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Something eventful this way comes: on pandemics, events, and capitalism

Existentially and conceptually the disruptive wake of COVID-19 is different from the kind of problems the global community has weathered in the past. My article draws on Alain Badiou's notion of an "event"—something unpredictable in its local specificities and radically open in terms of its possible effects—to explore the ramifications of the pandemic. Badiou's approach is distinctive in that it explores different kinds of social disruption and can help us grasp whether the pandemic might carry the seeds of a revolution. I explore the disruptive effects of COVID-19 by first defining Badiou's notion of events, and then examine whether COVID-19 fits this definition. I argue that although the current pandemic does not satisfy all Badiou's criteria, it nevertheless may precipitate an event because of the peculiar way it disrupts contemporary capitalism.

Keywords: Badiou, event, COVID-19, contemporary French philosophy, emancipatory politics, global capitalism

Introduction

Disruptive by nature, events like the current COVID-19 pandemic invite every kind of analysis, yet the sheer immediacy and scale of what is happening make it hard to discern all that is in play besides the obvious. It is not hyperbole to say the social, political, and economic turmoil of COVID-19 is reshaping our cultural landscape faster than our ability to comprehend all that is at stake. It is imperative we step back and try to get our bearings on what the pandemic may have dislodged, and why, if we are to grasp the full weight of its implications.

Existentially and conceptually the disruptive wake of COVID-19 is different from the problems we have weathered in the past and can be constructively construed along the lines of what contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou calls an “event” – something unpredictable in its local specificities and radically open in terms of its possible transformative effects (Badiou 2012).¹ The immediate challenge, however, is that if our current pandemic can precipitate an event in the sense defined by Badiou, this will not be decided or confirmed in the official registers: epidemiological facts, mortality rates, unemployment statistics, and so forth. It is not the official story that is our focus, but the larger meaning of COVID-19 as an interruption of the social fabric of our species. It is from “events”, the novelty of which escapes traditional classification, that we can catch a glimpse of other versions of ourselves and our political worlds, times of disjunction where personal epiphanies meet paradigm shifts. This is the other side of the pandemic – a possible silver lining amid the death, sorrow and anxiety. It is this possibility that I want to enquire about.

If we are to grasp the perplexing magnitude of the current pandemic, especially the range of differing local effects, I believe we need to better understand the kind of ramifications it can yield. And for this, some theory is required.² Although there is no shortage of methodological lenses applied to the current pandemic – historical, political, economic, scientific – Badiou’s approach, as developed in his seminal *Being and event* (2012), is distinctive in that it moves outside mainstream

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- 1 The notion of “event” as an unpredictable and unclassifiable occurrence is an important motif in post WWII French philosophy; for example, the work of Deleuze, Derrida, and Lyotard. Badiou stands out in his efforts to approach the possibility of events, and related ontological questions, through his understanding of set theory. Although it is human beings who recognise events, this ability is not located in any specific capacity, such as the body or language. Events are possible because novelty is a condition of reality (which set theory demonstrates), and that we as human beings can discover. In construing the event in this way, it can be said that Badiou moves away from the anthropocentrism that continues to ground so much of 20th century Western philosophy.
 - 2 Lourdes Velázquez highlights the value of philosophy, in general, as a lens for thinking about COVID-19 in his recent essay, ‘The role of philosophy in the pandemic era’ (2020).

frameworks to explore what makes certain situations so elusive to classification that the multiplicity of their consequences become impossible to predict, and so contain. Formulated from this vantage point we can ask: what effects might COVID-19 create beyond its epidemiological life as a virus and, most importantly, what is the character of these effects? More pointedly, does our current pandemic bear the seeds of a revolutionary social transformation and, if so, of what sort? Is there any reason to believe COVID-19 could be an “event”?

It should be acknowledged that Badiou himself does not think the current global pandemic provides the conditions for an event (Badiou 2020). From his perspective, there is nothing exceptional about it and nothing of revolutionary political significance can come from it – at least not in France. I will turn to the reasons for Badiou’s dismissal of the pandemic as an event in due course, but let me qualify the initial plausibility of my interpretation in emphasising that events are always “local”. That the COVID-19 pandemic does not rise to the occasion of an event in one place or political locale, does not mean it is excluded from emerging as an event in another, say the United States. I concede that COVID-19 does not fit the typical parameters of an event, and so is a contentious example. Yet as I aim to demonstrate, there are resources within Badiou’s thought to suggest the COVID-19 pandemic “may” have the dynamism to become an “event”. And so even though there is nothing revolutionary about the pandemic from Badiou’s local vantage point, there is nothing inherent about it that would prevent it from mobilising novel forms of collective action and emancipation elsewhere.

