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Caught in the Super-emergency

One of the most general observations about our contemporary age is that we live in a time of transition,[1] for which various alternative terms have been proposed – from "interregnum" (Gramsci)[2] and "the dialectic of standstill" (Benjamin) to "the great regression"[3]. There are many interpretations as to when this transition actually began, what it really means, and what it actually involves. There is also an almost universal consensus that this transition is not yet over and that no one knows for sure when it will end[4] and where it will take us.

Recently, things have become even more complicated as several crises have emerged that overlap and reinforce each other. The problems and contradictions of late capitalism have obviously taken their toll. It began with the climate crisis that was declared many decades ago and that we are all familiar with today, without any appropriate countermeasures having been taken so far. The latter, however, is not the only crisis we have experienced in recent decades. The mere enumeration of the events that have marked the last three decades quickly confronts us with all that we have denied and swept under the rug, but also testifies that great changes are underway. Three decades ago, the Cold War ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of socialism

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[1] This article is a result of the research programme P6-0014 "Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy" and the research projects N6-0286 "Reality, Illusion, Fiction, Truth: A Preliminary Study" and J6-4623 "Conceptualizing the End: its Temporality, Dialectics, and Affective Dimension".

[2] See Nancy Fraser, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born*, London and New York, Verso, 2019.

[3] See Heinrich Geiselberger (ed.), *Die große Regression. Eine internationale Debatte über die geistige Situation der Zeit,* Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2017.

[4] Or, as Nancy Fraser put it recently: "The duration of this interregnum is anyone's guess, as is the likelihood of its devolution into full-bore authoritarianism, major war, or catastrophic meltdown – as opposed to 'mere' slow unraveling." (Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism. How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do about It*, London and New York, Verso, 2022, p. 156.)

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(with the wars in Yugoslavia and Chechnya). Then, two decades ago, after September 11, the War on Terror erupted, with the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. A decade and a half ago, when all this had not yet settled down, one of the worst economic crises of all time broke out, the economic crisis of 2008. A decade ago, after the Spring of Nations in 2011, two more wars broke out, one in Libya, the other in Syria. In addition, while the second Libyan civil war lasted six years, the Syrian civil war is still ongoing, eleven years thus far. All these wars, together with the economic and political situation in Africa and the Middle East, have led to a severe migrant crisis (in Europe and worldwide). Add to this the long-standing crises of politics, the state, democracy, authority, the welfare state, and many other modern institutions such as schools, universities, hospitals, health care, prisons, and so on. Finally, given the two recent crises, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and Putin's current war against Ukraine, a rough picture emerges. Against this background, it seems that the time of transition is gradually becoming a time of crisis, perhaps even the great crisis of our time.

Although the term "crisis" is used to describe all these phenomena, in reality they are quite different problems with different consequences and effects. The term "crisis" itself comes from economics and in the past we got used to the idea that economic crises are a normal part of capitalism and eventually pass. However, the most recent economic crisis, the 2008 crisis, not only came as a surprise to everyone, especially economists, but was also somehow different. Although some economists warned as early as the time of the 2008 economic crisis that arrogance – we know what the crisis is about, right?[5]– could be damaging, no one even suspected what was coming. Today we know that the 2008 crisis was devastating, some speak of the Great Recession,[6] and others point out the lasting effects for the world economy and Europe in particular.[7] Be that as it may, this crisis, together with the crises mentioned above, form an unprecedented situation. The crises accumulate and follow each other with incredible speed – faster and faster (faster than any alleged master conspiracy could even invent, let alone manipulate). They reinforce each other and now form a veritable crisis

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[5] See Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth S. Rogoff, *This Time is Different. Eight Centuries of Financial Folly*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2009.

[6] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. A. Goldhammer, Cambridge (MA) and London, Belknap Press, 2014, p. 472.

[7] See Adam Tooze, *Crashed. How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, London, Allen Lane, 2018.

vortex. Nancy Fraser speaks in this context of "a general crisis of the entire societal order" and of an "epochal crisis":

> Beneath the system's tendency to precipitate an unending string of regime-specific crises lies something deeper and more ominous: the prospect of an epochal crisis, rooted in centuries of escalating greenhouse gas emissions, whose volume now exceeds the earth's capacities for sequestration. The trans regime progression of global warming portends a crisis of a different order. Implacably cumulating across the entire sequence of regimes and historical natures, climate change provides the perverse continuity of a ticking time bomb, which could bring the capitalist phase of human history – if not human history *tout court* – to an ignoble end. To speak of an epochal crisis is not, however, to proclaim an imminent breakdown. Nor does it rule out the advent of a new regime of accumulation that could provisionally manage or temporarily defer the current crisis.[8]

The picture drawn so far is, of course, somewhat simplified, and there is much that could or should be discussed. Nevertheless, for our purposes here, it is sufficient to recall this topic in order to put into context and perspective the questions that interest us here, namely, what urgency and emergency are. What we will try to show is how they define us all. The situation we face, described above, requires different conceptual weapons and different measures than those we have been using. On the one hand, everyone is aware that it is a difficult situation, and paradoxically, people talk about it all the time, but only to keep things as they are and to maintain the existing power relations. However, raising false hopes and illusions can be fatal. Things must be called by their right name, even if we are still searching for a suitable name for what is happening right now.

For this very reason, it is also important to point out that the term "crisis" is misleading in many ways. With its medical, legal, and moral undertones, it suggests that problems are not political, and it implies that they can vanish. The term "crisis" assumes that crises come and go, as they are transitory in nature, that they follow one another in more or less regular cycles, and that they eventually end. More than that, it assumes that they gradually lead to greater progress and general prosperity rather than to greater decline or ruin. The term also suggests that the system itself is not the problem and that it does not have any

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[8]   Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, pp. 16, 126.

major internal contradictions or antagonisms. In this sense, we could say that the term crisis is a fetish. For Freud, a fetish is something that both admits and denies something – in Freud's case, that something is castration; in our case, it acknowledges that there are some "problems" (or, in neoliberal parlance, "challenges"), but denies that they are serious problems, let alone antagonisms and contradictions. Combined with the optimistic ideology of progress and encouraged by the wisdom of the proverb "after the rain comes the sun again", the term "crisis" suggests that bad things always end eventually or "in the end" (or, "in the final instance"). However, "the end", the idea and concept of it, as Alenka Zupančič has recently shown in her book thereon,[9] is conceptually and philosophically a much more elusive category than it seems at first glance. The most persistent and fixed idea of "the end" is that "the new" always brings something better, or that when "the end" comes, the old bad things simply disappear or cease to exist. Briefly, the "spontaneous ideology" of "the end" is that it eliminates chaos (for us) and (our) contradictions.

Both terms, i.e. "crisis" and "end", therefore coincide in their false optimism of a happy ending. Such a fantasy (and its ideology) has accompanied us for a long time, announcing and accompanying various endings, "end times" and now the "times of crisis". But what if the latter are permanent, or do not end in the expected way? What if they do not lead to a better society, as we are spontaneously accustomed to expect, but to a worse one? What if this movement "from bad to worse" does not stop, at least not in the near future? What if we remain trapped in it? And finally, yet importantly – what does any of this have to do with urgency and/or emergency? In this paper we will proceed in three steps. First, we will look at what urgency and emergency are in their simplest terms, then we will turn to the metaphor of imprisonment, which has been very common lately, to describe what is happening to us today, and finally we will briefly state what critical theory has to do with all of this.

