

A **RETHINKING**  
**MARXISM**  
*Dossier*

**Pandemic and  
the Crisis of  
Capitalism**

Summer 2020

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# A RETHINKING **Pandemic and** MARXISM **the Crisis of** *Dossier* **Capitalism**

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This dossier is an attempt to address the pandemic, the crisis of capitalism, and the conjuncture of insurrection borne out of it from a perspective that rethinks Marxism. As the infrastructural institutions of the capitalist state crumble, having been cannibalized for four decades by processes of neoliberalization, extreme forms of economic inequality and class injustice, mapped onto and produced through lethal and variegated racist formations in the United States (but no doubt coming to a theater near you) have sparked an accelerated decolonization sequence. Spearheaded by black youth, this sequence has swiftly turned into a multiracial insurrection against racist police violence.. When we were collecting proposals for this dossier, the theme was the pandemic and the crisis of capitalism. It still is (and, from what it looks, it will be for a long while), but it is now also a conjuncture of insurrection and decolonization. This transformation of the conjuncture and deepening of the crisis is reflected in almost all the contributions as many have recalibrated, in real time, their interventions to address the unfolding complexity of the moment.

## This Dossier...

### *The Editors*

And indeed, this dossier is an experiment for us here at *Rethinking Marxism*. First and foremost, the time frame is very different from the slower pace of quarterly academic journal publishing. We announced the CFP in late Spring, the first drafts of essays arrived on June 15, it was a quick turnaround thanks to our referees, followed by revisions, copyediting, design and layout and now we are releasing it in early August—possibly too soon and already too late. Remaining

on this schedule itself was one of the biggest challenges. But this pace has allowed us to be in closer proximity with the conjuncture, speaking from within it, staking positions before the trajectory of the sequence realizes. Second, the discourse is intended to be similar in tone to our *Remarx* section: theoretical but not academic, grounded in the concrete real but not empiricist. The length of the essays are intentionally kept around 4,500 words or

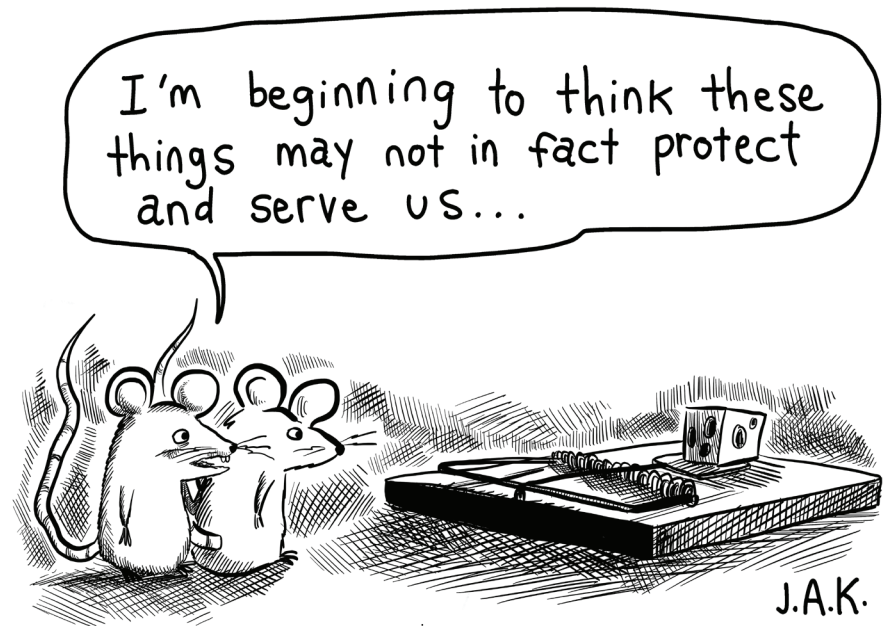
below, not only to make the work of producing this dossier less onerous but also to expand the readership. Third, this is a format that allows us to produce an open-access supplement to our quarterly journal published by Taylor & Francis. As an experiment, we have chosen the dossier format, one that is peer reviewed and professionally copyedited, yet is not a part of the numbered sequence of the journal. We intended it to be (at

least, initially) an e-book and designed it to be read on the computer or tablet screen, with a landscape layout.

One thing that amazed us in terms of the reaction we received is the international nature of the proposals and submissions. The selection of international perspectives that we are able to present to you here is a testament to the growing international reach of *Rethinking Marxism*—a feat that we are proud of, especially given our parochial origins “in the sleepy West of the woody East” that is the New England town of Amherst, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> In a way, this represents one of the directions toward which *Rethinking Marxism* would like to extend as we attempt to contribute to the decolonization process that is unfolding in the United States from an internationalist perspective.

We believe that only such an internationalist perspective can account for the corruption of imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism, and can push for a comprehensive decolonization not only in the racial formation of the United States but also elsewhere across the world: in every connected instance where multiple logics of appropriation (whether taking the form of primary accumulation or class exploitation or unequal exchange) intersect with racialized, gendered, and sexualized regimes of ordering and extend ecological destruction.

<sup>1</sup> See the legendary Pixies' postpunk anthem “UMass” from their 1991 4AD album, *Trompe Le Monde*.



**BOONE W. SHEAR:** Kali, thanks for doing this interview, and happy Father's Day to you.

**KALI AKUNO:** Thank you, yeah.

**SHEAR:** When we first approached you about a month ago to do this interview, we were interested in focusing on the pandemic as part of the current conjuncture, in the United States in particular. A lot has happened since then. And responses to both the antiracist rebellion and the pandemic made me think of some short commentary that you wrote in summer of 2016 heading into the presidential election that I think maybe can help bring some context to where we are now:

The US left must get prepared to fight on two fronts simultaneously from here on out. On the one hand, we must get prepared to fight the advance of an emergent white supremacy in its fascist form, which might in fact be even more virulent and violent if Trump doesn't win. And on the other hand we better get prepared to fight the most aggressive and malicious form of neo-liberal and neo-conservative governance Wall Street can buy, which

will be fiercely averse to any resistance from the left.<sup>1</sup>

So I'm wondering if we might start by talking a little bit about that two-front dynamic in this current moment; how are these fronts functioning and what is the Left up against?

**AKUNO:** Yeah. Both of those tendencies are kicking hard right now. The latter, the neoliberal option, is much more subtle. It appears in the

form of Biden and the Democratic Party—and it's part of the electoral apparatus. It's posing as both a friend of the people, but also, you have no other place to go. It's walking a fine line between trying to hold a multiclass, multiracial coalition intact while recognizing that it has some clear and obvious weaknesses based on their 2016 performance. They have to reconstitute, as they call it, the Obama coalition in order to have the faintest chance of winning because they not only have to win

the popular vote, just like they did in 2016, but they also have to win the electoral college, and that is not necessarily guaranteed. They may overwhelmingly win the popular vote, just on the basis of the domination of the two coastal areas, but lose everything in between. In which case the Republican Party would still be able to retain the presidency.

## Conjunctural Politics, Cultural Struggle, and Solidarity Economy: An interview with Kali Akuno

*Boone Shear*

<sup>1</sup>K. Akuno, "Short Commentary Reflections on the 2016 RNC/DNC and Electoral Politics," Navigating the Storm, 30 July 2016, <http://navigatingthestorm.blogspot.com/2016/07/short-commentary-reflections-on-2016.html>.

But here's a clear dilemma that they're posing to the people. Up to this point, in the face of a pandemic that has clearly brought out the contradictions in their health-care approach—the DNC's health-care approach—they have fundamentally denied the aspiration and demand for universal health care—given expression best by Bernie's campaign, but that's been an issue that he picked up from grassroots activists, really. So in the midst of a pandemic in April and May, the neoliberals stuck to their guns and said, "No, we're not going to offer universal health care." If anything, Biden, their representative, has been very much focused on saying we are going to fix the Obamacare plan. But there is no way of saving it, particularly in the midst of close to 50 million people newly unemployed. There's no way of salvaging it because people don't have the money to pay the premiums. And they're automatically not in the system because for most of us, our health care is tied to our employment. So you're unemployed, and you can't pay. There's no way for the math that they set up to even cover that.

But they're sticking to their guns. It's the market or die. And you see the same logic playing out in the face of the Floyd Rebellion and in what has probably become the central demand, around defunding the police. In the face of that popular demand, their core leadership says: "We're not defunding the police in any form or fashion, and in fact, we want to give them more money." This is the option which has been put clearly on the table by Pelosi, by Biden, and by Clyburn—remember the role that Clyburn played in the elevation of Biden, in saving Biden, I should say.

And so they've made it clear that they're not going to bend on two core things that are at the heart of what the vast majority of their constituency are objectively demanding and objectively need. And if they don't bend—which I don't think in this period they really can—if they don't bend, then they're still leaving the door open for an extremely hobbled and extremely weakened and increasingly more isolated Donald Trump, representing a neofascist option—just acting very openly and blatantly, now, the last couple of months, and the last couple of weeks in particular. The neoliberals are giving him life and breath because, with their approach and with a program that anemic, it's no guarantee that the vast majority of folks who are considered the kind of captured audience of the neoliberals are going to turn out for a program that doesn't speak to any of the fundamental demands or aspirations of the working class.

This is the pincer move that we are really in. And it's not just that these folks are entrenched, or these sets of interests are entrenched. They are very clear. They are much more clear than the general population, unfortunately. They are clear that the only way they're going to continue on is through more austerity and more of a squeeze on the working class. There really are very few material options for a break from this to happen unless everything is changed. So that section of the ruling class is very clear: either everything changes or fundamentally nothing changes.

And they are not with the program of everything changing, in no form or fashion. And that puts them in this real weird bind, and this weird place



where they can only speak to what is in their view the kind of amoral nature of the Trump administration. And the best that they really have to offer is, “We rule, more gently. We will rule, more civilly.”

**SHEAR:** “We will be less openly vicious.”

**AKUNO:** Right! The program remains the same. They’ve offered no alternative. And I think too many people see through that. So we really are at a conjuncture where the center cannot hold. I think they’re going to do everything they can between now and November to pull out all the stops to make sure that they can get back in office and try to sustain not only the country but the world economy as it was pre-COVID-19. But fundamentally there’s no way to do that.

And that really leaves the door open, both here and internationally, for the fascist option. And I’m not saying that just tongue and cheek. If the neoliberals and what they represent are not able to really corral and contain—particularly the energy that’s been unleashed around the Floyd Rebellion—if they’re not able to channel that in some very particular ways which gets people off the streets, which tones down the demands, which waters down the expectations, then you could very well see a sce-

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nario in which Trump and the forces that are allied with him are able—in the midst of continued unrest, or even an escalating unrest, which I think is a real possibility and which would provide a legitimacy—to cancel the elections. And to institute a program of law and order, which he’s clearly invoked.

And in some respects they [liberals] have suggested that they would support aspects of this as part of a getting back to normal: “This is all well and good, we’ll make a few tweaks here and there, but we got to get the show back on the road.” I mean, the Democrats, particularly Pelosi and Schumer, even more so than Biden, have given I think the greatest expression to this desire, if folks really listen to what they’ve been saying, as they’re trying to push through concrete relief programs, through the House and Senate right now.

At the same time, we have had police forces all throughout the country who, during the first two weeks of the uprising, were kind of flat-footed. It wasn’t clear whose orders to follow and who was giving the orders. It wasn’t clear what they would do. They were very much on the defensive rhetorically and positionally. But it seems since Atlanta in particular, they’ve kind of regained their footing. You started to see it, I think ini-

<sup>2</sup>“75-Year-Old Protester Shoved to Ground by Buffalo Police Has Skull Fracture: Lawyer,” *CBC*, 17 June 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/gugino-fractured-skull-1.5615718>.

<sup>3</sup>S. Cohen, “As Atlanta Police Protest, Is ‘Blue Flu’ the Next Pandemic?,” *Forbes*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sethcohen/2020/06/18/as-atlanta-police-protest-is-blue-flu-the-next-pandemic/#20e80661638f>.

<sup>4</sup>“Fear Grows of Modern-Day Lynchings as Five People of Color Are Found Hanged,” *Democracy Now*, 18 June 2020, [https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/18/headlines/fear\\_grows\\_of\\_modern\\_day\\_lynchings\\_as\\_six\\_people\\_of\\_color\\_are\\_found\\_hanged](https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/18/headlines/fear_grows_of_modern_day_lynchings_as_six_people_of_color_are_found_hanged).

tially, in Buffalo where they pushed an elder to the ground and cracked his skull,<sup>2</sup> and how the first kind of concrete action was, “Hey, if we’re going to be limited in the types of force we’re allowed to use, we’re just going to step down off of this unit.”<sup>2</sup> That was the first kind of clear action, and it’s been cascading since then, these kinds of symbolic actions.

But it’s being met on the streets, increasingly, particularly in small towns, but also midsize towns. You know, this open fascist violence is occurring, as we’ve seen. In the last two weeks, you know we’ve seen the kind of autonomous-zones experiments, the largest of which is the CHAZ, the Capital Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle. But its outskirts have been raided the last two or three weeks, by Proud Boys and other kinds of neofascist forces. That’s also happened in Portland, and it’s also happened on a major scale in Philly in defense of the Columbus statue and other statues.

So it’s not just happening in the outskirts of society or just in Trump country—that’s actually not true. And we can’t prove it yet, but in following the right-wing rhetoric—which is something I have to study in my political context to understand what the other side is thinking and moving, given the current proximity of forces—they’re speaking of this lynching that’s happening and folks being found hung, as an active lynching campaign.<sup>4</sup> And there’ve been some things that have been stated at least on the radio here, kind of instructions on how to go about doing that and pursuing that.

So I see this as an active campaign. I see it as part

of the kind of right-wing ideology which has been built up in particular since the 1980s. And the level of just open reception of forces in Oakland, in New Mexico, in Phoenix, and in Seattle where they’ve described the armed fascist vigilantes, they’ve been heard and recorded in many cases. Over the channels they’ve described them as “friendlies.”

The counter rebellion is in motion now, and I think it’s gaining steam. And it is my fear for those of us on the left, to be honest with you, that, in the euphoria of the moment, in seeing the kind of major actions of the Floyd Rebellion taking place now for three, almost four weeks straight, that folks are being blinded by what they want to see and are not seeing the counter-motion, the counterinsurgency that is developing kind of underneath it or alongside it.

And then there’s the undecided middle, which I think the vast majority of the working class in this country really falls into. And I don’t think we know quite yet what their appetite really is for sustained action in the midst of both a pandemic and in the midst of this uprising. It’s not quite clear yet. This is not a 1968 moment; this is different. Trump has tried to invoke that. And what makes it different is that a good portion of this “middle,” I would say, are black petty-bourgeois forces and other kinds of petty-bourgeois forces that have arisen over the course of the last fifty years, who very much feel that they are part of the system and who have something to lose, both in position and access, by a more militant hard-left orientation emerging. So it’s not quite clear where they’re going to bend and where they’re going to break, and how long or how much of



this kind of program they're willing to go with.

So the future is wide open. It's unknown. It is very hard to kind of imagine where things are going to go. But the one thing is clear: almost anything can trigger events to go on in any kind of direction. And so we need to be mindful of that. Relative to the initial question, the fascist option is clear. And I think also the neoliberal option is clear. And I think the interplay between them in the course of the next four months to a year is really going to define what the future looks like, I think, for many years to come.

### White Supremacy and Disposability

**SHEAR:** I want to make sure that we further explore this struggle between neoliberals and the Far Right, and in particular what this might mean for openings for the Left. And I am wondering if we can dig in a bit towards understanding some of the forces that are not only shaping political orientations but are also implicated in the concrete violence that's being experienced, exacerbated, and further exposed by the impacts and responses to the pandemic as well as the Floyd Rebellion and that, perhaps, are shifting consciousness and relationships. The pandemic, for example, has been talked about as a sort of great unveiling that reveals the depths of inequality and oppression

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in our system. Between the elite and the masses but also within the working class itself.

Frontline and care workers, black communities, indigenous communities, Latinx communities, incarcerated folks, the elderly, poor people and people without homes are much more at risk than the general population, and seemingly deemed more disposable.

For example, a study done by researchers at Harvard that was recently released found that: Among folks aged 25–34, black people had a COVID mortality rate 7.3 *times* as high as whites. Among folks aged 35–44, black people had a COVID mortality rate 9 *times* as high as whites. And for those aged 45–54, black people had a COVID mortality rate 6.9 *times* as high as whites.<sup>5</sup>

Similar inequities were also seen for Latinx and indigenous populations, who had COVID-19 death rates that were 5 to 8 *times* as high as white folks (for age groups 25–54).

How do you understand what has produced these dramatically different unequal outcomes by race? And what might be done to alter these patterns of racialized violence?

**AKUNO:** At its roots, it's the settler bargain. I agree wholeheartedly that this is laying bare a

<sup>5</sup> M. T. Bassett, J. T. Chen, and N. Krieger, "The Unequal Toll of COVID-19 Mortality by Age in the United States: Quantifying Racial/Ethnic Disparities" (HCPDS Working Papers vol. 19, no. 3, 12 June 2020), [https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1266/2020/06/20\\_Bassett-Chen-Krieger\\_COVID-19\\_plus\\_age\\_working-paper\\_0612\\_Vol-19\\_No-3\\_with-cover.pdf](https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1266/2020/06/20_Bassett-Chen-Krieger_COVID-19_plus_age_working-paper_0612_Vol-19_No-3_with-cover.pdf).

lot of the fundamental contradictions in this society. That's what COVID-19, basically, laid out. There's something I think, which is perhaps even more revealing, that can get at your question. In the midst of the kind of the epicenter of the pandemic in April where, by that time, almost all the states had come to the conclusion that they had to shut down. And at this time—in relation to those who could work from home and those that couldn't—white people were significantly more likely to be able to work from home than black people. Which meant that the brunt of the unemployment went to black workers, latino/a workers, indigenous workers. And it speaks to clear fractures around who's doing what work and why in the society.

**SHEAR:** Who's doing certain service work and care work, particular occupations that were thought of as low status and expendable and are now being shown as, and rhetorically supported as, being essential ...

**AKUNO:** Who's really doing that work? And who was in a position to do that? Who couldn't afford to stay home, or by virtue of their occupation couldn't stay home because they were deemed essential? And I think we really need to understand those relations. It helps to understand not only who got infected, who got sick, and who died, but it also speaks to the very nature of, and the lack of imagination of, the health-care response.

And, again, it points to the very real limitations of what the system was willing to do and was willing to accept at that point in time. I think everybody needs to be clear: the total response

from the beginning was about saving the capitalist system. Point blank. Period. From both sides. And they were only going to bend enough to keep that system afloat. And I would argue that it was very clear from the beginning, in how they rolled out those stimulus checks and who they were rolling them out to, and the conditions that they put on them, that all of the racial factors of how this society is structured was baked into that very response. And then you saw it play out, particularly amongst the Right, who were saying, "We're not going to give more of a stimulus, particularly on the federal level, because it incentivizes people to stay at home, because they make more unemployment than they do making hourly wages in their quote-unquote 'essential work.'"

So if we want to peel this onion further, and to get at both the response and people's clear understanding from the beginning of who this was going to impact and why, I think we begin to understand why there's just no regard for the consequences of reopening the economy, because there's just not only a chronic belief but there are statistical facts and proven scientific fact. If *this* population gets it, *this* is what's going to happen. If *this* population gets it, then this is what's going to happen. Using their language, since "normal people" aren't dying ... *let's go*. Let's get back to work. Because these black folks, these Puerto Ricans, and these Mexicans, and Central Americans, you know, these Hondurans and Nicaraguans and El Salvadorans who are in our meat-packing factories, or are in auto plants, or who are working in these fields—if they die, fuck it. We can replace them. Let's go. Let's keep it moving.

If we want to peel this onion back, we can see it's not just, like, who is dying. We can see it's a very structured setup of *who will die*. That's the piece I'm getting at, the way in which this structure is channeled very clearly: *this is who's going to suffer from this, and we've calculated and surmised that we're willing to accept that*. And that's not just like the right-wing fanatics who are pushing that. Listen to Cuomo, he's just as eager to get the economy in New York going as Donald Trump is. Cuomo may be using a bit more, you know, sound medical reasoning and actually working in some stages and phases. But the imperative to get everything going to the point where we're not worried about eradicating COVID, we're just trying to get it to a manageable position—that's always what he's been arguing. Liberal leadership has put him out as kind of a front man, right, and help argue, "This is the best humane response, and this is how the Democrats would do it." It's not about eradicating the disease; it's about making it manageable. That's always been the aim and objectives on both sides to varying degrees.

And the other dimension to this response is that everything has been geared towards finding a cure. Now what does that mean? That means we're finding a way in which we can profit off of the response to this particular pandemic. Because the clearest, easiest, proven way

is to shut the shit down and let it trace itself out. That is a no brainer. That easily could have and should have been done. Nobody really wanted to do that. People want to talk about the contrast between Trump and the Democrats, but we've got to interrogate that further because, in some fundamental respects, they really aren't that different. We have to really tell the truth there, and really point out what the alternative is. And if we want something different, we have to be clear about how much structural change actually has

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to happen. Nowhere in the past couple of months, amidst these discussions of talking about them as "heroes," nowhere are there serious proposals to raise the wages of these "essential" workers. We are not extending them overtime pay or hazard pay. Nowhere has that really been offered. It's been rhetorically stated, but nowhere has it fundamentally been put out there by either one of these forces

and the politics that they represent that they're going to make a fundamental change.

And so for me, what this fundamentally gets at, it really speaks to what I've called the age of disposability,<sup>6</sup> and we are starting right in the middle of it now in a way that's plain to see. I think if it wasn't for the Floyd Rebellion, we would be still very much in a deeper conversation about this. Unfortunately, I think there's some aspects of what's occurred in the last three or four weeks

<sup>6</sup> K. Akuno, "Until We Win: Black Labor and Liberation in the Disposable Era," *Counter-Punch*, 4 September 2015, <https://www.counter-punch.org/2015/09/04/until-we-win-black-labor-and-liberation-in-the-disposable-era/>.

which has kind of pushed COVID-19 kind of way back in the background. I'm kind of holding my breath because, it's like, it's not like this wave ever stopped. If this is really like its cousin the flu, we know it's going to get worse as it gets colder. So we are in for one hell of a ride.

And I know COVID-19 is not necessarily completely off a lot of folks' minds, but it has been interesting, some things I've had to point out to some comrades. I've been doing work responding to extrajudicial terror from the police all of my life, but there's a way in which the movement still has to do some groundwork to get folks to understand these dynamics. We've lost 70,000 black folks to this pandemic, at least; we didn't have the same level of anger or systemic response as we did to when Floyd got murdered. And we have to figure out how to get people to not just respond to the visceral but respond to the structural. And that's a major challenge we still have ahead of us.

### Hegemonic Struggle and War of Position

**SHEAR:** Despite these unveilings of violence over the past few months, capital accumulation continues unabated. On Friday, it was reported that another one-and-a-half million people filed for unemployment that week for a total of 45 million claims since the beginning of the pandemic, and during this same time the total wealth of the nation's billionaires has increased by almost 600 billion. The owning class seems to be doing just fine. One way to approach this challenge is by thinking through it in terms of a Gramscian "war of position." And this follows from some of what you have just described but even more so from a

recent essay that you wrote,<sup>7</sup> in which you discussed the potential openings for the Left: what we are up against most immediately is a sort of narrative or cultural struggle against Democrats and liberals who stifle radical politics. We can see this in the moves calling for defunding the police rather than abolition, or the inability to give any sort of serious thought to increasing well-being of frontline workers that you were describing earlier, or in ridiculous and awful symbolic gestures like the congressional Democrats kneeling for the cameras, donned in kente cloth ...

<sup>7</sup> K. Akuno, "From Rebellion to Revolution," *Viewpoint Magazine*, 11 June 2020, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2020/06/11/from-rebellion-to-revolution/>.



**AKUNO:** [Laughing] That was a moment I will forever be grateful that I got a chance to witness. That was some of the most absurd shit I've ever seen.

Photograph from Getty Images

**SHEAR:** The architects and managers of the prison-industrial complex!

**AKUNO:** Right! Like, this is bizarro world. I've



lived to see bizarro world.

**SHEAR:** In addition to or as part of this struggle of ideas that the Left must engage in, you were earlier suggesting a kind of more fundamental ontological situation, a kind of reliance on or investment in the disposability of life that's just sort of baked into and our dominant reality. It makes me want to think about the importance of not just struggling over the ideas and contents of what has been exposed in the dominant social order but the importance of a politics that seeks to rupture or work outside the real in order to support or create or expand other possible modes of life—so people cannot only think and act critically within the world as it is but begin to actually imagine and practice how to be together differently, as part of a shift in reality or opening of realities.

I agree with you, it's pretty clear that liberals and progressives are winning the cultural struggle over the Left, for the moment. At the same time, it is still pretty remarkable how public discourse has changed in the past few weeks and then things like systemic racism, racial capitalism, abolition, and even defunding the police—these are all new narratives and discourses to struggle over in the broad public arena. And then things like mutual-aid relationships and projects have exploded, some movements have become quite militant, acts of solidarity large and small are widespread. How

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might the Left engage in a struggle that doesn't just create progressive reforms that shore up liberalism and white supremacy but that begins to work towards and assemble other ways of being in the world? I am thinking here a bit in terms of what you described as nonreformist reforms in the first essay in *Jackson Rising*, practices and policies that subvert the logic of the capitalist system, "up end its relations, and subvert its strength ... [and] seek to create new logics, new relations, and new imperatives."<sup>8</sup> How to struggle in and against the violence of patriarchal

racist capitalist modernity and pull open and expand more fundamental ruptures or breaks so we can reorient and organize around life and relationality and autonomy?

**AKUNO:** I think that there is a path already in the present, I really do. I've been trying to look at what already exists, particu-

larly since COVID-19, in the level of mutual-aid response. We haven't seen that since the Great Depression. It's gotten hardly any attention. I think even in the movement, it hasn't received adequate attention. And it's a remarkable development. To me it's demonstrated that there is still something left of a deeper humanity in this empire, a humanity that neoliberalism as a cultural project has tried to do away with—this is actually the most successful dimension of the neoliberal project, but it hasn't broken that down completely. That's a deeply encouraging sign. And I think in some respects, mutual aid and

<sup>8</sup> K. Akuno and A. Nangwaya, eds., *Jackson Rising* (Ottawa: Daraja, 2017), 17

care really are the bedrock on which we need to be thinking about how we construct the alternatives. I think that's it. We've seen mutual aid play out almost everywhere in kind of a spontaneous motion—there's been medics, there's been food pantries, and other care. And it's set up everywhere quickly.

Now why am I saying this? Because I think it speaks to some of the work in the movement, and I think in particularly the solidarity economy. And it speaks to the success of some of our advocacy, even if we didn't necessarily see it borne out as we wanted to, before COVID-19, in practice. But beyond that advocacy, now the practice of cooperation and care is here on a level I think far faster, wider, and deeper than we imagined even six months ago. It's here now. The question I think is to what degree can it be politicized, and to what end?

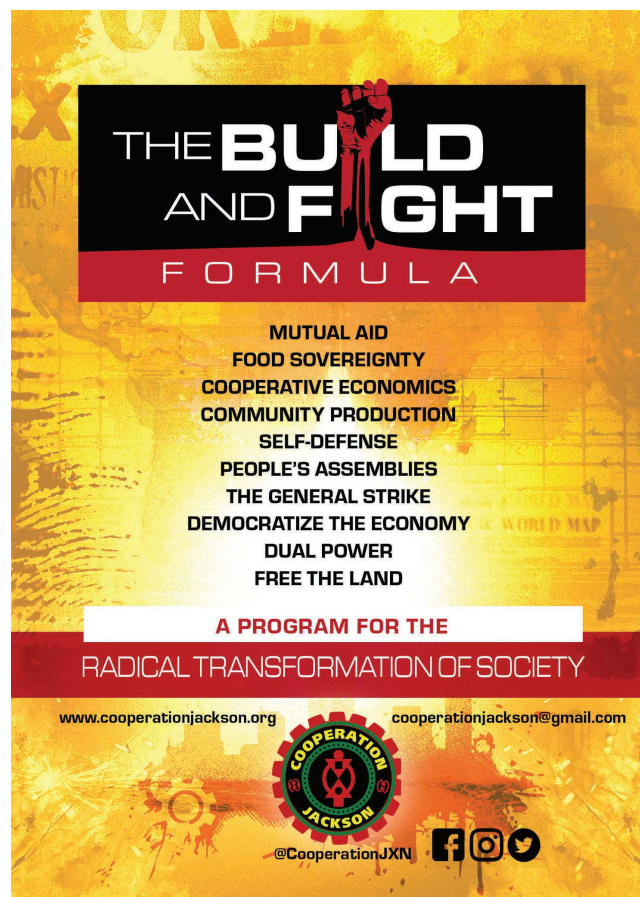
I think other practices and structures have to be coupled with it. Cooperation Jackson has been putting out what we are calling a "Build and Fight" program.<sup>9</sup>

And, you know, as fate would have it, it's broken

out into a ten-point program. But we started out with that mutual-aid piece, very deliberately and on purpose, in order to say: "This is what's already objectively happening in the world." We can work on politicizing that and then linking it with the work around food sovereignty that's

already happening, been emerging and deepening in a lot of our communities over the past fifteen or twenty years. And we could then tie that into all of the solidarity economy work and have this all move in a concerted political direction. The seeds of a new world are then there, and that gives us not only the social dimension of production that will be needed in a sustained conflict but the democratic, not only production, but distribution of the goods and resources that are then produced through the food sovereignty efforts, through the community production, through the cooperative piece,

and with—the mutual aid is already there: you're laying a material foundation to be able to express a different politics. If we're able to politicize this and then organize it to reach 40 or 50 or 60 million people, if we do that, we can take the best practices of the Unemployed Councils



<sup>9</sup> "The Build and Fight Formula," *Cooperation Jackson Announcements*, 24 June 2020, <https://cooperationjackson.org/announcements-blog/2020/6/24/the-build-and-fight-formula>.

work, and, you know, there are people out there talking about a Poor People's Army. And if we can do that, we have it. Like, we could objectively have it, and have it working in such a way that it is building the alternative outside of the state, outside the established capitalist market. And then it might be able to build enough strength to make a real go at it, a real challenge to not just make demands on the state, which are set up in a way in which we're asking the businesses and the managers to implement some things on our behalf, but are really chipping away and building direct governance and control.

We have that ability to get us there.

I think it is going to take some hard and uncomfortable politics. And this is where a battle of ideas is really important. I do think it's not a disjuncture to say that we got to conquer this fundamental reality of disposability head on. Because that's only going to increase, particularly as—as the capitalist market economy continues to worsen. And we know now already that a good chunk of jobs are never coming back. You know, most of them are “bullshit jobs”—to use that phrase—anyway. They are never coming back.

I think we have a basic recipe to do something profoundly different, but it is going to take some serious struggles with a lot of the liberal forces who want to channel things back into a position where they can manage and supervise as part of this rush to get things back to normal. So, for example, it's going to be hard having a real conversation between the *defund the police* folks and the *abolish the police* folks. The folks that want to push the defund the police are going to push for

a “practical” solution and say, “Hey, this is the best that we can do given the limitations.” But that's going to be a real question, and so they'll have the phrasing, and they already do, that the “abolitionists are impractical. They are intransigent and they are impractical.” If we fall in and cave to that narrative and are unable to win over a critical component of the defund side, then that radical alternative will be halted, stunted, and I would argue repressed.

**SHEAR:** And then you'll have a situation where so many people are going to not be interested or energized in following a kind of middle-of-the-road liberal or progressive platform, and the Right gains momentum.

**AKUNO:** Right. What the liberals are offering is not gonna work.

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The great recession that the “financial” collapse of 2008 set off did not lead to any successful transformative reform of capitalism. While it led to enough pain to crack the bourgeois aspirational appeal and to create openings for socialist politics,<sup>1</sup> those politics nowhere broke through the hegemony of the capitalist order. The challenge that COVID-19 and the uprising against police brutalities, working together, currently represent for the reproduction of that hegemony may be of a different order. They have arguably precipitated a general crisis of civil and political society potentially more dangerous to bourgeois and capitalist hegemony than any typical economic crisis, even a protracted one, would by itself be able to generate. The popular sentiment they have spawned is perhaps best captured by the expression “the right to existence,”<sup>2</sup> typical of the rallying cries with which the popular masses have historically sustained revolutionary moments.

Coming out of a confluence of predictable sparks and within the time of dangerous political impasse (teetering, at the edge of landscapes of inequality and insecurity, between savagery and despair) in which the neoliberal regime

of accumulation finds itself in relation to the Trump presidency, the crisis has emerged as an existential threat. The Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted the existential terror of a racist policing apparatus, which is easily visible at work over diverse racial and ethnic territories; not coincidentally, clear similarities have been popularly recognized between that terror and the terror that COVID-19 (in both its conditions and effects) has differentially imposed along lines of

class and gender (but also of age and sexuality). The condensation of varied forms and modes of inequality and injustice into the systemic existential threat felt by some—and sympathized with by many—is what generates the revolutionary potential of the moment. Since the 1950s, the political landscape has increasingly taken the form of traditional class struggles and increasingly the form of social-movement (citizenship) struggles engaged in what could be called a dia-

lectic of separation and solidarity. This condensation that we are witnessing, into a recognized condition of systemic terror, has now created the most intense moment of potential revolutionary transcendence of that dialectic since the 1960s. Understood in these terms (of admittedly Hegelian flavor), the revolutionary potential of the moment has perhaps emerged most clearly in the United States. It has, however, remarkable

## The Right to Existence

*Antonio Callari*

<sup>1</sup> Occupy and the Sanders movement in the United States; Syriza in Greece; Podemos in Spain; Corbyn in the UK; and, in a global-order context, the Arab Spring.

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the expression from Soboul (1980).



global resonances that are poised to feed into a great chorus of anger and despair, with global revolutionary potential, following the prospective states of widening and deepening poverty, including famine, across the world. Whether this potential is realized (in varied intensities and national and global configurations) will depend on if and how the “right to existence” will come to assert itself over the right (i.e., the logic) of capital.

Revolutionary prospects emerge more clearly if we consider that we are now in the midst and

not at the end of a *long duré* of crisis and struggles. The life-threatening conditions the capitalist regime of accumulation has created are not likely to be adequately addressed in any timely manner. On the one side, capitalist ruling circles, if not as ideologically and socially and politically

secure as they were prior to 2008, are far from being dethroned, and they will work to limit whatever reforms that will have to be made to types and terms of reform unlikely to eliminate the patterns of insecurity and exclusion that have brought civil society to this latest boiling point. On the other side, even if the intensity of underlying terror-inducing conditions were to be attenuated, the sense of need for a revolutionary transformation of society and economy is likely to be reenergized by the depth and differential impact of the great global ecological crisis already visible on the horizon. Certainly, we have long shed an episteme of historical

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inevitability. But, given these *long duré* prospects, we can still say with confidence that our crisis period (2008 to 2030–40, depending on the eruption date of the climatic crisis) does place the bourgeois-capitalist mode of humanity on the chess board, reasonably anticipating that a need for an epochal transformation will impress itself on the consciousness of humanity with increasing clarity through the crisis.

The specific question for this essay is how Marxism can see itself as a force for such an epochal transformation, through the evolution of this

crisis. Together, COVID-19 and the explosion of pent-up anger at murderous police brutality have gashed through the bourgeois dermis deeply enough that all but the most recalcitrant of the ruling circles have acknowledged the systemic nature of the precarity of life for at

least some, even linking it to general sensitivities about “inequality” that the great recession had already begun to generate. Of course, by itself, this acknowledgement will not lead to radically transformative policies, and possibly not even any reformist policies with teeth: the ruling circles have long practiced the art of changing some surface relationships, when the times require it, so as to forestall fundamental change.<sup>3</sup> But, as we also know, the ruling classes do not get to determine the course of history on their own. The longer the insecurities of life endure, and the greater the resulting increase of affective (anger, despair, mistrust, etc.) balances, the more

<sup>3</sup> See *The Leopard*, by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1958).

the likelihood that popular forces, in whatever combinations of organized and spontaneous actions into which they coalesce through the *long duré* of the crisis, will push beyond the limits of the existing social formation—revolutionary consciousnesses are always baked by the heat of *repeated* moments of crisis and instability. What kind of history (i.e., transformations, more or less radical) is produced by crises has always and everywhere been a conjunctural result of varied economic-and-cultural conditions and political interventions. Marxism has always seen itself as a force (along a spectrum ranging from the real to the aspirational) for shaping these conditions and interventions toward socio-communism. So I now turn to how we might see Marxism playing a role in this *long duré* crisis of *our time*.

\* \* \*

Marx himself worked toward such an intervention *in his time*, moving to strengthen a political force capable of effecting an epochal transformation. His intellectual biography may therefore hold some still useful guideposts as we consider a Marxist intervention in our times of crisis.

Marx never produced a thorough analysis of the political: his contribution was thorough, analytically; powerfully suggestive, ideologically; but only fragmentary, politically. But rather than diminishing the importance of “the political” for Marx, this absence of a thorough analysis on his part has a positive value for us, serving as a sign of the *undecidability* of the political: it is the space of a “real” (in the Lacanian sense) to which the legacy of Marxism must forever return, never to resolve it. That is, the terms of the political can-

not be analytically *defined* (given *finite* parameters) if the “real”<sup>4</sup> is to have its effects (i.e., keeping alive the possibility of a traversal from a crisis-ridden mode of existence to a new mode of being).

For Marx, the “real” agents who could cut through the veneer of bourgeois moral, juridical, and economic forms were “workers.”<sup>5</sup> I will turn later to a particular aspect of the powerful analytical framework through which Marx (and others after him) conceptualized the role of labor in the processes of capitalist surplus-value production while conceptualizing workers as agents of revolution. Here, two meta-analytical observations seem specifically valuable for reflecting on the relationship of Marxism to the crisis of these our times.

The first observation is that Marx—and this is well known—came to the centrality of workers *before analytically producing it*. He came to it from his (and Engels’s) observations of “worker” struggles (both artisans and waged workers, Lyon silk producers and Silesian workers, each in their own precarity). The analysis of the relations and processes of surplus-value production and distribution remains powerful and indeed constitutive of Marxism. But it is important to take some distance from that analysis, its compelling force notwithstanding, in order to remember another equally constitutive element of Marxism: namely, the *primacy of activity (activism) over the concept*; a primacy we know by the term “materialism” (in whatever version, dialectical or aleatory, we might use the term); a primacy reaffirmed, time and again at moments of socialist revolution, in the history of Marxism.

<sup>4</sup> The “real” is where that which is repressed or foreclosed—as, e.g., the relations of production are unacknowledged in bourgeois economics—continues to operate.

<sup>5</sup> Workers as producers of surplus value—in the form, that is, in which Marx described them in those parts of *Capital* dedicated to an analysis of the labor process and the objective condition of expanded reproduction, and not in the form of simple sellers of “labor” in which bourgeois ideology presents them.

The second observation is that Marx made agents of historical transformation of *workers* by virtue of their function as representatives of *humanity*. I do not mean to suggest any kind of return to a Marxism as Humanism here, certainly not in the terms in which that formation has come to be criticized (a Marxism grounded in any abstract, ideological/philosophical concept of humanity; e.g., Althusser 1970). The function of workers as representatives of humanity is what Marx and Engels (1998) produced in the 1848 *Manifesto*,<sup>6</sup> where they formulated workers as agents of an epochal transformation on the basis of the dialectical contradiction of their *condition of absolute dispossession* in a regime that had culturally and juridically boxed humanity into property relations—a formulation that, nota bene, Marx never found necessary to dispute or even qualify in his later writings. Why, we may ask, did the beyond-humanism Marx so link the working class to the fate of humanity? The answer to this question is not that he slipped back into the 1844 zone. It is rather that he and Engels needed this formulation in order to enact a concept of epochal struggle that they had already, even if only broadly, presented in the post-“break” *German Ideology* of 1846: namely, that modes of production change through the political leadership of a class capable of ideologically/philosophically position-

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ing itself culturally as a better representative of the interests of humanity as a whole (Marx and Engels 1970).

Now, we know that for about a century the narrative of worker agency was incredibly powerful as a condition for resistance to and transgression against capitalism. But we are also cognizant that the terms this narrative set up for resisting capitalism and creating socialism became problematic in the twentieth century:

in the West, as capitalism moved both to colonize the consciousness of swaths of the working classes and to normalize—extending antecedents Polanyi (2001) had presciently outlined in the 1940s—a biopolitical management of the conditions (upstream) and stresses (downstream) of the processes of capitalist accumulation; in the area of “really existing socialism”—the USSR and its Eastern European satel-

lites, but also socialist formations elsewhere—as socialist instincts and hopes were replaced by social forms that, designed to “manage” the economic logic Marx had described in *Capital*, ended up instead mostly reproducing it; and elsewhere, too, as old forms of dependency were reproduced and new ones created through continuing savage global processes of primitive and capitalist accumulation.

Since the 1970s, with the weakening of labor

<sup>6</sup> After Marx’s (1964) “break” from the humanism of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

movements and socialist movements connected to them, bourgeois interests and inclinations have pursued the accumulation of capital effectively—though not, of course, without stresses and contradictions—and have overcome forms of resistance relatively easily with prophylactic and policing actions at both the national and international levels. Even when announced under a banner of socialism, the resistance has, in the West, often only arced back to capitalist welfare-state forms of governance. The birth of a more radical socialist project—local worker cooperatives in articulation with other forms of cooperatives, experiments in social ecology and anarcho-communalism, forms of mutual aid and solidarity economies, experiments in planning from below as well as revisiting the potential for planning from above in the age of artificial intelligence—seems to me to be still in an embryonic form—still in need, that is, of the *synergistic maturation* necessary to eventuate the birth of a new epoch.

And we? Since the 1970s, we have been trying to understand, not so much the nature and logic of the more or less brutal processes of dispossession and accumulation we have witnessed, for the *broad* outlines of that nature and that logic were already familiar to Marxist theory, but more so how to harness more effective forms of resistance to and transcendence of these processes.

Might the *long duré* crisis of these *our* times not contain within it (evidence of) the elements for such more effective forms of resistance and for a maturation of the embryonic state of a new grand socialist project? If so, how might a Marx-

ist practice of theory help visualize and concretize those elements?

\* \* \*

Here, recall the two elements of historical materialism I introduced above: namely, the idea of the primacy of activity over the concept and the idea that the contention for political leadership in matters of epochal transformation requires ideas *standing for* the interests of humanity. In line with these two elements, we can ask whether the activism that our *long duré* crisis is energizing might be forming *ideas* that have the potential of expressing the force of humanity (i.e., activist masses as representatives of humanity) to break through the limits of capitalist value relations and propel us into a new mode of life.<sup>7</sup>

Our crisis presents itself immediately as a set of violations of a *right to existence*. Transgressing ideologically accepted norms of justice and generating mass popular movements of anger and protest, the crisis thus presents itself as a failure of the biopolitical conditions of life under the aegis of professed bourgeois rights: even establishment media figures are asking whether the promises of equality can be kept, whether the skepticism of the masses and their embrace of street power might be not only understandable but *also necessary*. It would certainly be problematic to overestimate the revolutionary potential of the moment's demand for the right to existence: even if the demand raises questions about capitalism, we know the strength of the bourgeois project to *contain* popular aspirations within certain juridical and cultural boundaries (e.g., equality of opportunities). But it would be

<sup>7</sup> Marx (1970) identified “theory” itself as constituting a “material force” when it grips the masses.

equally problematic to underestimate the revolutionary potential of the moment.

The transformative potential of the crisis is clearly visible in the widening popular understanding of the *systemic* ways in which the inequalities of capitalism undermine the right to existence of “some” (a violation of the ideologically powerful promise of an “all”) and in the resultant requests for *systemic change* encompassing all realms of life, *including class or class-proximate dimension of the economy*. It is true that this

moment thus situates itself primarily in the arena of social movements and citizenship-rights struggles rather than in the arena of the traditional class struggle, and that the struggle remains open to maneuvers of absorption within the bourgeois imagination (equal opportunity, personal responsibility, etc). But, as we know, worker struggles have themselves not been immune to bour-

geois strategies of absorption. It is also the case, *and this is the crucial point to consider*, that the very evolution of capitalism (from a formation in which the *rule of capital* imposed itself immediately at the point of production to a formation in which the *rule of the bourgeoisie* came to take the form of a state managing the biopolitical conditions of the processes of capital accumulation) has, for a long time now, worked to diffuse the operation of the class struggle from points of production to spheres of citizenship. Citizenship

**Yet the conceptual value apparatus through which the workings of capitalism are laid out remains—even in the nonessentialist philosophical framework in which Resnick and Wolff have embedded it—marked by (and thus cannot but carry the traces of) the historical conditions of the property or propertylessness of *Capital's* fully juridically enabled commodity producers.**

struggles can thus now be seen more directly as forms of the class struggle against the rule of capital than they could earlier (e.g., Brown 2015). Taking many forms, more radical in some cases (e.g., Italian *operaismo*, radical feminism, black Marxism) and less so in others (liberal versions of feminism and civil rights), this diffusion of struggles has arguably become a *defining* characteristic of bourgeois societies (capitalist social formations) after World War II. Even in their character as social-movement struggles,

the struggles of our day can thus be understood as struggles at the front line of an always latent epochal confrontation between capitalism and socialism and, thus, as containing within them the elements of the class struggle understood in terms of such a confrontation (which is how Marx understood it to the end of his life).

Only history will answer if the struggles for the right

to existence that we are now witnessing will be contained within or be able to transgress the limits of the bourgeois order. But history is made on the ground. How might Marxism see itself as a part of this history making? How might it produce a unity from the powerful energy and personality of the current struggles, even in their social-movement form, both with the healthy parts of the socialist vision it has crucially sustained historically and with the newly embryonic (see above) form of a grand socialist proj-



ect? Can Marxism’s analytic apparatus speak to the current struggles for the right to existence on their own terms, giving them *its* own energies while drawing from *theirs* in the process of forging a common (socialist) struggle against forms of injustice and inhumanity?

I want to argue that, if Marxism can be a force in unity with the activists of the day, it will not be via any explanation of what class is or how class works, which rests on analytical categories that were appropriate for the period of industrial capitalism, when struggles were carried out at the point of production. It will not be via any designation of the forms of identity and struggle (gender, race, sexuality, and environment, primarily, but others too) around which the social movements are organized as “conditions” of the class process that it continues to conceptualize in terms appropriate to workers’ struggles around surplus-value production: the rhetoric of “conditions” continues to make gender and race (and other) practices and identities secondary and to devalue their socialist revolutionary potential. If Marxism can be a force in the struggles of the current (*long duré*) crisis, this will have to instead be via the development of an analytical framework that, even as it coalesces around processes of surplus value, speaks *directly and organically* (and not only *methodologically*) to the identities and struggles of social movements—much as it spoke directly and organically to the identities and struggles of “workers” during the time of industrial capitalism. *This revision of its analytical apparatus, then, is what Marxism has to produce today.* In producing this revision, it would only be doing what Marx did close to two centuries ago in the face of the processes and struggles of

the capitalism of his times, or what other Marxists did a century ago (e.g., Hilferding on finance capital, or Lenin on the schema of reproduction) in the face of the (different) processes and struggles they were seeing in their times.

The analytical framework Marx (1977) himself produced was that of *Capital’s* volume I (volumes 2 and 3 bear the imprints of developments and movements after Marx). There Marx laid out the *logic* of commodity relations and extended this logic into processes of surplus value, and he then, in the section on primitive accumulation, traced out the *historical* conditions whereby workers—agents who, although they could *juridically* function as independent producers/buyers/sellers of commodities—had become *actually* dispossessed and reduced to mere sellers of “labor power.”<sup>8</sup> In *Capital*, then, both analytically and historically, the question of exploitation became (as was the question of socialism to become) a matter of the *ownership* (or lack thereof) of the means of production. It is true that the theoretical apparatus of *Capital* has been, in some ways, qualified and extended considerably; Resnick and Wolff (1987) in particular have made a powerful case for separating the question of surplus value from the question of ownership (and from other questions as well, such as the question of power). Yet the conceptual value apparatus through which the workings of capitalism are laid out remains—even in the nonessentialist philosophical framework in which Resnick and Wolff have embedded it—marked by (and thus cannot but carry the traces of) the historical conditions of the property or propertylessness of *Capital’s* fully juridically enabled commodity producers.

<sup>8</sup> N.b., that none of *Capital’s* analyses are possible without the presumption of full and unimpeded juridical property rights of commodity buyers and sellers.

Can this conceptual apparatus—which all by itself, and *in the terms in which it was first developed*, served the struggle for socialism so well during the times of industrial capitalism—can it serve the struggle for socialism just as well in the period of the biopolitical rule of capital? The answer is that it does not. And I think that it cannot without revisions deeper than the ones already introduced to date.

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Intellectuals associated with the social movements that have been at the forefront of activism have done much work to expand the conceptual horizon framing the operation of capitalism beyond that of agents juridically constituted as commodity owners (buyers and sellers). Both within leftist feminism (e.g., Silvia Federici 2014) and black Marxism (e.g., Cedric Robinson 2000), much work has been done to rethink the historical conditions of *primitive accumulation* as not only the conditions of property and propertylessness of juridically constituted commodity producers but also, *and more broadly and deeply*, as conditions for inclusion in or exclusion from the very realm of juridical ownership in itself. We thus now understand better that, while the process of primitive accumulation worked to cleave the right of the product of labor from juridically free but actually dispossessed producers, it also

**It is thus only when and if it reconceptualizes its analytical apparatus to embed constitutively its value categories in processes of repression or foreclosures of rights and identities (as opposed to simply applying its given categories to the cases of such identities) that Marxism will be able to enter into dialogue with the movements that are today at the forefront of the struggle for epochal transformations and work to shape a common socialist vision.**

included elements that either limited the juridical “value” claims of some producers (as in the case of women’s work) or negated these claims altogether (as in the case of the work of slaves). Along with changing the historical narrative of the formation of capitalism, this work has enriched the historiography of related aspects of capitalism.<sup>9</sup> It has consequently enriched our vision of socialism (beyond the idea of a planned economy and toward weaving forms of solidarity and community economies into the quilt of socialism—e.g., Gordon Nembhard 2014) and thus also our understanding of the social forces and human drives on which to draw in reenergizing that vision of socialism (e.g., Davis 1983; Kelley 1996).

But, while the work of reconfiguring historical conditions of primitive accumulation in a way that can link Marxism to social-movement forms of struggle in the age of biopolitics has thus been done (a gift of the social movements to Marxism), the work of reconfiguring the character of value relations along those same lines has, I think, lagged (Marxism, that is, has not yet returned the gift). It is indeed a great advance over traditional Marxism that the analyses of processes of surplus extraction and distributions have been extended to include sites (both class and non-class) other than sites of capitalist surplus-value production and distribution. But, to the degree

<sup>9</sup> E.g., the analysis of the influence of slave-labor practices on the shaping of capitalist labor practices (Roediger 2017).

that these analyses have only applied the traditional conceptualization of “value” as labor time, as inherited from traditional Marxism, they reproduce, in the epistemic subtext that sustains them, the conception of industrial capitalism and of the class struggle (with only agents inscribed in the juridical norms of property and propertylessness) that Marx produced for the activist workers of his times. As we have seen, this epistemic subtext excludes from the imagination of historical agency those who were, and continue to be, precluded<sup>10</sup> from a full recognition of their juridical rights in the regime(s) of the bourgeoisie.

It is thus only when and if it reconceptualizes its analytical apparatus to embed constitutively its value categories in processes of repression or foreclosures of rights and identities (as opposed to simply applying its given categories to the cases of such identities) that Marxism will be able to enter into dialogue with the movements that are today at the forefront of the struggle for epochal transformations and work to shape a common socialist vision. Can Marxism perform the reconceptualization that the form of struggle in the age of the biopolitical rule of capital requires? If what is true for “mankind” (namely, that it presents itself only with problems it can solve) is also true for Marxism, then this is a task Marxism *can* (and must) solve.

I conclude by suggesting a hypothesis about how Marxism can restructure its discourse *on value* so as to be able to contribute to the right-to-existence struggle that social movements have been waging, insofar as they can be struggles for socialism: by using the concep-

tual apparatus of Lacanian analysis<sup>11</sup> in order to *rethink the value* processes of capitalism in terms that *map* the repressions and foreclosures of some as elements in constitution of (and not simply conditions of) the regime of the idea of value with which the bourgeoisie has played its cards in history. That mapping could serve not only to enrich the critical analysis of the rhetoric of value but also to reset the terms of economic-theory analyses of money-value-price relations. The outcome will be a deontologizing of labor values, a rejection of the universal rationality that bourgeois thought assigned to *its* calculation of value, and an understanding of the constitution of the regime of value, including its quantitative accounting, as a condensation of the conditions of repression and foreclosure through which capitalism was born and works, as well as of the conditions of exploitation at the point of production that capitalism set up and works to enforce and reproduce. Then it would be possible to visualize (and be energized by) a condensation of social movements and socialist struggles. For the right to existence.

*Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*

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<sup>11</sup> Adopting it where appropriate, as has been done in, e.g., Madra and Özseltçuk (2005) and Tomšič (2015), but also transforming it where necessary—much as Marx did with the apparatus of classical political economy.

<sup>10</sup> By virtue of patriarchy or race, or in relation to the status of “land” as an object of possession that pertains to the form of foreclosure particular to native populations in settler societies, as discussed in, e.g., Coulthard (2014).



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You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.

Angela Davis<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A quote found on one of many posters featuring Angela Davis.

Angela Davis recently said of the year 1968 (I am recalling from memory), “We thought the revolution was going to happen at any time. We really did. We were sure of it.”

This was during a plenary session, “A World on Fire: Remembering 1968 and Looking to the Future,” at the 2019 National Women’s Studies Association Conference. The other panelists, Rabab Abdulhadi, Bernardine Dohrn, Ericka Huggins, and Madonna Thunder Hawk, all smiled and nodded in agreement. Remembering where I was in 1968, I smiled and nodded as well.

I was a member of the counterculture back in those days, living in the mountains of New Mexico, cooking on a wood stove, and getting water from a well. Being a young, relatively privileged white woman, the revolution that I foresaw may have been somewhat different. We envisioned a world where the United States did not wage war on small countries like Vietnam or Cuba and where racism was but an ugly memory. We believed in a world of primitive communism, eschewing everything

## The Other Side of the Portal: COVID-19 and the Crisis of Social Reproduction

*Drucilla K. Barker*

“plastic” and celebrating everything that was “natural.” This revolution was something we believed in, and like the black women activists on the panel in 2019, I had been sure that it was just around the corner.

We were right that things were going to change, but we were so wrong about what that change would be. Instead of peace and love and an end to militarism and racism, what eventually

emerged was the onslaught of neoliberalism, increased militarization and racism, and a backlash against much of what the women’s movement and the civil rights movement had accomplished.<sup>2</sup>

Today we are at another conjuncture: a deadly pandemic with no end in sight has brought into sharp focus a fragile and globalized economy, a frayed or non-existent social safety net for the vast majority of people, and a deep, worldwide economic recession. This has

been accompanied by what feels like an exponential increase in violence against women and people of color all over the world.<sup>3</sup> Is now finally the time for a revolution? What sort of revolution will it be? Is revolution even the right concept? Perhaps Arundhati Roy’s (2020) description is more apt. She writes that the pandemic has opened a portal between this world and the next. It is one that we can walk through while

<sup>2</sup> This did not happen overnight; it is the conjuncture of profound changes in the world economy, including rising oil prices, the Third World debt crisis, and the collapse of the Bretton Woods agreements, which have enabled neoliberals to roll back progressive gains and gut social protections.

<sup>3</sup> This violence manifests itself in different ways depending on specific geographic locations, cultural landscapes, and political regimes. For example, in the United States it is the cruel economic exploitation, cultural oppression, and wanton murder and imprisonment of black people; in India it is in the brutal treatment of migrants, Muslims, and Dalits; in Kashmir it is the cruel repression of indigenous Kashmiris; in Israel it is in the murderous apartheid regime being imposed on Palestinians; while in Brazil it is the ecological destruction of habitats that support indigenous peoples and in neoliberal policies that choke the life out of Brazil’s poorest classes. These are only a few examples among many.

“dragging the carcasses of prejudice and hatred,” or it is one that we can walk through with little or no baggage, “ready to imagine another world.” To realize on the other side of the portal a world freed from the carcasses of prejudice and hatred requires that we put social reproduction at the center.

### Social Reproduction

As longtime readers of *Rethinking Marxism* undoubtedly know, social reproduction refers to the reproduction of people and, in addition to biological reproduction, consists of the many quotidian activities—cooking, cleaning, child-care, eldercare, and care for the community and the environment—that provide the necessary foundation for human life and labor. It is comprised of both affective and material labor and is often performed without pay. As Nancy Fraser (2016) explains, it is indispensable to society, and without it there could be no culture, no economy, and no political organization. A society that systematically undermines social reproduction cannot endure for long.

The relationship between social reproduction and production is dialectical: just as social reproduction is essential to production, production is likewise necessary for social reproduction. This is to state the obvious. It is interesting, though, that under a capitalist economic system, they stand in contradiction to one another. Fraser (2016) articulates it in this way: social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation while, at the same time, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation destabilizes the same processes of social

reproduction upon which it relies. Similarly, Tithi Bhattacharya (2020) points out that despite its dependence on social reproduction, which she calls life making, capitalists are reluctant to spend any portion of their profits on processes that sustain and maintain life. This at least partially explains why care work is devalued or unpaid and why institutions such as schools and hospitals are privatized or underfunded.

This contradiction can be historically traced in the West to the violent transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, when women were confined to the supposedly noneconomic domestic sphere and the work they did there was devalued, even though the reproduction of the labor force, both generationally and daily, was essential to capitalism. This devaluation, along with notions that women had a natural proclivity for such work, reduced wages and added to capitalist profits (Federici 2004). This also entailed a sex/gender system in which women were subordinate to men. The contradiction so described becomes crisis when capital’s drive to expanded accumulation becomes unmoored from its social bases. In these cases, the logic of production overrides that of social reproduction, which destabilizes the very processes on which capital depends. In “destroying its own conditions of possibility, capital’s accumulation dynamic effectively eats its own tail” (Fraser 2016, 103).

Today is one of those times.

Fraser (2016) rightly points out that this contradiction manifests in different ways depending on the historically specific form of capitalist accumulation, and thus it is resolved in differ-

ent ways. In the United States, the doctrine of *separate spheres* was the mechanism during the liberal capitalism of the nineteenth century; the *family wage* was seen as the solution during the postwar era of state-managed capitalism; while the *two-earner family* has been the answer during the present era of financialized neoliberal capitalism. While all three of these resolutions allowed capitalist accumulation to continue, they required a society stratified by class, gender, geography, and race. During the liberal era, elite white women could retain their roles as the “angel in the house” only because of the labor done by racially marked women and men in the factories and on the sugar and cotton plantations in the New World.

In the postwar era of managed capitalism, the family wage was intended to support the breadwinner/caretaker model of the family; however, in practice it applied only to the white male “aristocracy of labor.”

Most recently, the two-earner family regime in the Global North has been sustained by the recruitment of women into the labor force, the relocation of manufacturing to the low-wage regions of the world, and the disinvestment in social-welfare programs by both the state and the corporate sector. To this let me add that, as women have entered the paid labor force, they have done so on a highly unequal footing. Those who are relatively affluent are able to use some of their income to purchase the domestic services no longer produced in the home, and these services are provided mainly by poor

women from minority, working-class, or immigrant backgrounds. Moreover, the availability of relatively cheap food, clothing, and other commodities necessary to sustain this latter group of workers can be attributed in no small part to the feminized labor force working in the Global South export-production factories (Barker and Kuiper 2014).

The two-earner regime is also characterized by financialization and debt. Debt is the tool by which global financial institutions are able to pressure states to slash social spending. Adequate nutrition, education, healthcare, and infrastructure take a back seat to the interests of the

financial class. Debt is also a disciplinary mechanism that functions to maintain a relatively docile and compliant labor force (Lazzarato 2011). With the shift in manufacturing from the Global North to the Global South,

and with the subsequent replacement of unionized industrial employment with low-waged, precarious, service work, real wages have fallen and many people have relied on consumer credit to maintain their standard of living (Barker, Bergeron, and Feiner, forthcoming). Thus, when the pandemic struck, it struck a world already in crisis, a world in which the conditions necessary to maintain life had become increasingly precarious, and this precarity proved conducive to the way the crisis was subsequently handled (perhaps mishandled is a better word).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The scale of precarity ranges from the gig economy in the industrialized world to the refugee camps and internment centers on the borders of Europe and the United States. This short essay focuses on the industrialized world and on the United States in particular.

## A Different Sort of Crisis

The crisis of social reproduction that the pandemic has wrought is different from previous crises because the usual resolutions cannot work as they once did. They cannot work because stopping a highly contagious disease requires, among other things, isolating those who are contagious from the rest of the population. This is not graduate-level epidemiology; it is something that people have understood at least since the Black Death devastated Europe. But here is the rub: due to the fact that potentially contagious people may remain symptom free for up to fourteen days, the scale of isolation required has had a devastating effect on capitalist accumulation. It really does come down to a tradeoff between profits and human life. As Alessandra Mezzadri (2020) puts it, in order to stop the pandemic, we need to undermine its economic base. Capitalists are not able to socialize economic losses by shifting them onto workers, the state, or both, in the way they did in response to the 2008 financial crisis. Today, with thousands of factories shut entirely and the production of most nonessential goods and services halted in many countries, capital cannot turn this into a labor crisis. As a matter of principle, it would be better if both employers and workers would withdraw from the market and stay at home.

David Ruccio (2020) voices similar sentiments in his insightful commentary on the statistical calculation of the U.S. unemployment rate and Trump's ham-fisted defense of its apparent decrease. Why, Ruccio asks, should we be celebrating this when the pandemic is still far from over? Instead, workers should be paid to

stay home rather than being forced to choose between selling their ability to work and receiving unemployment benefits that are inadequate at best, or unavailable at worst. This is not something to be applauded.

Indeed. Although the "stay at home" message is, at the end of the day, the best solution to stopping the pandemic, it is not feasible for everyone in our currently globalized, industrialized economy. Our livelihoods and our abilities to maintain life depend on supply chains remaining open, farmers growing and harvesting our food, retail outlets offering that food for sale, factories manufacturing our medicines and medical equipment, and health-care workers providing much-needed services.

The workers involved in these activities are essential workers: they are the ones whose labor makes both production and social reproduction possible. My fear is that, rather than a solution that recognizes, valorizes, and properly rewards these workers, we are going back to a de facto forced-labor regime. Many people, especially those in the "gig" economy with already high debt burdens, are being forced to work under risky and potentially fatal conditions. People with already high levels of consumer debt and little savings (numerous studies have documented this) are left with little or no bargaining power or room to resist. Capitalism has never been known for its benevolent attitude toward the health and safety of labor. Things haven't changed.

Here I am thinking of the workers in potentially harmful situations ranging from the custodians and health-care workers in hospitals and med-



ical centers, to grocery store clerks, to Amazon warehouse workers, to migrant workers harvesting our fruits and vegetables, to those working in the meatpacking plants. What we are seeing is not extra care and extra cash remuneration for these people but rather a callous disregard for their personal health and safety. Profits trump people. Pun intended.

Caring for children is another key part of social reproduction. Who is minding the children? The old solution of commodified and outsourced care isn't working. The solution for that portion of the population fortunate enough to work from home is that parents and guardians must take up the slack, all the while holding down a full-time job. We know that this work is falling disproportionately on women, and that has its own set of problems. What the effects will be on the children from such enforced isolation is outside my area of expertise, but I suspect it won't be good. For the essential workers, however, the stay-at-home solution is not feasible. Although some childcare centers are open and some funds (largely inadequate) have been allocated by the federal government to help offset the costs to families, the solution for many is a matter of informal arrangements relying on families and friends. Childcare provisions in the United States were insufficient before the pandemic, and things are even worse now.

**The solution for that portion of the population fortunate enough to work from home is that parents and guardians must take up the slack, all the while holding down a full-time job. Childcare provisions in the United States were insufficient before the pandemic, and things are even worse now.**

Here let me reiterate that, although the privileged few are able to greatly minimize the risk of infection, they do not entirely escape its consequences. If those who are fortunate enough to be able to work from home happen to have children, they must become full-time caretakers, playmates, and teachers. Again, this is a huge burden that falls disproportionately on women's shoulders. A burden that is even heavier on single-parent households. While this conflation of paid work with reproductive work is a private problem now, it will become over time a social problem. Children need other children, and parents need a break. Neither of these are forthcoming now.

### Navigating the Portal

So where do we go from here? We know how to fight the pandemic: social isolation when possible, contact tracing, masking, and increased testing. Many countries have slowed down the pace of the virus, and New Zealand has nearly eliminated it entirely. In the United States, however, the numbers go up on a daily basis, and the stark divide between those entitled to life and those whose lives are treated as disposable remains entrenched. As has been the case in previous capitalist regimes, one part of the population is able to remain relatively safe and comfortable while another part bears the risks and hardships.

Nowhere is this put into stark relief more than

<sup>5</sup> Sadly, this phenomenon is not confined only to the United States but is also found in countries like Germany.

<sup>6</sup> It is questionable whether he actually had the authority to do so, but nonetheless, this authority is what he claimed (Hemel 2020).

in the Trump administration's executive order to reopen meatpacking plants in the Midwest. Meatpacking and meat-processing plants are among the riskiest places for COVID-19 transmission. Workers are crowded together and must communicate amid the deafening drum of industrial machinery (Bromage 2020).<sup>5</sup> When the meatpacking plants began to close in March as a result of a disturbing rise in COVID-19 cases, the result was a shortage of beef, pork, and chicken. Trump responded by issuing an executive order declaring them essential services and effectively requiring them to reopen, and the executives at the top were only too happy to comply.<sup>6</sup> They, after all, are not the ones risking their lives on the plant floors. That risk fell on the workers: poor black and brown people, migrants both documented and undocumented, and people with felony convictions with few employment opportunities. Of course, workers resist, but they have little leverage.

Consider, for example, the House of Raeford chicken-processing plant in South Carolina, one of the Southern states where the number of COVID-19 cases is surging. It is also a state that is home to a large number of meatpacking and meat-processing plants, especially chicken and turkey, important anchors of the state's farm economy. On 7 May it was reported that twelve workers from the House of Raeford plant had been fired after protesting for better pay and working conditions. Mind you, they did not walk off the job; they simply marched on the sidewalk outside the factory carrying placards and signs. In the words of one worker (quoted in Bland 2020), "Our health conditions are not adequate ... There's no spacing. It's not sanitary and

we're overworked and underpaid." The company's only response was to say that they had not been promised hazard pay. At that point in time, there were no confirmed cases of COVID-19. The company did, however, issue face masks and plexiglass barriers, and it encouraged workers to social distance "when possible"—something that is impossible when working on the line. Later, on 1 June, it was reported that, despite the measures taken, cases of COVID-19 were beginning to be discovered among these workers (Fretwell 2020).

According to Sarah Rich of the Southern Poverty Law Center, the only effective solution is to keep workers on the line further apart, which will slow down the line and decrease the number of chickens processed (Fretwell 2020). Thus far, this has not been done. Nor has the possibility even been entertained. Even more troubling was the governor's only comment on the situation, which was to say that the House of Raeford was a fine corporate citizen and doing all that it could do. No, governor, they are not doing all that they can do. Far from it. Now, let me mention here, that this plant is not located in a rural, less densely populated part of the state; quite the contrary, it is two miles from the state capitol building, which is adjacent to the University of South Carolina and three miles from my house. At the time that I am writing this (it may change of course), the University is planning on opening for the fall semester and plans to welcome around 30,000 students back in mid-August.<sup>7</sup> The lives of the workers at the House of Raeford plant are not radically separate from the lives of these students, nor from the rest of us living in this area. When they become infected, we poten-

<sup>7</sup> This is an estimate. In the latest reported data, the campus had a total enrollment of 35,364 students, including graduate and professional students. President Robert Caslen has publicly stated that he expects total enrollments to be down anywhere from 10 to 15 percent in the fall 2020 semester ("South Carolina at a Glance" 2020).

tially become infected as well. As I said above, it's not Ph.D.-level epidemiology.

For me this sums up in a nutshell the importance of replacing “me” thinking with “us” thinking. We know that the old blood-soaked and well-trodden neoliberal approach will lead to an exponential increase in death and suffering. This is a story as old as capitalism. Forcing people to go back to work under clearly perilous conditions without *genuinely* adequate protection will only spread the contagion, leading to *more* shutdowns. This is generally presented as a choice between fighting the pandemic and opening the economy. It is a false dichotomy. The economy cannot reopen without adequate measures to control the pandemic. The health of people and the health of the economy are not separate.

### Conclusion: From Me to Us; From the Few to the Many

On a political level, sometimes, things feel overwhelming. But on a personal level, it's simple. Wear the damn mask, and practice social distancing. Our health and well-being depend on the health and well-being of others. Sadly, despite the surge in cases, both social and print media (and not only that from the American South) are filled with narratives of individual choice, constitutional liberties, and completely unscientific and ill-informed speculations on the medical dangers of masks. It has been well established that when I wear a mask, it protects

you. When you wear a mask, it protects me. It is a simple matter of reciprocity and the recognition that we do not exist as isolated individuals but rather as interdependent members of a social collective. Why are the principles of reciprocity and mutual care, which are the basis of other social formations, seemingly so absent in the globalized postindustrial society of the United States? What can we do to center those principles here and now?

Wanda Vrasti (2015), writing in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, suggested that we were witnessing a failure of imagination. That is, a

failure to imagine an alternative to the widespread belief that, despite evidence to the contrary, capitalist market relations are the best, the most rational, way of organizing society. However, people today are questioning that belief and are eager for alterna-

tives. Vrasti argues that, in order to combat the isolation and fractures imposed by capitalism and to create sustainable cultures of resistance, it is necessary to put social reproduction at the center, realizing that social reproduction and production are not radically separate. I would also add that such a culture must necessarily be antiracist and pro-environmental as well.<sup>8</sup> The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) and its offshoot, Black Lives Matter, is an excellent example. In describing themselves, the M4BL states that they center the experiences and leadership of the most marginalized black people, including those who are trans, queer, women, femmes,

<sup>8</sup> Internationally, we know that there are communities today in which the principles of neoliberalism are neither hegemonic nor ascendant. The Zapatistas in Mexico and movements around Buen Vivir in Latin America and Eco-Ubuntu in South Africa are just three examples. They have in common a desire to decolonize their communities and organize economies not around the quest for capitalist accumulation but around the need for adequate provisioning and an equitable distribution of income, wealth, and opportunity (Barker, Bergeron, and Feiner, forthcoming).



the currently and formerly incarcerated, immigrants, disabled, working class, and poor. One of their goals is the creation of a multiracial coalition that will “develop a collective strategy and shared practice” that, in addition to including the voices of the above, will include “climate justice, feminist, anti-war/anti-imperialist, and economic justice forces” (Movement for Black Lives 2020).

Today, our task as activists, artists, and intellectuals must be to envision, and thus participate in, the creation of a world on the other side of the portal, a world that is antiracist, antisexist, and pro-environmentalist. Moreover, interventions at this conjuncture must not only adequately account for the structural and intersecting aspects of capitalism, racism, and sexism but must also reach out to people on an affective level as well. This requires the work not only of scholars, policy makers, and activists but also of artists of all stripes and persuasions. And most of all, it requires that those who are privileged by virtue of our skin color, education, and other markers of social capital actually make the effort to listen and valorize the voices of people on the margins. It is only in this way that we can hope to realize the vision articulated by Tithi Bhattacharya (2020): “That life and life-making become the basis of social organization, to the flourishing of the many rather than the prosperity of the few.”

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## Renaissance Dreams

The Black Death is a natural benchmark for the COVID-19 pandemic, the basic point being that after the catastrophe, each place will undergo reconstruction on its own terms, which is why remembering the Black Death offers relief (“This was not as bad”) and also hope (“Things will be OK”). Things will not simply go back to normal, of course, but the new normal will be in any case an updated version of what we left behind. In this account, agency is not lost, just awkwardly *quarantined* for a little bit. Light awaits us at the end of the tunnel. However, there is a counterpoint of reference: the pandemic that decimated the Americas in the aftermath of the arrival of Spanish conquistadores. As we know, things did not go back to normal at all.

All major pre-Hispanic cities were devastated, paving the road to an overseas kingdom whose power seemed more apt for dealing with such ravaging diseases.

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic is far from being as devastating as either the Black Death or the European plagues brought to the Americas, yet the antipodal sequels of such extreme cases can help us make sense of the current politi-

cal reverberations. The most serious pandemic since the Spanish Flu a hundred years ago, COVID-19 has sparked the biggest international crisis since World War II. Facing the new coronavirus and its disruptive implications, China has outperformed the United States, making liberal democracy less glamorous in a collision where the future of world hegemony is at stake. Is it a shot of renaissance or a *conquista* that awaits us?

## Pandemonium: The International Situation after COVID-19

*Ramón I. Centeno*

The Spanish arrival in Mesoamerica in the 1510s found a variegated collection of city-states, the most prominent of which was Mexico-Tenochtitlan—that is, the *atlépetl* (polity) of Tenochtitlan, located on the island of Mexico in Lake Texcoco. A hegemonic force on the road to building an empire, the Mexica ruled along with their neighboring junior partners of Texcoco and Tlacopan through the confederacy known as the Triple Alliance, the Aztecs. Otherwise a tale of

imperial consolidation, such a path was abruptly interrupted by the expedition of Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador. He met polities resentful of Aztec power, and these managed to draw the Spaniards to their side. In this context, the archenemy of the Aztecs, the confederacy of Tlaxcala, became the military mastermind of a liberation war, co-led by the Spaniard adventurers, that besieged Mexico-Tenochtitlan.

The war did not have a winner yet when the smallpox carried by a Spanish soldier unleashed a furious virgin-soil epidemic, as deadly as the one that had already swept the Caribbean. “The Mexica warriors were greatly weakened by it,” according to a surviving noble of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in an account to Friar de Sahagún. Among the dead was Cuitláhuac, the Mexica leader that had been preparing a counterattack. A Spanish soldier elaborated in a letter to Charles V:

The pestilence of measles and smallpox was so severe and cruel that more than one-fourth of the Indian people in all the land died—and this loss had the effect of hastening the end of the fighting because there died a great quantity of men and warriors and many lords and captains and valiant men against whom we would have had to fight and deal with as enemies, and miraculously Our Lord killed them and removed them from before us. (Vázquez de Tapia 1953)

The epidemic crippled all sides of the war, except for the Spanish. The small military force led by Cortés thus acquired unexpected leverage and further mystical prestige in the middle of darkness. How were they immune to *cocoliztli*, the plague? Thrown into irreversible preeminence, the Spanish rise to power unraveled in the “New World” the greatest mass conversion to any religion of the millennium. A wave of Marian apparitions, the most famous of which was of course that of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, soon sprouted all over the land that had become known as New Spain. One apparition claimed, speaking in Nahuatl to a working-class man,

that she was the mother of all afflicted inhabitants of the land and that, as such,

I will listen to your weeping, your sadness, to settle, to remedy all your different needs, your miseries, your suffering ... Listen, put it into your heart, my youngest and dearest son, that what frightens you, what afflicts you is nothing. Do not let your face, your heart, be disturbed. Do not fear this sickness [*cocoliztli*] nor any other sickness which afflicts, which overwhelms. Am I not here, I, who am your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? (León-Portilla 2000, 103, 133)

In contrast, the Black Death two centuries earlier precipitated the Renaissance in Europe. There, the survivors embarked on a linear sequence of processing loss in which the work of mourning ultimately led to a reconnection with life and new possibilities for love. This propelled a momentous reevaluation: if God had not impeded so much death, then mankind was lonelier than imagined, yet humans still had each other. The reconnection with classic Greek culture was in this sense an affirmation of life on earth over the afterlife of heaven. Art started switching its focus from the sacred to the profane, from God to human.

In the Americas, processing loss flowed through a cultural switch in which mourners sought solace in the religion of the outsiders immune to the cataclysm. Far from a reinvention of the Old World as in the Renaissance, the Conquista was the collapse of another “Old World”—which is the true meaning of the “discovery” of the “New

World.” Contrary to the aftermath of the Black Death, epidemics in the Americas aroused subservience rather than emancipation. The loss, a cosmocide, was never really overcome and henceforth imbued the indigenous question with a spirit of melancholy—proof of an incomplete mourning—that lasts to this day.

### Farewell to American Redemption

Trump’s scrapping of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and his protectionist reform of the North American Free Trade Agreement must be contrasted with Xi Jinping’s (2017b) speech in Davos: “We must remain committed to developing global free trade and investment, promote trade and investment liberalization and facilitation through opening-up and say no to protectionism. Pursuing protectionism is like locking oneself in a dark room. While wind and rain may be kept outside, that dark room will also block light and air.” This ironic role reversal in which the head of the Chinese Communist Party defends the liberal global order from the illiberal course of its architect, the United States, illustrates the current situation. Not so long ago, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Pax Americana revived its original pre-Cold War vision of “a liberal-capitalist order of free trade stretching around the world, in which the United States would automatically—by virtue of its economic power and example—hold first place” (Anderson 2015, 151). In more recent times,

however, the economic dynamism of China has challenged the “harmony” between the general and the particular—that is, “The general interests of capital secured by the national supremacy of the United States.” As Anderson reckons, U.S. supremacy “is no longer the automatic capstone of the civilization of capital” (153). The main distinguishing feature of U.S. foreign policy since World War II, the coalition of isolationist and interventionist impulses, has been held together by threads: what can now ensure that the costs of American foreign policy will report internal benefits that, in turn, will reinforce U.S. hegemony?

**With the fall of communism, the ultimate revolutionary threat, why would capitalism still care about democracy? Why would contemporary Tocquevilles need to master democratic vaccines after three decades of the end of the revolutionary plague?**

If American primacy is no longer the natural result of a liberal world order sponsored by Washington, the only way to keep the privileged position of the United States is to alter such an order to produce the same outcome. Trump’s reaction

to this picture has been clear: the costs of U.S. world ambitions are too high for an economy in distress. If South Korea and Japan want U.S. military presence in their countries to deter China and North Korea, they will have to pay for it. If Europeans want U.S. military presence to deter Russia, they will need to give more money to NATO and stop expecting that Washington fixes everything. As Trump (quoted in Blake 2016) said to Hilary Clinton: “We cannot be the policemen of the world. We cannot protect countries all over the world where they’re not paying us what we need.” In this, however, Trump was only taking to a logical conclusion the “anti-free-rider



campaign” put forth by Obama (quoted in Goldberg 2016): “We don’t have to always be the ones who are up front.” It will not thereafter be easy to restore America’s prestige among its allies east and west of Eurasia.

Pushed by the economic imperatives brought about by the global financial crisis of 2008, the illiberal turn of U.S. imperialism has marked the end of a postwar cycle. This outcome, however, is intertwined with the concurrent end of an older cycle that connects the French Revolution with the fall of the Soviet Union. The defeat of revolutionary politics was of such depth that it caused anthropological damage that Traverso (2016) has defined as the “collapse of utopian expectations.” This fact, universally acknowledged as a defeat of the Left—notably, by the liberal celebration of the “end of history”—has ironically encouraged the deterioration of liberal democracy, the main political shield created against revolution.

It will never be sufficiently remembered that liberalism admitted democratic features only as a reluctant adaptation to the pandemic of revolutionary furor sparked by the French Revolution. Tocqueville thus raised two rhetorical questions: “Do we really think that after destroying feudalism and vanquishing kings, democracy will retreat before the bourgeois and the rich? Will it stop now that it has grown so strong and its opponents so weak?” Forced to deal with the “frightening spectacle” of a world infected with the Jacobin virus, liberals like Tocqueville urged elites “to educate democracy,” the “main task” of the time.<sup>1</sup>

With the fall of communism, the ultimate revo-

lutionary threat, why would capitalism still care about democracy? Why would contemporary Tocquevilles need to master democratic vaccines after three decades of the end of the revolutionary plague? Indeed, the case for preemptive care is not as seductive as the heroic rescue of a world on the verge of apocalypse. No wonder “the end of history” as a demoliberal paradise on earth, the last utopia, was a short-lived one. The imperialist celebration would sooner rather than later end in dilettantism. The last euphoric outburst was in Iraq, the last war in which U.S. imperialism attempted to win over the “minds and hearts” of an invaded country, as Bush Jr. said, to demoliberal regime change. Clinton had the Yugoslav wars while Bush’s father had the earlier Iraq War, which to his dismay remained an unfinished mission that the son would eagerly resume and complete. In contrast, the Obama years signaled a retreat from democracy promotion à l’américaine. Needless to say, the military apparatus did not contract, but the project “to remake the world in the American image”—as Anderson (2015, 24) sums up the spirit of American grand strategy—had lost appeal, which was manifest in Obama’s détente toward Cuba and Iran.

Trump has left behind the aim of redeeming the world. Instead of Bush Jr.’s baroque nurturing of a democratic Iraq open to foreign investment after invasion, Trump’s revisionism leans toward a minimalist approach: “We should have taken the oil.” This demoliberal insouciance fueled by revolutionary recession means that world elites have less incentives to admit/develop democratic features. Take Russia, whose capitalist restoration left behind any serious democratic

<sup>1</sup>By “democracy” the French aristocrat understood both a movement and a political regime. He despised the former as a plebeian threat and praised (reluctantly) the latter as a response insofar as it was elite shaped.

claims and formed the first of the “new authoritarianisms”: a new outbreak of oligarchic rule freed from the need to cook up democratic delicacies for the people.

Given this constellation, it is easier to see why China poses a threat to Pax Americana. If the road to prosperity can bypass democratic transition, why bother following the American example? If political success must put up with one-sided U.S. protectionism, why should anyone celebrate American leadership? If anything, COVID-19 has accelerated these previous trends.

### Catalysis in the Battle of COVID-19

“Only when the tide goes out do you discover who’s been swimming naked,” the American oligarch Warren Buffet once said, as if prophesying how the United States would pop up in the buff. It was still early in 2020, in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Trump assured he had it “totally under control” after offering “tremendous help”—CDC pandemic help—for China: “We’ve got tremendous expertise” (Peters 2020; Chiacu and Shalal 2020). Xi Jinping, for his part, refused the offer even as closed doors ringed the alarms and he convened the Communist Party’s top leadership, reasoning that the new coronavirus was “a major test of China’s system and capacity for governance” (Wee 2020). At that point, U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross was already rejoicing at Amer-

**Within the next two months, however, textbook American hubris turned into perplexity in front of a dramatic inversion of roles. China was now delivering sanitary assistance to the rest of the world while the United States dealt with internal political dislocation in the midst of the out-of-control spreading of infection.**

ica’s triumph over China in the trade war: “I don’t want to talk about a victory lap over a very unfortunate, very malignant disease,” he said, but “the fact is, it does give business yet another thing to consider ... I think it will help to accelerate the return of jobs to North America” (Campbell 2020).

Within the next two months, however, textbook American hubris turned into perplexity in front of a dramatic inversion of roles. China was now delivering sanitary assistance to the rest of the world while the United States dealt with internal

political dislocation in the midst of the out-of-control spreading of infection. The grand-strategy establishment went from foreseeing “cataclysmic change” in China to calling Xi Jinping “a forceful and triumphant leader on the world stage” (e.g., Pei 2020; Yanzhong 2020). In a candid yet melancholic appraisal,

Richard Haass (2020), president of the Council on Foreign Relations, grasped what was at stake: “COVID-19 will not so much change the basic direction of world history as accelerate it.” Being accelerated was nothing less than a “Post-American World” where *The Land of the Free* had lost its Hollywoodian glamour:

Long before COVID-19 ravaged the earth, there had already been a precipitous decline in the appeal of the American model. Thanks to persistent political gridlock, gun violence, the mismanagement

that led to the 2008 global financial crisis, the opioid epidemic, and more, what America represented grew increasingly unattractive to many. The federal government's slow, incoherent, and all too often ineffective response to the pandemic will reinforce the already widespread view that the United States has lost its way. (Haass 2020)

In the meantime, to be sure, Haass supposed that “not China or anyone else, has both the desire and the ability to fill the void the United States has created.”

When the pandemic hit Europe, Žižek (2020) rushed to predict the fall of capitalism, while Han (2020) glimpsed just the opposite: its reinforcement. The irony is that both were wrong/right as each one referred to his own “capitalism,” Žižek sensing the decay of Anglo-European capitalism and Han grasping Asian capitalism's rise. Indeed, the West dawdled in the first worldwide turmoil of the century. It is not that authoritarian regimes can take “draconian” measures that more democratic regimes cannot, as proved by the flawless responses of South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. But only China was in the position (and had the desire) to capitalize on the amusing disarray emanating from Washington, D.C.

Just in April, the United States lost 20.5 million jobs, increasing its unemployment rate to (at least) 14.7 percent—devastation unseen since the Great Depression (Schwartz, Casselman, and Koeze 2020). Over the next month, amid growing criticism from his neglectful initial response

and under the looming threat of “permanent damage” to the U.S. economy if the lockdown continued, Trump used China as a scapegoat, blaming its “incompetence” for causing “this mass Worldwide killing.” By then, Trump had just accused the World Health Organization, in a public letter, of an “alarming lack of independence” from China and demanded an investigation of that country's initial response, threatening to permanently cut off all funds to the organization for “so clearly not serving America's interests.”<sup>2</sup> Released in response to a \$2 billion donation from China to the WHO to combat the coronavirus, this letter made crystal clear who induced by consent and who by coercion. Before the end of May, Trump had cut U.S. ties with the WHO.

China, of course, could boast superiority over the West. Official Chinese media conceded that some “experts made some misjudgments at the early stage of the outbreak,” yet “China was right in almost every step it took starting from the Wuhan lockdown.” In contrast, “President Donald Trump really doesn't seem to be taking people's lives seriously,” and the United States overall “has done very poorly in its fight against the epidemic.” As a result, “The US has become more frenzied than ever before,” especially against China (Hu 2020a, 2020b).

In the fall of 2017, Xi Jinping (2017a) told the delegates to the 19th Congress of the Communist Party, gathered in Beijing's Great Hall of the People, that China's one-party system—a system of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”—offered an option for “countries and nations who want to speed up their development while

<sup>2</sup>The alert of “permanent damage” came from Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin in a Senate hearing on 18 May. The same day, Trump posted the WHO letter and, two days later, his charge of China's “incompetence.”

preserving their independence.” Far from good old Comintern proletarian internationalism, from which the Chinese revolution originated, the soft-power policy of leading by example is a recalibration of the “pacific coexistence” (with capitalist forces) doctrine of the Soviet Union. However, for the Soviets such an attitude was a defensive and nationalist one compounded, in the last decades, by economic decline. While also nationalist, the Chinese approach is assertive in that it seeks to translate current economic ascendancy into a duplet of building “world-class” armed forces by the mid-twenty-first century to underpin the foreign-policy goal of “preserving world peace and promoting common development.”

If ambiguous, China’s international prominence has already filled vacuums left by traditional Western powers. In a meaningful episode at the outset of the pandemic, after being denied aid by the European Union, Serbia’s president Aleksandar Vucic (quoted in Vuk-sanovic 2020) complained that “European solidarity does not exist,” calling it “a fairy tale on paper.” Accordingly, he concluded that “the only country that can help us is China.” A few days later, Vucic welcomed an airplane from China carrying medical devices, security equipment, and Chinese medical experts.

Other states, however, fear getting caught in a U.S.-China crossfire, such as the Asian middle powers who “do not want to be forced to choose

between the two,” as expressed by Lee Hsien Loong (2020), prime minister of Singapore. Overall, Pax Americana has lost predictability, which has led thinkers of U.S. hegemony to diagnose “the end of grand strategy” and prescribe “policy made on a case-by-case basis” (Drezner, Krebs, and Schweller 2020). Long-term imperial planning is growing moot.

### Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics

Unlike others in Europe, the Inquisition in Spain took on a totalitarian character that burgeoned after the conquest of Granada in 1492 and the ensuing forced conversion to Catholicism or expulsion of large Muslim and Jewish minorities (Saxonberg 2019). The new state arising from the unification of the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile resorted to Catholic intransigence as a tool to homogenize the embryonic Spanish nation. Opposed to the Protestant Reformation—the epitome of the Renaissance—Inquisition Spain both paved the way to the Counter-Reformation and sponsored it. The regime that landed on the shores of the Americas and embarked upon Hispanicizing it was no apostle of the Renaissance but its antithesis.

One of the casualties was Tlaxcala, hitherto a remarkable exception in the Mesoamerican political record. While sharing the same Nahua language and culture of the Mexica, the Tlaxcaltecas bypassed the monarchic path and

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developed a republic instead (Fargher et al. 2011). In his report to Charles V, Cortés (1866, 68) likened their form of government to that of “Venice and Geneva or Pisa, as there is no over-all ruler.” From the beginning, however, Cortés (and those who later succeeded him) compelled his republican ally to adopt some type of monarchic (if indigenous) rule (Fargher, Blanton, and Heredia Espinoza 2010). In this sense, when the Spanish forces rose to irreversible overall preeminence after the *cocoliztli*, Tlaxcala could not resist a regime change in tune with (and subordinated to) the Spanish Crown, and hence a republican experiment was cut short.

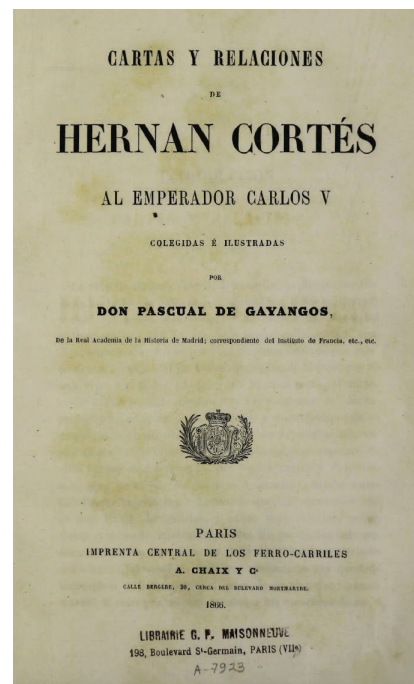
As for today, no renaissance is breaking through the COVID-19 pandemic either. Inquisition Spain was counter to reformation just like China was counter to proletarian democratization due to its Stalinist roots that paved the way back to capitalism. Although Zhou Enlai had a point when he found it too early to assess the implications of the French Revolution, today it is not too late to accept that no “French” reverberations are currently at work. Hitting in the middle of a postutopian impasse, the pandemic has struck world elites with the rise of a nondemocratic, non-Western power. In other words, China’s achievement has demonstrative effects that have cornered the old mantra of liberal democracy being the best possible of regimes. In this context, it is no surprise the dictatorial path taken by the presidents

of Hungary and the Philippines, whose emergency powers seem anything but short-lived.<sup>3</sup> This atmosphere explains anxious interventions such as those of Amartya Sen (2020a, 2020b) that implore India to remain true to democracy and resist the temptation of imitating Chinese-style “governance.”

Beside losing its democratic appeal, Pax Americana is also losing its liberal drive. The United States is resenting the rise of powers other than itself within the bounds of the order it built and in which it was supposed to thrive like no one else. Like an angry child, Trump has already exited some elements of such an order—such as the WHO, UNESCO, and UNHRC—and has withdrawn from further commitments such as the TPP or the Paris Agreement on climate change. The paradox is striking: the main capitalist state is growing disenchanted of a liberal international order whose staunchest advocate today is a state led by the Communist Party.

The success of China in the world economy, for its part, bears witness to the fantasies of liberal ideology, for China’s ascent would have been impossible save for a communist revolution and centralized economic planning. In this sense, China’s rise can be read as a glorious defeat of twentieth-century revolutions. While the Soviet Union fell altogether, China is living proof of the potential of socialist transitions.

<sup>3</sup> The recession of democratization has many faces and is not new. I mentioned the Russian case earlier, but since the regression of the Arab Spring into an authoritarian renewal in the Middle East, other democracies have fallen in the Third World, such as Nicaragua and Venezuela in Latin America. Of course, many others have deteriorated without collapsing. Again, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified previous trends.





The pragmatic introduction of market-socialist features in the late 1970s—having already been in play in Yugoslavia—showed that postcapitalist economics had room for experimentation beyond the dogmatic Stalinist-style micromanagement. However, the lack of (workers’) democracy bent that trial-and-error path into the interests of a top bureaucracy that could benefit from it, and that contained the seeds of a new bourgeoisie. In this other sense, it is a no-brainer that China is no agent of world revolution.

Just like Spain five hundred years ago in Mesoamerica, China today has emerged as the polity worthy of praise and emulation in the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chinese, moreover, can claim merits unlike the Spanish *conquistadores*, who were just immunologically lucky. This drama has unfolded as the world has witnessed the paralysis and self-ridicule of the White House in front of the same threat. In today’s predicament, not only is U.S. supremacy vis-à-vis China’s at stake but so also is the long-term appeal of liberal democracy. Posttotalitarian China is succeeding at showcasing itself not only as a serious global player but as a model polity. Moreover, China’s victory in “the battle of COVID-19” has taken on an overnight global character, unlike the vicissitudes of Europeans throughout the Americas, whose script of sword-disease-religion took centuries to reach

every corner.

Of course, it goes without saying, neither is China subjugating the United States nor is it an outsider to our constellation, in contrast to the relation of Spain with the Mesoamerican world. Notwithstanding, in both cases a pandemic put a world under the grip of an oppressive aftermath. As this essay earlier detailed, the extreme devastation of the sixteenth-century plagues in the Americas conditioned an extreme outcome:

**The extreme devastation of the sixteenth-century plagues in the Americas conditioned an extreme outcome: the rise of a foreign totalitarian empire. Likewise, in today’s world, the relative rise of China eased by a less destructive pandemic is not negligible. The U.S.-China standoff has put democratic impetus (even more) on the defensive, both by disbelief flowing from the West and by counterexample from the East.**

the rise of a foreign totalitarian empire. Likewise, in today’s world, the relative rise of China eased by a less destructive pandemic is not negligible. The U.S.-China standoff has put democratic impetus (even more) on the defensive, both by disbelief flowing from the West and by counterexample from the East.

### Fortitude

Rather than crying the increasing bourgeois belittlement of democracy, we should retrace what our age means by “democracy” in order to avoid getting caught on the same side—just differing in degree, not kind. By giving a blow to European monarchies, the French Revolution unleashed the rise of another form of government, the republic. In Machiavelli’s seminal framework, the republic conflated oligarchy and democracy, in the classic Greek sense. That today

we equate republic to only one of the terms, the latter, can be read as the success of the bourgeoisie in making us believe that there is democracy at play. In fact, what we today call democracy corresponds to what the ancient Greeks called oligarchy, government by the rich. Elections, which in our times epitomize democratic rule, were seen rather differently by Aristotle (1984, 1988; translation modified), who made the common-sense observation (for his age) that “it is held to be democratic for offices to be chosen by lot, oligarchic to have them elected.” The former was deemed democratic due to the confidence that the poor can govern, while the latter was oligarchic, for only the rich would have the means to prevail in elections.<sup>4</sup>

In his recommendations for avoiding revolutions, Aristotle warned oligarchies “to be very careful with the poor” and urged them to make the poor feel included in government: “And it is advantageous both in a democracy and in an oligarchy to assign equality or precedence to those who participate least in the regime—in democracy, to the rich, in oligarchy, to the poor—in all other respects other than the authoritative offices in the regime” (Aristotle 1984, 1988; translation modified). Translated to the age of capitalism, if the proletariat is given a choice between politicians of the bourgeoisie, is that really a choice? However, as Anderson (1976, 55) insisted in his classic work on the subject, rather than a mere *aggiornamento*, the reality of such a choice has profound effects “because the masses typically consent to this State in the belief that they exercise government over it.” How can this propensity not exist when the framework—that is, a set of liberties—that enables the choice is

a conquest of the masses? So far, the dilemma remains: either the masses move forward or any advances will be lost, as long warned by calls for “the independence of the workers,” or else they will “be reduced once more to a mere appendage of official bourgeois democracy” (Marx and Engels 2006).<sup>5</sup>

For Aristotle, oligarchies that strived to include the poor were “moderate,” whereas those that did not were “extreme.” In that sense, the rise of capitalism saw the demise of (feudal) monarchies at the hands of extreme (bourgeois) oligarchies that moderated afterward, as attested by the gradual extension of the right to vote. Today, however, that pinch of democracy in modern oligarchies—that is, our contemporary bourgeois or liberal democracy—is losing appeal. With the threat of revolutions that might bring the proletariat to power having subsided since 1990, is there any reason to feel exhorted by Aristotelian prescriptions?

At the heart of contemporary politics, the *Left vacuum* very much explains the world’s elites having a disregard for preserving, let alone enriching, their democratic credentials, such as with romantic claims that prettify a situation in which “democracy” is a junior partner to oligarchic rule. To be sure, democracy is rather distinct: it is what the revolutionary Left once called the dictatorship of the proletariat—such is the political void in today’s constellation. Back to square one, radicals must decide whether to remain melancholic or face reconstruction.

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<sup>5</sup> They added: “Instead of lowering themselves to the level of an applauding chorus, the workers, and above all the League, must work for the creation of an independent organization of the workers’ party” (Marx and Engels 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Karatani (2003, 183) has ventured: “If universal suffrage by secret ballot, namely, parliamentary democracy, is the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, the introduction of a lottery should be deemed the dictatorship of the proletariat.” Here I am sympathetic with Žižek (2006, 57) in his celebration of Karatani’s “heroic risk in proposing a crazy-sounding definition.”

*focuses on the contemporary contours and challenges of the radical Left, especially in the Americas.*

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## **Breathing in the Future**

*Ghazah Abbasi*

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## The Rocket's Red Glare

Bob and Doug rocket off on the SpaceX,  
T-minus 3:30.  
Shot not fired,  
going not once but twice,  
after hours  
of not going anywhere.  
Departure delayed.  
The whole world watching.  
Badass white woman astronaut crying  
tears of envy  
for breaths not taken  
in vacuum. In space, time extends life  
into eternity, human becoming vehicle becoming  
light, approaching futurity.  
Where even are they? Gods.

Rocket breathes oxygen in space  
while humans—Tony, Breonna, George—  
breathe their last on the pave.  
T-minus 38, T-minus 26, T-minus 42 years.  
Shots fired  
not just once or twice, but twenty times,  
months before 8 minutes and 46 seconds  
of not going anywhere.  
Injustice in delay.  
The whole world watching.  
Badass Black women crying  
tears in community  
for breaths not taken  
in air. In the protests ensuing, the rocket's red glare  
blasts off Black Lives Matter into the utopic futurity  
of right now.  
Who even are they? Gods.

State edifices collapse,  
crumble, returning to earth,  
just as Dragon returns to Earth:  
full of ease, grace, just  
detach,  
let it go.

Rockets jet off the earth,  
aflight. Here I come:  
God, an American, a modicum,  
progress achieved.  
Heroes leave this world behind.

## Abolition Repetition

Abolition is a repetition  
of contradictions. From slavery  
to segregation to policing, the opposition  
between Black resistance and Black oppression  
ever-present, ever-evolving.

Imprisoned,  
cotton-picked of old  
now radically transmuted  
into victorious secretly pink  
girlshorts—a scream,  
'SLEEP IN LATE'  
branded on rear. Two whole  
cents for waging labor hourly,  
blurring the lines  
between capitalism and slavery,  
skipping feudalism entirely,  
problematizing linearity  
in our theories of history.

'OOO: Objects, yes, Latourian  
objects *ACT!*  
Subjective objects objectify,  
agentic objects modify,  
up-end, transform,  
objects enact radical agency...  
etcetera, etcetera.'  
(Subtext: 'Black bodies do not.')

Black oppression is a repetition  
of iron chains  
becoming iron bars  
becoming iron laws  
becoming iron wares,  
Black oppression gone  
viral, gaseous, pervasive, in the air  
we breathe—or can't.

Five years behind steel bars  
for the wrong school district,  
Tanya McDowell.  
Eight steel bullets in a body  
because how dare you,  
Breonna Taylor.

'Form is content!' 'Techniques matter!'  
(Subtext: 'Black bodies are not; Black bodies do not.')

Foucauldian, Adornian post-isms fly  
in the face of Black lived experience  
and the constancy of white supremacy.  
From metal to vapor,  
to mediation from immediacy—  
or so goes the fantasy  
of linearity,  
where, now = lynchings + governmentality.

Abolition gifts a repetition  
that ain't half-bad—after all,  
radical revolutions always-already  
extrapolate half-lives into eternity  
in the Eighteenth Brumaire:  
"Bourgeois revolutions ... storm from success to success ...  
but they are short lived ...  
Proletarian revolutions, on the other hand ...  
criticize themselves constantly,  
interrupt themselves continually ...  
come back to the apparently  
accomplished in order to begin it afresh ...  
Until the situation has been created ...  
and the conditions themselves cry out:  
Here is Rhodes!"<sup>1</sup>  
(“Take it from me.”)

Abolition is a repetition  
of contradictions reemerging,  
ready for resolution.  
Abolition gifts a repetition,  
bringing back,  
bringing Black Revolution.

<sup>1</sup> K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 595, 24.

## Trailer

On an icy morning,  
a trailer truck arrives,  
bearing gifts. My groceries!  
Finally.  
I have been waiting  
so long for this.

Through  
walled-in and walled-up sanitary storage containers,  
a naked-handed, naked-faced  
frontline worker deftly sifts,  
fetish in the chain to my commodities.  
Interminable waiting,  
then,  
bags and bags and bags of  
pandemic paranoia.

“You should ask for masks and gloves,”  
ever the helpful comrade, I said.  
“I have the gloves,” mumble,  
“don’t sign the receipt—germs,” he said,  
waving goodbye.

Three hundred dollars per person for groceries  
and the freezer won’t close.

Three hundred pounds per capita homeland GDP  
but the trailer wouldn’t open.

*Las hielera en el borde  
llena hasta el borde.  
El frigo, muy friyo,*

The icebox at the border  
fills to the brim.

39 dead bodies  
in a trailer free-zone.

From Vietnam to the UK,  
immigrants nearly made it.  
Abandoned by God.  
The driver forgot them,  
waving goodbye,  
blood on his hands.  
Blood in their pants,  
tomatoes of cans.

“I can’t breathe” —Eric Garner.

“I can’t breathe” —George Floyd.

“I can’t breathe” —Pham Ti Tra My,  
I was not meant for this,  
not meant for cold storage  
not meant for having papers  
not meant for making ends meet  
not meant for stacking upright  
not meant for defecation  
not meant for European Union

“I am sorry, Mom,”  
I was  
not meant for safe passage  
not meant for crossing borders  
not meant for making mincemeat  
not meant for seeing daylight  
not meant for asphyxiation  
not meant to be forgotten.

Walled-out and walled-up in a refrigerated trailer,  
stranded, laid to waste,  
thirty-nine backline workers perished,  
chained to the fetish of our commodities.  
Interminable waiting,  
then,  
bags and bags and bags of  
xenophobic paranoia.

## Hope in the Face of Optimism

Optimistic futurity with its racist overtones  
defers Black and Brown liberation endlessly.  
Racial liberation?  
Sure, next revolution.  
No, *next* revolution.  
Ok, definitely,  
*the very next* revolution.

Pessimistic presence says, no—  
here and now, no more waiting.  
Pessimists count the breaths until they run out,  
pessimists count the chokeholds—then and now—  
still state sanctioned.  
Where optimism effuses the transmutation of form,  
pessimism stresses the constancy of content.

Optimistic utopists wait:  
for contradictions to  
(un)furl, (un)ravel,  
(un)discombobulate, accelerate.  
It's all forthcoming,  
it's not for nothing,  
all the Black people dying.  
Take heart, it's a process,  
we're joining dots, making progress  
toward racially liberatory socialism,  
both Black-utopian and scientific.

See that production go  
up in Black fumes?  
That's how you know  
it's time.  
See all that gun manufacture?  
After the revolution,  
all those factories recyclically craft  
ecosustainable toys for healing  
the souls of Black children—  
shell-shocked from genocide,  
coked up from solitary,  
choked up from brutality.

But chill, no worries,  
utopia's 'round the block,  
dystopia's nearly run its clock,  
the only way it could have been!  
Crack open a cold one  
and absolve me of responsibility  
for bad-faith, -analysis, -consciousness, all.  
Bro. Sis. Folx.  
So glad we took the time to.  
Get all that production  
fired up in the air planet on the brink  
and, oh yeah, decolonization,  
that's a special issue—  
it's a process, dude, *longue durée*.  
I bet,  
in the year 6000,

**VINCENT LYON-CALLO:** When I first sat in your class focused on many Marxisms, more than three decades ago, and began to see the rich tapestry of Marxist scholarship, I could not imagine we would be here today so many years later discussing a global pandemic. What an interesting time this has become and what a privilege it is to talk with you again today.

