

Davor Löffler |

## What Is It Like to Be Schrödinger's Cat? And Other Tales from the Edge of Planetarization

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Davor Löffler is an interdisciplinary researcher with a Ph.D. in Sociology from the Free University Berlin. He works as a lecturer for History of Science and Cultural Evolution Theory at Leuphana University Lüneburg and as a teacher at the New Centre for Research and Practice.

Independent Researcher  
davor.loeffler@fu-berlin.de

### Where Philosophy Ends, Philosophy Begins

Nothing philosophical about the Coronavirus and the current situation can be said. A very clearly defined object and a very clearly defined state present themselves to us. There is a virus and, if you contract it, you may die. That's it. It is very binary, a simple yes or no outcome, a simple if-then relation. In its lack of ambiguity and contingency, the global situation does not leave any space for interpretation, exegesis, or contextualization. It is a material circumstance, hardly different, for example, from questions like whether an organism can take in sufficient amounts of air, water, or nutrition, or a meteorite striking the earth. Within the phase space of the trillions of possible viruses, one had developed a composition that allows it to nest itself in various hosts. Some of these hosts remain unharmed by the virus's reproductive capacity, while others with ACE2-receptors in the linings of their airways may suffer from the virus's evolutionary, obviously successful, path to proliferation.

The virus could have been harmless, too, just as most of its (non-) relatives are. In fact, there is no intentionality or subjectivity in it; it is merely a chemical process accidentally beta-testing some organic firewalls. Precisely, its unambiguous, mechanical mode of existence enables us to expose and understand its functionality, which in turn allows for a rational treatment. Correspondingly, most state leaders

and governments are responding to it in the most rational way - rational here meaning following whatever functional demands general technocratic and biopolitical necessities in a globalized world pose. Both the fact that the threat can be tackled by rational means as well as that the political leaders apparently are capable of rationality is somewhat soothing to see. (That they were always capable of rational assessment, even prior to this state of exception, means that global elites' efforts at postponing climate change measures were grounded neither in unawareness nor ignorance, but in calculation. This is, by contrast, not soothing.)

The newly declared codes of conduct are as simple as they can get: Stay away from the virus. From East to West and back again, every political system was confronted with the same challenge and activated the same emergency protocols.<sup>3</sup> In its sheer material givenness, Corona is indeed the "Great Equalizer," as the pop-icon Madonna stated, although in a different way than she may have considered it in her marble bathtub during isolation. It ontologically equalizes all humans by means of the same material process, and it politically equalizes all collectives by driving them to activate the same, non-cultural relativistic sets of practical solutions. By leaving but one focal point of action and intention, it brushes off all ideological or philosophical approaches to it, any semantical, class, or cultural relativity. By boiling existence down to a ubiquitous givenness needing no metaphysical questioning or epistemological tuning of terms and concepts, it crowds out space for philosophical inquiry. Ultimately it admits no political philosophy, too, as all current streams of thought (what we care for and direct our intention to) are converging in the organization of mere survival. While practical specialists in politics and science seem to be having their moment in the sun, the "know how" sublates the "know why," rendering all great dogmatic enframements and cathedrals as ruins of history. The philosophies

<sup>3</sup> It was psyops for population management when governments pretended that plans were not set from the beginning, as if every step taken was not directly dictated by the universal material circumstances. Of course, every state has such emergency plans prepared in greatest possible detail, readily waiting in the drawers, and designed to deal with looming ABC-warfare in the second half of the twentieth century. The stepwise activation of the protocols (playing it down, declaring to be well prepared, shutting down public events, shutting down social institutions, ordering social distancing - soon personal tracking and wearing mask in the West, too) was conducted for preventing panic and disorder that would have rendered any collective action ineffective. If there ever was a moment when a global disaster could have been prevented, this would have taken place in December of 2019, but even then, there would have been no real chance for a successful containment.

of twentieth and early twenty-first century (not to mention philosophies preceding knowledge of microbial worlds and all the galaxies of life within the human) have absolutely nothing to contribute to an elucidation of the situation. Dogmas on which we have grown accustomed to rely - Existentialism, the Philosophy of Language, Structuralism, Hermeneutics, Classical and New Phenomenology, Critical Theory, Media Theory, Constructivism, Poststructuralisms of all stripes, Systems Theory, Philosophical and Historical Anthropology, Science and Technology Studies, Actor-Network Theory and, come lately, the Hybrid-Theories, the Philosophies of the Post- and Inhuman and the New Materialisms - all crashed and dispersed in the moment our skins and minds touched the surface of the virus. Now, they all seem, at best, like fainting echoes swallowed up in the loudmouths of their scribes, self-declared sages and secular gurus (5-10 per generation), dampened evermore as the curtains of the nano-frontier draw closer.