Times of Emergency

Urgency and emergency concern our relation to time, which, however, is never free from society and power relations. For what is urgency if not a pressure, a constraint, a demand, a call to action in the shortest possible time? The term

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[9]   See Alenka Zupančič, *Konec*, Ljubljana, Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, 2019.

itself suggests a biological, natural necessity, but it is always social in nature. So, urgency demands from us certain actions and deeds, it imposes on us a certain tempo or rhythm of our actions; it tells us what counts in terms of time. In its guise we are told what we must do, what is important (and what is not). In short, urgency mobilizes us, and it is worth remembering in this context that for Peter Sloterdijk (echoing Ernst Jüenger) our time is a time of "infinite" or "total" mobilization. Urgency urges, to speak like Heidegger, and interpellates us, as Althusser would put it, but in doing so, we still have the more or less free choice to do (or to not do) what we are (more or less subtly) told. An emergency is another matter. In it, one does what is necessary (to avoid greater threats and dangers). An emergency knows no alternative, no free choice; one must submit to its call immediately, without reservation and without hesitation. In the case of urgency one would wonder or doubt what to do, while an emergency no longer allows this possibility.

An emergency supposedly follows the logic of the "thing itself", at least in principle. An emergency demands an immediate response to an ultimatum – hence the gradations and varying degrees of urgency: urgent, very urgent, most urgent, extremely urgent, and so on. One is forced to follow the imperative of the emergency or perish. "Be quick or be dead," as Iron Maiden put it. The pressure of the current state of emergency is relentless – not only is there virtually no distinction between urgency and emergency, every urgency is already an emergency, moreover, one emergency follows another without pause, the emergencies never stop and so their pressure never abates.

Contrary to appearances, emergencies are not about speed, quickness, acceleration, or expeditiousness, but primarily about the lack of alternatives. In other words, our societies today are under immense dictatorial pressure from emergencies of all kinds. Therefore, as Nicole Aubert suggests, we can speak here of "a perversion of time,"[10] or, as Christophe Bouton claims, of the "dictatorial imposition of time."[11] In a similar context, as early as 1993, Paul Virilio introduced the concept of the "tyranny of real time, which would no longer permit dem-

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[10] Nicole Aubert, *La culte de l'urgence. La société malade du temps*, Paris, Flammarion, 2003, p. 130.

[11] See Christophe Bouton, *Le temps de l'urgence*, Lormont, Éditions Le bord de l'eau, 2013, p. 21.

ocratic control, but only the conditioned reflex, automatism." He repeats this point in an interview with Philippe Petit published in 1996: "The tyranny of real time is not very different from classical tyranny, because it tends to liquidate the reflective capacity of the citizen in favour of a reflex action."[12] In other words, urgency compels us but still leaves the door open, but we have no alternative to an emergency. With it, we are literally thrown through a window – the short time we have left, the time that "passes" until you reach the ground, is perhaps the definition of an emergency. In other words, an emergency has no excuses; it leaves us no choice but to face its agenda. Therefore, what do you do when your "house is on fire," as Agamben would put it?[13] Be realistic and face the situation, do what is necessary – that is the message of an emergency.

It is worth noting that in English there is a difference between *urgency* and *emergency*. The main difference is that in the latter case there is an immediate threat or danger to life, health, property, or the environment, while in the case of urgency there is no such immediate threat or danger. However, a state of urgency can become an "emergency" if it is not managed and addressed properly, i.e. within a specified time, which is relatively short, of course. An emergency, then, is an unexpected and dangerous situation that requires immediate action and has important consequences, not only in terms of the immediate concrete danger one faces, but also in broader terms. As Elaine Scarry points out, the "implicit claim of emergency is that all procedures and all thinking must cease because the emergency requires that 1) an action must be taken, and 2) the action must be taken relatively quickly. [...] The unspoken presumption is that either one can think or one can act, and given that it is absolutely mandatory that an action be performed, thinking must fall away."[14]

The choice is not only between action and between thought; it is also a choice that excludes any simultaneous or alternative action. An emergency is actually an exclusion of "whatever is not necessary". Actually, it is not an exclusion, but a suspension at least for the time that the threat is real. While it primarily excludes or suspends doubt, hesitation, thought, reflection, and discussion, an

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[12]   Paul Virilio, *The Politics of the Very Worst*, trans. M. Cavaliere and S. Lotringer, New York, Semiotext(e), 1999, p. 87.

[13]   See Giorgio Agamben, *Quand la maison brûle. Du dialecte de la pensée*, trans. L. Texier, Paris, Éditions Payot and Rivages, 2021.

[14]   Elaine Scarry, *Thinking in an Emergency*, New York and London, W. W. Norton, 2011, p. 5.

emergency not only commands a particular action, but also excludes certain other actions and, by extension, other future events. In the context of the economic and political system, an emergency is not just something that affects a particular life or existence, but something that determines the entire society, the existence and the way the whole society functions. In an emergency, the society is actually given an ultimatum to act in a certain way. When everything becomes so urgent that the use of emergency procedures becomes generalized, there is no longer a temporal normality in the sense that an urgency or emergency is an exception to the norm. Today, in various sectors of society, an emergency has simply ceased to have the status of an exception and has become the rule, the new socially dominant norm that permeates all everyday life and discourse. When one emergency follows another, permanently, constantly and without interruption, we enter a permanent state of exception. This supposedly saves us from the impending destruction or catastrophe; however, it is also a catastrophe in its own right. Not only does it introduce a certain order and priorities, but it also prepares the way for the unleashing of even greater new emergencies. In reality, this process weakens our societies, common organizations, and institutions. How? By disintegrating and weakening them it simultaneously mobilizes us for a specific cause and action, which are often (mis)used for individual purposes, profits, and gains.

Because of all that, we can say that today we live in societies of a permanent ultimatum, societies of emergency. While some of this overlaps with the "politics of fear" that local and global authorities are engaging in to mobilize us all, it would be too simplistic to say that this is all for show. Some of the threats are real and not imagined. Of course, it is all for the sake of maintaining power and for private gain, as "conspiracy theories" keep trying to show, but things are not entirely simple and straightforward. On the one hand, a great deal of effort is made to cover up and disguise the real conspiracies and power, but on the other there is a certain logic that depersonalizes and naturalizes the situation so that the (capitalist) system itself is never questioned. In our societies, there is the appearance that there are no (visible, identifiable, recognizable) dictators or dictatorial forces. There are those who benefit from such a situation, but they tend to hide and camouflage themselves. Ultimately, the goal is to hide, disguise, or erase any possible personal influence on what is happening. The rule of emergency makes all of this irrelevant because, by definition, things have always gone too far in an emergency – there is only time for an instinctive re-

action. The (necessary) appearance is that this emergency rule is a natural or semi-natural necessity.

The spontaneous idea here is that it is *time* itself that puts pressure on us. Time, which is always something difficult to imagine and always something abstract, is best imagined as "passing time", as a clock ticking, counting down the time, and thus exerting a certain pressure. The widespread image of a clock ticking down the final minutes or seconds serves this purpose – recall the image of the so-called Doomsday Clock invented by Eugene Rabinowitch just after WW II, which has been on the cover of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* since 1947. As Eva Horn points out, the Doomsday Clock

> indicates not only the feeling of imminent threat but also the irreversible nature of the new military technology – as irreversible as the course of time. What has been invented, as Günther Anders put it, cannot be uninvented: "Our age is the Last Age. The possibility of our self-extinction cannot be taken back and cannot end – except by the end itself." In the over seventy years since its inception, the clock's hands have oscillated between fifteen (1995) and two minutes to midnight (1953). The clock now not only indicates nuclear-threat levels, but also reflects dangerous technologies, political events, and, since 2007, factors contributing to climate change. It indicates a feeling that has revived in the modern age: the feeling of living in the end times.[15]

Although the Doomsday Clock image was intended as a warning of nuclear war and a wake-up call to avoid it, it has become embedded in many other ideologies and representations over the years. At the individual level, such range from the academic slogan "publish or perish" to the pressure on midlife women with regard to the fact that their "biological clock is ticking". Each of us perceives this pressure on a different level and experiences that the clock is ticking. As consumers, we are constantly confronted with various tasks concerning what we have to do, try, see, visit, read, hear, taste, eat, drink, fuck, etc., etc. – *before our bell rings, i.e. before we die*. Alternatively, as Jonathan Crary puts it: "The absolute abdication of responsibility for living is indicated by the titles of the many bestselling guides that tell us, with a grim fatality, the 1,000 movies to see before we die, the 100 tourist destinations to visit before we die, the 500 books to read

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[15]   Eva Horn, *Zukunft als Katastrofe*, Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer Verlag, 2014, p. 79.

before we die."[16] The same is true at other levels: Nations, for example, fear being overtaken by time and their neighbours because they cannot adapt, reform, and modernize fast enough. Time is running out, as the saying goes.

