

## **COVID-19 and the Real Impossible**

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### **Published version**

BLACK, Jack (2020). COVID-19 and the Real Impossible. *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 14 (2), 1-22.

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ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Fourteen, Number Two

## COVID-19 and the Real Impossible

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### Abstract

This article approaches the COVID-19 pandemic as an inherently antagonistic phenomenon. To do so, it carries forward the philosophical contentions (“revolution”) that Žižek outlines in his *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*, as well as his wider work. With reference to the parallax Real and McGowan’s Hegelian contradiction, it is demonstrated that Žižek’s philosophical premises hold a unique importance in politically confronting COVID-19. Indeed, by drawing specific attention to the various ways in which our confrontations with the Real expose the limitations of our socio-ideological orders, it is argued that it is in these very limitations (which now structure, manage and curtail our social interactions) that the limits of the Real are transposed through the various “fictions” we employ to fight and perceive it. In outlining this confrontation, a focused discussion on the Real as “impossible” – a “characteristic” that affords an important political significance for the present context and its ongoing limitations – is provided. In conclusion, if the COVID-19 pandemic demands a new “commons” (as argued by Žižek), and if our response to the crisis should be one where the desires of the nation-state are regulated and controlled, then, it may not simply be enough that we “demand the impossible”. Instead, it is today that the impossible demands a new “us”.

*“But COVID-19 arises as a pandemic that plunges us into the unknown and breaks into each and every one of us. COVID-19 breathes on the entire world. The same phenomenon for everyone, but to which everyone reacts differently, starting from their own singularity. Each with their own point of attachment which crystallizes in a unique and unpredictable way”*

François Ansermet (2020)

With a rising death toll; disagreements over the viability of national lockdowns; and, national societies divided between those left at home and those required to continue their work caring for the elderly, treating the sick and stocking our supermarket shelves, the COVID-19 phenomenon continues to crystallize various “points of attachment”, which, as Ansermet asserts, remain both unique and unpredictable. More importantly, these attachments shed light on a number of significant antagonisms within our social, political and economic relations. Though COVID-19 did not create these antagonisms – “the distances, ruptures and conflicts in the social landscape were already profound before coronavirus changed our lives forever” (Theodoropoulos 2020) – for the moment, there remains no suggestion that these difficulties will be surpassed “after” the pandemic. Instead, the effects of the virus, and its social, cultural, economic and political impact will, if anything, remain a prescient force post-2020.

To this extent, the COVID-19 pandemic offers the potential to confront these antagonisms head-on, steered by the prospect of re-orientating our political and economic orders as well as reframing our philosophical outlook. Indeed, while offering one of the “first” analyses of the virus, the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, has brought together key strands from his political writing to provide what some have considered an “opportunistic” attempt to frame the virus in the guise of his own philosophical outlook (Žižek 2018, 2020b, 2020c).<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, there has remained a unique academic frustration (mostly, via social media) against those who have sought to publish special journal editions, edited collections and commentary pieces on the virus and its impact.

Ultimately, therefore, COVID-19 *is* an inherently antagonistic topic and one that remains intricately tied to our philosophical and theoretical oppositions. It is on this basis alone that Žižek’s work prescribes a unique

importance in politically confronting these antagonisms as well as posing “new” questions on how we might even begin to encounter them (Sharpe and Boucher 2010: 106-109). In fact, Žižek (2006b: 242, italics added) notes:

We must ... distinguish the experience of antagonism in its radical form, as a *limit of the social*, as *the impossibility* around which the social field is structured, from antagonism as the relation between antagonistic subject-positions: in Lacanian terms, we must distinguish *antagonism as Real* from the social reality of the antagonistic fight.

It is the purpose of this article to consider in what ways COVID-19 elicits this Real antagonism as well as the limits and impossibilities it avers.

In what follows, due attention will be given to outlining Žižek’s application of the Lacanian Real, drawing specific attention to the ways in which our confrontations with the Real expose the limitations of our socio-ideological orders. Furthermore, while these limitations can be used to draw out some of the underlying antagonisms that COVID-19 reveals, its Real significance can be found in the multiplicity of symbolizations it encourages, matched only by its apparent capacity to resist these very symbolizations. In part, this requires a focused consideration on the Real as “impossible” – a “characteristic” that affords an important political significance for the present context and its ongoing limitations.

