

# The Magic of Matter: Bodies, Together and Apart in a Time of Pandemic

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**ABSTRACT:** I look at what Walter Benjamin calls the “magic of matter,” a silent form of communication between material objects, including our bodies. This communion exists even when bodies are separated as they are during the pandemic and becomes especially sensible to us when the physical presence of others is removed.

**KEY WORDS:** materiality, pandemic, bodies, communion, anarchism, archism

One truism in this pandemic is that it has made us all miss other people, not the people in our “pod” or “bubble” and not even the friends, family and fellow workers that many of us see on zoom or other platforms. What people miss (unless they are the kind to flout all of the strictures of the pandemic) is just other people period, the crowd, masses, social closeness, as opposed to distancing. This is probably not something that occurred to many people beforehand (it didn’t to me); people who live in large urban areas in the US, at least, tend to see other people as a kind of barrier. We think “those people are in my way.” “That person is between me and X.” “It’s too crowded here.” Now that that isn’t happening as much, it gives us an opportunity to think about the value of being bodies together with other bodies and the spaces that we collectively fill.

I am frequently reminded these days of Arendt’s notion that “men and not man inhabit the earth.”<sup>1</sup> If we can look past her use of masculine terms as a marker for all people, the principle she articulates here is a critical one. For Arendt, the ontological condition of human beings is that we live in a plural world. Each of us is born into a preexisting community and that community survives us after we die. For Arendt, any politics must reflect this basic fact to be worthy of the name. In public we encounter others and in that encounter we are checked and thwarted in

terms of what would otherwise be an externalization of our internal megalomania (some of us remain megalomaniacs any way, but that is a different story).

Does it matter if these other selves are not physically present? Do bodies on zoom count as performing this same function? Judith Butler's somewhat recent book, *Notes Towards a Theory of Performative Assembly*, speaks about this very thing. It is quite a prescient book in a way because at the time it came out bodies could still assemble and now they cannot (at least not everywhere and all the time as was once possible). For Butler the importance of crowds is not their uniformity but their diversity (very much in line with Arendt in this sense). She writes that the assembled crowd is composed of "groups of people who do not otherwise find much in common and between whom there is sometimes even suspicion and antagonism."<sup>2</sup> The assembly of bodies that you find in public spaces is not curated, not chosen according to any particular criteria. Relatedly, as Butler further tells us, these bodies exceed any attempt at representation (she writes that they "precede and exceed any government that confers and protects that right of assembly.")<sup>3</sup>

This does not mean that assembled bodies are always radical and leftist. There are of course gatherings that *are* highly curated and explicitly racist or nationalist. Until COVID-19, these sorts of rallies were increasingly common, not just in the US but all over the world (and they still happen to this day albeit somewhat more rarely and intermittently). Yet even at such assemblies, I think much of what Butler (and Arendt) has to say pertains. While the subjects that are interpellated into those bodies might well have allegiance to precisely the state or whatever other agent of rule they may seek to follow, their bodies have, as it were, a life of their own. Bodies are material objects and, when encountering other bodies, exhibit what Walter Benjamin calls the "magic of matter."

In the larger passage of Benjamin's that this phrase comes from he writes that material objects "can communicate to one another . . . through a more or less material community. This community is immediate and infinite . . . it is magical (for there is also a magic of matter)."<sup>4</sup> That is to say that, even as the subjects who occupy these bodies are speaking to one another, hearing addresses, being subjects and subjected, they are also communicating to one another as material objects, as aspects of matter that communicate despite being utterly silent. This other form of communication is not subject to all of the lies and projections that constitute what Benjamin calls mythic violence and I like to call archism (that is, the opposite of anarchism, the naturalized systems of hierarchies and exploitation that generally dominates the world). Even as these bodies appear to be obeying what they think is their own best interest, they are simultaneously rebelling, simultaneously failing to be what they are told that they are.

It is this failure or refusal perhaps especially that allows for the kinds of disobedience and resistance that both Arendt and Butler (albeit in very different ways) cherish about assembled bodies. This same quality is present whenever

bodies are together. This includes every kind of assembly ranging from strangers walking past each other on the street (whose assembly is necessarily fleeting and temporary, probably not even noticed at all, at least under normal, non-pandemic conditions) to the assemblies at Tahrir Square, Gezi Park, and so many other public spaces in the midst of a revolution. In those moments in particular, the power and resistance of assemblies may be particularly tangible because it is a moment when the failure of these bodies to be what archism tells them that they are becomes most legible to the subjects who inhabit those bodies. This is a time when the “magic of matter” and the possibility of human politics come into alignment and, when that happens, all of the lies of archism, the sense of what is possible and what is not, the power of interpellated identity, the fear of the state, the degradations and humiliations of capitalism, all fall away.