Let's start off with an easy question: On your *Economic Update* on June 8th, 2020, (Wolff 2020c) you discuss a very practical question: Why is it that the U.S., with 5 percent of the world's population, has 30 percent of the world's deaths from COVID-19 thus far, and what might be the Socialist alternative? This leads to other questions, such as: How can that be, despite the fact that the U.S. also is one of the world's wealthiest countries? Why is it that so many Americans are getting so sick and dying? Might it have something to do with the vast inequalities that existed in the U.S. prior to COVID-19 even arriving?

**RICHARD WOLFF:** As with all good questions, there are many factors that play in. You might even say that it is complexly overdetermined

that we have 5 percent of the people of the world and 30 percent of the deaths from corona. So let me go through just some of them. Absolutely, the inequality in this country means that, yes, we are one of the wealthiest countries in the world, but what has to be added is that we are one of the most unequal, in terms of the distribution of wealth and income, of the so-called industrialized nations. That inequality condemns large numbers of people, almost all of whom live

at the low end of the economic pyramid. They have bad diets, they have overcrowded housing, they have inadequate health care, and they often have unsafe working conditions. We all know what the story is, so it should not be surprising that even though the United States is rich, its extreme inequality makes the poor very vulnerable to any disease, particularly one that passes through infection.

But I would actually like to focus on a different kind of explanation, which will apply not only to the United States but also to other countries who have had bad experiences with this virus. I am thinking of Italy. Here is the argument that I would like to advance. What do you need to do? What two things that are crucial? To prepare your population for a dangerous virus and to manage the virus once it enters your community. So how do you prepare? You prepare by having on hand, in adequate numbers and adequately

## COVID and Capitalism: A Conversation with Richard Wolff

*Vincent Lyon-Callo*



stockpiled, all the necessary equipment. That is what preparation means. So you have produced, stockpiled, and distributed ventilators, masks, gloves, ICU units in hospitals, beds, and trained personnel. You do not have to be a trained epidemiologist to know that dangerous viruses have been with the human race from day one. A horrible one in 1918 killed 700,000 people in the United States. In recent years, we have had SARS and Ebola and a dozen others which are well-known and well documented. There is no excuse for not being prepared. The cost of such a preparation is a small fraction of the amount of wealth we have already lost in the United States from not being prepared. There is no efficiency argument. Indeed, any efficiency argument would go the other way. So, then, why? Well, the answer is capitalism.

It is not profitable for companies to produce a mask or a bed or a glove. To produce these things, to store them in some warehouse, let alone to stockpile them all over the country, waiting who knows how many months for the next virus to show up, is not profitable. The risk is enormous. You are just not going to do it as a capitalist. You can find more profitable, less risky investments elsewhere. How do we know that? Because that is what they did. They did not make the stuff, and we were not prepared.

In that situation, you could have the government come in and say the following: "Private capitalism stinks at being prepared for viruses; it is an unreliable engine for preparation, so we the government will be the offsetter; we will take on the risk and we will take on the expense because private capitalism is a failure here and we must

compensate." You would buy all the supplies and the test kits you might need for a disease that enters our country, and you would have it available. You would take the necessary steps at the government's expense.

Why did the government of the United States not do that? The answer is that it has long ago been captured by an ideology that runs roughly as follows: If it is not privately profitable to do something, then it should not be done. So the government of the United States did not do what it could have done. Through the failure of the private sector and the complicit failure of the public sector, we were not prepared. That's three-quarters of the answer to why we have suffered so badly from coronavirus.

Let me drive the point home one more step. Might there be an example I could point to where the government of the United States did do exactly what I just said? The answer is yes. The military. It is not profitable to make a missile or a rocket and store it. So the government comes in and buys all that stuff as fast as it comes off the assembly line and pays to store it and distributes it and trains the people to use it. The rationale is national security. But the notion of national security for health reasons doesn't work. That leads me to the final part of this. Why doesn't it? Why hasn't the medical-industrial complex—the four industries which monopolize the medical industry in this country; doctors, hospitals, medical insurance companies, and the drug and device makers—why haven't they been smart enough to develop an ideology that says the government should come in? The answer is obvious. If you brought the government in to make

us secure for a future, well, then why aren't you bringing the government in to make us secure right now with Medicaid for all or a single payer or any of the other plans? That's too ideologically dangerous for them. So they can't do for themselves what they enviously watch the military-industrial complex do brilliantly for itself.

Then there is the failure to manage it. Once you blow the preparation. Once you have awareness that you are going to suffer, you're going to lose a lot of people, you're going to have millions of people get sick. Then the political apparatus kicks in. Whoever is in power has to minimize the damage or the party or the leader will suffer because it is on their watch when everyone gets sick. So you need a government that doesn't want to test people because it doesn't want public awareness. We have, if my numbers are correct, less than 5 percent of people who have been

tested. That means we don't even know where the disease is, who has it, who is symptomatic, who is not symptomatic. All of the key questions, we don't have an answer ... We also have 20 to 30 million people who are unemployed and could be given the training to test people. We have all the people who can be the testers, and we can test everybody in a week. What's the issue? It's a total mismanagement, but not because we can't. Obviously, we could test everyone. We are a rich country, we have the people, and we could produce the equipment. This has become a political football. The Democrats are going to blame the

**If you brought the government in to make us secure for a future, well, then why aren't you bringing the government in to make us secure right now with Medicaid for all or a single payer or any of the other plans? That's too ideologically dangerous for them.**

Republicans. The Republicans have to pretend there is no issue, they are going to get everyone back to work, we're going to get everything back to normal. Normal is the only hope they have to make this horrible collapse, both healthwise and employmentwise, go away. For me, those are the key variables coming together to make the American experience so, so awful.

Last point: Last week there was a *Time* magazine article prepared by two physicians in the United States. The article was wonderful because it begins by saying that, here in the United States, the disease has infected 340 people per mil-

lion. In China it was 5 people per million. No matter what the fudging of numbers—on both sides—may have been, with these orders of magnitude, there is no excuse. The rest of the *Time* magazine article was about the utter failure of the United States. Not just in relation to China,

but they list about twenty other countries, all of whom have way better numbers than the United States. Those include Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, not just Vietnam and Cuba, who have very good numbers. My last point is that, even in a capitalist country, if you have a culture that says the government isn't some kind of fundamental evil, the way it is in our culture—South Korea has that. The government is revered. The government is given—from your and my perspective—too much respect. But, whenever the government has a historically developed authority and respect in a country, it can come in and

make the compensation for capitalism's failure. That was so missing in the United States. That's why England is so bad. And, ironically, it is why Italy was so bad. Italy used to have a left-wing orientation; they are going through a period of neoliberal kind of hegemony in reaction to the old Communist Party. So you could explain them, too, as the government was lost in that fog of neoliberal, laissez-faire nonsense that made them unable to step in, in a timely way. Which, by the way, in Italy they deeply regret.

**LYON-CALLO:** Italy, though, has eventually lowered their rates much more than the U.S.

**WOLFF:** Right, right. That is because they have that culture. And the left wing, which wants the government in there because of the old notions of Socialism, they attacked the right wing on just the point I'm making, and so the right wing was badly hurt. That's partly why Italy's politics are not as right wing as they could have been. Their mismanagement of COVID-19 brought back the leftist culture, and that is one of the reasons why you're seeing the right-wing government come down like a ton of bricks suddenly. Because they're in danger politically of the consequence of COVID-19. That may happen to Trump here, too. We'll have to see.

**LYON-CALLO:** The other component of this is the economic. We have massive unemployment in the United States. But, with social distancing being a public health requirement, was not massive unemployment necessary as so many businesses needed to close temporarily? Or is mass unemployment from COVID-19 better understood as failure of capitalism itself, as you

argued recently (Wolff 2020d)? Might it be that massive inequality and economic precarity are not inevitable? Has there not been very different experiences in other spaces, such as Cuba or even in Italy, as you discussed on a recent broadcast about Marcora Law (Wolff 2020a)? Are there lessons that people in the U.S. might learn from looking at the experiences in those places?

**WOLFF:** Well, I think the answer is to compare capitalist countries. At the beginning of the coronavirus in mid-March, unemployment in Germany was 5 percent and unemployment here was listed officially at something like 4 percent. Today, ten or eleven weeks later, unemployment in the United States, depending upon how you count, is 16 to 20 percent, maybe more. In Germany it went from 5 percent to 6 percent. So how do you explain the quadrupling of unemployment in the United States and a mere 20 percent increase in Germany? I could use France—the numbers are roughly the same as Germany. I could even use England, whose numbers are closer to Germany and France than to the United States.

What's going on? You can't do in those countries what you can do here. It's kind of an extension of what we just said about Italy. The power of the labor unions in France, Germany, and England and the power of the Left is such that, had you tried to throw a quarter of your labor force out of work like we did here, you would have seen street protests that would make what we've seen in the past two weeks look like a picnic. Those governments would have fallen. The countries would have come to a complete halt. It was out of the question. It was so out of the question that

even conservative turds like Boris Johnson or Angela Merkel or Emmanuel Macron could not even imagine it. They did not propose it. Instead, they went to the businesses and said, “It’s a collapse; people cannot come to work. It’s a supply shock of the most profound sort. We’re going to have the worst recession or depression in probably half a century, if not an entire century. So here’s the deal. We will bail you out, we will print money, but on this condition: part of the money we give you will be used to pay a minimum of seventy percent of the regular salary and wages of your labor force; you can fire nobody, and you guarantee the job will be here, however long this lasts.” That’s what they did. The United States did not do that. So the interesting question for me is, what the hell is going on here? Again, the state is powerful in Germany, France, and England. It’s never gone to the point of a type of religious fundamentalist notion that somehow the government is bad, an idea pushed by the [U.S.] governmental officials to pander to the private sector’s desire to have the government fund them and never compete with them. They tried to achieve that in Europe, but they couldn’t pull it off. That’s why there is the difference.

The experience of the 1930s in this country is peculiarly absent today. We have a level of unemployment like then. We have a desperate situation like then. Why are we not doing what we did then? For example, between 1934

**The experience of the 1930s in this country is peculiarly absent today. We have a level of unemployment like then. We have a desperate situation like then. Why are we not doing what we did then? For example, between 1934 and 1941, roughly fifteen million people were hired by the United States federal government.**

and 1941, roughly fifteen million people were hired by the United States federal government. Why are we not doing that now? Why are we not training and hiring some of them to become testers so we know where our disease is? Why not assign some of them to do all of that infrastructure rebuilding that everyone agrees needs to be done? Why are you paying, for example, an extra \$600 per week unemployment benefit to have them do nothing? Why don’t you pay them even an extra \$800 to do something? Build a park, do the things that were done in the 1930s. Why

not have another WPA, do some cultural work around the country? Lord knows we need it. It would be a spectacularly successful program. Let’s remember when Roosevelt did that, he got reelected three times. He taxed the rich and made these programs for the unemployed. And the brain-dead Biden—and I don’t mean that

because he’s old—but the brain-dead Biden, Clinton, Cuomo, it doesn’t even occur to them. They don’t admit the difference between the United States and Germany. They pretend that there is no such difference. The media follows suit and doesn’t talk about it. Every time I am on radio or television, I tell people about the experience in Germany. You should see the faces of the questioners. They look at me like a puppy that just got caught doing something it shouldn’t on the rug. Come on. It’s an amazing testimony. As my buddy Steve Resnick would have said,

it's another case of the power of ideology. What it is, what you can see or not see, even in your immediate environment. It's amazing. And don't get me started on the silence of the AFL-CIO. It's beyond words. It's a silence that's beyond any noise they could make.

**LYON-CALLO:** But could organization be emerging that might aid in moving beyond liberal or neoliberal reform and towards systemic changes? Do you see signs today that possibilities of moving beyond liberal reform and towards the necessary systemic changes to build alternatives to capitalism that are emerging—perhaps in Black Lives Matters, the Sanders campaign, national Poor People's Campaign, Cooperation Jackson, or the reception to your own work and the reaction to discussing democratizing the workplace? Is it possible that these movements can begin to organize together to create those possibilities for people to see?

**WOLFF:** I have never been a pessimist. Maybe I'm guilty of some degree of wishful thinking, but maybe that's a necessary part of being involved in social change. You have to believe in the possibility, and maybe you see signs of it. But let me start very personally. We are now coming up on 200,000 YouTube followers for Democracy at Work. I have 100,000 Twitter followers. By the way, I don't do that by myself. I have a team of people working with me. I never did radio or television in my life. For most of my career teaching at UMass, or before that Yale, I would get an invitation to go on a show and speak maybe once every two to three months—I think that was more than most of my colleagues got, because I was always politically active.

So starting in 2010—so it's now ten years old—everything changed. The crash of 2008 changed this country in very fundamental ways. I think we're still watching the ripples. Even as we enter a worse crisis, we're still engaged with the ripple effects of the 2008 crisis. Clearly, Occupy Wall Street was one result. Clearly, the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign was another result. And I'm a result. My life changed from being the professor you knew at UMass to being a public-intellectual, activist type of person. You're the third interview I've done today, and I will have more this afternoon. And that's my normal day. That has nothing to do with me. It has to do with the audience that creates the demand for what I do, for what I deliver. Imagine you're the type of person who whistles the same jingle all your life so the people close to you get annoyed after a while: we've heard that jingle forever, just stop whistling. And then, one day, everyone gathers around and pleads and begs with you to sing the jingle. You say, "But I thought you hated that jingle," and they reply, "Yeah, but the world has changed." That's me. I'm not saying what I didn't say before. I've been a critic of capitalism for most of my adult life. Just to give you an idea. Next month, you may see a long article in the magazine *Hustler*, about Socialism, which they asked me to write for them. I only give you that as an example because you're going to find my article between lots of images of naked women. And why did I do it? Because that's an audience I can't reach normally, for better or worse. It turns out that Larry Flynt, who owns that thing, follows my work, and he likes it. That's all over the United States now, often in situations you would never dream of. And I think they get it; they get



that something has radically altered. The viewpoint is not that things have changed; the viewpoint is becoming darker. It's becoming: everything is falling apart. You get it on the right, you get it on the left, you get it even in the middle now. Somewhere an awful lot of people understand that we are falling apart as a society. Having to choose between Trump or Biden is proof that we're falling apart. So I am very hopeful.

**LYON-CALLO:** One last question. Trump voiced early on that we're at war against the virus and we all need to be together in this war. There was even talk for a moment of enacting universal basic income for the duration of the crisis. Of course, that did not happen. "We're all in this together" in the war against the virus became, "You have individual responsibility to act to stay well individually." As you pointed out in the June 1st *Economic Update*, perhaps the sickest version of this is the advice to homeless people on what they individually need to do to keep themselves well (Wolff 2020b).

This rhetorical shift was accompanied by a massive economic stimulus package without any commitment of support for all—not even a commitment to having a potential vaccine being available to all. As we know, the government's intervention has helped certain segments of the stock market to flourish, such that billionaires' wealth increased by \$282 billion in just twenty-three days during the initial weeks of the lockdowns while working Americans became

even more economically and emotionally insecure. More recently, the uprisings in the streets around racism and police violence again indicate that we are far from all in it together in the U.S.

You have talked about the class war today in the U.S. We have had decades of embracing privatization, deregulation, automation, and the promotion of the free market in the quest for growth, efficiency, and so-called freedom and individual responsibilities. Both major political parties have embraced one version or another, and that has produced a massive transfer of wealth to the wealthiest. As you write, capitalism is certainly currently in crisis (Wolff 2020e). One can just look at the escalating debt, the number of people and businesses not paying rents or loans, or the opioid and mental health crises to see this.

I would suggest that there has also been a war on black males for the last several decades, sometimes referred to as the war on drugs. Others suggest that the U.S. has been at war against cultural pluralism, indigenous peoples, people of color, and any organized Left for centuries. On the June 1, 2020, issue of *Economic Update*, you highlighted a Federal Reserve report about how 40 percent of Americans making under \$40,000 lost their jobs in a recent six-week period. The mass unemployment is largely impacting poorer, already economically precarious people. In your discussion with Cornell West, you also

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mention how women and black and brown people have been hurt more than males and white people in general from COVID-19 (Wolff 2020b). We know that people who are older or have some preexisting conditions are most likely to die from COVID-19, but there is also much evidence that Native Americans and working-class black and Latinx people are more likely to die from this virus. And as the work of public-health scholars like David Williams (2020) has shown, there is increasing evidence demonstrating links between the stresses of living everyday with racial and class inequality and the vast health disparities in the United States. It is not individual behaviors but structures of violence producing the disparate economic and health outcomes from COVID-19.

Is there a way that we can think through the lens of overdetermination and antiessentialist analyses to consider that what is important is class and race and more? Do you have thoughts on how to balance these multiple entry points for our analyses of class and race and other factors? Can that help us to help young people who are angry and disillusioned to imagine possible other worlds? Can such an analysis help us to both analyze the current coronavirus moment and to think through how to actually build alliances, work together, and live in this world together?

**WOLFF:** I don't have really anything to add to that conversation except what appeared to me early on when Steve and I were first trying to work these things out and what occurred to us then. I haven't really made much progress beyond it. It always struck me that the logic of overdetermination, the rejection of an essentialism, means

that those of us who are more interested in the class dimension than others, for whatever peculiar reasons of our history—I wasn't born this way. The influences in my life made me focus on class. I am not saying it's good or bad; that's just who I am. But it's always been clear to me that the conditions of existence of any particular class structure—for example, the capitalist class structure that I am opposed to includes certain kinds of cultural constructs, one of which is race, the notion that people can be divided into some sort of different groups based on pigments in your skin. I understand that those kinds of cultural formations, like religions, are part of the conditions of existence. They are part of what makes capitalism exist and survive and reproduce over time. I think I can show how racism against people with darker skin has played that role for a long time in supporting and sustaining capitalism. So, therefore, racism is my enemy. I have to change these racialized notions. I have to problematize the concept of race. I have to explain to people that it is not a given, that there is nothing about us as human beings that suggests we ought to be classified in a significant way around the pigment in our skin.

So my enemy is racism, and now I discover something. I discover that there are other people like me who have a different history. They were brought up in such a way that the issue that most interested them was racial discrimination or racism. And that's what their focus is, but they get it, like I do, maybe with the theory of overdetermination, or maybe they just do this without self-consciousness. But they come to the conclusion that capitalism, a particular class structure, reinforces the racism that they want to get

rid of. We now can make a deal. I'm gonna help you fight racism and you're gonna help me fight capitalism so that we get a different system that neither needs nor allows racism or the class system of the exploitation of one person by another. We make a deal. I help you and you help me. Nobody is subordinating anybody. Nobody is claiming that their entry point is the right one. This is a coalition or an alliance built on the understanding that the kind of economic system we have needs racism and will be weakened if we can defeat racism, and the kind of racism we have will be at least weakened if we can defeat capitalism. No guarantees. Nobody has to believe that, if we got rid of racism, that capitalism would be gone, or vice-versa. It's a deal. And the deal has to be honored, and the deal has to be worked through periodically. And I say the same thing to feminists on that issue or ecologists on that issue. We've got a deal to make. And if we make the deal, we will help each other in terms of our goals, but we will also build the organization without which none of us are going to realize our goals.

That's the deal. And, you know, I've offered it many times. And I would say that most of the time they do not accept it. I realize that's part of my problem; that's part of our problem. We live in a culture that is very deeply committed to essentialism. I used to make a joke. Steve and I used to make a joke that we have a harder time with our left-wing audiences getting across over-

determination than getting across the notion of class as the production and distribution of surplus rather than the government. They can more easily take this new concept of class than they can take overdetermination. It's bizarre and has been surprising to us, but it's been true. One of the reasons that pushing overdetermination is valuable is that—I think, I hope—is that it trickles down into this gut-level question of how we build organizations that are powerful by drawing in people whose primary interests are different, but are not afraid of that difference.

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For example, one of the reasons why I like Kali Akuno is that he gets that. His primary issue is African American people and organizing them and working in an African American majority city like Jackson, but he understands that I need him and he needs me. We get it.

**LYON-CALLO:** And then we can build coalitions and alliances to work on the many aspects of our collective struggles.

**WOLFF:** Absolutely. There's no option.

**LYON-CALLO:** If our goal isn't to be right and that our interest is the essential or primary one.

**WOLFF:** Right. We've got to get rid of that. That's a killer. And, by the way, that's often the opening wedge for any disruptive people. Whether they're there by accident or they are there because they are working for some government agency. That's

the wedge to destroy coalitions. It's been a very big burden on us on the left that we have to get out from under.

**LYON-CALLO:** Even with my work on homelessness, I've seen that. It happens when people want to focus on one aspect as the determining factor. Not as one of many possible entry points that we need to build alliances to work on but as the determining factor, as though all the rest does not matter. It makes alliances impossible.

**WOLFF:** That's right. How do we teach people that you can have your entry point, you can have what's most important to you. That's not a problem. It's how you deal with people who disagree with you. How do you disagree on entry points but work together still?

**LYON-CALLO:** That's the challenge with these times of living with the coronavirus. There are so many areas of impact and possible entry points for acting, but one of them is that there is this profound sense of despair and hopelessness among so many people.

**WOLFF:** And, of course, having to stay at home due to the virus only makes all of that worse. You are even more isolated. Which, of course, makes the necessary alliances even more difficult.

**LYON-CALLO:** Of course. Interesting and challenging times. Thank you so much for talking with me today.

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Come on, man. Oh, oh.  
I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe.  
They'll kill me. They'll kill me.  
I can't breathe. I can't breathe.  
—George Floyd (R.I.P.)

Beautiful black bodies  
Drowning in sorrow  
From America's sin  
—“Jesus and the Black Body,” Linda Wiggins-Chavis

## In Cold Blood

The murder of George Floyd shall be recorded in history as the first post-modern lynching publicly perpetrated by the administration of Donald J. Trump. The context of this pandemic has moved from the horrific rising death toll laboriously tracked by the Center for Disease Control to the single languishing body of a beautiful black man. The

only justice that can possibly redeem the conscience of America is to turn the racial murder of George Floyd into the electoral assassination of Donald J. Trump. This is a possibility only, one that has to be politically actualized. The tragedy is that, instead of being replaced by a righteous man, Trump might be replaced by another senile white man, thanks to the liberal democrats.<sup>1</sup> Like life itself, we will have experienced

## Trouble with Donald J. Trump

*Alex Betancourt*

the world during the last four years first as tragedy and then as farce.<sup>2</sup> Justice is the tallest of all orders, and to exact it means cutting off a pound of flesh from America's body politic, with the blood included. James Baldwin's (1963) epigraph to his *The Fire Next Time*, a book that includes his “My Dungeon Shook,” reaches today's black youth as a message in a bottle: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more water, the fire next time!” Donald J. Trump and liberal democrats,

as well as the MAGA nation, have been feeling the heat of this country's racial fire. Since liberal democrats refused to feel Sanders's “Bern,” now seems to be the right time for a proper one.

The injustice of George Floyd's murder has the depth and severity of a Greek tragedy. We shall be kept waiting for Trump to gouge out his eyes, and Christian America will have to wait for his redemption for as long as a theater audience will have to wait

for Godot's arrival. Justice, like democracy, is a fugitive experience that has to be wrested from power rather than asked of “polite society.”<sup>3</sup> The most difficult and despairing thing to grasp is that the president, like Arendt's Eichmann, is not an evil man but rather a banal one. However, we must not confuse banality with ordinariness since Trump's banality has grave consequences. Wiggins's profoundly moving poem rings true for everyone in this country. It breaks my heart

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek (2009) identifies the first decade of the twenty-first century as following this logic, with 9/11 as tragedy and the 2008 financial collapse as farce.

<sup>1</sup> As long as capitalism remains the driving force of American power, liberal Democrats will always-already choose a Christian liberal over a socialist Jew. Marx (2009) knew this better than anyone, and “On *The Jewish Question*” serves as his purloined letter to the United States. See Derrida (1987).

<sup>3</sup> For the idea of “fugitive democracy,” see Wolin (2016).

every time I think of those eight long minutes that it took for the police to murder George Floyd. Differently from Wiggins's beautiful verses, rather than drowned, Floyd was choked with malicious intent. It is malice that makes murder a capital crime, not sinfulness. The cry for justice by Black America could be heard loudly in George Floyd's dying breath as he called out for his mama. This cry may leave liberals heartbroken, but liberalism cannot assuage America's guilty conscience. That can only be accomplished by socialism and participatory democracy.

### Mis-encounters

This essay is an attempt to explain the ideological character of Trump's presidency, his mishandling of the global pandemic, and the recent insurrection against racial injustice.<sup>4</sup> My argument may prove somewhat difficult to hear for many progressives. Even when we take into consideration the incredible catastrophe that Donald J. Trump's presidency has caused, I argue that the problem has a proper ideological basis. This thesis means that, in order to comprehend the political reality of Trump, we have to take Marx at his theoretical word. Taking Marx seriously, and rethinking Marxism for our times, means that we have to begin by discarding the idea that seeks to explain Trump's actions as those of an evil

**Donald J. Trump is a calculating and insatiable power-hungry man. There is nothing he is unwilling to do to get what he wants. He is the perfect capitalist, the incarnation of an idea. This is part of the reason his followers are enthralled with him and his persona. Their infatuation is the political result of reified consciousness. By reified consciousness, I mean that Trump's supporters do not perceive a moral world that requires an ideological justification for the president's blatant political perversities.**

man. The pathologizing of Trump is a symptom of the ideological bases of social analysis, not a political explanation for Trump's decisions. The characterization and constant derision of the president's ridiculous behavior produces an epistemological breach that has ideology at its base. The liberal world doesn't understand Trump. This has to be the biggest irony in history, given that no other president has been under as

heavy scrutiny as Trump has been. The misrecognition suffered by Trump is a properly Marxist ideological problem. The reason no one seems to understand Trump is the same reason why many socialists don't seem to understand him, either. That is, they don't get what Marx really meant by "ideology." To put it simply, Trump's mind works the same way that a Fidelity Investment commercial works. It doesn't matter if the stock market is collapsing and everybody is watch-

ing it collapse; as far as they are concerned, there is no better time for an investment! We must not forget that in the mid-90s, catastrophe bonds emerged (CAT bonds), which means the monetization of disaster. This is the true nature of ideology as Marx theorized it.<sup>5</sup>

Let's start with some of the material conditions of existence of the president. Donald J. Trump is a calculating and insatiable power-hungry man. There is nothing he is unwilling to do to get what

<sup>5</sup> Marxist interpretation is a properly socialist enterprise, and ideology doesn't work alone. To have a comprehensive view of Donald J. Trump, we also need to look at commodity fetishism and reified consciousness. Once this triad is put together, we can see the dialectic at work. I am going to focus on ideology in this essay. A subsequent piece will tackle the other two.

<sup>4</sup> The global and all-encompassing character of the pandemic means that its effects are being felt by every single person on this planet. The COVID-19 catastrophe is a proper universal Hegelian phenomenon. This means that it has also affected Trump. For an excellent political reading of the pandemic see Vázquez-Arroyo (2020).

he wants. He is the perfect capitalist, the incarnation of an idea. This is part of the reason his followers are enthralled with him and his persona. Their infatuation is the political result of reified consciousness. By reified consciousness, I mean that Trump's supporters do not perceive a moral world that requires an ideological justification for the president's blatant political perversities. The fact is that Trump has objectively achieved everything he has set out to do in life. As far as he is concerned, he is the most successful man in the American twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The problem is that liberals have a hard time acknowledging this simple fact. Trump is all he claims to be: an all-around successful man. More importantly, Trump's racist, xenophobic, misogynist comments and insinuations are cheap tricks made to order. They are having and will have severe consequences for this country. However, they are not his guiding principles. Trump becomes a racist whenever racism favors him politically. We must not forget that, when it suited him, Trump was pro-choice and immigrant friendly. This is because Trump has no "guiding principles" in the common moral sense of the word. Actually, he has no policies; he simply has an agenda that may seem cynical but isn't. Whenever his agenda overlaps with the GOP's, he is happy to oblige all of their policies.

There are no secrets about Trump's agenda, either. That's the other reality that seems to baffle liberals. Trump has always been very open and clear about what he cares about. Liberals don't understand him because they cannot conceive a way to be honest about themselves. This is their cynicism, not Trump's. Hence, they think: how could Trump, who is a morally corrupt individ-

ual, be honest about his ambitions? Trump must be lying; he did not mean it when he said years ago that after he made all the money he could as a businessman he would become the president of the United States. Liberals cannot take Trump at his word simply because they do not want to be taken at their own. If liberals were to be taken at their word, we would have to ask them what happened to closing Guantánamo, fighting poverty, passing meaningful immigration reform, properly funding Social Security and the Post Office, and expanding Medicare. We would also have to ask what happened to passing legislation to end colonialism in Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. Moreover, what happened to every other progressive promise liberals have been making since the foundation of the republic? Liberals have turned their eyes away from the severity of the racial and class problem in the United States for decades. Political liberalism's soup de jour is to pose as politics (Reed Jr. 2001).

### Ideology Critique

Since economic success is the ultimate moral virtue for capitalism, success is one of the strongest ideological goals in American society. This is why Trump can't comprehend the liberal news media's war against him. They loved him for years; what the hell happened? Donald Trump wants people to like him because successful men are likeable. He sees how his political base loves him, so it follows that others should love him, too. Therefore, as far as he is concerned, the liberal news media has to be "fake news." This is particularly true because they loved him for

<sup>6</sup> An excellent discussion regarding the liberal matrix within which the disagreement between Trump and liberal democrats takes place can be found in Madra and Özseltçuk (2019), who show that the opposition between neoliberal global cosmopolitanism and neomercantilist nationalist populism is a false dichotomy. Moreover, the historical nature that makes it a form of government is expressed as a transitioning form of domination in the corporatization of the sovereign nation-state. At the end of the day, it's the political economy of domination that characterizes a capitalist regime.

a very long time before he came to ruin their financial political dinner.<sup>6</sup>

Another thing Trump has been very clear about is that he wants to get away with whatever he wants to do. Who the hell doesn't want that? He's been doing it for over seventy years with impressive results. Not once has this man ever been arrested. Hence, it's perfectly understandable for him to be disconcerted at all the complaining. A Marxist look at Trump doesn't focus on his character flaws, improprieties, personal malfeasance, or ethics. A Marxist look explains Trump's ideology rather than complain about it. This is part of what Marx meant when he said that philosophers had interpreted the world when the point was to change it. Marx wasn't scorning philosophy as such; he was sneering at alienated philosophy—that is, philosophy performed as an ideology. In contemporary parlance, Marx was saying that liberalism as philosophy was useless because rather than helping to explain the world and uncover its perversities, it rationalizes the world through commodification. The idea that Marx was anti philosophy is, properly speaking, liberal propaganda. The fact that this propaganda has taken hold of the “woke” generation in contemporary socialist activism only speaks to the ideological strength of liberalism.<sup>7</sup> This

antitheoretical streak has always been a mark of left-wing infantile activism, although with different intensities. We should remember that in the debate related in Marx's (2009) “On *The Jewish Question*,” Bauer wanted *political* emancipation while Marx wanted human emancipation. This is the fundamental difference between a progressive liberal (or a “woke” socialist focused on identity politics) and a Marxist. As Slavoj Žižek

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(quoted in Aqeel 2020, 4) has aptly pointed out, “Those in power today love identity politics. It means each of us will cultivate their cultural identity and nobody will be excluded from the global market ... multiculturalism perfectly fits global capitalism.”

Liberal and progressive news media keep insisting on covering Trump's moral flaws, as if that were politically meaningful. Socialists should stop judging Trump's moral character, especially since it has been proven that it's politically ineffective to do so. Trump has to be dealt with politically, not morally or ethically, and especially not psychologically. That is a game of which Trump is a grand master, if only for the simple reason that he pays no mind to anything that doesn't follow his worldview. Liberals simply cannot deal with this, particularly the news media.

<sup>7</sup> On race and politics, see Reed (2020) and Reed Jr. (1999).



There are many recent examples of this ideological shortsightedness. Two prominent writings will suffice. First, let's take Ronald Brownstein's (2020) article for the *Atlantic*. Brownstein's analysis shares several traits with other progressive media. Most saliently, he thinks the political outcome of this pandemic is Trump losing the election in November. At the time of his piece, the forecast was more wishful thinking than political reality. Even right now, with the intensification of social protests throughout the country, Trump still has a good chance of winning if only because his opposition is senile and laughable in a way that Trump isn't. Walter Shapiro's (2020) recent piece for the *New Republic* suffers from the same ailment. According to Shapiro, Trump has been able to get away with his many lies "either because they are too inconsequential or because they would require too much effort to disprove. Voters, for example, would have to know something about the events in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692, or the more recent history of McCarthyism to be able to debunk Trump, the Martyr, every time he wails that he is a victim of a historical 'witch hunt.'" This is pure ideology talking, even now when Trump's lies are anything but inconsequential. Here, Shapiro absolutely reveals the nature of progressive liberalism. Assuming that the extraordinary effort that requires disproving Trump has to come from voters (one guesses that Bernstein and Shapiro would hope they were not being called to task as journalists), Shapiro's statement presupposes that Trump supporters don't know that he is a compulsive liar, as Brownstein also hints at in his article. However, everybody in the entire world knows that Trump is a compulsive liar! There is no American "Matrix"

in which Republicans took the "blue pill" and are somehow blissfully ignorant about the qualities of their president. The fact that everybody knows the truth but this knowledge has no political effect is what makes it an ideological problem of liberalism! The important political question is to ask why, in spite of this and many other well-known things, dozens of millions of Americans still support him. Thinking that somehow Republicans suffer from the biggest case of collective false consciousness recorded in history would be silly. One can only say that if this kind of thinking is what constitutes the liberal democrats' strategy for November, Trump's chances for reelection are much better than what liberal democrats may think.

Nonetheless, Shapiro makes a point worth considering, regarding the effect of the failed operationalization of the federal-aid package. He thinks the troubles with aid distribution will have a strong impact on American voters. This is also the central argument in Brownstein's piece for the *Atlantic*. He concludes by saying that "a divergence in the economic recovery of urban and nonurban areas—coming after a comparable split in their experience with the disease itself—could put Trump in a difficult position." However, this is something for which Trump may be able to avert responsibility, as he will try to do with racial injustice and police brutality. Even Shapiro has to admit that "not all problems with the stimulus payments are Trump's fault." Shapiro's closing argument suffers from the same ailment as his first. Presumably, in November "collective amnesia and sensory overload can no longer be his escape route." Trump does not escape political punishment because people for-



get how awful he is but does so because his base doesn't care about his moral failings. Moral failings are easily remediable things for Christians; all you have to do is ask for forgiveness. God commands them to give you a second chance. This is something that Republicans learned a long time ago. However, Republicans do care about many other things not easily forgivable, and the federal package will be one among others. The question will be whether the failures of the administration will be carried by Trump or whether, as he has done so many times before, he'll be able to displace responsibility for the death toll to civil servants who preceded him or to his advisors for betraying the American people. Trump's prospects on this score are very good, for the simple reason that much of the disaster with distributing federal monies have to do with the gigantic bureaucracy that is the federal system.

He will have a harder time explaining the thousands of deaths American families are suffering. And if Trump loses, it will probably be because of the depth and gravity of state-sponsored murders. However, even the social unrest taking place in the United States right now is a political momentum that has to be harnessed and given social direction and political purpose. Unfortunately, as of today, the only leader that could have given this country what it desperately needs (justice) was voted off of this November's ballot.

**Trump does not escape political punishment because people forget how awful he is but does so because his base doesn't care about his moral failings. Moral failings are easily remediable things for Christians; all you have to do is ask for forgiveness. God commands them to give you a second chance. This is something that Republicans learned a long time ago.**

## Les Enfant Terribles!

On that last note, another ideological phenomenon we are witnessing is the liberal chastising of young socialist democrats for being socialists! This is something that Osita Nwanevu (2020), writing for the *New Republic*, had the good sense to point out: "The notion that an organization set on abolishing capitalism would have otherwise had a meaningful place inside the tent of the Biden campaign is entirely too silly to merit an earnest response." Nwanevu was responding

to a tweet by *Tablet's* Yair Rosenberg, who argues that Bernie lost "in part because some on the left prioritize self-righteous symbolism over political power and influence."<sup>8</sup> This is another significant ideological misrecognition from liberals regarding the political nature of socialism. Rosenberg, like many liberal democrats, believes that socialists scoff self-righteously at Washington's political

power and influence. However, the very point of socialist democracy is to destroy the structure of that political power and influence, not partake in its perpetuation. Chastising socialists for not supporting Joe Biden is like chastising Roman Catholics for not supporting abortion, or chastising Jews for not adoring Jesus. The latter is not only antisemitic, it goes against Jews' core political principles and beliefs!

This maybe a good opportunity to point out a few

<sup>8</sup> Y. Rosenberg (@Yair\_Rosenberg), "Why did Bernie lose?," Twitter, 12 April 2020, 1:04 p.m., [https://twitter.com/Yair\\_Rosenberg/status/1249382799389360135](https://twitter.com/Yair_Rosenberg/status/1249382799389360135).

“small” differences between liberal democrats and socialists. While liberals march and protest, socialists organize and unionize. While liberals defend free speech and freedom of assembly, socialists speak up and assemble. While liberals vote for the status quo, socialists run to beat it. It’s time for liberal democrats to realize that the other “small” narcissistic difference socialists insist on is that they are not capitalists, while liberals are. The latter difference has gotten particularly lost for people of my generation and for baby boomers: basically, progressives in their forties to liberals in their late sixties. A whole class of progressives is having some kind of sadistic *jouissance* chastising socialist democrats for not endorsing Joe Biden. And now we are supposed to believe that a senile, rich white man is going to bring racial justice to the United States of America. Please!

A sociologically impressionistic glance at the type of people who are going for the “endorsement package” that Biden has offered young socialists looks exactly like me, only about a decade or so older. They are middle-class, educated defined-benefit pension holders with good health coverage. Many also had an affair with socialism in their youth but seem to have come to their political senses and know exactly the mistakes that young socialists are making. They have become well-intentioned liberal democrats and abortion-supporting free-speech activists. This is all good, but the problem is not a question of the narcissism of small differences. The problem is the huge political gap that exists between socialism and liberalism as worldviews, or *Weltanschauung*, as the Germans call it.

Understanding the difference between one worldview and the other is not rocket science. Liberalism is about the centrality and priority of the individual bearer of rights. Socialism feels the same way but is about society, not just individuals. Today, the battle between them has been taken to a different stage. The litany of liberal complaints goes something like this: “The primaries are over, Trump is the enemy, and all our forces must come together to defeat him. You gave a wonderful fight; you built a movement that will, in time, develop into a larger movement for (liberal) justice; but the most important political goal right now is to defeat Donald Trump, because as Bernie himself has established, Trump is the worst thing that has happened in American political history. So, now, grow up, take the defeat like a man, stop complaining about what you cannot get, because this is not some Freudian game of instant gratification.” Something along these lines captures the essence of progressive liberal chastising, as exemplified by the open letter in the *Nation*.<sup>9</sup>

The only problem is that every single argument supporting the endorsement of Biden is either politically misguided or simply wrong on its own merits: “We shouldn’t be blithe about the claims of the ‘old’ New Left. These are intelligent and solidary comrades who fought valiantly for this country and our cause. It is both politically unwise and immature to be contemptuous of their concerns. The fact that today they are wrong, politically speaking, should have no bearing on the debt socialists today owe those of yesterday.” But the idea among progressives that young socialists’ radicalism is going to hurt the Democratic Party is ill-conceived. Young socialist

<sup>9</sup> See “An Open Letter to the New New Left from the Old New Left,” *Nation*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/letter-new-left-biden/>.

democrats are not the radical wing of anything. They just want a piece of the twentieth-century dreamworld that we had (Buck-Morss 2000), even if it's the piece in which our hopes and political expectations went to die. The postmodern logic of late capitalism is what has destroyed the twenty-first century for our youth (Jameson 1984). They were never allowed to share in my generation's twentieth-century dreamworld. Where we had unions, they have professional service contracts; where we have pension plans, they have 401(k)s that go bust with the market; where we have tenure, they have flexi-time; where we had the GI Bill, they have crushing student debt; where we had single-parent incomes, they have multiple low-paying jobs. They have a reasonable and just platform everyone should support.

But that is not the way politics is played in this country. To suggest that young socialists are destroying democracy's prospects by refusing to support Biden is not only an insult to their political struggle but to history itself, to what real suffering and commitment looks like. If Biden can't defeat Trump, tough luck. The country is going to be in for another bumpy ride, but please do not go around blaming socialists like you have no responsibility for Trump making it to the White House in the first place.

**To suggest that young socialists are destroying democracy's prospects by refusing to support Biden is not only an insult to their political struggle but to history itself, to what real suffering and commitment looks like. If Biden can't defeat Trump, tough luck. The country is going to be in for another bumpy ride, but please do not go around blaming socialists like you have no responsibility for Trump making it to the White House in the first place.**

## Conclusion

That said, there are some lessons that socialists do need to learn from Trump. The first one is that you cannot be dismissive of religion, and much less of religious people's concerns. Hiding behind the veil of ignorance to what matters to people has been political liberalism's solution for avoiding this conflict. John Rawls (1993) termed this an "overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice." But while the Judeo-Christian tradition has a lot to say about redeeming the poor and a lot more to teach about punishing the rich, the whole liberal defense of the separation of state and church has mostly served to guarantee the interests of only the most retrograde sector of Christianity.

A second lesson has to do with socialists being self-righteous from time to time simply because they are right. Contrary to those who think that socialism is just a college phase for young kids, socialism is all that socialists have, because the other option went to hell. And that is where the democratic part of the Democratic Socialists of America comes in. Socialist democrats have the best proposals in the world right now about work, health, economy, environment, immigration, electoral reform, and many other fundamental issues like faith and racial justice. But

the problem for socialists is not about having the best political platform, since that doesn't win elections in this country. The problem is how to sell this platform. On this score, socialists can learn much more from horrible Donald J. Trump than from progressive liberals. How's that for irony!

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St. Patrick's Day at the House of Corrections,  
17 March 2020

4:30 p.m.: The door to the visitor's entrance waiting room is already locked. A sign on the door reads: "As of Monday, March 16th, 2020, all inmate visits will pause for the next 60 days or until the COVID-19 threat passes."

I knock and a correctional officer (C.O.) opens the door: "You here for bail?"

"Yep, I'm with the Bail Fund." He lets me in. Another volunteer is already inside waiting with cash to post bail for five people today. Two family members of people we are there to bail out are waiting with the volunteer, each person sitting in one of the modular chairs bolted to the ground, with several seats left empty between them. We're waiting for a roll-up metal door on a small window to open, where the bail clerk will appear. They'll take our money and

sign the paperwork that allows someone to be released.<sup>1</sup> None of us are wearing face masks. We take turns applying hand sanitizer at various intervals from a wall-mounted dispenser. The latest news suggests this helps.

The waiting room is normally buzzing—girlfriends, wives, parents, children waiting to see

their family members, people adding money to someone's commissary account through the electronic kiosk (which takes its own fee). The people in the room are almost always majority black and Latinx (especially Puerto Rican), with white lawyers passing through and occasionally some white family members.

Today, the linoleum-floored, fluorescently lit room is empty except for the C.O. and the group of us waiting to post bail.

"I heard they had corona here," one of the women says, not really looking at anyone. All the visitors' chairs face the same direction and can't turn. The C.O. is sitting at a high desk, facing toward us and the door.

"Naw. Someone was suspected, but he got released. I don't think he had it," the C.O. replies.

The woman pauses, then continues. "I think it's about population control." The C.O. says, "Mmm-hmm," but doesn't elaborate.

A delivery driver arrives, and the C.O. gets up to let him in. The C.O. brings the food back to his desk.

He picks up the phone and tells someone on the other side that the food is here. Two more C.O.s come out from the jail through "the bubble," the set of locked doors to the outside, which is controlled by other C.O.s behind a tinted glass window.

As they sort out whose food is whose, one of them remarks: "Cleaning crew was here when

## Case Study: COVID-19, Care, and Incarceration in Massachusetts

*Justin Helepololei*

<sup>1</sup>In Massachusetts, bail clerks personally receive a \$40 fee for each bail they process at a jail.

I got here. Did you hear what happened? Two cadets had fevers. Sent them home and they cleaned everything." The C.O.s nod, divvy up the food, and the two go back through to the jail.

More people start arriving to post bail for someone, two women and a group with two adults and one child. The bail clerk finally arrives and opens the divider separating her window from the waiting room. She starts taking our money and processing the paperwork for the five people we are there to get out. Everyone we're bailing out either has a bail of \$500, or lower, or the family members are covering the rest and we're contributing \$500 to help. Some have been incarcerated for months only because they couldn't afford a \$200 bail.

The clerk lets us know that the courts are closed at least until April and that, when they open, it's the defendant's responsibility to find out when their case has been rescheduled to. "It's gonna be a madhouse." One of the family members comments that she has just seen on the news that inmates from jails in New York were being released. The C.O. responds, "Yeah, that shit ain't happening here."

We're still waiting at 6:45 p.m. The C.O. tells us he's annoyed. He won't get time to take a walk and get coffee before his next shift. He says he'll call the sergeant to see what's holding up the release. "What they doin', takin' baby steps? Fuckin' moonwalkin'?" Eventually they release the people we're waiting for. I introduce myself to the three people I'll be driving home. I dodge a handshake and offer to bump forearms instead, apologizing that things have changed out here with the virus and all.

I drop off a young black man and a young

Puerto Rican man to their homes in Springfield and then drive the third, a younger white man, to the rural town of Monson. I wish them all luck with their cases and that they and their families stay healthy.

## COVID-19 and the Prison-Industrial Complex

Early into the COVID-19 pandemic, lawyers, activists, and families of people incarcerated in Massachusetts (as in many other places) began to voice concerns about the extremely high risk that people inside prisons, jails, and detention centers would face, of both contracting the virus and dying from it.

Prisons, jails, and detention centers are prone to disease transmission under normal circumstances. By design, people are forced to share close living spaces, phones, tables, exercise equipment, showers, toilets, and more. Social distancing is physically impossible. People who are incarcerated are also mostly poor and working class. They are disproportionately black, Latinx, indigenous, and other people of color and are more likely to have health conditions like asthma that put them at even higher risk of infection and death from COVID-19. Prisons and jails tend to have very limited medical resources, at best, and shockingly neglectful or abusive medical staff, at worst. Sheriffs and wardens are extremely reluctant to transfer incarcerated individuals to outside hospitals (see Andrews 2017; Schwartzapfel 2018; Coll 2019).

Not only do prisons and jails pose a threat to the people within them but they also risk becoming epicenters of disease transmission, espe-

cially as staff come and go each day, bringing the virus in with them and back out—the same reason schools and businesses have been closed. This occurred early on in Chicago when the Cook County Jail became the country’s biggest “hotspot” for COVID-19 transmission in April 2020 (Williams and Ivory 2020).

Activists raised all these concerns. Across states as politically disparate as Washington, Ohio, Alabama, California, and New York and even within the Federal Bureau of Prisons, officials under pressure from civil-rights organizations and community groups initiated early releases to rapidly decrease the number of people incarcerated (and to decrease their liability to care for them; see Kindy, Brown, and Bennett 2020). In Massachusetts, there were no mass releases. A trickle of early releases began only after the ACLU, the Committee for Public Counsel Services, and Prisoners’ Legal Services filed an emergency petition, demanding that the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court act to release as many prisoners as possible from prisons and jails in the state. The court ruled that it would initiate a process for lower courts to review individual cases of incarcerated people awaiting trial and make some categories presumed eligible for release. The ruling did not impact people who were already sentenced, even if they were close to the end of their sentence or especially vulnerable because of age or illness.

In western Massachusetts, the sheriffs who operate the jails and the district attorneys in charge of prosecutions that put people in jail spoke out against the ruling and against the efforts of activists to decrease the number of people locked up.

The central reason they have given for opposing release is their concern for the well-being of prisoners after incarceration, specifically the lack of housing and the lack of access to addiction treatment and recovery programming. They care too much, the sheriffs argue, to release prisoners from their custody—despite the heightened risks of contracting and dying from COVID-19 (See Johnson 2020; Cahillane 2020).

It would be reasonable to question how genuine these sheriffs’ feelings of care are for the people they incarcerate. As formerly incarcerated activists and organizers have pointed out, there is never adequate support for people returning from incarceration, and this problem long predates the COVID-19 era. Most activists and many people who have been incarcerated would insist that the sheriffs have only their own economic and political self-interest in mind, that if they release people, they might risk receiving less funding. If they genuinely cared about the well-being of people in their jails, activists argue, they would be fighting for more resources and more support for people to access after leaving their jails, not fighting to keep people inside them.

While it is entirely legitimate to remain skeptical of the intentions of the carceral system, I argue that the refusal of sheriffs in Massachusetts to release people under COVID-19 is consistent with a type of care, but one that is ultimately infantilizing and dehumanizing and that highlights the need for prison abolition as well as the dangers of reform. At the base of the sheriffs’ refusal to rapidly decarcerate as other states have done is a paternalistic mode of care based

on an assertion that the people they incarcerate are better off under their supervision than outside of it. This paternalism—deeply grounded in white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism—has been at the core of incarceration in Massachusetts since its colonial Puritan founding. State officials have long prided themselves on progressive, reform-oriented, and rehabilitative models of jailing.

In Massachusetts, sheriffs are elected officials who make their case to voters to be able to stay in power. And in western Massachusetts, sheriffs who champion more interventions and more rehabilitative programming—job training and certification, high-school equivalency and higher education, counseling and therapy, addiction treatment, parenting-skills classes, meditation, reentry support, and even permaculture—get elected; all these programs and more are currently running or have been run in western Massachusetts jails, to the extent that at least one sheriff has referred to his jail as a “locked treatment facility” (quoted in Becker 2019a). How well supported or how accessible or effective any of these programs are is highly dubious, especially within the coercive context of the jail, but the existence of these programs, and the emphasis placed on treatment and rehabilitation, determines where funding comes from and what it goes to. Programming is used by sheriffs, state officials, and private and nonprofit partners to present jails as necessary and

**The refusal of sheriffs in Massachusetts to release people under COVID-19 is consistent with a type of care, but one that is ultimately infantilizing and dehumanizing and that highlights the need for prison abolition as well as the dangers of reform.**

positive institutions within the community.

In some contrast with the open white supremacy of Southern convict leasing and plantations-turned-prisons (Lichtenstein 1996), and also with the massive warehouses of surplus humanity in California and other Western states (Gilmore 2007), the “progressive” jails of New England employ a domesticating form of vanilla power, no less grounded in racism but couched within a framework of paternalistic care and rehabilitation. In Massachusetts, only a small percentage of people incarcerated at state pris-

ons work within the state’s Massachusetts Correctional Industries, producing furniture, clothing, and other products mostly for other state agencies. At the county level, a minority of incarcerated people have jobs within the jails. Some in minimum-security or prerelease units do “community

service” for as little as one dollar a day. For most people incarcerated in the state, days are marked by boredom and by programming. Exploitation in this context is focused less on extracting free labor and more on subjecting incarcerated people to programming for which prisons, jails, and private, state, and nonprofit contractors receive funding and continue to employ themselves.

One example is the use of Section 35: involuntary confinement for individuals considered at risk of harming themselves or others because of addiction. Judges, petitioned by family members, doctors, or law enforcement, can order someone

to be arrested and brought into jail for mandatory drug-addiction treatment even if they have committed no crime. The sheriff of Hampden County in western Massachusetts, Nick Cocchi, has dedicated a unit of the jail to this program, with the support of local law enforcement and state legislators. In various press releases and interviews, former Section 35 detainees as well as their families have spoken in praise of the program. For these families, the dire shortage of space in nonprofit and private addiction-recovery programs means that the jail is their only option for readily accessible treatment (see Becker 2019b). This should not be the case, but in many communities like those of western Massachusetts, jails are the largest source of behavioral-health and addiction treatment. In these contexts, care and the violence of incarceration are not separable; as others have argued, care that comes from patriarchal white-supremacist institutions can itself be a form of violence.

In the context of forensic nursing, anthropologist Sameena Mulla (2014) argues that the “victim-patients” who seek medical assistance after sexual assault often experience additional violence during the enactment of care by health-care workers. This violence occurs without any individual nurse’s conscious intention. It is an outcome of a dehumanizing process in a setting that centers the forensic priorities of the state and the institutional and professional norms

**Only the abolition of that system—through decarceration and through defunding prisons and the police—can create the space needed for scaling up forms of care and responses to harm that are not paternalistic and that do not center the state or exist to benefit the industries that make up the prison-industrial complex.**

of the healthcare industry rather than the person seeking medical help. In the name of care, forensic nursing may retraumatize “victim-patients” in the process of collecting evidence. But this is in the context of the hospital. In the context of even the most “progressive” jails, care in the form of rehabilitation and sobriety is used to justify other forms of dehumanization: severing ties between incarcerated people and their parents, children, and communities; isolating individuals from each other; subjecting them to the routine humiliation of strip searches and deprivation of bodily autonomy and privacy; and, in this current moment, exposing them to heightened risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19.

