

# Social Distancing and the Deficit of Presence (A Philosophical Reflection on the COVID-19 Pandemic)\*

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**Abstract.** This paper argues that if the COVID-19 pandemic turns out to be a man-made risk (A. Giddens), i.e. an unforeseen consequence of a person's behavior and actions, then, in order to avoid such fatal contingencies that occur so unexpectedly, it is necessary to change the type of behavior and actions that have been established in the culture of the Modern Period. People have been forced to observe the spatial order during the pandemic. Social distancing, self-isolation, the Red Zone, and other spatial limitations have made people aware of the deficit of presence and the lack of independent, active participation in life. On the one hand, the novel coronavirus has returned us to an awareness of the biological, natural origin of human existence, which has been forgotten by culture (science). On the other hand, the practices of social rationing and restriction have revealed the influence of various forms of alienation – social, political, economic, and cultural – on the fate of each individual. Introducing the bio-principle (the virus) into the social, cultural, and political space radically changes the relationship between people and nature. This situation forces us to contemplate the meaning of the concept of culture, which received its definition in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is understood as non-nature, as reflected in the formula culture versus nature. This paper shows that the cultural ideal of human activity, established in modern times, is the reason behind the alienation of technogenic civilization and social forms of life from nature. By destroying nature and turning it into material for people's various techne, people found themselves in conflict with their own life. Culture has lost its inner meaning of the presence of the world and of an individual, which dissolved in various interpretations and ideas. Contemporary history is moving towards establishing a culture of presence, where the world is viewed not as a mere material to be used but as an area for humans to engage with. Today, we see the assertion of the right to difference and the right to the presence of diversity – in nature, culture, and politics (the struggle for a multipolar world) and in the personal domain (selfies, blogs, chats, etc.).

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, man-made risk, social distance, self-isolation, deficit of presence, alienation, culture of the presence, culture of New Modernity

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In just a year since the news of the outbreak of COVID-19 hit, our world has changed dramatically. The 20th century conditioned humankind to deal with all kinds of upheavals resulting from large-scale sociopolitical processes. For Russia, the First World War ended with a proletarian revolution, which brought class confrontation within countries to the global arena. The Second World War destroyed the colonial system and created conditions for the emergence of global ties and relations between peoples and states on new foundations. The COVID-19 pandemic declared by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, was not caused by sociopolitical or economic processes. However, its impact on the development of world civilization is likely to be even more significant.

We can already see this in the efforts of scientists, politicians, and public figures to wrap their heads around the pandemic, which is reflected in scientific publications and responses on the global network. According to *Dimensions*, more than 150,000 articles, ahead-of-print papers, and other materials related to COVID-19 had been published as of mid-January 2021.<sup>1</sup> The first scientometric analyses of publications on COVID-19 show that researchers naturally focus on the medical side (Colavizza, Costas, Traag, van Eck..., 2021) and the health effects of the virus (Kousha, Thelwall, 2020: 1068–1091). However, as the *Dimensions* data shows, many publications also deal with the social problems that the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated. The thematic scope of these publications is quite broad – from the impact of COVID-19 on the sustainable development of society (Leal Filho, Azul, Wall..., 2021: 85–99) to the correlation between the pandemic and the increase in the number of burglaries committed in Detroit in March 2020 (Felson, Jiang, Xu, 2020: 4–7). Methodologically speaking, most of these articles are made within the framework of specific sociological studies or are purely journalistic. But the pandemic that has hit humanity, caused by a previously unknown virus, needs more than a description and a characterization of what is happening; it also needs an understanding of the very nature of the phenomenon. This calls for a philosophical analysis of the new situation in which society now finds itself. In this sense, Dr. Konrad Szocik is correct when he writes that understanding the COVID-19 pandemic should not be restricted to the medical dimension and should involve ethical and philosophical reflection. According to him, the coronavirus should be considered in terms of global catastrophic risk rather than as a phenomenon of existential risk (Szocik, 2021: 199). The issue of how people's values, priorities, and habits change during a pandemic is the focus of the research being carried out by participants in the "Dictionary of the Era of the Pandemic" at the initiative of Elena Petrovskaya.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: COVID-19: Dataset of Global Research by Dimensions. *Marketplace, Google Cloud Platform*. URL: <https://console.cloud.google.com/marketplace/product/digitalscience-public/covid-19-dataset-dimensions> (accessed: 14.01.2021).

