

## Anthony Nestel | The World-Creating COVID-19 Protest in Tel Aviv

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Since the Israeli lockdown began due to COVID-19, the Israeli government has started passing anti-democratic bills in the name of the crisis. In response, the Black Flag movement organized a physical live protest in April 2020 in Tel Aviv, while maintaining social distancing. Organizers carefully measured and marked Rabin Square in central Tel Aviv with assigned spots, in the shape of an X, to safely accommodate as many protesters as possible according to the distancing guidelines. 2,800 spots were marked for protesters, which proved to be insufficient, and resulted in many people standing at the required distance on surrounding streets.

This protest, which had succeeded others that were held mainly online, physically united people in radical ideological and political disaccord. What occurred at the Rabin Square was something unique and unprecedented. As Chairman of the Joint List Ayman Odeh said in his speech during the protest: "It's not easy for me to stand among some of the speakers here tonight, but we need to see the main point - only through a joint Jewish-Arab struggle can we succeed." Odeh added, "This crisis presents a huge opportunity for a wide Jewish-Arab front for peace and democracy."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Josh Breiner, "Two Thousand Israelis Brave Coronavirus Fears to Protest Assault on Democracy," *Haaretz* (April 19, 2020). <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-over-a-thousand-israelis-brave-coronavirus-fears-to-protest-netanyahu-1.8781869>.

## COVID-19 and the Transindividual

2019 saw the emergence of a new virus that was named COVID-19. Many scientists discussed, prior to this emergence, the possibility of a new, highly contagious virus. They all agreed that a COVID-19-like virus would have tremendous and unpredictable ramifications for our highly globalized world. We now say that these scientists were absolutely right. However, what the scientists did not and could not predict was the quality of the encounter between the people of the world and this imperceptible, more-than-human wandering entity. Moreover, equally unpredictable was/is the human behavior regarding this ongoing encounter.

The French philosopher of individuation, Gilbert Simondon, identifies a "reciprocal relation"<sup>2</sup> between the psychic - the human's interior individuations - and the collective - the human's exterior individuations. These two correlated individuations continuously transform into new and emergent ontogenetic individuals, each in their own line or tendency, though never without impinging on each other. Inner individuations are required for the materialization of the collective and the collective broadens and intensifies the psychic into new and unprecedented individuations. This ontogenetic process is never linear but always an interpenetration. It is the power of the collective that transforms and individuates the human being by placing ever new and changing problems in front of her. The inexhaustible excess from which the individual contracts is what Simondon calls the *preindividual*<sup>3</sup>, or is, in other words, Deleuze's *virtual*.

What occurred with the introduction of the virus was that the protesters in Israel endured extra or deeper transformations by accessing the virtual even more. This extra contraction is what made this protest possible. Simondon defines this extra contraction as the *transindividual*. To partake in the transindividual, he argues, the psychic individual abandons something of her identity - this abandonment is always the result of a contingency, a disorganizing event - and must be contained and limited to personality marks and unique qualities - fundamental to social and collective existence.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuation psychique et collective à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information, potentiel et métastabilité* (Paris: Aubier, 1989), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Simondon, *L'individuation psychique*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

COVID-19 has been such an event. Some people *disindividuated* by renouncing - consciously and nonconsciously - parts of their identities in furtherance of a deviating becoming, an expansion of the reality of the virtual that made every individual and collective life possible but which the social always tries to contain and habituate. Nevertheless, the collective is imperative to the transindividual, it cannot be evoked without an encounter, something that a solitary individual can never accomplish. It is in this encounter that a "more-than-individual" and "more-than-collective relation"<sup>5</sup> is produced. With the transindividual, new and subtracted individuals can penetrate and originate something of the reality of the virtual, a new entity or event - in this case, the protest - that has the potential to transform collective and psychic life forever from within. How it will change is impossible to foresee.

