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Capitalism
and the Death Drive

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Capitalism and the Death Drive

What we nowadays call 'growth' is in reality random, cancerous proliferation. We are currently living through a frenzy of production and growth that seems like a frenzy of death. It is a simulation of vitality that conceals a deadly impending catastrophe. Production increasingly resembles destruction. Humankind's self-alienation may have reached a point 'where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure'.¹ What Benjamin said of fascism is today true of capitalism.

It is on account of our destructive rage that Arthur Schnitzler compares humankind to a bacterium. From this perspective, the history of humanity is like the progress of a deadly infectious disease. Growth and destruction become one and the same:

Is it then not conceivable that, for some higher organism that we are incapable of grasping in its totality, and within which humankind finds the condition, necessity and meaning of its

own existence, humankind represents an illness that tries to destroy that organism and – the further it develops – must destroy it, the same way a bacterium seeks to annihilate the human individual who has been ‘taken ill’?²

Humankind is blighted by a deadly blindness. We can only recognize the simpler levels of organization; regarding higher orders, we are as blind as bacteria. Thus, the history of humanity is an ‘eternal battle against the divine’, which is ‘necessarily annihilated by the human’.

Freud would have shared every ounce of Schnitzler’s pessimism. The human being, with his ‘cruel aggressiveness’, he writes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, is a ‘savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien’.³ Humankind annihilates itself. Freud may occasionally speak of the capacity of reason to recognize higher orders, but ultimately the human being is dominated by drives. For Freud, the death drive is responsible for our aggressive inclinations.⁴ Only a few months after the completion of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the Great Depression began. It would have provided Freud, one might think, with enough reasons to say that capitalism is that economic formation in which the savagery and aggression of the human being can best be expressed.

Given capitalism’s destructiveness, it seems plausible to connect capitalism with Freud’s death drive. In his study *Capitalisme et pulsion de mort* [Capitalism and death drive], the French economist Bernard Maris, who was killed in the terrorist attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, writes: ‘The great cunning of capitalism ... lies in the way it channels, it diverts, the forces of annihilation, the death drive, toward growth.’⁵ According to Maris, capitalism uses the death drive for its own purposes, and this ultimately proves to be fateful. Over time, its destructive forces gain the upper hand and overwhelm life.

But is Freud’s death drive really the right explanation for capitalism’s destructive trajectory? Or is capitalism propelled by an altogether different kind of death drive, one that lies outside of Freud’s theory of the drives? Freud’s death drive has a purely biological basis. At some point in time – so he speculates – the properties of life were evoked in inanimate matter by a strong force acting on it. This introduced into the previously dead matter a tension that had to be resolved, and thus living beings came to possess a drive to return to the inanimate condition. The death drive was born: ‘*The aim of all life is death*’, and, looking backwards ... ‘*inanimate things existed before living ones*’.⁶ Against the backdrop of the death drive, all instances of life appear as mere ‘myrmidons of death’. The drives of life have no aims of their own. Even the drives of self-preservation and mastery are partial drives whose function is ‘to ensure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself’.⁷ Every ‘organism wishes to die only in its own fashion’, and thus each organism resists any external influences that ‘might help it to attain its life’s aim rapidly – by a kind of short-circuit’.⁸ Life is nothing but the organism’s own being unto death. The idea of the death drive apparently held a lasting fascination for Freud. Despite some initial hesitation, he retained the idea:

The assumption of the existence of an instinct of death or destruction has met with resistance even in analytic circles; ... To begin with it was only tentatively that I put forward the views I have developed here, but in the course of time they have gained such a hold upon me that I can no longer think in any other way.⁹

The source of Freud's fascination was probably the fact that the idea of the death drive can help to explain human beings' destructive drive. Within the living being, the death drive works to bring about the being's dissolution. Freud interprets this processual death as an active self-destruction. Initially, then, the death drive expresses itself in the form of auto-aggression. It is only the drive towards life, Eros, that ensures that the death drive is directed towards external objects:

In this way the instinct [i.e. the death drive - DS] itself could be pressed into the service of Eros, in that the organism was destroying some other thing, whether animate or inanimate, instead of destroying its own self. Conversely, any restriction of this aggressiveness directed outwards would be bound to increase the self-destruction, which is in any case proceeding.¹⁰

Freud makes no distinction between human beings and other living beings when it comes to the death drive: the drive inhabits every living thing, as that being's urge to return to the inanimate state. From the death drive, Freud deduces aggression, thereby making a connection between two very different impulses. An organism's inherent tendency to resolve a tension and, ultimately, to die does not necessarily suggest a destructive inclination. If we understand the death drive as a gradual reduction in vitality, then we cannot infer from it any destructive impulse. In addition, because the death drive is common to all living beings, it cannot explain what is specific about *human* aggression. Humans, however, are especially aggressive and, in particular, cruel. No other living being is capable of blind destructive rage. Freud also deduces sadism from the death drive:

It is in sadism, where the death instinct twists the erotic aim in its own sense and yet at the same time fully satisfies the erotic urge, that we succeed in obtaining the clearest insight into its nature and its relation to Eros. But even where it emerges without any sexual purpose, in the blindest fury of destructiveness, we cannot fail to recognize that the satisfaction of the instinct is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the ego with a fulfilment of the latter's old wishes for omnipotence.¹¹

The death drive inherent in every living being, the urge to return to the inanimate state, does not explain the decidedly narcissistic enjoyment that the ego takes in sadistic violence. In order to account for sadism, there must be an altogether different kind of destructive drive.

According to Maris, the driving force of capitalism is a death drive that serves the purposes of growth. But this does not tell us what brings about the irrational compulsion of growth itself: the compulsion that makes capitalism so destructive. What is it that forces capitalism blindly to pursue accumulation? At this point, death enters the frame. Capitalism rests on a negation of death. Capital is accumulated as a defence against death, against absolute loss. Death is what accounts for the compulsion of production and growth. Maris scarcely pays attention to death. Even Freud does not address death as such. The idea of the death drive, as a death wish, conceals the fear of death. Tellingly, Freud does not take into account the fact that every living being resists death. He remarks, somewhat oddly, that the idea of the death drive means '[w]e have no longer to reckon with the organism's puzzling determination (so hard to fit into any context) to maintain its own existence in the face of every obstacle'.¹² It is therefore not unreasonable to suggest that Freud's idea of a death drive

ultimately represents an unconscious strategy for repressing the fact of death.¹³

The specifically human form of aggression, *violence*, is closely connected to the awareness of death, which is exclusively human. The economy of violence is ruled by a logic of accumulation. The more violence you exert, the more powerful you feel. Accumulated killing power [*Tötungsgewalt*] produces a feeling of growth, force, power [*Macht*] – of invulnerability and immortality. The narcissistic enjoyment human beings take in sadistic violence is based on just this increase in power. Killing protects against death. By killing, you arrest death. An increase in killing power means a reduction in death. The nuclear arms race also mirrors this capitalist economy of violence. Accumulating killing capacity is imagined as a way of accumulating a survival capacity.

The archaic economy of violence is exhibited in the spiralling violence of the blood feud. In archaic societies, every death is interpreted as the effect of a violent cause. Thus, even a 'natural' death may lead to revenge. The violence that led to the death is met with counter-violence. Every death weakens the group. Thus, the group must kill in turn in order to restore its feeling of power. Blood revenge is not an act of retribution, not a punishment. It is not a case of a perpetrator being held to account. Punishment is a rationalization of revenge; it stops revenge from escalating. Unlike punishment, blood revenge is undirected. That is the very reason it is so devastating. Sometimes, a group determined to avenge a death will kill individuals who were not involved in the death at all. Achilles took revenge for the death of his friend Patroclus by killing, and ordering killing, randomly. Not only enemies but also vast numbers of animals were slaughtered.

The etymology of 'money' points towards a connection with sacrifice and cultural rites. Money was originally the medium of exchange used for buying sacrificial animals.