### **The Real – a contingent unknown**

In his philosophical, political and cultural analyses, the Lacanian Real has maintained an important significance in Žižek’s (2017) critical outlook. In its simplest description, the Real stands in contrast to what we typically perceive as “common sense” reality (Taylor 2010: 67). Though it does not sit “behind” or “beyond” this reality, it does constitute a “void” or “gap” within the socio-symbolic orders that we use to structure and orientate our lives. The significance of this “gap” can be observed when we consider the Real in relation to Lacan’s Symbolic and Imaginary orders, which constitute his triadic Borromean knot.

Together, both the Symbolic and Imaginary reflect a form of signification, with the Symbolic denoting how “reality” is represented through language, and the Imaginary referring to those “images” which fantasmatically constitute one’s individual outlook. Notably, while the Symbolic is open to variance and difference, the Imaginary exposes a certain “arresting fantasy”, which underscores the subject’s sense of self (Žižek and Daly 2004: 7). It is against these orders that we trace how the Real serves as the necessary inverse to both the Symbolic and Imaginary: that is, for the Symbolic and Imaginary to exist, the Real is required.

Admittedly, this brief description does not capture the enigmatic quality of the Real. Indeed, while the Real serves as the antimony to our Symbolic-Imaginary constructions, it maintains a certain immateriality (“void”/“gap”). That is, it can only be approached, grasped or observed through its disturbing effects. These effects are “associated with experiences of breakdown not only of phenomenological experience, but even of language or culture itself” (Carew 2014: 3), and it is in this respect that such experiences bestow the Real a disruptive potential; a level of contingency which is apparent when our day-to-day proceedings are suddenly, and, in some instances, irrevocably, changed.

Nevertheless, though the Real can be found in moments of traumatic disarray, importantly, any recourse to “contingency” can just as easily serve as a form of domestication which inevitably seeks to contextualize the Real’s effects by affording it some sense of meaning. It is this desire to provide meaning which helps support and maintain certain ideological fantasies, which inevitably transpose such contingency to an external agency, be it an unwanted other or “the enemy” beyond the gates.

In part, these examples offer one way of providing contingent events a deeper sense of meaning, and, here, COVID-19 offers no exception. While the virus can be, and has been, viewed as a form of punishment against humanity (Monbiot 2020), there remains “something reassuring in the fact that we are punished, [that] the universe (or even Somebody-out-there) is engaging with us” (Žižek 2020c: 14). For Žižek (2020c: 14, italics added):

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. In the larger order of things, we are just a species with no special importance.

To this extent, Žižek's "contingency at its purest" draws attention to how a certain level of contingency persists in "those areas of life which cannot be known" (Myers 2003: 25). It is this sense of the "unknown" which underscores how our understanding of the world, and our relation to conventional notions of reality, are always mediated and carved-up through language.

What is important, however, is not to confuse the above assertions with Kant's noumena and phenomena distinctions – from which our ability to access the noumena remains forever out of reach – but, instead, to consider how our relation to/with the Real is always constructed *a posteriori*. That is, if the Real can be posited in the displacements that it effects, then such deformations can only ever be grasped through our Symbolic and Imaginary orders. To this end, the Real is what "inhabits language from *within*, generating a surplus of meaning, and a void of unanswered, unresolved questions" (Wilcox 2005: 352, italics added). It is through such an inhabitance that the Real can be *encountered*. Žižek explains:

for Lacan the Real is not what is forever there, absolutely immutable and so on. ... The fundamental wager, or hope, of psychoanalysis is that with the symbolic you can intervene in the Real. ... And the point is that through symbolic intervention these structures can be transformed. The Real is not some kind of untouchable central point about which you can do nothing except symbolize it in different terms. ... So the basic wager of psychoanalysis is that you can do things with words; real things that enable you to change modes of enjoyment and so on. (Žižek and Daly 2004: 150)

Consequently, we can "touch the [R]eal" through new interpretations and new forms of meaning (Leblanc 2020), which, in Žižek's political writing, can be seen to highlight how "The Real is no longer the eternal circulating form of

political failure, but rather the point of intervention to violently and radically alter the coordinates of the existing capitalist order” (Noys 2010: 8). This intervention seeks to use the “gap” (the Real), constitutive of the Symbolic, as a form of “motivation” (Hearns-Branaman 2014: 31), that can posit “a radical openness in which every ideal support of our existence is suspended” (Žižek 2008b: 9).

