

## Focus Essay

REVIEW OF HUMAN RIGHTS  
Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 2020, xxv-xxxii  
DOI: 10.35994/rhr.v6i1.105



## Coronavirus Pandemic: Nature Strikes back?

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### Abstract

Employing an ontological approach to the coronavirus pandemic, this essay problematizes the relationship between modernity and the Nature. I suggest that the notion of scientific conquest of the Nature is not only flawed, but also counter-productive to our progress. Moreover, I suggest that this notion is adding to the development of the authoritarian state with mass-surveillance infrastructure.

**Key words:** coronavirus, ontology, modernity, Nature, state surveillance.

### Modernity and Nature

In his book *The Abolition of Man* C. S. Lewis writes:

Man's conquest of nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be nature's conquest of man. Every victory we seemed to win has led us, step by step, to this conclusion. All nature's apparent reverses have been but tactical withdrawals. We thought we were beating her back when she was luring us on.<sup>1</sup>

Modernity is a mirror reflection or simulation of human confidence in his ability to become the master of the universe.

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Published Online: April 20, 2020.

ISSN (Print): 2520-7024; ISSN (Online): 2520-7032.

<https://reviewhumanrights.com>



This confidence comes from the human ability to scientific progress. Over the past few centuries, modernity has been the dominant narrative gripping the imaginations of the Western world. The development of scientific knowledge and technology increased human confidence and the potential messianic role humans could play through them. Some would call it the *anthropocene*, others *capitalocene*, but the message is explicit: we the humans are the ultimate decision makers in the world.<sup>2</sup> In this way, modernity has clearly questioned the old mythological and indigenous conceptions of the world and declared them to be superstitious and naïve.

However, this modern scientific understanding of the world has not debunked all the mysteries of cosmos. Therefore, it remains humble to natural cataclysmal events, and at best classifies them in terms of catastrophes and disasters. On the other hand, however, from critical theory studies we get to learn that disasters have social meaning, and they impact human conception of the world on both micro (psychological) and macro-level (socio-political). For example in 18<sup>th</sup> century the Lisbon Earthquake (1755) provoked the western world towards crude materialism and challenged the providential optimism. Similarly, the current outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic is also challenging the contemporary corporate social and economic order and its related human confidence. More specifically, when such existential crises occur, they disturb and paralyze us both emotionally and psychologically.<sup>3</sup> And thus people regard such catastrophes in apocalyptic and eschatological language such as; *oh God! This is the end of the world*, or *God is revealing His judgement upon us!* and so on. In other words, such catastrophic events have the ability of destroying the ongoing accepted notions about the world. Nevertheless, a proper understanding of such crises is to consider it as Nature's intervention or presence.

There are many views about the mystery of Nature, especially when it manifests itself with force. One of such views is of Slavoj Žižek who describes it as an "unimaginable catastrophic force" and "not-a-balanced-totality."<sup>4</sup> Philosopher Matthew Segal also in his recent work describes Nature as '*Gaia*' though not as an

anthropomorphized goddess—mother Nature but instead a gigantic, even monstrous assemblage of coevolving lifeforms precariously perched upon a complex, self-organizing set of geochemical feedback loops necessary for maintaining the habitability of the planet.<sup>5</sup> He also comments that somehow we should give up this dual ('Human' vs 'Nature') mode of understanding despite living in capitalism. In his Whiteheadian perspective we are too *gaians*, i.e., living organisms dependent on the *gaian /earthly* reality.

The problem with the dichotomy of Nature versus human is that we are treating Nature as an unanticipated 'other' and therefore consider 'Nature' alien to our existence and progress. On the other hand if we heed to the indigenous Japanese Shinto religious understanding, it holds that 'Nature' is divinity in itself and should be regarded sacred and harmonious.<sup>6</sup> The indigenous way of looking at Nature is quite participatory and therefore worth exploring. However, the popular corporate culture is more exclusive to the indigenous understanding of reality. This indigenous reckoning about Nature is often portrayed in a more perfect form in the animated movies of Hayao Miyazaki.<sup>7</sup> At least, from an experiential perspective, it can be argued that Nature itself needs participation otherwise it will constantly question the rational and mechanical understanding of human. Therefore, I argue that COVID-19 is not apocalyptic for human existence. It is rather a challenge for the mechanical understanding of the world. In other words, the existence of virus contains an explicit message of Nature gone wild and alienated from human's constant intervention. The introductory quote of C. S. Lewis of this essay reminds us of this reality.