Yes, "philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought," as someone once said. But that means, simultaneously, that time is philosophy. Times are primordial to their expressions, not least because expression exists only by historical difference. They are always messages from a different, a second past, which only becomes visible once a rupture in the lineage of the pasts occurs. Confronted with a new state of absolute totality, the outdatedness of philosophical dogmas became immediately exposed. Their words could not map the event. A metaphorical image for this can be found in the climax of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, when the archetypical trickster T-1000 is thrown into a barrel of molten metal. The shapeshifter desperately morphs through every form it learned to mimic in the hope of finding one able to withstand being engulfed by flames, but the non-entity and its many faces can only disintegrate in the purgatorial fire. Chaos to chaos, order to order, cosmical catharsis. It was too hot, it was too real for its virtuality. "The accident is the uncovering of the real," some other person said. The "great equalizer" Corona, the "Great Razor" of metaphysical assumptions, pares off previous epistemes from a world about to begin anew.

And where philosophy ends, philosophy begins. Now that the historicity and contextuality of philosophy has been laid bare and philosophical reasoning stripped of any remaining links to the new real, we are forced to wonder: What was all the philosophy about before

the virus? What was its status, what was its use, where was its truth? If we see now that, in the state of emergency, any prior state held as "natural" (capitalism, debts, "our" worldviews, philosophical inquiry as human condition, etc.) erodes and any vector associated with the former production of universals disperses into nothingness, what remains then of philosophy? Will it be switched on again the moment social machinery comes back into operation? And, if so, what does this tell us about philosophy and its striving for universality? Where does it exist, then, if it can be turned on and turned off by a chemical compound? About what exactly is it supposed to be informative? What kind of information does it provide? Does philosophy only work there, where there is an exchange value for symbolic meaning, a market for what may all too soon become, yet again, the "idols of the market," as someone once said?

Tipped and toppled from the throne of the absolute by the sheer materiality of existence, the philosopher has no choice but to concede: Where there is no breath, there is no body; where there is no body, there is no thought. This condition of the virus ultimately suggests how to reframe the question correctly: *When* does materiality allow for philosophy? Only once we have found the answer, can the inquiry continue: *Why* does materiality allow for philosophy? Philosophy begins where the world has shed itself of it and thought ascends in purity. New planet, new thought - new thought, new planet.

### What Is It Like to Be Schrödinger's Cat?

*I have a strange tickle in my throat for some time already. I wonder if... Today I woke up with a running nose. Could it be that... I feel a bit tired today. Is it a sign of... My joints feel kind of stiff. Does it mean... When will I know? Today? Tonight? Tomorrow? In a couple of days? I examine the past week: Where have I been, with whom did I talk, what did I touch? Was there something unusual about where I ate and what I drank? Did I touch my face? Did they say when a treatment, a medicine will be ready? Will I need help? Will I be able to help? When will I know?*

Yes, fully expressed, we all became subject to the following question: When will I know if I am already dead? Just like Schrödinger's Cat, our existence became a chimera of being alive and not being

alive. The difference is that the chamber containing us and the poison is not a spatial one, but temporal. More precisely, we do not even know whether we are or will end up in the chamber and exactly this uncertainty is the chamber. The chamber is formed by overlapping temporalities. The memory of linear time from the past from which we fell into the chamber is rendering the old past, as a whole, into a different, a second past, a past that leads nowhere, a past that is not the past of our current presence in the chamber and not the past of the future we are facing. The same goes for futurity. The other boundary of the chamber is made of the second future that coemerged with the second past, just in the moment the past ceased to exist and linearity broke. Our current situation in the chamber is found in the space gaping between the old past never to be seized again and the old future never to be reached again. We ended up outside of linearity and are held in a superposition of existential indeterminacy. A silent alarm in the dark is the new constant, duration without time, narrative without story.

