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## The Issues of Bio- and Psychopolitics in Pandemic Times as Reminiscences of the Romantic Glorification of Life

### ABSTRACT

The present coronavirus pandemic has confronted each of us individually and our society at large with new existential and theoretical-practical challenges. In the following article I present a look at the pandemic from the point of view of biopolitics (Michael Foucault, Giorgio Agamben) and psychopolitics (Byung-Chul Han). The reflections on biopolitics and psychopolitics, on top of the terms they used, make us aware of the fragility of human life on the one hand, and on the other hand, they encourage us to look for historical equivalents to our current struggle with the pandemic. For me, such an equivalent would be the culture of Romanticism: for example, works by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Juliusz Słowacki, and Friedrich von Schelling. Starting from a short description of the Romantic era, I proceed to my goal which is to show how, during the pandemic, fundamental questions asked by biotechnology and psychopolitics come to the fore as questions about us, human beings, and our individual and social survival.

**KEYWORDS:** biopolitics, psychopolitics, Romanticism, pandemic, bare life, *homo sacer*, achievement subjects

### STRESZCZENIE

Zagadnienia bio- i psychopolityki w czasach pandemii jako reminiscencje romantycznej gloryfikacji życia

Panująca pandemia koronawirusa konfrontuje każdego z nas indywidualnie, jak i nasze społeczeństwo z nowymi egzystencjalnymi i teoretyczno-praktycznymi wyzwaniami. W poniższym artykule przedstawię spojrzenie na pandemię z punktu widzenia biopolityki (Michael Foucault, Giorgio Agamben) i psychopolityki (Byung-Chul Han). Refleksje nad biopolityką i psychopolityką, jak i nad używanymi w nich pojęciami, uświadamiają nam z jednej strony kruchość naszego ludzkiego życia, a z drugiej strony skłaniają

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do szukania historycznych odpowiedników naszego obecnego zmagania się z pandemią. Odpowiednikiem takim będzie dla mnie kultura romantyzmu: przykładowo poświęcone tej tematyce utwory Johanna W. von Goethego, Friedricha Schillera, Juliusza Słowackiego, Friedricha von Schellinga. Wychoząc od krótkiej charakterystyki okresu romantyzmu, stawiam sobie za cel pokazanie, jak w czasie pandemii na pierwszy plan wysuwają się fundamentalne pytania zadawane w ramach bio- i psychopolityki – pytania o nas, ludzi, o nasze przetrwanie indywidualne i społeczne.

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** biopolityka, psychopolityka, romantyzm, pandemia, nagie życie, *homo sacer*, podmiot osiągnięć

## Introduction

In the past months, we have seen scenes previously known only from the genre of Hollywood disaster movies displayed by both social and mass media: deserted streets, empty store shelves, overcrowded hospitals, and funeral halls full of coffins. The SARS-CoV-2 immobilized the world. Politicians, epidemiologists, and economists have given interviews presenting their statistics and versions of their assessment of the situation. The effectiveness of different types of vaccines has become a hot topic. Political authorities have imposed far-reaching bans and restrictions, which have directly affected the economy, education, social and religious life. COVID-19 kills; therefore, life and saving it has become the center of the crisis. Information provided by the media concerns the nature of the virus, its spread, and the deadly threat that it poses mainly to certain segments of society.

The silent, stealthy spread of the epidemic, disregarding national borders and reaching all levels of society, has united people and separated them from each other at the same time, in a very special way. Using the Internet as a medium, new groups of people have emerged who motivate each other in the struggle for survival (the so-called survivalists or preppers), actively preparing for a long-term crisis, including possible radical changes in the social or political order on both a local and global scale (cf. Bowles, 2020). On the other hand, other groups have been protesting against the restrictions being imposed on them under the slogans of freedom instead of dictatorship.

Epidemics of all kinds have threatened humanity time and time again throughout history and taken many lives, from the biblical accounts of the ten plagues of Egypt to the great medieval plague (the Black Death). This is evidenced in literary and poetic works, from Homer's *Iliad* (1924) to Giovanni Bocaccio's *Decameron* (2000) to works of such contemporary

writers as Ling Ma (2018), who describes life in a futuristic New York City during an epidemic. The coronavirus pandemic has intensified the psychological impact of such works of literature and allows them to be read in a new light.