<sup>2</sup> Petrovskaya E. From the Editor. *Blue Sofa. A Philosophical and Theoretical Journal*. 2020. No. 24. P. 3–4.

## The pandemic as a “man-made risk”

In analyzing the “risk society” of modernity first described by Ulrich Beck in 1986 (Beck 2000), Anthony Giddens identifies two types of risks faced by an industrialized civilization – external and manufactured (man-made). External risk is risk experienced as coming from the outside, from the fixities of tradition or nature. Manufactured risk is risk created by the impact of our developing knowledge upon the world. This, notes Giddens, includes most of the environmental risks associated, for example, with global warming (Giddens, 2004: 42–44). We can agree with the Brazilian educators who, in an article entitled “Risk Society and Science Education,” describe the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic as a man-made (manufactured) risk (Pietrocola, Rodrigues, Bercot..., 2020). To be sure, the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus existed in nature before the outbreak of the pandemic. There may even have been individual cases of people falling ill due to the virus, but it is the conditions created by humans: a vast number of people getting together in one place (Wuhan is home to 10 million people); the urban lifestyle modern humans predominantly live; the constant multiple contacts between people; the expanded infrastructure for organizing social interactions, etc. All this created a favorable environment for the pathogenesis of COVID-19. An article by a team of American, English, French, Italian, and Chinese researchers traced how human mobility influenced the COVID-19 epidemic in China (Kraemer, Yang, Guitierrez..., 2020). The risk of a new pandemic emerging is primarily anthropogenic. This much is clear from the fact that the ability to build global contacts created by modern civilization has caused the rapid mutation of the novel coronavirus, with new and more “aggressive” strains appearing (for example, the emergence of the B117 strain in late 2020).

What does the appearance of such events in the development of civilization as manufactured risks tell us? Anthony Giddens answers this question: “Our society lives after the end of nature. The end of nature does not mean that the physical world or physical processes cease to exist. It refers to the fact that *few aspects of our surrounding material environment haven't been in some way affected by human intervention*” (Giddens, 2004: 43).<sup>3</sup>

Giddens is, of course, right: the advent of man-made risks marks the beginning of a new stage of historical development, where nature is integrated into the history of civilization. Today, humans view nature as nothing more than a means to assert their social, economic, and cultural activities. It would seem that the once expressed by the tireless Enlightenment positivist Yevgeny Bazarov has finally come true: “Nature is not a temple, but a workshop, and man is the workman in it.” However, the COVID-19 pandemic casts doubt on the validity of this point of view. Nature is not a temple, nor is it a workshop; the billion-year history of the various geospheres of the planet is proof of its independent existence. Has the COVID-19 pandemic become a reminder for

<sup>3</sup> Emphasis added by the authors.

humanity that there is something else on this planet, *something* that we must reckon with? This something is the necessary and constant presence of forces that are physically (spatially) external to human beings. The physical nature of SARS-CoV-2 as a body that occupies a specific place in space forces the individual to contemplate their presence in space. Presence is a keyword that accompanies the person on COVID space. It forces the person to see space and his or her place in it. *Presence* requires a reflective attitude and awareness of one's place in the environment.

