Triple Pandemics: COVID-19, Anti-Black Violence, and Digital Capitalism

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Abstract: This essay diagnoses systemic interconnections between COVID-19 pandemics, anti-Black racism, and the intensification of digital capitalism. By drawing on Charles Mills' rectificatory justice and Hannah Arendt's reflections on understanding and action, it argues that the role of philosophy lies in safeguarding racial justice and understanding against the hegemony algorithmic governmentality.

Key words: action, algorithmic governmentality, anti-Black violence, digital capitalism, rectificatory racial justice, Hannah Arendt, Charles Mills

How can philosophy respond to the explosive events of the global pandemic of COVID-19? And what kind of challenge does this pandemic present to philosophy? On the one hand, we have yet to come to terms with the economic, political, social, and medical crises as well as the effects of social distancing. On the other hand, we are witnessing the widespread, lethal effects of systemic racism, ranging from the disproportionate afflictions of COVID-19 suffered by communities of color to the ongoing police brutality and anti-black violence, which in the United States has killed hundreds of African Americans, including most recently Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks. As Levar Stony, an African-American mayor of Richmond, Virginia, has put it, taken together these events constitute "two pandemics" of COVID-19 and systemic racism: "One is six months old, the other 400 years old. And as the events of the last month and the last two weeks have made it painfully clear, both are lethal, especially for Black and Brown people" (Ortiz 2020). Let us add to this predicament a third "pandemic"—in terms of the harmful effects, worldwide—of the unprecedented intensification of digital capitalism, accelerated by a massive shift of work and education online.

In order to respond to this double, or perhaps triple pandemic—COVID-19, racism, and the computational turn—I would like to begin with a rather unlikely, at least at first sight, juxtaposition of Charles Mills' call for rectificatory racial justice for exploited groups excluded from common humanity, and Hannah Arendt's reflection on the difficulties of understanding in times of political crisis and genocide. What emerges from these two very different challenges to philosophy is a similar rejection of conceptual abstraction and "timelessness" in the name of diagnosing and contesting political exclusions from the full status of the human and from shared participation in the common world. For Arendt the ongoing threat of fascism, imperialism, anti-Semitism, refugee crises, and racism renders more and more groups "superfluous," expelled from the common world and humanity itself. Although the struggle against such superfluousness requires political action, it also poses enormous challenges for philosophical understanding, in so far as understanding is concerned with meaning rather than information (or algorithmically processed big data, in our parlance). Unlike science or data, understanding originates "in the very process of living, in so far as we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer," even though it might be possible (Arendt 1994: 209). Standing for fragile human plurality, this "we" and "our" attempts to find meaning are radically compromised, I would argue, by the incompatible historical experiences of oppression, privilege, and dehumanization. This is why political struggles and understanding are closely intertwined: understanding tries to render struggles meaningful even if it fails while action strives for the creation of a common world where meaning might be possible.

Mills for his part contests the white privilege of Western philosophy's dealing with "timeless" humanity as limited de facto to whiteness: "Whiteness remains representative of the human condition through the suppression of the alternative histories…of other humans" (Mills 2014: 32). To redress this racialization of philosophy, thinking and ethics have to begin by interrogating the historical amnesia of any "ideal" theory (Mills 2014: 29), evident in its indifference to and lack of responsibility for the domination of people of color—indeed, the lack of accountability for the "400 years old" pandemic of foundational racism in the United States. By challenging white ignorance of systemic racism, which Mills diagnoses as one of the effects of the racial contract (Mills 1997), he argues that any substantive moral and political philosophy has to begin by questioning the radical disparity between normative principles of justice based on equal moral worth and the dehumanization of human beings excluded from such equality. Grounded in the history of oppression, rectificatory racial justice is at stake in the struggle of people of color "not merely to be distributively included but to raise deeper questions of making rather rectificatory than distributive justice central" to political and philosophical projects (Mills 2014: 40). Indeed I would argue that the demands for such racial

justice are voiced once again by the current global demonstrations against racism, ignited by police brutality and the murder of George Floyd.