My strategy is to use Badiou’s notion of the event to argue that one of the clearest indications that COVID-19 qualifies as an event is the peculiar way it disrupts contemporary capitalism; that if anything suggests COVID-19 has the potential to become an event lies with some of the collective actions taken in response to the pandemic that challenge corporate global capital. The notion of “event” to describe something unpredictable or novel is not unique to Badiou and is a common theme that runs throughout much of post WWII French philosophy. And so why I make exclusive appeal to Badiou, despite his own caution, deserves some comment. First, rather than locate the source of an event in a specific human capacity, like language, perception, or temporality, Badiou locates it in features of situations; an event becomes discernible when a multiplicity of novel meanings and consequences emerge. Thus, although events require our participation, what we discover is neither something we simply impose on the situation nor a static property that awaits confirmation. Second, Badiou’s account of the event does not deny the efficacy of knowledge, nor does it privilege individual intuition at the expense of the notion of objective (infinite) truth. Why Badiou’s approach is advantageous will become clearer as my argument develops, suffice it to say he characterises events as potentially discernible for everyone, regardless of

education, circumstance, or status, even if our willingness to commit to events – following through on all they imply – remains our greatest challenge. And although it is true that Badiou's approach brings a level of abstraction to the event that can appear to overlook what is existentially compelling about eventful situations, his stance illustrates the interaction between human commitment, truth, and diversity in a distinctive and revolutionary way.³

I explore the connection between Badiou's notion of the event and COVID-19 in the following stages. Section One defines Badiou's notion of events and discusses some reasons why he thinks the pandemic is not an event. Section Two looks at some characteristics of political events and then examines why events pose the greatest of existential challenges. Section Three investigates the status of corporate global capital and explains why this new world order proves so impossible to effectively limit let alone dislodge (the naturalisation of capitalism). Section Four concludes by arguing that COVID-19 has occasioned collective decisions that disrupt capitalism, yielding unprecedented socio-political consequences (especially in the US), and so tentatively fits Badiou's notion of an event. The final argument, then, is that COVID-19 merits being called an event insofar as, within the US, it has inspired collective decisions and action that show another model of social existence.

Section one: what is an event?

Part of the perplexity of our current situation is not just the peculiar spread of the pandemic, but what it suggests about our ability to respond to a problem as a global community. We are witnessing what a global will to alter the status quo looks like in real time, and it is bewildering to behold. Even *laissez-faire* capitalism appears to have put itself into a temporary stall with entire circuits of exchange idling – travel and commerce between nation states are curtailed while large segments of civil society are put on hold. Properly digested, our current situation holds enough food for thought to sow the seeds of a revolution. Or perhaps no lasting wisdom or realisations will come from it, and we'll look back

3 The complexity of Badiou's program is well known (some might say notorious). In moving ontology outside philosophy and into mathematics, in particular set theory, a unique and distinctive approach to "reality" is introduced. That events are possible trades on infinite multiplicities, what Badiou calls the "void," which prevents any unit from definitive representation – this conclusion is established in set theory (not philosophical anthropology). My interest is to apply Badiou's theory of the event to a specific world-wide phenomenon – the COVID-19 pandemic – and not explain intricate details of his philosophy or contrast his strengths with other French philosophers of the event. The strategy is to explain what is minimally necessary about Badiou to explicate his theory of the event and apply it. For an overview of the many diverse strands in Badiou's thought, see Bowden and Duffy 2012.

on these times with a strange combination of resentment and nostalgia as the lessons proffered drift into oblivion. For the interim, however, I believe the court of interpretive possibilities remains open: what COVID-19 will come to mean is far from finalised. What makes Badiou's theory of the event so helpful is that it provides different ways of understanding the "undecidability" that surrounds much of the pandemic, and why this undecidability, or openness, won't last for long. It is a defining imperative of nation-states that they create boundaries to manage, control and predict the larger world that confronts them. What is distinctive about the current pandemic is that so much of its meanings and effects exceed the immediate concerns of health, and have from early on, which makes the effort of states to control the narrative of COVID-19 especially difficult. This is clear in the case of the US where COVID-19 has been a lightning rod of political polarisation from its earliest identification as a virus.

For Badiou, any situation that could be construed as an "event" is always in danger of being normalised, of having its suggestive possibilities shut down. Events are anathema to the status quo for they elude representation by the standard methodologies of the nation state – events strain accepted explanations. Something occurs that escapes the pathways of commonplace expectation and rationale. If uncertainly is uncomfortable for individuals, it is doubly so for the apparatus of the state (the "metastructure" that underwrites the capacities of the state to represent the world, for example, through legal, financial, scientific, military, and educational institutions (Badiou 2012: 105).⁴ The tools of the state are organisation, control, predictability. The most common strategy of states when confronted by something "anomalous" that has no simple causal explanation that accounts for all the variables, and whose effects elude familiar categorisation, is to find a target to blame. The power of states lies in their capacity to represent reality, whereas events evade representation – this is the crux of the matter. Thus, the typical response of the state when confronted by challenges that outmatch its managerial resources is to locate an "external cause" to harness the fallout. What Badiou calls the "law of the count" (the state's capacity to quantify, aggregate, and reduce complexity to parts) encounters its own limit and the "dysfunction" is laid at "the hands of a stranger (the foreign agitator, the terrorist, the perverse professor)" (2012: 208) – cue up China, the WHO, or some other *causée par l'incompétence*.

4 For Badiou, the dynamic of the state is more than the "ruling class" or specific economic power relations, say between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (the haves versus the have-nots), but those necessary structures that enable a "uniformity of effect" – a capacity to "re-present" and so administrate the interests of all those under its influence. See Badiou 2012: 105.