Those with a lot of money acquired a divine power to kill: 'Looked at from the perspective of its roots in sacrificial cults, money is as it were frozen sacrificial blood. To throw money around, to let it flow and watch it flow, produces an effect similar to the flow of blood in fights or on sacrificial altars.'¹⁴ The hoarded money gives its owner the status of a predator. It immunizes him against death. At the level of depth psychology, this archaic belief continues to operate in the idea that accumulated killing capacity, and accumulated capital assets, will ward off death. Capital's logic of accumulation corresponds exactly to the archaic economy of violence. Capital behaves like a modern version of mana. Mana is the name of that powerful, mysterious substance that one acquires through the act of killing. One accumulates it in order to create a feeling of power and invulnerability:

The warrior was thought to embody the mana of all those whom he had killed . . . The mana of the warrior's spear was likewise increased with each death he inflicted. . . ; with a view to absorbing directly his mana, he ate some of his flesh; and to bind the presence of the empowering influence in battle . . . he wore as a part of his war dress some physical relic of his vanquished foe – a bone, a dried hand, sometimes a whole skull.¹⁵

The accumulation of capital produces the same affect as the accumulation of mana. Growing capital means growing power. More capital means less death. Capital is accumulated in order to escape death. Capital may also be seen as frozen time; infinite amounts of capital create the illusion of an infinite amount of time. Time is money: confronted with a time-limited life, we accumulate time-as-capital.

Adalbert von Chamisso's novella *Peter Schlemihls wunderbare Geschichte* [*The Wonderful History of Peter Schlemihl*] can

be read as an allegory of the capitalist economy. Schlemihl sells his shadow to the devil in return for a bottomless bag of gold (that is, infinite capital). The pact with the devil turns out to be a pact with capitalism. Infinite capital makes the shadow – which stands for the body and death – disappear. But Schlemihl soon realizes that a life without a shadow is impossible. He walks the earth as the undead. The moral is: death is a part of life. The story thus ends with this admonition: 'But you, my friend, if you want to live among mankind, learn to revere first your shadow, and then your money.'¹⁶

Capitalism is obsessed with death. The unconscious fear of death is what spurs it on. The threat of death is what stirs its compulsion of accumulation and growth. This compulsion drives us towards not only ecological but also mental catastrophe. The destructive compulsion to perform combines self-affirmation and self-destruction in one. We optimize ourselves to death. Relentless self-exploitation leads to mental collapse. Brutal competition ends in destruction. It produces an emotional coldness and indifference towards others as well as towards one's own self.

In capitalist societies, the dead and the dying are less and less visible. But death cannot simply be made to disappear. If, for instance, factories no longer exist, then work takes place everywhere. If mental asylums disappear, then madness has become normal. It is the same with death. If the dead are not visible, a rigor mortis has extended over all of life. Life freezes into survival: 'In survival, death is repressed; life itself ... would be nothing more than a survival determined by death.'¹⁷

The separation of life and death that is constitutive of the capitalist economy creates an *undead life*, *death-in-life*. Capitalism generates a paradoxical death drive; it deprives life of life.¹⁸ A life without death, which is what capitalism strives

to achieve, is what is truly deadly. Performance zombies, fitness zombies, and Botox zombies: these are manifestations of undead life. The undead lack any vitality. Only life that incorporates death is truly alive. The mania for health is the *biopolitical manifestation of capital itself*.

Capitalism's striving for life without death creates the *necropolis* – an antiseptic space of death, cleansed of human sounds and smells. Life processes are transformed into mechanical processes. The total adaptation of human life to mere functionality is already a culture of death. As a consequence of the performance principle, the human being ever more closely approximates a machine, and becomes alienated from itself. Dataism and artificial intelligence reify thinking. Thinking becomes calculating. Living memories are replaced with machine memories. Only the dead remember everything. Server farms are places of death. We bury ourselves alive in order to survive. In the hope of survival, we accumulate dead value, capital. The living world is being destroyed by dead capital. This is the death drive of capital. Capitalism is ruled by a *necrophilia* that turns living beings into lifeless things. A fateful dialectic of survival turns the living into the dead: the undead. Erich Fromm writes the following about a world ruled by necrophilia:

The world becomes a sum of lifeless artifacts; from synthetic food to synthetic organs, the whole man becomes part of the total machinery that he controls and is simultaneously controlled by. ... He aspires to make robots as one of the greatest achievements of his technical mind, and some specialists assure us that the robot will hardly be distinguished from living men. This achievement will not seem so astonishing when man himself is hardly distinguishable from a robot. The world of life has become a world of 'no-life'; persons have become 'nonpersons,' a world of death. Death is no

longer symbolically expressed by unpleasant-smelling feces or corpses. Its symbols are now clean, shining machines.¹⁹

Undead, death-free life is reified, mechanical life. *Thus, the goal of immortality can only be achieved at the expense of life.*

The capitalist system represses life, and it can only be ended by death. Baudrillard turns the death drive against Freud, radicalizing the concept such that it comes to denote a revolt against death: 'In a system that orders you to live and to capitalize life, the death drive is the only alternative.'²⁰ By risking death, the revolt of death cracks open the death-negating capitalist system and exposes it to the symbolic exchange with death. For Baudrillard, the *symbolic* is that sphere in which life and death are not yet divided from each other. The symbolic is opposed to the *imaginary* of deathless life. The revolt of death means that the capitalist system is shattered by the symbolic: 'Nothing, not even the system, can avoid the symbolic obligation, and it is in this trap that the only chance of a catastrophe for the system remains. . . . The system must *itself commit suicide in response to the multiplied challenge of death and suicide*.'²¹

The protagonists of Baudrillard's death revolt are suicidal characters of every kind. He even attributes a kind of subversive potential to terrorism. But a suicide bomber opposes the death-negating system with his *real* death. His violent end cannot open up the system to *symbolic* exchange with death. Terrorism is not a counter-image to the capitalist system; it is a phenomenon that is symptomatic of that system. The brutality and emotional coldness of the suicide bomber reflect the brutality and coldness of capitalist society. The attacker has the same psychogram as members of the general population. His suicide is a form of *self-production*, imagined as the ultimate selfie. The pulling of the trigger that detonates the bomb is akin to the push of the camera's button. The suicide

bomber knows that, immediately after the attack, his photograph will circulate in the media, and he will then receive the attention he had previously missed out on. A suicide bomber is a narcissist with an explosive belt. Thus, terrorism can be understood as the ultimate form of authenticity.

The revolt of death cannot unhinge the capitalist system. What is needed is another form of life, one that rescinds the division between life and death and reconnects the two. Every political revolution must be preceded by a revolution of consciousness, one that gives death back to life. The revolution must create an awareness of the fact that life is only truly alive when there is an exchange with death. It must demonstrate that the rejection of death destroys all living presence: 'The war against death takes the form of a preoccupation with the past and the future, and the present tense, the tense of life, is lost.'²²

Death, understood as the biological end of life, is not the only, or only true, form of death. Death can also be understood as a continuous process in which one gradually loses oneself, one's identity, over the course of a lifetime. In this way, death may begin before death. The identity of a subject is a significantly more complex matter than is suggested by the stable name. A subject always keeps diverging from itself. The modern idea of death is based on biological functioning. Death is a matter of a body eventually ceasing to function.

Bataille understands death as an intense form of life. Death gives life intensity. It is an exuberance, excess, extravagance, indulgence, expenditure. Death provokes a rapture that is crucial in erotic experience: 'If love exists at all it is, like death, a swift movement of loss within us.'²³ Bataille opens his treatise *Eroticism* by stating: 'Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death.'²⁴ While Freud opposed Eros to the death drive, Bataille invokes the proximity of death to Eros. If the impulse to live is intensified to the

highest degree, it approaches the impulse to die, although, unlike Freud's death drive, Bataille views the latter impulse as itself an expression of life. The exchange between life and death takes place in the medium of eroticism. As exuberance and expenditure, death represents the principle of an anti-economy. Death has a subversive effect on the capitalist system: 'In a system where life is ruled by value and utility, death becomes a useless luxury, and the only alternative.'²⁵ Eroticism is an adventure of continuity. It breaks with the discontinuity of the isolated individual – the basis of the economy. Eroticism gives the self its death. Death is a *losing-oneself-in-the-other* that puts an end to narcissism.

The organization of capitalism depends on the desires and wishes that are reflected in consumption and production. Passion and intensity are replaced with comfortable feelings and consequence-free excitement. Everything is levelled out to fit the formula of consumption and enjoyment. Any negativity, such as pain, is removed in favour of the positivity of desire satisfaction. Death is the negativity par excellence. The compulsion of production abolishes negativity. Love is also accommodated to the capitalist process; it withers, becoming mere sexual desire. The other becomes just a sexual object for the narcissistic subject to use to satisfy its desire. Once the other is deprived of otherness, it can only be consumed.

