

COVIDeology in Six Parts

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1. Plague of COVID-19 Fantasies
2. Handwashing is still compulsive
3. Social Distancing is an Ideologeme
4. Loving what's in you more than you.
5. The Prime Minister's Two Bodies (and our own)
6. What does it mean to enjoy your symptom in the current conjuncture?

1. Plague of COVID-19 Fantasies

COVID-19 is a fantasy in that, as Žižek argues, fantasy teaches us what to desire; is concerned with the desire of the other (is radically intersubjective); as primordial form of narrative replaces some originary deadlock; stages, rather than transgresses, the Law; involves an impossible gaze; and maintains a distance from the explicit Symbolic.

COVID-19 teaches us what to desire: who knew that hand sanitizer, toilet paper, and surgical masks were subject to panic buying?

COVID-19 is concerned with the desire of the other (is radically intersubjective) - here the *Che Vuoi?* (What do you want?) question is most crucial - we are all, when confronted with the other, wondering what their desire is. Do they want to spread their sickness to me? And, then, more unknowable: what is my desire? Do I secretly want to catch a disease and, through no fault of my own, have a quick end?

COVID-19 as primordial form of narrative replaces some originary deadlock; hence the fixation in China as origin of the virus (filthy habits of eating wild animals that accord oddly with paleo bro fantasies) rather than seeing the spread of the virus as a symptom of the impossible-Real of our connected, globalized planet. Only with COVID-19 are we finally a planetary society, a global village

COVID-19 stages, rather than transgresses, the Law: finally, we have a reason to follow orders, to obey countless regulations, to regress to our childhood and be told to wash our hands (and even told HOW TO WASH OUR HANDS, in countless memes that happily appropriate punk rock and hip hop to the service of social order). In the same regard, feckless youth who keep partying during spring break or other "transgressors" are only doing so because it is forbidden.

COVID-19 involves an impossible gaze: images of Wuhan or empty Italian plazas recall nothing so much as the apocalyptic fantasy book of photographs *The World Without Us*: the fantasy/impossible gaze of who is looking at our empty world, post/Anthropocene

Finally, COVID-19 maintains, via the "empty gesture" (always accompanied by a forced choice) a distance from the explicit Symbolic. Like military hazing or Abu Ghraib, which obscenities support the official legalistic culture of imperialist adventurism, the virus and its plethora of hygienic discourses support each other, with public health officers (at least, in functioning social democracies like smug Canada) suddenly social media heroes. Too, the most radical act is to behave as if the fantasy were true. We should wear masks 🤒 at all time, when making love, brushing our teeth, eating French fries (recall that scene in *Sex & The City 2* where a New Yorker asks a Muslim woman how she eats fries with her veil on). But fantasy is also itself a plague,

works in a viral fashion. Fantasy is what connects us, spreads without any human effort and reminds us we are not isolated individuals.

2. Handwashing is still compulsive

Before the coronavirus, we mocked compulsive handwashers. We said they were obsessive. Lacan can help us. Recall his diagnosis of the jealous husband. Even if all the facts are correct, even if his wife is fooling around, he is still pathologically jealous. Handwashing, that is, is still an obsessive behavior. As Jameson argues, the subject of obsessive neurosis occludes desire, wonders if he or she is alive or dead.

3. Social Distancing is an Ideologeme

What does it mean to call social distancing an ideologeme. This “smallest unit of social analysis” (Jameson) is, on the one hand, a pseudoidea, that which bears a contradiction, has a repressed unconscious; on the other hand, the ideologeme expresses the contradictions of the antagonisms of the social. So. There are, of course, well-founded medical reasons for precautions during this plague, to flatten the curve, etc. But social distancing mistakes those (physical) precautions for a negation of the social bonds that constitute us.

4. Loving what’s in you more than you.

COVID-19 is ideology at its purest. We are told to self-isolate and maintain social distance - is it not the opposite? The Coronavirus shows we need each other, with even the most vile of right wingers now calling for socialized medicine and widely available testing. And the reverse is also true: we are all now global neighbors. ‘Love thy neighbor’ has never proven to be more of an impossible-real.

5. The Prime Minister’s Two Bodies (and our own)

In mid March, during the early days of Canada’s response to the COVID-19 with social distancing, etc., Justin Trudeau, whose wife has been diagnosed with COVID-19, gave a press conference two metres away from reporters, including others who (presumably out of concern for their own health or because they themselves were symptomatic) telephoned in their questions. (Indeed, in more than one press conference, one could hear reporters being instructed to “press *1” to ask their question, as if trapped on a phone tree to the cable company.) This separation of politician from members of the media – which is itself the medium through which the public learns of policy decisions from political leaders – is a new phenomenon in Canadian politics, where the tradition for decades has been the parliamentary “scrum,” during which reporters crush into a given politician in the hallway outside the chamber, the proximity of reporter to politician a sign of the Canadian democratic ideal. But with the Prime Minister at a distance, we now see emerging “the Prime Minister’s two bodies,” or the distinction between the PM’s actual, physical, body (which may or may not be infected by the coronavirus) and his governing body, that which issues political dicta and fiat. And do we not all have two bodies – call it the COVID-19’s Two Bodies – as we do our work as teachers or bureaucrats, online, “work from home”? Our virtual body, which lags behind overburdened VPNs and is distracted by social media, then splits off from our organic body, which simultaneously attempts to do child-care, monitor

our own temperature, wipe its ass with stockpiled toilet paper. Those who do not have two bodies – the workers who cannot work remotely (cleaners, mechanics, delivery persons) are then those who suffer.