Asking for a more caring criminal-justice system in this context means asking for more carceral intervention, more exposure to death for the sake of re-

legitimizing the political economy of incarceration. Only the abolition of that system—through decarceration and through defunding prisons and the police—can create the space needed for scaling up forms of care and responses to harm that are not paternalistic and that do not center the state or exist to benefit the industries that make up the prison-industrial complex. Interventions can look like the following: training community members in the mediation and de-escalation of conflict, building community-accountability processes to support those who have been harmed and those who have done



harm, and ensuring access to safe housing for people in crisis. These liberatory forms of collective care and transformative justice are already being imagined—and practiced!—in communities and in pockets of autonomous organizing, often building on preexisting practices and relationships that have long been neglected or targeted by the police and prison system.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>For more discussion and examples, see Chen, Dulani, and Piepzna-Samarasinha (2011), Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha (2020), and Kaba and Hassan (2019).

Groups like the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective in California, Safe OUTside the System Collective in New York City, and Pa'lante Restorative Justice in Holyoke, Massachusetts, have been exploring and practicing transformative justice for years. Movement thinkers and organizers like Mariame Kaba, Shira Hassan, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Mia Mingus have theorized, popularized, and helped facilitate the formation of new transformative-justice projects around the country and the world.

These ideas are not new, but they have gained new life. A wave of mobilizations for decarceration and prison abolition began in response to COVID-19 and the neglect of prisoners and other populations made vulnerable by capitalism and the state. By June, that wave has grown exponentially, articulating with community organizing and mass protests, across the country and the world, that have demanded the defunding and abolition of police in response to the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade and the ongoing killings of black people in the United States. Building on decades of work by black women scholars like Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Angela Davis, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and Michelle Alexander, on-the-ground

community organizations like Black Visions Collective and Reclaim the Block in Minneapolis—organizations working toward decarceration, defunding, and abolition—are leading the way toward envisioning and building communities of care, without prisons or police.

### Decarcerate Car Rally, 6 June 2020

2:30 p.m.: Some of us from Decarcerate Western Mass have started arriving at the parking lot of the AMF Chicopee Lanes bowling alley. Referred to here as A., the partner of a person incarcerated in the Hampden County Jail and House of Corrections (known as the Ludlow Jail) had proposed the idea of a car rally outside the jail to protest jail conditions. The jail, the main “men’s” facility, had been placed on lockdown: prisoners were unable to shower, access educational or therapeutic programs, make calls to family members, or access medical care. Building on that idea, we decided to include the regional “women’s” jail.

Two longtime community organizers from Springfield, Massachusetts, pull up in their own cars and say hi from behind face masks. They start decorating their cars with messages to “#FreeThemAll,” “Abolish Prisons,” and “Hold Corrupt Police Accountable.” More cars start arriving, first a dozen or so, and then the parking lot starts to fill. Some drivers stay in their cars; others get out, greeting each other at a distance and drawing on their cars with washable markers or taping signs demanding medical care and phone calls for prisoners to their windows. Some black and Latinx protesters are present. Most of the people are young and white, either arriving individually or in twos or threes. There are a couple families, some peo-

ple with babies. Some immunocompromised activists, who've messaged us ahead of time that they're excited to be able to attend the protest, wave from within their cars.

A reporter arrives, and organizers direct the reporter to talk to A. so she can share her family's experience, the demands that have been shared in a letter signed by people incarcerated at the jail, and the reasons why we've all assembled. A local activist lawyer arrives to check in with us. Police officers from the Chicopee Police Department tell us, unsolicited, that they and the Ludlow Police Department are going to "accompany" us "to keep us safe." A formerly incarcerated organizer and her family arrive. A volunteer with Western Massachusetts Community Mutual Aid arrives with a carload of donated bagels and greens that she offers to all the protestors to take home.

By 3:10, we decide to start the program. Several organizers from Decarcerate Western Mass speak on a megaphone borrowed from the local workers' center and address the more than sixty carloads of people spaced out across the lot, and A. shares her family's experience again and the demands of prisoners in the county jail. Other organizers discuss logistics, legal risks, and support resources. A Decarcerate Western Mass organizer offers up painted cardboard butterflies for people to attach to or hold from their cars. We disperse to our cars, and the lead cars make their way to the edge of the parking lot, with everyone else slowly lining up behind them.

The line of cars winds its way through the residential suburbs of Chicopee and Ludlow, toward the jail. Most of the people incarcerated there are black and Latinx, and most

are from the nearby cities of Springfield and Holyoke, but the jail is located far down a rural road, behind an office park. As we get within sight of the jail, we start honking, making noise to let people inside know that we're thinking of them and to let the sheriff and his staff know that we're paying attention. The sheriff's department has blocked the entrance to the jail parking lot with a tactical mobile response unit, and dozens of administrative staff and officers stand outside the jail, staring us down. Our cars slowly drive down a road alongside the jail, make a U-turn, and drive back again, honking. An older white sheriff's department official in slacks and a dress shirt steps out toward each car, trying to hand us what looks like an informational sheet, but each driver declines.

Eventually, the line makes it back to the bowling alley, where we park again and regroup. Formerly incarcerated and now an organizer with Massachusetts Against Solitary Confinement, C. arrives and addresses the crowd about the importance of supporting incarcerated women, who are often forgotten by both the system and social movements. We hop into our cars and head out again, this time to drive and make noise outside the regional women's jail in a different part of Chicopee. Once more, the road into the jail is blocked by the sheriff's department, but we pass by as close as we can and honk before dispersing. At 7:00 p.m., Decarcerate Western Mass organizers host a zoom call to debrief the action and discuss the Phone Zap action that has also begun—three days' worth of calling into the sheriff's office, district attorney's office, and local legislators' offices in order to uplift the demands of people inside the prisons.

By the first day of the Phone Zap, the sheriff's department has already stopped answering the phone. A new voicemail message states that, due to the high volume of calls from the Decarcerate Western Mass action, callers were asked to leave a message and someone from the department would respond ...

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I began this series of photographs at the onset of the coronavirus in March 2020. A sense of overwhelming loneliness and isolation arose out of the necessity to remain distanced from almost everyone and everything. This densely populated area of cultures, face-to-face education, and all aspects of progress came to a halt. Social distancing, social isolation, loneliness, and self-quarantine all have become the primary means of combating the invisible disease and not so invisible pandemic. The weeks and months that followed began to change the landscape of what was familiar. Yet what did remain was the urban environment dominated by buildings, cement, and occasional greenery.

As economic growth has ceased, alternate means of caring for and maintaining an urban environment have surfaced. Relying on our individual models and the existing programs of action that surround us has been challenged. Public policies addressing the needs of global health as well as economic and climate issues have taken the forefront.

The feeling of sameness, of maintaining a certain homeostasis, was apparent as I went from

building to building, feeling the isolation, the solitude. The photographs are all somewhat the same and possess similar qualities. It is an unavoidable collision and conflict that exists in the way we see and what we feel. There is the self that is concealed and the self that adapts to the environment. Yet, what remains is the sense of vastness—the blue sky with enormous clouds. There is a larger world, a universe that is out of our control. The urban landscape maintains a certain grit in contract with nature, a larger force ... a virus that is in the air ... which we are slowly dismantling and eradicating.

## Urban Isolation July 2020

*Glenda F. Hydler*

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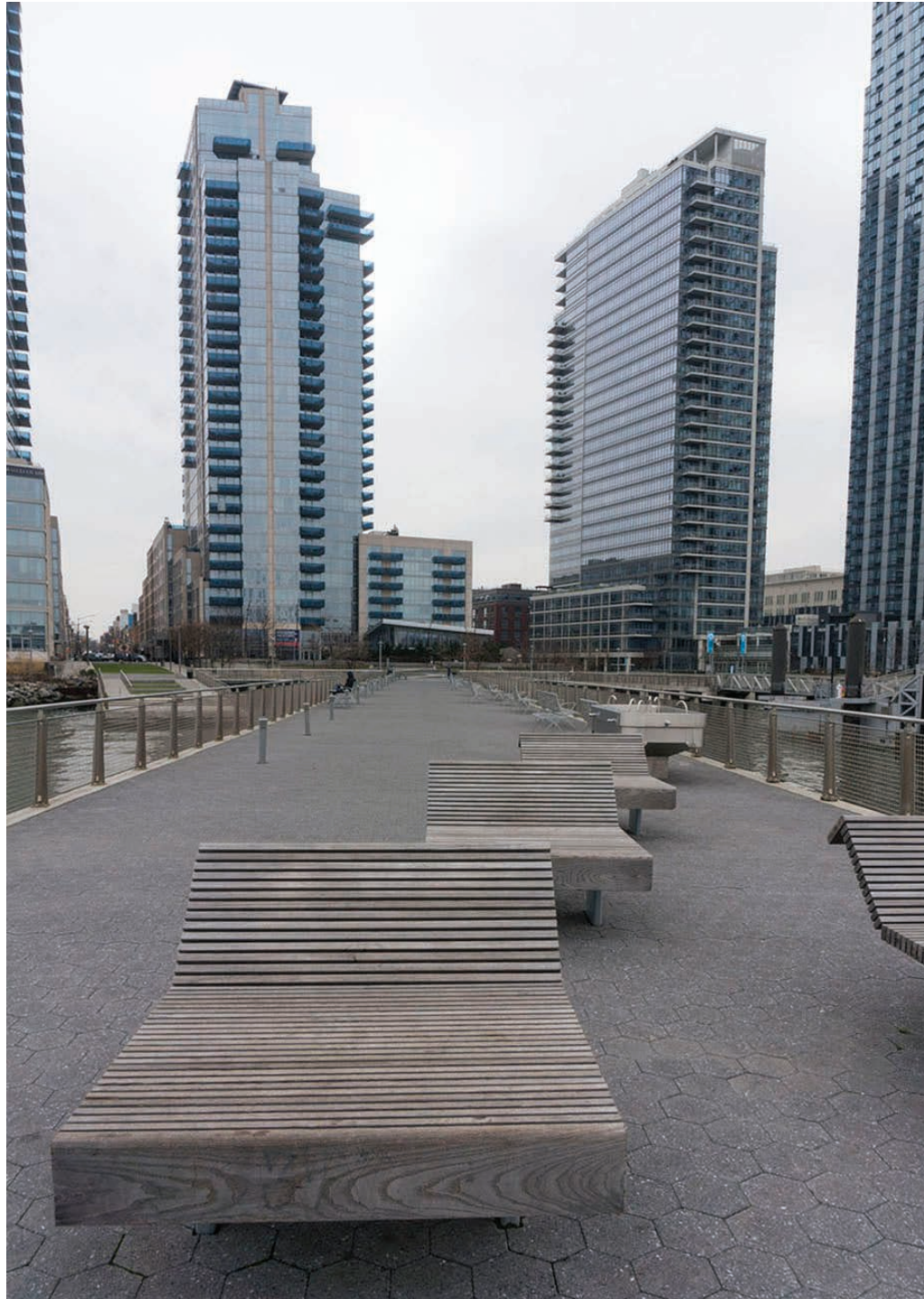














































































The post-COVID scenario has shown that the development path India has traversed can likewise create cities that can be what B. R. Ambedkar called a “republic of humiliation”; the experience of exploitation, oppression, violence, indignity, and exclusion is not the exclusive prerogative of the “village republic.” While the post-COVID effects can in no way be restricted to the “migrant workers,” and neither can the “working class” be reduced to them, our focus remains largely on migrant workers for reasons that are not of either their or our choice but of history.

India’s “working class”—the large mass of “performers of surplus labor” in both organized and unorganized sectors, in formal and informal units—are either waiting outside locked factory and construction premises, workhouses, shops, and warehouses or have already been thrown out of jobs, mercilessly, or are taking a long walk—exceeding at times 2,000 kilometers—back to their homes. They are walking away from the unimaginable cruelty of Indian cities that could not host them for the sixty days of complete lockdown—cities that house a large mass of “appropriators of surplus”—and back to

their rural homes or forest societies. As the surplus appropriators turned away from the plight of the surplus performers during lockdown, the surplus performers have turned toward their rural homes.

They are walking away from marginal locations *within* the circuits of global capital—from being a low-paid delivery worker for Amazon, open to hire and fire—to what we call the *world*

*of the third*—to the world of diverse agricultural and informal class processes in rural and small-town India and the gathering/rearing processes in forest societies (Chakrabarti and Dhar, 2009). They are walking away from class and non-class locations around the household and residential complexes—domestic workers, street vendors, and so on—that procreate *outside* the circuits of global capital in the urban world of the third. This is hence not just a story of “migra-

tion” and “reverse migration”; this is a story of *unlivable desire* (and of betrayal during the lockdown): the unrealizable desire to be *inside* the circuits of global capital met by a forced return to existences *outside* those circuits. This is hence a moment of both despair and hope: despair within the circuits of global capital in COVID times and the impossible hope of *being outside*, post-COVID.

## The Condition of the Working Class in India

Anjan Chakrabarti  
& Anup Dhar



Ajay Gudavarthy (2020) shows how 38.4 percent of the so-called migrant workers who were returning to rural India were OBCs (Other Backward Classes, a collective term used to classify castes that are educationally or socially disadvantaged). The rest of the migrants are largely constituted by the Dalits (Scheduled Castes), indigenous people (Scheduled Tribes), and Muslims. The condition of the working *class* in India is thus tied in a mutually constitutive relation with the condition of the working *castes* in India, which begs a careful, grounded introspection of their overdetermined relationship (Singh and Rawat 2020).

The working-class subject in India has—as if—*had* two faces. One directed toward the circuits of global capital. The other directed back home. For decades, the income/employment lure and glitter of “free” life in cities had drawn many to take jobs—even if insecure—at the peripheries of the circuits of global capital, as *mere* performers of surplus labor or as condition providers of such organizations of surplus (broadly, the “employee population” (Wolff 2012)). The apathy of the cities has now turned what looked to be the repository of hope into a register of despair and betrayal. The rural subject who was in the process of becoming urban is now returning back to the space that has been traditionally designated as backward, as lacking in development, as lagging behind, as third

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world-ish. This, however, is paradoxically that space consisting not only of regional variations in land ownership but is also where non-exploitative organizations of surplus—independent, communist, and non-exploitative communitic, say, in an individual or family farm—coexist alongside relations of exploitation—including global capitalist farms—made up of the nexus of class and nonclass positions occupied by surplus appropriators-landlords-traders-moneylenders.

In spite of an increase in food-grain production that made India self-sufficient in food, the agricultural sector does suffer from insufficient income growth, producing the much commented upon rural/farmer distress. The latter has happened, with regional variations, due to the overdetermination of multiple processes, some of which we highlight: through the state-capital nexus, conditions of agricultural processes were systematically decimated; land was rendered barren, land fertility and its capacity to retain moisture reduced through the introduction of hybrid or high-yielding seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and so on; where through deforestation and the resultant depletion of water tables and the cordoning off of forests by the Indian state, a crisis in rural world-of-the-third spaces was systematically engendered; all of which contributed to a breakdown of the conditions of existence within the world of the third and the resultant uprooting, leading to the

long-drawn process of migration. Nevertheless, it is to this complex rural space that they are now returning. Given this historical conjuncture, we turn our focus to a particular (by no means the only) issue: can a postcapitalist reconstruction of this space *now* happen? Can it become the seed for a future, given that the hope of a life inside the circuits of global capital now looks a distant dream, at least in the immediate future?

We build our response on three interrelated hypotheses: one, the economy is a complex and overdetermined ensemble of class processes—both capitalist and noncapitalist (the noncapitalist processes in turn could be exploitative and nonexploitative) as well as between-class processes and nonclass processes; two, the working class is embedded in an economy that is decentered and disaggregated in terms of processes of performance of surplus, appropriation, distribution, and receipt; third, such processes and the relations they produce are sites of anti-capitalist resistance to surplus appropriation by nonperformers and of postcapitalist reconstruction toward nonexploitative futurities. We arrive at three conclusions: (a) India's dominant economic form, "capitalist development" ("as we knew it"), is facing its worst crisis; (b) leftist politics—driven by progressivism, modernism, and industrialism (at times urbanism)—needs serious rethinking; and (c) ecological sensitivity, decentralized small industries, intermediate technologies, and world-of-the-third Marxism in both rural and urban spaces could characterize a possible future.

## Desire: The Future of a Pre-COVID Illusion

The substance of India's economic transition is marked by the movement of the originary multiplicity of class processes—constituted in turn by diverse modes of distribution of the surplus and other nonclass political, cultural, and natural processes (such as COVID)—toward capitalocentric and Orientalist directions. Such a direction has remained, a priori, unquestioned in state policy even as its emphasis has shifted from being driven by "state capitalism" in the 1950s–80s (the centrality of state capitalist enterprises for capital accumulation and centralized planning for allocation of resources to the "poor") to being driven in the post-1990s period by "neoliberal globalization" (the centrality of global private capitalism and local-global markets) (Chakrabarti, Dhar, and Dasgupta 2015). The pre-COVID economic formation (1990–2020) was marked by the twin centricities of globally generated surplus-value processes and the global commodity chain connecting local-local to global-global markets through the local-global conduits crystallized by a global order. The expanding circuits of global capital connect capitalist and noncapitalist class processes (along with attendant nonclass processes) to the hub of global capitalist enterprises (industrial, agricultural, technological, financial, merchant, etc.). India had thus moved from the erstwhile centrality of state capital during the "planning period" to a globally dispersed private mode of performance, appropriation, and distribution of surplus. The circuits or interconnected matrix of global capital was, however, not all encompassing: there was an *outside* that was not connected to the circuits of global capital and to

local-global markets. Such an outside (noncapitalist as well as capitalist)—materialized across urban and rural India and designated world of the third—is constitutive of exploitative, non-exploitative, and self-appropriative modes of performance, appropriation, and nonclass processes that contain, among other things, oppressive (even within communities) and nonoppressive apparatuses. No a priori value—good, bad, ugly—can hence be attributed to the rural world of the third to which the migrants are returning. It is just that a large mass of India’s working class is perhaps walking away from an insecure subject position (working essentially as casual and daily laborers) within the circuits of global capital and walking instead to an outside in their rural homeland—where they once had and will now again occupy multiple class and nonclass positions, the collective reconstruction of which in nonexploitative and just directions could offer a future.

However, developmentalism in India works through a foregrounding of the world of the third as *third world* and *noncapitalist* processes as *precapitalist*, thus presencing what had been marked as *differance* as the lacking/lagging other of the developed. The rural is also seen as that which is not yet urban/modern. Capitalocentric Orientalism, as Amie Césaire (2010) argues, was the grafting of the modern abuse of under-

development onto ancient and existing injustice within world of the third. Crucial to the presencing of the world of the third as homogeneously underdeveloped are the foreclosure of class as processes of surplus labor and the foregrounding of a logic of transition: precapitalist to capitalist, rural to urban, third world to the circuits of global capital. The expansion of the circuits of global capital continued unabated through a triadic process: (a) primitive accumulation and the consequent elimination of indispensable conditions of existence within world of the third; (b) “inclusive development” in the form of the distribution of “social surplus” for “social needs”; and (c) discursive crypting of noncapitalist, nonexploitative, or self-appropriative life forms within world of the third, thus making life within world of the third look increasingly unsustainable and, by default, making life in the circuits

of global capital look lucrative and seductive, thus directing the graph of desire toward the circuits of global capital. However, even as rural subjects were beginning to move toward cities, a vast number of them (designated “migrant laborers”) neither sold off nor abandoned their land and assets nor cut the umbilical cord with their communities. They planted one foot in the city and the other in their village or small town. It was, however, not just rural destitution that

**This is hence not just a story of “migration” and “reverse migration”; this is a story of *unlivable desire*; the unrealizable desire to be *inside* the circuits of global capital (and the betrayal during lockdown) and the forced return to existences *outside* the circuits of global capital. This is hence a moment of both despair and hope. Despair within the circuits of global capital in Covid times and the impossible hope of being-outside post-Covid.**



brought them to the cities. There was also desire to be inside the circuits of global capital. There was likewise a longing for “home,” too. The rural-informal subject was thus split, ambivalent.

Despite India having entered into a momentary recession in 2019, with income and job losses, extreme income/wealth inequality, and a farmer income/debt crisis, India’s pre-COVID transition to neoliberal globalization was presented by its economic apologists as a resounding success in terms of sustainable income growth and poverty reduction, and hence as irreversible.

The same pre-COVID phase also witnessed the large-scale decimation of trade unions and the decline of the Left. Except in a few states, the erstwhile Left’s “organic intellectuals” in villages and in small towns gradually lost touch with the “masses.” It was the right wing that connected to rural and small-town life in an organic, culturally rooted way, through religious leaders, school teachers, and social workers. Capitalism in this phase has itself been and is currently in deep crisis and, some argue, in permanent decay (the COVID period has turned this decline into a disaster). However, the crisis of capitalism and the rise of the Right were coterminous in India.

## Despair: The Inhospitability of the COVID Period

Setting aside empirical details and perversions of political machinations that usually follow such an event, we flag two fundamental effects of COVID that are integrated into the above-mentioned growing economic instability in India. Together they have induced a structural earthquake that has ripped apart the old economic “normal” and have turned India’s recessionary economy into a full-scale depression (the first in postindependent India).

It would not be too out of place to remind ourselves that among the five recessionary periods, two have been induced by agricultural shock (1958, 1966), two by energy shock (1973, 1980), and the present one by a pandemic-induced shock largely passing through the industrial sector.

First is the collapse of global capitalism. The capitalist production, distribution, and consumption chain linked through local-global markets have literally fallen apart, at least for the last few months. However, even amid this, the effects of erstwhile income and wealth inequality continue to be consolidated as the capitalists and their coterie do everything to protect their interests. As the top income bracket insulated themselves somewhat from the pandemic by using their savings and protecting their assets, the working-class/caste inside the circuits of global capital found themselves with

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three options: those who still had a job worked from home via internet access (except for the “essential” service providers); those who lost employment faced wage cuts; and others sat at home with the anxiety-prone prospect of losing employment (many among the last two are “migrant workers”). This recasting of India’s working class within the circuits of global capital complements the equally distressing scenario in the surrounding world-of-the-third in cities and industrial hubs.

Second is the collapse of the development model, signified by perhaps the largest “reverse migration” in the annals of human history. We have, however, *rewritten* reverse migration in India *in class terms* as a turning away from the hub of global capitalist class processes in cities and a turning toward a diverse class space in rural India—both exploitative and nonexploitative. *In spatial terms*, these are employees with(in) the circuits of global capital, especially at its margins or populating the world-of-the-third spaces in urban centers as both surplus performers and self-appropriators. Faced with the breakdown of conditions of existence in erstwhile rural spaces, their decade-long journey from rural to urban India has been hailed as the success of India’s development model. They had formed the underbelly of the organization of surplus, particularly the exploitative, which drove the juggernaut of India’s capitalist development that mainstream economics had analyzed in terms of market principles, optimization, capital accumulation, inclusion projects, people’s aspiration, and so on. Nowhere was there any mention of exploitation or of the deep-seated role of primitive accumulation in experiences leading to

migration.

Faced with the pandemic, the Indian state announced a total lockdown, thereby freezing not only the circuits of global capital but also bringing it to crisis with the class processes within the urban world of the third economy as well. In a matter of days, the workers realized that the city would only be hospitable to them as long as they were a *living machine of variable capital* supplementing the *dead machine of constant capital*. They were also considered dangerous by virtue of being potential carriers of the virus (for, in their living conditions in the cities, physical or social distancing is unimaginable).

Faced with four hours’ notice before a total lockdown (contrast this with how people traveling in international flights were treated) that froze transport (including railways, the most important mode of transportation for the working class, and also interstate buses) along with their jobs, income, and ability to sustain their reproduction of life (such as by paying rent), the millions of the *makers of modern India* walking with their family members, travelling in cycles and trucks for days and weeks, with hundreds perishing on the way, will remain one of the haunting images of economic, social, humanitarian, and health disaster in India. When the authorities relented after nearly one and a half months of lockdown, regional governments secretly supported by business lobbies (e.g., in construction), which are particularly dependent on these surplus performers, tried to stop the trains so as to spatially enslave them, but to no avail. The journey has perhaps become irreversible. While the dead machine of constant capital remained, the living

machine of variable capital moved on. It is not that the scenario in the rural and small towns of India is brimming with prospects of dignified livelihoods following the decade-long process of its submission to capitalist development, which has broken its back, but it seems that the little land, assets, and support system that they may have retained is considered enough to outweigh their present collective suffering from the rampant exploitation and indignity of standing in a long queue for hours to get a bowl of food from government functionaries. The development theories (Basu 1997; Eswaran and Kotwal 1994) of structural transition—à la Lewis-Ranis-Fei-Harris-Todaro models—from rural/agriculture to urban/industrial economy, from informal to formal, all those categorical divisions with abstract, imbued values ascribed to their relations (the former being inferior to the latter) have literally been blown away by this “long march” of urban employees back to the rural world of the third. It is as if the Indian economy—as we knew it—has collapsed. The formal economic history written by the literary class has literally been crossed out by the peoples’ history. Quite paradoxically, Indian agriculture, relatively unscathed from the effects of the post-COVID meltdown that till now has been essentially an urban phenomenon, has emerged with a good harvest as the only saving

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grace.

The Indian government, after two months of lockdown, decided to put in place a corona stimulus package, perhaps to mitigate the rising anger of the migrants, of additional Rs 40,000 crore (\$3.08 billion) for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).<sup>1</sup> To what extent this rescue package, depending upon when and how it will be released, will mitigate the vast income and

employment problem in the now even bigger world of the third is another question. In fact, there are now calls in some quarters to expand MGNREGA to the urban poor.

Along with a good harvest, what perhaps saved the Indian working population in general from mass hunger, and perhaps what saved the Indian state by extension, was the five-decade-long social-sur-

plus-distribution program for India’s food security, which included building a huge buffer stock through minimum support price and a public distribution system (PDS) for mainly food items through fair price shops or otherwise. This was something that the mainstream economists, barring a few, have consistently opposed and/or diluted on grounds of efficiency and market distortions by first arguing in favor of shifting PDS from universal to a targeted system (which did happen in the 1990s) and then attempting to get

<sup>1</sup> MGNREGA was a contribution from the Congress-party-led alliance of the first United Progressive Alliance government (2004–9) that included a substantial presence of leftist parties (MacAuslan 2008). Criticizing this program for its corruption and leakage, the present government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after it came to power in 2014 had been trying to demote the program and perhaps gradually prepare the ground for its disappearance, until the pandemic struck. See “Modi Tears into UPA Claims on MNREGA, RTI,” *Hindu*, 21 May 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/modi-tears-into-upa-claims-on-mnrega-rti/article5887687.ece>.



rid of it in the last decade. The counterfactual to the so-called inefficient PDS that prevented catastrophic fallout is what would have happened, especially for the lower-income and now unemployed working masses, if it had not been in place. The experience of the COVID period not only delivers historical proof of the absurdity of such efficiency logic in public policy but also demonstrates its criminal complicity and that of the theories that promote it in facilitating possible mass starvation, famine, and destitution, which would otherwise have transpired in India. It is also a good reminder that the Left is who led the “food movement” as a radical perspective on people’s needs before and after independence, combined with the food crisis of the 1960s that compelled the Indian state to introduce a gradual policy change in favor of food security and PDS.

The rescue package (officially called the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan economic package) had two angles: qualitative and quantitative. Its quantitative form to the announced 20 lakh crore was said to be 10 percent of GDP and was on introspection found to be mostly in the form of promised loans and moratoriums to be granted by the government, with approximately 1 percent of GDP reserved as extra fiscal stimulus, including for MGNREGA.<sup>2</sup> What effect it will have is already being debated, with even many in the

corporate sector and rating agencies doubting its tangible impact toward inducing recovery.

The qualitative content of the present set of reforms reflects an attempt in the continuation of supply-side policies of liberalizing and privatizing in favor of global capital (both Indian and foreign, particularly from the United States, Japan, and South Korea) and deepening the presence and widening the reach of local-global markets through a reworked geopolitical alliance that

**Rather, [India] is trying to recompose its structure to compete with and take over the place of China as the world’s major global supplier of manufacturing and information relation service products and in the process also achieve its strategic interest of isolating and weakening China in geopolitical terms; to this end, it has revised its FDI policy in April 2020 to prevent automatic investment and takeover by Chinese firms without government approval.**

sidelines China. The present collapse of global capitalism and doctrine of free trade on a world scale (as the WTO would demand and the World Bank/IMF has hitherto asserted) does not mean that India has given up on global capital; the Hindu nationalist assertion does not imply economic nationalism in the traditional sense that we used to see in the planning period. Rather, India is trying to recompose its structure to compete with and

take over the place of China as the world’s major global supplier of manufacturing and information-related service products and, in the process, also achieve its strategic interest of isolating and weakening China in geopolitical terms; to this end, it has revised its foreign direct investment policy in April 2020 to prevent automatic investment and takeover by Chinese firms without government approval. The present nationalist objective of becoming a global political power

<sup>2</sup> See Basu (2020) and “Government’s Economic Package Only 1% of GDP, Say Analysts,” *Times of India*, 20 May 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/govts-eco-package-only-1-of-gdp-say-analysts/articleshow/75837840.cms>.

by following a discretionary rather than the erstwhile rule-based policy is thus intrinsically tied with the aspirations of becoming a global economic superpower—all, however, at the expense of the working class.

What qualitative change has India to offer to global capitalists as an incentive? For one, it seeks to demolish India's existing labor laws in a way that labor will become literally the "wage slave" of capitalists. Three aspects pertaining to labor process are crucial for the labor-capital relation, which historically has been a function of class struggle: (a) the working day, (b) the workplace/technology, and (c) wage determination. The reform seeks to demolish the existing situation in favor of handing complete control of these over to the capitalists—making the working day elastic (absolute surplus-value production), adopting whatever technology and capital-labor ratio (relative surplus-value production process), and fixing whatever wage they wish (even if it is driven below the necessary labor equivalent, deepening the precarity of the working class). Suspension of all rights is akin to the abolishment of trade-union activities and interference in the profit drive of capitalists. The historical retreat of the Left is now to be turned into a rout of the working class.

The other aspects of this package are the large-scale privatization and sell-off of government property and enterprises to global capital, the further commercialization and corporatization of agriculture, and giving permission for private capitalist investment in hitherto restricted areas, such as in defense and public utilities, including the railways. The regulations regarding envi-

ronmental and other clearances, especially for raw-material extraction, are being wiped off at one go, and their ownership is being privatized; access for easy loans is encouraged, especially for the medium, small, and micro enterprises (MSMEs) needed to reshape competitive hubs (through outsourcing and subcontracting) that the recast circuits of global capital under a new world order will like to coalesce into.

It is another matter that the intended supply-side revival does not address the demand-side collapse that has followed the monumental loss of income and employment under the condition of mounting economic and health uncertainty. The question remains as to how the combination of a low-wage regime and a collapsing global economy will lead to any sustainable economic revival. This revival package bypasses the questions of income generation, standard of living, and the working conditions of laborers. It subsumes these under the full dictatorial power of (global) capital and hopes that investors will rush in with capital to reap future profits and investment, producing in turn future growth and employment. The present episode is, hence, not about class struggle within an enterprise but is a full-scale war against the working class in India; the story of migrants is only the tip of the iceberg.

It is ironic that India's prime minister, in contextualizing this package, made a Gandhian-style appeal to *atma-nirbharta* (roughly translated as "self-reliance"). This is not, at least until now, a return to Nehru's idea of self-dependence, which meant state-led capitalist development through centralized planning and an insulated econ-

omy. It has instead two components: The first is to become the center of global private capital through Make in India, as part of a new geopolitical order. The second is essentially directed at the erstwhile outside of the circuits of global capital—the world-of-the-third subjects whose numbers have now swelled even more as they have either been thrown out of work or have marched away from the circuits of global capital and the urban world of the third. Despite the promise of additional MGNREGA funding, it is clear that world-of-the-third subjects, in both the rural and urban areas, facing income and employment decline/collapse, are directly in line to be cut off from even receiving the extant social surplus from state-funded projects of “inclusive development.” The drastic COVID period decline in produced surplus value means that this class effect is bound to have a development effect on funds for social needs. The resource crunch that the present, already fiscally stressed, government faces from a collapse in tax collection as the circuits of global capital have disintegrated cannot but generate a drastic decline in the social-surplus distribution for erstwhile social needs; this fiscal stress is to be further aggravated by the financial pressure of a looming military face-off with China. Not only are effects of class and needs inalienably connected, it is also true that

**World-of-the-third spaces and their “reconstruction”—Tagore called it *punar-nirmaan*—in nonexploitative and self-appropriative directions have hitherto remained outside the orbit of Marxian struggles in India. The “enlightened” Left has harbored a secret contempt for rural, forest, and indigenous societies as precapitalist, feudal, underdeveloped, backward, superstitious, and colonized by false consciousness.**

the class war in favor of reviving global capital is pitted against the philosophy of social needs. In its idealized core, the appeal for an *atma-nirbhar Bharat* (self-reliant India) must be understood in the context of the possibility of an impending folding-up of the flow of social surplus that has been put in place over the last five decades. Its invocation represents an attempt at rearticulating and remapping the meaning of social needs through an age-old appeal to world-of-the-third subjects to stop depending upon the Indian

state as far as possible and ride through the depression period and beyond on their own (by taking advantage of schemes such as the cheaper loan facilities offered to MSMEs and the poor, such as the urban hawkers). Nevertheless, the contradiction within the class-need space can possibly represent one pathway in which collective opposition to an ongoing process of rearticulating and remapping social needs—

in terms of commodities (food), nutrition, health and education—can be sought in a new political imagination.

### Hope: World-of-the-Third Marxism

There is, however, amidst the ruin, a real opportunity for the future to be reclaimed, provided the political lessons from the defeat are learned. The seed of hope perhaps lies in turning away from—as we would like to reiterate—unexam-



ined progressivism, modernism, industrialism (even urbanism), and—paradoxically—the logic of more (more production, more income, more power); in turning instead to rebuilding habitable rural and forest societies (read nonexploitative registers in world-of-the-third spaces); in struggling over wages, working hours, and social security within the circuits of global capital in both urban and rural areas, in attempts to reshape these spaces through nonexploitative organizational forms; and in struggles over people’s social needs and claims to social surplus. This would mean a rewriting of the rural/urban divide, or of the rural-to-urban telos as the ambivalent interface between the circuits of global capital and the world of the third—in both rural and urban spaces.

World-of-the-third spaces and their “reconstruction”—Tagore (2011) called it *punar-nirmaan*—in nonexploitative and self-appropriative directions have hitherto remained outside the orbit of Marxian struggles in India. The “enlightened” Left has harbored a secret contempt for rural, forest, and indigenous societies as precapitalist, feudal, underdeveloped, backward, superstitious, and colonized by false consciousness; additionally, “brown Orientalism” and capitalocentrism have created a blindness to class as process of surplus labor, as has complicity in the hegemonic representation of world-of-the-third subjects as third-world-ish. The world-of-the-third subjects were thus seen only in the *waiting room of history*, waiting to be assimilated into the higher stage: capitalism—as if world-of-the-third subjects could only be a part of history; as if they couldn’t create history.

The Left’s opposition to capitalist development—in terms of trade-union struggle against capital and primitive accumulation and struggle for more state investment, less market involvement, minimum support prices, and so on—has generally remained trapped because of the unacknowledged capitalocentric Orientalism in the very hegemonic formation the Left sought to oppose. We are not suggesting that these movements have been ill directed (and perhaps they will become even more important in the future), but questions regarding their political language, means, and objectives need to be revisited. This is especially important when there is no guarantee that the crisis in the lives of the Indian working class will necessarily be accompanied by its challenge to the hegemonic order.

Let us end with migration. Migration is not a movement from rural to urban, nor is the movement from urban to rural *reverse* migration. It is, in class terms, a movement from and between diverse subject/class positions, across the rural-urban divide. In the urban areas, migrants had become mere employees in urban workstations, while the rural world-of-the-third space now holds more possibilities—including nonexploitative ones. For example, in areas where indigenous people (or OBCs or Dalits) own land, a farmer could be both the performer and the appropriator of surplus (i.e., in a self-appropriative class process). In other rural areas, highly commercialized exploitative farming, including capitalist ones with wage labor, are prevalent. This complexity of the rural world of the third thus provides an opening, and hope as well. The return of the urban working class to its rural home, of course, has happened in a moment of

extreme distress. However, the return is not just a return to the rural. It is also, in class terms, a return to a form of life in which the landed masses can at least be both performers and appropriators of surplus, actually and potentially. Is it time for what Tagore and Gandhi called *rural reconstruction*? Could this be the beginning of the creation of habitable world-of-the-third spaces—in both rural and urban sites? Rethinking urban world-of-the-third sites is equally important because, in loop with the rural, many of the migrants will perhaps once again go back to the cities to look for income and employment; the only difference is that they now will have a new experience of who they are and would perhaps have no illusion regarding where they are migrating to. Nonmigrant workers, too, urban and rural, having a different set of experiences of what the breakdown of the utopia of capitalist development means for them may reach similar conclusions. There is hope that the combination of these experiences also engenders an independent evaluation and audit of life within the world of the third—in class terms and also in terms of power and meaning.

Tragically, the world of the third has never had an independent audit. It has either been presented as precapital, as a prior stage of capital, as dependent on capital for redemption, or as a “local”/“community” romanticized as a homogeneous good. Can the world of the third become a site for class and need-based struggles, as well as nonclass struggles (Dhar and Chakrabarti 2019)? Can the Left field be reenvisioned as a struggle both within the circuits of global capital and outside it? Can we put to overdetermination anticapitalist (*sangharsh*) critique and postcap-

talist (*nirmaan*) praxis?

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The past months, many pieces have been written about the relevance of Michel Foucault's writings during the coronavirus pandemic, often reduced to vague historical analogies. They variously apply Foucault's (1975) descriptions of the plague in *Discipline and Punish* and his reflections on biopolitics to the current condition. As interesting as these historical comparisons could be for academics, most challenges we face today are not really addressed by knowing that the current pandemic is not only dangerous or complex but also "biopolitical." Is there really nothing more to Foucault's relevance than mere historical analogies? By the 2000s, some Italian political philosophers—such as Antonio Negri (Hardt and Negri 2000), Paolo Virno (2004), and Maurizio Lazzarato (1996)—had already updated Foucault's ideas for the twenty-first century by linking biopolitics to the politics of labor. They argued that contemporary capitalism had shifted to a post-Fordist mode of production based on "immaterial" or "biopolitical" production in which life itself has become the motor of production. Many workers in Western countries today do not laboriously produce commodities at the assembly line but

sell their creativity and social skills in the service sector. What makes life human—our capacity to speak, socialize, create—has been captured within the capitalist accumulation cycle. According to these Italian neo-Marxists, production becomes biopolitical when human life itself becomes a profit source. They thereby move the focus of class struggle from the traditional working class to the vibrant multitude of knowledge workers and emotional laborers that populate today's labor market. For these theorists, this multitude constitutes the revolutionary subject of this age.

However, Angela McRobbie (2020) has recently stressed the very material underbelly of one such service sector, the fashion industry. The fashion industry's glamorous facade of creative young designers and social-networking influencers has a hidden underside of warehouse workers and couriers who are underpaid by Zalando and other

"click and collect" companies. She argues that algorithmically managed warehouses entail a drastic change in labor practices that seriously disempowers workers in these sectors. By specifying the meaning of the concept of biopolitics in the context of the pandemic, we would like to emphasize that post-Fordist immaterial labor always went together with deskilled, precarious labor—a fact that has remained underexposed in many theories of post-Fordism but that the

## The Multitude Divided: Biopolitical Production during the Coronavirus Pandemic

*Stijn De Cauwer  
& Tim Christiaens*

current pandemic has made clearer than ever. As Achille Mbembe (2020) has recently suggested, the biopolitics of the current pandemic enacts “a vicious partitioning of the globe” in which some lives are valued more than others. Many of the knowledge workers described in the texts of theorists of post-Fordism sit at home teleworking while so-called essential workers risk their lives caring for the sick, delivering goods, or packaging food. The pandemic, in other words, exposes a series of divisions within the multitude that complicate its capacity to resist.

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Foucault (2003) introduces his concept of biopolitics while investigating the history of public-health policies. He argues that, throughout modernity, governments have increasingly concerned themselves with managing the health of their populations. While sporadic epidemics were already a problem in the Middle Ages, Foucault argues that only since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have governments regarded disease as a permanent factor requiring a consistent public-health policy. He writes that biopolitics is not so much concerned with temporary epidemics, but with “endemics”: that is, with the ways illness affects a population in a systematic and lasting way (243). The point of public-health measures was obviously not to have people idly sit at home in perfect health but to produce and maintain a healthy, docile, and

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especially productive workforce. Endemics were a problem because they “sapped the population’s strength, shortened the work week, wasted energy, and cost money, both because they led to a fall in production and because treating them was expensive” (244).

It is rightly noted in this context that Foucault somewhat neglected the role of class inequality in his studies. In his best-selling *Returning to Reims*, Foucault-biographer Didier Eribon (2013, 241) explains the lack of class analysis in

Foucault’s work by arguing that, in order to acknowledge other forms of oppression and struggle (such as sexual, gendered, and racial oppression), Foucault had to wrest himself away from the Marxism that dominated French intellectual life in the 1960s and 1970s, which was only focused on the struggle for the working class. However, Eribon

avows that this led to a neglect of class oppression altogether. Similarly, various Foucault-inspired scholars have taken up the task to study the role of racism and colonialism in greater detail than Foucault had done. Mbembe (2013, 167), for example, argues that many of the most brutal events of the twentieth century were made possible by decades of colonial and racist dehumanization intertwined with class oppression: “This development was aided in part by the racist stereotypes and the flourishing of a class-based racism that, in translating the social conflicts of the industrial world in racist terms,

ended up comparing the working classes and ‘stateless people’ of the industrial world to the ‘savages’ of the colonial world.” That the present division between people who can safely stay at home during a pandemic and the people who have to do unpleasant and risky work reproduces class, racial, gendered, and colonial forms of inequality goes without saying. Biopolitics segments the population into various groups and targets these groups with different policies to increase the health and productivity of the population as a whole.

Daniele Lorenzini (2020) is hence correct to have more recently described biopolitics as a politics of differential vulnerability: “Far from being a politics that erases social and racial inequalities by reminding us of our common belonging to the same biological species, it is a politics that structurally relies on the establishment of hierarchies in the value of lives, producing vulnerability as means of governing people.” The population is not a single homogenous totality but an internally fractured collective differentially subjected to various dangers and policies. Depending on one’s contribution to the population’s productivity, one receives a different treatment. Foucault (2003, 241; emphasis ours) hence succinctly defines the modern configuration of governmental power as “the right to make live *and to let die*.” Biopolitics implies that certain groups are structurally more exposed to health risks, exploitation, poverty, and generally unfavorable living conditions in order to safeguard the health of another part of the population.

We know by now that COVID-19 does not make everybody equally vulnerable but that various

groups of people are much more exposed to the virus’s lethal or financially devastating consequences—from people in Brazilian favelas to everybody without adequate health insurance in the United States. We also know that for a part of the population to stay at home, do telework, and minimize their risk of exposure to the virus, other people have to keep on working, harder than before, forced to risk their health. Still others lose their jobs and face unemployment because the sectors they work in are closed down. A Foucauldian intervention would thus not stop at saying that we live in “biopolitical times” but should examine the political conditions that make a specific unequal distribution of living conditions “acceptable” and should describe these conditions in all their diversified forms and ramifications.

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Since the 1990s, Italian neo-Marxist thinkers have taken up the notion of biopolitics to theorize their experiences with labor struggles in Italy throughout the 1960s and ’70s. They started from the workerist thesis of Mario Tronti’s 1966 *Workers and Capital*, that labor power always precedes and exceeds the capitalist mode of production in which it is integrated. As living labor, workers are always capable of much more than what is required of them in the capitalist mode of production, but to survive they must commodify their living labor and sell it as labor power at exploitative rates to the capitalist. Due to their weaker bargaining position, they must accept wages lower than the value they actually produce. For Tronti (2019, 155) this means that the workers’ subjectivity is split between two



antagonistically opposing sides: “Labor-power is not, therefore, just potential labor but also potential capital.” As living labor, labor power is the human potential to produce use values, but, as part of the capitalist accumulation process, labor power is nothing but a cog subsumed in a labor process beyond its control. Capital integrates labor power into its operations to generate even more capital: “Workers enter into capital, are reduced to a part of capital, as a working class. Capital now has its enemy within” (138).

Workers are, in other words, simultaneously capital and noncapital, and from this contradiction arises their resistance to capitalism’s attempt to integrate them into the production process. Working-class politics, from Tronti’s point of view, is not an effect of capitalist domination but is an integral element of the system. Workers are always already in struggle with capital, from the very moment they sell their labor power on the market. They oppose, “within and against capital” (*dentro e contro il capitale*), their own reduction to labor power serviceable to interests beyond their control.

However, Tronti wrote his magnum opus during the heydays of large-scale industrial production and the Fordist social factory, and this model ran out of steam by the end of the 1970s, forcing workerists to rethink their evaluation of contemporary capitalism. This rethought mode of production is usually designated as “post-Ford-

ism,” but the term has caused a lot of confusion. Post-Fordism is often described as a shift from the production of material goods to an age of “immaterial labor.” In the Fordist factory, workers produced standardized material commodities through monotonous labor at the assembly line. But this kind of labor moved to low-productivity-cost countries while the Western economy increasingly specialized in the provision of services and intangible goods. The commodities produced are no longer standardized material

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goods like cars or refrigerators but immaterial and intangible goods like information, affects, and knowledge. The bulk of the Western workforce no longer consists of a traditional working class employed in large-scale industry but of teachers, nurses, scientists, therapists, consultants, and so on. The very skills that make up the daily lives of people, such as social

skills, tastes, affects, opinions, creative and intellectual capacities, are now the main driver of capital accumulation. The production process itself is also far less rigid. As Virno (2004, 62) writes, “The tasks of a worker or of a clerk no longer involve the completion of a single particular assignment, but the changing and intensifying of social cooperation ... a conspicuous portion of individual work consists of developing, refining, and intensifying cooperation itself.” Workers are expected to flexibly and creatively cooper-

ate with each other and their clients to produce immaterial goods. An airline flight attendant must not mindlessly perform the same operation over and over but must “connect” with each client in a singular fashion. A nurse, likewise, must not merely cure a patient but also must employ soft skills to learn more about the patient’s medical history. Instead of executing centrally predetermined production targets, workers are left free to use their personal “virtuosity”—in Virno’s vocabulary—in whatever way they see fit to cultivate social cooperation.

Hardt and Negri (2000, 30) name the post-Fordist mode of production “biopolitical production.” Whereas the capture of living labor studied by Tronti only regarded the integration of workers’ physical and mechanical movements in large-scale industrial production, the post-Fordist capture of life goes much deeper into workers’ social relations and personal inventiveness. The subsumption of labor under capital goes much further, spanning the entire network of social cooperation among human beings. An airline company, for instance, not only captures its stewards’ physical labor into its operations but also their emotions, their social skills, their smiles. The hospital does not need nurses to merely perform standard, robotic operations but profits from their inventiveness and social skills. What makes us human, the capacity to be creative and engage with other people, becomes a direct source of profit in the

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post-Fordist regime. Human life itself as an incessant entanglement of social cooperation—or, “the multitude” in the Italian vernacular—is integrated into the process of capital accumulation. The political antagonism Tronti discerned in the commodification of living labor thus also becomes much more pronounced. And if life itself is commodified, then the struggle between living labor and capital is also diffused throughout the multitude, making human life directly political. If corporate profits depend on workers’ affective and social skills, then also the realms where those skills are cultivated become directly

political. In this way, the class struggle spreads from the workspace to the home and everyday life. Workers can oppose capital not only by struggling for their rights at the job but also by reclaiming the spaces post-Fordism has rendered serviceable to capital accumulation. For

Italian neo-Marxists, biopolitics is thus not primarily the government of populations but the struggle of life itself against its integration into the post-Fordist production process. Globalized capital paradoxically contains and produces the potential for resistance, which is now everywhere: “Resistances are no longer marginal but active in the center of a society that opens up in networks” (25).

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The Italian thesis of biopolitical production emphasizes the possibilities for a politics of life

but hardly connects to Foucault's original insight about differential vulnerability and the segmentation of the population. This shift becomes relevant once we note just how one-sided the immaterial-labor thesis really is. While Italian neo-Marxists frequently present the move to post-Fordism as a clear-cut shift from industrial mass production to a postindustrial economy based on immaterial labor, with industrial factories in low-productivity-cost countries, the reality is far more complex. The immaterial-labor thesis neglects the precarious and deskilled jobs post-Fordism has also generated in Western countries: warehouse workers, Deliveroo couriers, truckers, and so on. Script reading in a call center, for instance, might be directly communicative, but it can hardly be called "virtuosic"; on paper, nurses might be expected to chat with their patients, but in reality, their work is so closely monitored that they simply lack the time for such courtesies; warehouse workers in Amazon's fulfillment centers have not escaped factory disciplining at all but run from one aisle to another following a machine's commands. Clearly, though theories of post-Fordism have been very successful in describing the rise of high-skill, virtuosic jobs in the Western service sector, they have mostly ignored the simultaneous proliferation of deskilled jobs in, for example, the transportation sector, call centers, and distribution chains.

Hardt and Negri (2000, 292) briefly acknowledge this effect briefly in *Empire*, discerning "a corresponding growth of low-value and low-skill routine symbol manipulation, such as data entry and word processing," but they only give a detailed account of contemporary "digital Tay-

lorism" in their 2017 book *Assembly*, and even here their analysis is limited to just three pages (Hardt and Negri 2017, 131–3).

To find out how the multitude has become divided between high-skill immaterial laborers and deskilled workers subjected to digital Taylorism, it is helpful to look at business literature since the 1990s. This literature advises corporations to distinguish between their "core competences" and "non-essential activities" (Weil 2014). To guarantee their attractiveness to financial investors, corporations purportedly have to decide what their main contribution to the economy is and outsource the rest to subsidiary companies. Apple, for instance, is at its core a brand that markets high-quality tech products, so manufacturing those products, cleaning office spaces, or delivering the goods to local franchises are all nonessential to Apple's business model. That is why one of the most profitable corporations today employs only 137,000 workers worldwide. Those workers predominantly perform immaterial labor, but they are only the tip of the iceberg in Apple's entire production chain. While Apple employs many people in marketing and brand management, subsidiary branches like Foxconn handle "nonessential" matters like production, maintenance, and repairs. Corporations focus on their core competences in immaterial labor and subsequently set up contracts with a series of subsidiaries for the rest. Those subsidiaries subsequently hire the minimum number of deskilled workers needed to meet contractual standards. Given that the workers are now employed by a myriad of smaller companies, their political bargaining power is scattered. They possess fewer labor protections and

lower wages, and parent companies carry less responsibility for their subsidiaries' scandals. Sometimes the extreme working conditions in a company like Foxconn reach Western media and damage the parent company's public image, but usually these scandals pass by unnoticed.

In Western countries, as well, nonstandard employment contracts have spread through outsourcing. Cleaning, transportation, or menial data management are subcontracted to minor subsidiary firms that, thanks to their small size, avoid standard labor laws. These companies can hire and fire almost at a moment's notice and go bankrupt without making a sound. The platform companies McRobbie describes have especially perfected this strategy. Airbnb owns no real estate, Uber does not employ a single driver, Deliveroo workers have to bring their own bicycles to the job. Platform companies effectively render each individual worker into its own one-person subsidiary company. Investments (renting a delivery van), financial risks (not meeting your daily quota), health risks (not being able to work due to illness and stress), and constant availability (zero-hour contracts) are subsequently the burden of the individual worker. Workers compete with each other for gigs while the platform allots tasks through an opaque and unaccountable algorithm. The rise of such a gig economy at the

**These are not circumstances conducive to collective working-class politics. The competitive and impersonal working conditions of a labor process run by algorithms make it difficult to organize collective-labor struggles; the formation of unions is often explicitly discouraged, and collective bargaining for better working conditions is made near impossible. The coronavirus pandemic has made the dangers of the gig economy crystal clear.**

center of the post-Fordist economy puts serious pressure on the multitude's capacity for collective resistance. Capital still integrates workers into the process of capital accumulation but without the social cooperation that made the multitude capable of resisting and overcoming its subsumption. Workers in an Amazon fulfillment center are hired and fired by an algorithm that tracks their productivity in real time; Uber drivers spend most of their days alone in their cars; Airbnb hosts never meet, except maybe online. These are not circumstances conducive to collective working-class politics. The competitive and impersonal working conditions of a labor process run by algorithms make it difficult to organize collective-labor struggles; the formation of unions is often explicitly discouraged, and collective bargaining for better working conditions is made near impossible.

