

“Western Despotism” By Gianfranco Sanguinetti¹

The conversion of the Western representative democracies to a completely new form of despotism has, because of the virus, taken on the juridical features of *force majeure*² (in jurisprudence, *force majeure* is, as we know, a case of exonerated responsibility). And thus the new virus is, at the same time, both the catalyst of the event and the distraction of the masses by *fear*.³

Notwithstanding the hypotheses that I have made since the publication of my book, *On Terrorism and the State* (1979),⁴ about the manner in which this conversion from formal democracy to despotism would take place (at least to my ineluctable eyes), I confess that I didn't imagine that it would take place under the pretext of a virus. And yet the ways of the Lord are truly infinite. As are those of the Hegelian *cunning of reason*.⁵

We can say that the only reference [to such a turn of events], as prophetic as it is worrisome, is the one that I've found in an article that Jacques Attali,⁶ former patron of the BERD bank,⁷ published in *L'Express* during the epidemic of 2009.⁸

“If the epidemic becomes a little more serious, which is possible, given that is transmittable by people, there will be truly global consequences: economic (the models leave one to believe that this could involve the loss of three trillion dollars, or a decrease of five percent in the global GDP) and political (due to the risks of contagion). We would have to put into place a global police force, a global stockpiling and thus a global fiscal policy. Thus we would come, much

¹ Gianfranco Sanguinetti, “*Le Despotisme Occidental*,” dated 1 April 2020 and published on 20 April 2020 in *Lundi Matin* #239. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! on 20 April 2020. All footnotes by the translator, except where indicated. Sanguinetti's title echoes the title of a well-known work by Karl August Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism. A comparative study of total power* (Yale University Press, 1957). Thanks to Fabrice de San Mateo for pointing this out.

² Latin in original.

³ *Author's note*: I see that Edward Snowden has arrived at the same conclusion in an interview with him that was published on 10 April 2020:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5OAJnveyJo>.

⁴ Originally published in Italian in 1979, *Del terrorismo e dello stato* has been translated into English by Bill Brown as *On Terrorism and the State* (Colossal Books, 2014).

⁵ In German, *List der Vernunft*. Cf. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (German original: 1837).

⁶ See our review of Jacques Attali's *Noise* (first published in French in 1977 and translated into English in 1985), which includes some rather odd praise for Sanguinetti's pamphlet, *Truthful Report on the Last Chances to Save Capitalism in Italy* (first published in Italian in 1975 and translated into English by Bill Brown in 2014): <http://www.notbored.org/attali.html>.

⁷ The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

⁸ That would be the “swine flu” pandemic.

faster than economic reason alone would permit, to put into place the bases for a truly global government.”⁹

The pandemic was envisioned thus: how many [computer] simulations were run by the large insurance companies! And by the protective services of the States, too. Several days ago, the former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, returned to the necessity of a global government: “Gordon Brown has urged world leaders to create a temporary form of global government to tackle the twin medical and economic crises caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.”¹⁰

It is hardly necessary to add that such an occasion could be *seized upon* or *created*, without anything important changing. Once the intention is there, and the strategy designed, it suffices to have a pretext and then to act as a consequence of it. Not one of the heads of State was taken by surprise, except perhaps right at the start, due to stupidity. Afterwards, from Giuseppe Conte to Orban, from Johnson to Trump,¹¹ etc., all of these politicians – no matter how boorish they might be – quickly understood that the virus authorized them to do what they pleased with the old constitutions, rules and laws. The state of necessity would pardon all illegalities.

Once terrorism – which was exploited a bit too much, we can all agree on that – had exhausted the majority of its potentialities, which had been so well developed everywhere during the first 15 years of the new century, the moment came to pass on to the next stage, which I announced in 2011, in my text *Du Terrorisme au Despotisme*.¹²

Incidentally, the *counter-insurrectionary* approach that the improperly called “war against the virus” has taken up immediately and everywhere confirms the intention that underlies the “humanitarian” operations of this war, which isn’t being fought against the virus, but against all the rules, rights, guarantees, institutions and people of the old world: here I speak of the world and the institutions that have been in place since the French Revolution and that are now disappearing, under our very eyes, over the course of several months, indeed, as quickly as the Soviet Union disappeared. The epidemic will end, but the measures, possibilities and consequences that it has unleashed and that we are now experiencing will not. We are giving birth to a new world in pain.

Thus we are witnessing *the decomposition and the end of a world and a civilization*, that of bourgeois democracy, with its parliaments, its rights, its powers and its counter-powers, henceforth perfectly useless, because the laws and coercive measures are now being dictated by the executive [branch of government], *without being immediately ratified by parliament*, and

⁹ Author’s note: https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/sante/avancer-par-peur_758721.html.

¹⁰ Author’s note: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/mar/26/gordon-brown-calls-for-global-government-to-tackle-coronavirus>. [Translator: I have quoted directly from the English-language original.]

¹¹ Giuseppe Conte is the Prime Minister of Italy. Viktor Orban is the Prime Minister of Hungary. Boris Johnson is the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Donald Trump is the President of the United States.

¹² A Google search for this phrase, previously unknown to me, only brings up links to the present text. Since the same results occur when I translate this phrase into Italian (Sanguinetti’s first language) – *Dal terrorismo al dispotismo* – we may safely assume this text has not yet been published in any language.

because the judicial powers, as well as the powers of free [public] opinion, are losing even the appearance of independence and thus their function as counter-weights.

