# EUROPEAN SOCIAL THEORY REFLECTING ON A TIME OF CONTAGION:

# A BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Bernard-Henri Lévy (2020) *The virus in the age of madness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2020) *A cruel pedagogia do vírus* (*The cruel pedagogy of the virus*). Coimbra: Almedina.

Slavoj Žižek (2020) *Pandemic! Covid-19 shakes the world*. New York: Polity.

## Introduction

In 2020, a pandemic caused by a new coronavirus Sars-CoV-2, threw the world in disarray. Spreading from Hubei province in China, some commentators initially responded to it by suggesting that it was putting the world at war with an invisible enemy, an alien akin to one from outer space, albeit that it actually inhabited embodied inner space, not as "an enemy with plans and strategies to destroy us, (…) just a stupid self-replicating mechanism" (Žižek, 2020, p. 104-105). The pandemic interrupted the functioning of social networks and social order contingent on these. As with viruses before, it was an unexpected, unwelcome exogenous environmental contingency whose effects reconfigured and recalibrated existing circuits of power and the social networks through which these moved (Clegg, 1989). Such interruptions are moments capable of triggering reflection (Jett & George, 2003). It is major breaches of normalcy that reveal what constitutes the 'normal' (Garfinkel, 1967).

Seizing the opportunity, management and organization studies (MOS) scholars zoomed in and sought to proffer advice to executives as to how to manage a world gone wrong (Fan et al., 2020; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2020). While prescriptions,

when dispensed with an accurate diagnosis by a skilled professional, are indeed useful, we should not dismiss the value of critical reflection on the pandemic and its management (Zanoni, 2020; Piekkari, et al., 2020; Spicer, 2020; Kenney & Zysman, 2020). While observation of a major crisis presents an opportunity to review and reassess otherwise invisible, taken-for-granted aspects of our social organizing, nonetheless, these reflections are not the concern here. On the presumption that social theory differs from more middle-range theory (Merton, 1957) by offering descriptive, sometimes speculative, reflection on a large-scale canvas, in this book-review essay we discuss three new works explicitly exploring the social contours of the corona virus pandemic and the paradoxes that the virus uncovers. Three independent contemporary European intellectuals wrote these books, going beyond prescription, zooming out and locating the crisis and its meaning for the world in which we live. The books are Bernard-Henri Lévy's *The virus in the age of madness*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos' *A cruel pedagogia do vírus* (*The cruel pedagogy of the virus*) and Slavoj Žižek's *Pandemic! Covid-19 shakes the world*.

Henri-Levy (also known as BHL) has been hailed as France's most important (and controversial) intellectual (Chotiner, 2019). Santos and Žižek are clearly positioned on the left, albeit far from popular doctrines, whereas BHL's identity is more ambiguous even though he claims to be a leftist. Being a rich man (after inheriting his father's businesses), his ideological credentials are often viewed with a grain of suspicion by those on the left. All three are public intellectuals have attained the status of celebrities (van Krieken, 2018) in their respective circles; they are of similar ages; they share the same geographical space, Continental Europe. Most strikingly, they represent social theory perspectives at the margins of the English-speaking world of MOS and are rarely cited in this disciplinary field. Given their quasi-celebrity intellectual status this suggests, perhaps, a certain degree of parochialism in that field (Clegg & Cunha, 2020).

What these texts have in common is their paradoxical sensitivity. They all point to the interdependent oppositions facing decision-makers: should we protect people or protect the economy? Display strength or vulnerability? Keep calm by expressing confidence or transmit confidence by embracing doubt? These irresolvable choices are typical of paradoxes that present themselves as interdependent persistent oppositions (Schad et al., 2016). Žižek offers a compact version of the paradox, inspired by his youth in Socialist Yugoslavia: "Calm down and panic!". As he points out, in this country, when the authorities advised people not to panic, the people interpreted the advice as meaning that the authorities were themselves … in a panic! In the fictions that dominated the world his country was part of, cynicism about the meaning of messages from the authorities was the tested rational response (Fleming & Sewell, 2002). The element of panic, the institution of a doctrine of hygiene-ism (Foucault,1994) and the consequent enclosure of people to keep them meticulously clean of contagion is a key element of the biopower exercised over people in their respective Kafkaesque 'burrows', a theme that is also central in Lévy's (2020) book. He discusses how the panic pandemic took the world by storm, comparing the situation with Saramago's novel *Blindness*, in which a sudden and inexplicable epidemic of blindness reveals the fragility of civilization.

