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LIVING UNDER CORONAVIRUS CONDITIONS: BETWEEN “BARE LIFE” AND EVERYDAY PRACTICES

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the analysis of life in the current situation from a biopolitical paradigm that vividly recalled itself in the context of the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. The first part of the article is devoted to the problem of sovereignty as what determines the existence and functioning of the social order as such. Despite the fact that coronavirus casts doubt on stable ideas about sovereignty, the measures taken by the authorities of various states show that it will be more productive to correlate these measures with the classical theory of sovereignty, adding biopolitical optics to it. In this regard, the second part of the article focuses on clarifying the connection between sovereignty and proposed by Giorgio Agamben the concept of „bare life”, in which power and life constitute a biopolitical unity, and determines the position of modern man. The coronavirus pandemic actualized the thought of the Italian philosopher, and at the same time provoked a wide discussion among the philosophical community, during which Agamben's position caused a number of comments and observations. In the final part of the article, the author turns to the work of Michel de Certeau, which can be used as some kind of program that allows us to get away from biopolitical logic in the direction of a subject, who can control his own life. For this reason, attention is focused on the de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics, in other words, between the power of the sovereign and the cunning of the weak.

Keywords: coronavirus, COVID-19, sovereignty, state, biopolitics, bare life, everyday practices, strategies, tactics.

VIATA ÎN CONDIȚII DE CORONAVIRUS: ÎNTRE “VIATA NUDĂ” ȘI PRACTICILE COTIDIENE

Rezumat: Articolul este orientat asupra analizei vieții umane în situația actuală, dintr-o paradigmă biopolitică, care s-a evocat în contextul pandemiei COVID-19. Prima parte a articolului este dedicată problemei suveranității, ceea ce determină existența și funcționarea ordinii sociale ca atare. În ciuda faptului că coronavirusul pune la îndoială idei stabile despre suveranitate, măsurile luate de autoritățile diferitelor state arată că va fi mai productiv să coreleze aceste măsuri cu teoria clasică a suveranității, adăugându-i optica biopolitică. În această privință, a doua parte a articolului se concentrează pe clarificarea legăturii dintre suveranitatea propusă de Giorgio Agamben prin conceptul de „viață goală”, în care puterea și viața constituie o unitate biopolitică și determină poziția omului modern. Pandemia coronavirusului a actualizat gândul filozofului italian și, în același timp, a provocat o discuție largă între comunitatea filozofică, în timpul căreia poziția lui Agamben a provocat o serie de comentarii și observații. În partea finală a articolului, autorul apelează la opera lui Michel de Certeau, care poate fi folosit ca un fel de program care ne permite să ne îndepărtăm de logica biopolitică în direcția unui subiect, care își poate controla propria viață. Din acest motiv, atenția este orientată pe distincția lui Certeau între strategii și tactici, cu alte cuvinte, între puterea suveranului și viclenia celor slabi.

Cuvinte-cheie: coronavirus, COVID-19, suveranitate, stat, biopolitică, viață nudă, practici cotidiene, strategii, tactici.

1. Introduction

The concept of biopolitics as a technology of power that arose in a certain historical period (XVII–XVIII centuries) and became fundamental for the functioning of modern societies, formulated by Michel Foucault, made a significant contribution to our understanding of modernity and the mechanisms of the exercise of power and coercion. Fixing the appearance in the XIXth century of a phenomenon that can be called „power’s hold over life”, or „acquisition of power over man insofar as man is a living being, that the biological came under State control, that there was at least a certain tendency that leads to what might be termed State control of the biological”¹, Foucault in his thinking is based on the classical theory of sovereignty, in which the fundamental right of the sovereign was the right of life and death. However, in the XIXth century, the sovereign right to „take life or let live” transforms into the opposite – „make” live or „let” die, while the transformation takes place not only at the level of theory, but also at the level of specific practices and technologies of power relative to not a separate human body, but to a plurality of people with all that „set of processes such as the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population, and so on”². Thus, biopolitics produces a „new character” that is different from both the individual and society – the „population”³, whose health is taken care of by the sovereign.

In our daily lives, we can see many examples of this care – the other side of which is state intervention in private life – whether it is a ban on smoking in public places or attempts by some governments to restrict women’s reproductive rights.

