Arne Höcker (University of Colorado Boulder)

“Everybody makes it until they don’t”: Survival as Metaphor

Abstract:
We are obsessed with the specter of disaster and we seem to be living in catastrophic times. Since the events of 9/11, we exist in a state of high alertness and live with the constant awareness of threats of global proportion. Terrorism, war, and forced migration, ecological instabilities and economic uncertainty, all contribute to an atmosphere of heightened anxiety. On the one hand, this situation has caused an increased desire for security and resulted in urgent calls for more assertive political measures that do not rarely threaten to weaken our constitutional rights. On the other hand, we have responded by adapting to a rhetoric of survival that informs our cultural imagination and guides our individual reactions to an alarming growth of contingency in our lives. From the success of TV-series to Giorgio Agamben's thoughts on the state of exception, this essay traces and analyzes the pervasive language of survival in popular culture and critical theory. I argue that "survival" must be seen as a central term for understanding how we conceptualize our lives in face of a perceived constant threat, and what this means for our responses to disaster and catastrophe. Against the background of recent events such as the refugee crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, this essay offers a discussion of the (bio)political consequences of a society that increasingly imagines its own reality as one of survival.

Draußen ist feindlich
Einstürzende Neubauten

Now I’m feeling Zombiefied
Alien Sex Fiend

Preface

It does not happen often that one’s scholarly work is confronted with events of such global and historical scale that the legitimacy of its publication would be highly compromised without addressing the consequences for the presented argument. This paper set out to critically discuss the social, cultural, and biopolitical implications of a metaphorical shift within the semantics of survival that can be observed in the past three or four decades. It argues that this metaphorical shift manifests in an ideology of individual responsibility for failure and success, and results in unconditional acceptance of hierarchies and divisions in capitalist society. Initially, this paper was

composed as a contribution to a seminar on "Forms of Survival" at the 2018 convention of the American Comparative Literature Association in Los Angeles.[1] The seminar identified "survival" as a key term for understanding the continuous state of anxiety and high alertness caused by an increase of global ecological and economic crises. At that time, I did not image that I would revise my essay for publication under the global threat of a virus-induced disease called Covid-19. While I write this at the end of March 2020, I am sitting in my suburban home obeying a statewide order to stay inside due to the coronavirus pandemic. The latest news I read concerns a decision in the Alsace area in France to no longer intubate patients older than 75, a directive that has most likely already been in place—officially or not—in Italy, Spain, and New York, where the medical capacities have long been exhausted. While I seem to have a relatively good chance to survive the pandemic and in all likelihood do not have to expect life-threatening consequences from the economic recession that will follow with absolute certainty, there are many others also in my own social network for whom a mandatory lockdown or—where it is left to personal decision—the public demands for individual responsibility will be followed by not yet foreseeable consequences and life-altering uncertainties. What the pandemic and the expected unprecedented economic breakdown will mean for the so-called Global South far exceeds the limits of my imagination.

Running the risk of overstating my essays contribution to the current debate regarding the biopolitical consequences of the 2020 pandemic, the following pages will attempt a critical genealogy of the present situation. I suggest that an investigation in the current uses of the concept of survival will give us access to an ideological layer of our political economy that has informed

[1] I want to take this opportunity to thank Dominik Zechner for co-organizing this seminar with me and for generously sharing with me his insightful and important thoughts on, what he termed, "philologies of survival".

decisions responsible for the lack of preparedness with which we currently confront a virus that many have long predicted.[2] As my discussion will repeatedly touch on theoretical positions and concepts that have become central to the public intellectual debates about the biopolitical dimension of the current global crisis,[3] I will return to addressing the implications of my paper for the present situation in the concluding chapter. First, I will analyze the semantics of survival in its contemporary discursive variations as they appear in popular culture as well as in critical theory.

Who is a Survivor?

This question is pointedly addressed in an episode of Larry David's HBO comedy show, *Curb your Enthusiasm*.[4] Titled "The Survivor," the episode's plot can be summarized quickly. After ten years of marriage, Larry and his wife decided to renew their vows, and Larry made an appointment with the Rabbi to discuss the ceremony. During their meeting, the Rabbi asks Larry if he can bring a friend to the rehearsal dinner, adding that his friend is a survivor. Larry does not object, and back home with his wife, they have the generous idea to invite an old family friend, who also is a survivor and who might welcome the opportunity to meet someone who shares his experience. The day of the dinner comes, the guests are arriving, and Larry welcomes the old survivor friend, who wears clear marks of the trauma of the Holocaust, and who is indeed curious to meet the other

[2] See Mike Davis, *The Monster at our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu* (New York, London: The New Press 2005).
[3] This debate, initially triggered by a short article that the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben published on the website of the newspaper *Il Manifesto*, will more closely be discussed in the conclusion of this essay. English translations of some of the most important contributions to this debate can be found on the website of the European Journal of Psychoanalysis: http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/ (last visit March 27, 2020).
[4] See "The Survivor." *Curb Your Enthusiasm.* HBO. New York. March 7, 2004. Television.

survivor. It turns out, however, that the Rabbi's friend is not a Holocaust survivor, but a winner of the TV-Show *Survivor*. When the party sits down at the dinner table, it comes to a showdown between the two "survivors," each of them trying to outdo the other, to play down the other's suffering, and to stage themselves as the "true" survivor.