In this way, the general impression given is that the real problem is time, this abstract entity, and not our social, intersubjective, or class relations, with their problems, antagonisms, and contradictions. The problem, however, is not time itself, but the *form* in which it appears. For this reason, emergency is also often confused with speed. Although speed is the key, as Virilio would point out,[17] the speed per se is not the problem. As Christophe Bouton shows in his work[18] – one must distinguish between urgency/emergency and speed. The formula is not "I do not have time", but "I do not have *enough* time". While we can have the speed without the emergency, the latter presupposes a threat that must be avoided. Bouton therefore claims that Virilio is wrong because speed is neutral, it is what we do – the solution to the problem of emergency is not to slow down, to praise slowness, as Hélène L'Heuillet recently proposed.[19] Boutuon even asserts "My common thread is that there is no emergency per se: emergency is a highly socialized time, constructed by Western societies according to procedures established over centuries."

It is true that an emergency is a threat that requires the fastest possible response and maximum mobilization – but who or what decides what a real threat to society is? What are the priorities here? If anything, the recent Covid-19 pandemic has shown that things can be turned upside down literally overnight. What the dominant ideology has long told us was absolutely impossible has suddenly become possible. It is precisely these incredible reversals, of which there have been quite a few, that have contributed to the rise in "conspiracy theories". Moreover, to the widespread realization that we have often been subjected to such "tricks" and "reversals" of the ruling ideology in the recent past. Once again, who decides what a threat to society is? The threat must be as convincing and realistic

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[16] Jonathan Crary, *24/7. Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London and New York, Verso, 2014, p. 60.

[17] Speed is the key to not only power, but also wealth. The adage that time is money should be taken literally – as Michael Lewis has shown in his book *Flash Boys*, those who were faster at high-frequency trading on the stock market were also richer.

[18] See Bouton, *Le temps de l'urgence*, pp. 31–34.

[19] Hélène L'Heuillet, *Éloge du retard*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2020, pp. 15–21.

as possible, and this is achieved through fear, anxiety, and panic. The so-called "politics of fear" began already in the early 1990s, i.e. in the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which – ironically – fell precisely in the name of overcoming the fears of the Cold War. In one form or another, the politics of fear have continued for several decades now. The logic is cheap, but effective: if we do not follow the logic imposed on us by emergency/necessity, we will be destroyed. The conclusion from this is military in nature and simply continues the old Cold War logic: if we do not defend our way of life, the others will destroy us. This, of course, leaves us no time for the problems, the questions, the contradictions that our way of life, which we defend with all our might, actually causes in the first place. The problem is not only the forced way of acting, but also the choices that are repressed, pushed aside, or made impossible.

In this way, it seems that someone, a group of people, elites, conspirators, or a conspiracy is cleverly manipulating the situation. However, perhaps the greatest "cunning of reason" of history is precisely that despite many actual conspiracies, manipulations, and lies, the great manipulator does not really exist. Rather, every deceiver is ultimately deceived him- or herself. In our current situation, it is clear that there are players and financial speculators who benefit from it, but the "*cui bono*" interpretation cannot apply unreservedly here. The game has become too complex, too irrational, and has long been beyond the control of the players. Of course, there are many interests at play, lots of money, power, speculators – it is not that hard to figure out "*cui bono*" and "*cui malum*", who has the most to lose here. Even if there are interests and conspiracies, the strange situation we are in now cannot be explained by conspiracy theories. The latter are still ultimately far too rational and assume that "someone" is actually controlling the situation. Nevertheless, the problem is that in reality there is no one in control – this time there really is no pilot flying the plane.

What should we call this strange situation, characterized by a chaotic mix of actors, agents, factors, events, and emergencies, with their unpredictable logic? We propose to call it the Super-emergency. The Super-emergency is primarily the name of a situation that is out of control and feeds on our own antagonisms and contradictions. The Super-emergency, then, is the name of an entity or subject that does not really exist. It is the name of a logic of a situation that is neither a logic in the strict sense of the word, nor a logic of anyone or anything in particular. It is also a name for the blurring of the line between urgency and

emergency – every urgency immediately becomes an emergency, one emergency following another without pause. The Super-emergency, then, is something additional, unwanted, superfluous, even surplus, and yet something that comes across as first-class, first-rate, something superior. It supposedly comes out of nowhere and yet imposes its own primary importance. It has a dictatorial character and follows one of the most important principles of neoliberalism, the one propagated by Margaret Thatcher: "There Is No Alternative" (TINA). The rule of the Super-emergency seems to be a blind necessity guided by a higher, cruel Providence, but still just Providence. Through it, we are not only compelled to act and wait as we do, but we are inevitably convinced that it is impossible for us to act otherwise, and that this seems to be the most reasonable and sensible thing to do at any given time.

The Super-emergency seems to come out of nowhere, and yet it is a result of our unresolved antagonisms and contradictions. They beset us unbearably, precisely in the guise of the very Super-emergency, and yet because of it, due to the ever-new emergencies, we cannot address them – even if we intend to deal with them directly, we simply do not have the time to deal with them, since we have to deal with the Super-emergency. The latter is then the name of the constant, direct intrusion and imposition of ever-new emergencies, for the ultimate replacement and override of already existing emergencies. In its power (i.e. to be more urgent than the existing most urgent emergency), the Super-emergency keeps pushing forward. With it, time is not only "out of joint", it is downright adrift. The Super-emergency coincides with what we called in the introduction the "vortex" of crises, and it takes place against a specific historical, political, economic, and cultural background. Although on the one hand it cannot be understood without it, on the other, it is not its logical or natural consequence. The paradox is that the Super-emergency acts in the name of urgency and necessity, that it presents itself in the name of a super-power once attributed to God ("*Immensa potestas*" in Descartes), and yet, paradoxically, it is itself nothing necessary or essential.

As a dictatorship without a dictator, it dictates a certain tempo and rhythm of action, but this is different in different temporal situations. In other words, it is different in cyclical time and in linear time. Nicole Aubert, in her work that deals with many aspects of urgency and emergency, points out that "in the cyclical vision of time, the emergency does not exist, or at least does not exist in the

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same way as in linear time."[20] Nevertheless, things are a little more complicated. We have already mentioned that today's crises are of a different nature. Thus, although our modern capitalist society has long since left behind cyclical time in the strict sense, until recently it was still possible to speak of a cyclical occurrence of crises. Capitalism, then, is not just the rule of linear time, but a combination of different times. Aubert's argument is problematic for us here in at least three respects. First, it is questionable whether cyclical time really knows no urgency or emergency. Even in so-called primitive societies, natural phenomena such as earthquakes or solar eclipses can herald the end of the world or the end of cyclical time, requiring some action, not to mention other disasters such as plague and war, which no society can ignore. Another question is whether the difference between cyclical and linear time explains the difference between pre-capitalist and capitalist societies, since the latter in fact combine versions of both linear and cyclical time. Third, what is crucial for us here, urgency itself appears in different ways in linear time. Not only are there different criteria, thresholds, at which urgency becomes emergency, but there are different types of urgencies and different types of emergencies.