We organize this review essay around five themes inspired by the three books: power, panoptical control, neoliberalism, essential workers/invisibles, and leadership. We see these dimensions as underpinned by contradictions that configure paradoxical relationships. These authors provide opportunity to reflect on the organizational dimensions of the pandemic from a reflective rather than strictly prescriptive approach.

## Rapid reflections

The three books that we consider are all rapid reflections. Moreover, they are all short volumes, prepared at the very beginning of the pandemic. They all became available in the in early 2020, well before the persistence and scale of the pandemic was clear. No pretence of scientific explanations of virus and contagion is offered in them; rather, they represent social science attempts to explain the phenomenon through variable social science lenses. Not only social science lenses; they also represent expressions of engaged – even ideologically engaged – scholarship: as such, they do not just intend to describe, but also have a performative dimension, aiming to transform our perspective and frames.

Žižek's (b.1949, Ljubljana, Slovenia, former Yugoslavia) *Pandemic!* is composed of 11 short chapters and an introduction ("Noli me tangere"). The chapters read like an equal number of thoughts on the pandemic, each chapter raising a specific theme. The book is motivated by a question: why were we, in spite of years of warning from scientists, caught unawares by the pandemic? In this is short book (136 pages) the author projects his philosophical lens, punctuated by humour and references to popular culture on to the pandemic. The book reads more as an instant and impressionistic exercise interrogating perplexity (why did toilet paper became so hoarded?) rather than a philosophical approach. It covers topics such as surveillance and monitoring, leadership and barbarism, the need for a new communism. It can be read as a collection of postcards from the first period of the pandemic.

The same is also the case for Bernard-Henri Lévy's (b.1948, in Béni-Saf, Oran, French Algeria) *The virus in the age of madness*. Another short volume (128 pages), it is composed of five chapters following a prologue. Another collection of impressionistic reflections, this book discusses the emergence of medical power as a form of control that may be used to counter the rights and liberties of Western civilization. The sanitary emergency, BHL

proposes, can be used as a Trojan horse to defeat a way of life and its liberties. The sanitary emergency, in other words, may be used to promote forms of control in disguise. If Žižek sees the pandemic as an opportunity to reconfigure communism, Henri Lévy sees it as an opportunity to defend liberalism.

In the 32 pages of *A cruel pedagogia do vírus* Boaventura de Sousa Santos (b.1940, in Coimbra, Portugal) discusses the fragilities of our socioeconomic systems, namely the vulnerability of the state in face of its neo-liberal ordering. In this essay, the author exposes the differential effects of the pandemic caused by pre-existing imbalances embedded in this neo-liberal order. A new form of organization is necessary, he argues, to rebalance societies in a way that counters the debilitating conditions that the pandemic exposed; what this entails, he argues, is a reconsideration of the role of the state as neither liberal nor communist but a more communal future. In an earlier contribution to the journal, one of us characterized his worldview thus:

> Analysing contemporary society, de Sousa Santos suggested that we live in an 'interval society', in paradigmatic transition. The administered society and the world of the organization man is dead and the naked self-interest of shareholder value and the marketization of every aspect of society is no longer believed in by enough democratic subjects to make it electorally palatable. Nowadays, the ambiguity and complexity demand a new political, juridical and epistemological common sense that is participative and emancipative. A fundamental break with the automatic reproduction of the market and business as a default setting for all of life is required (Clegg & Bier, 2010: 235)

For Santos, the interval has been punctuated by the pandemic.