Viewed in this light, the Real maintains a significant structuring role for the subject. Though “The Real needs mediating ... it continues to bubble under the surface of the Symbolic and Imaginary constructions we use for that mediation” (Taylor 2010: 70), and, as such, it is through this mediation that the Real remains coterminous with the inconsistencies and contingent failures of the Symbolic order. Certainly, while the Real is “unknown”, it persists in a fundamental and elementary form, so that, rather than overcoming the Real, we are required “to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* with it” (Žižek 2008a: xxviii). It is this dialectical tension which underscores how “the Real is simultaneously *presupposed* and *posed* by the symbolic” (Žižek 2008a: 191). In short, there is an “intangible role” to the Real, which “provid[es] a certain invisible-immanent twist that gives shape and texture to reality” (Žižek and Daly 2004: 8).

We can approach this dialectical “twist” in “the inherent twist/curvature that is constitutive of the subject itself” (Žižek 2020a: 37). Indeed:

in order for the subject to emerge, the impossible object-that-is-subject must be excluded from reality, since it is its very exclusion which opens up the space for the subject. The problem is not to think the real outside transcendental correlation, independently of subject; the problem is to think the real INSIDE the subject, the hard core of the real in the very heart of the subject, its ex-timate center. (Žižek 2020a: 37-38)

Such “extimacy” (and inherent externality) can be identified in the subject’s imaginary formations, which continually seek to locate the Real as the impossible outside, or, as *that* contingent event whose impossibility demands

explanation. Importantly, it is this impossible limit which affords a positivization of the void or gap that is the Real (Žižek 2008a: 195).<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, further consideration will be given to elaborating upon how the Real posits a certain “impossibility” that can prove uniquely helpful in approaching the political significance of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be argued that by engaging with this “impossibility”, important political *possibilities* can be drawn.

### **Identifying the (Possible) Impossible**

What the above discussion hopes to avoid is the Real’s reification. It is in view of this potential for reification, as well as fetishization, that Žižek considers the Real “a topological term” from which “any substantilization ... is a kind of a perspective-illusion” (Žižek and Daly 2004: 78 see also Žižek 2020a: 219-272). What is important, however, is that such an “illusion” is not caused by any “positive entity”, but from the inherent paradox that constitutes the Real itself (Žižek and Daly 2004: 78-79). The paradox here is that the symbolic space remains predicated on its own “impossibility”, a paradox which bears witness to the fact that the Real happens; indeed, “the whole point of the Lacanian concept of the Real is that *the impossible happens*” (Zupančič 2003: 176).

Certainly, there are, as noted, various ways in which this impossibility can be ignored or obscured. The “impossible that happened” can be fetishized, thus transforming the impossible into a “virtue of ... impossibility” (Zupančič 2003: 178), and it can be avoided, via forms of fantasmatic disavowal that seek to deny or mask the impossible. Equally, transgressions which seek to reach for the “impossible” can be used to support hegemonic ideologies, which presuppose such inherent transgression as part of their ideological efficiency. In each case, what effectively transpires is what Zupančič (2003: 177) refers to as a move “from ‘the impossible happened’ to ‘this cannot possibly happen,’ ‘this is impossible’”.

In these instances, we are again led to a domestication of the Real. This can be seen in the multitude of “possibilities” that result in a particular event as well as the possible scenarios that such an event may entail for the

future. Here, the “actuality” of a particular event is evidenced in Žižek’s (1998: 157) contention that “there is always something traumatic about the raw factuality of what we encounter as ‘actual’; actuality is always marked by an indelible brand of the (real as) ‘impossible’”. In so doing:

The shift from actuality to possibility, the suspension of actuality through inquiry into its possibility, is therefore ultimately an endeavor to avoid the trauma of the real, i.e., to integrate the real by means of conceiving it as something that is meaningful within our symbolic universe. (Žižek 1998: 157)

This leads back to our previous discussion on contingency, and, in particular, how “the intrusion of the Real” is “what did not belong to the domain of possibilities”, but which, “all of a sudden – contingently – takes place, and thus transforms the coordinates of the entire field” (Žižek 2006a: 77). Such contingency can be traced in the distinction “between real impossibilities and the impossibilities of the real”; one that McGowan (2015: 38) clarifies as that between “the existence of a unicorn and the collapse of the Soviet Union”, with the latter reflecting a “possible impossible”. It is on these grounds that the Real can reveal a certain “openness”, the “irreducible contingency” of a “possibility”, that, once it occurs, was objectively necessary (Žižek 1998: 156). While this discussion pays dividend to the dialectical nature of possibility and actuality, contingency and necessity, what it helps to draw attention to are those *impossible interruptions* that the Real avers.