While archism in all of its predatory power—or mythic violence if you prefer—often seems both invisible (so that we don’t even usually give it a name) and all powerful, in fact it is much more vulnerable than it appears. The proof of this is that when radical assemblies happen and are sustained over time, regimes that have lasted for decades, even centuries can disappear, seemingly overnight. The bodies that are in fact always resisting the projections and lies of archist authority suddenly come into synch with one another and no regime can withstand that form of coordination. Because our bodies are never what the state or capitalism tells them that they are, archist authority, whether it comes in the forms of states, or capitalism itself, or some other form, can never be totalizing. There is always a space for resistance that occurs every time a single body passes another body along the way.

For this reason, our time of pandemic, when bodies are meant to avoid one another (literally like the plague) is a time when we might expect archism to flourish. If bodies can’t be together then it seems that they can’t emit that “magic of matter” that serves as a fount of resistance to all illicit and predatory forms of archist power. Yet, as we have seen in the US and elsewhere, this is not what is actually happening. The Black Lives Matter movement in the US is flourishing and changing the world. In Belarus, crowds are gathering each weekend to defy the long term dictator Alexander Lukashenko. There are movements all over the globe that are engaging to some degree or other in acts of defiance and refusal of archist power.

In the case of Black Lives Matter, it seems to me that had George Floyd been murdered just a few months earlier (that is to say before the pandemic began) his death might have just been added to the long and horrible list of Black men and women who are killed by the police. But this time something different happened. Suddenly, forms of racism that have been tolerated for decades have become untenable (Aunt Jemima Pancake Syrup, Woodrow Wilson’s name on buildings and institutions, confederate statues, the confederate symbol on the state flag

of Mississippi). Suddenly, Black Lives Matter has achieved a prominence that it never had before. This is not to say that this moment is going to banish racism once and for all; signs of reaction are gathering as I write this. But it does suggest that something is different.

What could that difference be if in fact we are meeting less often and encountering one another mainly in furtive and hasty ways? I think that the fact of our collective separation, which on one level might seem to make us less connected, in another way makes us *more* connected. That is to say, bereft of the fact of frequent and ongoing physical proximity with other people, that sense of what happens between us, that magic of matter becomes more visible to us precisely by its occlusion. The magic of matter does not need physical proximity to exist. For Benjamin every object in the universe is in communion with every other object regardless of distance. But to us as conscious subjects, subjects who are prone to the powers of interpellation and bullying, subject to violence and intimidation as well as the lures and seductions of archism, this communion is normally virtually undetectable.

It may indeed require its apparent occlusion for us to be able to “hear” this communal language (which is, after all, utterly silent, not expressed in language or any other form of representation) at all. The pandemic has been an unmitigated disaster and so many have lost their lives but if there is a silver lining to it, it is that people may be starting to realize how much they need each other, how much they belong together, how much even the seemingly casual “peaceful intercourse between private persons,” to cite Benjamin once again, is a critical aspect of our political life.<sup>5</sup> Under conditions of archism, this communion is normally the only way that most people can be said to have a political life at all. Archism, through its representational function (democratic societies being very much included), overwrites that communion with its own structures; we are said to be engaged in politics when we vote, for example. But voting just means that we allow someone else to live the political life that we are giving away.

The perceived absence of even this form of political life that has been made apparent to us by the pandemic exposes the way that we are so utterly depoliticized, the way that we have been isolated, divided and conquered (even when we are together). The perception of this loss has, I think, galvanized people in a way that they have not been for a long, long time.

None of this means that we are on the verge of an anarchist revolution, unfortunately. The forces of archism are powerful. When the semblance of politics afforded by liberal democracy doesn't do the job of protecting the capitalist core, as seems to be the case in our current moment, liberalism readily shifts to fascism, the other side of the same archist coin. The world is in terrible danger right now, and not just from the pandemic but from the pseudo populism and neofascism of Trump, Bolsonaro, Putin, Erdoğan, Duterte, Modi, etc.

There are no guarantees but that also means that a fascist future is not inevitable either. If our bodies are inherently anarchist, even the bodies of subjects who love their subjection to archism (and there are many such bodies), then the fact of their interconnection, the magic of matter, means that even as all of us are threatened and subject to archist predations and violence, we are just as much always available for an anarchist response. At the end of the day, it is archism that has to swim against the tide. It has to demand that bodies mean and do this and not that, that these (white) bodies are good and must be protected and those (Black and Brown) bodies are bad and have to be killed. It has to frenetically overwrite the silent but constant call of bodies to one another. Anarchism, on the other hand, need only allow these bodies to be together, to interrupt or silence the frenzy of archism in order to allow these bodies a communion of their own. This built in advantage is something that cannot be taken away, pandemics or no and, in this very dark time, I see the magical power of bodies together as showing that another world is not only possible, it is already, and always has been here.

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## NOTES

1. Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 96.
2. Butler, *Notes Toward a Theory of Performative Assembly*, 27.
3. *Ibid.*, 160.
4. Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," 67.
5. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 245.

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