The three works, considering their size and ambition should not be interpreted as reflected responses to a sudden event but rather as personal expressions of sensemaking in face of an evolving crisis. In spite of their status as *minimum opus*, they all include important ideas to

capture the zeitgeist, not only regarding the nature of the pandemic and its societal effect but also invoking the pandemic as a context in which to reflect on a number of macrosocial processes. We focus especially on a number of paradoxes exposed by the pandemic, namely paradoxes of veillance, neoliberalism and essential invisible workers.

## Power paradoxes

An important theme laced through the three books is that of power. The pandemic promoted an interesting paradox premised on power: those powers steering the state were able to exemplify their powerfulness by being able to impose lockdowns and institute states of exception, affording a supreme opportunity for authorities to indulge in power beyond the normal.

For autocracies and those others with populist and autocratic tendencies the exemplar is epitomized in what Žižek calls the "Putogan". But the Putogans of this world appear in several form and shapes. In India, Modi used the opportunity to advance his 'Hindus first' agenda (Prasad, 2020). Boris Johnson, at some point, disappeared from view, a victim of the contagion in whose power he had initially doubted. Trump presided over belief in miracles and miracle cures as the contagion raged in the incompetence he nurtured. The king of Thailand, Rama X, found refuge in the German Alps, in the company of his harem, while demonstrators in Bangkok faced the threat of arrest in a country still characterized by *lese majesté* legislation. What all these powerful leaders had in common, confronted with the shadow of a paradox, was the fact that their being in power did not correspond to being in control. In a pandemic, *no one is in control*. To use a famous leadership conceptualization, the context leads (Yukl, 2006). The fact that this condition is explicit creates a problem:

> "those in charge of the state are in a panic because they know that not only that they are not in control of the situation, but also that we, their subjects, know this. The impotence of power is now laid bare" (Žižek, 2020, p. 123)

Here is the irony: leaders need to project power especially when they are facing events that reveal their actual powerlessness. As a result, some leaders chose to display performances of strength, others performed empathy, while others adopted the mantra of believing in the science, despite the strange bedfellows thus conjured. An excess of strength in face of a highly volatile conditions proved to be a recipe for disaster, given that conditions changed so fast that today's orders were rapidly contradicted by tomorrow's needs. Boris Johnson experienced this when he became a victim after first dismissing the viruses' potency, being nursed back to (a form of) health by two aliens to the sceptred isle over which he ruled– one from New Zealand, the other from Portugal, his caretakers during the infection. During his absence the hapless and helplessly incompetent Cabinet Ministers who presided over the daily media briefings adopted the mantra of believing in and being guided by "the science", a convenient form of displacement of democratic responsibility and thus abrogation of power. Ironically, as time elapsed it demonstrated that autocracies and democracies ended up sharing some measures, with some evidence suggesting that autocrats were faster to react (Cheibub, Hong, & Przeworski, 2020). Autocrats using illiberal affordances may be able to manage power relations in ways that prove highly effective for mass organization.

Pandemics perturb power, the uncertainty nurtured by pandemic threatens dictatorial regimes by showing the limits of their certainties and their control, as a threat to the very legitimacy of the established order. Alexander Lukashenko, dubbed Europe's last dictator, felt that in his skin. After downplaying the gravity of the pandemic (which, he mocked, could be treated with sauna and vodka), he saw the people massively demonstrating against his regime in the

wake of a fraudulent electoral "victory": "all the dictatorial powers that the state apparatuses are amassing simply makes their basic impotence all the more palpable" (Žižek, 2020, 124).

At the same time, the disruption caused by the pandemic reaffirms well-honed mechanisms of power. One is "othering", disregarding and essentializing people who do not belong to an ideal group of community (Said, 1978), stripping them of their humanity (Arendt, 1951). Hence, people who contracted the virus become sometimes categorized as careless and antisocial (ironically, because of their failure to maintain social distances); foreigners characterized as potential threats as carriers of virus; in some extreme cases (Australia), even citizens who desire to venture overseas are treated with disdain and suspicion, if not being outright banned from returning home because of the government decision to impose strict caps on the number of travellers accepted into the county. The need to protect public health has been in some case construed as the legitimation for unprecedented surveillance and disciplining of the population. Interestingly some of the most extensive powers have been advocated in countries that – because of their peripheral location – were relatively less affected by the pandemic. For instance, both Australia and New Zealand have been extremely decisive and categorical in their decision to impose strict lockdowns in response to relatively minor outbreaks, while European governments have been very reluctant to adopt similar measures, resorting to them only when (November 2020) the number of infected people became several order of magnitude larger than in Oceania.

