidarity, with the accent on helping those most threatened, would prevail; however, as John Authers puts it, this solidarity has gradually “given way to a bitter factional and cultural battle, with rival moral principles hurled like metaphysical grenades. Different countries have taken antithetical approaches while the US has split itself almost into two nations, divided between those who wear masks and those who do not.”²

This conflict is a serious existential one, so that one cannot simply make fun of those who refuse to wear masks. Here is how Brenden Dilley, an Arizona chat-show host, explained why he doesn't wear a mask: “Better to be dead than a dork. Yes, I mean that literally. I'd rather die than look like an idiot right now.” Dilley refuses to wear a mask since, for him, wearing one is incompatible with human dignity at its most basic level.

That's why it is now entirely appropriate for a philosopher to write about bringing in the harvest: the way we deal with this problem ultimately depends on our basic stance toward human life. Are we, like Dilley, libertarians who reject anything that encroaches on our individual freedoms? Are we utilitarians ready to sacrifice thousands of lives for the economic well-being of the majority? Are we authoritarians who believe that only strong state control and regulation can save us? Are we New Age spiritualists who think the pandemic is a warning from Nature, a punishment for our exploitation of natural resources? Do we trust that God is just testing us and will ultimately help us to find a way out? Each of these stances rests on a specific vision of what human beings are. To that extent, in proposing how to tackle the crisis, we must all become philosophers.

1. <https://fortune.com/2020/05/29/farm-workers-test-positive-coronavirus-covid-19-tennessee/>
2. See <https://www.yahoo.com/finance/news/golden-rule-dying-covid-19-040107765.html>

1. **WHAT WE DON'T KNOW, WHAT WE DON'T WANT TO KNOW, AND WHAT WE CAN DO**

In the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*, Groucho (as a lawyer defending his client in court) says: "He may look like an idiot and talk like an idiot but don't let that fool you. He really is an idiot." Something along these lines should be our reaction to those who display a basic distrust of the state by seeing the lockdown as a conspiracy designed to deprive us of our basic freedoms: "The state *is* imposing lockdown orders that curtail our liberty, and it expects us to police one another to ensure compliance; but this should not fool us—we should really follow the lockdown orders."

One should note how calls to abolish lockdowns come from opposite ends of the traditional political spectrum: in the US, they are propelled by libertarian Rightists, while in Germany, small Leftist groups advocate them. In both cases, medical knowledge is criticized as a tool for disciplining people, treating them as helpless victims who should be isolated for their own good. What is not difficult to discover beneath this critical stance is the attitude of not-wanting-to-know: if we ignore the threat, it will not be so bad, we'll manage to get through it ... The US libertarian Right claims lockdowns should be eased in order to give people back their freedom of choice. That raises the question: what freedom? As ex-Labor Secretary Robert

Reich wrote: “Trump’s labor department has decided that furloughed employees “must accept” an employer’s offer to return to work and therefore forfeit unemployment benefits, regardless of Covid-19. Forcing people to choose between getting Covid-19 or losing their livelihood is inhumane.”¹ The “free choice” is, here, one between starvation and risking your life. The situation is reminiscent of that of an eighteenth-century British coal mine, wherein just doing one’s job involved a considerable risk of loss of life.

But there is a different kind of ignorance that sustains the imposition of severe lockdown measures. It’s not as simple as the state power exploiting the pandemic to impose total control—increasingly, I think that there is a kind of superstitious symbolic act at work here: a logic that says that if we make a strong enough gesture of sacrifice that brings our entire social life to a standstill, then maybe we can expect mercy. The surprising fact is how little we (and I include here the scientists) seem to know about how the pandemic works. Quite often we receive contradictory advice from the authorities. We get strict instructions to self-isolate in order to avoid viral contamination, but when the infection numbers start falling the fear arises that our actions are only making us more vulnerable to the anticipated “second wave” of the viral attack. Or are we counting on the hope that a vaccine will be found before the next wave? And as there are already different variations of the virus, will one vaccine cover them all? All the hopes for a quick exit (summer heat, herd immunity, a vaccine.) are fading away.

One often hears that the pandemic will compel us in the West to change the way we relate to death, to accept our mortality and the fragility of our existence—a virus comes out of nowhere and life as we know it is over. This is why, so we are told, people in the Far East are much better able

to come to terms with the pandemic—for them, death is just a part of life, of the way things are. We in the West less and less accept death as part of life, we see it as an intrusion of something foreign that can be indefinitely postponed if you lead a healthy life, exercise, follow a diet, avoid trauma. I never trusted this story. In some sense, death is not a part of life, it is something unimaginable, something that shouldn't happen to me. I am never really ready to die, except to escape unbearable suffering. That's why these days many of us focus obsessively on the same magic numbers: how many new infections, how many full recoveries, how many new deaths. But, horrible as these numbers are, does our exclusive focus on them not make us ignore a much greater number of people dying of other causes like cancer or a heart attack? Outside the virus there is not just life; there is also plenty of dying and death. Perhaps it would be better to look at death rates comparatively: today, this many people died from Covid-19 while this many succumbed to cancer.

We should change our imaginary here and stop expecting one big clear peak after which things will gradually return to normal. What makes the pandemic so unbearable is that even if the full Catastrophe fails to appear, things just drag on—we are informed that we have reached the plateau, then things improve a little bit, but the crisis continues. As Alenka Zupančič put it, the problem with the idea of the end of the world is the same as with Fukuyama's end of history: the end itself doesn't end, we just get stuck in a weird immobility. The secret wish of us all, what we think about all the time, is only one thing: when will it end? But it will not end: it is reasonable to see the ongoing pandemic as announcing a new era of ecological troubles. Back in 2017, the BBC portrayed what awaits us as a result of the ways we intervene in nature, reporting that "Climate change is melting permafrost soils that have been frozen

for thousands of years, and as the soils melt they are releasing ancient viruses and bacteria that, having lain dormant, are springing back to life.”²

Viruses are undead, always ready to spring back to life, and the irony is that their “immortality” echoes the immortality promised by the latest developments in brain science. The pandemic occurred at a time when pop-scientific media outlets are obsessed with two aspects of the digitalization of our lives. On the one hand, much is being written about so-called “surveillance capitalism,” a new phase of capitalism wherein total digital control is exerted over our existence by state agencies and private corporations. On the other hand, the media is fascinated by the topic of a direct brain-machine interface, or “wired brain.” With this, when my brain is connected to digital machines, I can cause things to happen in the outside world just by thinking about them; and, further, when my brain is directly connected to another brain, another individual can directly share my experience. Extrapolated to its extreme, the wired brain concept opens up the prospect of what Ray Kurzweil called Singularity, the divine-like space of shared global awareness. Whatever the (dubious, for the time being) scientific status of this idea, it is clear that its realization will affect the basic features of humans as thinking/speaking beings. The eventual rise of Singularity will be apocalyptic in the complex meaning of the term: it will imply the encounter with a truth hidden in our ordinary human existence, i.e., the entrance into a new post-human dimension.

It is interesting to note that the extensive use of surveillance has been quietly accepted in many parts of the world: drones were used to tackle the pandemic not only in China but also in Italy and Spain. As for the spiritual vision of Singularity, the new unity of the human and the divine, a bliss in which we leave behind the limits of our corporeal