### **The phenomenology of the COVID space**

Social rhetoric today is overloaded with spatial terminology – distancing, distribution area, self-isolation, quarantine, "red zone," visitation, admission, access, etc. The coronavirus pandemic highlights a person's physical existence in space and the active implementation of a wide variety of practices of distancing and isolation. Although these practices have always been part and parcel of the organization of society's social and political life, they have never had such an apparent anthropological content as they do now. Experts are returning to the notion of the social fabric as an ensemble of social relations and a system of boundaries, distributions, and differences.

The organization of social space has always been of interest to sociologists. It is no coincidence that the idea of "social distance" is traditionally attributed to Georg Simmel, who believed that the process of distancing and approaching (in the spatial, temporal, and symbolic sense) is a necessary basis for the imparting of value. Social distancing shows us how social relationships and differentiation are represented in physical and symbolic spaces. For Simmel and other social philosophers, social distancing determines the order and form of the organization of social communication. The American sociologist Emory S. Bogardus, who developed a scale for measuring social distance, points out that, "the chief significance of social distance is in connection with the maintenance of status or with a person's standing [...] Social distance results from the maintenance of social status, that is, of the status quo in social relationships" (Bogardus, 2003: 185–186). It is important to note that the traditional philosophical and sociological view of social distancing always associates distancing with the formation of the social structure of society because distancing expresses and reinforces social differences between groups. It is a sign of social distinction and a marker of social status.

The reason for the development of modern practices of distancing was the rapid spread of the virus. Moreover, while the words "virus" and "viral" had already entered the fabric of our daily lives (computer viruses, viral marketing, viral videos, viral content, etc.), people were not ready for the biological activity of microorganisms. It turned out that digital (that is, artificial) hygiene had become commonplace and commensurate with social existence, and the natural world of viruses was alien and terrifying. During the pandemic, life was kind of reduced to its most basic biological meaning, to those boundaries that nature has designated for use, where the mean limit

of life is death. In this case, social distancing – and even more social isolation/self-isolation – takes the person out of the sphere of communication. The person is reduced to a bodily unit, for which distancing ceases to be an indicator of *social* space and instead becomes an indicator of his or her position in the space of things. The marking of the space at the checkout and in front of the shelves at the supermarket makes the individual a *res extensa*, and not a subject of social relations, although they are told to “Keep *social* distance.” In a sense, neither philosophy nor cultural institutions were ready for such a turn of events. The new virus caused us to return to the question of the side of human existence that culture (science) forgot – our original existence – our biological and natural beginning, which, under the overwhelming pressure of transhumanism, gene technologies, cyberculture and digitalization, had effectively been “washed out” of active circulation. Philosophy was then called upon to provide us with a new understanding of the foundations of human existence.

Time and again, humankind has experienced pandemics that have forced difficult isolation conditions on people. In our modern civilization, the burden of (self-) isolation, it seemed, could be “compensated” by the wholesale introduction of online communication. It is as if IT culture and digital technologies have been called upon to smooth out the withdrawal from the familiar world. However, it turns out that they have uncovered several similar anthropological phenomena that require additional attention from philosophy. Perhaps the most important of these was the phenomenon of deficit of presence.

The concept of presence is significant for the ontology of the 20th century. We are inclined to agree with Jacques Derrida's definition of European metaphysics as the science of being as a present. “Presence,” as Derrida correctly points out, “Presence has always been and will always, forever, be the form in which, we can say apodictically, the infinite diversity of contents is produced” (Derrida, 1999a: 15). Martin Heidegger gives a very specific meaning to the notion of presence: to be present means to be the being we are, that is, to understand one's being, one's place in the world. Heidegger refers to such presence as *Dasein*. *Dasein* is ourselves, the being of this being is *always mine* (Heidegger, 1997: 41). Derrida, continuing the ontological tradition of Heidegger, puts the concrete IT in place of universal being (the subject of the “metaphysics of presence”). And then, the presence of this IT as the difference in all its specificity (termed *difference*) reveals a lack (deficit) of presence. “If *the difference* is (I also cross out the “is”) what makes the presentation of being–present possible, [then] it never reveals itself as such” (Derrida, 1999b: 128).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Square brackets added by the authors.