For citizens and states, so much of our security, stability and authority is premised on control that the potential disruption of this control is the gravest of existential threats. Events “unpresent” insofar as they suggest the limits of what can be represented, named, and categorised by the resources of civil society (Badiou 2012: 204). Thus, events are not bellwethers of better times – they are not “good” in the moral sense. In brief, events carry no guarantees; they exist as historical “singularities”. In fact, whether something is an event is only revealed later, the possibility of which persists at the behest of those whose interpretive intervention keeps open the multiple meanings of what has happened from closure and normalisation. Badiou writes: “One of the profound characteristics of singularities is that they can always be normalized: as is shown...by socio-political History; any evental site can, in the end, undergo a state normalization” (2012: 176).

We are still living in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, but whether it becomes what Badiou calls an “evental site” turns on the kind of consequences we draw from it and how it may implicate each of us. Not everything that happens is open to becoming an event. Badiou explains that events are historical situations and not natural occurrences, by which he means events do not appear outside historical-cultural situations. Change and transformation happen throughout the universe on scales miniscule and immense, but such processes do not require our assistance to unfold them whereas events do. Earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, or pandemics, none of these natural happenings are events in the sense Badiou employs the term: “We shall posit once and for all that there are no natural events, nor are there neutral events” (2012: 178). If the current pandemic can be called an event it will be thanks, in part, to the fact that treating it as an epidemiological phenomenon, a natural consequence of certain conditions (e.g. cross-species contamination) shall be seen, by some, to miss what is true about it.

Events are neither “primal events” nor “radical beginnings” – they have no simple origin point or ground zero (Badiou 2012: 210). They concern “multiples” (situations where linear causality breaks down and stable relationships/connections desegregate and pluralise) and are “local” rather than “global”. Global situations have the potential to have an impact on everyone in similar ways, which is why Badiou excludes them as events (2012: 176). Thus, on the face of it, situations like COVID-19 do not seem to fit the status of an event. It is a global pandemic – the same strain of the corona virus generates the same or similar effects on those it infects, regardless of nationality, although people’s access to care and larger circumstances mitigate this. By contrast, events resist diagnostic explication: aggregation, causal sequencing, statistical analysis, reductionism. Things happen that seem occasioned by a specific situation, yet it becomes impossible to predict all the manifold, yet mutually implicative, consequences

that follow from the situation. But in the case of the pandemic, we do “know”, in a general way, what caused the pandemic, its symptoms, and vaccines have been manufactured that will inoculate us against it, even if only partially. If events do exist, as Badiou conceives them, they are not the kind of thing against which one could inoculate oneself. So, let us clarify, if COVID-19 is an event this is because aspects of it resist confinement to the field of health alone; that in some places COVID-19 was never perceived as just a natural phenomenon, but something inseparable from the political. I argue in the sections to come that this is the case.

Events suggest a disconnect between our concepts, our knowledge of how things are organised, and the world. More familiarly, events reveal that the map is never representative of the territory. Claiming there are limits to what we can know, however, is nothing new. What stands out in Badiou’s approach – one of the things that markedly separate him from other philosophers of the event – is his appeal to modern mathematics, especially set theory, to demonstrate that reality consists of irreducible multiplicities.⁵ Events are situations where the discernment of new patterns, of multiplicities, is incumbent on the willingness of participants to draw them out. The vantage point of set theory allows Badiou to introduce generic procedures into certain kinds of situations, thereby establishing the possibility that innumerable effects can be gleaned from distinct and specific interactions. These novel effects were completely invisible before the event, whereas thanks to the event our participation is solicited in such a way that new pathways open that had previously seemed impossible. And unlike other prominent figures in French philosophy like Derrida or Levinas, Badiou’s use of set theory to ground his understanding of situations means that novelty and difference are not confined to a particular register, such as language or the ethical problem of the “other,” but are more varied in scope.⁶

Section two: participating in events

Just because something happens or is discovered that is new or unprecedented does not mean it qualifies as an event. Badiou argues that only certain situations

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- 5 Set theory allows calculations and predictions within specific ranges or sets (precise knowledge is possible) without ever being able to, or needing to, calculate the whole; the whole has no set limit and can have none. Every part (point, number, fraction, feature, particle, etc.) is a member of a multiple, and it is multiples all the way up and all the way down – Badiou’s name for these irreducible multiples is “The Void”. Structures congeal around the void, just as sets of all sorts can be created, but no structures exhaust or determine the void, just as there can be no set of all sets.
 - 6 For a comparison of Badiou’s view of the event with that of other French philosophers, see Calcagno 2007; see also, Bartlett and Clemens 2014.

can engender events.⁷ Our interest is in “collective situations” where change in the status quo arises outside the official cordons and interests of the state, yet from the people. Badiou explains this was once called “revolutionary politics,” but this term is now so abused a new appellation is needed. May 1968 is an example of a collective situation shadowed by an event, so is the French Revolution, and the Russian revolutions of February and October of 1917, and the Maoist revolution.⁸ What one witnesses here is not new legislation or leadership but a transformation of “political subjectivity”.⁹

What links events to the domain of the political is the kind of collaborative actions it engenders. Events occasion truths because they invoke a multiplicity of approaches that elude predictability and stress standard patterns of verification yet nevertheless expose something pivotal about a situation. Each event is unique in that it suggests a pattern of consequences tied to the event, that are indicative of the event and so true to the situation, yet depend on us to call out and name. Antonio Calcagno explains that “...an event is a rupture of an undecidable, general situation by a unique and singularizing intervention. It interrupts the becoming of any world or the relations of objects in the world such that their usual identifications and differentiations no longer happen” (Calcagno 2008: 105). In such cases, one’s contribution or intervention pries open the possibility of other breakthroughs and insights by other people, thus staying true to the event as a situation of dynamic multiplicity.