In turn, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic allowed the biopolitical phenomenon to become more tangible and visible than ever, in contrast to the fact that the virus itself remains invisible. In the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, most European countries have chosen the path of self-isolation to prevent the spread of the virus by

closing their own state borders and banning or restricting the movement of their own citizens within the state (curfews, quarantine for certain areas, special passes to leave homes), thereby taking under control the movement of population, understood as a controlled mass. Also have been taken a number of rational measures aimed at disciplining human bodies and emphasizing that the usual practices of human interaction and solidarity (handshakes, hugs and other physical gestures of care or attention), as well as sharing a common space (or presence in it) are now actions and behaviour, that place our loved ones, relatives, and strangers in the face of serious danger to life.

In parallel, the closure of schools and universities, factories and plants, religious institutions, entertainment venues, the suspension of political activities and political procedures (meetings, protests, elections, parliamentary hearings, etc.) called into question the familiar functioning of society and the state, making the possibility of their existence problematic.

All this allows us to state that, on the one hand, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic – due to the magnitude of its threat to human life, the economy, political institutions, and the social order as such – can be seen as a direct attack on the sovereign right to rule (and therefore control processes associated with life and death), and on the other, it paradoxically indicates that this right remains inviolable.

And this makes us think about how the rule mechanism works, what lies at its basis, and what consequences all this has for our private lives. For this reason, below I will try to develop a number of remarks regarding sovereignty and its carriers, in order to then move on to the issue of „*bare life*” – a concept formulated by Giorgio Agamben, in which power and life are closely intertwined, forming a biopolitical unity. In the concluding part of this text, based on a series of ideas by Michel de Certeau, I will try to formulate a positive perspective that will allow us to avoid being locked into a determining biopolitical trap.

2. On the problem of viral sovereignty

Drawing attention to the global trend to build walls and seal off national borders (between the USA and Mexico, Israel and Palestine, Hungary and Croatia, etc.), which existed long before the new coronavirus pandemic, Michael Marder writes that this tendency is based on resurgent nationalism, which „nourishes itself on the fear of migrants and social contagion while cherishing the impossible ideal of purity within the walled polity”⁴.

According to the American philosopher, the response to coronavirus in the form of closing borders, creating obstacles to movement and quarantines resonate with the same logic that underlies the construction of physical walls for political reasons, because „both acts are meant to reassure citizens and give them a false sense of security”⁵.

Michael Marder, who in his reasoning proceeds from the fact that in the world in which we live, everything is interconnected (increased mobility of people caused by professional activities, tourism, participation in international events, etc.), and borders are more like living membranes than physical walls, draws attention to the fact that a comparison of the spread of viruses on the Internet – the transfer of their or viral content from one device to another – and the coronavirus pandemic not far from the truth. In both cases, we are talking about the fact that the virus acts as such a form of life that can invade our existence at any moment, because – as the Russian philosopher Oxana Timofeeva rightly observes in her text, full of reflection about those affects that the virus produces – „the virus recognizes no borders; it easily passes passport and customs controls. From my hand, it would migrate to my passport, later to the policeman’s hand, and from there to the passport of a passenger in the neighbouring compartment, who would get off in Nuremberg and attend a conference or a business meeting”⁶.

In this regard, it is not surprising that the American philosopher proposes to turn to the origin of the name „coronavirus”, and what potential this name contains in itself. As it is known, the coronavirus got its name due to the large club-shaped spikes on its outer surface

that resemble the crown of a monarch. According to Michael Marder, as the attribute of sovereignty par excellence „crown is endowed with a microscopic entity that challenges the differences between different classes of beings, as well as between areas of life and death. Moving beyond the old borders, the virus becomes a figure of sovereignty in an era of dispersal of power”⁷. In reality, which at any moment can become viral, the hope that a sovereign nation-state will act as a saviour from danger seems to the American philosopher, an anachronism that must be overcome.

In this regard, seems to be a bit synonymous the discussion about the coronavirus of Jean-Luc Nancy, whose philosophical project, if I may say so, is focused on the revision of the idea of sovereignty in order to find grounds for its “non-working community”⁸. Starting with the remark of his Indian friend that in their homeland they talk about the „communovirus”, the French philosopher refers to the potential power that such a slip of the tongue carries: „How could we not have thought of that already? It’s so obvious! And what an admirable and complete ambivalence: a virus coming from communism, a virus that communizes us. That is much more fertile than the derisory „corona”, which evokes old monarchical or imperial histories. And „communo” is good for dethroning „corona”, if not decapitating it”⁹. For Nancy, developing throughout his philosophical career the idea of a community in the form of being of multiple identities, and not as a single collective subject in its various forms (nation, family, state), the virus plays the role of one who undermines sovereignty and „actually does communize us. It essentially puts us on a basis of equality, bringing us together in the need to make a common stand”¹⁰, thereby allowing us to feel the experience of community and the uniqueness that are possible only in a „together” situation.