## The deficiency of presence in philosophical reflection

The reflection of "deficiency" as a phenomenon of human existence has always been a feature of philosophy connecting this phenomenon with a wide range of topics that were based on an understanding of the ontological basis of the lack of presence.

E.V. Maksimova demonstrated that the traditional philosophy of conceptualizing the individual as an active principle that continually strives to break through the limits of its here-and-now existence comes from the recognition of the existential insufficiency of the person. Analyzing the manifestation of the inadequacy of the human being, Maksimova made a distinction between functional and ontological insufficiency. Functional insufficiency refers to the lack of something within the boundaries of the individual's locale, which gives rise to the desire to expand these boundaries. Ontological insufficiency is "the under-determinedness of being in its entirety, and it cannot be sufficiently explained in the lack of that which is present." In an ontological sense, insufficiency apprises itself in the "partiality of human existence," which requires "a connection with the whole to which the person belongs" (Maksimova, 2019: 6). Maksimova shows that it is ontological insufficiency that forms the basis for argumentation in the culture of religious discourse. The notion of the ontological insufficiency of a person was interpreted by religion as "a king of deficiency of life" in that the soul's true life is impinged upon by the hardships of carnal, earthly existence. A lack of life's graces hid the ontological insufficiency of the individual – a lack of presence of the soul. This peculiar "lack" of the presence of the soul was compensated by religious experience, which for many centuries allowed man to make peace with his mortality and filled life with transcendent meaning. The removal of religious experience from everyday life and the subsequent secularization of culture have brought about significant losses in terms of the existential "security" of being.

Karl Marx revealed the socioeconomic nature of various forms of human alienation in his early works, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. A classic capitalist society alienates the wage worker from the results of labor, from its generic essence, and, finally, causes man's alienation from man. Labour in conditions of private ownership turns into a process of the self-alienation of a person from himself. Moreover, money becomes a sign of universal alienation, the absence (deficit) of which deprives a person of all human capabilities. (Marx, 1974).

In addition to the problem of ontological negativity in understanding the notion of lack of presence, philosophical thought was also informed by a description of the mechanisms of social regulation and the practices of limitation. These areas have been widely studied in social criticism (Baudrillard, Foucault, Žižek, Agamben, Nancy, and others). However, the pandemic and the extraordinary nature of social existence are already considered a "new challenge" for philosophy and metaphysics, revising the philosophical understanding of war, death, freedom, and pain.

Michel Foucault described how spatial regulation is stiffened during pandemics. The social technologies developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to fight the bubonic plague are



still in demand today. Foucault compares the tools of social regulation used during the plague epidemic with those used to combat the spread of leprosy. While leprosy spawned "rituals of exclusion," the management of the plague gave rise to disciplinary practices and measures to maintain order. The nature of the disease determines the specific set of anthropological and political strategies to be used, which are based on either exclusion/exile or control/supervision. The leper is expelled, while the plague patient is placed under house arrest: "the great confinement on the one hand; the correct training on the other" (Foucault, 1999: 290). This is the genesis of biopolitics.

Giorgio Agamben continues Foucault's criticism of the disciplinary "panopticon society," writing in March 2020 about the "invention of an epidemic" that the heightened social hysteria in connection with the outbreak of SARS-CoV2 would lead to a complete restriction of freedoms and the "militarization" of power, and that the authorities would use the panic being spread by the media to impose a state of emergency "as a normal paradigm for the government."<sup>5</sup> According to Agamben, under the pretext of security, power instills fear and collective panic in the minds of individuals, which is no less an alarming symptom than the policy of isolationism and distancing. Moreover, he considers the term "social distancing" a euphemism to replace the harsher-sounding "confinement."<sup>6</sup> This permanent holding of people "in custody" turns them into a "population," a kind of faceless "naked life." But this is not the life we were given by nature; it is a product of biopolitical mechanisms. This is why, according to Agamben, "we have divided the unity of our vital experience, which is always inseparably corporeal and spiritual, into a purely biologic entity, on the one hand, and an emotional and cultural life, on the other" as a result of the introduction of "social distancing."<sup>7</sup>