But how can we know then? How can we observe our own indeterminacy? We find ourselves in a new state derived from the contrast to an old linearity which does not exist anymore, providing no grounding of the presence, while, simultaneously, linearity became exposed by the new state that does not exist without the rupture from the old linearity. Someone once called this a "catastrophe." All too many players are suddenly populating our presence and filling up the chamber. There is the old self, confused in its innocent belief in the things that were to come; there is the projected old self we should have been right now if everything would have gone as it should have, wondering if maybe still there is a chance for it to be; there is another self who is observing the disintegration of the old selves, sometimes bold to be, sometimes hesitant to be; there is another self who knows it may disintegrate soon in total. But there is yet another player who must not be forgotten: the experimenter outside of the chamber. The experimenter oversees processes within the chamber. Through the experimenter, the dispersed linearities are synthesized into the unity presenting itself to us as the reality we are facing. In the experimenter, the diverging temporalities are united. They will converge in the moment the experimenter comes into existence, the moment the experimenter concretizes. The mo-

ment the chamber opens constitutes both the experimenter and the cat, both the *position* from which we are observing what we are, could have been and may become and *that which* we are. This is our "eccentric positionality," as someone once said; the "view from nowhere," as some other person said; the glancing back on ourselves from a virtual futurity that constitutes that which forms us in every single moment of our existence. We, as the experimenters, are the background on which all the lines of our projections and the vectors of our selves are drawn. So, here, we have good news. As long as the experimenter exists, we still *are* despite being dispersed between times. And this is the most important thing we can know for now.

But, only for now; for we should remember that we were in this situation well before we stepped into the Corona-Chamber, in a much more extreme situation even, not as single individuals, but as the whole of humanity, the sapient layer in the holocenic composition of Gaia. Humanity as a whole has entered this unfortunate state of superposition, and, like Schrödinger's Cat, we cannot tell if we are still alive or already dead. Our presence on earth became an indeterminate state through our own existence. The presence has dispersed into a multitude of overlapping layers and vectors of temporalities of different lengths and widths, all of which were brought forth by anthropogenic environmental destruction. The presence, our presence dissolved into virtuality as it turned more and more into a mere glitter in the reflections of potential futures, of second order futures, the spectrum of futures of any futurity. Are we in a presence that will lead to a 2°, 3°- or 6°-Celsius future? Are we dead already or are we still alive?<sup>2</sup> We did not feel how we slipped into the chamber of absolute indeterminacy, since we had not developed a sensorium for it yet. We were incapable of knowing what it is like to be Schrödinger's Cat. Now, we know. Corona is a training ground for sensing our chances of accessing futurity.

### From Brute Globalization to Smart Planetaryization

When, in 1347, the Black Death arrived in Europe and went on its devastating course, the land already was in chaos and turmoil. The

<sup>2</sup> Although the drop in CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions due to the global shutdown may buy us some time and offer some hope, it also illustrates how vast the restrictions in energy consumption would have to be in order to stop global warming and how futile it is to think that merely local tunings within the current system could ever bear sufficient effects.

great political, economic, and technological achievements of the feudal, commercial, and agrarian revolution instantiated after 900 CE had led to a surge in productivity, which caused an explosive population growth from around 25 million to 90 million people by 1345. But the fourteenth century was anything but peaceful. The feudal institutions, originally successful organizational solutions to current problems, reached their limits and could not integrate the complexities and tensions arising in a population three times the size and density as at their onset. In this century of crisis, increasingly powerful political, clerical, and corporative entities began to rival one another for dominance and resources. Merchants and artisans of growing cities started to demand political rights, reform and peasant movements called for reconstituting religious structures and improvements to living conditions, monasteries rose to powerful factions, and, for a while, there were even three self-declared popes driving the fragmentation of the socio-political landscape further. At the same time, the bourgeois world slowly but unstoppably gained traction. The abstract matrix of social interactions based on prices, contracts, exchange value, and natural laws making up the core structure of Modernity's culture began to fan out from cities, markets, mechanical clocks, early factories and machines. But societies were still locked-in into traditional feudal institutions that blocked a long overdue system transition. Exactly here the plague stepped in and broke the path dependence of feudal institutions. By exterminating 30% of the population (depending on the area, between 20% and 80%), it necessitated a reconstitution of the managerial, administrative, and political system, which eventually lead to the onset of Modernity. Primarily it caused the end of serfdom. As the plague put holes and gaps into supply and production chains, it necessitated to distribute surviving workers flexibly and adaptively across the land in order to sustain agrarian production. This led to the instantiation of labor laws fixing prices in the emerging labor market, while, at the same time, taxation was centralized. The bureaucratization of production, as well as the centralization of command over drawing up borders (both internal and external for isolation), lead to state formation. As the land-to-labor ratio changed significantly, peasants, artisans, and merchants suddenly could become rich, which led to a strengthening of emerging modern working classes, the capitalist, and the citizen in general - all of which conditioned the formation

of concepts of equality and human rights (in this way the plague had an effect similar to the comet that made the dinosaurs extinct, thereby making possible the rise of mammalian underdogs). While this revolution in management and administration technologies marked the end of the feudal political structure, the shock of the plague also caused a shift in worldview. Elites were forced to legitimize themselves through effective leadership instead of tradition, rationality replaced belief, the materialist notion of the body took hold and aesthetics turned towards realism and beauty. In short, the Black Death broke the institutional and metaphysical lock-in, accelerated existing tendencies and initiated an otherwise unthinkable large-scale system transition, ultimately leading to Modernity.