In what sense? The urgency of our present emergency is not that we are in too much of a hurry in this "crazy world" today, that we are racing and rushing in our alienation from ourselves, from each other, and from nature. In short, the problem is not the acceleration that comes with modernity and capitalism. In fact, as Hartmut Rosa has shown, there are different kinds of accelerations in modern society. The Super-emergency is not simply the result or effect of what Rosa calls the intertwining of the three main types of acceleration, namely technical acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the rhythm of life, leading to what Rosa calls the "circle of acceleration" or sometimes the "spiral of acceleration."[21] Nor is the problem what Giddens calls the experience of a "runaway world" combined with globalization trends. The urgency imposed by the Super-emergency is of a different kind. It represents *the clash*, the *fallout* of several different logics, even of several different urgencies, of several different antagonisms. It is a name for their repression and denial in the Freudian sense. This does not mean that it pretends that these antagonisms

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20 Aubert, *La culte de l'urgence*, p. 190.
21 See Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. J. Trejo-Mathys, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 162, 185, 194, 311.

do not exist or that they have disappeared; on the contrary, it tries to resolve them; however, in a failed or false way, or better put: it solves them so that they remain unsolved. Many antagonisms have been created by the reign of neoliberalism, of which we do not know exactly whether it is alive or dead.[22] It is rather "undead", as Žižek would put it, and it is precisely as the living dead that it leaves a dangerous and persistent legacy of its principles and the antagonisms it has created. In addition, since, of course, the Super-emergency can never address them properly, let alone save them in such a false way, they are its eternal alibi. The Super-emergency is thus the name of the "eternal" displacement of the antagonisms of our society and of the capitalist system.

In other words, the Super-emergency must be understood against a particular background and context, but it cannot be *reduced* to it either. The reasons are complex and cannot be attributed solely to the urgency of various acceleration processes. Historical, technological, economic, and cultural reasons and antagonisms, which would have to be joined by several others, such as geostrategic, political, and systemic ones. As Wallerstein and Arrighi showed a long time ago, capitalism forms a world system, and its longest cycle, which began five hundred years ago, is now unstable. However, there are also some other important processes that have recently failed, or rather started to fail without really failing completely. The dictatorship of the Super-emergency is triggered by events that are unwelcome and undesirable to most (e.g. crises, wars, climate change, the rise of authoritarianism and inequality in the world) and that seem impossible to prevent or stop. These events follow one another without pause and with incredible speed, but the main problem is not speed; the problem and the solution to it are not acceleration or deceleration. The problem is the social and economic conditions under which such a mixture, such Super-emergency, can arise at all; the problem is the way in which the class struggle manifests itself today.

One of its manifestations is also a special mood, which is dominant today. For Christophe Bouton, every emergency as a social situation is accompanied by a certain atmosphere, mood,[23] and he speaks in this context about a "climate of

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[22] See Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011; Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Never-Ending Nightmare. The Neoliberal Assault on Democracy*, trans. G. Elliot, London and New York, Verso, 2019.

[23] There is, of course, no room here for a fuller discussion of this topic, which is quite complex and related to issues that at first glance seem unrelated – for example, Heidegger's

emergency."[24] Following Bouton, we claim here that the Super-emergency, too, is accompanied by what we call the "mood of nightmare". Since we have recently written about it at length elsewhere,[25] we will here only briefly present its general idea. In the narrow sense, a nightmare is a traumatic or anxious dream, i.e. a dream in which something extremely unbearable appears to the dreamer, while in the broader, colloquial sense, it describes a dire situation in which one is trapped and from which one cannot escape. A nightmare is always traumatic and unique. Every person and every social class have a unique, one-of-a-kind thing or idea that is the worst or most unbearable for them. For this reason, nightmares are usually given a special adjective, such as "Darwin's nightmare", "every parent's nightmare", "every artist's nightmare", and so on. The nightmare is on the other side of our desires, our dreams, and our fantasies. It embodies our worst fears; it is a situation that you fear the most. It is something you would most like to avoid – if you knew what you did not want, how to do it, and of course, if you had a choice. It is often accompanied by another adjective, the superlative of the word bad – "the worst": "Even in my worst nightmare, I would not imagine/think/wish/desire...." Moreover, a nightmare is associated with something that drags on, that keeps repeating itself and will not and cannot end. At least, that is how it seems when we are trapped in it. Worse, it is characterized by a sense of stagnation, even stasis (a word that has many interesting meanings), as if one were in a torture chamber. Not only does the suffering not stop, but it also gradually and progressively becomes more intense. Hence the "real" nightmare "mood": when we already think that something worse than what is happening can no longer happen, or that the nightmare will finally stop, we experience a surprise – something new appears and the aggravation occurs. As if the nightmare is the embodiment of Murphy's Law, which states that if something can go wrong, it will. Therefore, a nightmare is the case of a situation where if it can get worse, it will get worse. This gives rise to another fundamental dimension of nightmare: something that seemed impossible yesterday

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introduction of *Stimmung* in his work *Being and Time* (1927) and his later discussions on this topic. Heidegger is well aware of the connection between mood and necessity, for he claims: "Die Not nötigt in der weise der Stimmung." (Martin Heidegger, *Grundfragen der Philosophie. Ausgewählte »Probleme« der »Logik«* [Freiburger Vorlesung Wintersemester 1937/38], *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 45, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1984, p. 159.)

[24] Bouton, *Le temps de l'urgence*, p. 19.

[25] See Peter Klepec, "Covid-19, *das Unheimliche* in nočna mora", *Problemi*, 58 (9-10/2020), pp. 111–139.

is not only shamelessly enforced today, but becomes the standard of normality. Something that seems to belong in the realm of dreams and fantasy suddenly appears in reality, further blurring the line between dream and reality. A nightmare makes the adage true: truth is stranger than fiction. Therefore, there are four main features that characterize a nightmare: trauma or dread, confinement or suffocation (recall here the rallying cry: "I can't breathe!"), the unending or never-ending, singularity or uniqueness. As already mentioned, the nightmare mood is a privileged mood of this frenetic "stasis" that accompanies the "end times", which here we call the Super-emergency.

The Prison-House of the Super-emergency

Although the Super-emergency is something that constantly extorts speed, it is also characterized by stagnation, even confinement. This is also one of the reasons why it seems so natural to us today to speak of arrest, imprisonment, or entrapment – the history of the metaphors of confinement is actually quite long.[26] It was particularly prominent during the pandemic "lockdown" or "confinement", which is not particularly surprising. The metaphor of prison, of course, has various shades, nuances, and levels – from being locked in a claustrophobic place to a situation in which we find ourselves against our will. Deleuze, for example, once remarked that "[i]f you are trapped in the dream of the other, you are fucked." Catherine Malabou, in her recent article "Life and Prison", highlighted "the fact that the most important and profound contemporary philosophical texts devoted to the issue of life practically always comprise, in their very core, a reflection on the prison, on what it is to live in prison. As if life was the privileged victim of philosophical concepts as well as the privileged victim of language, of language's fascism."[27]

One of the texts Malabou mentions in this context is Fredric Jameson's *In the Prison-House of Language,*[28] published fifty years ago. Alhough Malabou does not go into detail, the details about Jameson's use of a carceral metaphor are

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[26] See Monika Fludernik, *Metaphors of Confinement. The Prison in Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

[27] Catherine Malabou, "Life and Prison", *E-flux*, 10 October 2020, https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/ confinement/351041/life-and-prison/, accessed 5 August 2022.