The coronavirus pandemic has made the dangers of the gig economy crystal clear. Now that many countries are in various stages of lockdown and are encouraging people to work from home, populations have become increasingly dependent on companies like Deliveroo and Amazon for their subsistence. Amazon has especially shown its pivotal position in the coronavirus economy, with double-digit growth in share prices combined with relentless pushback on



workers' resistance. While Amazon itself focuses on managing its internet platform, it uses largely self-employed independent contractors to actually deliver goods to people's homes. Its "core competence" is managing and promoting its platform as a reliable and convenient online marketplace. Other, "nonessential" matters like delivery can be outsourced to subsidiaries. In its fulfillment centers, Amazon's algorithms set the work pace and automatically fire those who cannot keep up with the accelerated rhythm. This makes it easy for Amazon to manage its workforce: the company establishes or suspends contracts in line with market demand without having to consult workers or respect labor regulations. When a worker gets unlawfully fired, Amazon can blame a glitch in the algorithm. During the pandemic, this has allowed companies like Amazon to massively increase profits. Amazon now has a quasi monopoly on the distribution of goods, and it does not have to share profits with its workers. To the contrary, workers' resistance is met with quick dismissal, as has become evident with the case of Chris Smalls, a packager at a New York fulfillment center who was fired after organizing a protest against the insufficient safety measures at Amazon's warehouses during the pandemic. While workers were exposed to infection, Amazon's board of directors was more concerned with winning the PR battle against what they

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called, in a leaked memo, a "not smart or articulate" worker (Blest 2020). Amazon's core business lies in self-promotion in the media, so it invests in immaterial labor to manage its public image while underinvesting in the deskilled labor that performs the actual material work of sorting and transporting packages.

Amazon is obviously not the only corporation in this position. The immaterial labor described by Italian neo-Marxists has always depended on deskilled, outsourced, and digitized labor. The

same could hence be said about Deliveroo, Zalando, or even the care sector—traditionally a source of middle-class jobs.

The knowledge workers of immaterial labor are thus just one side of the post-Fordist coin. On the other side are the masses of deskilled workers hired by subsidiary companies or stuck in parasubordinate self-employment. For the

past few months, this segment of the workforce has worked extra-exhausting shifts, delivering packages and working in distribution warehouses, exposing themselves to the virus and other health risks in doing so. This reality shows with painful clarity that the further away one works from the "core" of immaterial labor, the more disposable one's life becomes. The business models of companies like Amazon depend on the brand management conducted in their headquarters rather than on the factory-like

precarious labor of its warehouse and delivery workers. The latter can, in case of illness or resistance, easily be replaced with other, healthier, more compliant workers. Especially when, due to the pandemic, many workers in other sectors are losing their jobs, distribution companies like Amazon can count on a postindustrial reserve army to undermine workers' struggles against exploitative and dangerous working conditions.

Italian neo-Marxists would thus have done well to connect their analysis of post-Fordism to Foucault's original insight of biopolitics as a politics of differential vulnerability. The multitude they announced as the new political subject of the post-Fordist era is in fact riven with divisions and segmentations that upset some of its capacities for resistance and expose those workers deemed disposable to poverty and possibly a premature death. Not only does the post-Fordist business model of core competencies and nonessential subsidiary jobs divide the multitude between immaterial "core" workers and deskilled nonessential and disposable workers, but the biopolitics of governments during the pandemic also segments the multitude into different layers according to how valuable their contributions are to the overall health and productivity of the population. These two mechanisms intersect to create a patchwork of different levels of exposure to infection and impoverishment, riven with class, gendered, and racial dimensions. At the bottom of this hierarchy within the population, we find the deskilled, disposable workers that operate the distribution network of the coronavirus economy.

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## Quarantine Posters

*Esat C. Başak*

*Esat C. Başak (b. 1965) is a multimedia artist who uses techniques of montage, bricolage, and détournement in his aesthetic interventions and subversions. During the 1990s, he published the renowned fanzine Mondo Trasho in Istanbul, Turkey.*





*These days, if you are above 65 years old, forget leaving your apartment. You may be fined for 3,150 TL under Public Health Law section 1593, subsection 282.*



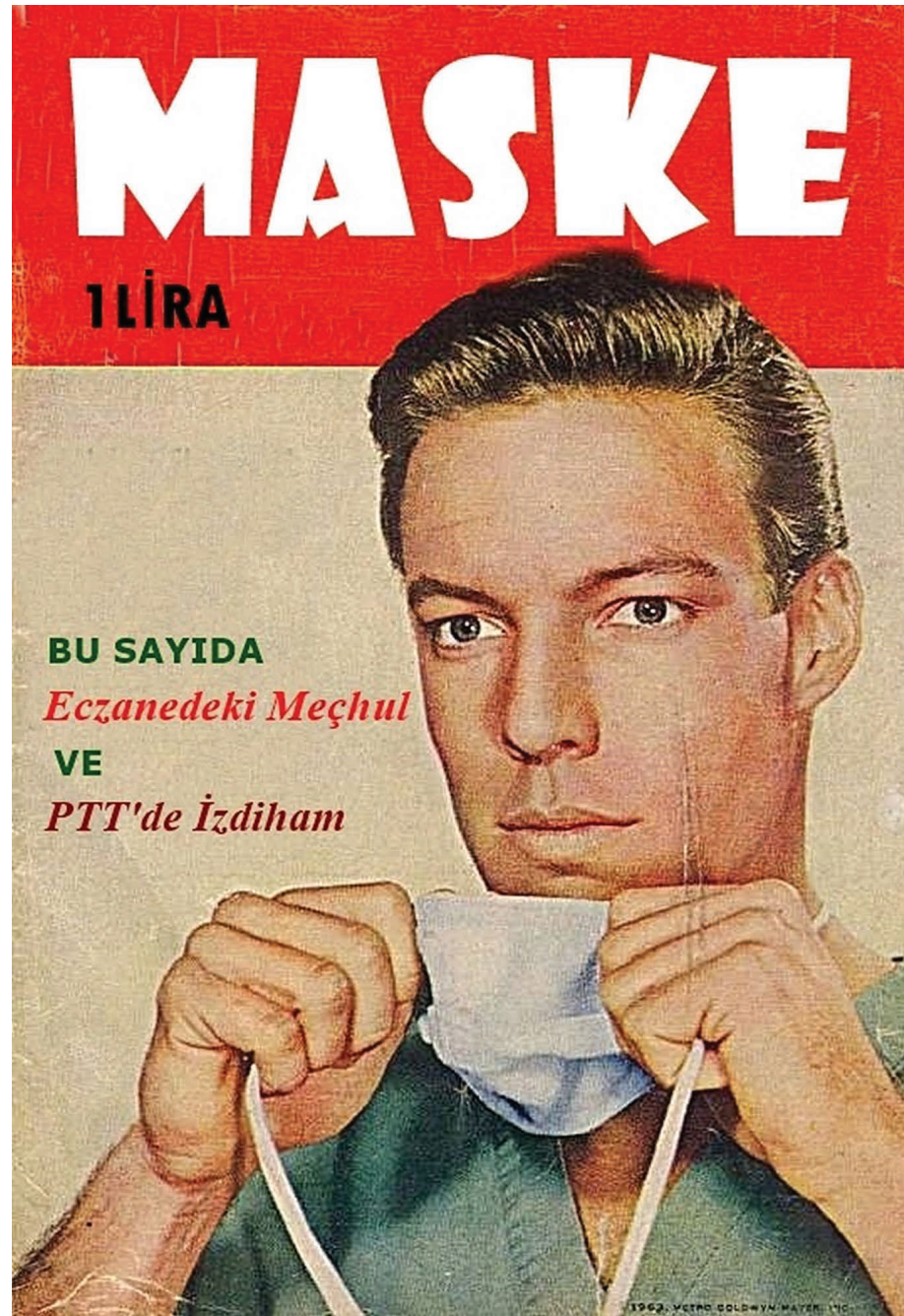
*The greatest enemy of Turkish World, Coronavirus must be squashed where ever it is seen.*

*On the bones: Cough, close contact, nausea and vomiting, fever, old age, diarrhea, travel abroad, bad hygiene, kidney failure, pneumonia, shortness of breath, chronic lung disease.*

*Be very aware for the Corona that threatens Turkey.*







*Mask*

*In this issue:*

*The unknown in  
the pharmacy*

*&*

*Stampede at the  
Post Office*





*It is not enough  
to open the malls!  
Open the beaches as  
well!*

*Herd Immunity*

*Coming to Turkey  
this Summer!*

mit Hilfe des Ministeriums für Gesundheit



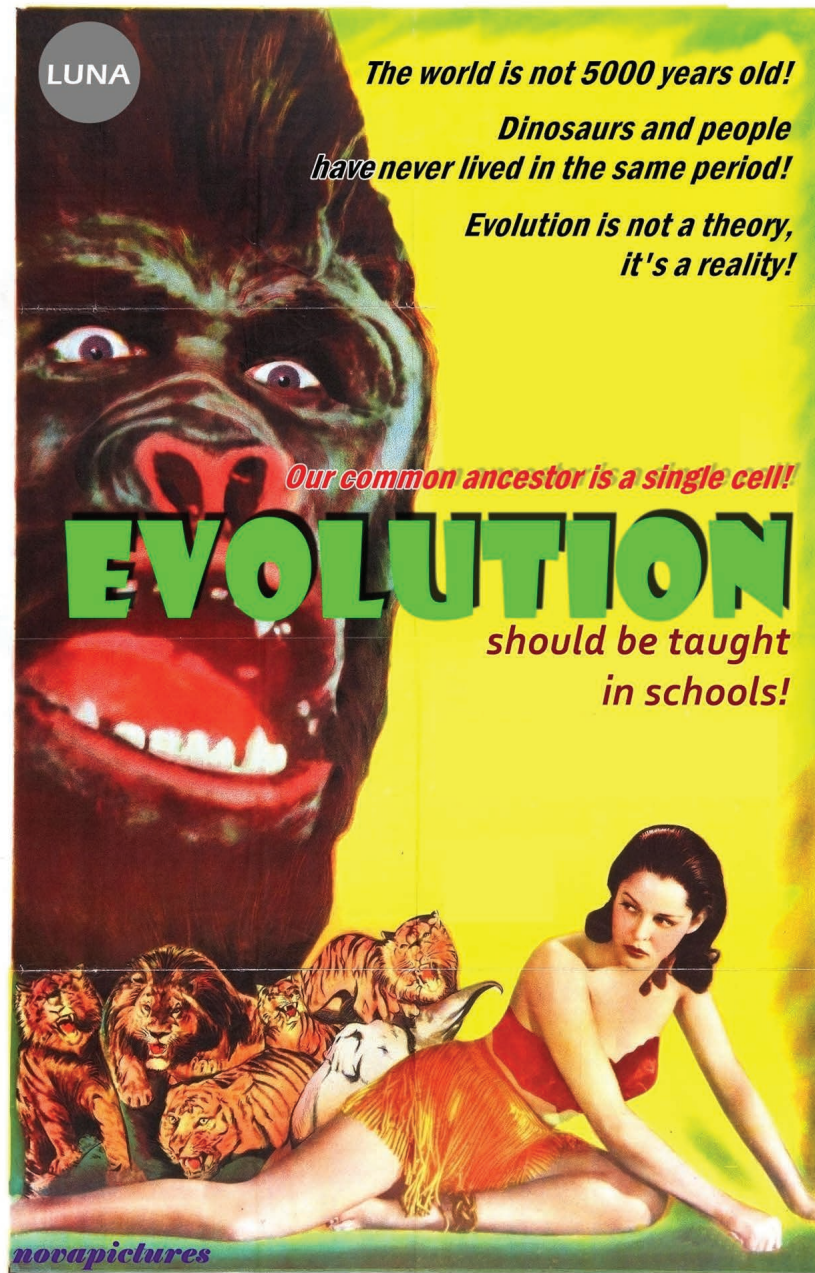
Ein Film von Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

# Quarantäne

ein Soziales experiment

ZWEI FLIEGEN MIT EINER KLAPPE SCHLAGEN  
*Film company präsentiert*







**BECERİKSİZLİKLERİNİ SAÇMA SAPAN  
ÖNLEMLERLE ÖRTMEYE ÇALIŞAN  
BİR GRUP İNSANIN İBRET VEREN ÖYKÜSÜ**

**BEFORE YOUR  
VERY EYES...**

Bedava Dağıtılacak!  
**OLMADI!**

ECZANELER SATACAK  
**SATAMADI!**

PTT dağıtacak!  
**YAPAMADI!**

evlere yollıycaz!  
**KAÇ KİŞİYE  
ULAŞTI?**

**ARTIK  
PARAYLA  
SATILIYOR**

**SONUÇ**

**WU-HAN'IN  
LANETİ**

"kibir ve cehalet  
yükü bir baskıdır"  
Epidemic Empire

"Umarım bir ikincisi çekilmez!"  
WHO

**UCU HERKESE  
DOKUNAN  
MÜTHİŞ BİR DRAM**

**20 Yaş Altından 65 Yaş üstüne  
Herkesin Görmesi Gereken  
Bir İbret-i Alem Şöleni**

**ENAZÇOCUK & epidemifilm**

*The Exemplary Story of  
a Bunch of People Who  
Tries to Cover Up Their  
Incompetence with  
Bullshit Measures.*

*Curse of Wu-Han*

*"A masterpiece full of  
arrogance and igno-  
rance" -Epidemic  
Empire*

*"I hope there won't be a  
sequel" —WHO*

*"A tragedy that effects  
all."*

*"Before your very eyes..."*

*Free Distribution! IT  
WASN'T!*

*Pharmacies will sell it!  
THEY DIDN'T!*

*Postal Service will sell  
it! THEY COULDN'T!!*

*Will be delivered  
to homes! WHO  
RECEIVED IT?*

*Now, only for sale!*

*A must see for everyone  
from below 20 to above  
65.*

*Minimum 3 Children  
Production & Epidemic  
Films*



The “key worker” has occupied a central place in Britain’s popular discourse during the pandemic. The celebration of those workers who have continued to work in Britain throughout the pandemic—emergency services workers, shop workers, couriers, and cleaners, among many others—has provided a point of unity for the nation as it endures the present crisis. The image of this particular worker has repeatedly couched the government’s public-health advice, with the obligations to engage in social distancing, to self-isolate when ill, and to only travel when necessary often stressed in relation to protecting the country’s key workers and the work that they do. Advertising campaigns have used this image as a cornerstone of their marketing campaigns, thanking key workers for their service and often donating money to funds to help them in various ways. It has also been adopted by individuals, with most engaging in a weekly round of applause for the country’s key workers, literally stepping into their streets and celebrating them.

It would, however, be mistaken to observe this celebration of key workers in Britain as a benign

expression of social solidarity in the face of the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. On the contrary, the encouraged celebration of Britain’s key workers and its performance within the key ideological apparatuses of the state throughout the pandemic serves to mystify the specific social conditions that have made the positions of these workers so perilous in the first place, and which nonetheless compel their continued work. In order to survive the present crisis, cap-

italist social relations—and the strategies of accumulation attached to them—have necessarily been protected and reproduced: a reality that has seen the safeguarding of workers fall secondary to the safeguarding of capital. The fetishism of the key worker and the universal celebration of this image of selfless dedication to work in the face of the pandemic has been an integral mechanism in the deployment of an “ideology of work” in Britain (Althusser 2014), the

primary aim of which has been to obscure the ongoing reproduction of capitalist social relations at the cost of the safety of workers in Britain, particularly those celebrated as “key” by this ideological deployment.

Readers of *Rethinking Marxism* will likely be familiar with the arguments presented by Louis Althusser (2014) in his text *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. However, one of the less analyzed

## The Ideology of Work and the Pandemic in Britain

*Samuel J. R. Mercer*

aspects of this text is Althusser's considerations of the "ideology of work" (43), and how the specific ideological schemas that emerge at the point of production fit more broadly with his analysis of the state (Mercer 2018). In his analysis of the labor process and the division of labor in society, Althusser (2014) argued that particular ideologies emerge at this level with the specific function of concealing or obfuscating the class antagonisms and inequalities that underpin the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. One particularly important ideological method by which the division of labor is justified—both within the labor process and within society more generally—is through an appeal to the capacities of the individual worker to surpass and transcend these divisions. Althusser argued that ideologies are deployed to "'humanize' relations in the enterprise between supervisors, engineers and managers on the one hand and workers on the other" (35), disguising material and structural class divisions as merely "technical" differences that can be overcome by any individual, providing they have the correct character. As Althusser wrote, "As for the worker who becomes an engineer or even a manager, he is, in our society, a museum piece exhibited to encourage belief in the 'possibility' of the impossible and the idea that there are no social classes or that someone born a worker can 'rise above his class'" (37). In Althusser's formulation, the idolization and celebration of workers was not to be viewed in a vacuum but rather as an ideological symptom of the reproduction of capitalist social relations at the point of production itself. In other words, the very process that allows for relations of production and strategies of accumulation to be main-

tained and reproduced is productive of very particular ideologies, including (in particular) a humanist celebration of individual workers as a way of disguising the structural context that determines the position and treatment of these individuals in the first place.

Thus, the appeal to the heroic characteristics of the key worker in Britain has the function of eliding the class antagonisms that underwrite this worker's position and mobilization during the pandemic. The development and deployment of the key worker as an image has emerged from a very specific division of labor set in place before and during the pandemic and has maintained this worker's position in relation to that division of labor by justifying and obfuscating the class inequalities inherent within this division (inequalities that have been agitated and brought to the surface by the pandemic itself). In observing the deployment of the image of the key worker within this ideology of work, three important observations can be made about its function during the pandemic in Britain: (1) the image of the key worker maps onto the division of labor and onto the strategies of accumulation attached to this division; (2) the image of the key worker is mobilized to provide a justification for the hierarchies of authority that maintain this division of labor; and (3) this image of the key worker facilitates the neutralization of any resistance to this existing order of things (Althusser 2014). Taken together, these observations make up the operation of an ideology of work in Britain during the pandemic, the precise function of which is to protect and maintain capitalist social relations in a time of crisis.

## The “Key Worker” and British Capitalism in the Pandemic

The first and perhaps most important point to make is that the key worker as an ideological image *emerges* out of a particular division of labor that has been established in Britain. As Althusser (2014, 36) argued, “Every process of production entails the existence of several labour processes and thus of a set number of *posts* for qualified labour, including the posts required to organize, coordinate and manage that process of production,” with those posts “filled on the basis of an implacable, insuperable class division.” Importantly, it is this division of labor that provides the grounding for the ideologies of work that emerge thereafter. The reference point for the worker as “museum piece” is precisely the division of labor from which this worker is taken and the class antagonisms that dictate this worker’s position within that division of labor.

The designation of certain workers as key workers, interestingly, maps onto the strategies of accumulation favored and prioritized within the British economy and the types of work associated with these strategies. In recent years, sociologists of work have attempted to explain an emerging division of labor within Western European societies, characteristic of a severe deregulation of

the labor market combined with a heightened rolling back of the welfare state and its social protections. The result has been the emergence of very particular sectors of employment as the centers of contemporary accumulation strategies within Britain—the retail sector, communications, logistics, and health care to name a few—which have been increasingly subject to this labor-market deregulation and exemption from social protection. Sociologists have summarized this development

in numerous ways, relying on concepts like “precariousness” (Alberti et al. 2018) or the “gig economy” (Woodcock and Graham 2020) to describe this emerging situation in Britain and elsewhere. Certain workers have become the protagonists of this division of labor—including healthcare workers, delivery drivers and riders, telecommunications workers, and transport workers—increasingly enjoying lower

wages, less rigid employment protections, and more informal employment arrangements, in keeping with their position at the center of Britain’s accumulation strategy.

When the pandemic hit in Britain and vast numbers of workers had to either work from home, be furloughed until further notice, or simply be laid off, at that time the ideological category of the “key worker” emerged and mapped nicely onto the workers implicated in these central

**The ideological notion of the key worker indicates that the reason why these workers continue to work as opposed to other workers is that it simply makes sense that these workers continue to work: if the health-care workers do not work, who will care for the sick? How will you buy food if the shop workers cannot open their stores? How will these essentials be brought to the most vulnerable in society if the delivery drivers cannot work?**

employment sectors, immediately justifying the continuation of their work. Health-care workers, couriers, shop workers, and transport workers all find themselves on the “front line” of Britain’s response to the pandemic; they are labeled as key workers and pressed into the service of keeping Britain’s economy running through the pandemic. Indeed, Marco D’Eramo (2020, 26) has noticed how the division of labor in society has mapped onto the decisions made about who can and cannot quarantine, as “the privileged lock themselves in houses with fast internet and full fridges, whilst ... the food industry, energy sector, transport services and telecommunications hubs must continue to operate.” The division of labor itself gives rise to the ideological category of the key worker, with the integrity of this worker to the maintenance of accumulation the condition for its designation as “key.”

This leads to the second of Althusser’s (2014) conclusions regarding the ideology of work: that the ideology of work reflects and reproduces the structures and hierarchies of authority that maintain this division of labor. Althusser was particularly adamant on this point. The division of labor in society is not kept in place by virtue of its “technical” characteristics alone—that is, by virtue of the “efficiency” or “pragmatism” of its organization—but is the reflection of very specific “hierarchical relations of authority” that maintain this division (39). In the case of the key workers described above, it is incredibly easy to

make a similar “technical” justification for their continued mobilization within the economy in Britain: is it not simply for the purposes of “efficiency” or “necessity” that these workers continue to work? The ideological notion of the key worker indicates that the reason why *these* workers continue to work as opposed to other workers is that it simply *makes sense* that these workers continue to work: if the health-care workers do not work, who will care for the sick? How will you buy food if the shop workers cannot open their stores? How will these essentials be brought to the most vulnerable in society if the delivery

drivers cannot work? However, just as appeals to the “technical” necessities of work “should be rejected and denounced as pure and simple arguments of the capitalist class struggle” (36), the same courtesy should be extended to such claims regarding Britain’s key workers.

**Appeals to the notion of the ‘key worker’ disguise these hierarchies of authority that lie behind their mobilisation during the pandemic, mystifying the class struggle reflected in social policy exclusions such as this, which compels their continued work.**

This division of labor is not kept in motion by these “technical” necessities alone. On the contrary, it is kept in motion by hierarchies of authority both at the state level and at the level of individual workplaces. This is particularly evident when looking at the social-policy decisions made by the British state, which not only exclude many of these key workers from their provisions but also empower their employers to ensure that their work continues. For example, workers on zero-hour contracts (characteristic of the key workers in supermarkets and in “necessary” retail outlets) have been system-



atically disadvantaged by the British government's furlough scheme (which pledged to pay 80 percent of the wages of furloughed workers), and this has meant "in practice that workers are receiving only 50% of their usual wage or lower" (Notes from Below 2020, 46). This is because zero-hours workers tend to be disproportionately dependent on overtime payments, which have not been included in the calculation of their standard wage (to which the 80 percent payment corresponds). Similarly, the British government has implemented a Self-Employment Support Scheme, where the self-employed can apply for a grant to cover 80 percent of their profits from the government. However, these measures have systematically excluded many workers categorized as "self-employed" but still working under the umbrella of a particular company (e.g., key workers such as taxi drivers working for Uber or couriers working for Deliveroo). The support scheme disadvantages these workers (often described as being in "false" self-employment), as eligibility "relies upon profits reported in tax returns, something that many self-employed workers will either struggle to produce or will bear little relation to their income" (46). Appeals to the notion of the key worker disguise the hierarchies of authority that lie behind their mobilization during the pandemic, mystifying the class struggle reflected in social-policy exclusions that compel their continued work.

**The ideology of the 'key worker' has produced effectively toothless forms of solidarity, organised primarily around the celebration of 'key workers' without any concerted effort to understand the social conditions that have underpinned this positionality.**

Third, the ideology of the key worker has been mobilized with a view to *repression* and to the undermining of the power of organized labor to resist or struggle against the division of labor in society (and the inequalities that persist within it). Althusser (2014, 39) described the implementation of "a form of *repression* in no way beholden to policemen, since it is exercised in the division of labour itself and by its agents," thus arguing that the division of labor in society was productive of a particular social arrangement that undermines or neutralizes resistance. This has been evident in Britain in a number of ways.

First, the ideology of the key worker has produced effectively toothless forms of solidarity organized primarily around the celebration of key workers without any concerted effort to understand the social conditions underpinning their positionality. This is particularly evident in the observation

by many commentators of a renewed social solidarity that has organized itself around a national appreciation in Britain of the key worker's contribution, culminating in symbolic rituals such as the weekly round of applause given by individuals outside of their homes. As one commentator writes, "The aim is to celebrate the unsung heroes that now stand to risk most from this crisis—doctors, nurses, paramedics—who are dealing with the surge in coronavirus patients and who face a high risk of being infected, also because of the dearth of proper protective equipment and the disastrous ways in which govern-

ment is managing this crisis” (Gerbaudo 2020, 5). However, the ideology of the key worker fosters forms of solidarity, such as this one, that are so evacuated of their social and political character that they are engaged in universally: not only by workers but by the politicians, employers, and police officers that stand so often in opposition to them and are responsible for the oversight and reproduction of the very relations that make life so dangerous for these workers in the first place.

This moralism has infected the labor movement itself, with major labor unions in Britain pausing industrial disputes and strikes to work cooperatively with the government to find a route through the pandemic, ignoring the very real antagonism that exists between that government and the workers the unions are supposed to represent (Notes from Below 2020).

But even though Althusser specified that these forms of repression exist independently of the police, the ideology of the key worker has been wielded by the repressive state apparatus as a way of more forcefully ensuring the survival of these strategies of accumulation amid social unrest and resistance. The police in Britain have invoked the name and image of the key worker and the imperative to “protect” and “respect” this worker as a pretext for the surveillance and disbanding of protests, picket lines, and other social movements on the grounds of public-health concerns.

**What this investigation reveals is that the notion of the ‘key worker’ is not a neutral category, merely conferring due importance to a set of workers that have persisted in their duties in Britain despite the dangers of the pandemic. Rather, the ‘key worker’ is symptomatic of an ideology of work set in motion within British capitalism, functioning to embed, maintain and reproduce particular relations of production and the class hierarchies reflected therein.**

The key worker has repeatedly been wielded by those who have sought to defend racism, police violence, and brutality against the recent efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement by arguing that these protestors’ struggle against state-sanctioned murder and the reproduction of institutional racism is putting their health and that of key workers in the health service at risk. In fact, in many cases the category of key worker has even been applied to the police themselves, as a way

of further excusing and justifying their attempts to maintain order and oversee the continuation of capitalist social relations, no matter how violently.

This investigation reveals that the notion of the key worker is not a neutral category that merely confers due importance to a set of workers that have persisted in their duties in Britain despite the dangers of the pandemic. Rather, the key worker is symptomatic

of an ideology of work set in motion within British capitalism, one that functions to embed, maintain, and reproduce particular relations of production and the class hierarchies reflected therein. The key worker as an ideological image emerges out of the division of labor in British society and was mobilized at the beginning of the pandemic in order to defend important strategies of accumulation in the wake of significant labor-market changes. The image of the key worker is used to justify the structures of

authority that continue to mobilize these workers with a view to continued accumulation, hiding the systematic exclusion of these workers from various social-policy considerations and protections behind an appeal to the “necessity” of their work. And the “key worker” as an ideological image becomes the cornerstone of the neutralization of potential resistance to these realities, providing a toothless image around which social solidarity can be built as well as a justification for the deployment of more repressive forms of social control in the face of strikes and social movements.

### Class Struggle, Ideology, and the Pandemic

The fourth and final conclusion reached by Althusser (2014) in his analysis of the ideology of work is that, fundamentally, the goal of this ideological machinery is to facilitate the exploitation of wage labor. Evident in this ideology is primarily the attempt by capitalism to reproduce and maintain the relations that facilitate the exploitation of the worker. As Althusser wrote, “The sole basis and purpose of all the elements (including the three functions) just analyzed is *exploitation* of wage-workers, especially those who are the ‘most exploited,’ always more harshly exploited: pure agents of production or *proletarians*” (42). The point that Althusser was trying to communicate with this final conclusion is that the struggle against this ideology relies

fundamentally on a knowledge of the precise social conditions that have produced it. Before strategies of resistance can be properly crafted and deployed, understandings of the material realities of exploitation must be accumulated, in the first instance. “Trade union activists waging the class struggle are well aware of this,” Althusser wrote, as “they have to fight this ideology step by step, taking up the same combat day after day to root this mystification out of their own consciousness (no easy task) and their comrades” (43).

**The demands for a UBI or for a reduction in work are not immediately progressive demands: as this investigation has shown, the payment of workers’ wages by the state and the reduction of the working-day are themselves strategies that have been bound up in the very renewal of capitalist social relations in Britain throughout this pandemic.**

This analysis reveals that the celebration of the key worker in Britain is ideologically symptomatic of the renewal and reproduction of the social relations that have governed work, production, and, thus, exploitation. These social relations are not peculiar to the pandemic itself: rather, the pandemic has been used as an opportunity to renew and bolster existing relations

in a way that secures their survival throughout the pandemic and beyond. Notes from Below (2020, 52) goes further and has argued that, after the pandemic, “there will be an attempt to seriously reshape work.” The task that lies ahead for organized labor is to be able to intervene in and struggle against this reshaping. Success here depends upon a confrontation of the antagonistic social relations that underpin this reshaping and a deconstruction of the ideologies that shield these relations from view.

Strategies by way of such an intervention have been put forward by commentators in Britain, who are attempting to envision more progressive changes to work following the pandemic. Some have argued that the pandemic has revealed both the necessity and the workability of a universal basic income as a potential social-policy reform that can share the risk of further economic decline from the pandemic more equitably (Harris 2020). Others have argued that this represents an opportunity to acknowledge that working time can be reduced and that the pandemic offers an opportunity to begin to reduce the working day and working week (Jones 2020). However, these strategies do not appear to adequately confront the material realities that would underpin such a change to the nature of work. The demands for a UBI or for a reduction in work are not immediately progressive demands: as this investigation has shown, the payment of workers' wages by the state and the reduction of the working day are themselves strategies that have been bound up in the very renewal of capitalist social relations in Britain throughout this pandemic. As Kathi Weeks (2016, 257–8) has written, “The models of nonwork they generate are too locked within the orbit of work as we now know it to push us very far beyond its gravity.”

This analysis reveals that work remains an important site of analysis for understanding the ways in which capitalist social relations are reproduced and maintained, particularly in times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic exposes this as the reproduction of the division of labor and the class relations attached to it become a priority in Britain in order to shore up the survival of important strategies of accumulation

throughout this crisis. Althusser helps us to arrive at such an understanding through an analysis and deconstruction of the ideologies that are symptomatic of this process of reproduction. The emergence of the “key worker” as an ideological figure in Britain gestures toward the persistence of this reproduction throughout the pandemic. By applying particular concepts, such as those provided to us by Althusser, contemporary sociology can begin to deconstruct these ideological productions and reveal the material realities hidden beneath them: a critical exercise that is crucial to the alteration and dismantling of these realities.

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The concept of biopolitics is used extensively to make sense of the coronavirus pandemic because the management of the pandemic tells us much about how the biopolitics of governing in contemporary neoliberal societies works.<sup>1</sup> For Foucault (1978, 142–3), biopolitics is the study of how the “biological” is captured by the “political” when life passes into “knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention.” Accounts of biopolitics, a politics over life, help us understand the differential relations between “making life live” and “letting it die.” This life-and-death relation is made possible by a vast establishment comprised of laws, policies, sets of rules, techniques and procedures, public-health mechanisms, technologies, and bureaucracies that render certain lives more disposable and sacrificable than others.

Within this nexus, biopolitics is always already an economy of differential vulnerability, and ultimately a sacrificial economy: some must die in order for some to live (Lorenzini 2020). In the face of the coronavirus pandemic, moreover, the hierarchies of race and class inequality have been demonstrated in remarkable ways, as many

of those characterized as “essential workers” are expected to continue working with no adequate health and safety protections. We have seen horrific examples of people being subject to what Marx (1976, 899) called “the silent compulsion of economic relations,” a compulsion to potentially work themselves literally to death. These populations are often differentiated by race, class, and sometimes citizenship status and also by access to health-care services. Therefore, the pandemic

has demonstrated the grim truth that “those whose labor is indispensable are among those whom capital renders permanently disposable” (De Genova 2020).

But the biopolitical discourse serves to conceal this truth; if this capitalist doxa has largely remained invisible until now or, better yet, appears as an all too natural “landscape,” it is because biopolitics has been tremendously effective in concealing this political dispensation, for it

promotes the preservation of capital as a prerequisite for human life. In other words, capitalism interweaves throughout biopolitics: if biopolitics is the politics of life itself, one mechanism to regulate life is through political-economic considerations, where the power of capitalism and capital-labour relations intervenes directly to regulate life itself. As Foucault (1978, 140–1) reminds us, biopolitics notably emerges as “without question an indispensable element

## The Biopolitics of the Coronavirus Pandemic: Herd Immunity, Thanatopolitics, Acts of Heroism

*Ali Rıza Taşkale  
& Christina Banalopoulou*

<sup>1</sup> See Agamben (2020), Esposito (2020), Latour (2020), Lorenzini (2020), Nancy (2020), and Preciado (2020).

in the development of capitalism.” This is what is forgotten, or remains unsayable, during the pandemic: biopolitics operates at the level of “life” but always presumes a hierarchy of “populations.” It aims at cultivating human capital through logics of competition and accumulation, not human life per se. This is what makes capitalism coterminous with the emergence of biopolitics.

From this dim perspective, the coronavirus pandemic offers a rare opportunity for a critique of the biopolitical argument and a chance to reveal the life-and-death nexus that more often than not is clandestine in its operation. A closer look at the contemporary moment reveals that it is as if death speaks rather than life. We can hear the voices of the dead, of the disposable, or of those differentially exposed to the risk of death. In other words, in the current context of the coronavirus pandemic, death rather than life is “put to work” under a biopolitical mode of production.

### Herd Immunity

According to estimates, one in five people have lived under some form of lockdown as a result of the coronavirus pandemic (Davidson 2020). In the face of the pandemic, some governments have decided that herd immunity is the only

long-term strategy for dealing with the virus, as it may not remain contained and could resurge again in the future without a vaccine. Instead of implementing a full lockdown, only at-risk populations have been put into quarantine while the virus keeps infecting populations until they acquire herd immunity. While the UK later distanced itself from this strategy, others like Sweden, the Netherlands, Brazil, Turkey, and the United States continue to hold to this approach,

with tens of thousands of deaths.<sup>2</sup>

Why would these countries pursue such a risky approach? The reason is thanatopolitics. Herd immunity is a terrific embodiment of how biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics as a specific means of accumulation and domination in contemporary politics. Since the late seventeenth century, we have been governed by biopolitics, which

is the precursor of global capitalist management. It justifies the prioritization of profit over people through concealing the reproduction of disparities beneath notions of a so-called “inherent justice” maintained by the “invisible hand.” Most important, it has enslaved peoples’ minds by making them believe it is their fault if they are poor, precarious, or unemployed.

We live in societies riddled by racialized biopolitical violence that marks certain lives as supe-

<sup>2</sup> In terms of adopting herd-immunity strategies, there are differences between these countries. While the United States and Brazil explicitly adopt “full” herd immunity, countries like Sweden and the Netherlands officially embrace “controlled” herd immunity. Turkey, on the other hand, maintains some form of managed or “controlled social life,” as its health minister suggests, which is in fact a hidden herd immunity agenda in the interests of the economy.

rior and other lives as inferior. In this sense, the pandemic does not put us “on a basis of equality,” as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests (2020); rather, it maintains the necessary conditions in which the current biopolitical strategies are reenacted and reperformed so that life is continuously rendered sacrificable to capital. Thus, the enactment of the herd-immunity strategy sheds light on the productive but also dim and often disregarded side of the current sociopolitical structure, which we can see emerging on a strictly biopolitical level: thanatopolitics, a politics of life nourished by death.

A number of theorists have discussed the shift in which biopolitics becomes thanatopolitics, a politics of life that ultimately generates massive death in a system that is best embodied in the Nazi regime. Timothy Campbell (2011, 72) argues that the distinction between the thanatopolitical “letting die” of liberal biopolitics and the “making die” of totalitarianism “grows ever smaller under a neoliberal governmentality” that no longer operates to turn people into things but operates now “to crush the person and thing, to make them coextensive in a living being.” For Achille Mbembe (2003, 39), contemporary biopolitics is thanatopolitics; it is concerned with “the subjugation of life to the power of death.” In a similar vein, Giorgio Agamben (1998, 122) adds that “if there is a line in every modern state marking the point at

**For Marx, “species-life” is inseparable from “species-being”—that is, the creative capacities of humans to constitute and transform themselves and their worlds. In the current herd-immunity strategies, we find not merely the creative capacities of the human species-being but also the functioning of life itself, externalized, made alien and hostile. As a result, increasing numbers of disposable lives are left to confront finance capital as “the life of the species.”**

which the decision on life becomes a decision on death, and biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics, the line no longer appears today as a stable border dividing two clearly distinct zones.” Thanatopolitics thus stands in opposition to the “ontologisation of life” and the reductive ontologies of biopolitical power to make life live, which “disavows the corollary power that ‘lets die’ in the name of life” (Murray 2018, 718). This shift toward thanatopolitics demonstrates how bio-

politics is not only about fostering life but also about administering death.

Thus, the thanatopolitical shifts must be seen as the move from the formal to the real subsumption of life under capital, following Marx’s theorization from the formal to the real subsumption of labor processes. Describing the alienation that occurs with the real subsumption of labor under capital, Marx

(1976, 1025) describes what was once a uniquely human capacity, now externalized, that is “not only alien, but hostile and antagonistic, when it appears before him [the worker] objectified and personified in capital.” For Marx, “species-life” is inseparable from “species-being”—that is, the creative capacities of humans to constitute and transform themselves and their worlds. In the current herd-immunity strategies, we find not merely the creative capacities of the human species-being but also the functioning of life itself, externalized, made alien and hostile. As a result,



increasing numbers of disposable lives are left to confront finance capital as “the life of the species.” What matters here is to trace how, in the name of COVID-19, herd immunity exemplifies a thanatopolitical economy that values life based on its sacrificability to capital.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the depths of social inequality and systemic injustice. It has revealed the wildly exaggerated and grotesque disparities in how illness, death, and suffering are “unevenly distributed” (De Genova 2020). We have witnessed how a whole tier of poorly paid and precarious workers are forced to make the impossible choice between staying home without income and going to work to likely infect others and be infected in turn. What starts to become apparent is some sort of bleak social-Darwinian scenarios, making plain that the sacrifice of some lives for the sake of others has been in the nature of the game all along.

Herd immunity entails a biopolitical relation between “making live” or “letting die.” As a perfect thanatopolitical measure, it is disguised as a move to protect the liberty of the affected populations. In reality, however, it is a perfect thanatopolitical solution that privileges profit and wealth over human life. In herd immunity, in other words, life has a value other than its capac-

**In a neoliberal competition-based society that structures our personal and working lives, praising front-line health-care workers as heroes—and thereby glorifying the sacrifice they are currently making against the coronavirus pandemic—obscures the workings and operations of the biopolitical establishment. There is nothing heroic about involuntarily putting one’s life in danger in order to ameliorate conditions created by neoliberal regimes that thrive off of disposable lives.**

ity to generate profit. Biocapital is now expanding its capacity to extract and capture profit from one’s reproducibility (Franklin and Lock 2003; Vora 2015), to one’s sacrificability. Some humans are “justifiably” expendable for the sake of others. What results is a system of biopolitical violence against the weak and the poor—elderly and disabled people, homeless people, refugees, and people with severe health conditions—many of whom are likely to also have a

lower socioeconomic status because of the correlation between poverty and illness (see Frey 2020).

Contemporary neoliberal economies renew this strategy with their institutionalization of a universal competition “in which fostering life and letting die become two sides of the same economic coin: you can have as much life as you can afford” (Short 2020). By escalating the intrinsic antagonism of life and

capital, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed “capital’s absolute and utter dependency upon human life-as-labor—which is to say, more precisely, capital’s constitutive requirements for the subjection of human life as subordinated (alienated) labor” (De Genova 2020).

Since the utter and abject disposability of human life is the enduringly manifest result of capital accumulation, herd immunity exemplifies a thanatopolitical economy that consumes

the future in the present. That is, a thanatopolitical economy that needs endless reproduction and circulation to remain “healthy.” As a consequence, life is rendered disposable, expendable, and sacrificial to a capital that is constituted and experienced as “Too Big To Fail.”

### Performance and the Thanatopolitics of Heroism

Concomitantly, the thanatopolitical aspects of present-day immunity strategies are (re)produced through the performative acts of heroism. In this context, the performance of “political glorification” and the “collective cheering” of the sacrifice of those workers designated as essential normalizes the political sacrifice of life to capital. It is interesting to see how various enactments and rituals of heroism glorifying the performative sacrificialization of life justify the thanatopolitical management of COVID-19. They serve to maintain life at the expense of those rendered disposable by the thanatopolitical registers of neoliberal economies.

As things continue to unfold, it becomes clearer that any alleged oppositions between lockdown measures and herd-immunity strategies are part of the performative tactics that prioritize capital over life. The pandemic has thus illustrated how performance—as an assemblage of theatricality, spectatorship, reality-shaping illusions, and impositions of preassigned roles—plays a crucial role in the (re)constitution of the processes by which life is being sacrificed to capital. In the process, performance is often utilized as an efficacious tool that praises biopolitical mechanisms. Here, performance is not to be conceived

as a tool that is oppositional to reality but as illusions and appearances that perform, as performance-studies scholar Diana Taylor (1994) reminds us: that is, they make things happen and thus are world making and reality constitutive.

Let us pause for a moment and think about the “cheering and clapping” performances in which essential frontline workers, particularly health-care staff, are publicly and politically praised as “heroes” of our time. Sacrifice to capital becomes a cruel spectacle for the rest of us to watch and give standing ovation. Ranging from the Eiffel Tower’s “merci” to the two minutes of applause at public performances to the very expensive governmental campaigns that express gratitude to those who put their lives at risk on the “front lines,” people that deal with precarity in order to secure either legal or illegal employment are now rendered valuable through celebratory practices that assign value onto them based on their sacrificability. Unfortunately, in our biopolitically designated society, the name of a hero is evoked, or supported, by power when it is necessary “to obscure the existing forms of power and exploitation, praising some workers and systematically forgetting the rest” (Lesutis and Heras 2020).

In a neoliberal competition-based society that structures our personal and working lives, praising frontline health-care workers as heroes—and thereby glorifying the sacrifice they are currently making against the coronavirus pandemic—obscures the workings and operations of the biopolitical establishment. There is nothing heroic about involuntarily putting one’s life

in danger in order to ameliorate conditions created by neoliberal regimes that thrive off of disposable lives (Lesutis and Heras 2020). There is nothing heroic in sacrificing one's life to capital. Since the coronavirus pandemic is governed as a discontinuity in capital's preservation and promoted as inseparable from the preservation of life, sacrifice becomes "the antidote" (Kordela 2017, 59), maintaining capital through death. Thus, rather than using the language of heroism and participating in its performative legitimization processes—which are instrumental in making invisible the existing forms of power and exploitation inherent to capital—we need to think about the deeper relations that biopolitical regimes of power obscure from our sight.

The danger of embracing the language of heroism and reenacting the neoliberal scripts of sacrificial politics is that it helps power to absorb and typically to foreclose any political and cultural critiques that might shine light on the underlying powers, pretexts, and preconceptions that constitute the biopolitical argument. For Foucault (1997, 72), critique is the "will not to be governed as such." However, this will is always formed in resistance and contestation with existing governmental regimes. This will now requires a critique of biopolitics. Thus, rather than just applauding those workers who are being sacrificed for the interests of the political class, we need to engage in a long-term critical and creative effort that is

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not subsumed to capital. We need to reflect on how these performances and rituals serve the interests of the political elites and the divisions they create.

After all, power does not want us to recognize each other as exploited by the same biopolitical logic. It does not want us to transform asymmetries of economic and political power that have been shaped by class and race over centuries. There is, however, a destabilizing paradox inherent in biopower. As Hardt and Negri (2000, 403) insist, the same structures and forces that secure

the foundations of the rule of governance are the ones that weaken and may overthrow it. It is precisely the plurality and totality of this systematic and inextricable nexus that makes biopower fragile and vulnerable, as well as making it possible to instantiate new social networks through which collective action

may proliferate. Biopower thus offers a productive framework for creating alternative social and political paths that expose the existing forms of power and exploitation in our disastrous present. This is important to address because what we need is not to reform the biopolitical mode of production but to get out of it altogether. The need for radical rethinking of a new life and new social relations is more timely than ever.

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**5 + 7 + 5 => 17**  
**Corona Haiku**  
**Infections**

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## One: Rhymes or no rhymes?

This season, this form  
can't hold me, can't hold my  
coronavirus complexes-es-es-es.

~ ~ ~

This form is not mine.  
I howl outside the lines, balk  
to rhyme the rhymeless.

~ ~ ~

The season admits  
of true mistakes: wearing masks  
won't fix the really really really broken.

~ ~ ~

No explanations  
silence the corona dead,  
zombies Marx— er, marching.

~ ~ ~

To five – seven – five  
or not to five – seven –  
five. That's the question?

~ ~ ~

Health[care] commodities,  
a rhyme for wealthiest-er.  
Truth: my son's word games.

~ ~ ~

Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh,  
is it wabbit season? Duck—  
corona season.

~ ~ ~

Duck, duck, duck, duck, duck  
duck, duck, duck, duck, duck, duck, duck  
duck, duck, duck, duck, duck ...

~ ~ ~

Globalism is  
global-ain't, Lenin's corpse  
rolls, rolls a joint, rolls.

~ ~ ~

Goose! Haha, ya'll been  
goosed again! Bush-Obama-  
Trumpin-[Biden?] *goosed!*

## 2. Voiceover Artist to the Stars

Come one, come all, step  
right up to the show of all shows—  
I'm wearing no pants!

~ ~ ~

“That guy made Nixon  
look a god-damned nun, a  
Muh-uh-uh-uh-ther Theresa.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anonymous ghost over-  
heard after next “free  
and fair” U.S. election,  
TBD-to-never.

~ ~ ~

The show zooms: monster,  
monstrance displays, world peels,  
munch the ruler Hosts.

~ ~ ~

“Marx, here. Not that Marx.  
Groucho. Always block your  
eyeballs. Watch the birdieeeeeee.”

~ ~ ~

[@RealDonald]Trump, [(Bill) Gates (real person? {highly doubtful})], and  
Corona [the beer of course] walk in[to] a  
bar. That's all.



## II.b.2016-?: It's gettin' Hot in here, so tAke of all ur kkklothes

...and you'll want to fix  
me in your place like the Boss  
blared by @GOP.

~ ~ ~

A season to die  
gives way to opening day:  
the hunter? White fear.

~ ~ ~

...we all agree here  
we all agree here we all  
agree here we all...

~ ~ ~

Two thousand twenty  
is only one more syllab-  
le. Add it up?

~ ~ ~

Ok, I'll rhyme but  
will you dance for me, will you  
play my favorite?

~ ~ ~

Lost? Me, too. It's way  
too hot in here to get where  
we're going. Undress.

~ ~ ~

First time tragedy,  
second time a farce, wee  
wee, wee, wee, wee ...

~ ~ ~

Watch this hand, don't look  
away, the white glove is key,  
avoid that man be[...].

~ ~ ~

"Don't look away." Slap! [fills any space with the  
right number of syllables]  
"You naughty child, you perv.  
You can't even see."

## Three, Maybe; or, Maybe Four: Shut Up and Listen for a Change

After disproving  
all other explanations,  
suffice the simplest:

wealth cares shit about  
people, planet; profit rules  
the end, moves too late.

Only a fool stays here.

## Ode to the planetary meltdown in seventeen perfectly rhyming syllables because no words will do: Edition MMXX

Sad. Sad sad sad sad.  
More sad sad sad sad sad sad  
sad. Sad. Sad. Sad-sad.

We have learned an “astonishing” lesson from the virus: we have actually proven that it is possible, in a few weeks, to put an economic system on hold everywhere in the world and at the same time, a system that we were told it was impossible to slow down or redirect.

—“What Protective Measures Can You Think of so We Don’t Go Back to the Pre-crisis Production Model?,” Bruno Latour

Giving voice to what many have been thinking, Bruno Latour penned a short essay on post-COVID futures eighteen days after the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. He admitted that it might be premature to imagine a post-COVID future in the midst of ongoing suffering and death, but he also argued for the necessity of thinking through how we might recover from the global pandemic “so that the economic recovery, once the crisis has passed, does not bring back the same former climatic regime against which we were battling, until now somewhat in vain” (Latour 2020, 1).

Putting the whole economic system on “pause”—or as Gerda Roelvink (2020) puts it, stopping the unstoppable—generates a moment in which both its form and trajectory can be called into question. Similarly, Arundhati Roy

## Grounded! COVID-19 and Recovering Postcapitalist Possibility in Place

*Stephen Healy,  
Matthew Scobie,  
& Kelly Dombroski*

(2020) uses the term “portal” to describe this experience of rapid change that gives further insight into possible futures. Like Roy, Latour, and others, we take the opportunity here to think about how our societies might imagine, enact, restore, and rebuild other economies as a basis for other worlds. In our view, how long this portal can be kept open is a crucial political question. Many world leaders, channeling what Kaika (2017) calls “resilience talk,” are hoping for a quick “snap back” to normal. Drawing on this same language, our interest is in exploring how we might “bounce forward” through the portal and do so in ways where our considered and careful response to COVID sets in motion a sustained response to climate change.

Holding this portal open is a difficult task that is both material and imaginary in nature. Attempting to force it closed is the wish for things to return to “normal,” a wish that takes on different inflections in different places; here, the United States and New Zealand serve as points of contrast. For New Zealand’s major opposition party, a return to normal means pushing for a return to tourism and other activities that are currently suspended, balanced against the necessary border-control measures needed to contain the virus (Moir 2020). In contrast, for the United States the return to normal is already underway: reopening the economy amounts to

Trumpian-hubris: acting as if the COVID-19 crisis were already over, as if humans rather than the virus set the timeline. For some in the United States the desire for normal is fueled by powerlessness, economic precarity, and fatalism: the uncertainty of the virus weighed against the certainty of unemployment and a lack of health insurance. This desire for normalcy persists even if returning to normal also means returning to ravenous extraction, ongoing exploitation, inequality, overwork, overconsumption, overproduction, mass tourism, and polluting traffic. With a sigh, we might comfort ourselves and say that returning to normal means economic growth and, with growth, a chance for work.

But we can also see in the present moment a great many for whom there is no going back to normal. In the distant past of November 2019, the slogan for antiausterity in Chile and Greece was “We cannot return to normal; normal is the problem.” Normal is (still) the problem. Our capacity to keep normal at bay, to hold the portal open, depends upon articulating a better alternative and developing a politics capable of bringing it into being.

Latour’s essay concludes with a practical exercise revolving around a set of six questions and prompts. In essence, Latour asks us to think through the following: What suspended activities would we *not* like to see return? What do we do with the people and materials enrolled

**This desire for normalcy persists even if returning to normal also means returning to ravenous extraction, ongoing exploitation, inequality, overwork, overconsumption, overproduction, mass tourism, and polluting traffic.**

in these activities? How do we transition them? And, finally, what activities presently suspended should begin again, and why? What new activities would we like to see emerge (Latour 2020, 3–4)?

These are not new questions for us in our respective and collective work in rethinking economies as members of the Community Economies Research Network (CERN).<sup>1</sup> In recent weeks, Australian and New Zealand members of this group have been exploring the parallels between Latour’s questions and the work of diverse-

and community-economies scholarship, which draws on many theoretical traditions—including Marxian, feminist, and decolonial theories, among others—to reframe economies as sites of ethical deliberation and political possibility beyond capitalism. We do this in part by rethinking

what is necessary for shared survival, how we distribute surplus labor, and how we encounter/exchange with others, care for common property, and invest in a common future (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013).