*Cut to the year 2020.* Although Corona, fortunately, is not nearly as deadly as the plague was (due to the fact that humans, in the meantime, gained vast knowledge of the microbial world - and learned that it even exists at all), it presents us, citizens of hypermodernity, with a situation paradoxically similar to that of 1347. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the industrial, hygienic, technological, and second scientific revolution lead to a surge in productivity, which in turn caused an explosive population growth from less than a billion to the present world population of eight billion humans. But, just like in the late Middle Ages before the plague, today's main political and economic institutions are rooted in an earlier stage of civilization, a time that was characterized by very different technologies and a world of nearly twenty times fewer inhabitants. They were established in a phase of history during which newspapers and coffee houses still formed the public sphere, and the horse carriage was the fastest mode of transportation. Obviously, institutions more than 250 years old, such as the Westphalian System, parliamentary democracy, the invisible hand of the market, and the concept of infinite growth (originally successful solutions to current problems), have reached their limits today and can no longer integrate the globalized world's complexities and tensions they brought forth. Furthermore, these institutions themselves became the direct cause of the threats to the survival of humanity, be it in anthropogenic (correctly: capitalogenic) global warming and environmental destruction, exploitation or wars. The system grew inefficient in terms of equal distribution and sustainability, it became inflexible regarding

internal and external shocks and it became detrimental regarding its own consequences, as well as the conflicts it causes. This state, which some called “Hyperglobalization” and yet others “Capitalist Realism,” is the same type of crisis for humanity as the crisis of the late Middle Ages was for the inhabitants of Europe. It is a *meta-crisis*, a crisis not *within* the system, but *of* the system. Will Corona, too, break the path dependence and initiate a fundamental system transition? Will it mark the end of “Capitalist Realism?” Or will we soon simply return to “business as usual?”

Business as usual here, of course, means the continuation of *Brute Globalization*. Brute stands for raw, wild, ferocious, untamed, brutal, stochastic, unrefined, crude, violent, for conquest, hard colonization through blunt occupation, and soft colonization through enslavement by debt. *Brute Globalization* is a continuation of the Westphalian System. Territorially defined states act as collective robber bands grasping at resource hot spots under the flag of whichever humanist ideology they can best sell to their own people and institutions playing the part of global referee. *Brute Globalization* is the result of eccentric outward expansions of nations on the flat plane of the globe, foisting themselves as centers of gravity for the flows of energy and resources extracted from the periphery.<sup>3</sup> “Hyperglobalization” and “Capitalist Realism” are the path-dependent continuation of Modernity’s institutions.

The lock-in into this path dependence originated after 1918, when the currently still ongoing global “state of exception,” the perma-crisis of permanent search for growth, was instantiated after the industrialized nations (whose borders began to emerge after 1347) first circled the globe in the name of competition. But it is exactly the technologies developed during fierce competition among the global markets that now provide a chance for a change. Automation, internet of things, health monitoring, tracking, AI-driven patient aggregation, deterritorialized platform markets, and soon score systems are all undermining the current structure of production and

<sup>3</sup> Although the current agendas are seemingly smarter by securing resource flows in narrow corridors with military forces aligned along the global supply chain and trade routes leading back to the homeland, they are still not smart, since the smart wars with drones, preemptive strikes, and nudged regime changes by financed revolutions are still just the tools of the old, expansive, and crude colonization by nation states, just a bit more updated, a bit more “just in time,” and a bit more adapted to local circumstances, since full blown occupations became too expensive and risky.

surplus value extraction. And, as such, they contain the seeds of a new world. But its breakthrough is blocked still by atavistic traditions, institutions, norms, and mindsets. Conceiving of this transition does not require much in the way of “sociological imagination,” as someone once called it. If we could start from zero and reset society based on *currently* existing technologies, would we establish the same institutions again? Hardly. They would appear as cumbersome antiquities, both comical and obscene in their managerial obsolescence, inefficiency, and unsustainability.