[28] Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.

quite interesting. Why? Because they do not really exist. Alternatively, as Emily Apter recently remarked,

> it is hard to underestimate the impact of the master trope of the *prison-house* on literary theory, and yet nowhere in the text [Jameson's] is it directly addressed. This is curious given that the book was written at a time when the prison was such an important crucible of the civil rights and Black Power movements [...] From the standpoint of theory already prevalent at the time, *prison-house* must be positioned in relation to Michel Foucault's project, itself informed by the French anti-psychiatry movement forged in the 1950s by François Tosquelles, Frantz Fanon, Jean Oury, Georges Canguilhem, and a bit later Félix Guattari.[29]

Even more unusual and strange is that the text Jameson uses as a motto, Nietzsche's thought on language, in its original does not even use the word *prison-house*. As Apter in her text extensively shows, the word was added in the English translation of Nietzsche's notebooks from 1886-1887. In German, Nietzsche speaks about "*sprachlichen Zwang*," constraints, compulsions, coercions of language: "*Wir hören auf zu denken, wenn wir es nicht in dem sprachlichen Zwange tun wollen, wir langen gerade noch bei dem Zweifel an, hier eine Grenze als Grenze zu sehen.*" Jameson uses the following English translation: "We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really a limit." The same fragment was translated by Walter Kaufman as follows: "We cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language; we barely reach the doubt that sees this limitation as a limitation."[30] Another English translation, William Bittner's alternate translation, reads: "We cease thinking when we no longer want to think within the constraints of language, we just manage to reach the suspicion that there might be a boundary here." It is not only that Jameson used the wrong translation, but, as Apter points out, his "lack of explicit reflection on the book's prison trope – whether as institution or episteme – is especially curious given that so much of the book consists of a sustained critique of theory that lacks 'self-consciousness of the object with which it is concerned'."[31]

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[29] Emily Apter, "The Prison-House of Translation?", *Diacritics*, 47 (4/2019), pp. 52–53.

[30] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, R. Bittner (ed.), Cambridge (MA), Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 110 (Fragment 5 [22] under the heading "Fundamental solution."). *Cf.* also Apter, "The Prison-House of Translation?", pp. 54, 69.

[31] Apter, "The Prison-House of Translation?", p. 54.

Without going into too much detail, we can say that Jameson simply used what he thought was the most appropriate. What he probably wanted to emphasize in the first place was a certain constraint and entrapment, the feeling or mood that "we can't get out". Here we are not concerned with what this means in the strict sense for his theses on structuralism or on language, but only with the moment of "being trapped", which has a strict parallel with what we above described as a "nightmare mood".

Nevertheless, there are many other parallels, of course. Without defending Jameson too much, it must be said that Nietzsche uses the carceral metaphor quite a few times in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*; he was quite fond of speaking of imprisonment or confinement – once he speaks of Dostoevsky being surrounded by criminals in prison, another time he speaks of the prison of the madhouse, he also speaks of man being imprisoned "in an iron cage of errors," and so on. In short, carceral metaphors abound in Nietzsche. Not only in Nietzsche, of course. Metaphors that speak of imprisonment and prison are, as mentioned earlier, ubiquitous in literature and in our everyday lives. One of the most popular authors today, Yuval Harari, in his best-selling book *Sapiens*, also used it. On one occasion, he says: "There is no way out of the imagined order. When we break down our prison walls and run towards freedom, we are in fact running into the more spacious exercise yard of a bigger prison."[32] In addition, if Jameson seemed pessimistic (at least as regards language), Harari seems much more so – all we can do is exchange one prison for another. Therefore, obviously the use of the carceral metaphor is widespread.[33] There are many reasons for this. One of the reasons, but not the only one, is certainly a political one. Today the vast majority of people are no longer slaves, servants, or serfs, all over the world the great majority live in (some kind of) democratic regimes (whatever that means), and yet we consider ourselves less and less truly free. The more we are free, the more we feel enslaved, subordinated, subjugated, subjected,

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[32] Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind*, London, Harvil Secker, 2012, p. 133.

[33] Another example of a modern bestseller would be Tim Marshall with his two books: *Prisoners of Geography. Ten Maps that Explain Everything about the World*, London and New York, Scribner, 2015, and *The Power of Geography. Ten Maps that Reveal the Future of Our World*, London and New York, Scribner, 2021.

trapped in a certain version of freedom, and no wonder that, as our contemporary Frank Ruda claims, we would have to abolish freedom itself.[34]

If we return here briefly to Jameson again for a moment, some other reasons why he speaks of prison should be mentioned – one of them is surely that he is above all a Marxist. Moreover, even if, half a century later, there are fewer and fewer examples of Marxists in the world, Jameson remains one to this day. Why is Marxism relevant for us here? For Marxism, namely, it is fundamental to eliminate everything that enslaves or subjugates the man, the woman, the worker – in short, all the oppressed and exploited. In other words, Marxism is the thought and practice of emancipation. Emancipation, however, means not only empowerment or liberation, but also "liberation from", not only liberation from a higher authority (the act of liberating a child from parental authority), but also from any visible or "invisible hand" (to refer here to an infamous metaphor of Adam Smith, which was used, by the way, by him only twice). The invisible hand refers of course, at least for us here, to the Super-emergency. Indeed, one of the etymological origins of the word emancipation is "*ex manu capere*", which literally means, "to seize from another's hand". In other words, emancipation means to problematize the existing distribution of the places where we are socially fixed and distributed: "emancipation means leaving the conditions that have been imposed on us."[35]

How are we deprived of our freedom, or, to use Rousseau's opening phrase from *The Social Contract*: "Man is born free, and he is everywhere in chains." – how does this happen? What are the modalities of unfreedom[36] today for those who are neither prisoners nor captives? We could discuss this at length, but there will never be enough space to do it properly anywhere. Perhaps critical thought, indeed all of philosophy since its beginnings, has grappled with this question. Recall Plato's famous allegory of the cave, for which Malabou asserts in her text "Life and Prison" that "philosophy, as Plato so forcefully demonstrates with the

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[34] See Frank Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom. A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

[35] Jacques Rancière, *Penser l'émancipation. Dialogue avec Aliocha Wald Lasowski,* Paris, Éditions de l'aube, 2022, p. 103.

[36] Recall that the *Merriam-Webster*'s dictionary enlists the following synonyms or near-synonyms for "unfreedom": dependence, heteronomy, subjection, captivity, enchainment, enslavement, immurement, imprisonment, incarceration, internment, subjugation.

cave, begins in prison." Not only in philosophy, but, as we have seen above, in many popular models of thought today the metaphor of the prison is used – one can add any number, from the "prisoner's dilemma" in economics to the cultural look and ideology of being "free", "out of the box", and "cool".[37] Not to mention that philosophy has "evolved" or "advanced", if one may say so, since Plato. While for Michel Foucault, a convinced Nietzschean, in his work *Discipline and Punish*, the question of the prison is perhaps the central problem of our modernity, uniting philosophical, political, ethical, institutional, and architectural problems in a single model, for Giorgio Agamben, who follows Foucault in many respects, a much more severe diagnosis is appropriate – not prison, but concentration camps – "as the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space (insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception)" appears "as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity."[38]

The issue here is not which of the two, if either, is right. Rather, we wish to call attention to a shift that affects the institution of the deprivation of liberty itself. It is a complex shift, but for the purposes of this paper, we will highlight only a few points. Put simply, it is a shift from prison as a particular and specialized institution, to a general prison that is no longer a prison in the proper sense and, above all, no longer has the visible or physical characteristics of a prison – flesh and blood guards, walls, cells, uniforms, time regimes. It is, so to speak, a shift toward a different kind of imprisonment and detention that coincides with other major changes of capitalism. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault wondered where the modern institution of the prison came from. Foucault was dealing with the problem of the prison around the same time that Jameson's book was written and for him prison goes together with other modern disciplinary institutions, such as the army, the school, and the factory, and they all function according to the same pattern and principles. Foucault calls all that "disciplinary power" and the best model for him is the (Benthamian) model of the prison, the panopticon. Hence Foucault's term panoptism for a model of power that was about to be replaced or supplemented with another kind of power, which Foucault did not realize at the time. There are different names for this "newcom-

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[37] See in this context Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool. Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

[38] Giorgio Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 102.