Paying tribute to the efforts to make the problem of coronavirus post-human form (Michael Marder), or to consider it as an opportunity for „being-together” (Jean-Luc Nancy), our reality, despite its viral nature, continues to act and react too humanly, using familiar tools. At the same time, it also raises some doubts about the coronavirus’s claim on the role of the supreme sovereign authority, in particular, Kyle Lambelet points to this: „Sovereignty indicates not

merely a plenary power, but a capacity to set the conditions for specific forms of political action. Rather than acting as a sovereign, COVID-19 is a garroting terror that unveils the limits of our pretensions of sovereignty”¹¹.

Given all this, the return to the world of physical walls and boundaries, i.e. a kind of theoretical step backwards, seems like a good way that will allow us to clarify some things about the foundations and conditions of our lives. For this, first of all, it is necessary to articulate a number of classical (or have become commonplace in the social sciences) ideas regarding sovereignty, which plays an important role in the functioning of various societies and the existence of a stable social order as such.

3. Sovereign power and it's functioning

Despite the fact that with the course of history the understanding of sovereignty has repeatedly changed, it has a basic definition that is quite flexible, and at the same time quite specific – „supreme authority within a territory”, while the political institution embodying sovereignty is the state¹².

The basis of such ideas about sovereignty and the corresponding political institution was laid in modern times, in particular, by the works of Jean Bodin (1530–1696) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who wrote them under the influence of the civil wars they that witnessed.

For Jean Bodin, who observed a civil war in France between Catholics and the Huguenots, the concept of „souveraineté” became the central concept in his work *De la république* (1576). Considering the problem of the order as central, Bodin believed that it can be solved only with the help of a concept in which „rulers and ruled were integrated into a single, unitary body politic that was above any other human law, and was, in fact, the source of human law. This concept was sovereignty. Only a supreme authority within a territory could strengthen a fractured community”¹³. Herewith the sovereign did not obey to any external law or authority.

In turn, Thomas Hobbes also wrote his work *Leviathan* (1651) under the influence of revolutionary events and unrest in England, „without application, and without other design, than to set before men's eyes the mutual relation between protection and obedience”¹⁴. According to the English philosopher, “the only way to erect such a common power” that is able to defend people from the invasion of foreigners, and the injuries of one another, „is, to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will”¹⁵. In other words, the establishment of sovereign power is possible thanks to a treaty that people (like some multitude) conclude with each other and transfer all their rights to the state in the image of Leviathan, „that Mortal God, to which we owe under the Immortal God, our peace and defence” (Hobbes, 1998, 114). As in the case of Bodin, the Hobbes sovereign also stands above the law, and sovereignty acts as the supreme authority. As Daniel Philpott rightly observes, that „concept continues to prevail as the presumption of political rule in states throughout the globe today, including ones where the sovereign body of law institutes limited government and civil rights for individuals” (Philpott, 2016).

The interpretation of the concept of sovereignty, laid down by Bodin and Hobbes, was reflected in the works of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who directly connects the idea of sovereign power with *bare life* – a life reduced to the survival and maintenance of biological existence.

In his concept of sovereignty, Agamben follows the German lawyer Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), according to which „sovereign is he who decides on the exception”¹⁶. In other words, a sovereign is one who, having legal power, is able to suspend the operation of the law, i.e. determine the exception from the legal norms. According to Carl Schmitt: „The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception”¹⁷. Being something that cannot be repeated, the exception is closely connected with a special legal formal element – the decision, by which the sovereign determines the fact that a normal order was

established (since the legal system only makes sense in the state of order). All this – the exception case and decision – is what should attract our attention in the first place, because it „reveals the essence of State authority most clearly”¹⁸. During a situation of exception, normal rules of life (as well as opportunities for it) are suspended, making it obvious that normality itself is directly dependent on who determines its establishment and content, while sovereign power itself exists only due to exception.

And here Agamben goes on to the problem of life. Analyzing the ancient tradition, the Italian philosopher notes that the Greeks did not have a single term for what we call *life*. They used two terms that were different semantically and morphologically: *zoé* to denote the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, people, gods) and *bios* to indicate the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group. Referring to Aristotle, the Italian philosopher points to the fact that in the ancient world *zoé* as „natural life is excluded from the *pólis* in the strict sense, and remains confined-as merely reproductive life – to the sphere of the *oikos* (home)”¹⁹. This Aristotelian distinction allows Agamben to argue that the exclusion of natural life from the political realm is the politicization of life as such, while the birth of biopolitics is associated with the birth of politics as such.

