

Coronavirus as a Symptom

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It has become commonplace to say that the coronavirus pandemic has also been a pandemic of panic, stress, anxiety, ignorance, selfishness, racism, hatred, and even loneliness. This “diagnosis” should not be underestimated. It is not just a metaphor.

The metaphor is the coronavirus. The virus is like a Freudian condensation of the various personal and social experiences associated with the pandemic. These experiences have been assimilated into the viral agent that represents them metaphorically.

The coronavirus is a metaphor for everything we are living through, suffering, and fearing, just as gold is a metaphor for value, money, a sunburst, or the colour of blond hair. Just as blond hair and richness could be symbolized by gold in a dream, so too, the virus could now serve as a dream symbol of our fear and loneliness. It is as if what we are living has the form of a virus.

The coronavirus becomes the metaphorical representation of our existence in the pandemic. We must understand well that we are what the virus means. With its metaphorical structure, the coronavirus is like a dream symbol. It is the condensed symptom of what we are, live, feel, and suffer.

Each one suffers their own symptom. Each one has, as Lacan would say about the symptom, their own “knowledge about oneself,”¹ their own “enjoyment of the unconscious,”² and their own “opaque enjoyment of excluding meaning.”³ In other words, each person has their own coronavirus.

There are as many different coronaviruses as there are different subjects. We could classify them into structures. Each structural configuration would then correspond to a particular manifestation of the viral agent as a symptom of our irreducibly unique existence.

The phobic coronavirus causes us to panic and makes us avoid information about the pandemic. The obsessively neurotic coronavirus forces us to scrupulously maintain good sense and realism, to consult endlessly as to the numbers of infections and deaths, but also to “take terribly protective measures against infection,” as Lacan says when pretending to quote Freud.⁴ The perverse coronavirus gives us a good pretext with which to attack nurses, burn down sick houses, or prevent the installation of hospitals. The normopathic coronavirus leads us to take advantage of the situation by enriching ourselves through financial profit, either by speculating in the stock exchange, buying and reselling face masks, or increasing the prices of ventilators or disinfectant gel.

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre 12, Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse*. Unpublished. Class of the 16th June 1965.

² Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre 22, RSI*. Unpublished. Class of the 18th February 1975.

³ Jacques Lacan, *Joyce le symptôme*, in *Autres écrits* (Paris, Seuil, 2001), p. 570.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre III, Les psychoses* (Paris, Seuil, 1981), p. 281.

The melancholic coronavirus comforts us with the certainty that the planet is finally beginning to get rid of something as despicable as us humans. The paranoid coronavirus makes us believe not in the news, but in conspiracy theories as we think that confinement is a ploy to control us or that the virus is either a biological weapon invented in laboratories or an effect of the fifth generation of mobile networks. Meanwhile, the hysterical virus alternately causes us to be suggestible, to sneeze, yawn and sigh, to long for lost contacts, or to console ourselves with computer screens, indulge in the spectacle on social networks, enjoy the pleasures of confinement and oscillate between boredom and desire, between love and heartbreak at a distance, and between despair and hope in the imminent revolution and end of capitalism.

The various coronaviruses could be easily exemplified by the political leaders of the world and the great intellectuals who have spoken on the subject. Perhaps we have the right to have a little fun by thinking, for example, about the hysterical coronavirus of Žižek, the obsessive of Han, the paranoid of Agamben, and so on. It would be interesting to continue this, but it is not the most important thing.

What matters is that the various coronaviruses have something in common. This commonality is, first, our shared existence in the capitalist world in which we live. It is, however, also capitalism itself, which unfolds in our existence and, now, in its symptomatic viral manifestation. It is here, in the capitalist system, where Marx discovered the notion of “symptom” that will later be applied in psychoanalysis, as Lacan has well noted.⁵

On the one hand, as a symptom of our existence in capitalism, the coronavirus is revealing to us our loneliness in alienation; that is, for Lacan, the only “social symptom”, the one of our “proletarian” condition, for which we do not have “speech to tie between us.”⁶ On the other hand, as a symptom of the capitalist system, the virus itself is like a lens that reveals much of capitalism. These revelations include the devastation of nature that destroyed the ecosystem in which the viral agent was trapped, the contempt for human life that has caused thousands of infections and deaths by not shutting factories and shops in time, and the inequality that opens a gap in each society between the lucky and the damned, between those who can confine themselves and those who must continue working, and between those who have and those who lack medical care, hospital beds, respirators, and other requirements for survival.⁷

Everything revealed by the “coronavirus of capitalism,” as I have called it elsewhere,⁸ must be heard. Real listening, as psychoanalysis teaches us, requires us to act accordingly. The resulting anti-capitalist action must leave Han behind, avoid Agamben’s wall, and reach the Žižekian hysterical point where the impossible is recognized. For the impossible to become

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire XVII, L'envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris, Seuil, 1991), p. 235.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, La troisième, intervention au Congrès de Rome, *Lettres de l'École freudienne* 16, 1975, p. 187.

⁷ David Pavón-Cuéllar, El coronavirus como síntoma del capitalismo, *Rosa, una revista de izquierda*, <http://www.revistarosa.cl/2020/04/06/el-coronavirus-como-sintoma-del-capitalismo/>

⁸ David Pavón-Cuéllar, El coronavirus del capitalismo, *Lacanemancipa*, 28 de abril 2020, <https://lacaneman.hypotheses.org/1532>

the real that it could be, however, we must go further and follow Marx when he prescribes that we face, “in a practical way,” those problems that we cannot solve in theory.⁹

⁹ Karl Marx, Manuscritos económico-filosóficos de 1844, in *Marx y Engels, Escritos económicos varios* (Ciudad de México, Grijalbo, 1966), p. 87.