The pandemic indeed forced us to contemplate our original connection with life. Furthermore, isolation, quarantine, and other spatial restrictions were indeed introduced in the spirit of biopolitics mentioned by Foucault and Agamben. But, as Canadian sociologist Zsuzsa Baross notes in her response to Agamben, the COVID-19 pandemic has turned the relationship between *politics* and *biopolitics* on its head. Life itself (the virus acting as a "messenger" *bio-*) influences politics. According to Baross, social distancing introduced into the social body is an "immune reaction by the political body to an invading life form that is not even properly alive."<sup>8</sup> The Russian philosopher P. Tishchenko analyzed healthcare practices during the pandemic, noting a

<sup>5</sup> See: Agamben G. The Invention of an Epidemic. *Center for Political Analysis*. 2020. March 12. URL: <https://center-for-politicsanalysis.ru/position/read/id/izobretenie-epidemii> (accessed: 19.12.2020).

<sup>6</sup> See: Agamben G. Social Distancing. *Center for Political Analysis*. 2020. April 10. URL: <https://centerforpoliticsanalysis.ru/position/read/id/sotsialnoe-distantsirovanie> (accessed: 08.12.2020).

<sup>7</sup> Agamben G. A Question. *Autonomies*. 2020. April 23. URL: <http://autonomies.org/2020/04/giorgio-agamben-a-question> (accessed: 31.01.2021).

<sup>8</sup> Baross Z. Agamben, the Virus, and the Biopolitical: A Riposte. *European Journal of Psychoanalysis (for Eastern European and CIS countries)*. Special Edition, Part 3. P. 45–46.

return to the values of the patient-centered care model, which forces us to take a fresh look at the manifestation of bio-power (Tishchenko, 2020: 31–49). We can agree with these thinkers that the pandemic, which emerged as a result of the introduction of a bio-initiator – a virus that had been "dormant" in nature – into the social, cultural, and political space radically changes the attitude not only of *politics* and *bio-politics* but also in the very relationship between man and nature. And this gives us pause for reflection on the meaning of culture, which has, since its conceptualization in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, been presented as a non-nature in the formula culture versus nature.

### Culture and presence

Strictly speaking, the phrase "social distancing" is a contradiction in terms, as the word "social" comes from the Latin *socialis* meaning joint, common, allied, connected, and "distance" comes from the Latin *distare*, which means to defend and includes the prefix *dis-*, meaning separation or detachment. Thus, social distancing is, at its core, the destruction of the very foundation of sociality – its cohesion and sense of community. And it is this – the primary and most accessible means of resisting the introduction of the *bio*-aspect into sociality – that forces us to rethink the very foundations of sociality itself.

Distancing does not only refer to the physical distance between people; see-through face guards or masks also separate people. The mask is one of the most ancient cultural phenomena. However, the protective masks worn during the pandemic differ from the protagonist's theatrical and carnival masks and archetypal images of folklore and literature. Carnival and ritual masks hide the person's personality, allowing them to exhibit specific cultural characteristics – erotic, ethical, aesthetic, humorous, etc. – more fully and openly. From a cultural point of view, the mask created the illusion of a doubling of the world, keeping one side of the individual hidden. It regulated the space of the carnival, the ritual, and the theatre, in opposition to the routine of everyday life and the grind of work. It was through the mask that the individual revealed his or her cultural face. It is no coincidence that the name for the ancient theatrical mask, *persona*, means "personality" in many European languages.