Like Latour, we have treated COVID-19 as but one symptom of a larger phenomenon of the Anthropocene. In his book *Down to Earth*, Latour (2018) describes the Anthropocene as the site of a new class conflict pitting “globalists,” who aim to sever all bonds of solidarity and earthly concerns, against “terrestrials,” who affirm their interdependence and avow a relationship with

<sup>1</sup> Members of CERN based in Australia and New Zealand have been meeting virtually to collectively consider our answers to Latour’s questions, and we partly draw on this shared thinking in this piece. We acknowledge the members of CERN-Sydney: particularly, Katherine Gibson, Jenny Cameron, Bronwen Morgan, Inka Santala, Declan Kuch, Dan Musil, Bhavya Chitranshi, Anisah Madden, Miriam Williams, Gradon Diprose, Louise Crabtree, Isaac Lyon, and Nanako Nakamura.



<sup>2</sup> See also Davis and Todd (2017) on decolonizing the Anthropocene.

their planetary home.<sup>2</sup> The opening COVID-19 creates is a chance for a response that generates a different *model of production* that is grounded in terrestrial commitments. We see Latour's concept of the terrestrial as broadly analogous to ecofeminist Val Plumwood's (2007) "mode of humanity" and Glen Coulthard's (2014; Yellowknives Dene) conception of culture as a mode of life. All three authors argue that the future must be grounded in place.

We explore the extent of this analogy in this essay. We do so as one displaced U.S. scholar living in Sydney, Australia, one disconnected Ngāi Tahu scholar raised and passing as Pākehā,<sup>3</sup> and one Pākehā/settler-scholar living in Christchurch—quite a complicated "we." The place in which we are grounding ourselves for this essay is Aotearoa New Zealand, where two of us reside. We do so for three reasons. First, Aotearoa New Zealand has had a singular experience of COVID-19 and its associated pause: it came "down to Earth" faster; business as usual stopped in a way that stood out. Second, as we will elaborate in the next section, concepts from Indigenous scholarship and modes of life *already present* in Indigenous communities and economies can help us make sense of Aotearoa New Zealand's response and what is at stake for responding to climate change, in ways that anticipated earlier what Latour is articulating only now. Third, in this context we can perhaps see more clearly than can be seen elsewhere what a terrestrial politics might be and what a new "model of production" could be that is beyond capitalism and the ecosuicidal machinations of the globalists—a model that is more clearly grounded in place.

<sup>3</sup> Pākehā is a term referring to people of non-Māori descent, often those of European descent. It is a term widely used in New Zealand English, including as an ethnic group on official forms alongside "New Zealand European."

In the section that follows, we explore Latour's understanding of COVID-19 as just one front of a twenty-first-century "class" struggle that pits modernizing globalists against terrestrials. While the broad outline of this conflict makes sense, we wonder if it is more complex than it might appear. We then recount the first three months of New Zealand's response to COVID-19, including the particular contributions of Māori tribal authorities and members. We frame parts of this response as an example of grounded normativities (Simpson 2011; Coulthard 2014), a concept emerging from Indigenous scholarship that articulates grounded modes of life emerging from the particularities of place. Particularly, Aotearoa New Zealand is at a jumping-off point; will it "snap back" to business as usual or bounce forward to climate responsiveness and new models of production? In the final section, we elaborate what a terrestrial future might look like by illustrating the ways in which this terrestrial "coming down to earth" has already begun in Aotearoa New Zealand: while some places have only recently come down to earth, others were already there waiting.

### COVID-19 and Coming Down to Earth

In his essay that began circulating earlier in the COVID-19 pandemic, Latour (2020) refers to the coronavirus as part of a larger earth-altering ecological mutation and to a set of irrevocable changes. The mutagenic agent in question is a 400-year process in which many have been displaced by "the impacts of 'great discoveries,' of empires, modernization, development, and finally globalization" (Latour 2017, 7; see Davis and Todd 2017; Veracini 2019). In the

twenty-first century, this process has culminated in what Latour (2017, 62, 9) has elsewhere called the “age of the new geo-social question,” defined by a universal “feeling that the ground is in the process of giving way.” And of course not just the ground: climate change, mass species extinction, ocean acidification, the inundation of plastics and toxic pollutants into the hydrosphere and biosphere—all these processes push us away from the familiar dynamics of the global/local, the “two attractors” that structure the familiar story of progress from the parochial to the modern, and displace us into the terrestrial—the same earth but with our perspective altered as we come into orbit around new attractors.

The terrestrial is a “third attractor,” a shared imaginary, something “we” might come to revolve around as “we” figure out how to live differently, potentially serving as a shared imaginary. In this terrestrial context, more-than-human material and biological matter move from passive background objects into the foreground as active forces imposing limits and making demands—Terra, Earth, making herself felt one way in Antarctica, in another way in the Himalayas, and in another in Aotearoa New Zealand. For Latour, the terrestrial is site specific and contextual but is not “local.” The terrestrial is the thin biofilm that covers the earth, supporting life, but it is also not “the global.”

This third attractor, the terrestrial, is set in opposition to a fourth attractor, the “out of this world.”

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The tension between these opposed attractors sets the stage for a new class conflict between down-to-earth terrestrials and out-of-this-world globalists. The “out of this world” impetus has been building for more than fifty years to sever all bounds of social solidarity and earthly attachment. Deregulation, economic privatization, rising global inequality, and climate denialism become discernible as a single, interconnected phenomena: an ideological project that masks a mad dash for the exit (Latour 2018).

Latour pays close attention to elites in his description of the globalists. We can certainly see how their interests play out in some responses to the

COVID-19 crisis: for example, in the way that Australia’s government has prioritized export-oriented natural-gas extraction as part of its COVID response (Morton 2020), or in the U.S. rhetoric in which

the loss of life to COVID is transformed into a regrettable blood sacrifice required to restart the economy. But we wonder as well if the problem isn’t more insidious than that. Elon Musk may be looking for a way to get to Mars, but in our view this is not much different than an equally improbable journey back to “normal.” This desire for normal is powerful. One inkling of the strength of this desire is in the cruise-ship industry’s report of rapidly booking up for the year 2021 (Quinn 2021). What if Latour’s new “class struggle” is not just a struggle against a global elite bent on smashing and grabbing what’s left of planetary resources but is, perhaps more so, a struggle against this widespread wish for a

return to normal?

The globalists are busy aiming their rocket ships out of this world. Some of the middle class, dreaming of “normal,” are booking next year’s cruise. For many, faced both with COVID uncertainties and also unforgiving social and economic realities, the return to “normal” feels like a safe haven. This is the context for articulating a political project Latour calls a “new socialism.” Here, the struggle is not simply to redistribute wealth and resources but rather to answer the question of what an economy is “for” in the first instance, to explore the “very manner in which the world is made fruitful” or, for that matter, “safe.” This involves taking it apart “pixel by pixel” and “testing in more detail what is desirable and what has ceased to be so” (Latour 2020, 3).

This may be a shared project—terrestrialism at a planetary scale—but the “pixel by pixel” suggests it is also situated, grounded. What is interesting to us about Latour’s arrival at the party is his clear call for “all of us” (his no-doubt non-Indigenous peers) to return to the knowledges that Indigenous peoples have held all along: the land is the source of life, the mode of life, the “model of production.” What we hope will come from Latour’s engagement with these ideas is a greater engagement from other academics in important scholarly

**We can envisage a pre-COVID-19 model of production on one side and a postcapitalist future based on a terrestrial mode of life on the other. The iwi checkpoints were managed by Māori communities to prevent the spread of the pandemic for all, and they provide a gateway to recognizing alternative forms of value, labor, exchange, and land, all based on contemporary, contextualized Indigenous perspectives.**

and political work that has been going on for decades, if not centuries. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the journey down to earth means Pākehā settlers recognizing the need to partner with tangata whenua—literally, the “people of the land”—where they have settled.

### The COVID Pause in Aotearoa New Zealand

The “go hard, go early” national response to the global pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a “team of 5 million,” was led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s coalition government. This was based on four alert levels announced and described on Saturday, 21 March 2020, with different layers of autonomy for individuals, families, and businesses within. Ardern’s contribution to the team as a masterful communicator was crucial in providing clear and reassuring communications in a deeply unsettling time. By Wednesday 25 March, alert level four effectively closed all “nonessential” businesses and required people to stay in their “bubbles”—effectively, households. The effect was visceral as the nation ground to a halt, the roads and skies were quiet, and people stayed within their properties unless exercising or going on a recommended one grocery shop a week. A Colmar-Brunton poll found that 87 percent of people in the country supported the measures

(Coughlan 2020).

For many, the lockdown operated as a period in which both business as usual *and* some of the constitutive elements of a capitalist subjectivity were suspended. In New Zealand's situation, the link between capitalist consumer activity—shopping, home-improvement consumerism, commercialized sports and outdoor activities, and tourism—and identity was severed quite abruptly. Widespread government payments replaced people's incomes, if required, so even wage-worker identities were suspended for many. While some elements of capitalist sub-

jectivity were suspended, the lockdown reinforced the Eurocentric notion of the nuclear family as the unit of governance, as the site of meaning making. In addition, a clear privileging emerged of large supermarket chains over locally owned businesses

and diverse food and essential-supplies enterprises. And while the coalition government has many Māori ministers, these decisions were all made without clear evidence of consultation with Māori iwi and hapū as treaty partners in the governance of Aotearoa New Zealand (Johnsen 2020). Thus, while there is now an opportunity to call business as usual into question, the intertwined question of how to respond to settler-colonial norms needs to be considered as well. While some parts of business as usual were stopped, we cannot deny that the lockdown process also reinforced many of the colonial, individualizing social structures that capitalism is

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seemingly built on. Yet this is not the full story.

While Ardern's alert levels were being communicated (or even preceding this), iwi community checkpoints were established by Māori communities under a "duty to protect" (Ngata 2020).<sup>4</sup> These checkpoints were established on roads entering more "out-of-the-way" parts of Aotearoa where the virus had not yet spread, by groups with mana whenua over the territory in question.<sup>5</sup> Māori communities were particularly concerned since Māori health outcomes are often poorer than those of majority Pākehā, and there was every reason to suspect this would

also be the case for COVID-19 (Coster 2020; Espiner 2020). An additional worry was that police would exercise "discretion" in favor of white people, particularly wealthy people with second homes—a worry that was not unfounded, given issues with racism in New Zealand policing (Johnsen 2020). In the end, checkpoints were carried out with police support, and they protected health for all in the community, not just Māori (Coster 2020).

The iwi checkpoints in some ways represent a meeting place of worlds at the physical and metaphorical level. We can envisage a pre-COVID-19 model of production on one side and a postcapitalist future based on a terrestrial mode of life on the other. The iwi checkpoints were managed by Māori communities to prevent the spread of the pandemic for all, and they provide a gateway to recognizing alternative forms of value, labor,

<sup>4</sup>In the Māori language, iwi refers to tribes. It is a term used unitalicized in New Zealand English, and the checkpoints were referred to as "iwi checkpoints" by English speakers.

<sup>5</sup>Mana whenua refers to an authority in the Māori language, where "mana" includes authority, strength, spiritual power, and charisma, and "whenua" refers to land—therefore, authority from the land. It is a term used unitalicized in New Zealand English, including in the media.



exchange, and land, all based on contemporary, contextualized Indigenous perspectives (Reid and Rout 2016). These contextualized Indigenous perspectives are vital in imagining a bounce forward for Aotearoa New Zealand, a bounce in which the social structures on which capitalism is built are decolonized and grounded in the specificities of place. Laenui (2000; and see Mercier 2020) is quoted in a new book on decolonization aimed at a general Aotearoa New Zealand audience: “True decolonization is more than simply replacing Indigenous or previously colonized people into the positions held by colonizers. Decolonization includes the reevaluation of the political, social, economic and judicial structures themselves, and the development, if appropriate, of new structures which can hold and house the values and aspirations of the colonized people.” The checkpoints, like Latour’s questions or Roy’s portal, offer us an insight into a post-COVID bounce forward in which the new structures of economy, society, politics, and justice are grounded in place and the local, where we—as a nation—are unashamedly “globalisation interrupters,” to use Latour’s language. Māori philosopher Krushil Watene (2020; Ngāti Manu, Te Hikutu, Ngāti Whātua o Orākei, Tonga) elaborates on concepts of manaakitanga (caring and supporting others)<sup>6</sup> and kaitiakitanga (caretaking of the environment and people),<sup>7</sup> identifying these as key words for understanding what *might* be possible

**Māori philosopher Krushil Watene argues that efforts by the current New Zealand government to emphasize an economy of care and well-being over an economy focused on growth are a start but require listening to Māori voices to move toward more collective modes of life.**

in a post-COVID-19 New Zealand. She argues that efforts by the current New Zealand government to emphasize an economy of care and well-being over an economy focused on growth are a start but require listening to Māori voices to move toward more collective modes of life.

Watene is alerting us to the fact that much of the material we need to bounce forward has been here all along. Indeed, Lorenzo Veracini (2019,

123) draws on Indigenous scholars Daniel Wildcat (Yuchi member of the Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma) and Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) to note that “Indigenous struggles have always focused on ... the ‘personality’ of place, where place is endowed with a specific identity that can be related to and communi-

cated with,” part of an argument that Indigenous place-based occupations are struggles relevant to *all* social movements. Similarly, Soren Larsen and Jay Johnson (2018) argue in their book *Being Together in Place* that developing close attentive relationships with place is what provides the possibility for settler-Indigenous partnerships for radical change. In the section that follows, we read Latour’s call for “all of us” to “come down to earth” through the lens of Coulthard’s (2014) and Simpson’s (2011) ideas of “grounded normativity” and the relational partnership approaches of the Ngāi Tahu iwi of Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand.

<sup>6</sup> See P. Wehi and T. Roa, “Reciprocal Relationships: Identity, Tradition and Food in the Kīngitanga Poukai He Manaakitanga: O te tuakiri, o te tikanga me te kai ki te Poukai o te Kīngitanga,” *SocArXiv*, 12 December 2019, <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/tz746>.

<sup>7</sup> See M. Kawharu, “Kaitiakitanga: A Maori Anthropological Perspective of the Maori Socio-environmental Ethic of Resource Management,” *Journal of Polynesian Society*, vol. 109, no. 4, [http://www.jpss.auckland.ac.nz/document/Volume\\_109\\_2000/Volume\\_109\\_No\\_4/Kaitiakitanga:\\_A\\_Maori\\_anthropological\\_perspective\\_of\\_the\\_Maori\\_socio-environmental\\_ethic\\_of\\_resource\\_management\\_by\\_Merata\\_Kawharu\\_p\\_349-370/pi](http://www.jpss.auckland.ac.nz/document/Volume_109_2000/Volume_109_No_4/Kaitiakitanga:_A_Maori_anthropological_perspective_of_the_Maori_socio-environmental_ethic_of_resource_management_by_Merata_Kawharu_p_349-370/pi).

## Terrestrial Solidarities in Aotearoa New Zealand

As we return to our daily routines in Aotearoa New Zealand, we find ourselves faced with some of the questions Latour has asked in his essay: What suspended activities would we *not* like to see return? And why? What do we do with the people and materials enrolled in these activities? How do we transition them? And what suspended activities should begin again? But we also have an additional question to ask: what new activities emerged in this time that we would like to keep? There is not necessarily a shared “we” in answering Latour’s questions. But Latour asks readers to think “pixel by pixel” about what a new model of production might be, grounded, presumably, in the earth. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, pixel by pixel is a process of experimentation and transformation taking place in the enduring context of the treaty and the political realities of a bicultural nation trying to work out a new mode of life together, one which opens up to the leadership of tangata whenua on the issues that affect us all. In the lockdown, this was manifested in the iwi checkpoints protecting the health of all. What other manifestations of manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga might be acknowledged moving forward? How might these specific practices be grounded in new normativities that protect the health of people and land?

Indigenous struggle within, against, and beyond colonial capitalism(s) is inspired by and oriented around land (Coulthard 2014, 13). Not just land in a material sense but as a “system of reciprocal relations and obligations [that] can teach us

about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in non-dominating and non-exploitative terms.” Coulthard gives the name of “grounded normativity” to this “place-based foundation of Indigenous decolonial thought and practices.” Although specific practices of grounded normativity are particular to Indigenous communities, inspired by and oriented around relationships between people and place, the concept of grounded normativity can be transferable across Indigenous contexts and can inform a basis for imagining and creating other more-than-capitalist economies.

Key to extending the terrestrial politics embedded within Indigenous traditions is to push back against the “liberal politics of recognition” that only recognize one mode of production—capitalism—and one mode of governance—state sovereignty—and that only allow for an Indigenous “culture” that fits within these parameters. Instead, Coulthard (2014) challenges these parameters and draws from Marx to assert Indigenous culture(s) as modes of production/modes of life. In the contemporary context of Aotearoa New Zealand, we can see the capitalist modes of production put under severe strain due to COVID-19 while the Indigenous modes of production/life that have always existed, despite repression, becoming visible to the mainstream through the crisis. Perhaps we have a portal-like moment revealing the preexisting conditions for radical resurgence?

Coulthard (2014) develops a framework for resurgence by drawing on Indigenous feminist movements. He draws from Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

(2011), who advocates a reorientation of efforts from transforming “the colonial outside” into “a flourishing of the Indigenous inside.” Simpson elaborates that resurgence involves recreating the cultural and political flourishing of the past to enhance the well-being of the present. For Simpson this requires sustainable Indigenous economies that are developed according to Indigenous thought, grounded in an intimate relationship with the land. Coulthard (2014) concludes that exploring these Indigenous alternatives poses three threats to colonial capitalism(s):

1. They connect Indigenous Peoples to land-based practices and knowledge and emphasize radical sustainability through education.
2. They offer a means of subsistence to break dependence on the state and capitalist economy.
3. Applying Indigenous governance principles to nontraditional economic activities can open up new means of engaging in contemporary economies in Indigenous ways.<sup>8</sup>

As we can see, “the terrestrials” evoked by Latour may find themselves coming down to earth only to meet those already grounded in a different model of production or, indeed, mode of life.

In an Aotearoa New Zealand context, a key hinge for such a terrestrial politics is treaty partnership. Treaty partnership sets up two spheres of authority based around the signatories to the 1840 Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi): the Crown, with authority based on kāwana-

tanga (governance), and Māori, with authority based on rangatiratanga (chieftainship). Both of these spheres also have the ability to be radically decentralized on their own terms. The iwi checkpoints discussed previously are an exercise in rangatiratanga, and their support from the Crown is an exercise in partnership.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the food, health, and other care packages, as well as the COVID-19 testing stations set up by Māori communities for their own people, are all examples of rangatiratanga-based diverse economic practices that have risen to meet the challenge the pandemic presents to the capitalist mode of production. These are part of a genealogy of practices based on grounded normativity and partnership, including: postearthquake care (Carter and Kenney 2018); partnership and cogovernance in urban regeneration (Thompson-Fawcett, Rona, and Rae 2017; Thompson-Fawcett and Riddle 2018); and care, solidarity, and partnership in mourning following the mosque attacks.<sup>10</sup>

While these practices are the happy hunting ground of speculative utopian academics such as ourselves, for the Māori communities practicing them every day, they are just common sense from the ancestors, based on a duty to protect (Ngata 2020). These practices are not necessarily unique to Māori or Indigenous communities; they can be understood as *grounded* normativities because they emerge from the obligations between people and place, *in place*. These economies of mana (authority) or economies of aroha (love) shine light through the cracks emerging clearly between the pandemic, capitalism, and the state (Hēnare 2014; Amoamo, Ruwhiu, and Carter 2018; Dell, Staniland, and Nicholson

<sup>9</sup> This support is illustrated through an article penned by Police Commissioner Andrew Coster and by the practical support police gave iwi checkpoints in multiple locations.

<sup>10</sup> See “Official Call to Prayer Event Announced,” Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu website, accessed 16 June 2020, <https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/official-call-to-prayer-event-announced/>.

<sup>8</sup> And see “Māori Tribal Economy: Rethinking the Original Economic Institutions” by Reid and Rout (2016).

2018).

One example of where such a grounded normativity is emerging in Aotearoa is the formal partnership between the Christchurch City Council and Ngāi Tahu, the iwi who hold mana whenua within the South Island. Following the Canterbury earthquake sequences of 2010–11, a formal recovery partnership emerged between the Ngāi Tahu iwi and the Crown (the government of New Zealand). The Earthquake Recovery Act (2011) and the Greater Christchurch Regeneration Act (2016) specifically named Ngāi Tahu as a statutory earthquake recovery partner.<sup>11</sup> This meant that, in addition to the requirements for Māori consultation already present in urban planning processes, a number of different Ngāi Tahu bodies were formally represented in recovery governance in Christchurch (Thompson-Fawcett and Riddle 2018). While Treaty partnership has long been discussed and sought in Aotearoa New Zealand, Thompson-Fawcett, Rona, and Rae (2017) note that this level of partnership is a significant shift in local governance, a shift that “has enhanced Indigenous influence as compared to conventional practices in the city up until the earthquakes.”

The results of this partnership are telling: not just in urban design with the newly rebuilt city reflecting Ngāi Tahu values, aspirations,

language, design, and more (Thompson-Fawcett and Riddle 2018), but also in other important areas. The Christchurch mayor and the Ūpoko (head) of the subtribe of Ngāi Tūāhuriri together cochair the Te Hononga-Papatipu Rūnanga Committee, which “binds” the Christchurch City Council with the traditional councils of the subtribes in the area. Recently, the two issued a joint statement with regard to statues and name changes in the area in response to the

Black Lives Matter movement. They thanked organizations with problematic names for changing them and acknowledged the work that has been done to balance European symbols with Māori ones, the example given being the carvings added to either side of the Queen Victoria statue to acknowledge and symbolize the partnership between Māori and the Crown. This example of partnership

emerged in the rethinking and recovery following the destruction wreaked by earthquakes, but what other partnerships, such as those prefigured by iwi checkpoints, might emerge in the wake of COVID-19?

## Conclusion

In *Down to Earth* Latour (2018) describes how the ecological mutations of the twenty-first century have effectively displaced “us” from both of the familiar attractors that once defined the process of modernization—the tension between

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<sup>11</sup> See “A Place to Remember,” Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu website, accessed 16 July 2020, [https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/our\\_stories/a-place-to-remember/](https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/our_stories/a-place-to-remember/).



the local and the global. In coming back down, we land on the earth, but not as it was before. Earth can no longer be imagined as a passive background, as Europeans tend to do, but must be recognized as an active force, something that *demand*s human consideration, something for us to negotiate with as we live in place on different terms. The class struggle Latour describes is between people who accept the terms of terrestrial relations—our interdependence—and those who seek to flee it, out of this world.

Our essay has sought to engage not only with Latour's call to awareness but also with a critical wariness to the "us" being invoked in the need to come back down to earth, and in how "we" might do that. Because, as we have argued, concepts such as grounded normativity and *kaitiakitanga* suggest that many currently have, and have always had, the techniques to live well together while grounded in and across places. While some of us (settler-colonists) have only recently "come down to earth," others were already there, trying to explain and reclaim and be heard. Latour concludes *Down to Earth* by introducing himself, locating himself in time and space (as being of French, Catholic, and viticultural heritage). And then he asks us to introduce ourselves. To us this is symbolically promising: these down-to-earth questions ground change in place and work toward real relationships, partnerships of change. But for us this raises additional, crucially important questions: What if the next step in positioning himself might also involve a recognition that some peoples already have knowledge of how to live in a particular place and are already operating in a different mode of humanity, despite colo-

onial repression? What might grounded normativities, in which obligations between people and place are developed by communities, look like as we move forward into post-COVID-19 recoveries? How far can such grounded normativities travel? Recognizing that the concept of grounded normativity emerges from the realm of Indigenous resurgence, how can others learn from it without appropriating it? What if "we" were to pause, regather, and seek to learn as the younger sibling in a "Tuakana-Teina" (older sibling/younger sibling) relationship?

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The solidarity economy (SE) is a set of cooperative economic practices that include worker, food, financial, and housing cooperatives, community land trusts and gardens, and other forms of collective work. Its practitioners and organizers have always framed the movement as a bulwark against the crisis of capitalism (Gordon Nembhard 2014; Williams 2014). Today, much of SE organizing is focused on building long-term and “scalable” formal institutions (Casper-Futterman 2019). However, often overlooked in this process is building the actually existing solidarity between practitioners that can fortify that infrastructure. Building these allegedly “informal” connections has become all the more important as the pandemic continues. Today, we see longstanding SE institutions that are struggling to do this work and to meet the moment while SE entities such as mutual-aid networks have emerged to address the concurrent health and economic crisis. The growth of the latter alongside the struggles of the former calls into question the importance of *formality* in such organizing as well as the *function* of solidarity.

## Building Where We Are: The Solidarity-Economy Response to Crisis

*Lauren T. Hudson*

One sobering reminder of the importance of building solidarity is the Berkeley Co-op—an institution that had existed for fifty years before its collapse in 1989. The co-op’s decline throughout the 1980s was so shocking that Masao Ohya, executive director of the Berkeley Co-op’s Japanese counterpart, the Japanese Cooperative Union, met with nineteen Berkeley representatives to understand the events leading to the institution’s failure. The outcome was a post-mortem report titled *What Happened to the Berkeley Co-Op?: A Collection of Opinions* (Fullerton 1992), which compiled testimonies from former general managers, staff, board members, co-op members, and nonmember shoppers.

At its height, the co-op was the largest retail food cooperative in the country. Its stores accounted for 75 percent of Berkeley’s grocery market, and the entire cooperative enterprise included gas stations, garages, bookstores, hardware stores, credit unions, and even funeral homes. The Berkeley Co-op was wildly successful, but as it continued to expand, it relied more heavily on nonmember patronage. In the midst of its expansion, the co-op’s board of directors decided to cut its education department, which was responsible for educating new members on the values of the institution and on cooperation generally. This decision also coincided with a decline in member patronage as



a percentage of total sales. This wouldn't be an issue in a traditional grocery store but in a cooperative firm kicked off a devastating cycle: more and more nonmembers shopped at the co-op and weren't "onboarded" to cooperative principles, which resulted in a decline in the incentive to become a member at all. As a result, increasingly the co-op too closely resembled its competitors, and its members began to leave, taking their financial investment with them. Though people were still shopping at the Berkeley Co-op, it relied on an ever decreasing source of financial patronage to continue operation, which was largely due to drifting away from its political and social mission. As former *Co-op News* editor Paul Rauber (1992, 17) succinctly described, "Committed Berkeley members wanted CCB to be all things; indifferent nonmembers only wanted a convenient supermarket ... CCB was never able to resolve this fundamental identity crisis." This inability to reconcile both interests is grounded in the fact that the institution lacked clarity around its own identity. With solidarity no longer a focus, expansion only further weakened the institution.

### Crisis

The Park Slope Food Coop opened almost twenty years before its Berkeley predecessor finally closed its doors. Located in the long-gentrified brownstone neighborhood in central Brooklyn,

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it is the largest member-run food cooperative in the country. Like the Berkeley Co-op before its demise, Park Slope has been a model of cooperation for SE organizers and advocates. The co-op's success is an example of how cooperative enterprises can be not only economically viable but also popular for the long term. While one can romanticize the ideals of community-controlled resources, the Park Slope's popularity is also due to its basic role as a cheaper grocery alternative. Park Slope members stock shelves, run

the checkout, receive deliveries, and perform other necessary functions as part of their equity in the firm. This "free" labor keeps food prices low and has been central to my own reproduction as a graduate student without a living wage.

Park Slope is of course not without its faults—like many other food cooper-

atives, it has yet to take a declarative stance on apartheid or on the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement, and it is currently resisting a unionization effort led by many of its staff members.<sup>1</sup> These tensions reveal deeper questions around whom the co-op stands in solidarity with, and when.

Today, these questions feel more immediate, as Park Slope has temporarily ceased to function as a cooperative at all. Since New York's stay-at-home orders issued in March, Park Slope has found itself in the interesting position of being an essential business run by "nonessen-

<sup>1</sup> In April 2019, staff members at the co-op filed a series of unfair-labor-practice complaints with the National Labor Review Board against the co-op's management, who they allege has intimidated workers against unionizing with the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union. See Quinn (2019) and "Park Slope Food Coop," National Labor Relations Board, accessed 24 June 2020, <https://www.nlr.gov/case/29-CA-240076>.

tial” workers. As *members* we work collectively to meet our most basic needs, but as *owners* we are obviously not employees. To ensure compliance with state orders, the co-op has suspended its member-labor system and hired employees to run the store. Sometimes these have been existing members, but sometimes not. This has translated to higher prices in the short term—the co-op now functions as a high-end, mostly organic grocery store in an expensive neighborhood in Brooklyn—and a growing financial crisis in the long term.

Compliance with the necessary social-distancing measures has also limited the number of people that can be present in the store at one time. However, the co-op’s own measures have *unnecessarily* created a divide between members who are able to wait in line outside of the store, sometimes upwards of an hour, and those who cannot. Though like many other food stores the co-op has implemented creative changes like specialized hours to shop, it still has yet to fully address the vulnerabilities of its large membership. Who can stand in line outside? Who can take time off from work to shop? Who lives close enough to the store so that doing either isn’t a burden?

Other smaller food co-ops in the city have found workarounds by safely engaging their existing member base. In these cases, member-owners perform grocery runs and deliveries to one another, facilitate contactless pickup of pre-made grocery boxes provided by cooperative farms, and fulfill online grocery orders. Despite Park Slope’s own hesitations, the overall cooperative value chain that connects SE institutions

together is organizing in response to the pandemic to meet people’s needs. Their flexibility despite spatial restrictions stresses the importance of making solidarity a project throughout the lifetime of SE institutions. For Park Slope, any such flexibility is predicated on whether its 17,000 members see themselves in alliance with one another or whether they only see themselves as reaping common benefits through co-ownership. This distinction between shared access to a commons and shared *management* of one is important (Huron 2018). Only the latter requires a change in social relationships between people, with the hope of creating an engaged, interdependent body for the long term.

## Emergence

While one SE model negotiates the uneven geography exposed by COVID-19, another emergent entity, that of the mutual-aid group, has formed in direct response to the crisis. Mutual aid is of course not new, but, within North American SE literature, it is often only referenced as an example of a niche strategy within homogeneous groups that aren’t considered “political.” In this sense, mutual aid is reduced to savings clubs or barter networks, but these aren’t by any means the entirety of the sector. These volunteer, nonhierarchical networks and groups often emerge in times of crisis to meet people’s immediate needs outside of the state or private sector (“What Is Mutual Aid?” 2020). In New York City we saw this as recently as Occupy Sandy, which arose in response to the physical and economic damage wrought by the hurricane. There are also historical examples of mutual aid, like the Black Panthers’ free-breakfast program and the

Young Lords, which were ongoing and weren't organized around a particular crisis moment but rather in response to continuous organized abandonment (Gandy 2002; Heynen 2009). Through these two forms, we can understand mutual aid as both an ethos and a tactic, the latter of which (securing and distributing food, collective political education, providing financial resources, etc.) has transformative potential regardless of whether the collectives themselves are formed as rapid-response or as extended political projects. At its core, mutual aid aims to change the relationships between its actors and, in so doing, change what participants consider possible (Spade and Sirvent 2020).

Neighborhood-based mutual-aid groups in New York City like the one I've been part of in central Brooklyn have organized to shift relationships between neighbors—largely between gentrifiers and rent-burdened residents, the latter of whom are more susceptible to contracting COVID-19 (Afridi and Block 2020). The groups we see forming in response to the pandemic were initially created to secure food for one another as the pandemic exacerbated large gaps in food access. Many early tasks for such mutual-aid groups were centered around buying and delivering groceries for those who could not go to the store. For these groups, requests are made over

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the phone via a number that has been spread by methods ranging from flyers posted in the neighborhood to word of mouth. A neighbor fulfills the request and then is reimbursed by others in the group. This peer-to-peer model has obvious functional and political issues. Functionally, it isn't sustainable: as the crisis continues, volunteer labor waxes and wanes, creating not only a backlog of requests but slower reimbursement. This model also depends on grocery stores: corporate entities experiencing their own distribution crisis. This latter issue has opened up discussion about shifting the model away from direct food provisioning to connecting people to existing SE entities (e.g., food cooperatives, community-supported agriculture groups, collective buying, etc.).

Politically, this strategy isn't different from charity, as you have a class of "givers" and a class of beneficiaries. When we map who is requesting help and who is fulfilling those requests over who is a longtime resident and who is not, we see that we're in danger of deepening a class divide rather than building across it. Not only does this model as it currently stands fail to change the relationships between people, it runs the real risk of co-optation by either the nonprofit-industrial complex or by city officials, both of whom deputize collective labor and energy toward their own ends to legitimize state

failure. These threats posed a question early on for mutual-aid organizers: mutual aid is predicated on solidarity, not charity (Spade 2020), so how do we bring our work in alignment with those values?

The goal of mutual aid is to change relationships between people—in this case hundreds of neighbors—and to take care of one another as an act of solidarity and of commitment to interdependence. To align with these values in the pandemic crisis, mutual-aid groups have had to shift their perspective from a service they are providing someone else to instead building a community that they will eventually rely on as they themselves become ill. This process begins with political education: What are the historic and contemporary examples of mutual aid? What are its values? Where are points of alignment and misalignment between those values and our work? We have been able to construct from these conversations a consensus-based governance structure intended to reflect the solidarity we want to have with one another. To facilitate this, we've created working groups that extend beyond food provisioning (e.g., housing, building community relationships, education) along with spaces of support and interest (e.g., gardening, recipe sharing, pet photos, music) where people share knowledge

and resources with one another, all mediated over the online platform Slack. The group itself is also part of an equally emergent mutual-aid ecosystem both in the borough and throughout the city. Weekly calls between neighborhood groups result not only in skill sharing but also in building toward aligned strategies.

Despite all of this work, one could technically label these efforts as “informal” survival strategies. Unlike firms, mutual-aid groups don't

**The “reveal” here is not that mutual-aid groups have been formal all along and are therefore worthy of engagement and inquiry; rather, it is that the internal mechanisms and organizing within such projects show us that formality is an altogether insufficient yardstick to judge the legitimacy of SE entities. Instead of emphasizing any “formality,” SE models must be judged by how well they engage their members for the long term while holding solidarity and comradeship at their center.**

require legal incorporation to function and have no outside regulation and no GDP. They are also colloquially perceived as informal because of their decentralized leadership structure and rapid formation. Regardless of their recent quick emergence, mutual aid has itself always been part of the SE ecosystem. Yet organizers in New York have lately focused much of our time creating and uplifting “formal” SE firms and infrastructure. Many of these entities—

such as cooperative membership networks—are necessary to facilitate cross-sectoral cooperation, but such an emphasis on formal cooperative spaces runs the risk of minimizing the radical potential of informal SE spaces such as mutual aid (Hudson 2018). Not only do we minimize such work, we inaccurately label it as “informal” to begin with, reinforcing a cycle in which SE efforts such as mutual aid are labeled as “infor-



mal” and are thus minimized, which then makes them appear niche and not transformative, contributing to their “informality.”

There is nothing occupationally different between the work that these neighborhood and citywide groups are doing and the work that their equivalent SE firms are doing. Over the course of only three months, they have established their own processes to recruit, train, and relate to one another. Mutual aid groups have simultaneously responded to the immediate needs of the pandemic crisis while building a foundation for equitable governance. So, despite not being SE *firms*, mutual aid groups *are formal*, as they operate by their own logics and processes that are communicated to and regulated by those involved. Though accurate, the “reveal” here is not that mutual-aid groups have been formal all along and are therefore worthy of engagement and inquiry; rather, it is that the internal mechanisms and organizing within such projects show us that formality is an altogether insufficient yardstick to judge the legitimacy of SE entities. Instead of emphasizing any “formality,” SE models must be judged by how well they engage their members for the long term while holding solidarity and comradeship at their center. Both the Park Slope Food Coop and emergent mutual-aid groups are regulated entities that feed people, which could be considered formal, but only the latter are asking “Are we failing at solidarity?” and shifting their work accordingly.

## Uprising

The global uprisings organized in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor,

Ahmaud Arbery, and nearly a thousand others who are killed yearly by police in the United States again show SE practitioners how well their institutions are able to activate their membership. While the general coordinators of the Park Slope Food Coop initially refused to issue a statement in support of Black Lives Matter, other entities met the moment and again shifted focus and mobilized in response to both systemic and acute police violence. These responses had been developed and used by organizers prior to the uprisings, and mutual-aid groups like mine shared them with each another. In a matter of days, these groups coordinated mask and PPE drop-offs to protesters, led trainings on protest safety for one another, coordinated jail support, and made countless other acts of solidarity within and beyond their immediate neighborhoods—all in addition to continuing the food work that brought them together to begin with. These groups were already building a newly energized network of relationships in response to one crisis; what we see with the uprisings is that they’ve also created space for people to move toward liberatory politics. These efforts are in addition to the vast responses from New Yorkers broadly, who may not be directly involved with mutual-aid groups or any other SE entities but are performing solidarity nonetheless by offering their homes and COVID-shuttered commercial spaces as sanctuaries for protesters. If the SE entities created by the pandemic have shown us that cooperation emerges in crisis, the uprisings have shown us that cooperation releases abundance. Relationships and places that were formerly cordoned off and privatized have now been “set loose.” These actions are of course

<sup>2</sup> Protesters in Bristol, England, removed the statue of slave trader Edward Colston, while others in Seattle, Washington, reclaimed six blocks in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, creating the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ). Homeless residents in Philadelphia have also reclaimed the Benjamin Franklin Parkway to demand low-income housing and an end to police harassment.

part of global efforts to transform urban spaces through protest, to remove racist and imperialist monuments, and to physically reclaim urban spaces.<sup>2</sup>

### Questions for SE Entities, New and Old, “Formal” and “Informal,” in this Moment

For longstanding SE institutions, the question is how to become dynamic and flexible while keeping solidarity at the center of the work. It’s not enough to simply provide a version of a service after a crisis, especially if that service excludes people in the time they need it most. SE institutions thus also need to ask themselves, are we failing at solidarity? Doing so opens the door for flexible and creative solutions to meet needs. Park Slope missed this opportunity when it transferred its collective responsibility to feed people to the nonprofit volunteer organization Invisible

Hands. Instead of a system in which members *help one another*, a member in need may call the organization, which then pairs them with one of their 10,000 volunteers in the city to shop for them. While this may seem to alleviate the issue of immunocompromised and otherwise vulnerable people accessing groceries, it’s an odd choice for a member-run institution of nearly 20,000 people. If the co-op had prioritized solidarity, it could’ve marshaled members into a base of support that shops for one another in spatial clusters

and could have overcome the physical boundaries that the firm is currently reinforcing. However, as long as the institution prioritizes shared *access* to a resource over shared *responsibility* for it and for one another, it lacks the political will to overcome these boundaries.

Similarly, the question for emergent mutual-aid groups is how to maintain the political will to cooperate. If the aim of mutual aid is to create permanently organized communities of care and reciprocity, then we have to not only

sustain newfound energy but also make these spaces desirable places to be. We can do so by making these communities accountable to ourselves and our neighborhoods. Relatedly, mutual-aid groups must resist neoliberal co-optation of these efforts from both the state and nonprofits. The recent uprisings are again instructive; they are an international refusal of the status quo. While we

see reformist logics pushed by government officials and public intellectuals alike—from boilerplate policy demands to performative kneeling to “Black Lives Matter” boulevards—we have in equal measure seen the rejection of those logics and the dissemination of abolitionist visions.<sup>3</sup> This is the energy needed in the SE space broadly and in mutual-aid work in particular, to “remain threatening and oppositional to the status quo and cultivate resistance, rather than becom[e] complementary to abandonment and

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<sup>3</sup> Campaign Zero’s #8CANTWAIT campaign pushes eight police reforms intended to lower police killings by 72 percent, ignoring that police violence persists in states and cities that have already enacted these measures; see the #8CANTWAIT website, accessed 12 June 2020, <https://8cantwait.org>. Meanwhile, #8toAbolition is a set of eight nonreformist reforms that, unlike the former, truly limit police power; see the #8toAbolition website, accessed 12 June 2020, <https://www.8toabolition.com>.

privatization” (Spade 2020, 142).

These reflections aren’t meant to argue that emergent mutual-aid groups are inherently radical while older SE entities are doomed to fail. Rather, they’re intended to raise a flag. Before the pandemic, SE practitioners and organizers were already working against a culture that socializes us to think in terms of charity instead of interdependence. Although we’ve successfully built SE institutions that function cooperatively, those institutions—Park Slope as just one example—can still reproduce the subjectivity of charity. The presently emergent mutual-aid entities are likewise not immune.

While in some ways these entities have the advantage of prioritizing a strong cooperative culture from the outset, like other collective efforts they also produce their own boundaries. Neighborhood-based networks by design exclude others nearby who are as equally in need or equally resourced as those considered “in bounds.” These networks are having and should continue to have conversations about who they are, in alignment with, socially and spatially. For these entities, solidarity is a question that needs to be constantly raised, not just in the context of two unprecedented world events dovetailing together but throughout the lifetime of our efforts. Failing to do so risks weakening the energy we have and, like the Berkeley Co-op, losing our sense of ourselves.

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As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, the scope of its devastation on communities across the world is gradually becoming clear. At minimum, we are experiencing a “triple crisis” whereby the medical, political-economic, and socio-psychological impacts of COVID-19 combine and intensify the pain felt by populations worldwide (Žižek 2020, 90). Also startlingly apparent is the fact that the harm caused by COVID-19 is distributed unevenly. The pandemic is exacerbating preexisting inequities along familiar lines of race, class, gender, and national origin.

In the United States, Black Americans are disproportionately represented among the essential job sectors, such as cashiers and custodians, and are dying of COVID-19 at an alarmingly higher rate relative to the U.S. population at large (Ray 2020; Ledur 2020). Large sectors of health-care and food-production services are composed of immigrant workers who face health risks during the pandemic (Bloemraad and Slootjes 2020). Women face simultaneous risks of exposure to the virus both in women-dominated professions like nursing and home healthcare and also in increased expectations of care work at home

## COVID-19, the Vanishing Mediator, and Postcapitalist Possibilities

*Jason C. Mueller,  
John McCollum,  
& Steven Schmidt*

(Jaffe and Bhattacharya 2020). Last, COVID-19 is ravaging Native American communities that have long borne the brunt of structural pain inflicted by the U.S. federal government, which continues to neglect infrastructure and public-health projects in Indigenous nations in an ongoing history of dispossession (Lakhani 2020).

COVID-19 prompts us to acknowledge two possible realities. On one hand, it highlights the absolute urgent need of changes

like guaranteed employment, housing, healthcare, racial justice, environmental restoration, and more. On the other, looming promises of severe austerity and brutalizing mass surveillance across the colonial-capitalist world system make these necessary shifts seem even more difficult to achieve (Grosfoguel 2002; Robinson 2014). Can we achieve a major paradigm shift, or will capitalism maintain itself through continued crisis manage-

ment? To help us contemplate these questions, we use Fredric Jameson’s and his colleagues’ concept of the *vanishing mediator* to make full sense of our current moment and future possibilities. Turning to North Dakota, a state characterized by right-wing politics, fossil-fuel interests, and Indigenous dispossession, we outline the already existing traces of a more hopeful future in a place where radical change appears to be far from likely. We argue that the vanish-

ing-mediator concept is useful for helping us identify the foundations of a postcapitalist society in our present moment.

### What Is a Vanishing Mediator?

Fredric Jameson (1973) uses the idea of a vanishing mediator to describe ideologies that help transition societies to new eras that appear completely contradictory to the current time. Jameson originally used this concept to describe a contradiction that he observed while analyzing Max Weber's account of the rise of Protestantism and capitalism. At face value, the austere lifestyles promoted by early Protestant sects appear to be incompatible with the extractive and profit-driven practices of early modern capitalism. Jameson resolves this paradox by showing that Protestantism's central values—discipline, entrepreneurialism, and frugality—brought in, or mediated, the rise of capitalism by equating moral worth and heavenly salvation with hard work, participation in the labor market, and monetary success. While Protestantism itself has disappeared as an all-encompassing ideology that organizes everyday life, our current capitalist system still relies upon many of these same beliefs. Our world has not become less religious. Instead, the values of Protestantism have been translated to a capitalist ethic, drained of their original spiritual and religious meaning, and

remain embedded in our everyday lives.

Slavoj Žižek (1991) adds to Jameson's account of a vanishing mediator by illustrating the relationship between changes of *form* and content in a sociopolitical system. First, the *initial* change of content takes place within the existing form. Then, once its substantive content within the old form has been altered enough, it sheds the old form entirely. At the level of one's subjective interpretation of historical change, the precise moment when you *retroactively posit the presup-*

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*positions*, the mediator vanishes. In other words, in the (future) moment when you look back to reflect on our present moment and see it having the historical logic of *necessity* (i.e., believing something “always had to happen at that moment”) rather than the logic of *contingency*, the mediator vanishes.

Applying this concept to the COVID-19 pandemic offers

both optimism and caution. Vanishing mediators can connect us to political futures beyond neoliberal capitalism. However, such a postcapitalist society is far from guaranteed to be left leaning, and this depends on whether there is widespread agreement that the moment is in fact a crisis of capitalism and also whether it is the time to push a robust leftist political agenda rather than abandoning the political process altogether. Crises are profound moments of subjective indeterminacy, and the “proper reading”

of a crisis impacts how the postcrisis moment will shape up (Jessop 2015).

### Covid-19 Crisis Politics as a Vanishing Mediator

In the months prior to COVID-19's emergence, there were key shifts in the U.S. political landscape that are important for understanding our current mode of pandemic crisis management. First, presidential candidate Andrew Yang discussed the implications of technological innovation and automation across sectors of employment, as well as the need to implement a universal basic income (UBI; see Stevens and Paz 2020). In addition, presidential candidate Bernie Sanders (2020a, 2020b) centered universal healthcare and an employment-generating Green New Deal in his platform, demanding all Americans take up the universalist ethic of "fight[ing] for someone you don't know."

These shifts were partially reflected in the federal government's response to the pandemic. Shortly after COVID-19 began ravaging the United States, the government passed bills to send \$1,200 stimulus checks to nearly all Americans and promised free COVID-19 testing for all (Erb 2020). The Trump administration even proposed making direct federal payments to hospitals to pay for COVID-19 treatment for the uninsured, echoing the basic framework for a national health insurance program in the United States (Abelson and Sanger-Katz 2020). While these policies are woefully inadequate, their enactment by a right-wing government is an implicit acknowledgement of how urgent these types of protections are. New political imaginaries are

being awoken, with many coming to the realization that "everything that sustains life—housing, food, clean water, and healthcare for all—[must] be protected and decommodified" (Brown and Zheng 2020).

If enough people view these crises as unacceptable, then this moment has the potential to be *evental*, introducing a possibility for radical change (see Badiou 2013). These moments can potentially activate human subjectivity as we become dedicated to a cause beyond our immediate needs, working tirelessly to cultivate a world beyond capitalism. However, there is a wide gap between the current stage of decaying neoliberal capitalism and that of the future post-capitalist utopia to which many aspire. Moreover, despite the government-sponsored programs outlined above, the present strategies of crisis management in the United States still favor capital over labor (Wolff 2020). Thus, for this moment to serve as a vanishing mediator, we must strive to radically alter the *content* of the existing system, which can lead to an altogether different *form* that it will take in the future.

The potentiality of a vanishing mediator in this moment is what Žižek (2020) calls war communism and what we call COVID-19-induced wartime socialism, or simply CV19 socialism. We conceptualize this particular mediator as CV19 *socialism* rather than *communism* as the concept of socialism encourages us to consider difficult questions about the nationalization of industries and about transitional moments "which the loftier regions of communism allow us to avoid" (Jameson 2016, 317). The concept of war socialism applies to the acts of numerous cap-

italist states who are flirting with nationalizing industries, with enacting nearly universal programs that provide financial assistance to the masses, and with partially coordinating a global response to a public-health and economic crisis that transcends national boundaries.

The present moment is grim, and we conceptualize CV19 socialism in a more hyperbolic than “actual” way. The implementation of quasi-universal emergency welfare actions was a choice made by political-economic elites to *stabilize* an unstable capitalist state. The immediate task is to use and push this temporary stability (i.e., the temporary shift in *content* of the U.S. capitalist state) further, facilitating a full shift in the *form* of the U.S. political-economic system. Accordingly, CV19 socialism from above and mass mobilization from below will both be necessary to make this moment a vanishing mediator.

The potential for eventual politics and a vanishing mediator is present in the overlapping areas of environmental restoration and political economy. In the next section, we illustrate the potential for CV19 socialism to act as a vanishing mediator in relation to these issues. As an example, we offer a case study of the U.S. state of North Dakota, with its currently unsustain-

able and extractive political economy and how this can be radically reconfigured to usher in an era of environmental justice and jobs guarantees in a post-COVID-19 world. We also show how this dovetails with longstanding Indigenous resistance movements that have articulated how alternatives to capitalism must be accompanied by ecological sustainability and Native sovereignty (Estes 2019a).

### Ecological Restoration and Postcapitalist Aspirations: North Dakota and Beyond

An important case of how transformative postcapitalist ideas might come into play in our current crisis moment is the U.S. state of North Dakota. The state’s extractive economy will likely be devastated by COVID-19, with a recent study predicting that the “labor force will decline by 7.5% to 15% ... the unemployment rate could

increase by as much as 20% ... total tax collections may decrease by more than 50%” (Associated Press 2020). North Dakota is also the site of the ongoing dispossession of the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota communities. Nonetheless, there is an opportunity for implementing radical new social policies to address these issues and more. Despite facing serious political challenges while embodying major contradictions between capital, labor, and ecological degradation/resto-

**There is popular support across Native American nations in the United States not only for a Green New Deal but a Red Deal that centers Indigenous voices in struggles against colonialism and capitalism but also in struggles for environmental justice and self-determination. Although national attention to these issues intensified after the 2016 Standing Rock antipipeline movement, Indigenous nations have long challenged capitalist and settler-colonial valuations of land and labor.**



ration, a Green New Deal is one such platform from which we can build a more equitable future (see McCollum 2019).

North Dakota's latest chapter in a long history of extractive settler-colonialism is its dependence on oil extraction in its western region, the site of the Bakken oil shale formation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, oil prices plummeted between March and April 2020, causing the state's tax revenues to fall by an estimated 12 percent (Boesen 2020). Although North Dakota's dependency on oil revenue makes it an unlikely candidate for a state-supported decarbonization program, in many ways it already provides an *informal* jobs guarantee through its oil sector. In fact, the state offers an estimated \$100 million a year in tax rebates and other forms of subsidization, including the elimination of sales taxes on extraction-related equipment that purchasers are not required to report to state regulators (Redman 2017). Given the present state of low oil demand, North Dakota's dependence on oil revenues is not a sufficient source of funding.

A project oriented toward environmental restoration and Indigenous sovereignty and justice would enable the region to reconstruct their social ecology and political economy around radically different principles. The state *already* uses a complex web of regulations, tax incentives, permits, and zoning laws to direct oil extraction, transportation, and refinement. Similarly, the state reacted to the original oil boom with a sovereign wealth fund and rapidly appropriated funds for new schools in the booming regions as well as transportation infrastructure, law enforcement, and other social necessities.

Granted, these appropriations served the needs of extractive firms, but they demonstrate the state's *capacity to act*.

A program built on postcapitalist aspirations could mobilize state resources in a similar manner for the creation of public wealth and the protection/restoration of the region's ecology. The state is already deeply involved in the permitting and operation of wind-energy farms throughout North Dakota and has established a comprehensive wind-energy technician program at Lake State Regional College, all while proving that the state can attract and train a suitable labor force (Huttner 2019). How then might COVID-19 crisis politics help usher in a program in North Dakota that taps into existing state arrangements to substantively change its content in a postcapitalist, anticolonial direction?

There is popular support across Native American nations in the United States not only for a Green New Deal but a Red Deal that centers Indigenous voices in struggles *against* colonialism and capitalism but also in struggles *for* environmental justice and self-determination (Estes 2019b; Hill 2018). This movement also identifies how North Dakota's extractive oil economy, staffed predominantly by large camps of male oil workers, reinforces a violent heteropatriarchy that harms Indigenous communities (Estes 2019a). Although national attention to these issues intensified after the 2016 Standing Rock antipipeline movement, Indigenous nations have long challenged capitalist and settler-colonial valuations of land and labor.

It is also worth noting that Native American

communities across North Dakota were some of the first in the state to take serious steps to stem the spread of COVID-19 in their territories (Sisk 2020). Any postcapitalist initiative emerging from this pandemic must forge substantive links between movements for Indigenous, racial, socioeconomic, and climate justice (Estes 2019b; Sunrise Movement 2020). The earlier Standing Rock/Dakota Access Pipeline protests were indicative of this potential, and expansive coalition building is going on as we speak (Elbein 2017; Martin 2020; Sunrise Movement 2020; Whyte 2017). Importantly, this movement explicitly ties climate justice to an anticolonial beyond-capitalist project that also emphasizes Indigenous sovereignty (Ellis 2019).