And here, sharing Michel Foucault’s series of intentions regarding biopolitics, and at the same time criticizing him for refusing to develop the traditional approach to the problem of power, which is exclusively based on juridical models („What legitimates power?”) or on institutional models („What is the State?”), and his calling for a „liberation from the theoretical privilege of sovereignty”²⁰, the Italian philosopher, on the contrary, suggests paying attention to the intersection between the juridical-institutional and the biopolitical models of power. According to Agamben, these two areas of analysis cannot be separated from each other: „It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception”²¹. Thus, Agamben makes obvious the deep and archaic connection between power and „bare life”, in order to then turn to the

interpretation of the mythology laid down by Hobbes about the natural state and its overcoming with the help of a social contract.

Taking into account the fact that Hobbes is mainly represented as a theoretician of a social contract, under which people renounce their rights in favour of a powerful and single sovereign so that the creation and existence of a state become possible, Giorgio Agamben suggests looking at the other side of this view: „Contrary to our modern habit of representing the political realm in terms of citizens' rights, free will, and social contracts, from the point of view of sovereignty only bare life is authentically political. This is why in Hobbes, the foundation of sovereign power is to be sought not in the subjects' free renunciation of their natural right but in the sovereign's preservation of his natural right to do anything to anyone, which now appears as the right to punish”²². Analyzing „Leviathan”, the Italian philosopher concludes that for Hobbes the property of the body to be killed is the basis of both the natural equality of people, and the need for the formation of the state, and for this reason „the great metaphor of the Leviathan, whose body is formed out of all the bodies of individuals, must be read in this light. The absolute capacity of the subjects' bodies to be killed forms the new political body of the West”²³.

For Agamben, the issue of the politicization of „bare life” (despite its initial politicization) is becoming more obvious in modern times, during the formation of nation-states. Turning to the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* (1789), which proclaimed sacred and inalienable human rights, the Italian philosopher refuses to consider the declarations of these rights „as proclamations of eternal metajuridical values aimed at binding the legislator to the respect of such values: it is time, rather, to understand them according to their real function in the modern state”²⁴. The problem that concerns human rights, can be noticeable even on the basis of the ambiguous title of the document, which establishes the connection between the natural (human) and political (citizen). For Agamben, the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* becomes what fixes the final politicization of „bare life” and its placement in the political-juridical order of the nation-state. According to the Italian philosopher: „Naked life (the human being), which in antiquity belonged to God and in the

classical world was clearly distinct (as „zoé”) from political life („bios”), comes to the forefront in the management of the state and becomes, so to speak, its earthly foundation. Nation-state means a state that makes nativity or birth [nascita] (that is naked human life) the foundation of its own sovereignty”²⁵. The principle of birth and the principle of sovereignty, which previously existed separately, are combined in modern times and form a single whole. In practice, this turns out to be that the claim for the possession of human rights depends on belonging to the nation, while exclusion from it entails the deprivation of these rights (as well as the powerlessness of human rights outside the context of the national state).

To illustrate this thesis, Agamben refers to the space of the concentration camp as „the place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* that has ever existed on earth was realized”²⁶. Pointing to the historical debates about when the first camps appeared, like the „campos de concentraciones” created in 1896 by the Spaniards in Cuba for suppressing the anti-colonial rebellion, or like the „concentration camps” in which at the beginning of the XXth century the British kept Boers during the Anglo-Boer War, the Italian philosopher emphasizes „that in both cases, a state of emergency linked to a colonial war is extended to an entire civil population. The camps are thus born not out of ordinary law (even less, as one might have supposed, from a transformation and development of criminal law) but out of a state of exception and martial law”²⁷.

This becomes even more evident in the case of Nazi camps generated by the state of exception and the subsequent political decision and legal procedures. Showing that before 1933 in German legal practice, existed for a long time norms to suspend fundamental rights, Agamben points out the fact that the Nazis’ rise to power entailed a state of exception that lasted until the end of the Third Reich. Thus, the state of exception gradually turned into a rule, becoming a permanent element of German reality. In this reality, camps were created as an institution the state of exception, which continued to exist in everyday life. The political prisoners and Jews who became its inhabitants were deprived of any political status and civil rights, while their life was reduced to „bared life”. For this reason,

the camp claims to be „the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation”²⁸. At the same time, the placement in the camp – by political decision – of certain groups of persons ensured the existence of a biopolitical German body, since „the separation of the Jewish body is the immediate production of the specifically German body, just as its production is the application of the rule”²⁹. Thus, a nation gains its unity through the discovery of those who go beyond the national and are excluded from it.