By negating death, capitalism follows in the footsteps of metaphysics. Capitalism expresses a materialist metaphysics that strives for infinite capital. Plato already dreamt of a city without the dead. His ideal state rigorously discriminates against the dead. Any arable land, it says in *Laws*, should be free of graves. Graves have to be placed so as not to inconvenience the living. The dead may only be kept in the house for a maximum of three days, and only for as long as is necessary to rule out cases of suspended animation. Plato does not allow the living any symbolic exchange with death. Death is to be

repressed, and the dead are a reminder of death. They are thus treated like waste that must be disposed of swiftly. But life that avoids death as if it were a pollution will suffocate in its own excrement.

Adorno opposes death-negating metaphysics with a form of thought that 'takes up in itself the undiminished, the non-sublimated awareness of death'.²⁶ Our repressed knowledge of death must be made conscious in all its severity. Human consciousness is mortal consciousness. Adorno knew that life that negates death as something purely destructive must itself develop destructive traits, that health is an ideology of capital – an illness, even. The hysteria of survival at all costs disfigures life. Adorno opposes the ugly cancerous growth of undead life with beauty that is innervated by the negativity of death:

Exuberant health is always, as such, sickness also. Its antidote is a sickness aware of what it is, a curbing of life itself. Beauty is such a curative sickness. It arrests life, and therefore its decay. If, however, sickness is rejected for the sake of life, then hypostasized life, in its blind separation from its other moment, becomes the latter, destructiveness and evil, insolence and braggadocio. To hate destructiveness, one must hate life as well: only death is an image of undistorted life.²⁷

Liveliness is friendliness. That life is friendly that is able to die.

Despite his ambivalent relationship with death, Freud is perfectly aware of the necessity of reconciling life with death. The unconscious repression of death must give way to the conscious acceptance of death:

Would it not be better to give death the place in reality and in our thoughts which it is due, and to give a little

more prominence to the unconscious attitude towards death which we have hitherto so carefully suppressed? This hardly seems an advance to higher achievement, but rather in some respects a backward step – a regression; but it has the advantage of taking the truth more into account, and of making life more tolerable for us once again.²⁸

To affirm life means also to affirm death. Life that negates death negates itself. Only a form of life that returns death to life will liberate us from the paradox of undead life: *we are too alive to die, and too dead to live.*

Why Revolution Is Impossible Today

At a recent debate between me and Antonio Negri at the Schaubühne in Berlin, two ways of critiquing capitalism clashed head-on. Negri was enthusiastic about the possibility of global resistance against the 'empire', the ruling neoliberal system. He presented himself as a communist revolutionary and called me a 'sceptical professor'. He emphatically invoked the 'multitude', the networked revolutionary masses and protest groups, apparently in the belief that this multitude could bring down the empire. To me, the revolutionary communist position seemed somewhat naïve and divorced from reality. I thus tried to explain to Negri why revolution is not possible today.

Why is the neoliberal system of rule so stable? Why is there so little resistance to it? Why does any resistance that emerges so quickly dissipate? Why, despite the growing gap between rich and poor, is revolution not possible? In order to explain this, we need a deeper understanding of how power and rule function today.

To establish a new system of rule, one must ensure there is no resistance. This is also true of the neoliberal system of rule. In order to inaugurate a new system of rule, what is needed is a positing power, and this often implies violence. But this positing power is not the same as the power that provides the system with its internal stability. It is well known that Margaret Thatcher, one of the pioneers of neoliberalism, regarded the trade unions as 'the enemy within' and fought violently against them. But this kind of violent assertion of the neoliberal agenda is not what constitutes neoliberalism's system-preserving power.

The system-preserving power of the disciplinary, industrial society was oppressive. Factory workers were brutally exploited by factory owners, and this violent exploitation prompted protest and resistance. In that situation, a revolution that would overturn the ruling relations of production was a possibility. In that system, it was clear who the oppressors, as well as the oppressed, were. There was a concrete opponent, a visible enemy who could serve as the target of resistance.

The neoliberal system of rule is structured in an altogether different fashion. The system-preserving power is no longer oppressive but seductive. It is no longer as clearly visible as it had been under the disciplinary regime. There is no longer a concrete opponent, no one who is taking away the freedom of the people, no oppressor to be resisted.

Out of the oppressed worker, neoliberalism creates the free entrepreneur, the entrepreneur of the self. Today, everyone is a self-exploiting worker in his own enterprise. Everyone is both master and slave. The class struggle has been transformed into an internal struggle against oneself. Those who fail blame themselves and feel ashamed. People see themselves, rather than society, as the problem.

Disciplinary power, attempting to control people by force,

by subjecting them to a dense matrix of orders and prohibitions, is inefficient. Much more efficient is that technique of power that ensures that people subordinate themselves to the system of rule voluntarily. The exceptional efficiency of this technique derives from the fact that it does not work through prohibition and deprivation but through pleasure and fulfilment. Instead of making people docile, it tries to make them dependent. This neoliberal logic of efficiency also applies to surveillance. In the 1980s, people still protested en masse against the census. Even schoolchildren took to the streets.

From today's perspective, the information requested by the census – profession, qualifications, how far one lives from one's workplace – seem almost risibly innocuous. There was a time when people felt themselves to be confronting a state, a ruling institution, that was trying to wrest information from its citizens. That time has long since passed. Today, we expose ourselves voluntarily. It is precisely this felt freedom that makes protest impossible. Unlike those protesting against the census in the eighties, we do not significantly resist surveillance. Voluntary self-disclosure and self-exposure follow the same principle of efficiency as voluntary self-exploitation. Against what should we protest? Against ourselves? The American conceptual artist Jenny Holzer expresses this paradoxical situation in one of her 'truisms' thus: 'Protect me from what I want.'

It is important to make a distinction between positing and preserving power. System-preserving power has now taken on a smart, friendly form, and it has thereby become invisible and unassailable. The subordinated subject is not even aware of its subordination. It believes itself to be free. This technology of rule is a highly efficient way of neutralizing resistance. Forms of rule that oppress people and undermine freedom are unstable. What makes the neoliberal regime so stable, so impervious to resistance, is that it makes use of freedom

instead of suppressing it. Restricting freedom quickly provokes resistance. Exploiting freedom does not.

Following the financial crisis in Asia, South Korea was paralysed and in shock. Then the IMF came along and provided a bailout. In return, the government had to implement neoliberal reforms, and to use force against the resulting protests. This kind of oppressive power is positing power, and it often involves the use of force. But this positing power differs from system-preserving power, which, in the case of the neoliberal regime, presents itself as a form of freedom. According to Naomi Klein, the state of shock that societies like South Korea and Greece find themselves in after catastrophes such as the financial crisis are the perfect opportunity to forcibly subject these countries to radical reprogramming. In South Korea, there is no longer any real resistance to these measures. Instead, one finds high levels of conformism and consensus – together with depression and burnout. South Korea currently has the highest suicide rate in the world. Instead of seeking to change society, people use violence against themselves. The outward aggression that might have provided a basis for revolution has instead given way to auto-aggression.

There is no cooperative, networked multitude that could serve as a global protest movement and revolutionary body. Rather, the current form of production is based on the solitary, isolated, disconnected entrepreneur of the self. It used to be the case that, although enterprises competed with each other, there was solidarity within each enterprise. Today, everyone is in competition with everyone else, even within a single enterprise. This universal competition may lead to an enormous increase in productivity, but it destroys solidarity and the sense of community. You cannot form a revolutionary mass out of depressive, disconnected individuals.

Neoliberalism cannot be explained in Marxist terms. It

does not even exhibit the famous 'alienation' from work. We throw ourselves enthusiastically into our work until we burn out. The enthusiasm is, in fact, the first stage of burnout. Burnout and revolution are mutually exclusive. It is therefore wrong to believe that the multitude will throw off the parasitic empire and establish a communist society.

What is the state of play regarding communism today? Everywhere there is talk of 'sharing' and 'community'. The sharing economy is supposed to be replacing the economy of property and ownership. 'Sharing is caring': this is one of the maxims of the 'circleers' in Dave Eggers's novel *The Circle*. The cobblestones on the way to the headquarters of the Circle company are interspersed with tiles bearing slogans such as 'Find Community' and 'Participate'. But really the slogan should be 'Caring is Killing'. The digital ride-sharing platform WunderCar, which seeks to turn every one of us into a taxi driver, makes use of the idea of 'community' in its advertising. But the advent of the sharing economy does not herald the end of capitalism or the creation of a more communal global society in which sharing is valued above ownership, as Jeremy Rifkin claims in his book *The Zero Marginal Cost Society*.¹ On the contrary, the sharing economy ultimately leads to the commercialization of all aspects of life.