Can we learn anything from them with regard to how we approach the pandemic? Of course, we do know that history does not repeat itself, and that we are living in the times of the “fourth industrial revolution,” which in short is the era of the Internet and artificial intelligence. In times of pestilence, the unifying element between different historical eras is the question of basic survival, of human life, and saving it. However, it is not at all clear what we mean by “life,” and to what extent cutting off entire communities from the rest of the world is “protecting” or “saving” lives. The multidimensionality of the coronavirus pandemic situation has thus been commented on by politicians, psychoanalysts, and social philosophers, as well as in popular science writings and academic studies (cf. Peters, 2020; Chandler, 2020)<sup>1</sup>.

The following article discusses a view on the pandemic from the perspective of issues discussed by so-called biopolitics and psychopolitics, a view that roots back to Romanticism. Contemporary philosophers, like the poets, artists, and scholars of the Romantic era, seek answers to the complex questions about life with its individual, biological, and social dimensions. These questions have added importance when asked in the face of a significant threat such as an epidemic or pandemic. Generally speaking, I show what the basic turn towards broadly understood life, which the pandemic puts in question, is present in these two ideologically similar currents. On the one hand, the study of biopolitics, psychopolitics, and the concepts they use can revitalize our perspective on the historical period of Romanticism and its presence in contemporary culture? On the other hand, it is important to note that biopolitical and psychopolitical theorists have paid little attention to discussing their Romantic roots as a literary and philosophical era. Rather, they focus on contemporary social and political science paradigms.

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1 A forum for philosophical reflection on the coronavirus pandemic was created in 2020 by the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, which published Michel Foucault's text on “pestilent cities” as well as brief reflections by Giorgio Agamben (cf. *Coronavirus and philosophers...*, 2020). These texts are commented on by: Jean-Luc Nancy, Roberto Esposito, Sergio Benvenuto, Divya Dwivedi, Shaj Mohan, Rocco Ronchi, Massimo de Carolis (*On Pandemics...*, 2020). From the psychoanalytic perspective, the following authors published their reflections on the pandemic: Monique Lauret, Elisabeth Roudinesco, Pietro Pascarelli, Javier Bolaños, Julieta Lucero, Florencia Bernthal Raz, Evan Malater, Emma R. Jones, Pietro Barbetta, and Julia Kristeva) (cf. *Psychoanalysts facing coronavirus...*, 2020). Further literature on the subject is provided on the websites I mention.

## 1. Romanticism: the cult of nature and life force

Views on various types of disasters caused by natural forces, which may include pandemics, have evolved throughout human history. One of the significant dates in this matter is 1755, when, after the Lisbon earthquake, Voltaire (real name: François-Marie Arouet) wrote *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* (1755)<sup>2</sup>, dedicated to the event that, in addition to the death of many thousands of people and huge material losses, led to a “worldview quake.” In the broadest terms, Voltaire presents two polar opposites: on the one hand, there is the requirement to recognize the rationality of the natural world as a whole, in which law and order reign; on the other, there is the acceptance of the reality of physical evil, of its existence, which is not subject to rationalization, just as the sudden outbreak of a pandemic is not subject to rationalization. Voltaire oscillates between the “optimism” of rational order and the “pessimism” of the triumph of absurd evil. Philosophers of the Enlightenment rejected the traditional Christian notion that supernatural forces could intervene in the laws of nature. These laws began to be viewed through the lens of mathematical models. In 1779, the term *statistique* appeared in French to denote a quantitative method of studying mass phenomena, which is now called statistical inference. By the end of the seventeenth century, statistics was a branch of state science called *Political Arithmetick* (cf. Ostasiewicz, 2012). Over the years, it has evolved into mathematical statistics, intended to help capture and naturally explain complex, often difficult to grasp relationships between seemingly independent phenomena.

What Romanticism was, or is, is aptly characterized by Rüdiger Safranski:

Romanticism is an epoch. The Romantic is a state of mind not limited to one period. It found its fullest expression in the Romantic epoch, but it does not end with that age; the Romantic exists to the present day (Safranski, 2008, p. 6).