All this allows the Italian philosopher to put forward the thesis that „the birth of the camp in our time appears as an event that decisively signals the political space of modernity itself. It is produced at the point at which the political system of the modern nation-state, which was founded on the functional nexus between a determinate localization (land) and a determinate order (the State) and mediated by automatic rules for the inscription of life (birth or the nation), enters into a lasting crisis, and the State decides to assume directly the care of the nation's biological life as one of its proper tasks”³⁰.

It is not surprising that the growth of exceptional measures brought to life by the coronavirus, and including the suspension of the law and fundamental rights, makes Agamben's arguments recall and apply them to the current situation.

4. Coronavirus, biopolitics and „bare life”

The discussion that the politics caused by the coronavirus pandemic recalls the state of emergency (and the production of „bare life”) was initiated by Giorgio Agamben himself, publishing in late February 2020 in his column on the website of the publishing house Quodlibet a text entitled *The Invention of an Epidemic*. Considering the legislative decree (decreto-legge) – a special regulation that the Italian government can take in extreme circumstances – adopted „for hygiene and public safety reasons”, which contains serious restrictions on the freedom of citizens, the Italian philosopher once again drew attention to the tendency to use a state of exception as a normal paradigm for

power. By analogy with the threat of terrorism, pushing for exceptional measures, the invention of the epidemic becomes for Agamben the ideal pretext for scaling them up beyond any limitation³¹.

Agamben's text, published at the end of February 2020, when the spread of coronavirus across Europe was just beginning, then its scope and danger could still not be felt enough, entailed a heated discussion among philosophers and social researchers, initiated by Jean-Luc Nancy. Criticizing Agamben for underestimating the dangers of a new virus, the French philosopher writes that the exception really becomes the rule in a world, „where technical interconnections of all kinds (movement, transfers of every type, impregnation or spread of substances, and so on) are reaching a hitherto unknown intensity that is growing at the same rate as the population”³². For this reason, it is necessary to be careful and not to forget that in addition to the authorities and their policies „there is a sort of viral exception – biological, computer-scientific, cultural – which is pandemic”³³.

In turn, the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito, emphasizing that the whole philosophical program of Nancy is based on a sharp opposition to biopolitics, to which he always contrasted the relevance of the technological apparatus, „while in fact even the term “viral” itself points to a biopolitical contamination between different languages – political, social, medical and technological”³⁴, proposes to focus just on the fact that we cannot deny the constant deployment of biopolitics. As Roberto Esposito writes: „From the intervention of biotechnology on domains that were once considered exclusively natural, like birth and death, to bioterrorism, the management of immigration and more or less serious epidemics, all political conflicts today have the relation between politics and biological life at their core”³⁵. Pointing to the long and complex relationship between politics and medicine, as well as the risks that contains the abuse of emergency measures, the Italian philosopher calls for an attempt „to separate levels and distinguish between long-running processes and recent events”³⁶.

Not forgetting this thesis of Esposito, implicitly referring to the need to consider coronavirus as a unique event, we should focus on how coronavirus and policies regarding it actualized in the current

situation both the idea of biopolitics in general, and the ideas of Agamben in particular.

And here, in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, it is appropriate to recall the arguments of Michel Foucault, who, analysing an order published at the end of the XVIIth century on measures taken if the city is threatened by a plague epidemic, shows how power forms an „enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an interrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism”³⁷. For the French philosopher, this order against the plague serves as an example of a description of the modern form of government that controls the population. Making a fair remark about the existence of the image of the plague as the festival that suspended laws and lifted prohibitions, the French philosopher notes that another image takes a more tangible place, which is characterized by strict boundaries: „not laws transgressed, but the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the meditation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power; not masks that were put on and taken off, but the assignment to each individual of his “true” name, his “true” place, his “true” body, his “true” disease”³⁸.

For the French philosopher, the plague as a form, at once real and imaginary disorder, becomes the phenomenon that gave rise to disciplinary schemes, brought to life the separation of people within „multiple separations, individualizing distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power”³⁹. On the one hand, the discipline-blockade allows the authorities to become omnipresent and visible, and on the other, it contains the beginnings of the panoptic-type discipline, or the discipline of ubiquitous surveillance, which is „a functional device that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid,

more effective"⁴⁰. In other words, by increasing prohibitions through their own power, at the same time, the government also manifests its concern for those who obey it. This is what opens up the space for biopolitics, i.e. for the impact of power mechanisms directly at the level of human bodies.