Playing on ideas reminiscent of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Sartre, to participate in an event is to experience the “possibility of a decision without concept,” and thus a decision that requires my complete engagement but offers no guarantee of knowledge (Badiou 2012: 429). Far from providing certainty, truths require one’s fidelity to work through the challenge of the new without assurance of anything. Consequently, to participate in possible events puts one at odds with the state and the status quo, since what is true for the state rests on what can be recognised, rewarded, and recycled back into the system. Truths, however, are precisely those connections that resist incorporation into the dominate

7 Badiou famously argues that four basic kinds of situations have the capacity to disclose events: love, art, science and politics. Badiou summarises: “As such, love, art, science and politics generate – infinitely – truths concerning situations” (Badiou 2012: 340). These individual (love), mixed (art and science) and collective (politics) situations can engage each of us directly, existentially, but in different ways; they engender types of participation that disclose what is at stake in a situation that resists reduction to a single explanation. Ashton, Bartlett and Clemens (2006) discuss why these four domains are the sole situations that can elicit events.

8 See Calcagno 2008.

9 For other attempts to apply Badiou’s theory of the event to specific political situations, see Emerton 2017, and most recently, McGill 2019.

vocabulary of the status quo. Badiou calls the various procedures one engages in to unveil new truths about a situation “generic” (Badiou 2012: 339). He uses that term to emphasise how, from the standpoint of the state, insofar as the true is different from what we have come to expect, a break in the series, it does not fit with knowledge. Moreover, the truths that emerge are not the property of any sole individual; there is a pervasive anonymity surrounding the eventual situation and those that intervene on its behalf.

The consequences that are dislodged in the shadow of the event are “indiscernible and unclassifiable for knowledge” (Badiou 2012: 338). It is not that the truths unveiled directly contradict the knowledge and expertise of the state (which would make them identifiable by their opposition), but instead show the limitations or illegitimacy of the current state of knowledge. Here, it is not official expertise that guides one’s intervention but a particular kind of commitment; in this way the “generic is egalitarian” because it bypasses the many balancing acts of power and “power struggles” emblematic of knowledge and its institutionalisation (Badiou 2012: 408–9).

The existential challenge of engaging what is novel and anomalous, of participating in the discernment of what is true about a situation, is that as soon as one names the event there is a desire to speak for it, to take personal credit for what is discovered. But in claiming to speak directly on behalf of the event – as its leader or spokesperson – one normalises the event and risks transforming it into yet another means of control. To act in fidelity to the event, to be led by the new truths it can disclose, is to let others share in the act of intervention. Thus, if the truth can set us free, it is because it cannot be owned by any person or tradition. Events suggest the power of the new, the chance to glimpse what may also be true of reality, and this can be intoxicating. In the effort to name the many effects that events can have, it is easy to insist one prediction or categorisation is the definitive one, and inadvertently shut down the countless possibilities that events suggest. “What the doctrine of the event teaches us is rather that the entire effort lies in following the event’s consequences, not in glorifying its occurrence. There is no more an angelic herald of the event than there is a hero” (Badiou 2012: 211).

As can be seen, Badiou does not conceive truth as a static predicate or correspondence between subject and object. Rather the true speaks to a movement of discovery, relation, and dedication; it is to experience oneself as a bridge in an inferential process that is never simply in any one person’s hands. Whatever is true invites continual supplementation of the new, which is why our intervention in events can generate truths that resist complete ideological capture. That truths are infinite in number is what the state denies, since in

conceding such multiplicity it loses control over the link between power and knowledge. And it is precisely this link that political events disrupt.

Now that we have a sense of the perplexing character of events, how they could be possible, and the type of situations conducive to them, I want to press the question of whether COVID-19 might be considered an event. I concede to Badiou that COVID-19 is a global phenomenon and a natural one; it is a virus before it is anything else. If COVID-19 is an event or has the potential to become one, this is because its identity as a global pandemic was not interpreted the same way in every location or nation-state. In certain places like the United States the local struggles over what the pandemic represents, and unrepresents, were political from the very first recorded cases. The quick retort to this is that everything in Trump-era politics was, and remains, political; COVID-19 was deliberately made political to play the game of politics. And if that is all there is to it, then Badiou is correct; COVID-19 may be interesting for all kinds of reason, but an event it is not. If my interpretation is to hold any plausibility, I need to demonstrate that a) COVID-19 disrupted something anathema to all statist politics, something politically revolutionary but outside party lines, b) that what COVID-19 disrupted is worthy of being called an “event,” and c) that human intervention was required for the event that is COVID-19 to emerge.

That COVID-19 has disrupted much of daily life is clear, but being disruptive, in and of itself, is not enough to signal an event, nor is the fact that it has generated unpredictable consequences. For my account to gain traction we need a richer exploration of the pandemic’s effects, of what it disrupts, and how this disruption allows for local interventions of revolutionary (evental) import. It is the wager of this essay that the most telling place to look for this effect lives where COVID-19 encounters capital. If COVID-19 is an event, it will be thanks to its capacity to call out the power of ordinary citizens to “de-naturalise” capital.