And so, the people are being brusquely and traumatically conditioned (as Machiavelli has established: “the damage must be inflicted all at once, so that those who experience it do not have time to savor it”):¹³ the *citizen*, who disappeared a long time ago and was replaced by the consumer, now sees him- or herself reduced to the role of simple *patient*, over whom one may exercise the right to life or death, to whom one can administer any treatment whatsoever, or even decide to kill, according to his or her age (productive or nonproductive) or following any other criteria that has been decided upon arbitrarily and without the right of appeal, upon the discretion of the caregiver or other people. Once he or she has been imprisoned at home, or in a hospital, what can he or she do against coercion, abuse or arbitrariness?

In Italy, for example, the Constitutional charter was suspended without causing the least objection, not even from the “guarantor” of the country’s institutions, President Mattarella. Become simple anonymous and isolated monads, subjects no longer have any “equality” to assert or any rights to claim. The law itself will no longer be prescriptive, but has already become discretionary, like life and death. In Italy, we have seen that, under the pretext of [fighting against] the coronavirus, one can kill, straight away and with impunity, 13 or 14 unarmed prisoners,¹⁴ whose names, crimes or circumstances do not even have to be given, and *no one gets upset*. The Italians have done even better than the Germans did at the prison in Stammheim.¹⁵ They should admire us, at least for our crimes!

Other than money, nothing is discussed anymore. And a State like Italy is reduced to begging from the sinister and illegitimate Eurogroup¹⁶ to get the capital necessary for the transformation from a democratic form to a despotic one. This is the same Eurogroup that, in 2015, wanted to savagely expropriate the entire national heritage of Greece, including the Parthenon, and to confer it to a German-controlled fund in Luxembourg. Even *Der Spiegel* characterized the diktats of the Eurogroup as “a catalogue of atrocities” intended to humiliate [*mortifier*] Greece, and Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, in an article published in *The Telegraph*, said that, if one wanted to put a date on the end of the European project, that was it. Now the thing is done. Only the Euro remains and only provisionally.

Neo-liberalism has had nothing to do with the class struggles of old; it doesn’t even have a memory of them; it believes it has erased them from dictionary. It believes itself to be all-powerful, which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t fear class struggle, because it knows full well what

¹³ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter VIII. The translation that I prefer – the one done by Angelo M. Codevilla and published by Yale University Press in 1997 – renders this as “injuries must be done all together, so that, being tasted less, they offend less” (p. 35).

¹⁴ Cf. Zoe Tidman, “Coronavirus: 12 inmates dead and 16 escape as Italy prisoners [sic] riot over lockdown measures,” *The Independent*, 12 March 2020. According to a blatant lie told by Alfonso Bonafede, the Italian Minister of Justice, “Unfortunately, 12 inmates have died from what initial findings suggest are mostly overdoses on drugs taken from the medical room during the disorder.” <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-italy-prison-riots-death-toll-modena-foggia-alfonso-bonafede-a9396311.html>.

¹⁵ The prison at which several members of the Red Army Faction were murdered by the German authorities, circa 1976-1977.

¹⁶ A group composed of the Ministers of Finance from the countries that participate in the European Union.

it is preparing to inflict on the people. It is obvious that the people will soon be hungry; it is obvious that the unemployed will be numerous; it is obvious that the people who work off the books (four million in Italy) will have no support. And those who have precarious employment, and who have nothing to lose, will begin to struggle and engage in sabotage. This explains why the strategy of the response to the pandemic is, above all, a strategy of *counter-insurrection*. We will see this in spades in America. The FEMA¹⁷ camps will soon be full.

Thus, the new despotism has at least two good reasons for imposing itself in the West: one is to confront the internal subversion that it provokes and expects; the other is to prepare for an external war against a designated enemy, which is also the oldest despotism in history, about which we have learned nothing new since the publication of *The Book of Lord Shang* in [China during] the fourth century BCE. This is a book that all Western strategists should hasten to read with the greatest attention. If one should decide to attack Chinese despotism, one must begin by demonstrating to it that one is better than it *on its own terrain*, that is to say, more effective, less costly and better performing. In brief, a superior despotism. But this *remains to be seen*.

Thanks to the virus, the fragility of our world now appears in broad daylight. The game that is currently being played is infinitely more dangerous than the virus and will cause many more deaths. And yet our contemporaries only fear the virus.¹⁸

It seems that the current era has tasked itself with contradicting what Hegel said with respect to the philosophy of history: “the history of the world is the progress of the consciousness of freedom.” But freedom itself only exists insofar as it struggles against its opposite, he would add.¹⁹ Where is it today? When in Italy and France, people denounce those who do not obey?²⁰

If a simple microbe has been enough to throw our world into obedience to the most repugnant despotism, this means *that our world was already so ready for despotism that a simple microbe would be enough*.

The historians will call the time that is now beginning *the era of Western despotism*.

¹⁷ The Federal Emergency Management Agency, not at all a factor or player in the current crisis in America, but a perennial bugaboo for conspiracy theorists.

¹⁸ But see Giorgio Agamben, “*L’invenzione di un’epidemia*,” *Quodlibet*, 26 February 2020, among others.

¹⁹ “World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom – a progress whose necessity we have to investigate” (Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*).

²⁰ Here in America, those who do not obey – those who are protesting at the State capitols in Michigan, Ohio, Colorado and elsewhere against stay-at-home orders and other anti-viral measures – are, judging from all appearances, not freedom-loving libertarians, but fundamentalist Christians, Nazis and other *fucking idiots*.