If the double pandemic of COVID-19 and systemic racism underscores the urgency of rectificatory justice, action, and intersectional understanding accountable for racial violence and exclusion, this urgency is undermined by a third global pandemic, namely, the increased "datafication" and perhaps irreversible computational transformations of everyday life. As more and more everyday human activities, from dating, driving, entertainment, to hiring, juridical decisions, policing, and social relations are mediated by algorithms rather than human decisions and debate, the far-reaching implications of the hegemony of digital capital, especially for justice or gender and race equity, are hard to foresee. The most obvious difficulty is that of inaccessibility, caused by the secrecy of proprietary algorithms and by the lack of technical expertise of the public affected by them. The algorithmically driven global practices of data collection, user profiling, surveillance, and predictive analytics operated by the digital technology giants—Amazon, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Apple—are not open to public scrutiny and therefore constitute "black boxes" (Pasquale 2015). This global hegemony of private digital technology corporations not only raises questions of data privacy and increased surveillance, but also risks transforming politics and demands for justice into what other scholars and philosophers have called "algorithmic governmentality" (Stiegler 2019; Rouvroy and Berns 2013), in which political and juridical decisions are increasingly replaced by automated algorithms. In sharp contrast not only to Mills' rectificatory racial justice but also to any political deliberative processes, algorithmic decisions rank individuals and distribute public goods on the basis of digital profiling. By reproducing and automating racial, gender, and economic oppression, computational profiling—a digital upgrade of the long-standing political practice of racial profiling (Browne 2015)—constitutes "technological redlining" (Noble 2018).

Accelerated by the pandemic of COVID-19, algorithmic governmentality works in tandem with digital capitalism. For example, with a large scale shift of work and education online, a new division and precarity of labor have appeared: telecommuting, in sharp contrast with non-transferable site specific jobs, which are either lost due to massive unemployment or performed by "essential workers" in the endangered workspaces without sufficient protective equipment. With the exception of medical personnel, most of the essential workers in the United States, many without health insurance or unemployment benefits, are faced with the cruel choice of endangering their lives or losing their livelihood. Never before has the adjective "essential" been so closely aligned with "precarious." Add to this the aggressive push for further automation in order to replace lost jobs with Machine Learning (Lynch 2020). These disruptive economic shifts in labor have speeded up the ongoing mutation of neoliberalism into computational (Stiegler) or surveillance

(Zuboff) capitalism. According to Zuboff, such capital is driven by the imperative of accelerated accumulation of data from all computational operations and its conversion into profits through the production of prediction products, ranging from advertising to predictive policing. Invented first by Google and now perfected by all digital giants, surveillance capitalism extracts "collateral" data, the byproduct of billions of users' online interactions, not only for matching advertising with user profile information (UPIs) but primarily for the fabrication of new prediction products which anticipate our actions. As more and more scholars—Safiya Umoja Noble, Simone Brown, or Bonnie Sheehey, among others—point out, the intensity of digital surveillance, modes of profiling, and economic consequences vary greatly along race, ethnicity, poverty, and gender lines.

One of the ideological mystifications of digital capitalism, sometimes advanced by philosophy itself, is the claim that the accelerated development of the algorithmic processing of big data and artificial intelligence is ushering in a fourth revolution on the global scale. As Floridi (2014), for example, argues, this computational revolution is characterized by the progressive decentralization of the human, the increase of global economic prosperity, and the promise of democracy shared by human and nonhuman intelligent agents. After Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud, human self-understanding and relations to others are radically altered by artificial intelligence postulated by Turin and actualized by new ICT technologies. What Floridi fails to consider is the entanglement of digital and computational technologies in power relations and sociopolitical practices. Because this Western narrative of the Brave New World of technological conquest is so utterly abstracted from all political and economic inequalities, imperialism, and white supremacy, we should not be surprised that the advocates of technological revolution are oblivious to political struggles driven by the urgency of racial, political, or economic justice.

Needless to say these claims about the "democratizing" effects of digital technologies and computational capitalism have been called into question by political activists, scholars, and philosophers long before the eruption of COVID-19.[1] More recently, the NAACP has launched the "Stop Hate for Profit" campaign against Facebook.[2] Most significantly, the political crisis, which has erupted on the global stage by the lethal conjunction of COVID-19 and white supremacy, has also revealed a radical disjunction between technocratic "revolution" and political struggles for justice. In the United States the persisting systemic racism and anti-black violence during COVID-19 have led to massive demonstrations around the world demanding racial justice for the victims of police brutality and white supremacy. Creating new coalitions across racial, gender, and economic differences, one hundred twenty-six million political protesters in the US alone, organizing online but marching in the streets at the risk of their health, have shown that even though social media and ICT technologies have changed some of the organizational tactics, these technological advances have not dissipated the

urgency of direct political struggle for justice. As Zeynep Tufekci (2017) points out, although digital tools are useful for organizing, political activism cannot thrive without collective struggle, debate, and decision making, as well as the cultivation of new social relations through acting together over time.

To conclude these brief remarks, I want to say that the political activism during the two pandemics—racism and COVID-19—have put rectificatory racial justice, including that of reparations for slavery, back on the national and international agenda. And the role of philosophy both during the pandemic and in the post-COVID world lies in safeguarding these principles of justice and understanding against the new hegemony of big data, algorithmic governmentality, and computational capital.

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Notes

1. See Stiegler 2019, O'Neil 2016, and Browne 2015, among others.
2. See NAACP 2020.

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