Section three: the naturalisation of corporate capital

The structures that nation-states provide do many things for us. These structures function well or poorly based, in part, on the confidence we have in them. This confidence is won in many ways. The lifeblood of the state, its underlying telos, is that it has the competence to name those elements of the world required to make decisions. Badiou calls this competence “the ethic of knowledge”, the unwritten law of every state, which is grounded in the maxim “act and speak such that everything be clearly decidable” (Badiou 2012: 314). This maxim does not deny confusion, speculation, or indecision, but it assumes that things are decidable and results quantifiable, or will be, given sufficient time and resources. The ethic of knowledge names a fundamental principle of the state, which is that knowledge

is inseparable from institutionalisation, from organisation, administration, and control (Badiou 2012: 293). That things are undecidable or “indiscernible” is a result of certain practical or technological limits and suggests nothing about the limitations of knowledge, let alone the nature of reality. Consequently, whatever problems can’t be solved through more administration, legislation, or economic restructuring are not problems that should concern the state. Undoubtedly, there is much to be thankful for in this “trade-off” of a “constructible universe” over an eventful one, but this trade-off incurs costs. Badiou warns: “The sacrifice demanded here as the price of measure and order is both intuitively enormous and rationally incalculable” (2012: 310).

The state’s confidence in the ethic of knowledge takes manifold forms, but arguably none are as illuminating as its relations with the naturalisation of capital. The idea of capital’s naturalisation is a notion some readers may be familiar with, but others less so, and thus warrants explanation. At its simplest, the claim that capital has become “naturalised” conveys the pervasiveness of a certain type of capitalism (corporate globalisation), and our inability to alter this system despite its dysfunction. Capital becomes akin to a force of nature in which we are swept up, willing or no, unable to alter its course, and whose power is so overwhelming that intentionally disrupting it would seem to require something like an “event” to have any chance of success.

To say capital is naturalised means more than stating people are naturally greedy or avaricious. Rather, to label capital naturalised is to name a systemic ideology that has become second nature, a habituated mode of assessment. In a system of naturalised capital everything can be, or should be, a commodity, that everything can be costed and has a cost, and that such commodification should proceed regardless of the harms it creates – it is the only alternative forward. Formulated another way, global capitalism is naturalised to the extent it is no longer regarded as one “value” among many, but as a “fact”, as an expression of how the world really works (Fisher 2009: 16). It is our confidence in order and control, the ability to manage systems, that shows how the naturalisation of capital aligns with what appears to be its opposing check and balance, the ethic of knowledge. Both share the same ontology, that reality is reducible to what can be catalogued and utilised.

As Žižek explains, building off Badiou with whose philosophy he often engages, capitalism no longer names a stage of historical evolution, a type of economic structure. Rather, capitalism “is the first socio-economic order which de-totalizes meaning ... there is no global ‘capitalist world view’ ... the fundamental lesson of globalization is precisely that capitalism accommodates itself to all civilizations” (Žižek 2009a: 25). It is the endless elasticity of contemporary

capitalism, the capacity to adapt to any particularity – nationality, politics, ethnicity, religion, you name it – that speaks to the comprehensiveness of its power; it is the ultimate omnivore. The capacity to see everything as a resource, as instrumentally valuable, becomes valorised as an end-in-itself. The necessity of economic growth morphs into the default model, and mother, of all necessity.

A defining element of contemporary capitalism, something emphasised by Žižek and also Badiou, is that unlike earlier models of capital, the current system no longer strives for economic stability but has acclimated itself to continuing economic crisis. The model is unending growth and sustainable returns. Such expansion can only persist amid a culture of perpetual change and challenge, where new methods and models are devised to enhance revenue, deregulate limits, minimise competition – pushing the envelope is the status quo. As Žižek explains, crisis was once something capitalist systems avoided, “a dangerous exception” to normal modes of operation, whereas nowadays it has become “internalized ... as the point of impossibility which impels it to continuous activity” (Žižek 2009b: XV). Contemporary capitalism is specifically tailored for crisis as the means to justify its continual expansion: “it can only reproduce itself by ‘borrowing from the future’; by way of escaping into the future. The final settling of accounts when all debts would be paid cannot ever arrive” (Žižek 2009b: XV).¹⁰

Characterising contemporary capitalism as inherently in crisis, as the internalisation of an on-going zero hour, highlights how the system works and the scope of naturalisation. Arguably, the United States stands as one of the clearer examples of what capitalism nourished on crises looks like. What the case of the US illustrates is not that corporate capitalism hides its dysfunctionality – that as a system of economic organisation the promised trickle-down effect of profits to the middle class never occurred, that lower corporate taxes never did encourage more local investment or better jobs, that deregulation never improved products, that entrance into markets never became easier, that the most exploitive old-school forms of industrial capital were never tamed.¹¹ We know, and have known for a while, that corporate globalisation has exacerbated inequalities across the board while simultaneously making it progressively harder to change anything

10 See also Klein 2007.

11 Joseph Stiglitz (2020) provides a lucid synopsis of these growing problems in his recent book, *People, power and profits: progressive capitalism for an age of discontent* – see especially Chapter two, ‘Toward a more dismal economy’.

for those outside the gated communities of the 1%.¹² As a case in point, despite the extensive harm caused by the interests of Big Capital in precipitating the 2008 financial crisis in the United States, the most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression, nothing substantial has stuck to address the problem at any level.¹³ Such passivity in response to so pervasive and crippling a social fallout is but one symptom of capital's naturalisation; like a hurricane, corporate capitalism is seen as a force of nature all are powerless to correct despite knowing the damage it leaves in its wake.