Following the broadcast of the episode, some have argued that Larry David had gone too far, not taking seriously the trauma of the Holocaust. But rather than satirizing Holocaust survivors, the show reveals something about today's approaches to trauma and survival. On the most superficial level, the episode mocks and criticizes our culture of victimhood, in which a life without sneakers, toiletries and a gym is considered hardship. But there is an additional and more profound layer of criticism to be found in this episode. It goes without saying that the two survivors are not even close to having shared similar experiences. The difference in their appearance alone speaks volumes: the strong, tall, tan, and young TV-Star Colby, whom the women at the table admire and pay their attention; and the old Sully, who lost an eye in the concentration camp and carries visible signs of the horror he lived through. Sully's anger is understandable: if we think of people like Colby when we hear the term survivor, the memory of the Holocaust will soon be gone. Survival has become a show, a spectacle, a demonstration of strength and power. Today, survivors look like Colby: healthy, strong, and admirable. And precisely this is the crux that suggests that the Holocaust survivor and the TV-show survivor still belong to the same order of things, although on the opposite ends of the spectrum. The TV-show *Survivor* stages survival as survival of the fittest; in the logic of the show there can only be one, only one will win the million Dollars and will carry the title of "sole survivor". This "sole survivor" will not only have mastered the dangers of nature, or what our civilized minds can still imagine as such. In Larry David's episode, the TV-show

survivor Colby brags: “The whole time, everybody is backstabbing me and undermining me trying to get me kicked of the show.” The main task of the show is the social challenge to survive the others and to demonstrate willingness to walk over dead bodies. An experience that Holocaust survivors share in a literal sense, and that makes their survival such a difficult task that many have failed because they could not live with the guilt that goes with having survived all the others. The TV-show *Survivor*, however, stages assertiveness, authority, and unscrupulousness as necessary and rewarding qualities. The message is that those who want to make it in this world must prevail, must be willing to make sacrifices, and should not become emotionally attached to anyone, particularly not a teammate. A survivor has to demonstrate, we might want to call it: leadership qualities.

The episode from Larry David’s *Curb your Enthusiasm* is a disturbing witness to an essential modification in the concept of survival that has increasingly overwritten and even replaced the concept of life itself. In the introduction to an essay collection from 2011, titled *Überleben: Historische und Aktuelle Konstellationen*, Falko Schmieder speaks of survival as new “Grundbegriff der ‘Nachgeschichte’,” as an essential concept of posthistoire that is no longer capable of imagining historical alternatives.[5] Schmieder points out the semantic vagueness of the concept to which it would owe some of its current popularity. While the essays in his edited collection attempt to carve out the different cultural and historical variations of the concept and distinguish between its traumatic, anthropological, and everyday applications, I will purposefully adhere to the semantic fuzziness of survival to which it undoubtedly owes its particular strength to

[5] Falko Schmieder, “Überleben. Geschichte und Aktualität eines neuen Grundbegriffs,” in *Überleben. Historische und aktuelle Konstellationen*, ed. Falko Schmieder (Munich: Wilhlem Fink, 2011), 9.

affect and to assign urgency to current cultural, social, and political debates. As Larry David's episode shows by confronting the social Darwinist concept of survival with that of the Shoah, the semantic scope of survival covers completely different and even antagonistic experiences that we would not dare to compare. The confrontation of the Holocaust survivor Sully and the TV-show survivor Colby might indeed be comic and shockingly inappropriate at first, until the realization sets in that the semantic overlap has its historical equivalent reminding us of the devastating consequences of a society that lets its socio-political decisions be guided by the biopolitical principles of social Darwinism and racial engineering.

But even when accounting for all the differences of the concept in its various historical and cultural contexts, there always seem to remain two essential points of reference. First, survival, in all of its facets, relates to questions of power.[6] And, second, to the concept of survival corresponds the perception of the world as a hostile place that constantly threatens its inhabitants with catastrophe and disaster. It is against the background of these conceptual references that I want to follow present cultural and theoretical manifestations of survival in this paper.

[6] Elias Canetti has emphasized this important relationship between survival and power and has analyzed the connection to the process of social separation and individuation: "The moment of *survival* is the moment of power. Horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. The dead man lies on the ground while the survivor stands. It is as though there had been a fight and the one had struck down the other. In survival, each man is the enemy of every other, and all grief is insignificant measured against this elemental triumph. Whether the survivor is confronted by one dead man or by many, the essence of the situation is that he feels *unique*. He sees himself standing there alone and exults in it; and when we speak of the power which this moment gives him, we should never forget that it derives from his sense of *uniqueness* and from nothing else." (Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1984), 227).