We can draw out this importance via Zupančič’s (2008: 162) comparisons with “the Deleuzian Real”: a Real that “ultimately refers to the cosmic whole as an inherently productive self-differentiating substance”. Accordingly, while Deleuze’s turn to difference ultimately “obliterates the Real that keeps repeating itself in this difference”, for psychoanalysis, and Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular, it is an allegiance to “the rift, the crack, implied by yet invisible in the deployment of differences, and repeated with them” that is affirmed by the Real (Zupančič 2017: 118). Such repetition can only ever be grasped and confronted via the Real’s distortion, which, itself, results in the retroactive framing of such difference to begin with.

In accounting for this difference, further clarification can be given to acknowledging Žižek's (2006a) "parallax Real". According to Dean (2014: 223), "there are two aspects to the parallax Real: multiplicity and its impossible core". By extending Lacanian conceptions of the Real, a parallax perspective allows us to see that the Real is not necessarily what, following Lacan, "always returns to its place", but rather, is "the hard bone of contention which pulverizes the sameness into the multitude of appearances" (Žižek 2006: 26). It is in this sense that the Real "persists" through the impossibility of ever achieving a holistic perspective, so that one can only ever achieve a "shift in perspective", from which each perspective either stalls or snags on the Real's "hard bone of contention" (Žižek 2006a: 187).

It is this contention which reveals how "The Real ... is retroactively posited as the necessary yet impossible cause of this very multiplicity" (Dean 2014: 223). What drives this retroactive positing, however, is the concern that there is some "pre-synthetic Real" un beholden to the multiple (re)productions it later assumes (Žižek 2000: 33). What is important is that "this mythical/impossible starting point, the presupposition of imagination, is already the product, the result of, the imagination's disruptive activity" (Žižek 2000: 33), and, thus, exposes the retroactive positing of the subject itself. Though "this mythical/impossible starting point" pays homage to the Real, as that "hard bone of contention" which can only ever be accessed through multiple variations (hence, its "openness"), more importantly this clarification helps to highlight that while "the impossible is always possible", ultimately, "we can arrive at it only by grasping how narrowly our choices are constrained within the symbolic structure" (McGowan 2015: 39). This constraint remains an integral part of the inherent limits that frame both the subject and society.

Indeed, to help elucidate on this constraint, we can draw attention to Žižek's (2020a) account of Adorno's (2004) "negative dialectics", where he argues:

"Negative dialectics" designates a position which includes its own failure, i.e., which produces the truth-effect through its very failure. To put it succinctly: one tries to grasp or conceive the object of thought;

one fails, missing it, and through these very failures the place of the targeted object is encircled, its contours become discernible. (Žižek 2020a: 53-54)

Akin to the role of the corpse in Copjec's (2015) analysis of detective fiction, Adorno's (2004) "negative dialectics" is one that draws attention to the "limit" – the missed/failed object – that underscores the immanent impossibility of the position that is held; a self-negating process which produces its own "truth-effect" (Žižek 2020a: 53-54). What Žižek's (2020a) reference to Adorno reveals is the *structural inconsistency* of both language and phenomenal experience, and to the Real which "shows itself negatively through their immanent obstruction" (Carew 2014: 3).<sup>3</sup> It is this Real which "provid[es] a certain invisible-immanent twist that gives shape and texture to reality" (Žižek and Daly 2004: 8).

What remains significant in this "twist" is that it underscores the process of scientific inquiry, from which any "scientific insight" is itself predicated on a level of abstraction that nonetheless requires greater "scientific" complexity. It is here that our experience and representation of "objective reality" relies upon certain "impossible" abstractions in order to be "perceived" (Žižek 2015: 10). In short, this abstraction presents a suspension of one's immediate reality, in favor of scientific formulas and algorithms as well as concepts and principles, which, while helping to symbolically frame this reality, remain far removed from any immediate, and, in some cases, rational, perception (what you see and feel).