Consequently, the problem of capital's naturalisation is not that we lack the freedom to make decisions or that we are all just dupes, but that neither our freedom nor our knowledge can be exercised to disrupt the system. Naturalisation names this process of neutralisation where one's powerlessness to substantially change the status quo is reflected back to us in both subtle and not so subtle ways. This powerlessness is reinforced in the way knowledge is conceived. The ethic of knowledge that grounds the state does not rest on fabrication or illusion. It is perfectly capable of making reliable inferences about the world and responding to problems. Rather, the evidence that is collected, whether about national problems like the savage inequalities of K-12 education, the rampant inefficiencies of the penal system or health care, systemic institutional injustices of race, class, and gender, or global problems like climate change – all this information and data does little to enact any substantial change. Whatever the dominant modes of knowledge reveal, responses are first constrained by what can be managed within existing institutional settings.

For Badiou, the ethic of knowledge encapsulates this paradoxical commitment to precise categorisation and data collection that is nevertheless impotent to change the status quo. It is knowledge as essentially an elaborate mechanism

12 There is now so much well-documented research on this problem it's an embarrassment of riches. Just Stiglitz's work alone in this area is voluminous. For example, *The great divide: unequal societies and what we can do about them* (2015); *The price of inequality* (2012); *Freefall: America, free markets, and the sinking world economy* (2010); *Globalization and its discontents* (2002). See also Heather Boushey, *Unbound: how inequality constricts our economy and what we can do about it* (2019); Rana Farooqhar, *Makers and takers: the rise of finance and the fall of American business* (2016); and for a broader perspective see, Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the twenty-first century* (2014); Dani Rodrick, *The globalization paradox: democracy and the future of the world economy* (2011). Although the research accumulated here fits Badiou's larger assessment of corporate capitalism, the underlying reasons behind its growth, and the alternatives, are very different.

13 See Stiglitz 2020, chapter 5, 'Finance and the American crisis'. See also Paul Krugman, *The return of depression economics and the crisis of 2008* (2009); Jesse Eisinger, *The chickenshit club: why the justice department fails to prosecute executives* (2017); and Danny Schechter, *The crime of our time: why Wall Street is not too big to fail* (2010).

of accounting, with the centralisation, administration, and prescriptive specialisation of knowledge the end goal of knowing. Thus, although we live in an information economy powered by Big Data and obsessed with the acquisition of technical knowledge, such a platform is largely powerless when it comes to contending with the naturalisation of capital – both the ethic of knowledge and the naturalisation of capital end up aiding and abetting one another. Indeed, it is possible that the most pressing problem for contemporary capitalism is not that it seems unable to provide us with the so-called American dream, but – as Žižek puts it – “how to keep people’s faith in capitalism alive when the inexorable reality of [crisis after crisis] has brutally crushed such dreams” (Žižek 2009a: 26).

Worry about the naturalisation of capital is not new. Its iconic formulation can be found in Marx, but the concern that rampant materialism can hijack the most essential orientations of human beings goes back to Plato’s *Republic*. Although explanations of capital’s naturalisation reach their most sophisticated formulations with theoreticians of the left, the most compelling evidence for the phenomenon of naturalisation currently comes from prize-winning economists (Joseph Stiglitz, Thomas Piketty, Paul Krugman¹⁴) and mainstream work in the environmental/life sciences that shows the impact of global capital on the natural world. One need not be a Marxist to recognise the systemic harm of global (corporate) capital, although solutions will differ greatly depending on the extent to which one accepts the ideological conditioning behind capital’s naturalisation.

From Badiou’s perspective, and those who share it like Žižek, the problem is not that we don’t know the widespread social harms, inequalities, and imminent environmental dangers of corporate globalisation; we are simply caught in an unending stall when it comes to substantially addressing any of the root causes. The systemic problems of corporate capitalism are not unique to any single country. Nations around the globe have become swept up by an economic system that, as Hardt and Negri explain, “sets in motion a continuous cycle of private reappropriation of public goods: the expropriation of what is common” while externalizing harms and losses on the present and the future (Hardt and Negri 2001: 301).¹⁵ Such commodification is not only allowed to continue but is largely accepted as the inexorable progress of Big Capital, and our compliance, or inability to break it, brings our problem to a head. In the words of Žižek: “The

14 Piketty’s and Stiglitz’s work have already been referenced, but see also Krugman 2007.

15 Building on Hardt and Negri’s (2001) idea of the tragedy of the commons, Žižek underscores how corporate privatisation threatens to commodify the three great commons of life: the “commons of culture” (trapping forms of cognitive capital that live in our language and education), “commons of external nature” (cordoning off and exhausting natural resources), and the “commons of internal nature” (controlling human capacities through new forms of biogenetic technology). See Žižek 2009a.

only true question today is: do we endorse the predominate naturalization of capitalism, or does today's global capitalism contain antagonisms which are sufficiently strong to prevent its indefinite reproduction?" (2009a: 90-91).