In the context of the pandemic, the mask has become an expendable item, erasing faces and unifying them under the same color. This kind of anthropological unification is dangerous both socially and existentially. This is why Agamben, reiterating his thoughts on the danger of the "state of emergency" policy, recalls the oft-cited ending to Foucault's *The Order of Things* to describe the consequences of the pandemic: "man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand."<sup>9</sup> However, we would disagree with Agamben's characterization of what will remain in history after the coming wave

<sup>9</sup> Agamben G. When Your House is on Fire. *Center for Political Analysis*. 2020. October 18. URL: <https://centerforpoliticalanalysis.ru/position/read/id/kogda-tvoj-dom-gorit> (accessed: 31.01.2021).



washes away the face drawn into the sand – it is not a "naked, silent life devoid of history, thrown at the mercy of power and science."<sup>10</sup> The tragedies and misfortunes of the pandemic gave rise to the desire to make sense of what was happening and think about establishing a “new normal,” as Slavoj Žižek puts it.<sup>11</sup>

The philosophical response to the challenge of the world of the pandemic is to re-think the experience of life, and those cultural attitudes that have become established in the new European culture. In a March 2020 interview Bulgarian–French philosopher Julia Kristeva noted, "Humanity is rediscovering existential solitude, the meaning of limits, and mortality," and that "a reevaluation of life as a whole, starting with everyone's vulnerability concerning pleasure and sexuality" is needed.<sup>12</sup> This vulnerability, so eloquently described by the psychoanalyst and philosopher Kristeva, proves once again that pandemics have exposed the limits of human life, the lack of presence. Lockdowns and the creation of a transparent society under digital control create new forms of civilizational alienation of man from his very nature.

All this brings to mind yet again Heidegger's division of the ways of being of the individual into “inauthentic” and “authentic.” In the former, “one's way of Being is that of inauthenticity and failure to stand by one's Self,” where “Being-with-one-another” entails “care about [...] distance,” about *smoothing out* the difference from others, catching up to and standing on a par with them, about being average, “just like other people” (Heidegger, 1997: 128, 126). Note that Heidegger gives an entirely different meaning to the distance that ensures being with one another (“social distance”) to that which it acquired during the pandemic. The second way of being, in which Dasein is “brought before its Being as ‘there’” is revealed to him in a situation of “*its thrownness, and – proximally and for the most part – in the manner of an evasive turning-away*”<sup>13</sup> (Heidegger, 1997, 134, 136). It is in this “evasive turning-away” that the motives of the current understanding of “social distance” and “self-isolation” are heard, bringing the individual face to face with his presence in this world. The word *thrownness* is intended to signify, Heidegger notes, the “*actual handing over*” to one's being (Heidegger, 1997: 135), that is, the necessity to occupy oneself with one's being, to understand it as the work of one's own hands. The situation resulting from the pandemic, with an expanded deficit of presence, creates the need to turn to and take care of oneself – one's being.

Social distancing practices and a sense of the deficit of presence reveal themselves in several anthropological strategies in the context of a pandemic society. These strategies for coping with the deficit of presence are expressed in the spatiotemporal coordinates of action.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Žižek S. It's Time to Build a New Normal. *Center for Political Analysis*. 2020. December 10. URL: <https://centerforpolitical-analysis.ru/position/read/id/vremja-stroit-novuju-normalnost> (accessed: 31.01.2021).

<sup>12</sup> Kristeva J. Humanity is rediscovering existential solitude, the meaning of limits, and mortality. *European Journal of Psychoanalysis (for Eastern European and CIS countries)*. Special Edition, Part 3. P. 19, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Emphasis added by the authors.

The first anthropological survival strategy in a society living under conditions of social distancing can be called "regression to the corporeal." This strategy involves the human body setting the boundaries to action. Its repertoire is extensive and expresses itself in a number of ways, from sports training, yoga, and trying new foods, to over-eating, excessive drinking, etc. The range of bodily practices narrows the space of human action and is characterized by narrowing the ecumene, the lifeworld, to a capsule house. The order of human existence is built by establishing dominion over the body within the boundaries of the home world.