Agamben uses similar theoretical optics, but supplemented by the notion that human life is politicized at its core, showing in the analysis of the current situation in Italy how it manifests in practice „the idea of contagion itself, which is what grounds the exceptional emergency measures that have been adopted by the government"⁴¹. For this, the Italian philosopher refers, in particular, to the figure of the infector (*untore*) from the works of Alessandro Manzoni, which in turn is taken from the Milan decree of 1576 on the plague. Creating a figure of the one who voluntarily spread the plague in the city, leaving poisonous ointments in public places, the Milanese authorities created an atmosphere of fear and suspicion in society. According to the Italian philosopher, the decisions of the Italian government, aimed at restricting freedom, „transform every individual into a potential infector, exactly as the laws on terrorism considered, de facto and de jure, every citizen to be a potential terrorist"⁴². The fact that every person begins to be perceived as a potential carrier of the virus that can infect many people makes it possible „the degeneration of the relationships between men engendered by them"⁴³ and provokes existence in „bare life”.

The wave of panic that has swept Italy is becoming for Giorgio Agamben an indication that „society no longer believes in anything but bare life. It is obvious that Italians are disposed to sacrifice practically everything — the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions — to the danger of getting sick. Bare life — and the danger of losing it — is not something that unites people, but blinds and separates them. Other human beings, as in the plague described in Alessandro Manzoni’s novel, are now seen solely as possible spreaders of the plague whom one must avoid at all costs and from whom one needs to keep oneself at a distance of at least a meter⁴⁴. Life that becomes indistinguishable from death, turning into a single value, undermines

ideas about familiar ethics and humanity: „Dehumanization is unfolding before our eyes. It begins with cowardice, with suspicious views of the other, the outsider, the migrant, the foreigner as potentially contagious”⁴⁵.

As another, and no less important, consequences of the epidemic, the Italian philosopher calls the fact that the state of exception showed that it has truly become the normal condition. People’s habit of living in conditions of perennial crisis and perennial emergency allows them not to notice that „their life has been reduced to a purely biological condition and has not only every social and political dimension, but also human and affective”⁴⁶. Whereas the fear of losing life in its biological form can serve as „the foundation of tyranny, of the monstrous Leviathan with his unsheathed sword”⁴⁷.

Bearing in mind the fact that sacrificing freedom for security has the other side of life in an eternal state of fear and insecurity, Agamben points to the spread of the „war with the virus” metaphor, which seems absurd, because that this war is waged with an invisible enemy. For this reason, it’s possible to talk about civil war, because „the enemy isn’t somewhere outside, it’s inside us”⁴⁸. This statement – as Oxana Timofeeva writes – can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, the enemy is our own cowardice, bordering on xenophobia, on the other hand, as potential carriers of the virus „we ourselves are what everyone like us seems to shrink away from in horror”⁴⁹.

The gloomy picture of the present and possible consequences of the coronavirus pandemic for the future, drawn by the Italian philosopher, could not remain without attention from the representatives of the philosophical community. In particular, Slavoj Žižek, noting that „Agamben’s reaction is the extreme form of a widespread Leftist stance”⁵⁰ with their criticism of any measures for control and regulation as manifestations of totalitarian tendencies, writes that „such a social interpretation doesn’t make the reality of the threat disappear”⁵¹. In addition to restricting freedoms, this threat has given impetus to new forms of local and global solidarity. And, according to the Slovenian philosopher, „it is a mistake to reflexively interpret all forms of sensing and modelling as “surveillance” and active governance as

“social control”. We need a different and more nuanced vocabulary of intervention”⁵².

Where Agamben sees in social distancing (or isolation) serious and negative political consequences for the ability of people to unite and solidify with each other⁵³, Žižek, on the contrary, sees a manifestation of empathy: „not to shake hands and to go into isolation when needed IS today’s form of solidarity”⁵⁴. In other words, there is negative solidarity. If for the Italian philosopher „bare life” and the danger of losing it is what separates people, then for Žižek everything looks more ambiguous, since such a state „it DOES also unite them – to maintain a corporeal distance is to show respect to the other because I also may be a virus bearer”⁵⁵.

In turn, Agamben's philosophical position met with more fierce criticism, which, more likely, takes place at the level of claims to the examples that he proposed, rather than to his theoretical constructions as a whole. At the same time, when Agamben's criticism is focusing on the new paradigm for the governance of men and things, the essence of which can be reduced to organizing the bodies of citizens in such a way that there is a shift from their rights to health (health safety) to the citizens juridical obligation to be healthy⁵⁶ (biosecurity)⁵⁷, some researchers classify Agamben as supporters of the deniers of coronavirus, as, for example, Tim Christaens, a philosopher from the Leuven Catholic University: „If the reader thinks that makes Agamben sound like coronavirus denialists such as Bolsonaro or Trump, then I must confess they are right”⁵⁸. In his opinion, Agamben's reasoning about the current situation sounds like „the ramblings of a 77-year old man in Italy”⁵⁹. In this regard, with Tim Christaens agrees the Italian psychoanalyst Sergio Benvenuto, for whom Agamben's scepticism about the measures taken is an indicator of his misunderstanding of what is actually „happening in the molecularity of human relations”⁶⁰. For the Italian psychoanalyst, the observance of security measures acts as a form of caring for others, while their violation claims to be regarded as antisocial behaviour, and Agamben, according to Benvenuto, is among the potential violators.