## Powers of veillance

Leaders over the world have created states of exception – to fight the pandemic, which led to the creation of a neologism: coronopticon (*The Economist*, 2020a). The expression borrows from the notion of the panopticon as a form of generalized veillance rather than localized surveillance (Zorina, Belanger, Kumar and Clegg, forthcoming). At its core, were mechanism

of tracking, tracing and quarantining, strategies pursued with variable effectivity across nations comparatively. If the first duty of the state is the security of its citizens, some nations (such as South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand) assumed powers to enable this security with greater alacrity and success than others (the European Union states, the UK and USA, especially).

Powers once assumed are not always relaxed; the example of passports being introduced in the wake of the second wave of the Spanish Flu epidemic after the First World War is a case in point. That contagion "revealed the vulnerability of modern states linked by globalization to pandemics. Thus … the concept of passports mutated to also regulate the movement of people owing to "considerations of health or national security" (Kavalski & Smith, 2020). South Korea  exercised veillance over the movement of mobile phone users to map the quarantine or its breaches by individuals infected with COVID-19. Taiwan did something similar, while China used smartphone data at the city level to ensure that only people conclusively free of COVID-19 could move about in public. Some European governments used location data from mobile network providers to measure compliance with social distancing rules. In Australia and New Zealand similar measures were also introduced but the main emphasis in these countries was on lockdown, restricting social mingling and having affordances in place for tracking and tracing people when it occurred.

The three authors consider the dangers of devising permanent new powers to fight a temporary crisis. Institutional rules have been circumvented to create new apparatuses of control. In Cambodia, Hun Sen now rules with a law that allows for unlimited surveillance of the citizens. The panoptical inclination, inherited from the Khmer Rouge (see Clegg, Cunha, & Rego, 2012), is refreshed in a new guise; less deadly but no less autocratic. Hun Sen is far from being the only ruler to expand control: intrusive surveillance flourished in places such

as Hungary, Turkey, China, and others (see *The Economist*, 2020b). In Indonesia and the Philippines, the army was put in charge of fighting the virus. Duterte has urged security forces to shoot dead those who disobeyed the orders, signifying that disobedience leads to death from the firearms of the repressive state apparatuses as readily as it does for those seeking solace in drugs. The more technologically sophisticated the possibilities, the deeper the potential for control by new panoptical mechanisms devoid of any other institutional regulation. The surveillance society analysed by Zuboff (2019) benefits significantly from the "windows of opportunity" created by the Covid-19 pandemic, by creating a "normality of exception" in Santos' (2020) phrase. New modes of surveillance were already being adopting by companies to control their employees (Bhave, Teo & Dalal, 2020); the pandemic will only further potentiate their use. In this context new distinctions are mandatory. We need not only to be able to distinguish democratic states and states of exception but also, from now on, democratic and anti-democratic states of exception.

## Neoliberalism and its paradoxes

Covid-19 disrupted the assumed second nature of existing economic mode of organization. At one level, the lock downs, the social isolation and exclusions disrupted norms of local and global networks massively; more than this, however, Santos (2020) sees the virus as sundering "hypercapitalism". Capitalism, he states, gave birth to modern colonialism and patriarchy. The creation of market society led to an imbalance in which, in its late manifestations, the market superimposed itself over the state and community. The notion of hypercapitalism has also been used by Piketty to denote the historical period following the fall of Soviet Union, characterized by a strong trend towards concentration of wealth fuelled by the digital revolution, free circulation of capital and financialization of the economy. This evolution was not, however, an unavoidable effect of market forces and self-organization, but