Described so broadly in scope and time, Romanticism encompasses science, literature, art, and philosophy, unifying the two aspects of an individual’s inner and social lives: Romanticism is the culture of its era. This

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2 Cf. also the passage from *Candide* referring to the Lisbon earthquake: “Scarce had they set foot in the city ..., when they perceived the earth to tremble under their feet, and saw the sea swell and foam in the harbor, and dash to pieces the ships that were at anchor. The whirling flames and ashes covered the streets and public places, the houses tottered, and their roofs fell under the foundations, and the foundations were scattered; thirty thousand inhabitants of all ages and sexes were crushed to death in the ruins” (Voltaire, 1991, p. 18).

is reflected in the views of mathematician, philosopher and scientist Friedrich von Schelling (1775–1854): “So long as I myself am identical with nature, I understand what a living nature is as well as I understand my own life” (Schelling, 1976, cited in: Fisher, 2020, p. 64, cf. Richards, 2002, p. 112). Schelling develops his organic philosophy of nature in opposition to Cartesianism, life for him being a Kantian scheme of freedom (encompassing the literal and the symbolic). Two aspects of the romantic view of life should be noted:

1. A view in which biology was treated as a scientific discipline in its own right, although combined with physics and chemistry as subsidiary disciplines subordinate to the search for a “new biology.” It was assumed that living organisms, unlike artifacts, are primarily goal-oriented and cannot be reduced to mechanical processes. The new biology was intended to realize a medicine inspired by the Hippocratic Oath and therapeutically oriented: “A new scientifically trained, activist physician would be one of the chief agents in spreading knowledge useful for economic and social improvement, thereby preparing the ground for the gradual emergence of a just society” (Lenoir, 1990, p. 119). The romantic metaphor of the universe as a dynamic and creative organism has been resurrected today and is being reused in scientific and colloquial discussions. For example, the biogenetic law, which characterized much of the Romantic naturalist’s speculation, has been reformulated and readapted to fit new discoveries and theories in the natural sciences of the twentieth century (cf. Esposito, 2016, p. 4–8). The terms “Romanticism,” “organic,” and “anti-mechanistic” were purely descriptive, implying that the aforementioned intentionality of biological organisms was not causal but regulative.
2. Issues of man’s unity with nature, the totality of life (organic, social, and individual), and the meaning of individual life are all among topics discussed in Romanticism. The thinkers of this period paid attention to the inner life of man – to spirituality, feelings, emotions, but also to the distinctiveness of the human person and their individuality. The assumed domination of emotion over reason was a rebellion against the existing Enlightenment reality and its social norms. Not only scientific empiricism and the rational arguments of the Enlightenment, but also literature, art, and poetry were accepted as methods of learning about the world. The typical romantic literary hero is a rebel who is confrontational in life and death, and also motivated to action by passions such as love or hate. The romantic hero demands freedom as the highest principle of his existence. This has a direct impact on the perception of his

passion, which he tries to live without regard for moral responsibility (cf. Hoffmeister, 1990, p. 169–170).

Among other things, pandemics were among the phenomena that posed a threat to such a conception of life, on its anatomical, spiritual, and social levels, as I demonstrate with the example of three Romantic authors and their understanding of life. On the one hand, life is a biological phenomenon, and on the other, it takes place in the spiritual-emotional sphere and has social consequences.

Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), a physician by training, is one of the greatest romantic dramatists in German literature. By the time he wrote his poem *The Plague* (*Die Pest*) in 1782, the black death that had been ravaging Europe for centuries had essentially subsided. By means of the metaphorical “poisonous mist” (*gift’ger Nebel*), Schiller characterizes the deadly pathogen of plague, which at the time had not yet been discovered. In the last stanza of the poem, the plague (as a protagonist) cheerfully, and alternately with a roar of pleasure, praises God in its own horrible way (“Rapture change to dread alarm. / Thus the plague God wildly praises!”, Schiller, 1880, p. 316), as if aware of its own biologicality, as determined by the laws of nature, and thus maliciously challenging either divine omnipotence or divine and human powerlessness. Death is seen as a permanent, indelible reality of human existence and consciousness. Infected with tuberculosis, Schiller said shortly before his death: “Death cannot be an evil because it is something general” (Wiese, 1978, cited in: O’Callaghan, 2011, pp. 256–257).

The Romantic period poet Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849), in his poem *Father of the Plague-Stricken at El Arish* (Słowacki, 1932), describes the plague as a biological phenomenon, negatively related to the concept of life. In the face of the plague, it turns out that nothing is given to man “permanently,” nothing is independent of the changing events of blind fate or the blind laws of nature. The protagonist of the poem is an Arab, the father of a family. His wife and children all die, day after day. This universal and psychologically profound poem is a tale of undeserved suffering, a struggle against a plague, but also against an unfeeling, merciless God-ruler against whom man has no rights: “I could not think that he would take from me / The four who yet remained within my tent” (Słowacki, 1932, p. 674). The infected family members die quickly and convulsively, one hundred and twenty days pass like a moment, and the whole family disappears from the face of the earth. The deadly plague acts as a biological machine accompanied by the violence and mercilessness of nature.