But, as someone once said, “Where the danger is, also grows the saving power.” While witnessing the first political reactions to the Corona-Crisis, many observed, as if in great surprise, that “things *can* be different.” This observation triggered utopian fantasies of possible socioeconomic consequences resulting from the crisis, such as the introduction of permanent UBI, nationalization of companies, or reduction of fossil fuel-based mobility. Unfortunately, all these changes will, in all likelihood, remain wishful thinking. Initial measures aimed at alleviating the immediate consequences of the pandemic will not stick. In states of exception, the unusual always temporarily becomes the normal, similar to the state someone once called “war communism,” before social realities yield again to “business as usual.” But it is possible that the measures undertaken by the systems in order to restore and strengthen themselves after Corona will in the long run lead to overdue system transformation. The reinstatement of hyperglobalization supported by the new technological possibilities could ultimately result in the transition from *Brute Globalization* to *Smart Planetaryization*.

In order to restart the globalized economy and hold steady to its previous path, adding yet another prosthetic layer to the institutions at the core of *Brute Globalization* will be necessary. First and foremost, there will be the need to establish an early global warning system similar to the one established after the Tsunami disaster in 2004, in which globally distributed seismographs are connected and autonomously sound alarms for local governments. After Corona, governance institutions that exist today in the form of slow and legally non-binding wetware structures (e.g., the World Health Organization) will be partially externalized into an automated and decentralized network of epidemic detectors. This warning system will be



ecological and hybrid in nature, as it must not only integrate virological, epidemiological, and medicinal data, but also relate such data to information concerning local and global economies, production, consumption, mobility, and resources; technological potentialities, geology and climatology; even individual habits and cultural practices. This is the only way future pandemics, which from now on will haunt humanity on a regular basis, can be preemptively integrated into the system. In order to prevent another global shutdown, the warning system must closely follow holes in the tightly knitted web of resource flows as they emerge, morph, and move around the globe. This warning system will not only detect where pandemics puncture the global networks of supply and production chains, but, in its next iteration, it will predict their occurrence and activate political measures based on mere probabilities of future threats.

Interestingly, climate change will pose exactly the same challenge to the system of *Brute Globalization* as pandemics. From now on, regularly occurring natural disasters (hurricanes, droughts, fires, floods) will, similar to Corona and the Black Death, put holes and gaps in supply and production chains that are equally dynamic and emerging, morphing, and moving over the surface of the planet. In order to save globally interdependent economies, both upcoming pandemics and natural disasters raise the need for the establishment of an automated, decentralized detection and preemption system with governmental powers that allows immediate restriction responses and emergency protocols to be triggered. This first system of automated, globally cooperative emergency governance could turn out to be the larval stage of a new form of politics and economy, one in which the virtual provides the basis of automated decision-making.

Conceived in this way, *Brute Globalization* necessarily leads to *Smart Planetarization*. Smart means connected, hybrid, ecological, dynamical, balanced, intelligent, preemptive, precautious, integrative, recursive, sustainable, diplomatic, and holistic. *Smart Planetarization* is the next logical step in the development of cultural metabolism and the cumulative unfolding of civilizational history. In *Smart Planetarization*, a layer of discrete data points (i.e., functionally defined relations) of infinitesimal resolution is spanning over objects, systems, and processes of any kind, detecting, relating, integrating, and preempting their actions, movements, and growth.

By calculating and objectifying the probabilities of local and global future scenarios, a second universe layered over the material realm will be opened. Projected potentialities of futurity will form an own space within this realm, with compartments as real and priceable as a piece of soil around which a border is drawn. In *Smart Planetarization*, the diverse materialities, human, and non-human entities are commensurabilized through the rendering of their processuality and integrated for active and passive participation. This commensurabilization of the heterochronic and scale-variant systems of all domains is the precondition for transforming the potentials of any futurity of systems and processes on Earth's surface into values and of feeding them into distribution and exchange mechanisms. This automated pandemic warning system could thus spark the onset of the full entanglement of cultural metabolism with the planetary and of the futurity of cultures with the futurity of all futurity.

Such transitions are not new; they have happened before. Someone once conceptualized events like the Black Death or Corona as events of "Maximal Stress Cooperation." MSC-events are usually wars, but they can also be natural disasters or plagues. In such events collectives are challenged by existential threats and the individuals are forced to cope with and cooperate under maximal stress, as life and death are the only possible outcomes in and of these situations. These events test cultural practices, knowledge, and values and gauge their ultimate utility. In cases of success (that is, in the case of victory over the stressor), maladapted practices and norms are filtered out and the catalogue of traditional values and virtues is reset. In this way, a situation of "Maximal Stress Cooperation" can become the founding event of a new culture. Corona, with its own propositions of maximal stress cooperation, could become such a founding event. It might ready us finally for the long overdue transition to real planetarism.

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