In this respect, scientific theories posit a decidedly "'inhuman' realm", one that is only accessible through forms of scientific abstraction, as evident in new apparatuses that help generate the Real *in* "reality" (Žižek 2016: 32). In fact, "with a diameter from 20 to 300 nano-meters (one millionth of a millimeter)", Focchi (2020) highlights how "the [COVID-19] particle that currently undermines our lives and modifies our habits remains essentially invisible, unless we have that indispensable electron microscope that not all of us usually have in our toolbox".

It is on this basis that science presents a "cut" in the Real;<sup>4</sup> it presents a level of inquiry that, in order to engage in "objective reality", requires a loss

of ontological consistency for the “subject”. This loss of the subject’s substantive consistency is reflected by the fact that “some part of [... reality] must be affected by the ‘loss of reality’” (Žižek 2001: 66), as evident in the abstract generalizations (the Real) that science relies upon.<sup>5</sup> For the biosciences, what is affected in this loss is the subject as a substantial being; reduced, instead, to its biological form. Accordingly, while there remains a “monstrosity” in science; one that “enables us to construct new ‘unnatural’ (inhuman) objects which cannot but appear to our experience as freaks of nature (gadgets, genetically modified organisms, cyborgs, etc.)” (Žižek 2016: 285), equally, it is through science that what makes the “human”, “human”, is paradoxically reduced to a meaningless biological materiality – an “inhuman” collection of bio-statistical information, far removed from the “human” inner sense of self.

For this, we can reflect upon the fact that forms of “biological naturalism” continue to remain inextricably tied to the importance of the “gene”. Conceived as a “noncontradictory figure of authority”, genetic references present a level of determinism which suggest that “The self-identical gene knows what it wants and pursues its aim with a ruthless purpose” (McGowan 2019: 150). As McGowan (2019) outlines, such thinking envelops the gene with an authority, grounded in its own self-evident persistence. However, what this approach seeks to dissipate, but, ultimately, obscures, is the “irreducible contradiction”, which finds itself reflected in a non-contradictory, neurotic fantasy of “genetic” authority – a fantasy that, nonetheless, continues to rely upon its own self-contradiction (McGowan 2019: 152).<sup>6</sup>

Notably, McGowan’s (2019) work offers further insight on the importance of this contradiction via his account of Hegel’s dialectical philosophy. For McGowan (2019: 9), what steers Hegel away from misguided interpretations of dialectical synthesis, is the assertion that his approach to dialectics presents contradiction as “a prerequisite of being”. McGowan’s (2019: 9) Hegelian contention is that “One must integrate the ultimate inevitability of contradiction into the fabric of one’s thought in order to avoid betraying its constitutive role”. One must, in other words, approach contradiction as an “affirm[ation] that our conceptual distance from the world

is actually our mode of access to it” (McGowan 2019: 128); a form of access that is itself constitutive of the aforementioned limits, failures and inconsistencies that the Real inscribes.

It is in this regard that Žižek (2016: 102) contests that “‘contradiction’ is the Real itself”; indeed, a point of impossible coincidence:

we do not magically overcome the impossibility which cuts across the symbolic – rather, we grasp how this impossibility which seemed to keep us apart from the Real, which rendered the Real impossible, is the very feature which locates the symbolic in the Real. The Real is not beyond the symbolic, *it is the impossibility inscribed at its very heart.* (Žižek 2015: 108, italics added)

As noted, there are various ways in which this “impossibility” can be avoided; what we can infer, however, is that such deferment presents a particular aversion of contradiction. In particular, we can consider how such aversions to contradiction echo the mitigation of the gaze in the operation of ideology. The effects of this are helpfully outlined in McGowan’s (2015: 79, italics added) account of cinema:

The primary way that ideology operates in the cinema is not (as Screen theory contends) through identification with the camera or with the characters on the screen *but through the depiction and subsequent resolution of the gaze.* The resolution of the gaze occurs within a fantasy that accomplishes the impossible. In the course of this ideological operation, the impossible real becomes a symbolic possibility, and the real thus disappears from view. Films that perform this operation have an inherently pacifying effect on spectators. They work to convince the spectator that the trauma of the real is actually nothing but a temporary symbolic hiccup.