That sand-thou hast no children buried there / To thee it seems not menacing but fair, / Gilded perchance, a place of life and mirth- / To me it is the plain of hell on earth I (Słowacki, 1932, p. 678).

Above the desert shines the taunting sun:

The sun was not the brilliant orb on high, / The shining orb that yesterday I knew, / But was a vampire sun of ghostly hue. / The heavens too, which gazed upon the death / Of my three children, fading one by one (Słowacki, 1932, p. 674).

Hardly does the grief-stricken father lay his children in their grave, that already other biological organisms appear nearby – hyenas, “corpse-eaters” – attracted by the presence of decaying bodies.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) wrote in a letter to Charlotte von Stein (Rome, 8 June 1787):

Also, I must say myself, I think it true that humanity will ultimately triumph; only I fear that at the same time the world will become one great hospital in which one man will be the other’s humane nurse (Goethe, 1911, p. 332).

Today (February 16, 2021), according to data from Johns Hopkins University, we have had over 142 million people infected with SARS-CoV-2 and over three million dead in the around the world’s “great global hospital” (Center for Systems Science..., 2021). Coronavirus patients are in almost every country in the world. Our Earth is not only an enormous hospital, but since the pandemic broke out, it has become a great cemetery with mass graves. The mechanism of death is described by Goethe in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*:

You allow that we designate a disease as mortal when nature is so severely attacked, and her strength so far exhausted, that she cannot possibly recover her former condition under any change that may take place (Goethe, 1854, p. 285).

In a letter to Johann P. Eckermann, he wrote that when he was exposed to contracting putrid fever (*Faulfieber*), he only avoided it through a determined attitude of “moral will” and by the fact that “He stayed away from the world to stay healthy and fulfill his duties better and better” (Rossbacher, 2000, p. 67). His strategy still holds true today and is experiencing a renaissance: discipline and seclusion, staying in quarantine, avoiding contact, wearing masks, disinfecting rooms and hands.

The romantic defense of lofty and sacred ideals appealed to the beauty and majesty of the natural world and the value of the inner world of personal experience. Romanticism exalted the experience of the sacred and mysterious, but its explanation of those experiences pointed not, as in the

Middle Ages, to transcendence, but to nature. The Romantic answer to the question of where we must turn to discover true reality – the ultimate basis of consciousness, the source of meaning and beauty – was the same as that of the enlightened empiricists and materialists: to the depths of nature.

## 2. Biopolitics – the fight for “bare life”

In the following pages, I present the views of thinkers concerned with contemporary political, social, and cultural transformations: biopolitics and psychopolitics. Then I indicate their connections with the understanding of the phenomenon of life and its manifestations in the Romantic era outlined above.

According to Michel Foucault (1926–1984), a French psychopathologist, philosopher, sociologist, and historian, a radical transformation in the exercise of power is being revealed since the eighteenth century, when life itself became an object of concern for authority. He coined the term “biopolitics,” which he describes as: “a new technology of power ... exists at a different level, on a different scale, and ... it has a different bearing area, and makes use of very different instruments” (Foucault, 2003, p. 242). What Foucault means is biopower focused on life (individual human bodies and on whole populations), using different mechanisms from those of sovereign legal and political power. Biopolitics is a conceptual and operational framework for social development that promotes *bios* (life) as the central theme of every human endeavor, whether in politics, education, the arts, governance, science, or technology. In this conception, *bios* is a term that refers to all life forms on the planet, including their genetic variants from different parts of it. Modern biopolitics does not use a disciplinary mechanism, but acts as a population-wide control apparatus.

Foucault provided numerous examples of biopolitical control: “the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction” (Foucault, 2003, p. 243). Modern societies have created technological and political opportunities to variously regulate the life of the human species as such. Foucault claims that “what might be called a society’s ‘threshold of modernity’ has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies” (Foucault, 1978, p. 143). The French philosopher contrasts the biopolitical method of social control with the control exercised by political power in the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages, pandemics caused death to be understood as an integral part of life. In the late 18th century, with the advent of the natural sciences, the reality of death was shifted to the realm of the biological sciences. The development of vaccines and medicines, on top of the introduction of public hygiene recommendations allowed for



the control of pandemics and the prevention (and/or halting) of death in parts of the population.