How has the homeworld transformed in the context of the fight against COVID? The lowest level of transformation of the ontological order took place in the traditional way of life, where the locus of the home world included both the house itself and the adjacent territory, which typically requires a great deal of attention and works to maintain. The first anthropological strategy of inclusion in the world of the pandemic is to reproduce the lifeworld. That is, not carrying on as if nothing had happened but building a social universe within one's own *oikos(a)*. This is the power of Robinson's world, where the Leviathan can be recreated anywhere. The growing virtual world has only intensified the changes at home, turning it into an office, a laboratory, a switchboard, a library, a cinema, a spa, and so on.

The first anthropological survival strategy focuses on corporeality; as such, it contains a powerful resource for aestheticizing the life project and the world of everyday human life. Here, the phenomenon that Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht dubbed the production of presence manifests itself (Gumbrecht, 2006). The isolation imposed on people by the response to the pandemic forces us to look at everyday life in a different light, creating that "island" effect that Mikhail Bakhtin referred to when discussing the medieval carnival, where the everyday objects appear with varying degrees of intensity. Then we call them aesthetic. "Aesthetic experience may help us recuperate the spatial and bodily dimension of our existence; it makes sense to hope that aesthetic experience may give us back at least a feeling of our being-in-the-world, in the sense of being part of the physical world of things" (Gumbrecht, 2006: 109). These words, spoken by Gumbrecht back in 2003, ring very accurate today. Several sociological studies demonstrate how the perception of the importance of the aesthetic characteristics of the human environment increases during a pandemic (Corcoran, Hill-James..., 2020).

The second anthropological survival strategy during the pandemic (in conditions of shrinking space) manifests itself in withdrawal and apathy on the one hand and with violence, skepticism, and COVID-19 dissidence on the other. The strategy focuses on falling out of social space and time, receding from reality, misunderstanding and denying the gravity of the situation, and an unwillingness to change. Perhaps this is the most straightforward and obvious reaction to stress. This strategy unfolds in the context of ever-increasing depression, a repetitive home routine, and the availability of virtual violence – a crisis of the values of humanism. The reasons lie in the costs of modernization, globalization, and the creation of a risk society. Governments responded to COVID-19 dissidents with fines, arrests, and water cannons, thus recog-

nizing the presence of this part of society. It is challenging to rebuild a life when we are constantly faced with a myriad of choices in a situation of economic, and indeed value, insecurity. It requires enormous personal and sociopolitical investments. The second anthropological strategy can potentially radicalize the moods of all social groups and communities. The virus represents an existential challenge to cultural boundaries and subjectivity. As Dr. Larissa Pfaller of the Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nürnberg correctly points out, the situation of the pandemic requires the recognition and strengthening of individual and social activity and an understanding of the vulnerability of existence as an anthropological condition and the establishment of relationships of care and solidarity (Pfaller, 2020: 821–829).

The second anthropological survival strategy interprets the lack of presence in the binary of oppositions of the conflict (wealth/poverty, freedom/imprisonment, employment/unemployment, etc.), and social distance is seen in this context as a tool of rigid social ranking. By breaking the six-foot rule, removing masks, and violating norms, COVID deniers are radicalizing the refusal to shrink their home world. They are politicizing their actions, putting forward socio-political demands for access to a wide variety of public spaces, including workspaces. This is why, as an analysis of the policy documents of 114 countries shows, the COVID policies of states are gradually shifting focus from public health to a wider range of social issues as the pandemic develops.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

If the COVID-19 pandemic is indeed a "man-made" risk – that is, if it is an unexpected consequence of the behavior and actions of people – then we need to change our behavior and actions somehow to prevent such unexpected disasters from happening again. Culture is responsible for the nature, content, and direction of all human activity, which carries a system of values that determines the type and direction of human action.