the outcome of contingent decisions, supported by specific interests and enabled by a complex regulatory and ideological apparatus (Piketty 2020). The Covid pandemic has highlighted the consequences of social and economic cleavages produced by hypercapitalism, and the social determinants of the epidemics differential consequences are very visible. For instance, the knowledge workers, central to a knowledge society, were able to continue working from their keyboards, despite being locked down at home. Those who cleaned, nurtured and tended to the impurity of society; those who assisted and cared for aged and frail people; those who toiled physically in manual labour or confined spaces, those who did the body work that defines the various skin trades as lower caste (O'Neil, 1972) had no such options. For such people, their everyday life was already defined as being lived in dangerously marginal relationships to hygiene-ism (Zulfiqar, 2019); the pandemic made their marginality more salient and revealed the scale of contagion spread through body work.

We do not need a conspiracy theory, as Žižek pointed out, to anticipate the costly consequences of the crisis. The market economy gave way to a "market society" (Sandel, 2012) which may likely become even more pronounced after the pandemic. In Covid-19 society a "new barbarian capitalism" (Žižek, 2020, p. 127) flourished, in which the old and weak were left to die in "aged care" facilities in which the virus spread like wildfire, in part because of the casualization of a workforce that could unwittingly spread it between different locations of work. As Žižek recounts, in socialist utopias this was nothing new: at some point in Ceausescu's Romania retired people were not admitted to hospitals because they were not productive anymore (p.101).

Old age in hypercapitalism differs; it is less that people are abandoned by the state as the fact that the market kills them. Private sector aged care maximizes surplus value by minimizing the value attached to old folk. Low wage, relatively unskilled care-providers, often casual and

precarious employees, often uninsured medically because of the nature of their casual employment, spread the virus through the workings of the aged care labour market. For these less privileged workers, lower standards of living were the norm. Class and ethnic distinctions became even more a matter of life and death. Poor neighbourhoods were more exposed to the virus than the wealthier. In Lisbon's Bairro da Jamaica, in Doha's Industrial Area, as well as in myriad other places around the world, death stalked not only the disproportionately black and brown and poor people but the poor of any colour.

To counter this barbarism Žižek advocates a new communism, not designed from the old Soviet or contemporary Chinese moulds but one founded upon trusting the people – a novel idea for those regimes. This new breed of communism is not an "obscure dream" but a paradoxical combination of state (top down) and community (bottom up). Santos (2020) suggests what he calls a "new articulation", a new logic in which community and state play a more significant role, given capitalism's failure to manage social life decently. Of course, no one can anticipate the world that will emerge out of the pandemic. It may take the shape of a new barbarism but also it could be a more equal society (Scheidel, 2018), following the pattern of some previous pandemics. Santos (2020) defends the need of a "new articulation" to counter the progression of the market society.

## The paradox of essentiality and invisibility

The pandemic revealed that the notion of the periphery (Day & Shoemaker, 2004) includes not only organizations and markets but also a huge group of people. Santos (2020) dedicates significant attention to the groups formed as disempowered, disenfranchised people: women, the precariat, street workers, the homeless, the people from the poorer neighbourhoods, refugees, older people, people with disabilities. Some of these people have been described as doing jobs that latterly have been described as "essential". People who fall outside the

category of knowledge workers, the core of organizational "wars for talent" do not do what "essential workers" sustain. They do not clean, tend, teach, toil and transport. These people, formerly invisibles, suddenly have become visible. The role of those groups of people normally situated outside the attention of talent management departments, including working mothers (especially affected by working from home), the old and retired, people with disabilities, the homeless, must also be added to the ranks of the invisible. Their treatment, namely of the old, was an expression of savagery (Henri-Lévy, 2020)

Some organizations had already developed policies tailored to some of these groups (Cunha et al., 2020), but the pandemic rendered these groups' specific needs more salient. The pandemic, in this sense, differs from other crises because its effects were fast and furious in contrast with other equally serious crises, less immediately manifest in nature, that hid in plain sight, as Bansal et al. (2018) point out. If organizations are to be transformed by the pandemic then policies dedicated to the inclusion of these groups and that counter the ongoing climate crisis will need to be embraced, if only because, as Ibarra (2020) notes, Covid-19 poses specific problems for vulnerable minorities. When knowledge work is now known to be doable from anywhere, independently of an urban infrastructure of transport, cafes, bars, offices etc., the masses that lived off these knowledge workers, the service sector employees, the homeless and charitably supported persons, will be a new, potentially dangerous sub-proletariat freshly joining the reserve army of the unemployed.