The Grammar of Catastrophe

In her 2010 novel *die alarmbereiten*, Austrian author and essayist, Kathrin Röggla, presents a tableau of collages, in which she explores the genre of the catastrophe narrative and the discourse of crisis. The last chapter, titled "deutschlandradio," follows a radio show broadcasting phone calls from concerned citizens in the wake of an unnamed disaster. The callers complain about the unreliability of the responsible state institutions by which they feel abandoned. Instead, praise is given to neighborly helpfulness, spontaneous solidarity and general humanness in the face of catastrophe: people come together in times of crisis. Then, the following dialogue:

– the woman who called earlier wants to say something again and asks: did one now survive?
– pardon?
– she means: did one now survive, or will there be more coming at us?
– i am not sure. they didn't say anything about it in the news-special about an hour ago.
– it is not clear, if it is over yet.
– yes it is, one has survived.
– but the all clear will not be given, that's just the situation one has to live with.[7]

Avoiding narrative contextualization, *die alarmbereiten* spells out what Röggla called elsewhere "die Katastrophengrammatik," the grammar of catastrophe, that we have to study "because it is

[7] "- die anruferin von vorhin möchte sich noch einmal zu wort melden und fragen: hat man jetzt überlebt?
- wie?
- sie meint: hat man jetzt überlebt, oder kommt noch was auf uns zu?
- ich weiß nicht. in der sondersendung vor einer stunde haben sie darüber nichts gesagt.
- es ist ja nicht klar, ob es vorbei ist.
- doch, man hat überlebt.
- aber vollständige entwarnung wird nicht gegeben werden, das ist nun mal die situation, mit der man leben muss." Kathrin Röggla, *die alarmbereiten* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2010), 180 (my translation).

spoken anyways, because it is our daily bread, because it is the language that is spoken above our heads, the ruling language."[8]

This grammar of catastrophe significantly constitutes our perception of the world we live in. Accordingly, this world and this life appear to be in constant danger; we learn this every day when we open the paper, go online, turn on the TV, when we switch from CNN to the weather channel to ESPN. We live in and with the situation in which, as Röggla's radio host puts it, the all clear cannot be given. But yes, we survive! Indeed, the caller's naive question whether one has now survived, employs the correct terminology, but the wrong tense. One will not have survived, one survives. Under the constant threat of catastrophe, and under the constant spell of its rhetoric—again: "the all clear cannot be given"—to live means to survive. Certainly not in the same philosophical sense in which Jacques Derrida in his last interview with *Le Monde* famously identified life with survival.[9] In the language of catastrophe and anxiety, however, survival is a key concept, and it has begun to absorb, to affect, and to overwrite the determinations of the concept of life with its own logic. In this context, survival might be seen as life in its highest possible intensity, as Derrida argued, but as the title of Röggla's novel already suggests, it is life under constant alert and highest attentiveness, anxious life.

[8] Kathrin Röggla, "Die Rückkehr der Körperfresser," in *besser wäre: keine: essays und theater* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2013), 38 (my translation).
[9] See Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, transl. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York, NY: Palgrave McMillan, 2007).

"I will survive"

Today, we all are survivors. Everyone will be able to recall an event, an illness, an accident that qualifies them as survivor. We all belong to a group of people who have managed to get out of a somewhat dangerous and life-threatening situation, and we can all choose from a colorful selection of awareness ribbons to remind us of our fight for survival. As Ellwood Wiggins points out in his essay published in this issue, survival implies an active, seeking will, and is thus to be distinguished from the passive concept of endurance.[10] The claim to be a survivor is a claim for agency. Those who survive not only passively endure hardship and suffering, they moreover demonstrate fitness, strength, and power over life and death.

This particular conception of survival seems more essential, however, to US-American than to European culture, and it might help explaining some of the current conflicts between the Western powers regarding the options of how to respond to economic and ecological crises.[11] We seem to be living in catastrophic times; floods, earthquakes, the threat of terrorism, new viruses and the return of extinct diseases; even the climate has turned against us. We begin to suspect that our attempts to control nature and to exploit its resources have essentially contributed to nature's rebellion against us. But there seem to be two conflicting narratives in response to this situation. In the tradition and terminology of 19th century moral and judicial discourses, what I would like to call the European narrative refers to our guiltiness against nature, emphasizes our own

[10] See Ellwood Wiggins, "Enduring Myth: The Survival of the Unfit in Sophocles, Heiner Müller, Ursula Krechel, and Hans Blumenberg," *The Germanic Review* 95 (2020): ***-***, ***.
[11] The vital role of calamity, disaster and its representations for US-American culture has been analyzed among others in Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: The Making of Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

responsibility and holds us accountable in order to reverse as much as possible the damage that has been done. Can the melting of the polar ice caps still be stopped? Might it already be too late? The other narrative, the American so to say, works differently: it does not linger on questions of reversal and reparation, but puts an emphasis on technology. Accordingly, the solution is not to restore what once was, but to control what will be.