6. What does it mean to enjoy your symptom in the current conjuncture?

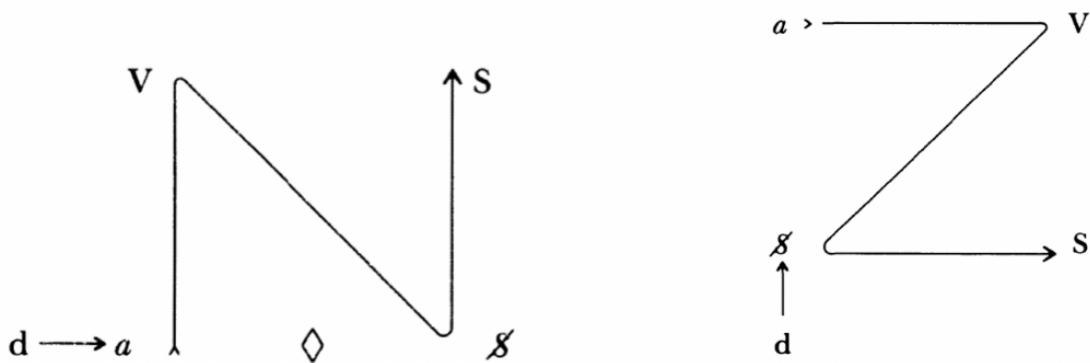
We can approach this question in two ways: first, the break down the phrase “enjoy your symptom” into two component parts (what is enjoyment? what is our symptom?) and then to ask *who* is doing the enjoying.

In the first analysis, we actually have to confront three questions: what is enjoyment, what is our symptom, and ... what does it mean to *demand* that we enjoy our symptom?

Enjoyment, or *jouissance* in Lacanese, is always fraught, is an unbearable pleasure that we cannot endure, that we are unsure about. And it always has to do with the other. We are always troubled by the enjoyment of the other – buy the “subject supposed to enjoy” and this is what Jacques-Alain Miller and Žižek have argued is the underlying structure for racism. We suppose or imagine that the ethnic other has an access to enjoyment that we do not – their smelly food, their inscrutable folk customs, their laziness or stealing of our jobs (or feckless youth who keep partying during spring break) – and we hate them because we hate our own enjoyment.

Then, what is our symptom, and what does it mean to enjoy it. Freud comments on how Dora enjoys her symptom, meaning that the hysteric does not want to let go of what afflicts her. What are our symptoms now – the different paraphernalia (masks, gloves, wipes, unexpectedly both the *objet petit a* of our consumerist/hoarding desires and, perhaps, eroticized) that are suddenly part of everyday life? The medical symptoms of either being afflicted with the coronavirus or a common cold or flu, all of which send us into a panic that we unconsciously enjoy *because now we are confronting life and death*? Of either that or the symptoms of what we endure with our quarantine, lock down, self-isolation and social distancing, from the mundane (boredom, lack of exercise) to the work-related (scattered focus, innumerable emails whilst attempting childcare) to more extreme pathologies (from depression to higher risks of domestic abuse) to the bare life under which refugees, the urban poor, or Indigenous people live under conditions of camps, slums, reserves *that were already unacceptable*.

The demand to enjoy our symptom then means we are confronting the obscene super ego, which is to say not the big Other qua Law but a plethora of regulations. 250 people gatherings? 50? 10? 5? Go outside or don't? Wuhan foot bump or is no contact better?



We also can think about who is doing the enjoying: here Lacan's two schemas of the Sadean fantasy can help us. Benvenuto reminds us, in *Conversations with Lacan*, that for Lacan, sadism and masochism are "two moments of the same dynamic" (146). Lacan called desire "the henchman of the subject's split" (*Écrits* 652) and we can see how desire works in these graphs from "Kant avec Sade". On the left, desire works through the *objet petit a* – which is the sadist as object of our fantasy. We enjoy sadistic videogames, novels, or films by hiving off the sadistic protagonist from an appreciation of the aesthetics, the world building. Desire works through the sadistic object, via V or pure Kantian will (*volonté*), and pushing through the divided subject \$ to a fantasy of a pure S, a victim who cannot be killed. In this sadistic fantasy, the coronavirus is that object, which we watch, fascinated, as it wreaks havoc around the globe, an improbably colorful image that looks like a dog's chew toy or infant's teething ring.

Our position as subjects of the coronavirus is then the masochistic one: we CHOOSE to submit. "Sade delegates a right to jouissance to everyone in his Republic" (656), Lacan notes. Thus desire moves through us as divided subject (\$), even as, Lacan goes on to say, as if describing this virus that is "in us more than us," that is already everywhere: "the molecules that are monstrous insofar as they assemble here for an obscene jouissance awaken us to the existence of other more ordinary jouissances encountered in life" (658). Enjoy the coronavirus! Enjoy social isolation! Enjoy life as we approach death!