## Rethinking the model

In summary, the pandemic crisis leads our authors to assume the need to adopt a new model, one that departs from capitalistic logic. Santos considers that, as a social model, capitalism has no future and its organization of production is utterly discredited. In this he reiterates criticisms from within the MOS community (e.g., Kochan, 2002). The privatization of public

companies left the state devoid of tools, capabilities and dispositions with which to fulfil its mission. The state was left managing residual welfare, warfare and selective specifications of security. The weakness of the state thus exposes the need to find a new logic of social organization. There are merits in such criticism, namely the need to avoid a correspondence between market society and market economy (Sandel, 2012). As the pandemic exposed, societies gain from strong public, private and civil sectors. However, a strong state sector, *per se*, is no guarantee of a well-functioning democratic society, as the case of authoritarian Chinese state capitalism attests (Milanovic, 2019). That neoliberal capitalism incapacitated the state in responding to emergencies is advanced by Santos (2020). While it is easy to defend the opposite viewpoint, that the crisis over-empowered the state, ideology was undoubtedly thrown into question. States that had preached austerity and fear of debt and deficit, such as the UK and Australia, suddenly ditched neoliberal economics for Keynesianism stimulatory policies. Ideology is as important today as it has ever been; capitalism as an instrumental vehicle not only organizes the economy but also its ideological terrain (see also Abbott & Mackinnon, 2019): the pandemic has punctuated the elective affinity between a neoliberal state and a neoliberal ideology with a period of exception that increasingly threatens both ideology and state practices.

Instead of a new eruption of social Darwinism (Santos, 2020), in which a “good us” confronts an “evil them”, as genocide studies have explained, we need new forms of collaboration founded on global human interests, suggests Santos (2020). The defence of neoliberal politics has been associated by Santos (2020) with religious conservatism in diverse expressions, such as reactionary Catholicism in Europe, Pentecostal evangelism in parts of Latin America, radical Buddhism in Myanmar, radical Islamism in the Middle East. With the goal of rescuing the economy, these groups seek to eliminate parts of the population that not only do not subscribe to their beliefs but in consequence, are dispossessed productively,

economically. Another, simpler, possibility is that in moments of crises, under certain forms of leadership that can project responsibility for the crisis on to external others, people simply regress to more basic forms of defence against a real or imaginary enemy (Kets de Vries, 2020). The important message is that leaders that are able to overcome the basic defence mechanisms that lead to Manichean approaches to reality are needed. Such leaders need to see themselves as part of a global response rather than as tribal chieftains fighting a traditional enemy.

## Paradox lessons

The pandemic revealed, in summary, how the world of leadership, management and organization seem to be in dire need of paradoxical thinking, as it can typically consider single solutions, shifting from 'everything's fine, we need to bite the bullet, and we cannot afford stopping everything' to 'panic mode: total lockdown'. A more sensible way to deal with the panic of the pandemic is one that requires managing a long-term issue. Organizing might oscillate purposefully between strong measures that quarantine and/or exclude those bodies carrying the infection and relatively more 'relaxed' periods of successful exclusion and/or containment of the virus, in which activities can be carried out in a semi-normal way. Strong measures might include initiatives of temporary but total and well enforced lock-downs aimed at slowing the epidemic; working on retrofitting social structures to cope with the pandemic's effects in the long term, such as adding ICUs, reinforcing remote working and teaching capabilities, improving sanitation protocols, especially on public transport and developing new practices that minimize social distance, while also sending strong media messages to the population that clearly state how and why the pandemic is serious and why responses to it are equally serious but not forever. In time, reopening of theatres and restaurants with new stringent distance protocols could be part of the pole of relaxing

regulation, albeit that there would be a readiness to lock-down again if there were further increases in transmission, etc. Doing this allows both for educating the population and maintaining a semblance of normalcy: if people see no end to lock-down, panic and fear will escalate; if they are not given the opportunity to experience a lock-down they do not take things seriously enough ... The pandemic exposes the importance of thinking paradoxically in order to face important organizational and societal grand challenges.