The concepts of biopower and biopolitics are deceptive if they appear as current buzzwords providing a perspective on the actions of governments in times of pandemic. Foucault developed three models of thinking in relation to three infectious diseases that help us better understand the actions of governments in the face of pandemics than does the semantic cliché of “biopolitics” (cf. Sarasin, 2020). He repeatedly returned to models of these diseases and described the political response to them as three models for different forms of government: leprosy (power separates the healthy from the sick, excludes deviants and lunatics from society, preferably placing them outside the city gates so as not to care about them at all), plague (exercise of power by disciplining society; Foucault, 1995), and smallpox (power “coexists” with the pathogen, collects data, and compiles statistics; Foucault, 2009, pp. 255–284). Foucault did not talk about real pandemics, but he used the phenomena of infectious diseases as models of thinking in order to organize forms of power according to his ideal models. Something opposite to these models is happening now (2019–2021): we are living in the midst of a real pandemic. Societies are subject to top-down directives, and scientists are observing different ways in which power and governments operate shown through the media. What can we learn from the three models Foucault developed? We observe transitions and overlaps between different elements present in the three models. For example, the strict lockdown of the city of Wuhan resembles the plague model, while the way of handling the issue in South Korea or Singapore is oriented according to the smallpox model. Some European countries have also slowly moved or are moving towards this operating model.

According to the chronology provided by Foucault, biopower emerged in the West in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In other words, the genesis of biopower coincided with the literary historical period called Romanticism. Many scholars have actually connected Romanticism and biopolitics. The book by Robert Mitchell *Experimental life: Vitalism in Romantic science and literature* (2013), and Sara Guyer’s *Reading with John Clare: Biopoetics, sovereignty, Romanticism* (2015) convincingly demonstrate that the concept of biopolitics not only can shed new light on the well-known Romantic texts (philosophical, scientific, and literary), but also reveals some themes on Romanticism that have hitherto remained open: for example, the notion that Romanticism is a direct precursor to strong 20- and 21st-century nationalisms and environmentalisms.

In Romanticism, the artist or poet was often treated as a spiritual guide with a responsibility for the life of a nation or a population. The Romantics rejected the Enlightenment views treating the natural world as a regulated

organism; for them it was a primordial entity, a mysterious creation, eternally alive. In the Romantic era, responsibility for collective life was expressed, among other things, in the search for a new biology. Similarly, Foucault is concerned “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order” (Foucault, 1978, p. 138). Speaking of sustaining and ordering life, Foucault refers to the German Romantic notion of “cultivation,” construction or formation (*Bildung*), which functions as part of a particular apparatus of power: an apparatus of individualization and immunization. *Bildung* emphasizes experience, which is not reducible to the precepts of pure Enlightenment reason (cf. McCall, 2007, pp. 7–13).

Against thus outlined background, which emerges after Foucault’s announcement of the end of man and humanism, reflections of Italian political philosopher and totalitarianism scholar Giorgio Agamben emerge. The situation created by the coronavirus pandemic seems at first glance to resemble the realization of a biopolitical model: governments, advised by statisticians and doctors, are imposing a “pandemic dictatorship” on the entire population, while getting rid of all democratic obstacles under the pretext of “saving lives,” “health,” and “survival.” Ultimately, they are able to govern the human population as pure “biomass,” as “bare life,” biological life. It is no coincidence that these concepts are invoked by Agamben, who introduced the concept of “bare life” into contemporary political theory.

In the book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (1998), Agamben juxtaposes “sovereign power” and “bare life,” the „sovereign” and „holy man” (*homo sacer*). Both are outlaws: the sovereign stands above the law, and the holy man below the law; the sovereign defeats the law, while the *homo sacer* does not grow up to it.

The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life – that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed – is the life that has been captured in this sphere (Agamben, 1998, p. 53).

The sovereign can put anyone in a state of emergency and place the “holy man” in that state. For the authority, everyone is a potential *homo sacer*. For the “holy man,” everyone is a potential authority. Agamben argues:

It is not possible to understand the ‘national’ and biopolitical development and vocation of the modern state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, if one forgets that what lies at its basis is not man as a free and conscious political subject, but, above all, man’s bare life, the simple birth that as such is, in the passage from subject to citizen, invested with the principle of sovereignty (Agamben, 1998, p. 76).