A built-in assumption of capital's naturalisation is that crises and dysfunction cannot alter the model – these are just the costs of doing business. I think it is fair to say that the harms that come with this mindset are as familiar as they are substantial: continuing species extinction, destruction or exhaustion of the world's natural resources and ecosystems, increasing inequalities in quality of life, imminent disenfranchisement of future generations, just to name the obvious. The evidence of these harms is overwhelming, and some degree of global consensus exists on the exigency of the situations, even if solutions are lacking.

The most pressing question, then, is whether disrupting the naturalisation of capital requires an event. And this comes down to how one reads the situation – can everything be adequately represented that needs to be, can variables be sufficiently defined, can reforms be planned and managed? If so, then our problem can be fixed by the resources of the state (and nothing novel or different outside the system is required). Unfortunately, if the description of capital's naturalisation is reliable – that crisis and the externalisation of harms have become normal modes of operation – and if Badiou's description of the ethic of knowledge does capture epistemological commitments endemic to the modern institutionalisation of knowledge, then it is unclear how the application of state expertise will outsmart Big Capital. If being broken is part of how things work, what sense does it make to fix things? The gambit of this essay is that COVID-19 has locally disrupted or unmasked the naturalisation of capital in unique ways that unravel fault lines that would have remained otherwise concealed; that COVID-19 has dislodged some of the sources of our neutralisation despite efforts to maintain them. If this is the case, it suggests that COVID-19 deserves to be named an "event," but what is there to suggest such a situation?

Section four: COVID-19 and the confrontation with capitalism

Badiou insists that events are always local – they turn on specific situations or sites. Although COVID-19 is a global pandemic, whether it emerges as an event pivots on how we engage locally with the situations it creates. There are no universal events (Badiou 2012: 338-9). Thus, if COVID-19 deserves to be called an event, this will depend on its capacity to elicit a new mode of local collective action that disrupts the pacifying effects of capital's naturalisation. By contrast, one of the clearest indications that COVID-19 is incapable of becoming an event would be to show that every nation can respond in basically the same way to

resolve the problem and contain its fallout. This has not been the case, which is especially clear with the example of the United States.

One core element in the naturalisation of capital is the pacification of our powers as agents of change. Many things are tolerated by corporate capital, but deliberate interference – say intentionally restricting or losing large parts of the economy without clear financial gains somewhere in the immediate future – ought to be unthinkable. The financial costs of COVID-19 are staggering, globally and locally. Exact figures are hard to come by and there may never be consensus on the numbers given the many variables involved, but a rough estimate of the loss, for example, to the US economy is around 10% of GDP (\$2.14 trillion) in just the first two months of combatting the virus.¹⁶ Economists report that GDP contracted 30% in the US from April to June 2020, a loss so extreme it has no historical equivalent.¹⁷ The IMF in April 2020 predicted a loss to the global economy of roughly \$9 trillion over two years.¹⁸ My point, however, does not turn on exact financial figures; suffice it to say the losses have been, and will continue to be, unprecedented, long-term, and crippling for many local businesses and service industries. Rather, what is remarkable about these losses is the fact they are self-induced; they are the result of decisions and restrictions we have placed on ourselves.

Collectives of the world's nations acted against the further spread of COVID-19 despite initial predictions that the most likely to suffer fatalities were those most vulnerable – those whose toll on resources is already the highest, namely, the elderly and infirm. If someone had predicted that certain places, for example, the United States, would willingly lose large swathes of its economy (over 10% of its workforce), and risk a recession of unprecedented magnitude, to slow down a pandemic whose greatest casualties are among the elderly, no one would have believed them; or at least no one should have believed them. There is nothing in our collective experience to warrant such a monumental endeavour undertaken to prevent possible harms to an already vulnerable population at such great and immediate financial risks to capital. Look at the priorities of the United States: it remains the only developed nation in the world that has yet to establish health care as a basic human right; 20% of its children live in poverty awaiting a future

16 There is a range of sources on the problem. See, for example, <https://www.mercatus.org/publications/covid-19-policy-brief-series/cost-covid-19-rough-estimate-2020-us-gdp-impact>; or <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/03/modelers-weigh-value-lives-and-lockdown-costs-put-price-covid-19>

17 See, for example, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/30/economy/us-economy-2020-second-quarter/index.html>

18 <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>

mired in slow violence despite having the largest GDP in the world.¹⁹ Gradual and incremental changes over years – better sewage, safety devices, healthier materials – are doable; extensive financial triage in a matter of weeks to help average citizens, not so much.

Certainly, preventative measures were taken to protect us from spreading and contracting the virus. We know viruses mutate and so precautionary measures were implemented as a matter of survival, but this default explanation to fight or flight reasoning moves far too fast. The threat COVID-19 posed to the public was never uniform, the elderly were particularly at risk but so too were those in the service industry and those who worked in urban centres. To further complicate matters, healthy people can transmit the disease without even being aware they have it. However confident people were in assessing the risks, the fact remains that unprecedented financial decisions were made in a time of great uncertainty. There is no simple line-of-sight on the dominoes of decisions that led to temporarily turning down the dial on economic prosperity. To write off the many economic decisions involved as simply self-interested or self-serving is to reify the reality of the process. It is one thing to see smoke in a theatre and yell fire, it is quite another to gear down an entire economy and fundamentally re-shift the social orientations of culture. What seems clear is that unprecedented decisions were made to intentionally restrict global capital in a time of uncertainty; the state chose not to put our health and welfare even more at risk by letting corporate capital continue unconstrained. In the case of the US hundreds of thousands of lives, many the least economically productive, were prioritised over trillions of dollars. The multiple possibilities that such a situation suggests wait to be named; it is the character of these possibilities, the potential consequences they engender, that justifies calling COVID-19 an event.