### **Socio-economic and political horizons**

Symbolically, COVID-19 represents the breakdown of order on both micro (psychological) and macro-level (socio-political). However, the macrocosmic dysfunction and breakdown of society i.e., economy and politics, are more obvious. More specifically, it challenges the structures of modern political culture. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek argued in his recent interview that this catastrophe

can destroy the current liberal capitalist order and replace it with communism because European society is on the verge of a perfect storm.<sup>8</sup> Though, I do not agree with his view, however, it is obvious that these are unprecedented circumstances and therefore anything is possible. Moreover, current paranoia of the disease clearly indicates the fragility of capitalist mode of being. From the corporate media to corporate governments and international non-profit agencies, every institution is in a state of emergency.

Meanwhile to tackle the problem politically, governments have imposed states of emergency and legitimized the limiting of individual freedom to secure society from the obvious danger. With it is growing the notion of 'positive state'<sup>9</sup> which is somewhat similar to the welfare state but one in which state has greater control and guiding role in economy. But the idea of positive state will eventually lead to the development of authoritarian state. Anne Applebaum reflects on the fear of the rise of authoritarian state in her recent work.<sup>10</sup> She argues that those who are in power would consider the present crisis an opportunity to grab more power. This is what she has noticed in Hungary, Poland, France, Italy, Israel and South Korea and so on. It can be argued that historically modern state has been trying to negotiate liberty for security. And the central theme in this approach is to somehow control fear and anxiety about mortality. More specifically, from a Hobbesian perspective the fear of death is what keeps the 'politics and power' alive and it is not a novel view. However, in this current case, the fear of death does not necessarily mean the physical death, rather what I am arguing here, is the death of confidence in human ability against Nature. It is this fear of powerlessness that really disturbs the modern political man. In other words, virus as a *Gaia* effectively threatening human's colonialism of Nature.

In light of the above discussion two extreme scenarios can be projected. The best-case scenario is that this pandemic impels humans to stop colonialism of Nature and consequently reform the contemporary capitalist order. In this case, it will be a world based on human cooperation and participation rather than

exploitation. The worst-case scenario is that humans would deem the pandemic as a legitimate ground for the messianic and redemptive role of modern exploitative state. The latter scenario is more likely possible and the reason of this prediction is our recent past, i.e., the era of 9/11. It seems that just like what happened in the aftermath of the 9/11 when the state positioned itself in emergency mode by adopting various measures of legal and political control. Similarly, since this disaster has replaced the 9/11, so the post-COVID-19 world will be another litmus test for bio-politics legitimized by new legal measures. As it has been reported that China has incorporated a strict surveillance system in order to quarantine patients. India is also following these measures.<sup>11</sup> The case of Hungary is exemplary of bio-fascism and sadly such will be the case of many states around the world.<sup>12</sup>

To conclude this essay, I would argue that it is time to realize the problematic path that humanity has taken over the course of past five centuries. We need to reflect on how to end the violent approach of man towards Nature. It is also time to think about how to put an end to our corporate messianic state before we fall in oblivion.

#### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 68.

<sup>2</sup> Moore, *Anthropocene Or Capitalocene?*

<sup>3</sup> I am implying to the five stage scheme of response developed by Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross on how patients react upon hearing to any kind of terminal illness. She proposed five stages of reaction; denial and isolation (No, not me, it cannot be true), anger (why me?), bargaining (some kind of hope to mitigate the trauma), depression (If I am going to die, why care about anything), acceptance (when one is no longer able to fight, one tries to prepare and accept the case with some kind of sad hope). See, Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *Examined Life*.

<sup>5</sup> Segall, 'Imagining a Gaian Reality After the Virus'.

<sup>6</sup> 'Statements | Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology'.

<sup>7</sup> Miyazaki, *Gake No Ue No Ponyo*. and Miyazaki, *Mononoke-Hime*.

<sup>8</sup> Nash, "What I like about Coronavirus" by Slavoj Žižek'. Also see, Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*, 29.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Positive State' is synonymous with the modern welfare state where the government tries to regulate all the public goods and services such as education, health, businesses etc.

<sup>10</sup> Applebaum, 'When Disease Comes, Rulers Grab More Power - The Atlantic'.

<sup>11</sup> 'How China's Using Surveillance to Fight Coronavirus'.

<sup>12</sup> Applebaum, 'Creeping Authoritarianism Has Finally Prevailed - The Atlantic'.

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