It is the latter narrative that coincides with the concept of survival. It is deeply rooted in American culture, and its connection to capitalism has often been noted. In his 1993 essay, "Everywhere you want to be: Introduction to Fear," Brian Massumi focuses precisely on this connection. His essay starts out with a Timex commercial: three cases of ordinary people who experienced some kind of extraordinary accident and survived. A rock climber who survived a fall from an 85-foot-high cliff, a pilot who fell from a plane and hung onto it until it landed, and an adventurer who survived a skiing expedition to the North Pole. They have in common that they survived a dangerous situation and that they are wearing a Timex wristwatch. Just as the watch "they take a licking, but they keep on ticking." The message, Massumi concludes, is that we are all survivors. We have all fallen, if not from a plane or a cliff, then at least from the stairs or the hammock. We are survivors of the everyday and everyday survivors.[12]

"Every day," Karl Marx wrote in *Capital*, "brings a man 24 hours nearer to his grave, but how many days he has still to travel on that road, no man can tell accurately by merely looking at him. This difficulty, however, does not prevent life insurance offices from drawing, by means of the

[12] See Brian Massumi, "Everywhere you want to be: Introduction to Fear," in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 3-38. A more recent discussion of the concept survival in capitalist culture can be found in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing*, The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

theory of averages, very accurate, and at the same time very profitable conclusions."[13] While accidents never happen in a perfect world, as Blondie knew, life insurance offices introduced us to survivor benefits.[14] The mark of distinction is given to us by something that has *not* happened to us but potentially could have and eventually will. We have learned that we do not survive by our own power but by accident. Literally!

The protagonists of the Timex commercials carry common names, they work average jobs, and they buy affordable watches. They are easy to identify with and it is easy to participate in their extraordinarily average lifestyle: you just need to buy the watch. In a world in which household accidents are on the rise, Timex customers Lynn Hill, Hank Dempsey, and Helen Thayer seem to offer some kind of stability and security. It seems to be the same stability that we attempt to draw from narratives of catastrophe; they can be fictional or real, as long as they sustain the promise of the spectacle. What Susan Sontag wrote in her 1965 essay, "The Imagination of Disaster," has not lost any of its timeliness: "we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror."[15] As Sontag has shown, both threats are combined, addressed and resolved in 1950s and 60s science fiction films by, at the same time, reflecting and allaying worldwide anxieties.

Yet, the latter does not seem to apply anymore. It is Kathrin Röggla, again, who points out the difference:

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[13] Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume 1: The Process of Capitalist Production*, transl. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1906), 227.
[14] Blondie, "Accidents Never Happen," *Eat to the Beat* (New York: Chrysalis, 1979).
[15] Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1965), *224*.

> It really seems to be the case that the decision for the authoritative present tense of the catastrophe narrative has irrevocably been made. Nowhere else does our obsession with the present become more obvious. No longer do we care about past and future; we are exclusively driven by practical constraints and the need for immediate reaction. Only the protagonist of a catastrophe flick might wonder, "How did I get here?" But we already know that we live in a world, in which nothing is up for discussion anymore, because everything is constantly about survival and the quick reaction to always already established circumstances.[16]

The fantasy of catastrophe, disaster or science fiction films up to the 1990s was based on identification with the individual hero who—as we can take for granted from the moment he or she enters the screen—will survive, often by means of individual faculties such as courage, intelligence, willingness to do hard and dirty work. The epitome of this hero might have been Bruce Willis with his dirty white tank top in the series of *Die Hard* movies. But the narrative pattern that had worked so well for three films between 1988 and 1995, seemed to be completely antiquated when Willis was sent to the big screen again in 2007 to fight a group of cyber terrorists. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the blockbuster has been replaced by the success of TV-series, which by its mere format seem to be much better suited to represent today's cognitive uncertainties and social instability and a life that is lived with the constant awareness of its contingency. TV-series react to the increasing loss of identification in our everyday life with the willingness to sacrifice the individual hero. No longer can we be confident that there are characters whose survival is guaranteed. Survival is now based on serialization, it does not know a happy

[16] "Es sieht wirklich so aus, als ob die Entscheidung für das herrische Präsens der Katastrophenerzählung allerorts gefallen ist, denn wo sonst zeigt es sich deutlicher, das Gegenwartstier, das uns heute alleine reitet, das weder Vergangenheit noch Zukunft kennt, nur Sachzwang und Reaktionszwang. "Wo sind wir hineingeraten?", mögen sich allenfalls Protagonisten eines Katastrophenstreifens fragen, wir wissen längst, wir befinden uns in einer Welt, die nicht mehr diskutierbar ist, weil es eben ständig ums Überleben geht und die schnelle Reaktion auf immer schon feststehende Verhältnisse." Röggla, "Die Rückkehr der Körperfresser," 25 (my translation).