The bare or pure life is the human being, the same as an animal, without any political definition or mediation. It is the isolation of metaphysics from various forms of concrete life that defines and conditions Western politics. Projects that assume that political communities are based on belonging or seeking to establish citizens' political rights are doomed to failure. The figure of the *homo sacer* is one of the most distinctive elements of Agamben's project to redefine sovereignty in biopolitical terms. In contrast to the concept of collective political sovereignty as the basis of state policy, the *homo sacer* refers to a more authoritarian model that relies on the role of state authority to simultaneously condition and contain the transition from a bare life to a rights-owning individual.

In *Homo sacer*, Agamben (1998) analyzes Foucault's work and places it once again in an area that the latter wanted to break with: the field of sovereignty. Agamben argues that the power of the sovereign is not tied to the ability to assert rights, but is implicitly tied to "bare life," which is a life incorporated into the political universe through paradoxical exclusion, and which is subject to the violence and decisions of the sovereign. It would be interesting to explore the notion of biological power in relation to sovereign power, in order to assess its significance and productiveness, and what this brings to our understanding of modernity and postmodernity.

Foucault described "pestilent cities" where authorities exercised surveillance to control the contagion of disease. It was a kind of early form of observing others that allowed the authorities to remain anonymous. The governments of these cities implemented administrative procedures at the street level with the intention of implementing quarantines understood in terms of "strict spatial division": "It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment" (Foucault, 1995, p. 195). Agamben, on the other hand, citing Foucault to some extent, writes about how COVID-19 has reinforced the tendency to impose and use the state of emergency as the normal mode of government during a pandemic.

One of the first phenomena that Agamben believes have manifested themselves in the wave of pandemic panic paralyzing entire countries is that our societies no longer believe in anything but bare life. On the one hand, it is clear that many of us are willing to sacrifice virtually everything – normal living conditions, social relationships, ordinary work, even friendships and religious or political beliefs – in order to avoid the deadly threat of disease (cf. Agamben, 2020). On the other hand, however, it appears that in many cases COVID-19 virus infection causes mild, flu-like symptoms. In addition, it is estimated that only a few percent of cases require intensive care. Hence questions about the accuracy of the news reports in the media and the reactions of the authorities, who themselves

did much to bring about the panic, thus creating a genuine state of emergency with severe restrictions on the daily life in almost all regions of the world.

With reference to the notion of *homo sacer*, Agamben criticizes “romantic ideology” (i.e., the illusion that poetry can liberate us from the bonds of culture and history), noting that it attempts to define the concept of “the people” in relation to the concept of “language” by explaining “something that was already obscure (the concept of a people) with the help of something even more obscure (the concept of language)” (Agamben, 2007, p. 144). He points out that the idea of there being an entity called “the people” or an entity called “the language” that can be clearly and coherently defined is a fiction of the Romantic thought, which (by establishing a “symbiotic equivalence” between the two concepts) transformed two adventitious and indeterminate cultural entities into almost natural organisms equipped with their own necessary rights and characteristics.

### 3. Psychopolitics – digitized world, digitized humanism

Born in Seoul in 1959, cultural theorist and philosopher Byung-Chul Han studied philosophy, literature and theology in Germany, where he now lives. He is among the most creative and prolific minds analyzing and critiquing contemporary Western society. In his view, we live in a society of biological survival that is ultimately based on the fear of death. Today, survival, or staying alive, appears to be the highest good, which creates a belief that we are in a constant state of war.

Life has never been as fleeting as it is today. Not just human life, but the world in general is becoming radically fleeting. Nothing promises duration or substance [*Bestand*]. Given this lack of Being, nervousness and unease arise. Belonging to a species might benefit an animal that works for the sake of its kind to achieve brute *Gelassenheit*. However, the late-modern ego [*Ich*] stands utterly alone. Even religions, as thanatotechnics that would remove the fear of death and produce a feeling of duration, have run their course. The general denarrativization of the world is reinforcing the feeling of fleetingness. It makes life bare. Work itself is a bare activity. The activity of bare laboring corresponds entirely to the bare life. Merely working and merely living define and condition each other (Han, 2015, p. 18).