### Black Flag and the Change of Strategy

Many journalists say the protest was an act against the coalition deal signed between Blue and White leader Benny Gantz and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. A deal that ended more than a year of political stalemate and deadlocked elections. Since March 2019, the Israeli population has been asked to go to the polls three times, in each instance producing a tie between Gantz and Netanyahu. On the third occasion, Gantz, after the introduction of the virus in Israel, made the scandalous move of joining Netanyahu - a Prime Minister Gantz called unsuitable for the position due to many corruption claims - and destroying his own centrist political party. The pair's deal incorporates an accord that Gantz would take over the position of prime minister in eighteen months. Netanyahu however, who will keep the prime minister position in the meantime, induced Gantz to consent to many political requests, one of which was veto power over the appointment of the following state prosecutor and attorney general in his many trials for bribery, fraud and breach of trust. Additionally, Netanyahu is allowed to choose half of the committee of designated judges.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 197.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Sales, "Five Important Points about the Gantz-Netanyahu Deal and Israel's New Emergency Government," *The Jewish News of North Carolina* (April 22, 2020). <https://www.jweekly.com/2020/04/22/5-important-points-about-the-gantz-netanyahu-deal-and-israels-new-emergency-government>.

Amid all of these political negotiations, Black Flag<sup>7</sup> organized its first protest on March 19th when a convoy of cars drove from all over Israel to Jerusalem for Knesset speaker Yudi Edelstein's "refusal to set up parliamentary committees and his attempt at thwarting Blue and White efforts to advance the replacement of Netanyahu."<sup>8</sup> The movement quickly transformed into a national phenomenon, one event turned into weekly protests in Tel Aviv and beyond. The culmination, in my opinion, occurred when many thousands of people decided to gather at the Rabin Square on April 16th against, according to some journalists and protestors, Gantz's coalition plans to join Netanyahu and other "controversial policies advanced by the government to curb the spread of the coronavirus."<sup>9</sup> So, what made the protestors assemble? Why this shift in strategy after many "safe" convoys and online protests? Why did people in radical disaccord decide to meet that night? I believe it was mainly out of a desire to create, to feel and perceive the new.

### The Creative Act

How to apprehend this desire and consequently the protest as an experience? I would postulate that the answer lies partly in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of affect. Affects, according to Deleuze and Guattari, are not to be represented in language or signification, they take place on a divergent register, an asignifying one, and can only be encountered in experience, as the passage from one intensity to another, and as a reaction, at the level of matter, in or on the body. They are what constitutes life as a whole. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, affects are the "molecular" "beneath" the "molar,"<sup>10</sup> the molecular understood here as what Simon O'Sullivan argues is, "life and art's intensive quality, the stuff that goes 'beneath,' in fact that always parallels, signification."<sup>11</sup>

Affect is what connects humans to the becoming of the world. It is the matter in and on us reacting, resonating and interacting with the

<sup>7</sup> Black Flag was initiated by three brothers and a sister who had not been previously involved in any political activity.

<sup>8</sup> Rina Bassist, "Israel's Black Flag Protest Gathers Momentum," *Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East* (April 26, 2020). <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/israel-benjamin-netanyahu-benny-gantz-knesset-black-flag.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Bassist, "Israel's Black Flag."

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by B. Massumi (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 43.

matter of the world. The creative act for Deleuze and Guattari is an “access point,” the gateway to a divergent world of molecular transformation - a different experience. They argue that this is what renders the creative act abstract: the rendering visible of imperceptible forces.<sup>12</sup> John Rajchman writes about this notion of the abstract as the realm of potentialities prior to figuration. The creator - in this case the protestors - come to experience the world as intense, not as the repetition of the old, but rather “filled with unseen virtuality of other strange possibilities.”<sup>13</sup> This is, I would argue, what occurred prior to the protest at the Rabin Square. The night of the protest was a coming into being of what was previously seen with the help of the transindividual. We must not, however, interpret this “seen” as a clear image but rather as a strange possibility for experiencing the radically new.