ending, and literally functions as a cliffhanger. One can start out with *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) and Special Agent Dale Cooper's final look into the mirror, in which he recognizes his evil counterpart Bob who has disguised himself in the body of the only protagonist whose morality had not been compromised.[17] When Omar Little in the highly acclaimed show *The Wire* (2002-8) is shot to death in a corner store by a 10-year old, in a scene of terrifying banality, also dies the show's only character of identification and the last reference to the old outlaw hero and the individual who still makes his own decisions.[18] *Game of Thrones* (2011-19) became famous for sacrificing its protagonists almost arbitrarily and without the blink of an eye. And the zombie-revival show *The Walking Dead* (2008-) does not know actors with guaranteed job security. The show's executive producer, Gale Anne Hurd, denied in an interview that the show's leading character, Rick Grimes, played by the actor Andrew Lincoln, would have the best chances to survive with the following statement: "In this world, nobody is safe! No holds barred. That includes Rick. The truth is, we never want to lose anybody … but it's the nature of this universe."[19] The same message here as elsewhere: everybody is replaceable, life is precarious. Even more, in the context of the zombie apocalypse to die for the plot means to die for the survival of the species.

On May 18, 2011, a few months after the first season of *The Walking Dead* had been broadcast, the United States' *Center for Disease Control and Prevention* posted on their website a survival tutorial for the zombie apocalypse in order to raise public awareness of emergency preparedness: "Plan your evacuation route. When zombies are hungry they won't stop until they get food (i.e.,

[17] See "Beyond Life and Death." *Twin Peaks*. ABC. New York. June 10, 1991. Television.
[18] See "Clarifications." *The Wire.* HBO. New York. February 24, 2008. Television.
[19] https://www.today.com/popculture/walking-dead-producer-new-season-no-holds-barred-8C11306212 (last visit, September 24, 2019).

brains), which means you need to get out of town fast! Plan where you would go and multiple routes you would take ahead of time so that the flesh eaters don't have a chance! This is also helpful when natural disaster strike and you have to take shelter fast."[20]

The message is clear: be informed, be prepared, don't wait until it is too late, listen to the warnings, follow the instructions, take them seriously, the future is uncertain, we are not safe. In a 2005 essay titled "Fear," Brian Massumi reports that the color-coded terror alert system that had been introduced by Homeland Security in 2002 in reaction to the 9/11 attacks, has "danced ever since between yellow and orange," between elevated and high risk. The best scenario on this scale is green or low; "no risk" or "safe," Massumi concludes, "has fallen off the spectrum of perception."[21]

We have begun to establish our present in the consciousness of survival. No longer do we think of survival as a possible scenario in a future catastrophe, we are already surviving. Life is survival in permanence. This might just be the way that we process our anxieties. However, we no longer trust in the principium individuationis. The metaphor of the zombie apocalypse, used by the CDC and more recently again as a training scenario by the Pentagon, makes clear that this is no longer about the individual but about the species.

[20] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preparedness_101:_Zombie_Apocalypse#The_blog_post, last visit September 21, 2019.
[21] Brian Massumi, "Fear (The Spectrum Said," in Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique 13.1 (2005), 31.

To Make Survive

In our familiar academic terminology, we are inclined to use the concepts *bio-power* and *state of exception* here. In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault famously introduces his theorem of bio-power and argues that a society's "threshold of modernity has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question."[22] Simplified briefly, Foucault distinguishes between three different forms of power: sovereign power, disciplinary power, and bio-power. While disciplinary power regulates the behavior of individuals in the social body by initiating the organization of vast spaces of enclosure (schools, prisons, asylums, hospitals, army barracks), bio-power addresses man not as individual but as part of a population or species (birth and death rates, statistics of life expectancy etc. are the first objects of knowledge on which the new power is based). More recently, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben took on Foucault's concept of bio-power in order to combine it with the political concept of a state of exception to argue that the camp (as in concentration camp) has not been a historical anomaly, but that it would indeed be the hidden matrix, the nomos of our current political space. Following Foucault's concept of bio-power and in the footsteps of Walter Benjamin's, Carl Schmitt's and Hannah Arendt's thoughts on the state of exception, the concept of survival has assumed as central role in Agamben's theory: "Biological life, which is the secularized form of naked life and which shares its unutterability and impenetrability, thus constitutes the real forms

[22] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 143.