The enlightened modern person has lost not only faith in God, but also her Romantic faith in nature, in the very reality of commonly understood reality. All of this makes human life radically ephemeral. Life in today's

digitalized, often virtual world and society, according to Han, is much more complex and difficult than life as a *homo sacer*. Authority acts in ways that elude theorists' observations; it allows itself to be granted the right to apply law in the name of a positively understood social good. Hyperactive people today are not subjected to the controls or disciplinary repression presented by Foucault. Society today is not one where the exercise of power is reduced to disciplining citizens by placing them in hospitals, nursing homes, insane asylums, prisons, barracks, or institutions. The place of such a society has long been taken over by a society of fitness clubs, office buildings, banks, airports, cheap airline tickets, the Internet, cellular networks, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories. The society of the 21st century, then, is not one of control, discipline, or isolation, but one focused on achievement and realization thereof. We are "achievement subjects." We are constantly encouraged to see our lives as series of new "projects" that we can pursue, with a myriad of opportunities for self-improvement that are offered to us. We are emotionally stimulated to achieve a variety of successes. We adore our personal projects, using smartphones that track our steps, likes, and shares of our "tweets" (cf. Han, 2017, p. 22). We are managers of ourselves. The walls of disciplining institutions that used to separate the normal from the abnormal seem anachronistic today.

Foucaultian analyses of the workings of power fail to describe the psychological and temporal-spatial changes that have occurred in the transition from a disciplined society to a society of achievement. The oft-used Foucaultian notion of the "society of control" does not reflect these changes either; it still contains too many negative connotations. In this kind of new society, economic capital becomes more important. But no enemy nor any strangers oppress us or threaten us or infect us from the outside of this understood modern society. We "burn out" with our countless self-improvement projects. The Internet, on the one hand, clarifies this process, but on the other, it exacerbates and facilitates this kind of burnout.

We are under the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic putting the society of achievement under increasing scrutiny and imposing biopolitically understood regimes of surveillance, control, and quarantine, resulting in the loss of previous freedoms. Collective fear and hysteria can put an end to living in our connected welfare. The present pandemic has already brought mass dying into the light of day, which in turn is causing increasing anxiety in a society focused on individual achievement (cf. Sigüenza & Rebollo, 2020).

Han (2020) lists nine characterizations of the coronavirus pandemic, placing it in a broader perspective than *homo sacer*, a summary of which I give below:

1. The coronavirus pandemic shows that human vulnerability or mortality is not democratic, but rather depends on the social status of the sick person. Dying was never democratic. The poor get sick and die on the outskirts of big cities, while the rich move to their homes outside the city.
2. A pandemic is not only a medical problem but also a social one. Countries with little social disparity fare better in times of crisis.
3. COVID-19 does not support democracy, but rather autocratic rule. In times of crisis, people are looking for strong leaders.
4. As pandemics develop, we are moving toward a biopolitical surveillance system. Not only our communication, but even our bodies and our health are becoming subject to digital surveillance. The pandemic shock will result in the consolidation of digital biopolitics around the world that, through electronic systems. It will take control and surveillance of our bodies, to create a biopolitical, disciplined society with constant monitoring of citizens' health.
5. The virus has shown that we live in a society of biological survival that is ultimately based on the fear of death. Survival is seen as something absolute, as if we are in a constant state of war. All vital forces are employed to prolong life. The survival society has lost its sense of quality of life. That which is pleasurable is sacrificed for the highest goal, i.e., health.
6. The pandemic makes death visible again. The presence of death in media makes people nervous. Survival hysteria turns society into something inhuman. Something or someone right next to us is a potential virus carrier and we need to stay away from it/them. The elderly are dying alone in nursing homes because no one is willing or able to visit them because of the risk of infection.
7. To survive, we voluntarily sacrifice everything that makes life worth living and the sense of community and intimacy worth experiencing. Religious communities give up services in order to survive. Love is revealed through alienation; the religious narrative of resurrection gives way to an ideology of health and survival.
8. The panicked reactions to the virus show that something is wrong with our society.
9. COVID-19 is probably not a good omen for the countries of Europe and the United States. The virus is a test for the functioning of various political and economic systems.

Asian countries, which tend to allow less liberty, took control of the pandemic fairly quickly. The winners in the fight against the coronavirus are such countries as Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan or Singapore, where an authoritarian mentality derived from the cultural

traditions (Confucianism) is still entrenched. To confront the virus, Asians are increasingly using electronic surveillance, and doing countless tests for the disease. These treatments may lead to the development of various methods of digital surveillance that are difficult to imagine for Western societies focused on individual achievement. In the aforementioned countries, not only virologists and epidemiologists, but also teams of computer scientists and Big Data specialists are fighting the epidemic and tracking the spread of the pandemic. According to Han, “‘Big Data’ enables prediction of human responses and the future, therefore, can be manipulated accordingly. Big Data has the ability to turn people into puppets” (Han, 2016). Big Data are a kind of continuation of the hopes placed in the aforementioned Enlightenment practice of statistical research.