er", from "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello) to Post-Fordism and neoliberalism. The latter emerged in the name of solving economic problems (inflation), but eventually "expanded to become a comprehensive worldview, and has not been just a doctrine solely confined to economics."[39] Neoliberalism openly advocated openness, freedom, free exchange, and the free market. Although its main enemy was socialism and the (a certain kind of) State, neoliberalism appeared precisely against the model of power that Foucault analysed in his work on prison. Neoliberalism coincides with another kind of power (and that Foucault was somehow aware of since he gave lectures in the late 1970s on it, but this is a long story in itself), the kind that Deleuze defined in his text "On the Society of Control". In this wide-ranging and prescient text, Deleuze first notes a general breakdown of all sites of confinement – such as prisons, hospitals, factories, schools, and the family. According to Deleuze, all of these institutions are now in a state of permanent reform, and so societies of control take the place of societies of discipline. Whereas in disciplinary society one enters and leaves an institution in which one is confined for a certain period, in the society of control there is an endless postponement (constant change). Deleuze claims that disciplinary societies have two poles: signatures, which stand for individuals, and numbers or places in a register, which stand for their position in a mass. In control societies, on the other hand, it is no longer the signature or the number that matters, but the code: codes are passwords that provide access to a limited space. Instead of the analogue language in disciplinary societies, the digital language of control consists of codes that indicate whether access to a particular piece of information should be allowed or denied. Moreover, whereas disciplinary man produced energy in discrete amounts, control man undulates, moving among a continuous series of different orbits. Whereas the old sovereign societies worked with simple machines, levers, pulleys, and clocks, and the newer disciplinary societies were equipped with thermodynamic machines, control societies work with a third generation of machines, information technology, and computers, where the passive danger is noise and the active one is piracy and viral contamination. This technological development is, according to Deleuze, more deeply rooted in a mutation of capitalism. This mutation is widely recognized and can be summarized as follows: capitalism in the 19th century was concentrative, focused on production, and property-oriented. This made the factory

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[39]   Phillip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, London and New York, Verso, 2013, p. 56.

a place of confinement where the capitalist owned the means of production and perhaps other similarly organized places such as hospitals and schools. Capitalism in its current form, however, is no longer focused on production, which is often moved to remote parts of the Third World, even in the case of complex operations such as textile plants, steelworks, and oil refineries. It is focused on metaproduction. It no longer buys raw materials or sells finished products: it buys finished products or assembles them from parts. What it wants to sell are services, and what it wants to buy are activities. It is a capitalism that no longer focuses on production, but on products, that is, on sales or markets. Therefore, it is essentially dispersive, with factories giving way to businesses. The sales department becomes the business centre or soul of the company and marketing is now an instrument of social control and production: such control is short-term and rapidly shifting, but at the same time continuous and unlimited, while discipline is long-term, infinite, and discontinuous. In a sense, Deleuze summarizes the transition from disciplinary society to control society: "A man is no longer a man confined [enclosed], but man in debt."[40] Alternatively, as Hélène L'Heuillet puts it: "time has become the modus operandi of control."[41]

This entire transition took some time for the changes in the political, social, and economic landscape to take full effect. Many critics, including Foucault, did not see that the nature of the prison (as well as other rigid institutions like the school and the factory) had changed in the meantime, corresponding to the transition from disciplinary power to a society of control. Of course, this transition has not been as smooth as Deleuze expected. Jonathan Crary makes the following critique, which is relevant to our issues here:

> As influential as Deleuze's text became, it is clear with hindsight that disciplinary forms of power did not disappear or become superseded, as he maintains. Rather, the continuous forms of control he identifies took shape as an additional layer of regulation alongside still functioning and even amplified forms of discipline. Contra Deleuze, the use of harsh physical confinement is greater today than at any time previously, in an expanding network of deliriously panoptic prisons. His evocation of open, amorphous spaces without boundaries is belied by the

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[40] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations. 1972-1990*, trans. M. Joughin, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 181.

[41] L'Heuillet, *Éloge du retard*, p. 34.

brutal deployment of walled borders and closed frontiers, both of which strategi-
cally target specific populations and regions. Also retrospectively, it can be noted
that Deleuze did not address the intensifying overlap between control society and
consumer society's proliferating manufacture of individual needs, far beyond the
products and commodities that were obligatory even in the 1970s. Nonetheless, in
affluent sectors of the globe, what was once consumerism has expanded to 24/7
activity of techniques of personalization, of individuation, of machinic interface,
and of mandatory communication. Self-fashioning is the work we are all given,
and we dutifully comply with the prescription continually to reinvent ourselves
and manage our intricate identities. As Zygmunt Bauman has intimated, we may
not grasp that to decline this endless work is not an option.[42]

The prison in the classical sense of the word is a secluded place with walls, uni-
forms, guards, and a special regime. The essence of the prison is not only that
the prisoners are locked up in a separate environment and subjected to the rules
that prevail there, but above all that time is robbed from them, time is taken
away. The punishment consists in being thrown into prison for a certain peri-
od of time and paying with what is most precious to people – their time. In this
context, it is not unimportant that "being imprisoned", means "serving" or "do-
ing time" in English. Alternatively, as is nicely put by Michael Hardt in his essay
"Prison Time": "By an indubitable logic, then, the paradigm for punishment is
the loss of this most precious asset that all possess equally: time."[43]

The dilemma of us humans, finite beings, is that our time (on earth) is limited
and therefore priceless to us. We value above all free time, time for ourselves,
we value above all the time in which we can do what we want. Free time. In
which we can even do nothing. Or whatever we want. Even to think or to philos-
ophize, for which, as Aristotle already knew, one must have free time. Therefore,
to think the dilemma of time, we need time. We are free or unfree to the extent
that we freely dispose of our free time. The time we have to spend to ensure our
existence, our physical survival, and our needs is not our free time. Even Benja-
min Franklin recognized a connection between time and value – time is money,
he said. Since human labour creates value, that value has a common equivalent,

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[42] Crary, *24/7*, p. 72.
[43] Michael Hardt, "Prison Time," *Yale French Studies* (special issue *Genet: In the Language of the Enemy*), 91 (1997), p. 64.

money. If we have to work part of the time to earn a living, then we are not free for at least part of our time. For this reason, emancipatory thought since Marx has pointed out that we are prisoners of capitalism. Not only because "capitalism is fundamentally about time,"[44] but also because capital is above all the master of time. Alternatively, as Hardt puts it: "Power in our society is above all power over our time."[45]

Perhaps only two brief remarks. The first relates to reflections on common time, the second to the increasing scarcity of time and the transformation of leisure into working time. As the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou remarked:

> [it] is very striking to see that today we are practically bereft of any thinking of time. For just about everyone, the day after tomorrow is abstract and the day before yesterday incomprehensible. We have entered a period of a-temporality and instantaneity; this shows the extent to which, far from being a shared individual experience, time is a construction, and even, we might argue, a political construction. For example, let us briefly reconsider the 'five-year plans' that structured the industrial development of the Stalinist USSR. If the plan could be celebrated even in works of art, such as Eisenstein's film *The General Line*, it is because, over and above its (doubtful) economic significance, planning designates the resolve to submit growth to the political will of men. The five years of the five-year plan are much more than a numerical unit, they are a temporal material in which the collective will inscribes itself, day after day. This is indeed an allegory, in and by time, of the power of the 'we'. In various ways, the entire century saw itself as a constructivist century, a vision which implies the staging of a voluntary construction of time.[46]

The other side of this process, the flip side of our inability to comprehend collective action and time planning, is the privatization of our time. The latter takes many forms, of which we will mention only two here: the privatization of our common time in the debt economy and the colonization of our free time with the rise of digital capitalism. Maurizio Lazzarato's thesis on the "debt economy"

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44 Bouton, *Le temps de l'urgence*, p. 219.
45 Hardt, "Prison Time", p. 65.
46 Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. A. Toscano, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007, p. 105.