of life literally as form of *survival*."[23] Of particular interest for Agamben is the mirroring relation that Foucault assigns to the old sovereign power and modern bio-power. While sovereign power, according to Foucault, was based on the right "to make die and let live," the essence of bio-power is to be found in the reversed formula "to make live and to let die".[24] While Foucault emphasizes the difference between the two forms of power and their historical exclusivity, Agamben claims that there is a hidden but fundamental connection. The inclusion of bare life into the realm of the political, he argues, would be the essential core of sovereign power. The figures of the *homo sacer*, the embodiment of naked or bare life, the disenfranchised who is outlawed and deprived of all rights, and the sovereign, who decides on the state of exception and therefore also stands outside the law, for Agamben, belong to the same juridico-political order. It is crucial for Agamben's theory that bio-power under the aegis of sovereignty still emphasizes the power over death, and in contrast to Foucault, does not aim at the production, progression, optimization, and reproduction of life. According to this logic, to live is only imaginable as survival. In regard to recent political and technological developments, Agamben therefore wants to find the essence of our time in a third formula: "no longer either to make die or to make live, but to make survive. The decisive activity of bio-power in our time consists in the production not of life or death, but rather of a

[23] Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 8.

[24] "I think that one of the greatest transformations political right underwent in the nineteenth century was precisely that, I wouldn't say exactly sovereignty's old right- to take life or let live- was replaced, but it came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it. This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite right. It is the *power to 'make' live and 'let' die*. The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die." (Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, transl. by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 241.)

mutual and virtually infinite survival."[25] Agamben's historical paradigm for this shift is Auschwitz as the place, where the bio-political model is radicalized up to the very point where life and politics, life and law, zoe ("bare life") and bios ("qualified life") become indistinguishable and where there is no difference anymore between the establishment of a norm and the application of the law. Agamben has been harshly criticized for neglecting the singularity and for violating the incomparableness of Auschwitz and to cross-fade the Nazi concentration camps with Guantanamo and the soccer stadium, in which asylum seekers have been imprisoned. But he also keeps emphasizing that he does not declare the camp the paradigm of modern politics because of what happened in the concentration camps, but rather because of the judicial and bio-political dispositifs that made the camp possible as a place with the potential to bring every form of life into the form of survival. If nothing else, this opens up a critical perspective on questions of how to organize our personal freedom without committing our lives to uncompromising contingency. The camp is a place where everything is possible; it puts at stake the relation of life and law. After this fact, it is impossible to return to the old state of things. In reference to the Nuremberg and the Eichmann trial, Agamben concludes, that "the law did not exhaust the problem" of Auschwitz, instead, the "problem was so enormous as to call into question law itself, dragging it to its very ruin."[26]

But is Agamben's concept of survival that, by its crucial reference to Auschwitz is not detachable from the image of the Holocaust-survivor, compatible with the ways in which we today organize our lives in constant reference to survival? Whatever one wants to think of Agamben's approach, the concept of bio-power could certainly be suitable to draw connections between the historical

[25] Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 155-56.
[26] Ibid., 20.

preconditions and consequences of the Shoah and the ways in which we stage today's society as a society of survival.

In her essay "Überlebensgemeinschaften," Eva Horn has analyzed the cultural variations of modern biopolitics in catastrophe films since the 1990s.[27] Our fictions of survival, Horn claims, are almost always built on blood, be it one's own or that of others: it is either the community that must defend its existence against an alien species, or it is the nuclear family strengthening its bond by the experience of disaster. Horn finds the modern biopolitical program in the fact that our fictional characters do not survive anymore by means of virtuous faculties but because others have to die. The most relevant observation of Horn's essay in the context of this paper is that confrontation between species as the most common narrative in catastrophe fiction, is increasingly replaced or superimposed by a narrative that no longer emphasizes otherness but is essentially organized around equality and identification. Everybody is equal, everybody has the same right to live, but someone must die for others to survive. The catastrophes of these plots are usually manmade, and there is no other who can be held responsible; we are alone with ourselves and we are forced to make decisions about who will and who will not be saved. The Earth appears to be a restricted place, where space and resources are limited, and one might be forced to secure one's own life by letting or making the other die. Deeply buried in our thinking about austerity, that today we are used to attributing to the politics of Angela Merkel, we find a persistent element of biopolitics, and Eva Horn reminds us that this is not only true with regard to worst-case scenarios but also for common debates about assisted suicide, geriatric care, therapy for incurable patients

[27] See Eva Horn, "Überlebensgemeinschaften. Zur Biopolitik der Katastrophe," in Merkur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken 10/11 (2013), 992-1004.

and their economic justifications. The worst-case scenario eases us into thoughts that we forbid ourselves to think under the circumstances of everyday life.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with brief discussions of two contemporary scenarios in which the logic of survival examined in this paper becomes particularly apparent in all its gravity: the continuing Mediterranean refugee crisis on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the still ongoing global Covid-19 pandemic.