The transition from ownership to 'access', which Rifkin celebrates, does not liberate us from capitalism. Whoever lacks money also lacks access to sharing. Even in the age of access, we are still living within the 'ban-opticon'; those without money are still excluded.² Airbnb, the community marketplace that encourages people to turn their homes into hotels, even economizes human hospitality. The ideology of community, or of a collaborative commons, leads to the total commodification of community. Simple, purposeless friendliness becomes impossible. In a society in which everyone rates everyone else, friendliness is commercialized. People become

friendlier in order to receive better ratings. Even at the very heart of the collaborative economy, the relentless logic of capitalism still rules. Paradoxically, despite all this wonderful 'sharing', no one gives anything away. Once it begins to sell communism itself as a commodity, capitalism has reached its culmination. Communism as a commodity: that spells the end of any revolution.

The Total Exploitation of the Human Being

'Customer lifetime value' is the term used to describe the value a human being represents for a company over the course of a lifetime. Underlying this concept is the intention of transforming the whole of the human being's life into commercial value. Today's hypercapitalism transforms all of human existence into a network of commercial relations. There is no area of life that can escape commercialization.

The increasing digitization of society makes the commercial exploitation of human life easier, expanding and accelerating the process. It subjects areas of life that were previously inaccessible to economic exploitation. What is necessary today, therefore, is the creation of new areas of life, even new forms of life, that resist the total commercial exploitation of human life.

Apple's flagship store in New York is in every respect a temple to hypercapitalism. It is a cube made entirely of glass. Inside, it is empty. It thus represents nothing but its own transparency. The actual shop is located in the

basement. The building is the principle of transparency made material.

The translucent Apple store is perhaps the architectural counter-image of the Ka'bah in Mecca, with its black curtain, the Kiswah. Ka'bah literally means 'cube'. The black building is not at all transparent. The cube is also empty. It represents a theological order that stands in opposition to the hypercapitalist order.

The Apple store and the Ka'bah represent two different forms of rule. The transparent cube is meant to represent freedom. It symbolizes limitless communication. But this transparency is itself a form of rule, one that, today, takes the form of a digital totalitarianism. The transparent cube announces a new rule: the rule of hypercapitalism. It symbolizes today's total communication, which is gradually coming to mean total surveillance and total exploitation.

The Ka'bah is closed. Only priests have access to the inside of the building. The transparent cube, by contrast, is open 24/7. Anyone may enter it as a customer. Here we have two different ruling orders: rule by closure and rule by opening. The latter is more efficient than the former, however, because it pretends to offer freedom. The glass cube is hypercapitalism's celebration of a hypercommunication that pervades, exposes and monetizes everything. Here, with the transparent cube atop the shop in the basement, communication, commercialism and consumption coincide.

Global companies collect data on consumer behaviour, marital status, profession, preferences, hobbies, living conditions and income. The algorithms they use do not differ significantly from those of the US National Security Agency.

The world-as-department-store turns out to be a digital panopticon that subjects us to total surveillance. Total exploitation and total surveillance are two sides of the same coin. The marketing company Acxiom divides people into seventy

economic categories. The group of people with the lowest value as customers are called 'waste'.

Big Data makes it possible to predict human behaviour. The future can thus be calculated and manipulated. Big Data turns out to be a highly efficient psychopolitical instrument that allows one to manipulate other human beings like marionettes. Big Data produces a sort of knowledge that facilitates mastery over others, making it possible to intervene in and influence the human psyche without the person noticing. Digital psychopolitics degrades the human person into an object that is quantifiable and controllable. Big Data thus heralds the end of the free will.

Sovereign is he, the jurist of constitutional law Carl Schmitt wrote, who decides on the exception.¹ Much later, he revised his famous statement: 'After the Second World War, and facing my death, I now say: "Sovereign is he who decides on the [distribution of] waves in space."² Carl Schmitt apparently spent his life afraid of the manipulative effects of radio and television. Today, in the age of the digital regime, the statement on sovereignty would have to be revised yet again: sovereign is he who decides on the flow of data in the network.

Digital interconnectedness allows for every aspect of a person to be rated and exposed. This sort of personalized data collection presents considerable risk, and so it must be strictly regulated. The activities of credit scoring companies such as Schufa also have a discriminatory effect.³ The economic evaluation of a person contradicts the idea of human dignity. No one should be degraded into an object of algorithmic evaluation.

The ulterior motives that drive Schufa, an institution whose quasi-holy status is taken for granted in Germany, may be inferred from the fact that, some time ago, the company had the idea that it could garner useful information by

trawling through people's social media posts. Their advertising slogan – 'We create trust' – is pure cynicism.

Companies like Schufa destroy all trust and replace it with control. To trust someone means that I maintain a positive relationship with him despite my relative ignorance about him. Trust enables me to act in the absence of knowledge. If I already know everything about a person, trust is redundant. Schufa processes more than 200,000 queries every day. That is only possible in a control society. A society based on trust would not need companies such as Schufa.

To trust someone implies the possibility that one's trust will turn out to have been unfounded, that is, the possibility of betrayal. But the possibility of betrayal is constitutive of trust itself. Freedom also implies a certain risk. A society that submits everything to control and surveillance in the name of security becomes totalitarian.

In the face of the growing threat of digital totalitarianism, the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, recently urged states to formulate a charter of fundamental rights for the digital age.⁴ The former minister of the interior Gerhard Baum also demanded a comprehensive reduction in data collection and processing – a data disarmament.

What are needed now are new and radical approaches to avoiding data totalitarianism. Technological fixes to ensure that personal data is automatically deleted after a certain amount of time should also be sought. This would lead to a thoroughgoing data disarmament, something we sorely need in these times of data frenzy.

By itself, a charter of fundamental digital rights will not be enough to prevent data totalitarianism. We must also bring about a change in consciousness and mindset. We are not simply inmates or victims of a digital panopticon that is controlled from elsewhere.

The original panopticon was Jeremy Bentham's design for

a type of prison. The prisoners are housed in an outer ring and observed from a central tower inside the ring. In the digital version of the panopticon, we are not simply imprisoned. Rather, we are active participants. We take part in building the digital panopticon. By exposing ourselves, by hooking ourselves up and voluntarily uploading our body-related data to the net, like the millions of devotees of the 'quantified self' movement, we actually maintain the digital panopticon. This new form of rule does not force us to be silent. Rather, it constantly asks us to communicate, to participate, to express our opinions, desires, wishes and preferences – even to narrate our lives.

In the 1980s, everyone in Germany was up in arms about the census. An office was even bombed. Even pupils took to the streets. There were mass demonstrations.

From today's vantage point, this reaction seems incomprehensible. The information requested was innocuous – one's profession, qualifications, marital status and the distance between one's home and workplace. Today, we do not object when hundreds and thousands of sets of data related to us are collected, stored, passed on and sold. No one is up in arms about it. There are no mass protests against Google or Facebook.

During the census protests, people felt that the state, the ruling institution, was attempting to scrutinize them against their will. Those days are long gone. Today, we voluntarily expose ourselves, without the need for any pressure or official decree. We put all sorts of data and information about ourselves online voluntarily, without knowing who knows what, and when, about us.

The lack of control over our data represents a serious crisis for freedom. Such is the quantity of the data we now produce that the concept of data protection has become obsolete. We are now not just the victims of state surveillance but active elements of the system. We voluntarily surrender protected

private spaces and expose ourselves to pervasive digital networks that scrutinize us.

As a new form of production, digital communication seeks to dismantle protected spaces and transform everything into information and data. Through this process, all protective distance is lost. In the context of digital hypercommunication, everything is mixed up with everything else. The borders between inside and outside become more and more permeable. Humans become interfaces within a totally interconnected world. Hypercapitalism furthers and exploits this digital defencelessness.

We must ask ourselves, very seriously, what kind of life we want to live. Do we want to continue to give ourselves up to total surveillance and total exploitation, and thus forfeit our freedom and our dignity? It is time to organize a collective resistance to the looming digital totalitarianism. Georg Büchner's words are as relevant as they ever were: 'We are puppets, our strings are pulled by unknown forces; we ourselves are nothing, nothing!'⁵

Inside the Digital Panopticon

Today, everything is 'smart'. Soon we shall live in smart cities, where everything – yes, everything, without exception – will be interconnected: not only humans but also things. We will receive emails not only from friends but also from household appliances, domestic animals and the food in our fridge. All this will be made possible by the internet of things. In the smart city, we will all walk around with Google glasses. Everywhere and at every moment we will be provided with useful information, without having to ask for it. We will be guided to the restaurant, to the bar, to the concert hall. The data glasses will also take decisions for us. In combination with a dating app, they will even bring us more success and efficiency in matters of love and sex.