Recognizing Agamben's contribution to the development of Foucault's ideas about biopolitics, as well as the importance of this

concept to explain a number of aspects of modernity, and stating as an objection that „bare life” „would be closer to the pensioner on a waiting list for a respirator or an ICU bed, because of a collapsed health system, than the intellectual having to do with the practicalities of quarantine measures”⁶¹, social theorist Panagiotis Sotiris proposes to change the perspective and raise the question of the possibility of democratic biopolitics. In other words, „Is it possible to have collective practices that actually help the health of populations, including large-scale behaviour modifications, without a parallel expansion of forms of coercion and surveillance?”⁶². Turning to the work of the late Foucault, who developed the ancient idea of „care of the self” as a practice of individualization and resistance to power practices, the Greek social theorist gives the affirmative answer to this question. In his opinion, this alternative biopolitics - combining individual and collective care without coercion, and also including the democratization of knowledge, which makes the collective decision-making process possible - is able to indicate a way to go from coercion to discipline towards collective efforts within the framework of common struggle.

Despite the fact that the proposal on biopolitics from below made by Panagiotis Sotiris has a significant interest and can be further developed and substantiated, it seems that a successful theoretical move would be an attempt to evade the biopolitical paradigm, or rather, turn it around in such a way as to block mechanisms related with coercion and the production of „bare life”, which hidden lies in the foundation of sovereignty. This requires a slightly more attentive look at everyday life itself, which avoids falling into a solid theoretical framework.

5. The everyday and its tricks

First of all, it should be noted that for a long time the phenomenon of everyday life occupied a peripheral place in the philosophical tradition, „while in the classical paradigm the human subjectivity was understood as a definite rationally grasping essence, everyday life was understood as a sphere which dispersed the self and

prevented it from obtaining the essence”⁶³. Such a point of view can become more obvious, if we recall the ancient world in which life in *pólis* was understood as genuine, i.e. given in its entirety, while dwelling in the *oicos* sphere was perceived as something with which simple maintenance of existence was associated. In turn, „the so-called postclassical thinking tries to comprehend the phenomena ignored by classical tradition as a new basis of the subjectivity”⁶⁴, one of them is the everyday.

At the same time, the analysis of this sphere is complicated due to the complexity and ambiguity of the phenomenon of everyday life, which is constantly present in our lifeworld and constantly disappears from it, therefore it is difficult to disagree with the statement that „terms such as “the everyday” and “everydayness” confront us with all the impalpable and ambivalent, with all the controversial and fluid in everyday life, i.e. with the specific mode of existence realizing itself in daily life”⁶⁵.

Despite the large number of attempts to conceptualize the everyday, two directions of research on this phenomenon are dominant – the sociological and the ontological. Among those who can be attributed to both camps is the French philosopher Michel de Certeau, who, exploring the everyday in a sociological way, found in it an ontological core that has a significant impact on the formation of subjectivity.

And the appeal to his thoughts in the context of the coronavirus pandemic can be a critical response of the everyday to the biopolitical paradigm of describing the modern world, in which the subject plays the role of the one who has to follow the rules (Foucault), or is in the foundation of sovereign power (Agamben). And here, following the Russian sociologist Vadim Volkov, it should be noted that „in many ways, de Certeau’s work represents a critical reaction to Foucault’s research of the 1970s and his exaggeration of the capabilities of modern power apparatuses to exercise domination, albeit through impersonal, capillary, “microphysical” mechanisms and practices whose impact is not noticeable due to their productivity”⁶⁶.

For this reason, Michel de Certeau turned to an analysis of everyday practices by which „consumers” – i.e. a wide category of actors for

whom there is a certain way of subordination through consumption⁶⁷ – can go aside from fulfilling the expected or prescribed role with the help of practices that allow to appropriate the sociocultural space organized by the authorities.