Scenario 1: Shipwreck with Spectator

According to German philosopher Hans Blumenberg, humans have sought to grasp their existence above all through a metaphorics of the perilous sea voyage, and, one could add, in light of catastrophe. In his 1979 essay, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, Blumenberg analyzes the evolution of the complex of metaphors related to the sea, to the shipwreck and the spectator.[28] The nautical metaphor for human existence is particularly interesting where it reflects the perspective of the spectator and contributes to the philosophical contemplation of the human condition. The witness of shipwreck enjoys satisfaction of safe passage through catastrophes, the pleasure, one might want to say, of one's own survival. Blumenberg's essay, however, shows that the meaning of the metaphor does not remain stable, but rather changes over time and influences the ways in which we conceptualize our forms of existence. While the Greek philosopher Aristippus, for example,

[28] See Hans Blumenberg, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer: Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1979).

argued that shipwrecks would make humans reflect and, by doing so, would turn them into philosophers, others demonized seafaring as a foolish transgression of human boundaries. The metaphor of shipwreck with spectator originates with the Roman Lucretius in the last century BC. In the second book of "The nature of things," Lucretius writes: "Pleasant it is, when on the great sea the winds trouble the waters, to gaze from shore upon another's great tribulations." But it is not the pleasure to witness the other's misfortune, as the following verse shows: "not because any man's trouble are a delectable joy, but because to perceive what ills you are free from yourself is pleasant."[29] It is the experience of distance that Lucretius's use of the metaphor foregrounds and with this experience of one's own secure position offers a form of self-consciousness and confidence to the spectator, who is thus liberated from the feeling of fear.

Following Blumenberg's history of the metaphor, it is the Enlightenment period that abandons this contemplative perspective onto the world and places the figure of shipwreck in the context of world discovery and conquest. No longer is it a contemplative distance that is considered to be the premise of cognition, but active curiosity that has to take the risk of shipwreck. As a consequence, the spectator now becomes part of the observed event. No longer a merely philosophical metaphor of self-reflection, shipwreck with spectator now assumes a moral and aesthetic stance. Over the course of Blumenberg's study of the metaphor, the spectator loses the position of an outside and distanced observer who can take a secure position from which he can reflect on himself and the world.

[29] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, transl. by W.H.D. Rouse. Loeb Classic Library 181 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 95.

In light of recent events, it seems appropriate to add a new chapter to Blumenberg's metaphorological survey. Shipwreck has again become a familiar image that we witness with eerie frequency. Daily we are confronted with boats overflowing with people who entrust their lives to the sea and the forces of nature. While we often react with pity to the image of those who drowned or are washed ashore, we also tend to feel threatened in our own existence and justify our anxieties by conceptualizing our own lives by means of metaphors of catastrophe borrowed from those in nautical distress: "waves of refugees are flooding into Western Europe," "The boat is full," etc. Today's fictions of catastrophe, to return to Eva Horn's observations, seem to have sacrificed the spectator position for the immediacy of a global threat: we all sit in the same boat; we all have to deal with the same task of survival. This scenario no longer allows for communal solidarity, but only increases the general spirit of competition and rivalry. When we today see with increasing frequency boats of refugees in nautical distress, many of us may only see our own hardship and our own struggle for survival. The more we understand our own lives under the signature of survival and its metaphors, the more life appears to be a struggle for existence, and we seem to lose the ability to care for those whose mere lives are at stake. Recent debates about migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea and the legal struggles over migrant rescue ships landing on European soil, must be seen in the context of our society's pervasive discourse of survival that justifies the suspension of general human rights and values by invoking a state of exception that requires us to take more drastic measures.

Scenario 2: Social Distancing

On February 26, 2020, still at the beginning of the devastating Covid-19 outbreak in Italy that caused the entire country to shut down and so far has resulted in the highest death toll in any of the affected nations, Giorgio Agamben publicly addressed his concern that the pandemic is only the pretext under which the government would establish a state of exception that will be here to stay. "It would seem," he wrote, "that, terrorism having been exhausted as the cause of measures of exception, the invention of an epidemic could offer the ideal pretext for extending them beyond all limits."[30] After immediate critical interventions from—among others—Jean-Luc Nancy, Agamben felt the urge to offer some clarifications:

> Fear is a bad counsellor, but it makes us see many things we pretended not to see. The first thing the wave of panic that's paralyzed the country has clearly shown is that our society no longer believes in anything but naked life. It is evident that Italians are prepared to sacrifice practically everything—normal living conditions, social relations, work, even friendships and religious or political beliefs—to avoid the danger of falling ill. The naked life, and the fear of losing it, is not something that brings men and women together, but something that blinds and separates them. Other human beings, like those in the plague described by Manzoni, are now seen only as potential contaminators to be avoided at all costs or at least to keep at a distance of at least one meter. The dead—our dead—have no right to a funeral and it's not clear what happens to the corpses of our loved ones. Our fellow humans have been erased and it's odd that the Churches remain silent on this point. What will human relations become in a country that will be accustomed to living in this way for who knows how long? And what is a society with no other value other than survival?[31]

Indeed, Agamben's "clarifications" barely even touch on the main point of Nancy's intervention, that "he fails to note that the exception is indeed becoming the rule in a world where technical