That night redefined what a protest is, and what a protest can do. The creators that night generated a different world, a new experience for themselves and the rest of the world. That night people performed otherwise, in a relational milieu stripped of all their self-centredness. The (prior) right-wing Israeli Jew cared for the Palestinian body, and vice versa, not entirely out of self-care, but also out of care for the event, for the relational potential that surpassed them as individuals; for the realm of affect, the possibility for another molecular becoming. This performativity, I believe, did not entirely serve the purpose of a critique or a sense of what a different future might entail but rather it was the presentation of a creative work in progress. It was the making and unfolding of a creative act in close collaboration with an abundance of human and more-than-human entities. COVID-19 did/does not only decrease our capacity to act, it has the ability to also produce joyful encounters, those which increase our capability to act in this world.<sup>14</sup>

The protestors did not encounter their habitual Selves that night nor did they encounter the habitual Other. The role the protestors

performed was that of an asubjective body amongst a performance as an event. The habitual and the intellect were cast overboard. The encounter was not with this or that subject, but with a body on an X. These Xs functioned as a choreography of care, in search of unknown affective encounters. For Deleuze, affective “imageless thought”<sup>15</sup> encounters are forced into action via the interruption of ordinary notions and habits. These encounters are the genuinely new and are embedded in paradoxes. The protest’s form is no longer its recognizable one; the right-wing Jew is no longer recognizable as the right-wing Jew; the left-wing Jew is no longer recognizable as the left-wing Jew; the Palestinian is no longer recognizable as the Palestinian; “I am no longer recognizable as myself.” The imageless thought in the encounter, as many of the protestors experienced that night, defies recognition.<sup>16</sup> The creative act and its unfolding was an expression and manifestation of the domain of affects; the realm of affects here being understood as the virtual. This protest truly involved a moving beyond the recognizable: a kind of over-coming of oneself via the transindividual into the virtual. How can that not be a creative act?

### The Virtual and the Possible

In his speech, Ayman Odeh brings up an idea for a better possible future world to come. However, while the future is tremendously important, as is the critique of the unfolding present, the other-worldliness created and expressed in the protest was, I would argue, world-creating in its very becoming: another world and not merely a springboard for a better, different world far into the distant future.

What was at stake in the protest was not only the setting up of a possible futuristic world that would ultimately require certain conducts for its realization. Realization, in this instance, always already resembles the real, according to Deleuze.<sup>17</sup> The idea of a possible

<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> The new equals the unrecognizable, as Deleuze argues in *Difference and Repetition*, “the new - in other words, difference - calls forth forces in thought which are not the forces of recognition, today or tomorrow, but the powers of a completely other model, from an unrecognized and unrecognizable *terra incognita*.” Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 179.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 211. In *Difference and Repetition* (1997) Deleuze makes a crucial distinction between the possible and the virtual: “The only danger in all this is that the virtual could be confused with the possible. The possible is opposed to the real; the process undergone by the possible is therefore a ‘realization.’ In contrast, the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself. The process it undergoes is actualization. It would be wrong to see only a verbal dispute here: it is a question of existence itself.” Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 1994), 181-82. Art is another way to describe this creative act according to Deleuze and Guattari.

<sup>16</sup> John Rajchman, *Constructions* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 61.

<sup>17</sup> For Spinoza, encounters will always have different characters: certain encounters will be fruitful, others not as much. Joyful encounters are of the joy-intensifying type, the ones that increase our capability to act productively in the world. Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. by W.H. White (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2002).

Jewish-Arab front is already an actualization minus its realization. Contrarily, the actualization of the virtual is always a genuinely creative act. This protest actualized invisible universes, affects that prior to their actualization were real but unable to be envisaged or conceived. Consequently, following Deleuze, the process of realization and actualization differ in kind with the former functioning via resemblance (representation) - intellect - and the latter via distribution (difference) - affect. This grants the protest an ethico-political imperative because it implicates a moving beyond the previously familiar and a reordering of the world. Ultimately, the political cannot but also be situated in the new, in the creative act that brings about a genuinely new experience.