The case of North Dakota asks us to consider how a vanishing mediator may usher in anticapitalist and anticolonial relationships that are not new but rather have long been endorsed by Indigenous nations. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights how the ecological and health-care crises experienced by Indigenous nations are intimately linked to their continued subjugation by the U.S. government. Any emancipatory post-COVID political movement in North Dakota must also center Native American sovereignty. Since a widespread fidelity to left-leaning programs will be required well beyond North Dakota if CVI9 socialism is to become a vanishing mediator, let us briefly move the scale of analysis to the fed-

eral level.

### Beyond a Green New Deal: An Initiative for Health, Environment, and Technological Investment

Here, we offer a dose of experimental utopian thinking, sketching what widespread fidelity to an eventual COVID-19 politics might look like in

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terms of a nationwide initiative. Simply put, something more comprehensive than a Green New Deal is required. We shall call this the Health, Environment, and Technology initiative, or HEAT. In the wake of COVID-19's devastation of a country already possessing a subpar healthcare system, decrepit infrastructure, and widespread unemployment, an initiative

that generates jobs on a mass scale is needed. The HEAT initiative would be a federally backed plan that would, at minimum, offer guaranteed green tech training and employment for any that seek it; coordinate the building of health clinics and facilities across the country (as a part of a universal health-care plan), with local input by working-class, disenfranchised, and other affected communities; and invest in technology that will lead to automation of labor that no longer requires humans to carry out its tasks, in tandem with the provision of a UBI (onto which the newly unemployed may fall back as a safety net or that the gainfully employed may use at their

own discretion).

This ambitious program should be *demanded* by a population scarred by COVID-19 and that lacks universal healthcare, is facing the highest unemployment rate since the Great Depression, and faces a climate catastrophe that makes COVID-19 appear as “a dress rehearsal for the next crisis, the one in which the reorientation of living conditions is going to be posed as a challenge to all of us” (Latour 2020; Soergel 2020). Following Bernie Sanders (2020a), many Americans may decide to *fight for someone they don’t know* if for no other reason than it being a rational necessity for survival in a post-COVID-19 world. The struggle to radically alter the form of the U.S. political-economic system could build off the heretofore unheard of shifts in content of the U.S. political economy, ushered in through political imaginaries fomented immediately before the pandemic and emboldened by the implementation of CVI9 socialism.

Americans are taking an explosive interest in socialism during the pandemic as they realize that capitalism cannot be “fixed” and insist on systemic change to build a more just society (Godfrey 2020). Cross-national networks of solidarity already exist, from the communities of mutual aid forged through the Dakota Access Pipeline protests to formalized groups like the Sunrise Movement (Whyte 2017; Witt 2018). This in tandem with demands from insurgent left-leaning political candidates at local, state, and federal levels of governing can initiate major change within the structures of U.S. power in the years ahead.

If short-term measures prove inadequate, a federal review of goal attainment could be implemented in which a federally mandated draft would come into effect, subsequently creating a “universal army” working toward these goals (see Jameson 2016). Building a robust, publicly owned, ecofriendly, public-health-oriented and technologically sophisticated infrastructure requires mass mobilization of all those capable of participating. We envision widespread election of socialists into office across the United States and federal-to-local coordination among working-class and disenfranchised communities nationwide as a prerequisite for this task. Fidelity to this task can create citizens who don’t wince at the prospect of deployment in a nationally necessary workforce. Instead, the desire to build a livable society free of poverty, exploitation, and scarcity will be motivation enough. To explore how this may start at the state level, let us conclude by returning to North Dakota.

North Dakota’s political economy of unchecked fossil-fuel extraction and its corresponding externalities cannot continue under the present juncture of a global pandemic and rapidly declining demand for fossil fuels. Thus, some postcapitalist dreaming is required to turn CVI9 socialism into a vanishing mediator. The North Dakota Sovereign Wealth Fund offers an example of how a post-COVID-19 HEAT initiative might work. This fund was established by voters in a 2010 state constitutional amendment with the goal of providing the state with funds to weather price downturns in agricultural commodities and oil revenue. Thirty percent of revenues from oil- and gas-extraction taxes are designated to flow into the fund (Gross 2014). Today,

<sup>1</sup> See “Legacy Financial Statements,” North Dakota Retirement and Investment Office, accessed 29 July 2020, <https://www.rio.nd.gov/legacy-fund>.

the fund’s value sits at around US\$6.5 billion,<sup>1</sup> and it could support ambitious socioeconomic and ecological projects across the state.

In preparation for the 2021 legislative session, North Dakota lawmakers sought public input in fall of 2019 on how the legacy fund might be used. Participants in a November 2019 meeting of the Legacy Fund Earnings Committee identified such disparate needs as free school lunches for children, tourism development, affordable housing, infrastructure development, and health care as suitable for spending legacy-fund dollars (Springer 2019). This type of democratic input could facilitate the transition to a wider HEAT initiative throughout the state and could act as a model for other political entities. The job guarantees offered by new social arrangements could ensure that this path is equitable, and they could be crafted with input from the state’s Native American nations and other exploited communities. This model could be used with modification across the United States.

### Concluding Remarks

Considering the above, the following is abundantly clear: rather than imagining this as a time to “put aside politics” and address the crisis in an allegedly “neutral” way, our moment demands

the opposite. As May turned to June 2020, political uprisings emerged across the United States in response to the ongoing brutalization and devaluation of Black lives in America—still unrelenting, even during a deadly pandemic (Taylor 2020). As Angela Davis (2020) presciently observed, “the conjuncture created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the recognition of the systemic racism that has been rendered visible under these conditions” have generated the

**Following Bernie Sanders, many Americans may decide to fight for someone they don’t know if for no other reason than it being a rational necessity for survival in a post-COVID-19 world. The struggle to radically alter the form of the U.S. political-economic system could build off the heretofore unheard of shifts in content of the U.S. political economy, ushered in through political imaginaries fomented immediately before the pandemic and emboldened by the implementation of CV19 socialism.**

“extraordinary moment” in which we are immersed. These ongoing, overlapping crises have created space to forge new solidarities with communities worldwide while facilitating utopian thinking on what a new world system might look like—a system that moves beyond the profit motive and exploitation of labor and is instead based on mutual cooperation, coordination, and care. In the era of capitalist realism, this thinking is more necessary than ever,

as it assists in displacing the false belief that there is no alternative to capitalism (Fisher 2009; see also Frase 2016). Striving toward a new form of socialism/communism should be conceived as a struggle to achieve a difficult-to-impossible utopia. Far from depressing our expectations, this radical act dispatches the idea of simple blueprints to achieve utopia. Instead, we must constantly strive toward an uncertain emancipatory



endpoint (Badiou 2013; Jameson 2016; Özselçuk and Madra 2005).

An obvious but often neglected issue must now be stated: *nothing is guaranteed*. Whether COVID-19 crisis management ushers in ecosocialism or a new form of barbarism is not predetermined. We are active participants in crafting the future we wish to see. In the United States, CV-19 wartime socialism has the potential to serve as a vanishing mediator that brings about social change—if we become active subjects with a fidelity toward building a postcapitalist society. Millions have already shown such a fidelity. There is also an urgent need for the U.S. government to craft an internationalist foreign policy that offers solidarity with and diplomacy toward the workers of the world (Bessner 2019).

More people around the globe are demanding environmental justice, racial justice, and economic justice while striving to create a world system not based on colonial-capitalist exploitation. With the possibility of unimaginable mass immiseration on the horizon, it is our responsibility to turn this moment into a vanishing mediator, creating a better world for ourselves and future generations. There is much work to be done. Onward!

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As the Great Pause dissolved into a fast-forward toward an unscripted future, we emerged into a world simultaneously vaster with possibility but also narrower and more local.

\* \* \*

ATHENS: Around early March, just before the Great Pause commenced, Greece's troubles accelerated. On its land border with outsized neighbor Turkey, the Greek army and police confronted thousands of migrants seeking to push in. In the Aegean, boats accustomed to carrying tourists delivered riot-police units to Turkey-facing islands to quell local opposition to the construction of more detention facilities for the daily arriving migrants.

Angry that they'd been downgraded since 2015 from high-end tourist destinations to EU containment zone, the islanders confronted the police, sending them packing back to Athens.

Turkish overflights of Greek islands and non-lethal dogfights increased as Ankara sought to establish its oil-exploration rights in the Aegean, and the Greek government negotiated with Egypt, the EU, and NATO to block Turkish

involvement in Libya. At home, the probusiness right-wing government's bureaucrats reshaped central Athens into a tourism destination, sold property that was simultaneously undervalued and overpriced to non-EU citizens in return for golden visas, and drafted legislation intended to facilitate investments by almost completely removing environmental safeguards.

This was the state of affairs frozen by COVID-19's arrival.

It quickly became apparent, even as we slept, awoke, and slumbered again during that first wave's suspended reality, that we were being eased into a new way of living. Long before our known unknowns about the virus's longevity and infection methods were answered, a peculiar subconscious certainty of an impending new normal settled in the back of our minds. It was bolstered by thousands of fragments joining into a whole: from politicians and jour-

nalists speaking of a change more permanent than temporary, to a viral Atlantic magazine headline predicting as early as February that 70 percent of the world's population was likely to contract the virus (Hamblin 2020), to a WHO warning that the new virus might never go away.

Twenty years after 9/11, as that event had already receded into the realm of history, it seemed that

## Welcome to the New Localism

*Iason Athanasiadis*

we were on the threshold of an equivalent shift in our collective behavior, a traumatic mass incident upon which would pivot an ordinarily unacceptable level of government encroachment into our lives. The state of exception had laid the ground for a form of shock doctrine. At the same time, the virus had emerged as a result of deforestation and the cruel conditions of the meat-eating industry. Its spread through air-



plane travel became an index of globalization. It was truly a product of our times.

The now generally acceptable idea that contact tracing can keep us healthy has imposed a new level of societally acceptable monitoring, enabled by the intrusive technologies revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden. After decades when the dominant operating principle was that the economy is more important than human welfare, well-being is now used as a pre-

text for employment's deeper deregulation.

So what else will our new normal involve?

### Tribal Behaviors, More Localism

As the virus closed in, I was on the land border with Turkey, interviewing men wielding hunting rifles and wooden sticks, who'd volunteered from across Greece to repel asylum seekers trying to cross the Evros River. Every night, they headed into the closed military zone to patrol an area illuminated by powerful tractor lights, set fire to vegetation where people could hide, and detain those who'd managed to cross the river (confiscating their clothes and belongings in some cases) before delivering them to the police or directly intimidating them into swimming back whence they'd come. These patriots were experiencing a rare moment of unity and inter-Greek solidarity as they grouped together to confront migrants whom for years they had allowed to pass through on their way to Europe, but whom they now perceived as being pawns of Athens' former Ottoman overlords, instrumentalized to violate the border and challenge Greek sovereignty.

The tribal solidarity on show on both sides of the border was an unsettling demonstration that the mainstream human reaction to modernity's growing impersonality (exemplified by the spreading technologization of daily life and employment, more austerity, and less social value) is to cluster around conceptions of identity. This already happened in the Middle East in the 2010s after what came to be known as the Arab Spring: a series of uprisings against outdated authoritarian regimes that offered their



populations an unspoken pact of low-quality, free or heavily-subsidized housing, education, basic goods, and employment in return for obedience and minimal social freedoms. The arrangement collapsed when, in a demonstration of the market's invisible hand, financial speculation and the rising Chinese middle class drove up the price of wheat and maize. The rise of one society resulted in the breakdown of less dynamic ones.

As public order disappeared, disillusioned Libyans, Egyptians, and Syrians, who saw their incipient freedom snatched away in the ensuing chaos and counterrevolutions, either turned apolitical or flocked toward more assertive identity movements, sectarian, ethnic, or imagined. ISIS was just the most notorious example of a wide gamut of new associations that appeared once debilitating censorship and state control was lifted. The discontent of those flocking to identitarian movements partially emanated from feeling the effects of a dominant economic system whose imposed, top-down rules squeeze advantage out of more monitored working conditions, slimmer margins, and more globalized logistical chains. Those unable to react against the market's decentralization rationalized the problem as one of horizontal competition among races and cultures, deepening the emergence of identitarianism, both in Europe and elsewhere. COVID-19, despite having a global and racially indiscriminate effect, has not been popularly perceived as not meriting a tribal response. Rather, nations have turned inward, closing their borders and competing with each other for medical supplies and the miracle vaccine. Perhaps critical ability is the first thing relinquished by frightened societies.

### Migration in the Time of COVID-19

Irregular migration and tourism aside, Greece isn't very globalized. Wealthy locals and religious pilgrims traveling by airplane from Milan Fashion Week and the Holy Land imported the first cases of COVID-19 in mid-March. Nevertheless,





frightened locals perceived the threat as coming from the east: as the government ordered a nationwide shutdown of restaurants and bars in the face of the spreading virus, a local woman on the migrant-loaded island of Chios (where I was researching a story on the Church's refusal to shutter its places of worship) darkly warned that "God help them [asylum-seekers] should we discover a case among them ... we'll burn them."

Fearful that Greece's austerity-strained public-health system would collapse, the government soon ordered a nationwide lockdown that restricted asylum seekers to their camps. Despite there not being a single case recorded of an asylum seeker infecting a Greek (aside from unsubstantiated rumors of an illegal brothel where migrant ladies serviced locals), migrants nevertheless became public punching bags, sometimes literally. On the dark highway headed back from Evros, a ragged, desperate figure flagged our car down. He was a badly beaten Egyptian migrant who said he'd crossed over from Turkey to Greece in the first wave, then remained hiding in the forest until his water ran out, forcing him onto the tarmac for help. Unfortunately for him, the first vehicle to stop contained police officers who confiscated his wallet, phone, and passport before battering and abandoning him on the roadside.

The Egyptian's complicated and expensive journey had begun in Upper Egypt, continued by airplane to Oman, then northern Iraq, and by foot across the snow-covered mountains into Iran and Turkey, before Turkish authorities drove him and other migrants to the Greek border to wait for President Erdogan to announce the

border's opening. As the migrant spoke, a deep cough wracked his chest, making me wonder whether he'd picked up the virus on his journey through Iran or Turkey.

The Greek government shared this concern and soon forced all new arrivals, regular and irregular alike, into a two-week quarantine. This meant little in a place like Chios's overcrowded main camp where tons of uncollected rubbish littered the ground, hundreds of young men besieged the reinforced main building staffed by a few employees, and social distancing was impossible. As both sides of the Aegean quarantined, refugee flows dropped off by over 90 percent, and the Greek government instituted an additional unofficial pandemic protection policy of pushing migrant boats back and forcing new arrivals to keep two-week quarantines on the exposed beaches or docks where they'd arrived.

### Quarantined Athens as a Theatrical Stage

Anxious about the risk of catching the virus, I returned to Athens a few days before the full lockdown and shut myself at home. My apartment in downtown Athens usually vibrates with the noise of traffic and renovations, but now it was deathly still, aside from birdsong and tolling church bells traversing an achingly clear and unpolluted atmosphere. Vacant boulevards, shuttered stores, ancient touristless temples, and a central square whose grand renovation had shuddered to a halt, offered an intriguing, though depopulated, vision of what a society that had completed its carbon transition and reduced its energy imprint to a minimum might look like.



As Athenians adjusted to social distancing by congesting in supermarket aisles or huddling over their screens, I walked the streets at all times of day and night, reveling in having the city to myself, aside from some homeless, some addicts, some squads of police motorcyclists, and flocks of pigeons. The stillness felt like having been gifted a month of Sundays.

One night outside the Temple of Hephaestus, I met a cultivated man who'd rejected a conventional petit-bourgeois life to roam the streets during daytime and shut his eyes at night to the view of an illuminated Acropolis. He poker-facedly informed me that the sudden disappearance of most people had failed to affect either way his ongoing quest to find people of substance to converse with about music.

On another dusk, as I elatedly walked through a part of the city center famous for its South Asian bazaar atmosphere and stolen goods, a young man wearing an outsized mask and sitting on the steps of a decrepit neoclassical building asked me if I wanted to buy drugs. Already high from walking through the abandoned city, I declined.

All the theaters were closed, but Athens was so vacant that roaming it felt like traversing a cardboard stage set, the audiences standing on the balconies of the upper circle offering up their ova-







tions to essential workers. The unreality of the scene was augmented by the knowledge that the suspension of time would soon be over, to be followed by a curtain-raiser on a harsher climactic act. For the time being, this rather cinematic Great Pause—from our geopolitical and economic troubles, or from the impending climate disaster—had separated us from our recent daily lives and plunged us into a mass introspection of the kind that people had once embarked upon pilgrimages hoping to attain.

### E-Normality

When the quarantine lifted, it wasn't hard to pin down that something had changed. Aside from a slew of new public behaviors and the feeling—while walking down a street of masked and be-gloved people—of inhabiting a horror film, few of yesterday's issues had been resolved as worrying new phenomena appeared. Legislation was passed to further flexibilize the labor market, and professional life invaded our homes and private time through teleworking's Trojan Horse. The government had worked hard during the quarantine to introduce all the e-government platforms disregarded by previous administrations, stitching a little tighter the mesh of surveillance that had begun during the 2004 Athens Olympics with the installation of street cameras. Even as digital platforms made us more accountable, the government claimed a pandem-






ic-awarded emergency prerogative to conclude a series of untransparent direct-contract awards to companies, some of them shells, thus disbursing public funds to business, political, and journalistic allies. The government's rhetoric was free market, but its practices continued to be feudal-style patronage.

Although 20 percent of Greece's GDP depends on tourism, few tourists are likely, as long as the air industry struggles to recuperate. This isn't without a silver lining for the majority of Greeks for whom renting in central Athens had become mathematically impossible, prepandemic (Andreas-Bakas 2019): the complete absence of tourists returned us to the comforting reality of that economic-crisis-era cliché, before real estate began inflating: the price of everything has collapsed, including rents.

Unlike in Spain, where planning for the introduction of a universal basic income (UBI) is advanced, the Greek government hasn't even considered it. UBI is problematic because, while on the one hand it can stabilize a collapsing labor force it also fixes that labor force in place, reducing the subject's mobility and cementing fundamental structural injustices that internet-based distribution networks typically accentuate without restoring to workers any of the profits their labor funnels into the value chain. Similarly, the distancing involved in the pandemic response furthered the process of diluting communities and capitalizing society by substituting what used to be communal exchanges, personal neighborhood connections, and a sense of local belonging with paid services. Some who worried they might be asymptomatic carriers decided to commit fragile parents they could no longer visit regularly to old persons' homes, products were delivered by fleets of motorcyclists (or drones), and the police attacked gatherings of people in public spaces (see Athanasiadis 2020).

One of the first stories to grip Greeks emerging into the new normal was the drama of an attractive woman whose jealousy





over her boyfriend having friended another attractive woman on Facebook drove her to attack and disfigure the other woman with acid. In a sign of the times, a surgical mask completed her wig-and-sunglasses disguise. But aside from demonstrating how fear of the invisible virus now fuels other illegal activities, compelling media narratives such as this one were also handy distractions against further popular inquiry (or anger) into the extent to which the establishment reactions to the pandemic were obscuring the global economic crisis's true causes. It seems that it hasn't been in the public interest to understand that the greater cause of the 2020 crash is the uninterrupted financialization of the global economy in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. Or to begin unpacking how stock exchanges could be posting gains amid the worst U.S. unemployment statistics ever recorded.

As more detailed mortality figures have emerged, there has been growing suspicion that COVID-19 isn't so much more lethal than conventional coronaviruses and that the panic-driven quarantine was much ado about nothing. In Greece, by the time the quarantine was lifted, less than two hundred persons had died, and herd-immunity was at 2–4 percent, meaning that negligible progress had been made in fighting the virus during the Great Pause. But the government's feel-good narrative about how Greeks, by staying at home



and ordering takeout, had performed a Thermopylae-level collective feat that washed away the austerity years' shame while reversing negative Western impressions about the country, was a form of public healing. Never mind that other Mediterranean countries could boast equivalent or better pandemic records; the mere act of investing time and money in highlighting this modest short-term success fostered a narrative that reactivated Greece's precious tourism season (and foreign currency streams) even as it reimported the virus.

The full quarantine was useful in demonstrating that where there's a will there's a way of urgently reducing our energy imprints and carbon emissions. It also reminded us that the current media drumbeat, focused exclusively on individuals reducing their energy imprints rather than industry or the military making reductions, is unacceptable, not least because they are the greatest polluters. It seems silly to ban cooking with natural gas when fighter jets burn thousands of gallons of gas per training fight, and how military bases are electrified remains entirely opaque. Ultimately, the quarantine proved that, if we care about not further reducing our lives into standardized, monitored sizes friendly to acceptable modes of economic activity, the measurement of our happiness must be disconnected from the annual increase in national GDP.

Meanwhile, the threat of logistical chains being paralyzed by a second wave is spurring a reshaping of production cycles toward the more regional, threatening the U.S. dollar's global dominance and, apparently, foretelling the end of unfettered capitalism (Foroohar 2020; Bhat-



tacharya and Dale 2020; Rozsa 2020). A shift toward industrial multilateralism could be channeled toward injecting renewed meaning into our locales and cultures and reducing isolated and consumer-driven living. The internet would remain, like a digital airport connecting us to far-flung social and professional locales, but without the high energy imprint.

Real airports would still exist, but discouraging trivial travel would propel heretofore ignored distances and localized relationships to the fore, allowing them to regain an edge over virtual ones predicated on long-distance travel. Harsher travel conditions and less superficial scene shifts—Reykjavík yesterday, Rome today, Rio tomorrow—would open our eyes to the extraordinary local variety we've willfully bypassed in



our manic competition to be faster, richer, and more camera friendly. It would also spur regional revivals, blocked so far by a model whereby educational, financial, and cultural global hubs have sucked up local talent.

Our new world can contain fewer tourists, “investor” profiteers, and narcissists piggybacking on locales as backdrops for constructed identities, with more individuals rooting themselves somewhere, learning the language and culture and contributing rather than extracting. This evolution is a necessity for our battered planet, not a utopia.

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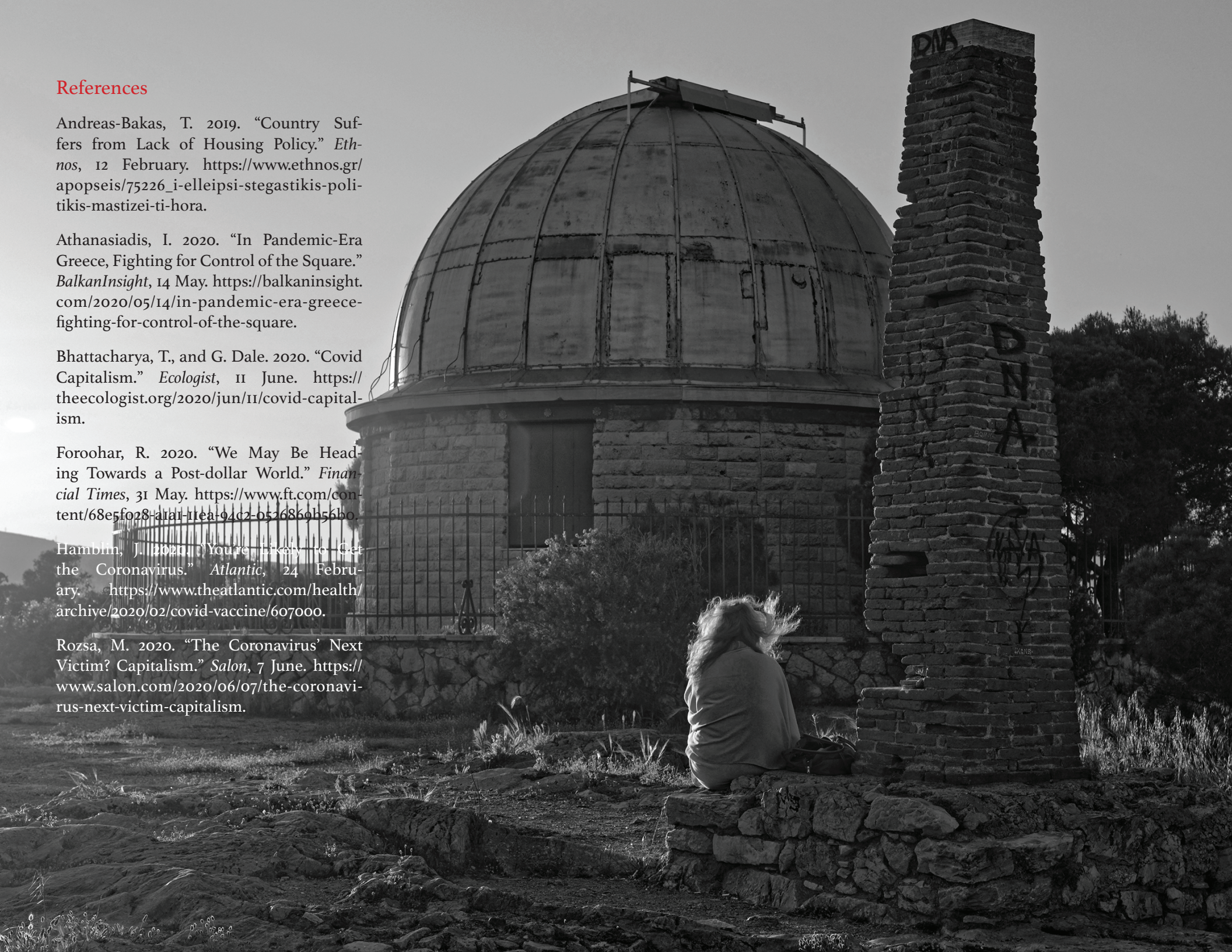
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<sup>1</sup>In an open letter explaining the pricing Gilead chose for the COVID-19 drug remdesivir—\$3,120 for a five-day course of treatment—Daniel O’Day (2020), the chairman and CEO of Gilead Sciences, wrote that the company chose to “price remdesivir well below” the savings that will result from shorter hospital stays. An investment bank analyst calls the price a “spectacularly good value” (Lupkin 2020). Critics of Gilead range from Public Citizen, which described the pricing as an “offensive display of hubris and disregard for the public,” to U.S. Representative Lloyd Doggett, a Democrat from Texas, who said that it was “an outrageous price for a very modest drug, which taxpayer funding saved from a scrap heap of failures” (Thorbecke 2020; Erman, Burger, and Maddipatla 2020). Both refer to the what Public Citizen estimates is over \$70 million of taxpayer money that Gilead received through federal grants for development and clinical trials of remdesivir (Thorbecke 2020). According to one analyst, total 2020 sales of remdesivir are likely to be about \$2.9 billion, while study and manufacturing costs are projected to be about

It can be tempting to view hoarders, price gougers, and people who refuse to wear masks during public health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic as selfish jerks with antisocial or even sociopathic tendencies. But focusing on individual “rule breakers” pulls them out of social context and conceals economic structures: capitalism stipulates profit seeking—and it does so with significant costs to public health. Price gouging hoarders are not “breaking rules.” Their entrepreneurial behavior is consistent with capitalist logic.

Antisocial “entrepreneurialism” occurs at multiple levels: from a student who charges classmates 50p (about US\$0.65) for single squirts of hand sanitizer (Harvey 2020), to people who stockpile and unashamedly resell cleaning sup-

At best, entrepreneurship is just another word for capitalistic behavior.

—“What Does Determine the Profit Rate? The Neoclassical Theories Presented in Introductory Textbooks,”  
Michele Naples and Nahid Aslanbeigui

## Theorizing Entrepreneurial Price Gouging: Interdependency, Injustice, and Hand Sanitizer

*Jennifer Cohen*

plies and toilet paper on eBay, Amazon, and Craigslist (Tiffany 2020), to drug companies that jack up prices for medications like insulin—and remdesivir (Thomas 2019).<sup>1</sup>

In the United States, the federal government failed to take responsibility for regulating the prices of necessities during the pandemic initially, leaving a void to be filled by private entities, some of which enacted more seemingly

ethical policies than government itself.<sup>2</sup> From a social-reproduction perspective, one would expect capitalist employers to respond if illness threatens their ability to extract surplus value through the less and less sustainable exploitation of increasingly ill workers. During the pandemic, people, especially women, may be forced to act as “shock absorbers” to mitigate this problem by providing home-based care for the sick and taking on additional household labor.

However, such mitigation extends the already fraught work of reproducing life in nonpandemic conditions, potentially to the detriment of health generally and women’s health in particular (Cohen and Venter 2020; Cohen 2019). In this relatively early stage in the pandemic, even at the local scale and even where the COVID-19 virus has caused many deaths among wage workers, the threat to profitability is a crisis of consumer demand, not (yet) one of incapacitated labor.

\$1.4 billion, leaving \$1.5 billion in pretax revenue (Nathan-Kazis 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Trump signed Executive Order 13,910 on 23 March 2020, prohibiting hoarding and price gouging related to health and medical resources, including N95 masks, respirators, ventilators, hydroxychloroquine (HCL), medical gowns, and other personal protective equipment. The order does not apply to consumer products like hand sanitizer. See Exec. Order No. 13,910., 85 Fed. Reg. 17001 (26 March 2020), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/03/26/2020-06478/preventing-hoarding-of-health-and-medical-resources-to-respond-to-the-spread-of-covid-19>.

Nonetheless, Amazon and eBay quickly banned secondhand sales of hand sanitizer and cleaning wipes, noting that these sales violated “fair pricing” policies (Terlep 2020; Tiffany 2020). eBay pointed to its “Disaster and Tragedy Policy,” which prohibits attempting “to profit from human tragedy or suffering.”<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, there is little political will to limit price gouging on \$700 EpiPens at the governmental level.

At the microentrepreneurial level, the profit seeking activity incumbent to capitalism, celebrated in more usual times, is decried during crises. Yet ambiguity around whether to applaud or punish profit seeking behavior is demonstrated by the case of the student selling single squirts of hand sanitizer, whose “dad was calling him up [from work] to let him know he’s a f#%\*ing legend” (Harvey 2020). A commenter on the *HuffPost* news story wrote,

“Give him ten years he’ll be a great businessman who understands supply and demand.” Commenters were overwhelmingly of the opinion that he should be commended for his “entrepreneurial genius.”

Despite unprecedented political action in the social interest during the pandemic, in which people fundamentally altered their lives to protect their health and the health of those around them, contradictory-but-internalized ideology

that embraces entrepreneurialism and economic thought dominates in the abstract. As of 1 July 2020, the Facebook post by the above-mentioned student’s mother had attracted 228,350 reaction icons: 154,009 were “Haha,” 65,508 were “Like,” 8,005 were “Love,” and 615 were “Wow”; 131 were “Angry,” 81 were “Sad,” and one was “Care.”<sup>4</sup> In the same moment that people are dying from COVID-19, stores have shortages of hand sanitizer because of hoarding and

price gouging. The cognitive dissonance is clear as profit seeking wins plaudits even as it causes deaths.

Where this activity is recognized as troubling, as in the case of two brothers in Tennessee, it is often framed in terms of the behavior of a few “bad apples,” which shames sellers while concealing the economic structure that compels exactly this behavior (Vigdor

2020). In comparison to the boy selling squirts of hand sanitizer, these entrepreneurial adults were given a chillier reception. With help from his brother, Matt Colvin spent thousands of dollars on 17,700 bottles of hand sanitizer to resell. Colvin was profiled in a *New York Times* article about his reselling that garnered almost 4,400 comments. After the article was published, he reported getting hate mail and death threats (Nicas 2020a, 2020b; Vigdor 2020).

<sup>3</sup> “Disaster and Tragedy Policy,” eBay, accessed 24 April 2020, <https://www.ebay.com/help/policies/prohibited-restricted-items/disaster-tragedy-policy?id=5051>.

<sup>4</sup> The Facebook post, published 11 March 2020, was shared 198,650 times and accrued 110,424 comments by 1 July 2020. The comments were overwhelmingly congratulatory. Of one hundred randomly selected for review, fifty from men and fifty from women, ninety were positive, seven were ambiguous, and three were negative. See J. Tompkins, “This is a picture of my teenage son just getting in from school,” Facebook, 11 March 2020, post linked from [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hand-sanitizer-school-suspension\\_n\\_5e6b071ec5b6dda30fc642ef](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hand-sanitizer-school-suspension_n_5e6b071ec5b6dda30fc642ef).

In another article about the price gouging brothers, Simkins wrote (2020), “It takes a unique perspective to witness the suffering of innocent people and think, ‘How can I turn this into a profitable enterprise?’” But does it? We are left with unresolved questions. How is it that this entrepreneurial, profit seeking perspective is at once “unique” and simultaneously the motor of capitalism? Why is the same entrepreneurialism that is apparently laudable under usual conditions shameful under unusual conditions? The obvious response is that this “profiteering” is different from “profiting.” But how? It cannot simply be because price gougers exploit (draw profits from) innocent people who are suffering; innocent people also suffer exploitation in the generation of profits through production. The answers lie in (a) the in/visibility of interdependency and (b) the in/visibility of exploitation and injustice in the spheres of production and circulation.

At the societal level there are two lines of thought at play that may appear compatible in the abstract but are contradictory in practice—and not only in disaster conditions. One obscures interdependency and exploitation while the other acknowledges both. The first posits entrepreneurialism as an ideal, self-motivated, masculinized, individualized mode of (socially fantasized) subjectivity (Madra and Ötselçuk 2010): he is rational economic man at his self-made manliest. In this social imaginary (and in mainstream economics), entrepreneurs’ gains are understood as merited, earned through innovation or risk bearing (Naples and Aslanbeigui 1996; Tsaliki 2006). Here, entrepreneurialism is seen as a unique talent put to work in profit seek-

ing activity. At the same time, however, if entrepreneurialism is just profit seeking, it is ubiquitous and foundational in an economic system driven by profit. As noted by Naples and Aslanbeigui (1996, 57), “Entrepreneurship is then just a euphemism for ‘being a capitalist.’” Echoing the sentiment, a commenter wrote of the boy selling squirters of sanitizer, “That’s awesome ... he’s a little capitalist.”

The second line of thought (and praxis) is solidarity. Such thinking recognizes human interdependency and shared interests. The move from the imaginary of the self-made man to the actually existing social world reveals the tangible ways in which men are, in fact, made.<sup>5</sup> Interdependency is a condition for reproducing human life. Herein lies the recognition that no man ever “made himself,” that people are produced, both physiologically through women’s [going into] labor and through ongoing effortful activity disproportionately done by women (Cohen 2019, 2018). This is not to suggest that men and their activities have nothing to do with said process; it is to point out that societies rely on women and their labor in fundamental ways that are erased by, and erased in, the mythology of the self-made man.<sup>6</sup>

In this nonindividualistic reality, price gouging during a pandemic renders injustice visible to all—even to those otherwise invested in entrepreneurial imaginaries—except for the most willfully resistant, egotistical, or thoughtless (Arendt 1963). Writes a commenter on the story on Colvin (Nicas 2020a), one of the brothers in Tennessee, “I am generally a free-market capitalist. But government’s role in a free market is to

<sup>5</sup> I continue using the terms “man” and “men” because of the ways in which both entrepreneurialism and social reproduction are gendered.

<sup>6</sup> For feminist critiques of *Homo economicus*, see Hewitson (1999) and Hewitson and Grapard (2011).

adjust incentives. Such pernicious exploitation should be punished.”

Interdependency in the “public” nature of public health is similarly made visible in the context of a pandemic. In the face of disasters, it is typical that price gougers are selling commodities perceived to have the potential to make a difference between life and death. Unique to a pandemic are the ways in which our individual health becomes more obviously contingent on the health of others. Therefore, others’ abilities to protect themselves and their health is a social interest—a public good. In response to Colvin’s hoarding and price gouging, a commenter acknowledging both interdependency and injustice wrote, “For every person that was deprived of necessary supplies due to callous profiteering not only affects the health of that person but of all others in a chain reaction that would have never happened but because of the disappeared supplies ...There is deep cruelty in this type of profiteering” (Nicas 2020a).

That type of profiteering is deemed unjust, while other forms of profit generation are socially understood as reasonable.<sup>7</sup> The term “profiteering” describes unreasonable profits in an acute crisis. In price gouging, then, profit seeking has gone too far. What “gone too far” means in

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terms of the site of profit seeking and the source of profit must be examined. First, injustice has been extended beyond the “hidden abode of production,” where exploitation is mystified, into the sphere of circulation, where it takes on a very visible form. Consequently, price gougers’ profits—gained from workers’ wages—appear unjust in the social imaginary while exploitation in production as the usual source of profit

remains mystified.<sup>8</sup> Theoretically, this injustice comes through an unjust price, which may be interpretable as a form of secondary exploitation.

Aquinas (n.d., 2nd pt. of 2nd pt., quest. 77, art. 1) addresses price gouging directly under “Fraud in Buying and Selling” in *Summa Theologica*. For Aquinas, all sales should be exchanges of equal value. He believed that under conditions that raise a buyer’s willingness to pay but do not raise a seller’s costs, selling something

for more than it is worth is unjust. Specifically, when the buyer is willing to pay a price above the worth of an item, the benefit that accrues to the buyer is not due to the seller but rather to the conditions impacting the buyer.

Similarly, Marx (1999) writes that under normal conditions, exchange of equivalents prevails. Marx identifies competition as the mechanism through which a price will reflect the underlying

<sup>8</sup> Most Marxists would argue that there is deep cruelty in capitalist profit generation in production as well, but exploitation is mystified by the illusion of equity between contracting parties in the labor market.

<sup>7</sup> See Erçel (2006) for a rich description and postcolonial analysis of this dissonance with respect to exploitation as orientalized in sweatshop discourse.



ing value of a commodity; commodities cannot be sold at prices that deviate from their values except in instances of “inexplicable privilege” for a seller. Further, in markets in which people are both buyers and sellers, any seller who gains from an above-normal price loses that gain when they are the buyer, facing the same above-normal price for the commodity themselves. Only when a buyer and seller are of different classes is profit realized in exchange. “To sell commodities above their value to such a class, is only to crib back again a part of the money previously given to it.” Marx is referring to buyers as a class. The example he offers is a conquered seller first paying tribute to a buyer, who then uses that money to purchase goods from the conquered seller, effectively paying for the goods with the seller’s own money. In contrast, a class of workers receives wages from capital and uses those wages to buy commodities from capital. For a capitalist class inclusive of owners of industrial, financial, and commercial capitals, to “crib back” an amount of money from wages paid to the working class that is greater than the value of commodities purchased appears consistent with price gouging.

There is some purview for theorizing price gouging as a redistributive technique, cribbing back money from the wage to capital and thereby redistributing, but not creating, value. It could be considered a form of secondary exploitation that takes place in the sphere of circulation. In volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx (1991) writes that secondary exploitation comes through financial or property relations and is considered archaic, but other theorizations identify such a process in wage theft (Rasmus 2016) and financial expropri-

ation (Lapavitsas 2009). Price gouging may also belong on this list.

A “natural” disaster throws open an extractive window—a window that opportunist entrepreneurs seek out. Under disaster conditions, buyers are likely to be willing to pay prices for damage-preventing or damage-mitigating commodities that are above the commodity’s worth. Contra Aquinas, the price gouging entrepreneur aims to capture money belonging to buyers who have the ability to pay a price above the worth of the commodity.<sup>9</sup> The profitability of such extractive windows can be high and might even lead entrepreneurs to create disasters or to intensify the disastrousness of those that are natural. This connection clarifies the relationship between hoarding and price gouging: for the entrepreneur, hoarding enhances the disaster conditions, increasing profitability and theoretically raising the rate of secondary exploitation.

Regardless of whether the high prices charged by price gougers are merely unjust or are a form of exploitation, price gouging during a pandemic (among other disasters) renders the injustice visible. Accordingly, social judgment is harsh. A commenter on a *New York Times* article went so far as to call Colvin “the new poster child for the banality of evil,” referring to Hannah Arendt’s body of work.<sup>10</sup>

The commenter is onto something but is not quite right. By my analysis above, Colvin is the poster child for *non-banal* evil. In the sphere of exchange, secondary “exploitation” is visible as unjust, inciting anger. In contrast, the banal form,

<sup>9</sup> Although “willingness to pay” is language more commonly used in economics, I distinguish between willingness to pay and ability to pay. In capitalism, buyers’ ability to pay is more important than their willingness to pay. Posing “willingness to pay” as key for buyers obscures the reality of the inequitably distributed resources that constrain one’s ability to pay, not one’s willingness.

<sup>10</sup> “As someone who lives in the communities this guy stripped ... it has been absolute madness trying to find hand sanitizer, masks, or even bleach. I have one friend in heart failure unable to get hand sanitizer and face masks. I and several more of my friends are immune suppressed. In the meantime, COVID just popped up in Chattanooga, Knoxville, and the Tri-Cities (places I bet he visited on his way to Kentucky), and this guy, the new poster child for the banality of evil, stripped all the store shelves from there to the border. What are immune suppressed people supposed to do? I hope he thinks long and hard about his 17,000 bottles of hand sanitizer when people start dying over here” (Nicas 2020a; emphasis added).

exploitation in production, is deemed reasonable and remains invisible. Hence, price gouging serves to highlight the banality of exploitation in production, not just the non-banal injustice in circulation. In “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” Arendt (1971, 417) defined the banality of evil as “the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer.” In the capitalist class process, exploitation on a giant scale is profit seeking. Its source is not an ideological conviction, although complementary ideology is constructed and revised, and ideological conviction grows with it. The point is precisely that it is *not* the wickedness of any given “bad apple” capitalist; it is capitalism itself that compels exploitation. While this injustice becomes apparent through price gouging during a crisis, it should not come as a surprise; profit maximization is a capitalist imperative.

It is, however, worthwhile to consider how this group of commercial capitalists rationalize and defend (or denounce, if “caught”) their activities when confronted with the moral questionability of their profits. Many of these entrepreneurs are already business owners, aside from the price gouging entrepreneurial venture, which makes their explanations even more intriguing.

In an article about the Colvin brothers, a reporter

asks about “the morality of hoarding products that can prevent the spread of the virus, just to turn a profit.” After casting about for an explanation of why his “contribution” merited remuneration, “Mr. Colvin said he was simply fixing ‘inefficiencies in the marketplace.’ Some areas of the country need these products more than others, and he’s helping send the supply toward the demand ... He thought about it more. ‘I honestly feel like it’s a public service,’ he added, ‘*I’m being paid for my public service*’” (Nicas 2020a; emphasis added). Colvin has made reselling products into an occupation from which he reportedly “earns”

over \$100,000 per year. Yet he appears never to have thought about what he is getting paid *for* in terms of his own efforts. In Colvin’s framing, the exchange is no longer even a private service; he claims it has public benefits. With respect to necessities for health, the opposite is true, of course: hoarding and price gouging

have public costs.

The price gougers’ self-reflections are both extraordinary and utterly ordinary, in the same way that entrepreneurial perspective is at once “unique” and foundational to capitalism. They seem defensive, anticipating judgement by others, but simultaneously, and stupefyingly, self-absorbed. Their two main defenses are that “I’m not a bad person” (or “I’m not *that* bad”) and that “others would do the same if I hadn’t.” The first case is self-congratulatory for not being *more* exploitative, defending himself, perhaps,

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from his own nagging doubts. One price gouger says, “I’m not trying to sell someone an eight-ounce bottle of hand sanitizer for \$100, which I’ve seen. *I’m not a bad person*” (Tiffany 2020; emphasis added). Returning to Colvin, a tearful denial: “It was never my intention to keep necessary medical supplies out of the hands of people who needed them,” he said, crying. *That’s not who I am as a person*. And all I’ve been told for the last 48 hours is how much of that person I am” (Nicas 2020b). They seem to want to distance themselves-as-people from themselves-as-entrepreneurs, as if these are conflicting, or even contradictory, identities. Perhaps this distancing reflects a realized, if only momentarily, incompatibility between the fantasy of self-made manliness and the reality of interdependency. Colvin’s rationalization of his price gouging as a “public service” could be interpreted

as an attempt to reconcile these conflicting identities. The entrepreneurs’ insistence may also be a demonstration of their own dissonance, being caught up in the individuated shaming of bad apples rather than a social indictment of the structures compelling their activities.

The parallels between Arendt’s analysis of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi and organizer of the holocaust, and these entrepreneurs’ own comments about themselves are eerie. Arendt (1963) described Eichmann as thoughtless, blank, and incapable of imagining himself in another’s position.

**These stories of entrepreneurialism are not amusing anecdotes. They suggest that capitalism grows capitalists, from children to adults, who seek to profit from human suffering. The stories are about societal values, which the pandemic reveals are gendered and racialized matters of life and death, in starker terms than usual.**

To demonstrate, she tells the story of the interrogation of Eichmann for war crimes in which he repeatedly relates—to the interrogator, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany—how unfair it was that he had been unable to ascend the Nazi SS hierarchy. Arendt writes, “What makes these pages of the examination so funny is that all this was told in the tone of someone who was sure of finding ‘normal, human’ sympathy for a hard-luck story” (50).

Similarly, with the 4,400 comments on the *New York Times* article, many commenters were aghast that Colvin seemed to expect the reader to pity him because Amazon and eBay removed his accounts, leaving him with no way to sell the sanitizer and other items he had hoarded. He said, “It was crazy money ... It’s been a huge amount of whiplash ... From being in a situation where what I’ve got coming and going could potentially put my family in a really good place financially to, ‘What the heck am I going to do with all of this?’” (Nicas 2020a). The commenters were not sympathetic.

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<sup>11</sup> The author's calculations use 2019 data available at "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 22 January 2020, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>.

Three-quarters of healthcare workers are women, 45 percent are women of color, and 22 percent are Black women (Bahn, Cohen, and Rodgers 2020).<sup>11</sup> Nursing occupations make up three of the five most common jobs held by Black women in the United States (Frye 2020). When men hoard and price gouge for items that impact public health, it is women who are put in harm's way. This is true in women's paid work and in the direct reproductive activities undertaken in households, where they may be exposed to the virus by sick family members. For many women, such as single mothers, quarantine is virtually impossible. Further, it can hardly have escaped the readers' notice that value is being redistributed from women to men, as it is redistributed from labor to commercial capital. Redistribution takes place both because women are disproportionately the buyers of these products and because the price gougers tend to be men, or at least they were in every instance of price gouging that I was able to find in the research process.

In addition to endangering individuals, especially women, the profit motive undermines healthcare system capacity when, for example, people hoard what are effectively necessities for health (Cohen, forthcoming). For many workers—potential demanders of health care should they fall ill—hoarding means they cannot take precautions to maintain their health. This is a dangerous situation for all, including the hoarders. Colvin shared one of his "death threats" with the *New York Times*. It read, "Your behavior is probably going to end up with someone killing you and your wife and your children" (Nicas 2020b). Maybe the author did intend it as a death threat, and Colvin would not be the first;

healthcare workers around the world have been threatened with violence during the pandemic (Gharib 2020). An alternative interpretation is that his entrepreneurial activities are putting his own family at risk of infection and death from COVID-19 by impeding the ability of others to take basic precautions.

Price gougers are not bad apples; they are emblematic of the basic principle of capitalism: profit seeking. It is only because the pandemic makes apparent, first, interdependency in public health and, second, the injustice and perhaps exploitation of extracting value, that their entrepreneurial behavior attracts attention and anger. The immediacy and high-risk nature of this context distinguish it from the usual, banal, seemingly reasonable value extracted in production.

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On 22 March 2020, Donald Trump tweeted (originally in block capitals): “We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself. At the end of the 15 day period, we will make a decision as to which way we want to go!” Trump appears to have come to this conclusion after watching *The Next Revolution with Steve Hilton* on Fox News.<sup>1</sup> On his show earlier that day, Hilton—the former director of strategy and close friend to British Prime Minister David Cameron,<sup>2</sup> before straining his relationship with the former prime minister by enthusiastically supporting Brexit—said, in his characteristically languid tone: “You know that famous phrase, ‘the cure is worse than the disease?’ That is exactly the territory we are hurtling towards.” Hilton then went on to quote an article from the *Guardian* that referred to a study that had calculated austerity measures were to blame for at least 130,000 deaths in the last decade (Helm 2019). Bearing in mind that Hilton had worked for the government that was largely responsible for these measures, it was a bizarre source to turn to. But perhaps that irony was lost on many U.S.-based viewers. This is also not to mention that modeling has predicted that the

<sup>1</sup> Steve Hilton (@NextRevFNC), “Don’t turn a public health crisis into America’s worst catastrophe,” Twitter, 22 March 2020, 10:25 p.m., <https://twitter.com/NextRevFNC/status/1241914037476175872>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Gove once remarked that “it is impossible to know where Steve ends and David begins” (Nelson 2015).

## Counting the Cost: COVID-19 and the Crisis of Utilitarianism

*Neil Vallelly*

potential deaths from COVID-19 are exponentially higher than the figures attributed to austerity. Hilton finished: “The years of austerity for America to pay the costs of this shutdown will be worse.” Here, Hilton flaunts his lucrative lack of imagination. Of course there will be austerity in the wake of the pandemic, he implies. What else could there be?

Hilton’s circular and amnesiac argument interlinks two dominant political rationalities in the early twenty-first century, both of which have been ruthlessly exposed by the pandemic. The first is *neoliberalism*. The COVID-19 pandemic will eventually end. The economy will be in ruins. Unemployment will be at record highs across the Global North. The 2008 financial crisis will look like a minor blip in comparison. Neoliberalism will be dead (again). And Hilton does not even stop for a moment to think that there might be any

other postpandemic policy measures than austerity. He displays here the characteristic complacency of those who have been in or around power since 2008, a complacency embodied in a deep-seated unwillingness to think beyond neoliberalism as a means of ordering the economy and social life.

Post-2008, many governments managed to convince vast swathes of the general populace that

social spending and benefit cheats were to blame for the crisis. In doing so, they could market austerity as the only fair response. This wave of aggressive austerity heralded an age of “new neoliberalism” that, as Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2019, xx) note in their book *Never-Ending Nightmare*, “openly adopted the paradigm of war against the population.”<sup>3</sup> But who are these governments going to blame this time? Some have turned on China, or the World Health Organization, but such notions are hardly valid reasons for imposing austerity on national citizens. Moreover, the pandemic has revealed the decay of health and social institutions in the neoliberal decades, especially since 2008, so that blaming social spending is no longer a viable avenue (not that this will stop many governments trying). Even the right-wing think tanks that aggressively pushed the austerity agenda in the last decade in the UK, such as the Adam Smith Institute, the Institute of Economic Affairs and Policy Exchange, and the Centre for Policy Studies, have conceded that the age of austerity is over (Inman 2020). There are very few plotlines that could come together to rebuild the austerity narrative. This time, governments would have to force austerity on their citizens without any accompanying narrative other than *we know of nothing else*.

Neoliberalism is supplemented by the more subtle yet equally persuasive political rationality of *utilitarianism*. The founder of utilitarianism, the eighteenth-century philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham, would have been very pleased with his moral theory’s lasting impact on public policy making. The conventional utilitarian logic approaches all events

from a consequentialist perspective, focusing on the action that will cause the least pain and maximize the most pleasure for the greatest number of people. For Bentham, this approach was not merely theoretical. Instead, it was an objective way of creating public policy by relying on evidence and rational prediction (or what is now known as “modeling”). In his book *The Happiness Industry*, the political economist William Davies (2015) charts the influence of utilitarianism on twenty-first-century obsessions with happiness and well-being, especially in public policy. Davies argues that utilitarianism was Jeremy Bentham’s attempt to eliminate the metaphysical from political and legal policy in the late eighteenth century. In this respect, Bentham was “the inventor of what has since become known as ‘evidence-based policymaking,’ the idea that government interventions can be cleansed of any moral and ideological principles, and be guided purely by facts and figures” (17).

The best measurement for pleasure and pain, Bentham (2003, 117) concluded, was money. He wrote: “The Thermometer is the instrument for measuring the heat of the weather: the Barometer the instrument for measuring the pressure of the Air ... Money is the instrument for measuring the quantity of pain and pleasure.” In such a world, financial greed is not only justifiable at the level of ethics but actively encouraged at the level of governance and social relations. Also, if money is the best measurement of happiness, then the free market can act as the normative mechanism through which happiness can be judged and distributed. Consequently, the role of government becomes to safeguard the market. As Davies (2015, 27) writes, “By putting out there

<sup>3</sup> And see “New Neoliberalism” by Davies (2016).

the idea that money might have some privileged relationship to our inner experience, beyond the capabilities of nearly any other measuring instrument, Bentham set the stage for the entangling of psychological research and capitalism that would shape the business practices of the twentieth century.” Furthermore, a new breed of psychologists and social scientists has emerged in the early twenty-first century, armed with contemporary behavioral science and psychology, neuroscience, and data analytics and claiming to have irrefutable empirical evidence of pleasure and pain in neural pathways and affective responses—evidence that contemporary governments rely on heavily to push forward “evidence-based” policies.

