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**The Virus as the Other:
A reply to Dr. Bolaños' 'Becoming-virus,
Life from the Point of View of a Virus'***

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Recently, Dr. Paolo Bolaños provided a pandemic reflection entitled “Becoming-virus, Life from the Point of View of a Virus” which reminds us of life’s precariousness from the vantage of becoming-virus. This reply, following primarily Peter Sloterdijk and Byung-Chul Han, offers an alternative to the Deluzian jest to *become* the virus by underscoring the naivete of forgetting the fear-qua-respect of the foreign.

Peter Sloterdijk portrays the history of humanity as the progression of having learned to widen our immunized spheres.¹ Initially, we found security with the placenta, the family, civil society, until today’s global point of being enthralled in Capital that, especially prior to the pandemic, we considered without any serious alternative. What perhaps is important to note is the shift in the concept of the sovereign in our immunized spheres. In today’s global village,

* Paolo Bolaños, “Becoming-virus, Life from the Point of View of a Virus,” *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, Vol. 19 (2020 Issue), 190-193.

¹ See Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Microspherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2014), 772.

there is none outside since it is Capital that dictates the trends of globalization and the whole world is this one immunized whole.² In Roman history, as Agamben shows us, the appointment of a *homo sacer* signifies this state of exclusion from the immunizing march in that sense that one is appointed by the sovereign into this precarious state of suspension: a space included within the sphere yet excluded at the same time. The subject in this regard is vulnerable to the sovereign as one is placed in this reserved place. However, with the global march under Capital, we are afforded a questioning of what it means to be a *homo sacer* under this new sovereign and what (or where) this state of ambiguity is within today's global immunized sphere.

The stark difference between yesteryear's sovereign control and today's society of Capital is marked by a shift from a disciplinary society (Foucault) to a society of control (Deleuze) to an achievement or even a palliative society (Han).³ What Han does is to reconfigure how *bare life* is put on display, not in context of Agamben's usage but in today's normalized condition of positivity.⁴ The state of inclusion/exclusion today in which the Capital's *homo sacer* is condemned to is the experience of positivity's overabundance due to precisely what Dr. Bolaños expounds as semantic arbitrariness. The shift from "should" to "can" in the neoliberal world – reflected in "the reduction of the academe into mere metrics or big data"⁵ – creates the illusion that one can become anybody with only enough effort and that there is nothing completely Other, entirely foreign to the powers of Capital's rationalization. This is the violence of semantic arbitrariness: the abundance of positivity, propelled by today's *can* instead of former years' *should*, burns one out. One slips into the black box of anthropotechnic practices,

² See Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 7.

³ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control" *October*, 59. (Winter 1992), 3-7, Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), and Byung-Chul Han, *The Palliative Society*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

⁴ See Han, *The Burnout Society*, 48.

⁵ Bolaños, "Becoming-virus, Life from the Point of View of a Virus," 193.

either improving oneself or having improved oneself—or neither.⁶ *Bare life* therefore is a life conditioned according to this modern imperative of changing (improving) one's own life but at the same time reflecting the hollowness of this call.⁷ It is a state of being suspended of the anthropotechnic drives in the experience of absolute compartmentalization within the neoliberal project. This perhaps is what it means to forget that semantic arbitrariness. In Capital's black box, the *homo sacer* has no time to play yet is playing. A truly paradoxical figure arises in this utmost desire to work, to improve, but ultimately to play Capital's ultimate game of anthropotechnics. Self-improvement becomes the battle cry of modernity's development, thus the utmost fascination with metrics for its façade provides a semblance of quality and of power. This becomes a gamified incentivization for today's *homo sacer*. What is sacred has been turned into play: *homo ludens* plays to exhaustion, riddled by the rules of the game which "absolutizes survival" since one acts under the assumption that the arena is immunized of any foreign beings since we are protected by Capital's all-encompassing gaze.⁸ This *homo ludens* thus reveals to us *bare life*, biological capacities simply open to be exhausted, "too alive to die, and too dead to live."⁹

With these initial musings, we get to see how this pandemic has provided us a new definition to *bare life* under Capital's sovereign control. This current experience has amplified Capital's game to a grotesque extent since socio-economic inequality has made the same lockdown (or "enhanced community quarantine") affect people according not solely to their foresight but to their capacity to purchase essentials.¹⁰ I can buy therefore I am protected—is this not

⁶ See Han, *The Burnout Society*, 48.

⁷ See Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 444.

⁸ See Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017), 49-50, Han, *The Burnout Society*, 50, and Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes: Macrospherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Semiotext(e): South Pasadena, CA, 2014), 772.

⁹ Han, *The Burnout Society*, 51.