At the same time, we must be careful not to identify the 'wrong' paradox: depending on how narratives of events are 'punctuated' (Watzlawick et al., 1967) it is possible to construe different interdependent oppositions, framing the challenge in very different ways. For example, the issue of border controls can be represented as a contraposition between a collective need (protecting the public from the risk of importing the disease) and an individual one (the right of free movement). Statistics showing the frequency of transmission caused by overseas travellers have been used in Australia to justify strict state limitations in the number of residents allowed back in the country, by rationing flights and then quarantining arrivals remotely. The distresses caused by these policies are justified as the need to safeguard public health.

In some states, imported infections arose from the inadequacy of quarantine and screening protocols, determined by poor state management and by the market choice of relying on cheap labour and private subcontracting. Similarly, some of the worst effects of the pandemic were caused not just by the virus but by policies that caused its diffusion among the most vulnerable segment of the population: people in aged care. The issue has been sometimes presented as a dilemma between the need to shelter frail, elderly people through isolation, versus the unbearable psychological cost of such isolation, as if the choice was between risking of dying because of Covid-19 and the risk of dying from a lack of compassionate

human touch in a facility focused on profits rather more than privations arising from being deprived of social contact. While this trade-off is unmistakably present, the real cause of the diffusion of the virus in aged care facilities in areas (Lombardy in Italy, UK, Victoria in Australia) has been the reliance on a privatized model of aged care, employing a visibly precarious workforce (e.g., Peticca-Harris, deGama, & Ravishankar, 2020), whose movement between different facilities as a casualized, part-time labour force contributed to the contagion.

Paradoxes are resistant to simple solutions, and the complex challenges caused by Covid-19 cannot be tackled by developing some 'silver bullet' remedy. While vaccination constitutes one of the most effective weapons that can be mobilized to counter the current emergency, the development of a vaccine will not make the pandemic disappear overnight. In addition to the immense logistical difficulties implied in inoculating the entire global population there are political, social and economic hurdles that need to be tackled. In the absence of adequate international cooperation and coordination, the availability of an effective vaccine could, paradoxically, increase conflict, division and inequality. Vaccine nationalism (Kamradt-Scott, 2020) could jeopardize the effectiveness of inoculation, as vaccination success is predicated upon an altruistic proposition: vaccines rarely provide perfect protection to those who are inoculated but safeguard the entire population by creating an artificial herd immunity. Vaccines are a collective gift.

## Final comment

The Covid-19 pandemic creates an interesting situation, a world of volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous responses in which control coupled with expertise belongs neither to the politicians nor even the epidemiologists, newly public figures. It is the totality of social ordering and arrangements that is at stake. In this book review essay, we have explored some

of their lessons on the paradoxes plaguing the pandemic. We suggest that crises render paradoxes especially salient and that by "visibilizing" them (Tuckermann, 2019), they become more manageable. Žižek (2020, p.102) suggests that we should retrieve Immanuel Kant's suggestion: "obey but think, maintain the freedom of thought". Doing this is crucially important in world where paradoxical choices have to be made, between elite control and the demos of community. In some respects, irrespective of all else, the restitution of this freedom before the fates that dominated our times may be the best defence of a rekindled humanity and humanism, unbowed by fetishization of "the science" as a mask for democratic irresponsibility, if only because no single science can resolve policies that must manage not only the corporeal body and the body politic but also the social body. Social science, spurned by power for so long, may briefly have interesting roles to play. These three books sketch some of the directions in which that role may play out.

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