Do we not see something similar in the various attempts to manage, control and resolve (however successfully) the COVID-19 pandemic? While in no way critical of these attempts (clearly, some of them should be followed),

ultimately, they neither divest nor deny the virus. Instead, “we can see all there is to see except *that* which constitutes the field of vision by falling out of it” – *the virus itself* (Zupančič 2016: 420, italics added). Therefore, “In order to see something of this fallen out element, we have to look elsewhere: for example in our social interactions and in the ‘fictions’ that structure these interactions” (Zupančič 2016: 420). Indeed, these structures are made evident in the various forms of social distancing that now manage our interactions and in the computer generated compositions that seek to give an image to the virus.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, in the face of COVID-19, it is *in* the very limitations that now structure, manage and curtail our social interactions that the limits of the Real are transposed through the various “fictions” we employ to fight and perceive it. More importantly, “It is only in this way, and not by looking at things directly and realistically, that we can get some idea about the real at work in social reality” (Zupančič 2016: 420-421).

### **The Impossible Happens**

While we can conceive of our various attempts to make sense of and manage the virus as mere “speculation”, a point made clear in the daily news updates and conflicting (even dangerous) stories that have littered social media (BBC 2020); equally, we can just as easily observe how “The increasingly unmanageable dimension of our economic crisis is evidenced by the embarrassment accompanying any political attempt to contain it through warmed-up neo-Keynesian recipes or (worse) calamitous neoliberal injunctions” (Vighi 2020). However, such an “unmanageable dimension” does not present the absence of any ready-made solution. Rather, what it serves to suggest is the failure to find the “right” dimension to approach the problem. Zupančič (2017: 139) explains:

we have not lost the Real (which we never “had”), we are losing the capacity of naming that can have real effects, because it “hits” the right spot, the (dis)junction between the necessary and the Real (impossible). In all the profusion of words and more words, we lack the words that work. ... The right word is not the same thing as a correct

word, and it is certainly not about someone “being right” (or not); it is not simply the word that conveys, for example, the factual truth of what is going on. This is not about “efficiency” either. It is about words that name something about our reality for the first time, and hence make this something an object of the world, and of thought. There can be words and descriptions of reality prior to it, and there always are. But then there comes a word that gives us access to reality in a whole different way. It is not a correct description of a reality; it introduces a new reality.

These new significations – or attempts to find the word – help to frame the various ways in which the virus serves to entangle itself, not just in our biological make-up, but also our social and political relations. Though the word “coronavirus” was largely unheard of before the start of 2020, it now reveals a “new reality”, one that can allow us to access the inherent failure, limitation and contradiction of our social, economic and political orders.

In order to perceive this “access”, we can begin to trace how the COVID-19 pandemic reveals something that we had previously considered “impossible”, and it is here that our attempt to define the contours of this “impossible” remain important. Indeed, while the “possibility” of a global pandemic “existed” in our Hollywood fantasies,<sup>8</sup> the “impossibility” of the coronavirus – that is to say, its *actuality* – points to what was previously considered to be “impossible” according to our social, political and economic coordinates. Indeed, the failure to account for the virus and its global impact is not a limitation that existed a priori, but is, instead, a point of action – a Real-impossible actuality (Žižek 1998, 2013, 2015). Here, “An act is more than an intervention into the domain of the possible – an act changes the very coordinates of what is possible and thus retroactively creates its own conditions of possibility” (Žižek 2013: 143).

In this way, what this unexpected phenomenon presents us with is the de-ontologization of our former ideological templates (Vighi, 2020). This argument is taken further by Vighi (2020), who illustrates how “the ontologisation of labour is the elementary ideological template through which

all capitalist societies affirmed themselves, as indeed did socialist ones". He elaborates:

Differently put, the dogma of labour-time is the specifically modern form of alienation without which homo economicus loses its ontological compass, no longer knowing what to do with themselves. In this respect, Covid-19 impacts our lives by depriving them, at least momentarily, of their symbolic substance. (Vighi 2020)

Indeed, the extent to which "this specific artifice is losing its socio-ontological efficacy" is one that not only accounts for how "the structural crisis of capitalism, accelerated by the virus" is made visible, but how such visibility renders clear that the secrets of capitalism rely on an inherent "absent substance" (surplus-value) upon which the system depends (Vighi, 2020). For Vighi (2020), this "minus passed off as a plus" is profit – an element that for capitalism is always lacking and never enough. Accordingly:

While Marx resolved the riddle of surplus-value within the context of capitalist exploitation and profit-making, he did not see that the answer to the riddle posed by surplus-value is that there is no answer – surplus-value makes the world tick as the signifier of an impossibility. (Vighi, 2020).