¹⁰ See Carmen Sigüenza and Esther Rebollo, "Byung-Chul Han: Covid-19 has reduced us to a "society of survival"" (12 May 2020),

the very dictum of Capital's anthropotechnics of "I can (exercise, buy commodities, invest, undergo surgery, purchase private healthcare) therefore I am protected, therefore I improve"? What the pandemic reflects, embodied in the virus, is a metaphysical problem of the 21st century.¹¹ We are experiencing a crisis for global society's very foundations are on stage—those occupying the black box are us. Capital has fostered humanity to mimic its language of consumption: I need therefore I buy. Ideas that uphold contemporary (neoliberal) society, i.e., Capital's rules of the game, are challenged, witnessed individually with people's willingness for or sudden reluctance to constant surveillance or politically with the closing of the internal borders of the European Union. Both are done under the banner of public safety yet apparently far from the language of mere consumption or expenditure. We are witnessing a new grammar, not just vocabulary, for our experiences.

I agree with Dr. Bolaños that the proceedings of 9-11 herald our next few events—yet it is a naivete to fail to articulate it: post-9-11 society is marked by paranoia which, coupled with populist rhetoric, paved way for xenophobia and the petrified the display of power through the construction of a physical state of aberration which celebrates its 20th anniversary this 2022.¹² Perhaps if back in 2001, the zestful insight of *becoming* the Other was adapted, the neoliberal world would have understood the plight of enraged communities in the Middle East or in Vietnam or in other territories that simply reached the tipping point with the advent of extremist groups. Despite both parties on opposite sides of the then perceived immunized line, i.e., the demarcation between neoliberal or democratic and extremist, being human beings what proliferated was a fear of the then jihad-wearing faceless Other, a fear of another terror attack and a

<https://www.efe.com/efe/english/destacada/byung-chul-han-covid-19-has-reduced-us-to-a-society-of-survival/50000261-4244328>.

¹¹ See Markus Gabriel, "We need a metaphysical pandemic," (26 March 2020), <https://www.uni-bonn.de/news/we-need-a-metaphysical-pandemic>

¹² See Jess Bravin, *The Terror Courts: Rough Justice at Guantanamo Bay* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

scramble of governments' theater act to present a defensive position.¹³ What we are facing though today is something entirely other and non-human: must we adapt this disposition to embrace it and accept the playful injunction to simply *become* that other?

Perhaps this reply's crux is due to the frisky ending of Dr. Bolaños' piece. Instead of heeding to Deleuze's invitation to *become* the virus, I would rather that we remind ourselves of its utter foreignness. This is not simply a shift of immunized lines between nations or among populations, democratic to zealots but rather human and entirely non-human. What this shows us is that we have misunderstood the global immunization thrust. Today's sovereign Capital cannot remedy all problems with its economic immunization. Although vaccination makes one *become* the virus, today's scramble for inoculation is due to that paranoia that our immunized global sphere is highly infected – not merely our bodies but also our thoughts – which resounds Agamben's admission that "The enemy is not outside, it is within us."¹⁴ The threat of the foreign is inside the global sphere for this is not fully immunized. We have pockets of what is foreign that can still outpace us *homo ludens* in the ultimate game of life than our skill of mastering Capital's game.

The invitation of Dr. Bolaños is in fact likened to Capital's jest: be inoculated and return to the economic centers, *become* the virus as fast as possible and life resumes normally. With such a purview, we truly realize this twofold ambiguity in Capital's state of exclusion: on the capitalist tone we are awaiting to simply embrace, *become*, the virus to return to the globalized world; on the pathogenic tone: we have been vaccinated yet are restricted because the virus is on the run with its variations. Following Dr. Bolaños indication, we may say we are in a state of limbo for we have both *become* and *not become* the virus. However, let us be honest, we are not and have not. We cannot see life from the

¹³ See Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York: Random House, 2018), 166-168.

¹⁴ Agamben, "Clarifications," trans. Adam Kotsko (March 17, 2020), <https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/>.

perspective of the pathogen because it is something completely foreign. It is not just about stretching our thought experiments to more radical extremes lest we get caught up in semantic arbitrariness especially pertaining to actual experiences of death, the death of our fellow human beings. There are still pockets of unimmunized zones beyond the sovereign reach of Capital and what comes from these extents ought to be treated with a fear-qua-respect than simply providing a caricature of it and reducing its lethality to mere metrics and survival as simply a game of who can first *become* it. We must be wary of how entangled we are within Capital's semantic arbitrariness lest the 5,585,913 deaths due to COVID (as of January 20, 2022) be further excluded within this black box we already are in.