A penumbra of uncertainty and instability has followed COVID-19 since it first arrived in the US, drawing out every kind of response imaginable, from conspiracy theories to anti-vaccination movements to re-thinking voting along with the very processes of democracy; it is a situation that refuses to stand still. This is exacerbated, no doubt, thanks to social media and a climate of political polarisation but there is more going on here than just hype. COVID-19 has dramatically called into question what it means to be a citizen, making the problem of how to balance individual rights with the common good near inescapable not simply for people in power but for all of us. Antonio Calcagno explains that the “making consistent of a multiplicity through an intervention is what constitutes an event for Badiou” (Calcagno 2008: 1053-4). The plethora of interpretations plaguing Covid is

19 See Stiglitz 2020, especially chapter 9, ‘Restoring a dynamic economy with jobs and opportunity for all’.

indicative of something potentially revolutionary, of indiscernible consequences that wait to be named, and which speak to a new affirmation of human agency. Like pulling on a thread, COVID-19 has exposed inequality after inequality in everything from health care to childcare to policing to voting to prisons to wages – and what it has exposed is that all these problems are of our own making. This cascade of effects, each one a truth called out by collective action, has proceeded in the shadow of what should be unthinkable: that some agents of the state took responsibility for restricting corporate capital rather than serve as its pawns. It is this first effect that echoes through all the rest. Because if corporate capital can be curtailed based on a choice rather than necessity, we really can change the socio-political order. Should we fail there is no one to blame but ourselves.

However varied the motivations that temporarily brought corporate capital to heel, what matters is how we read the situation. The initial response to COVID-19 has demonstrated that the seemingly impossible can happen, that other collective concerns can trump financial ones. That this was done on a global scale yet locally enacted, we must never forget. This does not mean monies have been effectively managed, companies and people will not profit from the pandemic, that tech companies won't make record profits, or that the stock market won't soar. Indeed, almost two years on corporate capital seems to have weathered the pandemic quite well. Since corporate capital feeds on crises, one should not be too misled by its quick rebound. The system's ability to capitalise on everything speaks to the pervasiveness of its naturalisation; it is precisely this feature that makes it so impossible to check. That many of the markets are moving as if nothing has happened is part of what they do, because from the perspective of Big Capital nothing substantial has happened, and therein lies the problem.

Corporate capital could have been slowed in many other ways. A large meteorite bombardment or thermo-nuclear war would also retard the naturalisation of capital because the immediate urgency of the situation would remove it from the scale of decisions and human intervention. The centre would collapse of its own accord. Dystopian predictions may encircle COVID-19, but the current pandemic is not an imminent threat to humanity, and nothing we have discovered so far suggests it could become so overnight. It is many things, but an apocalyptic event it is not. Decisions were made to stem Big Capital and these decisions could have been different; there was no necessity or inevitability behind the decision to put people's welfare first. That this happened even in the most stalwart home of corporate capitalism, that of the US, and initially enacted under Trump, arguably the most myopic President the country has ever had, speaks to the anomalous character of COVID-19, and should be read as suggestive of an event.

That we are in trouble with corporate capital is voiced from many places. Nobel-prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz argues in his 2020 book, *People, power and profits*, that despite its multiple forms of dysfunction and injustice, “It is still not too late to save capitalism from itself” (2020: 247). Between the naturalisation of capital, on one hand, and the ethic of knowledge, on the other, the situations described in this essay suggest the resources of the status quo are no longer up to the challenge. Any hope of sufficiently repossessing the spirit of global capital and refashioning it as but one means of human existence rather than its end would seem to suggest something like an event, in the terms Badiou outlines, to hazard the chance for an open future. Thus, I argue, contra Badiou’s own intuitions on the current pandemic, that COVID-19 merits being named an event, because despite its global character as a pandemic it has created a situation whose decisions have unlocked innumerable local possibilities of revolutionary import.

Unlike natural disasters, which reduce our options, events disclose aspects of socio-political reality by manifesting new ways of engaging and participating in our collective existence. Their status is precarious because it is we who must name them and follow through on what they imply. As a result, events are always in danger of being shut down, their existential significance denied and explained away. And since COVID-19 has engendered decisions that suggest the commodification of our existence can be stopped, its status as an event will surely be challenged. Few situations remain fertile for long as sponsors of events. We’ve been taught to believe the prudent course is to control multiplicity and difference, and domesticate it; if this were not the case, capital could never have reached its current depths of naturalisation. That which cannot be clearly identified, claimed and owned; that with which one cannot bargain. We are still beset by messages that tell us this path leads to nihilism. And so, an infinite universe of potential is traded for a one-dimensional world of “Human, All-too-Human” aspirations.

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