Yet, if, as Vighi (2020) proposes, "The empty foundation, ... must not be ignored or rejected, but assumed and re-signified as the ground of a new social bond emerging against and beyond the moribund capitalist narrative", then it is a re-signification which demands an equally re-signified conception of the subject – one open to the contradictory nature of being.

Consequently, while it is in this sense that we can consider how "The subject is the nonsubstance; he exists only as a nonsubstantial self-relating subject that maintains its distance toward inner-worldly objects" (Žižek 1991: 66), what is significant is that this distance is not a "safe distance". Instead, it requires a Hegelian double reversal; a "negation of negation" that posits the limitations and contradictions underscoring both our past as well as present

responses to the virus. Ultimately, it is a distance that remains intimately tied to the contradictions in reason and the negation its purports (McGowan 2019). Indeed, for McGowan (2019: 75), “Rather than marking the subject’s dispassionate turning away from the world, the turn to reason indicates the presence of a distortion in the subject’s understanding of the world occasioned by the inclusion of its desire in this understanding”. Though, as McGowan (2019: 78) asserts, “reason is the apprehension of ... contradiction”, this contradiction can be apprehended in the very “limits of the possible and the impossible” (Žižek 2013: 144). This is not a recourse to identifying what is “possible” within our present orders, but, as evident in Žižek’s (2020c) recourse to Communism, an attempt to identify those “impossible limits” (the Real) within our present ideological configurations, which declare what *is* “possible” and “impossible” (Žižek 2013).

Moreover, this limit is there within the “self-limitations” that our “self-interested acts” prescribe (Flisfeder 2020), and which, under the guise of COVID-19, bear witness to the fact that the unconscious attachments that these “self-interested acts” rely upon, require a universality beholden to a public, collective response. If the COVID-19 pandemic demands a new “commons”, and if our response to the crisis should be one where the desires of the nation-state are regulated and controlled, then, it may not simply be enough that we “demand the impossible”. Instead, it is today that the impossible demands a new “us”.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a critique of Žižek’s *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (2020c), see Baroud and Rubeo (2020) and Lucas (2020). Notably, many of the critiques which have been levelled at the book ignore the fact that Žižek chose to publish the book via a small, independent publisher (who no doubt has greatly appreciated the attention the publication has received), and that all royalties from sales of the book will be donated to *Médecins Sans Frontières*.

<sup>2</sup> It is on this basis that the subject can be defined as an “‘answer of the Real’ ... we can inscribe, encircle the void place of the subject through the failure of his symbolization, because the subject is nothing but the failure of the process of his symbolic representation” (Žižek 2008a: 195).

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<sup>3</sup> Zupančič (2003: 176) offers further insight on this via her account of love and the fantasies which underscore our “love stories”: “This ‘immanent inaccessibility’ also explains the basic fantasy of love stories and love songs that focus on the impossibility involved in desire. The leitmotiv of these stories is: ‘In another place, in an-other time, somewhere, not here, sometime, not now.’ This attitude (which clearly indicates the transcendental structure of desire: time and space as a priori conditions of our experience) can be read as the recognition of an inherent impossibility, an impossibility that is subsequently externalized, transformed into some empirical obstacle”.

<sup>4</sup> This is given further clarification in Daly’s account of the “symbolic Real” (Žižek and Daly 2004: 8-9).

<sup>5</sup> With regard to physics, McGowan (2019: 117) notes how “In order to make sense of physical reality, scientists must disregard what appears in our experience if they are to avoid missing reality altogether”.

<sup>6</sup> McGowan (2019: 149-153) supplements his critique of “naturalism” with a corresponding account of the role of fundamentalism and its recourse to neurotic fantasy.

<sup>7</sup> Importantly, Focchi (2020) notes that, “this image is not a photo, it’s a CGI (Computer Generated Image); a semblance, in short. It’s a digital illustration, and it’s a bit like the images of fairy tales we read when we were kids. We had never seen the Ogre in flesh, but his picture was in the book: having him on a page that could be opened, but also closed, somehow reassured us”.

<sup>8</sup> The films *Outbreak* (Wolfgang Petersen 1995), *Contagion* (Soderbergh 2011) and *I Am Legend* (Lawrence 2007) all deal with global pandemics.

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