The achievement society is shedding its increasingly negative perception of control that progressing deregulation is removing. Instead of prohibition, order or rule, there come: design, initiative and motivation. A disciplined society is constantly exposed to resistance expressed in a general “don’t”; this opposition in turn generates lunatics and criminals. Instead, the achievement society generates depressed people and losers. The positive phrase that defines achievement societies is the unlimited, often self-destructive “can,” the first-person plural of this affirmation is the widely known *Yes, we can!* It is supposed to express the positive nature of the new society. We are at the same time dealing with a kind of “exploitation”. Usually, “exploitation” means that someone is used by someone else. Han, however, believes that in reality, we are exploiting ourselves. “The crisis we are now experiencing follows from our blindness and stupefaction” (Han, 2017, p. ix). The “crisis” essentially refers to two things: first, the one of our democracy, caused by the shallowness of digital communication, social media, information overload, etc. According to Han, this crisis manifests itself in questioning the importance of critical thinking, respect, trust, etc. Secondly, it leads to consequences experienced on a personal level, such as stress, depression, professional burnout, suicide, etc.

The sudden presence of the invisible coronavirus puts a strong question mark on the “can” mentality, making us aware of the transience of the achievement-oriented life, and the camouflaged form of “exploitation,” also showing us the two aspects of the crisis in which our society has found itself.

#### 4. Conclusions

The multidimensional crisis created by the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the ambivalence of our human condition in the 21st century. On the one hand, it consists of an increasing number of cases and deaths,

a lack of clarity about the possibility of further recurrences of the pandemic, its side effects, and the effectiveness of different types of vaccines. In addition, it is accompanied by the closure of entire sectors of the economy, pushing the limits of health care capacity, the growing numbers of people with depression, and the increase in domestic violence. It is possible that the economic and social impact of the pandemic will keep affecting even the world's richest countries in the coming years. On the other hand, pandemic-induced development also provides an exceptionally favorable opportunity to restructure societies, perhaps not always in the spirit of democracy. The pandemic shook up many popular beliefs that had hitherto been considered more or less unassailable. State interventionism – in the economy as well as in culture – is again seen by many as a necessary aid to survival or maintaining pre-pandemic living standards.

In Foucault's work, biopolitics takes the form of concrete policies by authorities that target individuals not as "legal subjects" but as "living beings." For Agamben, the nation-state is to some extent biopolitical for the reason that it engages man not as a free and conscious political subject, but primarily focuses on *homo sacer*, the bare life of man.

Foucault and Agamben refer to the literary, philosophical, and cultural legacy of the Romantic era and show its reflection in biopolitics. In the latter's work, references to that era appear in historical retrospect, when, for example, he analyzes the birth of clinics or points to Romantic ideology. Han advocates the romantic cult of the individual, passionate hero as a symbol of resistance to what he sees as the modern cult of tranquility and achievement in the digitized world that makes it possible. "To me, the Romantic world of [German poet Friedrich] Hölderlin is the world of the future" (Han, cited in: Oltermann, 2017). Unlike Foucault's controlled society where people know that their freedom is limited, people in the achievement society are also controlled but are falsely convinced that they are free. This shift from disciplining the body (biopolitics) to controlling the mind (psychopolitics) is happening in a seductive and camouflaged way. Consequently, people become inclined to even aggressively exploit themselves until they burn out and begin to suffer from depression, for example. Somewhere along the way, the Romantic reference to reality and nature is lost in all that.

In conclusion, I would like to add that the scientific and practical use of the knowledge of philosophers, literary scholars, historians, and sociologists, in addition to the importance of the disciplines they practice, is not to multiply the knowledge of the debates these scholars have had with each other in peaceful times. The times of the pandemic are filled with real threats to life itself. Hence, the challenge for humanists or sociologists today is to be able to think fruitfully about the unknown, the disturbing,



the challenging, and even the repulsive. It is also to look for historical parallels, solutions, and to construct appropriate models that can clarify the current situation helping individuals and whole societies. They involve modifying historically existing debates, but more importantly, identifying new and current issues related to the COVID-19 virus pandemic in light thereof.

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