shows how debt has become the basis of the social through the reign of neoliberalism and how it restructures individuals, the state, and society. For Lazzarato, debt is transversal, cutting across all of society and all power relations. This means that it is not limited to the economic, the political, or the social. Crucially, the debt relationship robs us of our own future. Alternatively, as Lazzarato puts it: "The debt economy has deprived the immense majority of Europeans of what was already weak political power, a power conceded by representative democracy. It has deprived them of a growing share of the wealth that past struggles had wrested from capitalist accumulation. And, above all, it has deprived them of the future, that is, of time, time as decision-making, choice, and possibility."[47]

The other important process today is the colonization and privatization of time, which affects not only workers' time and working time, but also all our time, especially our so-called "free time". Since Marx, workers have been demanding an eight-hour workday; today we are confronted not only with the fact that working time has become almost unlimited and flexible, but also with the fact that it extends to what we used to call our free time, the weekend, the holiday. Today, paradoxically, our free time, our (in)activity in our own free time is something that produces value and surplus value. Free time has actually become a value-creating activity and, in this sense, work. Today, we do not even need a special institution to stay in or to be locked into – we are, so to speak, enslaved and locked into our own homes. "We are doing time" there, at home, so to speak. All our free time has become working or labour time. Even when we express ourselves online, we are actually doing work. The World Wide Web is not only a platform for the expression of feelings and affects, but also a huge tool for the evaluation and valorization of affects. In their work *Le Web affectif*,[48] Camille Alloing and Pierre Julien have pointed out that affect is something that circulates and must circulate, and that it is, of course, primarily for profit. In this context, they put forward the thesis of the "affective proletarian" who produces value through his affects but is not paid for it. In a sense, of course, today we are all "affective proletarians" who are not paid for our work – which is not real work strictly speaking. Moreover, even if "modern progress" consists in the fact that we are "no longer in prison", we re-

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[47] Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of an Indebted Man*, trans. J. D. Jordan, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2012, p. 2.

[48] See Camille Alloing and Julien Pierre, *Le Web affectif. Une économie numérique des émotions*, Bry-sur-Marne, INA Éditions, 2017.

main bound by the fundamental logic of prison – which consists in the fact that our time, our future, is taken from us. In addition, here the question of urgency and emergency arises again, but from a slightly different angle.

What Is to Be Done With the Super-emergency?

The question of urgency has been a constant companion of politics and philosophy since its beginnings. Its relevance and meaning for us today is undoubtedly complicated; it has a long history and many important dilemmas and dichotomies. For the sake of simplicity, however, we select here three unsurpassable milestones that continue to shape this issue today. First, there is a problem of an urgent political action exemplified in the figure of revolution. The French and American Revolutions as two seminal events that put such issues on the political agenda. Then there is the October Revolution with its repetitions, partisans, opponents, and failures. Lenin created one of the most iconic images related to this question in his 1903 work "What Is to Be Done?", which is a literal repetition of the same title of a 1863 essay by Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky, a 19th-century Russian revolutionary democrat. That title, throughout the 20th century and to this day – rightly or wrongly, is another question – has summed up the essence of Marxism. To act here and now, the call "*Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*", has always been the motto of Marx and Engels. This call is still relevant today, in our time of counterrevolution, and outlines the dilemma of urgent political action as well as urgency or emergency. Above, we tried to make a rather simple thesis: because we are trapped today in a certain logic, which we have called the Super-emergency, we are trapped in a perpetuation of the same, and this not only steals our own individual and personal time, but also deprives us of any common future. The revolution, which no one knows what it might look like today and whether it is still feasible or possible, thus continues to shape the question of the urgency of political action here and now. In this context, however, the question "What is to be done?" is not only a call for immediate political action, not only a call for revolution, but also a call to reflect in our time on the relevance, meaning, purpose, and utility of theory (of the revolution) as such.

As Boris Groys emphasizes, any

> theory confronts us with the paradox of urgency. The basic image that theory offers to us is the image of our own death – an image of our mortality, of radical fini-

tude and lack of time. By offering us this image, theory produces in us the feeling of urgency – a feeling that impels us to answer its call for action now rather than later. But at the same time, this feeling of urgency and lack of time prevents us from conceiving long-term projects; from basing our actions on long-term planning; from having great personal and historical expectations concerning the results of our actions.[49]

However, if theory and philosophy privilege contemplation, it also at the same time hates passivity. Therefore, for Groys, every

> secular, postidealistic theory is a call for action. Every critical theory creates a state of urgency – even a state of emergency. Theory tells us that we are merely mortal, material organisms – and that we have little time at our disposal. We cannot waste our time in contemplation. Rather, we must act, here and now. Time does not wait and we do not have enough time for further delay. In addition, while it is of course true that every theory offers a certain overview and explanation of the world (or explanation of why the world cannot be explained), these theoretical descriptions and scenarios play only an instrumental and transitory role. The true goal of every theory is to define the field of the action we are called upon to undertake.[50]

All of the above reasons, including those mentioned by Groys, are also – at least for us – the main reasons for a certain need of intellectuals, especially in the twentieth century (from Nietzsche, Adorno, and Heidegger, to Derrida and Agamben), to "catastrophize" the situation. It is a need to exaggerate, to shock, which is supposed to "wake people up". This task is dubious in its nature and in reality, shocking people all the time actually numbs them. The truly pessimistic and black portrayal of the present therefore not only failed in its basic purpose, but also has at best provoked mocking comments, like the "Hotel Abyss" style of thought, a style that paints the blackest picture of the present for someone who has all the benefits at his or her disposal. In other words, the fate of theory and philosophy, which, as the famous 11th thesis of Marx states, should actualize or realize itself, not to mention the difficulties with revolution – its failures and counter-revolutions in the West and its reversals in the East, along with its final infamous demise – led to what Slavoj Žižek describes as follows:

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[49] Boris Groys, *In The Flow*, London and New York, Verso, 2016, p. 33.

[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

A favored exercise of intellectuals throughout the twentieth century – which can also be taken as symptomatic of what Badiou calls the 'passion of the Real' (la passion du reel) – was the urge to 'catastrophize' the situation: whatever the actual situation, it had to be denounced as 'catastrophic', and the better it appeared, the more it solicited this exercise. Heidegger denounced the present age as that of the highest 'danger' of the epoch of accomplished nihilism; Adorno and Horkheimer saw in it the culmination of the dialectic of enlightenment in the administered world; up to Giorgio Agamben, who defines twentieth-century concentration camps as the 'truth' of the entire Western political project. [...] So I am tempted to propose a radical reading of this syndrome: what if what the unfortunate intellectuals cannot bear is the fact that they lead a life which is basically happy, safe and comfortable, so that, in order to justify their higher calling, they have to construct a scenario of radical catastrophe?[51]

Žižek later even named this strategy the "Hölderlin paradigm":

More generally, the entire Judeo-Christian history, up to postmodernity, is determined by what one is tempted to call the 'Hölderlin paradigm': 'Where the danger is, grows also what can save us' (*'Wo aber Gefahr ist wächst das Rettende auch'*). The present moment appears as the lowest point in a long process of historical decadence (the flight of Gods, alienation ...), but the danger of the catastrophic loss of the essential dimension of being-human also opens up the possibility of a reversal (*Kehre*) – proletarian revolution, the arrival of new gods (which, according to the late Heidegger, alone can save us), etc.[52]

Of course, Žižek is right when he points out the special enjoyment we all have in observing this world of ours, which is not only afflicted by one crisis after another and goes from "bad to worse", but has also passed the critical point of impending catastrophe. The latter, however, has already occurred. Here it is Žižek, again, who emphasized the role of the contemporary ideology of cynicism and denial, so well described by Octave Mannoni – "I know very well, but..." throughout virtually all of his work. Add to all this "the politics of fear" and you get a mixture of despair and terror reminiscent of what we described above as a mood of night-