Data glasses will scan our visual field for useful information. We will all become happy hunters of information, and in the process we will adopt the perspective of the hunter. Areas of our visual field that are not likely to contain information will be ignored. Contemplative lingering, dwelling

Byung-Chul Han
The Palliative Society
Pain Today

Translated by Daniel Steuer

polity

Of all the corporeal feelings, pain alone is like a navigable river which never dries up and which leads man down to the sea. Pleasure, in contrast, turns out to be a dead end, wherever man tries to follow its lead.

Walter Benjamin*

Algophobia

*Tell me your relation to pain, and I will tell you who you are!*¹

This line from Ernst Jünger can be applied to society as a whole. Our relation to pain reveals what kind of society we are. Pain is a cipher. It contains the key to understanding any society. Every critique of society must therefore provide a hermeneutics of pain. If pain is left to medicine, we neglect its character as a sign.

Today, a universal *algophobia* rules: a generalized fear of pain. The ability to tolerate pain is rapidly diminishing. The consequence of this algophobia is a *permanent anaesthesia*. All painful conditions are avoided. Even the pain of love is treated as suspect. This algophobia extends into society. Less and less space is given to conflicts and controversies that might prompt painful discussions. Algophobia also takes hold of politics. The pressure to conform and to reach consensus intensifies. Politics

accommodates itself to the demands of this palliative zone and loses all vitality. 'There is no alternative': this is a *political analgesia*. The vague 'centre ground' has a palliative effect. Instead of argument and competition over the better ideas, there is a surrender to systemic compulsion. Post-democracy, *palliative democracy*, is spreading. This is why Chantal Mouffe demands an 'agonistic politics' that does not shy away from debate.² Palliative politics is incapable of implementing *radical* reforms that might be painful. It prefers quick-acting analgesics, which only mask systemic dysfunctionality and distortion. Palliative politics lacks the *courage to endure pain*. So all we get is more of the same.

Today's algophobia is based on a paradigm shift. We live in a society of positivity that tries to extinguish any form of negativity. Pain is negativity par excellence. This paradigm shift is also present in psychology, where there has been a movement away from a negative 'psychology of suffering' and towards a 'positive psychology' concerned with well-being, happiness and optimism.³ Negative thoughts are to be avoided. They should immediately be replaced with positive ones. Positive psychology subjects even pain to a logic of performance. For the neoliberal ideology of resilience, traumatic experiences should be seen as catalysts that increase performance. There is even talk of 'post-traumatic growth'.⁴ The idea that we should build our resilience in order to increase our psychological strength has turned the human being into a permanently happy subject of performance, a subject as insensitive to pain as it is possible to be.

There is a relationship between the 'Mission Happiness' of positive psychology and the promise that

one can live a life of permanent drug-induced well-being. The US opioid crisis is emblematic in this context. This crisis is not just a matter of the greed of pharmaceutical companies. Rather, its foundation is a fateful assumption regarding human existence. Only an ideology of permanent well-being could have brought it about that a medication originally for use in palliative medicine could have been administered on a mass scale to healthy individuals. It is no coincidence that an American expert on pain, David B. Morris, remarked decades ago: 'Americans today probably belong to the first generation on earth that looks at a pain-free life as something like a constitutional right. Pain is a scandal.'⁵

The palliative society and the performance society coincide. Pain is interpreted as a *sign of weakness*. It is something to be hidden or removed through self-optimization. It is not compatible with performance. The *passivity of suffering* has no place in an active society dominated by ability. Today, pain cannot be expressed. It is condemned to be *mute*. The palliative society does not permit pain to be enlivened into a *passion*, to be given a language.

The palliative society is also the society of the *like* [*Gefällt-mir*], increasingly a society characterized by a mania for *liking*. Everything is smoothed out until it becomes agreeable and well-liked. The *like* is the signature, even the *analgesia*, of *the present*. It dominates not only social media but all areas of culture. Nothing is meant to cause pain. Not just art but life itself should be *instagrammable*, that is, free of rough edges, of conflicts or contradictions that could cause pain. What has been forgotten is that *pain purifies*. It has a cathartic effect. The culture of the likeable and the agreeable lacks any

opportunities for *catharsis*. We are thus suffocated by the *residues of positivity* which accumulate beneath the surface of the culture of likes.

A report on an auction of modern and contemporary art reads: 'Whether Monet or Koons, whether Modigliani's popular reclining nudes, Picasso's female figures, or Rothko's sublime colour-block paintings – even, at the top end of the market, excessively restored pseudo-Leonardo trophies – apparently all these need to be assignable upon first sight to a (male) artist and to be so likeable as to border on the banal. At least now a female artist has begun to break into this circle: Louise Bourgeois set a new record for a gigantic sculpture – thirty-two million for her work from the nineties, *Spider*. Even a gigantic spider can apparently be more decorative than threatening.¹⁶ In the works of Ai Weiwei, even morality is presented in such a way as to inspire *likes*. Morality and likeability enter into a happy symbiosis. Dissidence decays into design. Jeff Koons, by contrast, creates *like*-worthy art that is morality-free, and ostentatiously decorative. The only adequate response to his artworks, as he himself states, is 'Wow'.¹⁷

Art today is vehemently forced into the straitjacket of the *like*. The old masters are not spared by this anaesthetization of art either. They are even linked up with fashion design: 'The exhibition of selected portraits was accompanied by a video demonstrating how well historical paintings by, for instance, Lucas Cranach the Elder or Peter Paul Rubens could be colour matched with contemporary designer clothes. And of course the video did not fail to mention that historical portraits are a precursor of today's selfies.¹⁸

The culture of likeability has manifold causes. First of all it follows from the economization and commodification of culture. Cultural products have increasingly become subject to the compulsion of consumption. They have to assume a form that makes them consumable, that is, likeable. This economization of culture runs in parallel with the culturalization of the economy. Consumer goods come to bear a cultural surplus value. They promise cultural and aesthetic experiences. Design therefore becomes more important than use value. The sphere of consumption enters into the artistic sphere. Consumer goods are presented as works of art, and this leads to a mingling of the artistic and consumer spheres which, in turn, means that the arts come to draw upon the aesthetics of consumption. Art becomes likeable. The economization of culture and the culturalization of the economy are mutually reinforcing. The walls between culture and commerce, between art and consumption, between art and advertisement, break down. Artists are forced to become brands. They begin to conform to the market, to be likeable. The culturalization of the economy also affects production. Post-industrial, immaterial production incorporates artistic forms of production. It has to be *creative*. But creativity as an economic strategy only permits *variations of the same*. It does not have access to what is *wholly other*. It lacks the *negativity* of a break which hurts. Pain and commerce are mutually exclusive.

When the cultural sphere was sharply delineated from the sphere of consumption, when it followed its own logic, it was not expected to be likeable. Artists steered clear of commerce. Adorno's catchphrase about art's '[f]oreignness to the world' was still valid.¹⁹ Art that aims to

serve human well-being is, accordingly, a contradiction. Art must be able to alienate, irritate, disturb, and, yes, even to be painful. It dwells *somewhere else*. It is *at home in what is foreign*. It is just this foreignness that accounts for the aura of the artwork. Pain is the tear through which the wholly other can enter. It is precisely negativity that enables art to provide a counter-narrative to the dominant order. Likeability, by contrast, perpetuates the same.

'Goosebumps', Adorno says, are 'the first aesthetic image'.¹⁰ They express the dawn of the other. A consciousness that is unable to shudder is a reified consciousness. It is incapable of *experience*, for experience 'is in essence the suffering in which the essential otherness of beings reveals itself in opposition to the tried and usual'.¹¹ A life that rejects all pain is also reified. Only 'the act of being touched by the other' keeps life alive.¹² Or else it remains a captive in the *hell of the same*.

The Compulsion of Happiness

Pain is a complex cultural structure. Its presence and meaning within society depend on forms of rule. The pre-modern society of torture had an intimate relationship with pain. Its dreams of power were, in fact, filled with cries of pain. Pain served as a means of rule. The grim festival, the cruel rituals of torture, the glamorous staging of pain – they all stabilize the ruling power. Tortured bodies are insignia of power.