The culture of Enlightenment established in modern times, which Gumbrecht called the culture of meaning, creates the image of the ideal person, oriented towards Truth, illuminated by knowledge and significant pragmatic achievements. This cultural ideal of human action within the new European culture laid the foundation for all the achievements of world civilizational development. But it was also the reason for the alienation of technogenic civilization and social forms of life from nature. By destroying nature and turning it into material for his various *techne*, man has found himself in conflict with his existence. The culture that placed the stamp of meaning on everything did not take those things that went beyond the stated meaning into account. Thus, the inner meaning of the very presence of the world and man has disappeared from

<sup>14</sup> Gao J. Quantifying Policy Responses to a Global Emergency: Insights from the COVID-19 Pandemic. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. 2020 (ahead-of-print). DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.3634820.

culture, dissolving into various interpretations and ideas. Environmental crises, the threat of floods as a result of global warming, and, finally, the pandemic force culture to recognize the significance of presence (corporeal, material, and spatial).

Of course, victory over the coronavirus is possible if we harness the achievements of civilization. For example, the science of *modern age* culture has given us vaccines such as Sputnik V and others, although this does not protect us against the dangers of other manufactured risks. The exclusion of such cases demands that we change how we view the world – not as material or a means of our existence, but as participation/engagement in life. This is how the type of culture that can be called the culture of presence is formed.<sup>15</sup>

The presence culture confirms the significance of presence itself – of a person, thing, action, or situation. Our social environment is becoming an anthropological laboratory looking for ways to cultivate presence. These frantic anthropological searches should be crowned with creating new strategies for dealing with and overcoming the lack of presence. In the first half of the last century, the cultural search for the creative avant-garde ran counter to socio-political processes: while the arts were replete with creativity in different forms, freedom and originality increasingly came to the fore, totalitarianism – extreme forms of the dictatorship of the political and ideological norms – was becoming the norm in society, and mass consumerism was taking over everyday life. Compare this to the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its increased variety in both the creative and everyday aspects of life that came to be known as post-modernism.

This gave way in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to an increase in the processes of differentiation and stylistic diversity, both in the creative arts and in everyday life. These processes have been given the name "postmodernism." However, Jürgen Habermas is right when he says that the project of modernity has likely not exhausted itself yet, and therefore, "subject-centered reason is replaced by systems rationality" (Habermas, 2003: 390), rationality that takes diversity into account. Modern society is moving towards asserting the right to difference, the right to the presence of diversity – in nature (the struggle for the conservation of biological diversity), in culture (the preservation of local cultures in the context of globalization), in politics (the struggle for a multipolar world), and in the personal world (selfies, blogs, chats, etc.). The culture of new modernity takes the person out of the shadow of the *pedestal* to the *podium*, where everyone can make their achievements known (Konev, 2020). The culture of the laboratory goes beyond the scope of research centers and universities and moves into everyday sociocultural practices, placing the individual in a situation of anthropological search. The active cultivation of presence gets the individual in-

<sup>15</sup> Unlike Gumbrecht, who attributed the culture of presence to the Middle Ages, we proceed from the fact that the culture of presence is replacing the culture of meaning/representation and characterized the formation of the culture of the new modernity (See Konev, 2018).

volved in events and processes with specific situational meaning and not some universal meaning. Inclusion, participation, and involvement, which reveal themselves in the meaning-generating action of the individual, are crucial elements of presence. A perfect example is the millions of volunteers helping people affected by the pandemic (#WEARETOGETHER).

Many existing anthropological strategies for surviving a pandemic are aimed at mastering the technogenic nature of our time. Anthropological responses can vary wildly in content, but Julia Kristeva's prescription should unite them, "We are ready for a new art of living that will not be tragic, but rather will be complex and demanding."<sup>16</sup> This means that the need for a project of a new practical philosophy will be felt particularly strongly.

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#### Conflicts of interest.

The authors declare the absence of any conflicts of interest.

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