[30] Giorgio Agamben, "The Coronavirus and the State of Exception," https://autonomies.org/2020/03/giorgio-agamben-the-coronaviris-and-the-state-of-exception/, last visit March 27, 2020.
[31] Giorgio Agamben, "Clarification", http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/, last visit March 27, 2020.

interconnections of all kinds […] are reaching a hitherto unknown intensity," and that "[g]overnments are nothing more than grim executioners, and taking it out on them seems more like a diversionary manoeuvre than a political reflection".[32] Certainly, the choice between the state of exception and conducting an uninterrupted social life currently does not exist, and it almost seems as if Agamben falls prey to his own metaphors. Other academic observers of the current crisis can offer much more reflective analyses when situating the social and political consequences of the pandemic in the larger context of what Naomi Klein called "disaster capitalism," the blueprint of which she saw in New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina.[33] "We are in the early stage of a medical Katrina," Mike Davis wrote on March 12: "Despite years of warning about avian flu and other pandemics, inventories of basic emergency equipment such as respirators aren't sufficient to deal with the expected flood of critical cases." The state of exception is not simply the order to socially distance ourselves and to respect the lives of others, but rather a political economy that has sacrificed any form of prevention—medical, economic, and ecological—for the sake of immediate profits: "The outbreak has instantly exposed the stark class divide in healthcare: those with good health plans who can also work or teach from home are comfortably isolated provided they follow prudent safeguards. Public employees and other groups of unionized workers with decent coverage will have to make difficult choices between income and protection.

[32] Jean-Luc Nancy, "Viral Exception," http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/, last visit March 27, 2020.
[33] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007).

Meanwhile millions of low wage service workers, farm employees, uncovered contingent workers, the unemployed and the homeless will be thrown to the wolves."[34]

What does all of this leave us with in regard to the context of survival? It is helpful here to refer to yet another response to Agamben. In his noteworthy contribution to the debate, Slavoj Žižek suggests that there is indeed a unifying effect of the practice of social distancing. However, he immediately adds a warning not to overemphasize and mystify individual responsibility: "Such a focus on individual responsibility, necessary as it is, functions as ideology the moment it serves to obfuscate the big question of how to change our entire economic and social system. The struggle against the coronavirus can only be fought together with the struggle against ideological mystifications, plus as part of a general ecological struggle."[35] As others before him, Žižek envisions measures that do not stop with universal healthcare but include a more profound ecological response. He might indeed agree with what Panagiotis Sotiris called "a democratic or even communist biopolitics" that combined individual and collective care in a non-coercive way.[36] If this should indeed become a possibility that will prevent us from spiraling into "barbarism with a human face," the biopolitical dystopia of "ruthless survivalist measures enforced with regret and even sympathy but legitimized by expert opinions,"[37] we have to start thinking of our time on earth

[34] Davis, "COVID-19: The Monster is finally at the door," http://links.org.au/mike-davis-covid-19-monster-finally-at-the-door, last visit March 27, 2020.
[35] Slavoj Žižek, "Is Barbarism with a Human Face our Fate?" https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/18/is-barbarism-with-a-human-face-our-fate/, last visit March 27,2020.
[36] Panagiotis Sotiris, "Against Agamben: Is a Democratic Biopolitics Possible?" https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/14/against-agamben-is-a-democratic-biopolitics-possible/, last visit March 27, 2020.
[37] Slavoj Žižek, "Is Barbarism with a Human Face our Fate?" A recent article by Austin Frakt in the New York Times shows that this is indeed no longer a dystopian vision, but a real scenario

differently in terms of community and solidarity instead of those of competition and survival. It might not be bad advice, indeed, to listen to Agamben's warning while practicing social distancing and showing respect to those who are most vulnerable. In the midst of the catastrophe that we cheerfully envisioned for decades and that has now finally arrived, we can get serious and ask ourselves how we want to live. If life is indeed a struggle, it must not be a struggle for survival, but one that is fought for those who do not have long to live, as Sergio Benvenuto argues: "A grotesque clown like Boris Johnson told the British people to 'prepare to lose loved ones before their time'. But why not address the dying too? Why not say 'prepare to lose your lives'? As if death were always the death of the other. Perhaps he meant 'prepare to lose your elderly …' For BoJo those who will die, those who have all the ingredients for death, also lose the quality of addressees, they are no longer even a 'you'."[38] In Benvenuto's example it becomes clear what kind of politics the logic of survival entails. Rather than invoking a state of exception by conceptualizing our crises in terms of survival—that means to calculate with the death of others and to always be ready to make difficult sacrifices—we should consider adopting a language invoking a practice of care.[39]

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that has been debated in medical journals for years: "Who Should Be Saved First? Experts Offer Ethical Guidance," New York Times, March 24, 2020.

[38] Sergio Benvenuto, "Forget about Agamben," http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/, last visit March 27, 2020.

[39] It is in this regard that John Hamilton discusses the urgent philological problem of security: *Security: Politics, Humanity, and the Philology of Care* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).