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[51] Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2004, pp. 48–49.
[52] Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil. Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, London and New York, Verso, 2014, p. 344.

mare. The fact is that the constant awakening of fear and threat can dissipate and exhaust. Even the founder of the Doomsday Clock, Eugene Rabinowitch, deplored the strategy of his movement: "While trying to frighten men into rationality, scientists have frightened many into abject fear or blind hatred."[53]

In the end, we get a mixture that Badiou nicely described as follows and which nicely fits our topics of urgency:

> Today we endure the marriage of frenzy and total rest. On the one hand, propaganda declares that everything changes by the minute, that we have no time, that we must modernize at top speed, that we're going to 'miss the boat' (the boat of the Internet and the new economy, the boat of mobile phones for everyone, the boat of countless stockholders, the boat of stock options, the boat of pension funds, I could go on...). On the other hand, all this hubbub cannot conceal a kind of passive immobility or indifference, the perpetuation of the status quo. This is a type of time upon which the will, whether collective or individual, has no grip: an inaccessible amalgam of agitation and sterility, the paradox of a stagnant feverishness.[54]

Even before the current pandemic, "the neoliberal glorification of competition, constant conformity, and 'personal improvement' triggered has created an epidemic of mental suffering. In the United States, mental suffering is more American than Coca-Cola."[55] In this sense, Berardi speaks of the (capitalist) economy as a "Prozac economy." The latter is not a specifically American characteristic, but something inherent to capitalism as such. As Laurent de Sutter has shown in his book *Narcocapitalism*, all capitalism "is, necessarily, a narcocapitalism – a capitalism that is narcotic through and through, whose excitability is only a manic reverse of the depression it never stops producing, even as it presents itself as a remedy. [...] Narcocapitalism is the capitalism of narcosis, that enforced sleep into which anaesthetics plunge their patients so as to unburden them from everything that prevents them from being efficient in the current arrangement – which means, work, work and more work."[56]

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[53]   Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, New York, Viking, 2018, p. 311.
[54]   Badiou, *The Century*, pp. 105, 106.
[55]   Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Second Coming*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019, p. 53.
[56]   Laurent de Sutter, *Narcocapitalism*, trans. B. Norman, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018, pp. 43, 44.

No wonder, then, that intellectuals call the situation catastrophic, because it is catastrophic! Here we should introduce a logic that Žižek also uses frequently in his works – an x looks like an x, but we must not deceive ourselves, it is actually an x! Žižek refers here to the well-known joke of the Marx brothers: "You remind me of Emanuel Ravelli. – But I am Emanuel Ravelli. – Then it's no wonder you look like him!" Today, radical action is called for because the situation demands it – and the situation is indeed catastrophic.

It has long been known that the coming decades will be decisive, and futurologists have known this for a long time. Futurology relies heavily on a pattern that combines observation of the present and past trends with the identification of the new. Any knowledge of the future assumes that similar conditions that have occurred in the past will occur again in the future. This notion relies on the extrapolation of what exists – but remains blind to more than just our orientation and disposition to action. Alternatively, as Derrida put it: the future comes in two forms: the French term *futur* is something that relies on what is already there in some sense, while *avenir* is what will happen and what cannot be known in advance. In other words, predictions and forecasts are one thing; actual history is another. Or, as the appropriate saying for our time goes, truth is stranger than fiction. Much of what has happened even futurologists could not predict...

On the other hand, it is true that futurologists in particular have known for a long time that the carbon stocks that drive today's mode of production will soon be exhausted and that we will find ourselves in a difficult situation. For them, it was no secret that in the future we will have to deal with the climate crisis and the switch to other means of production because the reserves of gas, oil, and coal will simply be exhausted:

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> The challenges we face for near and long-term futures have been called a crisis of crises. They range across the gamut of socio-cultural, geo-political, and environmental domains. Bearing in mind that all these challenges are complex and systemically interconnected, this chapter offers multiple starting points for further dialogue. Futurists discuss the grand global challenges from a variety of perspectives. James Dator calls them the 'Unholy Trinity, Plus One'. Dator's Unholy Trinity is the end of cheap and abundant oil; multiple environmental challenges; and global economic and fiscal collapse. Dator's Plus One is lack of adequate government intervention. Jorgen Randers claims that a sustainability revolution is

under way, but that it will take most of this century to complete. He identifies five big issues, which are inextricably linked with the sustainability revolution and its likelihood of success. His big issues are the end of capitalism, the end of economic growth, the end of slow democracy, the end of generational harmony, and the end of a stable climate.[57]

Awareness of the urgency of action against climate change is now widespread. Even if we, we as humanity, have reached and signed the Paris Agreement, even if there is general agreement that urgent action is needed, something always comes up and prevents or postpones the actual implementation plans. This "something" is not only at the level of subjective or particular evasions or trickery, but also at a more "objective" level. The introduction of new situations (e.g. in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine) introduces a completely new group of unpredictable and uncontrollable actors who act according to an autonomous, unpredictable self-will. Although there was (once) unity and will on climate change, there are now divisions again, and the question is when the moment of urgent collective action will come again. If ever. Here we have the most fundamental level of the current paradoxical situation – even when something is urgent, even when there is an emergency, something even more urgent immediately emerges. We lacked time, but now we lack it even more; we lack it in an even more urgent sense of the word. We have no time, and yet we never get around to it; something seemingly more urgent keeps getting in our way, it keeps popping up. It is as if we are trapped, locked into a certain logic of time, that dictates a constant and random, ever-new emergence of emergencies, to the point of a perpetual reign of the Super-emergency.

There is an urgent need for action, perhaps more urgent than ever. This is now widely known and generally accepted, at least as far as climate change is concerned. However, even when there is agreement on the need for urgent action, something always comes up and prevents or postpones the actual implementation plans. We have called this "something" the Super-emergency, which always leads to a paradoxical situation – even when something is really urgent, even when there is an emergency; something even more urgent immediately pops up. We lacked time, but now we lack it even more, we lack it in an even

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[57]   Jennifer M. Gidley, *The Future: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 116.

more urgent sense of the word. We have no time, and yet we never get around to it; something seemingly more urgent keeps getting in our way or keeps popping up. It is as if we are trapped in a certain logic of time that dictates a constant and random, ever-new, emergence of emergencies, to the point of a perpetual reign of the Super-emergency.

Therefore, it is not only urgent to think about and deal with urgency and emergency per se, but with their particular deviation, even perversion – the Super-emergency. Even if we do not have time to think and act differently, as our leaders, the media, and propaganda keep claiming ("now we do not have time to hear, discuss, exchange opinions, talking"[58]; now is not the time to "philosophize, now is the time to act"[59]), we should insist on it. Or, as Žižek emphasizes in his text "Die populistische Versuchung": "The very urgency of the present situation can in no way serve as an excuse – it is precisely urgent situations that are situations of time for reflection [*Nachdenken*]."[60] And action, radical action, of course. With the aim of recuperating our common future. As Daniel Innerarity pointed out: "The most pressing matter for contemporary democracies is not to accelerate social processes but to recuperate the future. The future must once again be granted a privileged space on democratic societies' agendas."[61] In other words, what we have tried to show here is that what is really urgent and necessary for us now, today, is to free ourselves from this yoke of emergency in which we are imprisoned and which we have here called the Super-emergency.

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[58] Aubert, *La culte de l'urgence*, p. 89.

[59] Of course, there are many other dimensions, one of them the following: "Billions of dollars are spent every year researching how to reduce decision-making time, how to eliminate the useless time of reflection and contemplation. This is the form of contemporary progress – the relentless capture and control of time and experience." (Crary, *24/7*, p. 40.)

[60] Slavoj Žižek, "Die populistische Versuchung", in Geiselberger (ed.), *Die große Regression*, p. 309.

[61] Daniel Innerarity, *The Future and Its Enemies: In Defense of Political Hope*, trans. S. Kingery, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 17.

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