In the course of the transition from torture to the disciplinary society, the attitude to pain changed. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault points out that the disciplinary society uses pain in more discreet forms, subjecting it to a disciplinary calculation: 'Punishment of a less immediately physical kind, a certain discretion in the art of inflicting pain, a combination of more subtle, more subdued sufferings, deprived of their visible display, should not all this

he treated as a special case, an incidental effect of deeper changes? And yet the fact remains that a few decades saw the disappearance of the tortured, dismembered, amputated body, symbolically branded on face or shoulder, exposed alive or dead to public view. The body as the major target of penal repression disappeared.¹ Tortured bodies are no longer appropriate in a disciplinary society oriented towards industrial production. Disciplinary power manufactures docile bodies as means of production. Pain, too, is integrated into techniques of discipline. The ruling powers continue to maintain a relationship with pain. Through the use of pain, orders and prohibitions are engraved in the mind of the obedient subject, even implanted in its body. In the disciplinary society, pain plays a constructive role. It *forms* the human being into a means of production. But pain is no longer displayed publicly; it is moved to closed disciplinary spaces, such as prisons, military barracks, institutions, factories, or schools.

The disciplinary society has a fundamentally affirmative relationship with pain. Jünger describes discipline as 'the way man maintains contact with pain'.² Jünger's 'worker', in particular, is a disciplinary figure. He hardens in his encounters with pain. In the heroic life which 'strives incessantly to stay in contact with pain', one aims at 'hardening oneself like steel'.³ The 'disciplined face' is 'closed; it possesses clear direction'. But the 'delicate face' of a sensitive individual is 'nervous, pliant, changing, and open to the most diverse kinds of influences and impulses'.⁴

Pain is a necessary element of the heroic picture of the world. In his futurist manifesto 'Counterpain', Aldo

Palazzeschi writes: 'The more laughter one can discover in pain, the more profound one is. One cannot laugh truly without having first dug into the depths of human pain.'⁵ According to the heroic worldview, life must be arranged in such a way that it is 'armed' against pain. The body, as the place where pain occurs, is subjugated to a higher order: 'Of course, this presupposes a command center, which regards the body as a distant outpost that can be deployed and sacrificed in battle.'⁶

Jünger juxtaposes heroic discipline with the sensitivity of the bourgeois subject, whose body is not an outpost, not a means for a higher purpose. The bourgeois subject's sensitive body is, rather, an end in itself. It has lost the horizon of meaning that made pain appear as something endowed with meaning: 'The secret of modern sensitivity is that it corresponds to a world in which the body is itself the highest value. This observation explains why modern sensitivity relates to pain as a power to be avoided at all cost, because here pain confronts the body not as an outpost but as the main force and essential core of life itself.'⁷

In the post-industrial and post-heroic age, the body is neither outpost nor means of production. Unlike the disciplinary body, the hedonistic body, which likes and enjoys itself without any relation to a higher purpose, develops a hostile attitude towards pain. To the hedonistic body, pain appears wholly senseless and without purpose.

Today's performance subject differs fundamentally from the disciplinary subject. Nor is it a 'worker' in Jünger's sense. In the neoliberal performance society, negativities, such as orders, prohibitions and punishments, give way to positivities, such as motivation, self-optimization

and self-realization. Disciplinary spaces are replaced with zones of well-being. Pain loses any connection with power and rule. It is depoliticized, and becomes merely a matter for medicine.

Be happy is the new formula of rule. The positivity of happiness pushes aside the negativity of pain. Happiness is employed as positive emotional capital to ensure that individuals possess a permanent capacity to perform. The neoliberal dispositif of happiness is highly efficient because the principles of self-motivation and self-optimization allow for almost effortless domination. The subjugated are not even aware of their subjugation. They think they are free. They exploit themselves, without the need for any external compulsion, and in doing so they believe that they are realizing themselves. Freedom is not curtailed but exploited. The appeal to '*be free*' produces a compulsion that is far more devastating than the injunction '*be obedient*'.

Within the neoliberal regime, even power appears in a positive form. It becomes *smart*. In contrast to repressive disciplinary power, smart power does not cause pain. *Power becomes altogether decoupled from pain*. It can do without repression. Subjugation takes place through self-optimization and self-realization. Smart power operates in seductive and permissive ways. Because it parades itself as freedom, it is less obvious than repressive disciplinary power. Surveillance also takes on a smart form. We are constantly asked to communicate our needs, wishes and preferences – to tell our life stories. Total communication, total surveillance, pornographic exposure and panoptic surveillance coincide. Freedom and surveillance become indistinguishable.

The neoliberal dispositif of happiness distracts us from the actually existing form of domination by forcing us into psychological introspection. It ensures that all are preoccupied with their own psyches rather than interested in critically questioning their social conditions. The suffering society creates is privatized and psychologized. What must be fixed, some would have us believe, are not social but psychological conditions. In fact, the call for psychological optimization is a way of adapting us to the existing form of domination and veiling social ills. Thus, positive psychology marks the *end of revolution*. Instead of revolutionaries we have motivational speakers, who come on the scene in order to ensure that no anger, or even discontent, arises: 'On the eve of the Great Depression, in the highly polarized 1920s, there had been plenty of labor organizers and radical activists around to rail about the excesses of the rich and the misery of the poor. In the twenty-first century, a very different and more numerous breed of ideologues promulgated the opposite message – that all was well with our deeply unequal society and, for those willing to make the effort, about to get much, much better. The motivators and other purveyors of positive thinking had good news for people facing economic ruin from the constant churning of the job market: embrace "change", no matter how terrifying; grasp it as an opportunity.'⁸

In our absolute determination to combat pain we also forget that pain is *socially mediated*. Pain is a reflection of socio-economic distortions which leave psychological as well as physical traces. Analgesics, prescribed by the dozen, mask the social conditions that create the pain in the first place. The strictly medical and pharmacological

treatment of pain prevents pain from becoming *eloquent*, even *critical*. It deprives pain of its character as an object, as something social. The palliative society immunizes itself against criticism through medically induced numbness or numbness produced through media consumption. Social media and computer games have an anaesthetic effect. Permanent social anaesthesia prevents insight and reflection; it even represses the *truth*. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes: 'The need to lend voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience is objectively mediated.'⁹

The dispositif of happiness isolates us. It leads to the depoliticization of society and the disappearance of solidarity. Each person has to look after his or her own happiness. Happiness becomes a private matter. Suffering is understood to be the result of personal failure. *Instead of revolution we thus get depression*. Working on our own soul as best we can, we lose sight of the social relations that lead to social malformations. Tortured by fear and anxiety, we blame not society but ourselves. The catalyst for revolution, however, is *shared pain*. The neoliberal dispositif of happiness nips it in the bud. The palliative society *depoliticizes* pain by *medicalizing* and *privatizing* it. The *social dimension of pain* is thus suppressed and repressed. Chronic pain, a *pathological phenomenon of the burnout society*, does not give rise to protest. In the neoliberal society, tiredness is apolitical. It is a *tiredness-of-the-I*, a symptom of the overstretching of the narcissistic subject of performance. Tiredness isolates us instead of binding us together into a *We*. *I-tiredness* must be distinguished from *We-tiredness*, which is the product

of a community. *I-tiredness* is the best defence against revolution.

The neoliberal dispositif of happiness reifies happiness. Happiness is not just a collection of positive feelings that promises enhanced performance. It cannot be captured by the logic of optimization. What characterizes happiness is the fact that it is not at one's disposal. Inherent in it is a certain negativity. True happiness is only possible as *fractured*. What stops happiness becoming reified is precisely pain, and pain gives happiness endurance. Pain *bears* happiness. *Painful happiness* is not an oxymoron. Any *intensity* is painful. *Passion* binds pain and happiness together. Deep happiness contains a moment of suffering. Pain and happiness, as Nietzsche says, 'are two siblings and twins who either grow up together or . . . remain small together.'¹⁰ Where pain is suppressed, happiness is attenuated, becoming a dull contentment. Those who are unreceptive to pain close themselves off from deep happiness. The one who is open to pain Nietzsche describes as follows: 'The plethora of *kinds of suffering* falls down like an infinite blizzard on such a human being, just as the strongest lightning flashes of pain discharge on him. Only in this condition – always open to pain from all sides and down to the deepest level – can he be open to the subtlest and highest kinds of happiness. . . .'¹¹

Survival

The virus is the mirror image of our society. It shows us what kind of society we have. Today, survival has an absolute value, as if we were in a state of permanent war. All the forces of life are used for the prolongation of life. The palliative society turns out to be a society of survival. In the pandemic, the bitter fight for survival is subjected to a viral intensification. The virus enters the palliative zone of well-being and turns it into a quarantine zone in which *life is completely paralysed into survival*. The more life becomes survival, the greater the fear of death. Algophobia is ultimately thanatophobia. The pandemic makes death, which we had carefully repressed and set aside, visible again. The prominence of death in the mass media makes people nervous.