As de Certeau shows, the modes of action of users and consumers should not be seen as a passive adoption of rules and following them, but as their creative processing, which goes beyond the logic of subordination. In this regard, the French philosopher develops Wittgenstein's idea that the speaking and the acting person are always immersed in the world of ordinary language, so he „remains the possibility of creative appropriation, practical reinterpretation of authoritative discourse based on a specific life form”⁶⁸.

By analogy with the way the speaker appropriates the language and makes it serve in his own interests, can be described and other situations that are based on the relationship of power and coercion to a certain type of action. While the dominant power has its own ideas about how everything should be arranged, each concrete situation of life introduces distortions into these representations. In other words, it comes about the coexistence of two orders, which face each other in the common (everyday) world: „In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called “consumption” and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of the circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it”⁶⁹.

Inside the dominant order, consumers, these „unrecognized producers, poets of their own affairs, trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality”⁷⁰, produce trajectories that do not coincide with the pre-designed space through which they have to move. Figuratively speaking, it comes about a cat-and-mouse game, during which one who is to be captured is constantly looking for escape opportunities. It is not surprising in this regard that such a model of relationships, which has the features of conflict, can be understood as

the confrontation between weakness and strength, or tactics and strategy.

Defining strategy as „the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated”, the French philosopher points out that „it postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed”⁷¹. For de Certeau, the work of any rationalization is primarily aimed at highlighting the place of its own power and will, and this gesture, or procedure, becomes what makes panoptic practice possible, i.e. control and transformation of objects that are within the reach of this power. Having a place, the strategy differentiates this space, creating hierarchies and prescriptions, and also establishes a symbolic order that allows to see and to recognize it.

In turn, tactic is defined as „a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus”⁷². In its case, there is no delimitation of the external space, which creates the conditions for autonomy, i.e. the place of a tactic belongs to the other, „thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power”⁷³. Tactic is a game of chance, an art of the weak, cunning to confront a stronger opponent. In a situation where the inequality of forces is obvious (as a peasant uprising is powerless against the regular army, or a distinct political opposition in a totalitarian regime is a form of suicide), tactics initially proceed from conformity, therefore, passive resistance practices (such as sabotage) aimed at minimizing losses or efforts, become means of the weak. Improvisation and creativity become something that allows them to resist the means of power that the weak cannot have by definition.

And here, to summarize the essence of the distinction proposed by de Certeau, it is appropriate to quote the Belarusian philosopher Ina Nalivaika, who writes the following: „Official culture is based on the supremacy of strategies; they establish a definite structure with the help of a system of proper places that become points of

suppression. Deviant and scattered tactics give the possibility of escaping from the power of strategies with the help of a series of operations, the specific wisdom that Ancient Greeks called *metis*⁷⁴.

In the case of the coronavirus pandemic and the authorities' response to it, which have made significant adjustments to the everyday and familiar lives of many people, often pushing into the idea that survival itself (i.e. „bare life”) is now much more important than life, which can be lived with dignity, de Certeau's reasoning can remind us that this worthy life is possible even in such difficult times. The weakness of individual citizens in the face of Leviathan in all its manifestations leads to the search for ways to reduce its influence, using the Greek *metis* – cunning to resist coercion or open violence.

In conditions of social distancing, self-isolation and restrictions on movement, this cunning can take various forms, whether taking a dog from a shelter for the opportunity to go out into the fresh air more often, organizing parties and other events through Zoom, or leaving in the thicket of the park as an opportunity to take off the mask for a short time. All this seemingly small set of tactics becomes what emancipates the subject, returning him freedom to control his own life, or his own subjectivation. It is at such moments the biopolitical mechanism loses for a while its strength, and with it the sovereign that produces it.

6. Conclusion

The adoption of exceptional measures, which the coronavirus pandemic entailed, once again actualized the problem of power and the structure of social order. First of all, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic gave scholars and social theorists an excellent opportunity to think about how this situation can change our ideas about the world if we perceive the virus as a real actor. On the other hand, the nature of political measures and rulings shows that the old logic of sovereignty continues to work, and the state of exception makes us remember all kinds of dystopias, in which the odds for human existence do not look relatively promising. Nonetheless, the fact that there is resistance for

each force entitles us to think that the development paths are open and our existence does not have an obvious scenario. For this reason, I would like to end this text with the words of the German philosopher Odo Marquard, who urged us not to build dystopian scenarios, because „the modern world is not heaven on earth, nor hell on earth, it is only earth on earth”⁷⁵.

Notes

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- ⁷³ de Certeau, 2002, 37.
- ⁷⁴ Ina Nalivaika and Mikkel Tin B. (Eds.), *Phenomenology of the Everyday* (Oslo: Novus Press, 2014): 76.
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