The society of survival has no sense of the *good life*. Even enjoyment is sacrificed in the pursuit of health as an

end in itself. Strict smoking bans exemplify this hysterical pursuit of survival. Enjoyment must give way to survival. Everywhere, the prolongation of life at any cost is the preeminent value, in comparison to which all others must take second place. We are prepared to sacrifice everything that makes life worth living for the sake of survival. In the face of the pandemic, even the restriction of fundamental rights has been accepted without so much as a question being asked. We comply willingly with the state of exception that reduces life to bare life. In the viral state of exception, we voluntarily lock ourselves in quarantine. Quarantine is a viral variant of the camp in which bare life reigns.¹ In the pandemic, the neoliberal labour camp is called the 'home office'. The only difference between the home office and the labour camps of despotic regimes is that, in the former, the ideology of health and the paradoxical freedom of self-exploitation reign.

Because of the pandemic, the society of survival has prohibited church services, even at Easter. Priests, too, practise 'social distancing' and wear protective masks. They sacrifice faith entirely to survival. Neighbourly love is expressed, paradoxically, by keeping one's distance from one's neighbour, who is a potential carrier of the virus. Virology deprives theology of its power. Everyone is listening to the virologists, who have acquired absolute authority in interpreting the situation. The narrative of resurrection has completely given way to the ideology of health and survival. Faced with the virus, faith degenerates into farce. It is replaced with intensive care units and respirators. The dead are counted daily. Death reigns supreme over life, drains it, and thus turns it into survival.

The mania for survival makes life radically transient.

Life is reduced to a biological process that must be optimized. It loses any *meta-physical* dimension. Self-tracking acquires the status of a cult. Digital hypochondria, constant self-measurement with the aid of health and fitness apps, degrades life into a mere *function*. Life is divested of any narrative that could give it meaning. Life is no longer a matter of what can be *recounted* but a matter of what can be *counted, measured*. Life becomes bare, even obscene. There is nothing that promises to endure. All those symbols, narratives, and rituals that made life something more than mere survival have faded into oblivion. Cultural practices such as the worship of ancestors gave vitality even to the dead. Life and death were combined in symbolic exchange. Because we have completely lost those life-stabilizing cultural practices, the mania for survival reigns. Today, we find it particularly difficult to die, for it is no longer possible to find a way of bringing life to a meaningful closure. Life ends in non-time. Whoever cannot die at the right time must perish in non-time.* We age without becoming *old*.

Capitalism lacks a narrative of the good life. It elevates survival to an absolute value. Capitalism is nourished by the unconscious thought that more capital means less death. Capital is accumulated against death. It is imagined as a *capacity* [*Vermögen**] for survival.² Because life is finite, we accumulate capital time. The pandemic is a shock to capitalism, but it has not suspended it. It does not provide a narrative to counter that of capitalism. There will not have been a viral revolution. Capitalist production has not been decelerated; it has been forced to stop. There has been a nervous pause. The lockdown has not brought about leisure but enforced inactivity. It has not provided

space for *lingering*. It is not true that the pandemic has meant health being prioritized over the economy. The entire economy of growth and performance itself aims at survival.

The fight for survival must be juxtaposed with an interest in the *good life*. A society that is gripped by the mania for survival is a society of the undead. We are too alive to die, and too dead to live. Our overriding concern with survival we have in common with the virus, this undead being which only proliferates, that is, survives without actually living.

The palliative society is a society of positivity. It is characterized by an *unlimited permissiveness*. Diversity, community and sharing are its catchwords. The *other*, as the *enemy*, is made to disappear. The accelerating circulation of information and capital reaches terminal velocity when there is no longer any immunological resistance from the other. Transitions thus become mere passages. Boundaries are removed. Thresholds are torn down. The immunological resistance to the other is radically weakened.

The immunologically organized society is surrounded by fences and walls, as in the time of the Cold War. Space is divided into *blobs* that are separated from each other. But such immunological barriers slow down the circulation of commodities and capital. Globalization, which was given a massive boost following the end of the Cold War, is a process of de-immunization which dismantles all barriers in order to accelerate the flow of commodities and capital. The immunological effect of the negativity of the enemy has no place in the constitution of the neo-liberal performance society. In this society, war is waged

first of all against oneself. Exploitation by others gives way to self-exploitation.

The appearance of the virus has triggered an immunological crisis. It has intruded into an immunologically weakened, permissive society, causing a shock-induced paralysis. In a panic, borders are closed again. Spaces are separated off from each other. Movement and contact are radically limited. The whole society returns to *the mode of immunological defence*. What we are witnessing is the *return of the enemy*. We are waging war against the virus, the invisible enemy.

The effects of the pandemic are similar to those of terrorism: terrorism also triggers an overwhelming immune response by throwing naked death at bare life. At airports everyone is treated like a potential terrorist. At airports we endure, without protest, the most humiliating security measures. We allow ourselves to be frisked for concealed weapons. The virus is a terror in the air. Everyone is suspected of being a potential carrier of the virus, and this leads to a quarantine society, which, in turn, will lead to a biopolitical surveillance regime. The pandemic does not promise a different form of life. In the war against the virus, life is more than ever a matter of mere survival. The virus only intensifies our mania for survival.

The Meaninglessness of Pain

A chief characteristic of the contemporary experience of pain is that it is perceived as meaningless. We no longer possess a meaningful context within which to find support and orientation when faced with pain. We have completely lost the *art of suffering pain*. Medicalization and pharmacology destroy all 'cultural programs for dealing with pain'.¹ Pain has become a meaningless evil that must be fought with analgesia. As purely physical agony, it lies completely outside the *symbolic order*.

Paul Valéry's Monsieur Teste represents the modern, sensitive bourgeois subject who experiences pain as meaningless, as purely physical agony. He has completely lost the Christian narrative which once served as a kind of divine narcotic or stimulant. 'Pain has no meaning.'² With this short sentence, Valéry expresses an unbearable thought that weighs on us as heavily as the death of God.

The human being has lost a narrative protection, and thus also the ability to alleviate pain symbolically. Without this protection, we are at the mercy of a naked body deprived of meaning and language: "This terse sentence marks the historical endpoint of a development during which pain was removed from its cultural codification. For the first time, pain presents itself as something that resists meaning. It was only possible to formulate such a sentence after an enormous amount of demolition work had already taken place. In the course of the nineteenth century, physiologists and anatomists seem to have removed Christian semantics from the cultural body for good. Valéry's sentence belongs to the vicinity of Nietzsche's catchphrase "God is dead." With these sentences, the coldness of the cosmos penetrates our bones."¹³

For Monsieur Teste, pain cannot be narrated. It destroys language. Where the pain begins, his sentences break off. Its existence is registered only by the ellipses: "Ah-h-h!" He was in pain. . . . "It's nothing . . . much," he said. . . . "Wait . . . I count grains of sand . . . and so long as I can see them . . . my increasing pain forces me to notice it. I think about it! Waiting only to hear my cry . . . and the moment I hear it, the object, the terrible object, smaller and still smaller, vanishes from my inner sight . . .".¹⁴

Confronted with pain, Monsieur Teste falls silent. Pain robs him of his language. It destroys his world, traps him in his mute body. The Christian mystic Teresa of Ávila might be presented as a counter-image to Monsieur Teste. For her, pain is highly articulate. It is with pain that narration begins. The Christian narrative gives pain a language. It also transforms her body into a stage. Pain

deepens the relationship with God; it creates intimacy, intensity. It is even an erotic process. A holy eroticism transforms pain into lust: "I saw in his [the angel's] hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away; nor is the soul content with less than God. The pain is not bodily but spiritual, although the body doesn't fail to share in some of it, and even a great deal."¹⁵

According to Freud, pain is a symptom that points to a block in someone's personal story. Because of this block, the patient is not able to continue his or her story. Psychogenic pain is an expression of buried, repressed words. The word becomes *thing-like*. The therapy consists in the liberation of the person from this linguistic block, a liberation that makes the person's story fluid again. Monsieur Teste's pain is a '*thing*', a '*terrible object*' that escapes narration.* Without a past or future, it rests in the mute present of the body: "When the pain suddenly invades, it does not illuminate a past: it only illuminates the present areas of the body. It causes a local echo . . . It thus reduces consciousness to a brief present, to a constricted moment deprived of its future horizon . . . Here we are as far away from any kind of history as it is possible to be. . . ."¹⁶

Pain has now become *reified* into a purely bodily agony.

The meaninglessness of pain cannot be understood as straightforwardly emancipatory, as, for instance, freeing pain from theological pressure. Rather, the meaninglessness of pain points to the fact that our life – having been reduced to a biological process – is *itself empty of meaning*. Meaningful pain requires a narrative which situates life within a meaningful horizon. Meaningless pain is only possible within a bare life empty of meaning – within a life that *no longer narrates*.

In *Thought Figures*, Benjamin talks about those healing hands whose unusual movements give the impression of *telling a story*. Stories are the source of a healing power: "The child is sick. His mother puts him to bed and sits down beside him. And then she begins to tell him stories."⁷ Benjamin believes that the story a sick patient confides to the doctor at the beginning of treatment is already the beginning of the healing process. He asks 'whether every illness might be cured if it could only float along the river of narrative – until it reached the mouth. If we reflect that pain is a dam that offers resistance to the current of narrative, it is evident that the dam will be pierced when the gradient is steep enough for everything that crosses its path to be swept into an ocean of blissful oblivion. Stroking marks out a bed for this torrent.'⁸ The hand of the mother who strokes the sick child creates a channel in which the current of narrative can flow. But pain is not simply a dam that offers resistance to this narrative flow. Rather, it is pain itself that allows the current to flow, so that it might carry the pain along with it. *Pain initiates the narrative in the first place*. Only then can pain be 'a navigable river which never dries up and which leads man down to the sea'.⁹

We live in a post-narrative age. Our lives are deter-

mined not by recounting but by counting. Narration is that *mental* faculty [Vermögen des Geistes] which can overcome the contingency of the body. Benjamin's suggestion that narration may be able to heal any illness is therefore not far-fetched. Shamans also drive out illness and pain with magical incantations that have a narrative character. Where the mind retreats, the body is empowered. Faced with the intensity of a pain that has become meaningless, the mind has no other option but to acknowledge its impotence: 'Teste's question – "What is a man's potential?" – is a challenge that touches upon man's *maximum* capabilities. But we also need to consider a *minimum*: if sensibility "exceeds any answer", if the "untamed part of the organism" gains the upper hand, the faculty of man is pushed aside by the "potential for pain". Whether shallow or deep, what Valéry rediscovers again and again is the *threshold* where the body that has been left alone on the stage allows the mind just enough illumination for it to recognize its own defeat.'¹⁰

Monsieur Teste anticipates the hypersensitive late-modern man who suffers meaningless pain. The threshold of pain at which the mind admits its impotence is today lowering rapidly. The *mind* as a narrative faculty is abolishing itself. In modern life, in particular, where our environments cause us less and less pain, the part of our nervous system that registers pain seems to become increasingly sensitive. A hypersensitivity develops. Algophobia, in particular, makes us extremely sensitive to pain. It can even induce pain. The docile body, which has to cope with a great deal of externally caused pain, is less sensitive. And it is characterized by an altogether different intentionality; it is concerned not

protects man against the elementary forces, the threat also grows.

The pandemic demonstrates that the wall sheltering us from the elementary forces can break at any time. As the palaeontologist Andrew H. Knoll puts it, human beings and the other animals are 'evolution's icing', and 'the bacteria are the cake'.³ Microbes threaten to break through the fragile surface, even to conquer it, at any time. Sinbad the Sailor, walking about on the back of a whale in the belief that it is a safe island, may be the enduring metaphor for mankind's ignorance. We take ourselves to be safe, but it is only ever a matter of time before we are pulled into the abyss by the elements. In the Anthropocene, humans are more vulnerable than ever. Our violence towards nature returns and exerts itself upon us with even more force.

Jünger believes that pain cannot be made to disappear. He speaks of an economy of pain. If it is suppressed, it invisibly 'amasses as hidden capital accruing compound interest'.⁴ With Hegel's cunning of reason in mind Jünger postulates a 'cunning of pain', according to which pain breaches artificial barriers, permeating life drop by drop: 'No claim, however, is more certain than the one pain has on life. Where people are spared pain, social stability is produced according to the laws of a very specific economy, and, by a turn of phrase, one can speak of a "cunning of pain" that never fails to reach its aim. At the sight of this state of widespread comfort, one is prompted to ask immediately where the burden is borne. As a rule one will not have to go far to uncover the pain. Indeed, even the individual is not fully free from pain in this joyful state of security. The artificial check on the elementary forces

might be able to prevent violent clashes and to ward off shadows, but it cannot stop the dispersed light with which pain permeates life. The vessel, sealed off from pain's full flow, is filled drop by drop. Boredom is nothing other than the dissolution of pain in time.'⁵

Jünger's postulate of the cunning of pain is not altogether implausible. Pain, it seems, cannot be expelled from life. It seems to make its claim on life felt in all sorts of ways: despite the huge progress that has been made in the development of analgesic medications, there is no less pain. Even the greatest arsenal of medication cannot defeat it. The shadows, as Jünger says, may be warded off, but the room is instead filled with dispersed light. Watered down, pain is broadly disseminated. Today's epidemic of chronic pain seems to confirm Jünger's thesis. In the pain-averse palliative society, in particular, the *silent* forms of pain that have been pushed to the margins grow, and their meaninglessness, muteness and imagelessness persist.

Pain is based on different forms of violence. Repression, for instance, is a *violence of negativity*. It is inflicted by others. But violence not only comes from others. The excess of positivity that is expressed as over-performance, over-communication and over-excitability is also violence. The *violence of positivity* leads to the pain of stress. The psychological tensions that are characteristic of the neoliberal performance society are particularly algogenic. They exhibit auto-aggressive characteristics. The performance subject is violent towards itself. It exploits itself voluntarily until it breaks down. The slave takes the whip out of the master's hand and whips himself in order to become master, to become free. The performance subject

wages war against itself. The *internal pressures* this creates plunge the subject into depression. They also cause chronic pain.

We are witnessing a steep increase in self-harming behaviour. 'Cutting' is developing into a pandemic. Images of deep wounds from self-cutting circulate on social media. These are new images of pain, and they suggest a society that is dominated by narcissism, in which all are unbearably burdened by themselves. Cutting is a futile attempt to cast off this ego burden, to break out of oneself, to free oneself from destructive internal tension. The image of the self-cutting victim is the *bloody absence of the selfie*.

Viktor von Weizsäcker describes the primordial scene of healing as follows: 'When a sister, still very young herself, sees her little brother in pain, she senses what to do before knowing anything: her hand finds its way; she wants to caress him where it hurts – *thus, the little Samaritan becomes the first doctor*. A pre-knowledge about a primal effect is unconsciously at work in her. That knowledge guides her urge towards her hand and leads the hand to perform the soothing caress. For that is what the brother will experience; the hand will soothe him. Between himself and the pain slips the sensation of being touched by the sisterly hand, and the pain retreats before this new sensation.¹⁶ We are currently moving further and further away from this primordial scene of healing. The experience of healing care in the form of the sensation of *being touched and addressed* is becoming increasingly rare. We are living in a society in which people are increasingly lonely and isolated. Narcissism and egotism are intensifying. Growing competitiveness and the weakening of

solidarity and empathy also contribute to people's isolation. Loneliness and the lack of a sense of closeness to others amplify pain. Perhaps chronic pain and self-cutting are also the body's cries for attention and closeness, even for love – telling indications of the fact that, today, there is rarely any *touching*. We seem to miss the healing *hand of the other*. No amount of analgesia can compensate for the loss of that primordial scene of healing.

The aetiologies of chronic pain are diverse. Distortion, strain and tension within the social fabric can cause or intensify chronic pain. In particular, what makes chronic pain so unbearable in today's society is the vacuum of meaning. Chronic pain reflects the fact that our society is devoid of meaning, our *time without narration*. It is a time in which life has become bare survival. More analgesia or further psychological research can do little about it. These only blind us to the socio-cultural causes of pain.