The philosophical legitimacy of utilitarianism has gradually waned over the centuries since Bentham’s original theories. Marx (1976, 758) was especially scathing of Bentham’s work, calling him, in the first volume of *Capital*, “the arch-philistine ... that soberly pedantic and heavy-footed oracle of the ‘common sense’ of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.” He continues his attack in a footnote, describing Bentham as a “purely English phenomenon” and claiming that “in no time and in no country has the most homespun manufacturer of commonplaces ever strutted about in so self-satisfied a way.” He finishes: “I should call Mr. Jeremy a genius in the way of bourgeois stupidity” (758–9n51). Utilitarianism’s emphasis

on the consequences of an action meant that it could never properly overcome its potential to justify the most heinous of human-rights abuses. Perhaps more crucially, utilitarianism could not sidestep the philosophical problems of how to define utility and happiness and, particularly, whom should be called upon to judge them. Invariably, the white European (perhaps even just white English) male became the normative judge of utility, which was particularly useful for imperial governments in the nineteenth century and beyond.

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Utilitarianism has certainly not disappeared from the discipline of philosophy, with new variants such as two-level or preference utilitarianism emerging in the late twentieth century, the latter practiced by the high-profile ethicist Peter Singer. But it would be fair to say that the Benthamite utilitarian tradition has lost a significant amount of phil-

osophical validity. However, as the philosopher Jonathan Wolff (2006, 2) notes, “While philosophers have turned away from maximizing consequentialism, public policy decision making has embraced it.” In the neoliberal decades, utilitarian logic has become predominantly economic in character, in the sense that almost all policy making responds to one simple question: what is the least amount of funding (cost) required to keep a service or system functioning (benefit)? These calculations usually take the form of cost-benefit analysis, which draws on data and



modeling to ascertain whether a policy is worth the financial cost.

Wolff (2006, 2) observes that cost-benefit analysis is used across a vast range of policy areas: “From the building of a new airport to the permissibility of performing a particular animal experiment.” The advantage of cost-benefit analysis, we are told by its devotees, is that it removes prejudice or subjective reasoning from decision making, much like Bentham thought utilitarianism could do to moral philosophy. But Wolff implies that the real attraction to cost-benefit analysis is that it financializes all activities, even subjecting each human life to financial valuation. The problem, he identifies, is that cost-benefit analysis “in its purest form is a particularly crude form of consequentialism: consequentialism of money.” It is thus easy to see why philosophers might disregard cost-benefit analysis as a flawed morality, but policy makers view it as a magical formula for determining the distribution of public funds. A consequentialism of money is exactly what any treasury desires as it attempts to map the future.

For his reading of the pandemic, Hilton undertook a simple cost-benefit analysis. He acknowledged that there might be a way of limiting the amount of infections and deaths as a result of COVID-19, but these all involve shutting down the vast majority of economic life. The benefit would be a much smaller loss of human life, but

the economic cost would be catastrophic. But if we do not shut down the economy, he suggested, then the loss of human life might be catastrophic, but the economy might survive. In hushed and solemn tones, Hilton dressed up this cutthroat utilitarian logic as a deep concern for the welfare of the everyday citizen.<sup>4</sup> He said, “Our ruling class and their TV mouthpieces whipping up fear over this virus, they can afford an indefinite shutdown. Working Americans can’t.” Never mind that many workers are fearful of returning to work in the midst of a pandemic,

or that it is actually the contemporary ruling classes—large corporations and business owners—who have been pushing to restart the economy. None of these facts really concern Hilton, or Fox News for that matter. The ultimate point of Hilton’s diatribe is to remind viewers that the economy and

the financial system are much more important than the lives of everyday citizens, even if he disguises this belief as a concern for those same citizens. For those who have benefitted from this utilitarian outlook throughout the neoliberal decades, the kind of state intervention and social policies enacted to combat the pandemic are illogical. The financial valuation of human life is far too high, they conclude.

This cost-benefit imbalance has plagued many initial governmental responses to the virus. In the UK, Boris Johnson spoke in early March of “taking it on the chin” and letting the disease

<sup>4</sup> Hilton, “Don’t turn a public health crisis into America’s worst catastrophe.”

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“move through the population, without taking as many draconian measures.” He spoke of “bizarre autarkic rhetoric” coming from the rest of the world, which might “trigger a panic and desire for market segregation.” His advisors spoke of “herd immunity” and “flattening the curve,” of mitigating rather than suppressing the virus. Herd immunity is Utilitarianism 101, approaching the COVID-19 virus from a purely consequentialist perspective. The herd-immunity strategy allows the virus to spread with the hope that when it has infected approximately 80 percent of the population, the antibodies developed to fight the virus by the infected part of the population protect the 20 percent who are uninfected. The illness will therefore kill a certain proportion of those infected in the initial stages but, in the long run, the virus will be held in check. Thus, according to the herd-immunity logic, the long-term benefits outweigh the short-term costs, and a certain number of deaths is deemed palatable.

Johnson’s amaurotic chief advisor, Dominic Cummings, reportedly pushed the herd-immunity strategy forcefully in the initial stages of the pandemic, with his approach summarized by Tory ministers, according to one newspaper report, as: “Herd immunity, protect the economy, and if some pensioners die, too bad” (Shipman and Wheeler 2020). By mid-March,

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however, Johnson, Cummings, and other members of the cabinet were infected with the virus, and Cummings performed an abrupt U-turn on the herd-immunity theory after modeling predicted that the mitigation approach could lead to at least 250,000 deaths. An initial utilitarian approach had proved disastrous, and any kind of benefit had been eliminated from the cost-benefit ratio. There will be unprecedented deaths in the UK as a result of this initial approach, and the economy will still be in ruins. This is a cost-cost scenario.

The pervasiveness of utilitarian logic was not confined to the UK and United States in the early stages of the pandemic. In New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has been rightly credited with a proactive and urgent response. But her decision to put New Zealand into lockdown at a very early stage did not

go down too well in parts of the business community. A prominent businessman and former leader of the Opportunities Party, Gareth Morgan, chastised Dr. Souxsie Wiles, a public-health academic, who argued that the lockdown needed to stay in place after many were calling for its abandonment after only two weeks. Morgan berated Wiles on Twitter (with barely disguised misogyny): “Do you have any appreciation of how important the economy is? ... The official value of a life in NZ is \$10k (ask Pharmac) ... cost so far = \$5bn! Wake up!”<sup>5</sup> PHARMAC

<sup>5</sup> Gareth Morgan (@garethmorgannz), “Do you have any appreciation of how important the economy is?,” Twitter, 13 April 2020, 2:35 a.m., <https://twitter.com/garethmorgannz/status/1249586995858264070>.

is the governmental agency that funds medicine and medical equipment in New Zealand. According to Morgan, this agency has managed to render redundant millennia of Western philosophical reflection on the value and meaning of life. Turns out, life is worth \$10,000 New Zealand dollars (NZD). If only Plato had known this, it might have saved us all a lot of hassle.

Morgan's calculation of the value of life raises many questions, however. For one, his economic valuation is not only ethically indefensible but also empirically problematic. Morgan had a friend who was denied a medical treatment that cost \$10,000 NZD. The friend subsequently died. Morgan uses this example as evidence for the universal cost of a life, which he then puts into his version of the utilitarian calculator. As of 14 June 2020, New Zealand has twenty-one deaths from COVID-19, thus equaling \$210,000 NZD, according to Morgan's equation. If the economic cost was \$5 billion NZD in mid-April when Morgan tweeted Wiles, then we can assume it is much higher now, even though parts of the New Zealand economy opened up again in early May. Such a disparity between economic cost and social benefit is unthinkable under utilitarian political rationality. The cost-benefit ratio is far too unbalanced.

But the pandemic seriously undermines the logic of utilitarian policy making. Cost-benefit analy-

sis is all well and good in the abstract, especially if the human cost emerges over a long period of time. Austerity, for example, has undoubtedly contributed to many deaths in the UK and beyond, as Hilton even observes, but its effect is indirect. Austerity does not infect the body, clog the lungs, or stop the heart. It puts people in positions where they are more likely to experience such things, but it does not appear on any records as the cause of death. The effects of austerity can therefore be hidden by governments,

**When the world stops turning, as it has in the early stage of this decade, and when we really need health care, welfare, education, and social care, none of these institutions or services are capable of effectively providing the aid that they are supposed to because they have all been focusing on doing something else: namely, maximizing benefits (financial profits) and minimizing costs.**

even translated into a lack of sufficient personal care, work ethic, or responsibility on behalf of the deceased. But when thousands of citizens die daily from the same virus, cost-benefit analysis can no longer hide behind the surface of everyday life. Suddenly, policy makers must directly calculate

deaths versus the economy. And no matter how ruthless and utilitarian a government might be, this is a very difficult sell to the general populace. Most governments have buckled under this pressure, favoring some kind of state intervention that will irrevocably damage the economy but will limit the loss of life—even if in many cases, like in the United States and UK, these interventions have come far too late. There is also the danger that many countries, out of fear of complete economic meltdown, will reemerge far too early from lockdown procedures only to find themselves in the midst of a second wave



of infections and even worse economic devastation. There is no cost-benefit model that has the capacity to protect human life and the economy at the same time.

Over the last four decades, health care, welfare, education, social care, and the like have all been subjected to utilitarian scything. Hospitals, for instance, have been cut back to bare levels of staffing and equipment, with short-term profits, high patient turnover, and access to governmental funding prioritized over patient welfare and staff resources. Care work has been increasingly casualized, with many workers employed on zero-hour contracts that cut costs on wages but endanger the people whom these workers care for. Universities likewise maximize financial benefits by cutting costs on permanent academic staff, relying instead on a vast army of precarious and casual lecturers and tutors. But when the world stops turning, as it has in the early stage of this decade, and when we really need health care, welfare, education, and social care, none of these institutions or services are capable of effectively providing the aid that they are supposed to because they have all been focusing on doing something else: namely, maximizing benefits (financial profits) and minimizing costs.

It is clear, therefore, that among the series of crises this pandemic has engendered, we are witnessing a crisis of utilitarianism. But this is not

merely a philosophical or abstract crisis. Utilitarianism has been at the heart of governmental power and capitalist expansion since the early nineteenth century. After all, Bentham's aim was to reform social and legal policy and to rid philosophy of the metaphysical and replace it with rational and predictable calculations of human emotion. The philosophical limitations of such a project have been outweighed by its potential to justify the exertion of capitalist power over citizens under the ethical dictate that the consequences of such exertions of power are deemed to be for the benefit of the majority of people

**Utilitarianism has therefore provided ethical justification for the expropriation of natural resources and public property and the exploitation of labor power under the myth that maximizing productive activity will eventually lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people.**

in the long run. In the mid-nineteenth century, utilitarianism was used to justify colonial expansion under the rubric of what the moral philosopher Bernard Williams (1985, 108–10) later called “Government House utilitarianism,” an elitist ethics that posited English legal and moral codes as vastly

more civilized to those existing in the continents outside Europe. In the late nineteenth century, utilitarianism overtly made its way into economic science, primarily through the works of the early neoclassical economist William Stanley Jevons. Davies (2015, 50) argues that “Jevons's landmark contribution was to plant [the utilitarian] vision of a calculating hedonist firmly in the marketplace. Bentham was seeking mainly to reform government policy and punitive institutions, which acted on the public in general. But Jevons converted utilitarianism into a theory of

rational consumer choice.” The ramifications of Jevons’s amalgamation of utilitarianism and rational consumer choice are felt most keenly in the hyperconsumerized and marketized society we live in today.

Simplest of all, any philosophy that prioritizes the maximization of utility naturally overlaps with capitalist discourses of productivity and accumulation, especially if economic growth, output, and wealth generation are politically constructed as the most useful courses of action for both individual and social happiness. Utilitarianism has therefore provided ethical justification for the expropriation of natural resources and public property and the exploitation of labor power under the myth that maximizing productive activity will eventually lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. But, instead, mass utility maximization has only further enriched the capitalist class, with the actual work of utility maximization performed by lower classes who receive few of the benefits of that utility maximization. The idea that utility maximization might actually lead to some kind of collective or social benefit is thus precluded in capitalist social relations. Utility maximization can only head in one direction, away from those who actually produce utility and toward those who either own the means through which utility is maximized or get to judge what utility looks like. This is abundantly clear in the age of globalization, in which the exploitation required to achieve utility maximization has taken on a new geographical formation, with the Global South maximizing utility for the Global North. Instead of leading to a prosperous future for the vast majority, utility maximization under capitalist

conditions can only entrench international class relations, trapping vast swathes of humanity in intergenerational forms of poverty, exploitation, and immiseration while ensuring the consolidation of wealth in the hands of an ever-decreasing few.

All of this is to say that a crisis of utilitarianism is simultaneously a crisis of capitalism and power. This is precisely why certain politicians, advisors, and media mouthpieces, like Hilton or Morgan, are ranting against the preventative approach to the pandemic. They know that neoliberal hegemony depends on utilitarian policy making, because when governments stop thinking purely in terms of the calculation of financial costs and benefits, as most have been forced to do during the pandemic, then suddenly the logic of neoliberalism makes very little sense. And if a crisis of utilitarianism is simultaneously a crisis of capitalism and power, then it also presents an opportunity to confront capitalist social and power relations. The pandemic has forced a reimagining of cost and benefit, one that aligns more closely with social-democratic and, more hopefully, left-socialist conceptions of these terms. We can expand costs far beyond the narrow realm of the financial to include social, ecological, emotional, and physical. Benefit can be judged not just by profits and productivity but also by collective experiences of the social and the environment. We can leave behind the “bourgeois stupidity” of Benthamite utilitarianism, once and for all.

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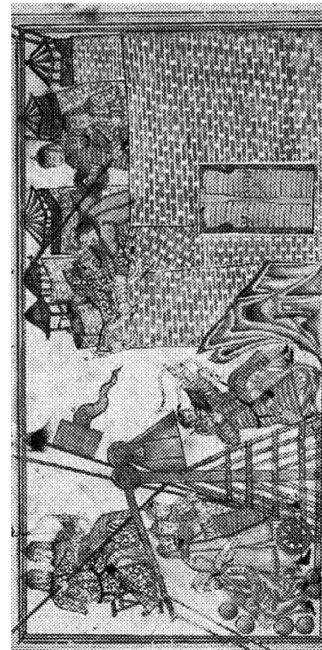
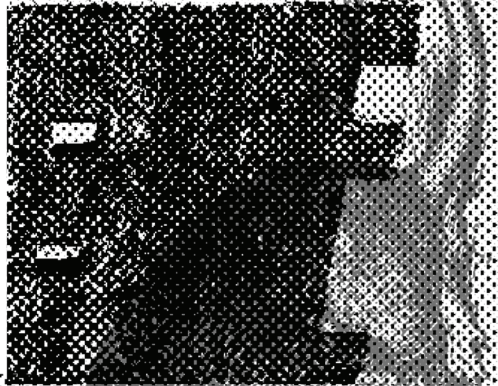
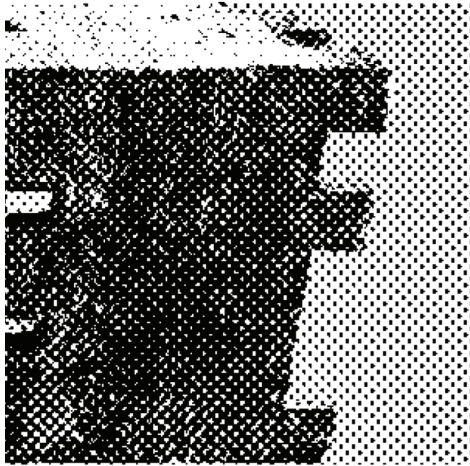
## **DISEASE / CONTROL**

*Andy Broadey,  
Félix de Rosen,  
& Richard Hudson-Miles*



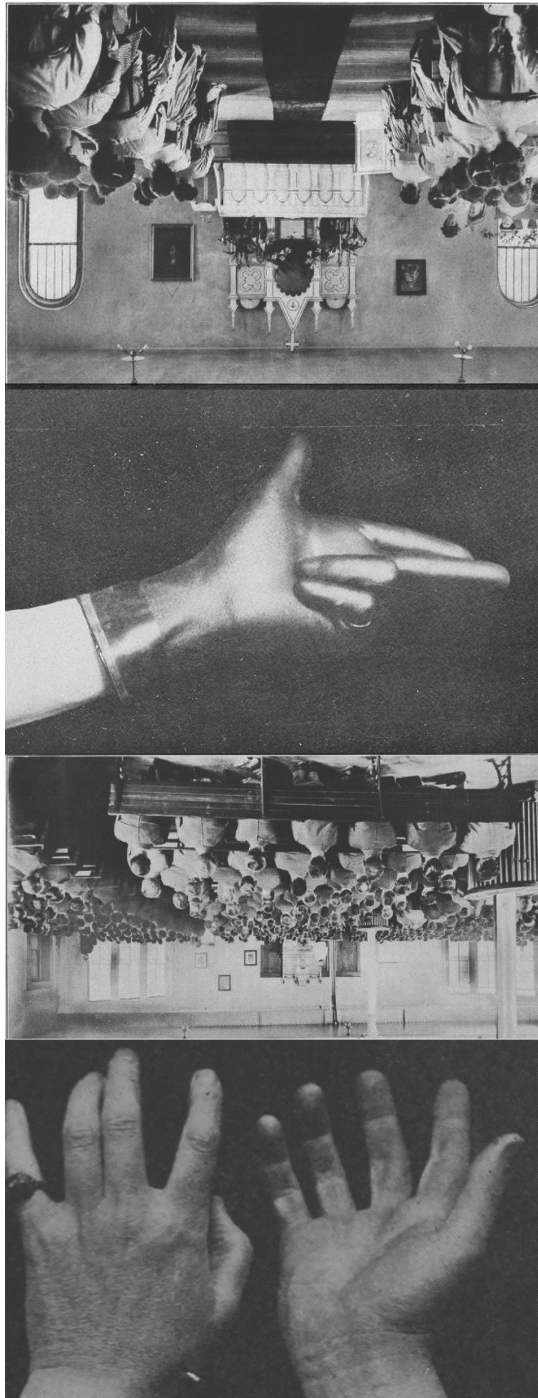
Because of its highly visible and disfiguring effects, leprosy was feared throughout the Middle Ages. Its mark was that of a malevolent evil, presumed to be as contagious as the disease itself. As Foucault ([1977] 1995, 198) argues, this disease gave rise to “practices of exclusion” such as leper colonies in which the afflicted were left to their doom and society, purged of this pestilence, could imagine itself pure. Spinalonga is a beautifully sunny Cretan island that was fortified by the Venetians in 1578 as a defense against the Ottoman threat but also as a base for the military to protect trade routes. From 1903–57 the island was used as a leper colony, one of the last active in Europe. Despite entering into the fortified compound through a door ominously named “Dante’s Gate,” the lepers were given sustenance, medical aid, and social-security payments. This social care was a significant advance over the previous treatment of lepers, around Crete or elsewhere, who had been forced to live in exile or hide in the darkness of caves.



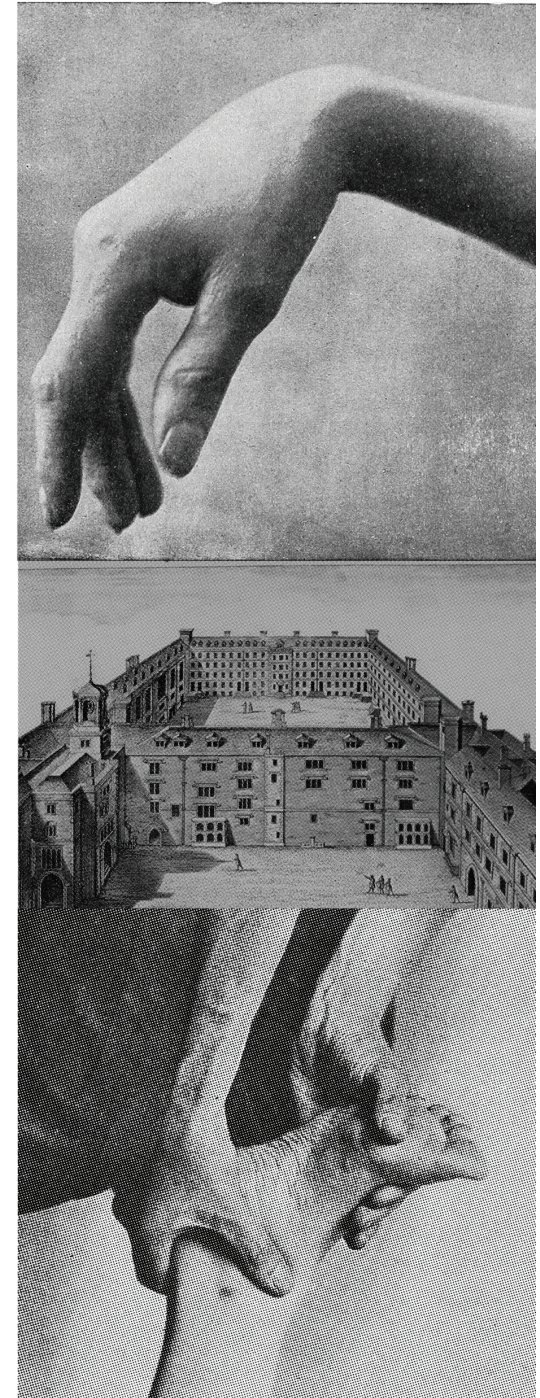


Coming from the East, the “Black Death” reached the shores of Italy in 1348 and eventually would kill over twenty-five million people, an estimated third of Europe’s population. Also known as the “Pestilence” or the “Great Mortality,” this disease was the worst pandemic ever to afflict humanity. Likely named after the black-blue swellings that appeared on the infected or the black rats that carried and transmitted the disease, this name also betrays a general logocentrism within Western culture—recognized by Georges Bataille’s ([1929] 1985, 20–3) essay “The Big Toe” but still evident today—that demarcates whiteness as the index of justice, light, and the good and darkness as that of evil, maleficence, and disease. A paranoid and apocryphal tale designed to demonstrate the baseness of the Mongols recounts how they sacked the city of Kaffa by catapulting the diseased and dying over the city walls. Giovanni Boccaccio, resident in Venice during the time, found inspiration in these dark times for his *Decameron* (1353), a book of one hundred stories told by a group of ten young white Florentines to pass the time as they escaped the darkness of the city for two weeks.



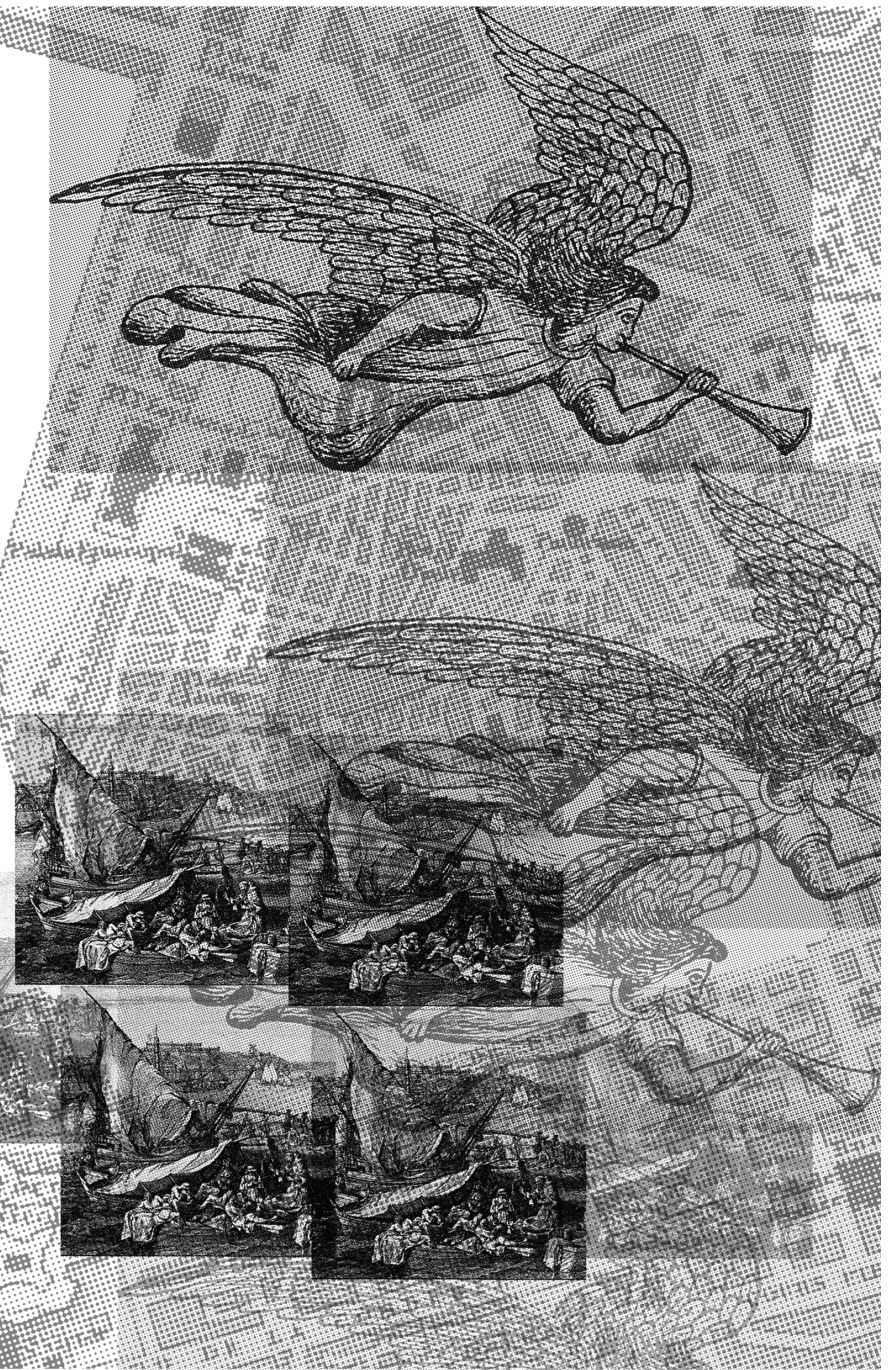
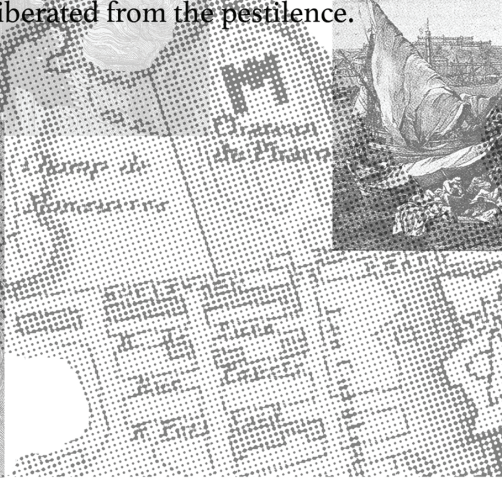
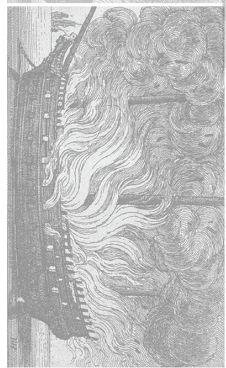


The “Great Confinement,” analyzed by Foucault ([1965] 1988, 43) in *Madness and Civilisation*, refers to the mass institutional incarceration of the criminal, the poor, the insane, and the unemployed across Europe in the seventeenth century. In London this found its expression through the establishment of four “Houses of Correction”: Bridewell, London (1553); Clerkenwell, Middlesex (1616); Southwark, Surrey (1724); and Tothill Fields, Westminster (1618). The latter was condemned as unsafe and unhealthy and moved to Hangman’s Acre, St. George’s Field (1772). Though these institutions were paid for by a tax, the public was also encouraged to support these institutions through voluntary donations. The “Justices of the Peace” used these Houses of Correction as a way to avoid the bureaucracy of formally charging petty criminals; the inmate demographic mainly consisted of prostitutes, thieves, and the “loose, idle and disorderly” ([www.londonlives.org/](http://www.londonlives.org/), 2020). Inside, convicts were forced to work, usually beating hemp, the idea being that hard work would improve the moral fiber of inmates and leave them with no time or energy for deviant activity. Gradually, society recognized the folly of these institutions wherein petty criminals associated with the murderous, the immoral, and the insane in a melting pot that amplified deviance rather than correcting it.





On 25 May 1720, the Grand Saint-Antoine, a three-masted French merchant ship, sailed into the port of Marseille. Since departing from Lebanon two months earlier, nine of its passengers had died. Following protocols designed to prevent disease outbreaks, Marseille's health bureau ordered the ship, its passengers, and its cargo of precious silks to be held in quarantine on a nearby island. However, under pressure from silk merchants eager to bring their commodities quickly to market, the bureau allowed the early transfer of the cargo to the mainland. On 20 June, a woman died abruptly in downtown Marseille, an area of narrow streets and dense housing. She was the first victim of community transmission of the Great Plague of Marseille, a pandemic of bubonic plague caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. By the middle of August, the death count had reached more than one thousand per day. By then, the wealthiest had fled, along with many government officials. Bodies were left on the streets, and prisoners were forced to carry them toward mass graves. Fearing the spread of the pandemic, King Louis XV sent thirty thousand soldiers to enforce a strict quarantine over the entire region. Fifty miles north of Marseille, he requisitioned local villagers to build a seventeen-mile-long drystone wall to prevent escape. As Foucault ([1975] 1995, 198) recognized, spatial measures brought in to combat the spread of the plague—such as curfews, barriers, and other forms of civilian lockdown—combined with new forms of “hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing” to generate a new political dream of a perfectly disciplined society. Nevertheless, every year the Basilica of the Sacred Heart holds a special mass honoring a promise made in 1722 to annually give thanks if the city were liberated from the pestilence.







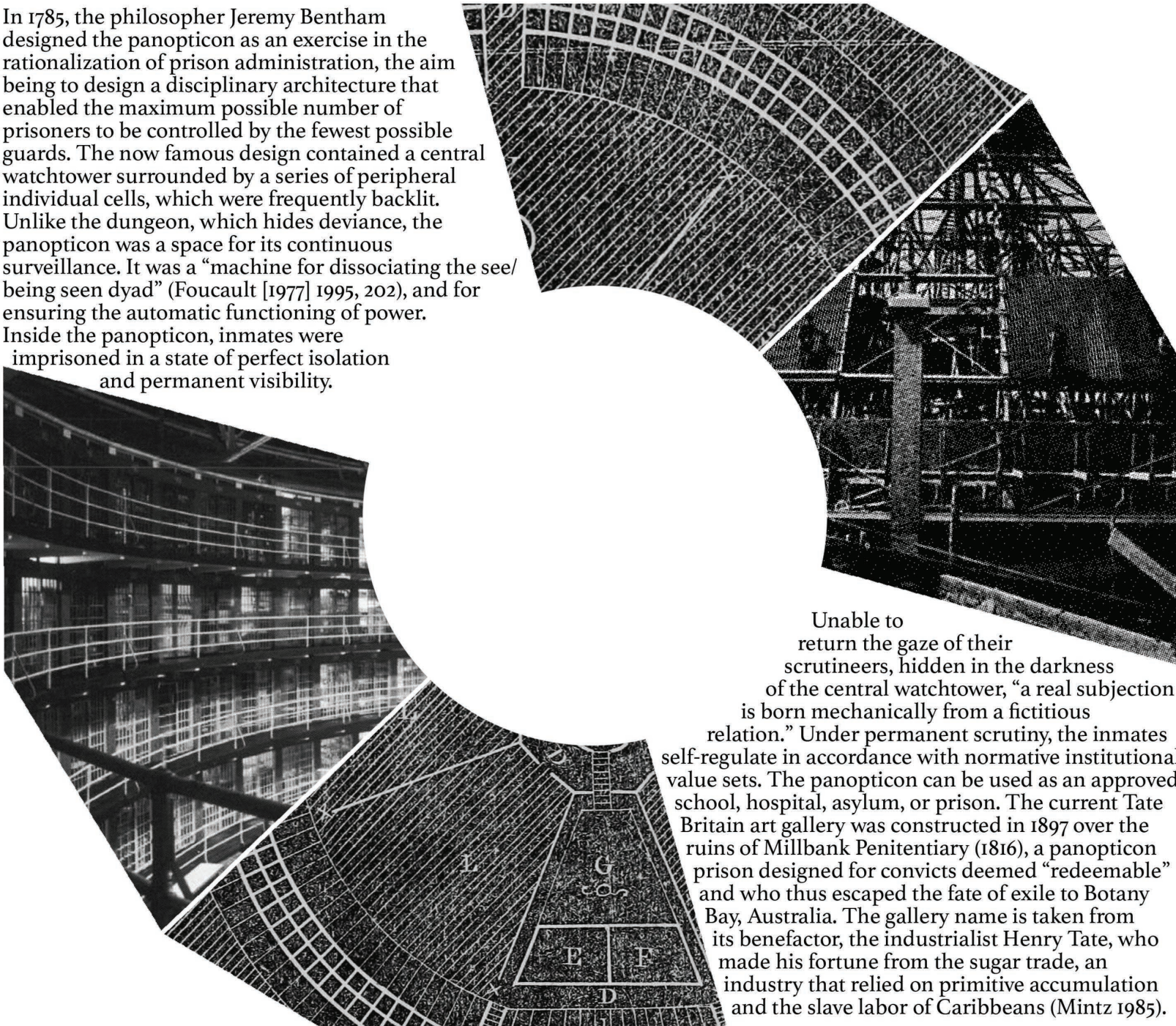
Paris is known globally as La Ville-Lumière, the “City of Light,” a name that currently seduces tourists but can be traced back to the reign of the “Sun King,” Louis XIV. In order to spread his magnificent light and sovereign power to all corners of the city, the king appointed Gabriel Nicolas de la Reynie as the first lieutenant general of the Paris police on 15 March 1667. De la Reynie established the world’s first modern police force, whose primary objectives were the protection of the bourgeois areas of the city and the repression of its slums. A key tool in this regard was light: the streets and bridges were filled with lanterns, making them easier to police, and citizens were also encouraged to light their windows with candles to expose the criminality that hid in Paris’s dark, medieval alleyways. More extreme was Napoleon III’s cure for this labyrinthine, dark, and uncontrollable city architecture. He appointed Georges

Hausmann to bulldoze wide thoroughfares through the medieval center of Paris, creating less places for criminals to hide but also allowing easy access to the city center for his military in case of a popular rebellion against his dictatorship. Hausmannization started a process of gentrification that forced the poorer classes to the periphery of the city, preserving the center as a sanitized bourgeois and upper-class zone. The contemporary spectacle of Paris illuminated is therefore also a performance of political power and a celebration of society surveilled. Its grands boulevards, which now host a variety of designer boutiques to titillate the desires of both tourists and the Parisian bourgeoisie, are simultaneously the spaces of affirmative culture and discipline.





In 1785, the philosopher Jeremy Bentham designed the panopticon as an exercise in the rationalization of prison administration, the aim being to design a disciplinary architecture that enabled the maximum possible number of prisoners to be controlled by the fewest possible guards. The now famous design contained a central watchtower surrounded by a series of peripheral individual cells, which were frequently backlit. Unlike the dungeon, which hides deviance, the panopticon was a space for its continuous surveillance. It was a “machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad” (Foucault [1977] 1995, 202), and for ensuring the automatic functioning of power. Inside the panopticon, inmates were imprisoned in a state of perfect isolation and permanent visibility.



Unable to return the gaze of their scrutineers, hidden in the darkness of the central watchtower, “a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation.” Under permanent scrutiny, the inmates self-regulate in accordance with normative institutional value sets. The panopticon can be used as an approved school, hospital, asylum, or prison. The current Tate Britain art gallery was constructed in 1897 over the ruins of Millbank Penitentiary (1816), a panopticon prison designed for convicts deemed “redeemable” and who thus escaped the fate of exile to Botany Bay, Australia. The gallery name is taken from its benefactor, the industrialist Henry Tate, who made his fortune from the sugar trade, an industry that relied on primitive accumulation and the slave labor of Caribbeans (Mintz 1985).





The recent death of George Floyd at the hands of a racist police force has renewed discussions about their fitness for purpose. Though beyond the “overtone window” of the liberal mainstream media, the current politics of the street is forcing them to engage with contemporary activist calls to defund the police, calls that also question the historical legitimacy of the police per se.

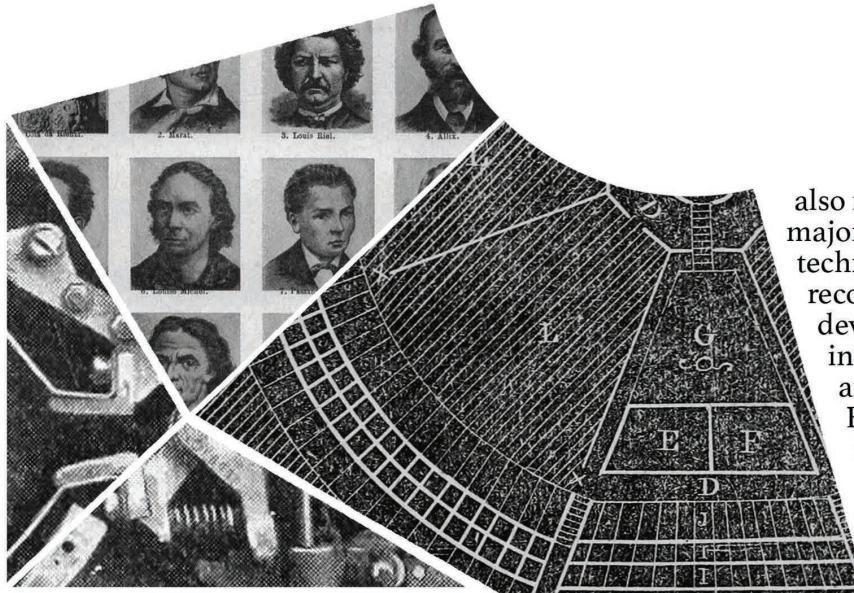
Dominant-hegemonic ideology has naturalized the existence of the police within society, disguising the fact that this repressive state apparatus (Althusser 1971, 142–3) is a relatively modern invention. The first formal U.S. police force was established in Boston in 1838, primarily to protect mercantile capitalism. Boston merchants successfully argued that police costs should come from the public purse, as the police operated for the common good. However, the call for an organized police force in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came primarily from the South, especially from those with a historical vested interest in the slave system. In the UK, shortly after the military repression of unarmed civilian demonstrators at the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, the police force was invented in 1829 by Robert Peel to suppress the threat of an increasingly organized industrial proletariat. A secondary function of the police force was to control the public space of the city, which the proletariat needed for mass rallies, and to clear commercial spaces of the undesirable characters that might otherwise affect commercial trade or the general spectacle of the city.



For Foucault ([1975] 1995, 209), “Panopticism is the general principle of a new ‘political anatomy’ whose object and end are not the relations of sovereignty but the relations of discipline.” It is

the discipline-mechanism: a functional mechanism that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come. The movement from one project to the other, from a schema of exceptional discipline to one of a generalized surveillance, rests on a historical transformation: the gradual extension of the mechanisms of discipline throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, their spread throughout the whole social body, the formation of what might be called in general the disciplinary society.

Between the years 1860–1909, Cesare Lombroso took thousands of portrait

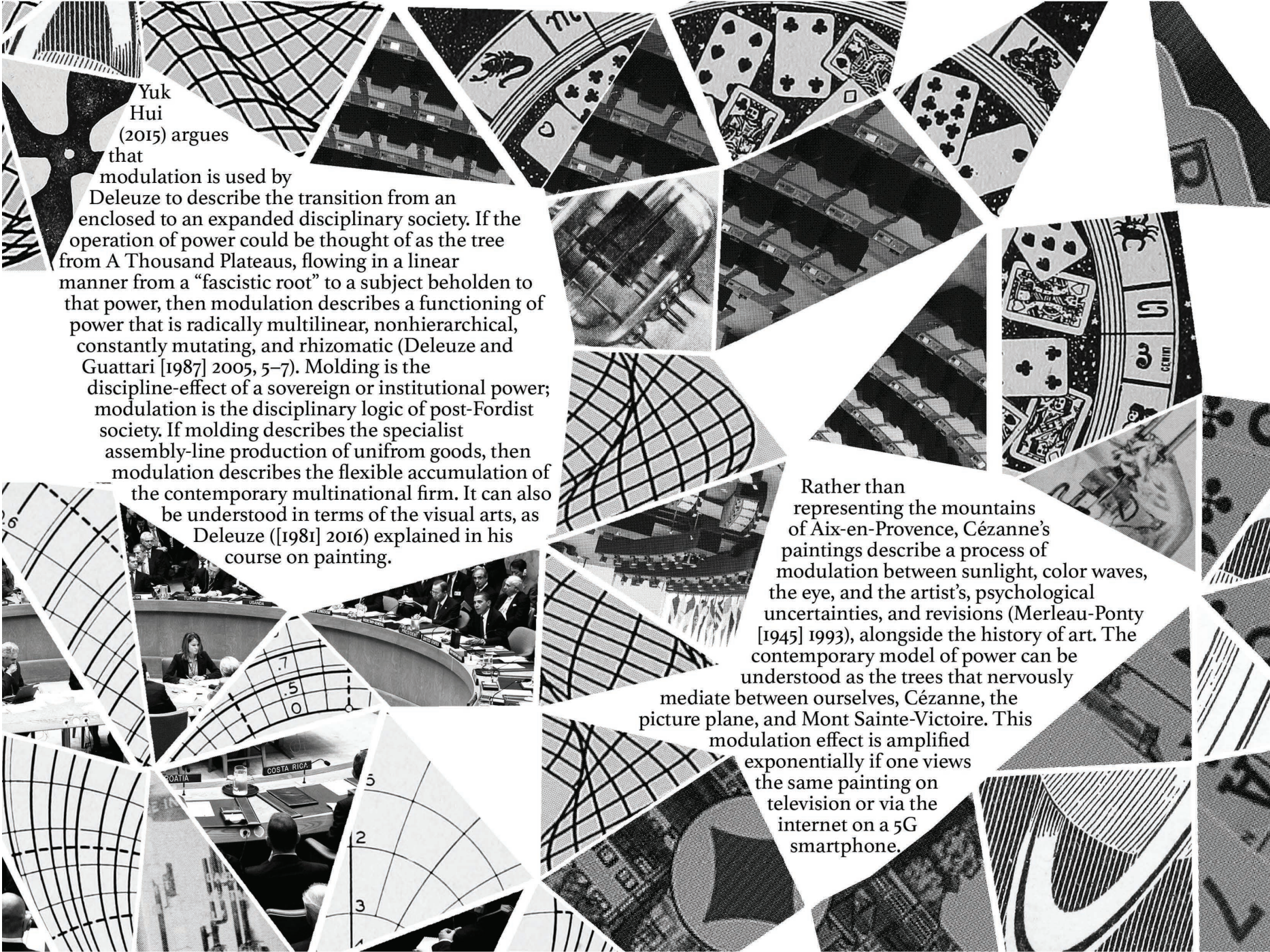


photos of individuals who were considered socially deviant in order to develop his theory of social atavism: the idea that criminality could be identified by physiognomy. Phrenologists regularly made death masks of hanged criminals as demonstrable proofs of their theses. These methods quickly gained favor with the police force, and Lombroso’s photos were even used as evidence to convict in courts. Subjects included murderers, the insane, ethnic minorities, lesbians, and others deemed abnormal. Lombroso’s work is widely regarded as pioneering modern criminology, but it also marks the advent of panoptic surveillance society. The majority of contemporary police work relies on surveillance technology for convictions. The NYPD currently uses facial recognition databases to identify suspects and also uses “mobile device forensic tools” to access metadata from mobile phones, including search histories, location, encrypted communications, and biometric data such as fingerprints or face ID’s. The Brennan Center for Justice has recently made a freedom of information request to the NYPD to disclose information related to their use of such data to develop “predictive policing” technologies to prevent future crime, in a similar manner to the hi-tech methods employed by the privatized police force in Paul Verhoeven’s film *Robocop* (1987).









Yuk  
Hui  
(2015) argues  
that

modulation is used by Deleuze to describe the transition from an enclosed to an expanded disciplinary society. If the operation of power could be thought of as the tree from *A Thousand Plateaus*, flowing in a linear manner from a “fascistic root” to a subject beholden to that power, then modulation describes a functioning of power that is radically multilinear, nonhierarchical, constantly mutating, and rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari [1987] 2005, 5–7). Molding is the discipline-effect of a sovereign or institutional power; modulation is the disciplinary logic of post-Fordist society. If molding describes the specialist assembly-line production of uniform goods, then modulation describes the flexible accumulation of the contemporary multinational firm. It can also be understood in terms of the visual arts, as Deleuze ([1981] 2016) explained in his course on painting.

Rather than representing the mountains of Aix-en-Provence, Cézanne’s paintings describe a process of modulation between sunlight, color waves, the eye, and the artist’s, psychological uncertainties, and revisions (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1993), alongside the history of art. The contemporary model of power can be understood as the trees that nervously mediate between ourselves, Cézanne, the picture plane, and Mont Sainte-Victoire. This modulation effect is amplified exponentially if one views the same painting on television or via the internet on a 5G smartphone.



12

March 2020 represented a shift from the “control” to the “delay” phase of the UK government’s COVID-19 strategy. The UK’s arrogant exceptionalism resulted in the lessons of Central Europe being ignored. Prime Minister Boris Johnson boasted that he would continue to shake hands with the general public, only to contract the virus himself. At the time of writing, the UK’s COVID-19 death toll has passed 40,000, the worst in Europe. In a postcontrol society of digital modulation, the notion of centralized “control” is purely ideological. The UK government’s vain attempts to perform power through the daily spectacle of organized press briefings only highlights Deleuze’s “general crisis” of decentralized power beyond governments, institutions, and ideological state apparatuses (Althusser 1971, 142–3). At these propaganda briefings, color-coded lecterns signify the relative status of the social emergency.

The disembodied talking heads of experts, one of whom broke his own lockdown guidelines to pursue an extramarital affair, are projected on video monitors to demonstrate responsible social distancing. Scared of appearing like the party of big government, these new restrictions are presented as “guidelines,” not “laws,” a message that has not reached the police, who routinely harass individual members of the public. This bathos is embodied in NHS Nightingale Hospital, London, named to play on notes of nationhood and wartime pluck. Seven Nightingale Hospitals were constructed in the UK. Their gargantuan scale was designed to symbolize a government taking charge of a social crisis. Originally planned to have 4,000 beds, NHS Nightingale London treated just fifty-four patients before closure on 15 May. Kept in hibernation, “just in case” of a second spike, Nightingale is a monument to an incompetent Conservative government. Its mute speech articulates the distance between the spectacle of power and its real-world effects. Here, Foucault’s (1977, 198) dream of a perfectly ordered society recedes into a generalized crisis of mismanagement.



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*Andy Broadey is lecturer in contemporary art, history, and theory at the University of Central Lancashire. His installations examine the postcommunist imaginary and destabilize ideologies of globalization. He exhibited at The Nehru Centre, London, in 2019 and has recently published on Tino Sehgal and Andrea Fraser (Jagiellonian University Press, 2020). (See <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2916-0115>.)*

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**YAHYA M. MADRA:** David, I know that you see your blog (now up and running for more than a decade) as a platform not only for chronicling, almost on a daily basis, the socioeconomic injustices caused by the acephalic drive of the circuits of capital (the URL address of your blog is anticap.wordpress.com after all) but also for renewing the theoretical practice of the critique of political economy as practiced by Karl Marx in his economic writings. In this interview, I want to restage some of the critiques of mainstream economic discourses that you have articulated on your blog since the early days of the pandemic. Let me begin with the status of mainstream economics and the public discourse around policy responses to the economic consequences of the pandemic. You argue that in comparison to the global crash of 2007–8, this time around there may be a discernible shift in commonsense economics. Can you expand on that?

**DAVID F. RUCCIO:** Yes, Yahya, the question I have been thinking about of late goes something like this: is something going on—in the United States, Europe, and perhaps elsewhere—that

represents a radical shifting of the ground, a fundamental change in the common sense concerning economic issues?

Now, to be clear, I am using the term common sense as it figured prominently in the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*. Common sense, if we follow Gramsci's usage, is a generally accepted collective body of knowledge, a way of understand-

ing or interpreting what is going on in the world that appears, at least at any moment in time, as beyond dispute. Moreover, there is nothing fixed about common sense, since it can—indeed, we should expect it to—shift and change over time.

So, again, the question is, has the common sense about economic issues been moving in a new direction in recent months?

It's pretty clear, at least to those of us on the Left, that

the \$2.2 trillion (or, if you count the leveraging, close to \$6 trillion) CARES Act is mostly a bailout to large corporations—Boeing, the airline industry, and, with little oversight, any other corporation that manages to get its snout into the trough. The same corporations that, until recently, were spending enormous sums on dividends and stock buybacks, which reward only shareholders and increase executive pay.

## Critique of Political Economy —Pandemic Edition: An Interview with David F. Ruccio

*Yahya M. Madra*

But the way the bailout has been discussed, at least outside the halls of Congress and the White House, reflects a critique of the bailout of Wall Street and the automobile industry that was orchestrated by the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama after the crash of 2007–8. The ground, it seems, has shifted.

The debate about the terms of the bailout—across media platforms, from many different pundits and political perspectives—has been much more attuned to how

workers and others got completely shafted in the previous “recovery” and how corporations, banks, and the rich were handed bags of money, almost none of which “trickled down” to workers, poor people, and others at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Even more, the way the bailout was structured added to the ability of those at the top to capture the lion’s share of whatever new income

and wealth were generated in the aftermath. My sense is, there is a common understanding that economic inequality in the United States got a whole lot worse because of the way the previous bailout was envisioned and enacted.

But, of course, this shift hasn’t occurred in a vacuum. In addition to concerns about how the United States was transformed in a much more unequal manner during the Second Great

**Private markets have failed, grotesque levels of inequality are driving the divergent costs of the health and unemployment pandemics, and the previous bailout enriched a small group at the top and failed, more than a decade on, to reach the vast majority of American workers. But that common understanding of what has gone wrong in recent years opens up new possibilities for both ends of the political spectrum when it comes to economic issues.**

Depression, people have witnessed how inadequate the U.S. private, profit-driven medical-industrial complex has been in either preparing for or responding to the health pandemic. And workers—those toiling away on the front lines of overburdened and perilous public-health facilities, the many who are required to abandon their families and endure unsafe conditions while laboring in “essential” industries, and the millions and millions of others who are being

forced to join the reserve army of the unemployed and underemployed—are the ones who are paying the costs.

To be clear, the outcome of this changing common sense is still quite uncertain. If it has shifted, and I think it has, it has taken on dimensions that both the nationalist Right and the progressive Left are able to seize on. Private markets have failed, grotesque levels of inequality are driving the divergent costs of the health

and unemployment pandemics, and the previous bailout enriched a small group at the top and failed, more than a decade on, to reach the vast majority of American workers. But that common understanding of what has gone wrong in recent years opens up new possibilities for both ends of the political spectrum when it comes to economic issues.

There will be many, of course, who, in the midst



of the current crises, will call for the previous common sense to be restored. My view, for what it's worth, is that time is past. The old common sense has been effectively discarded. We just don't know, at this point, which one will take its place.

**MADRA:** I presume the pull towards the ancien régime is going to be very strong. This, of course, in part can be explained in terms of class interests, if we can be vulgar Marxists (though even there, there is a vast room for debate; it is not clear what is the best path to proceed in terms of the interests of the capitalist classes). But let's be genteel a bit more and stay at the level of discourse analysis. The pull towards the old common sense is going to be very strong because mainstream economics is silently structured around its discourse.

**RUCCIO:** Yes, as they say, “the economy” has broken down and needs to be repaired. Notice that in this way of framing, the metaphor that silently structures the discourse on “the economy” is a machine. Often, especially in conservative political discourse and neoclassical economic theory, the economy-as-machine is said to be functioning on its own, in a technical manner, with all its parts combining to produce the best possible outcome. Unless, of course, there's some kind of monkey wrench thrown into the works, such as a government intervention or natural disaster. However, according to liberal politics and Keynesian economics, the economic machine by itself tends to break down and needs to be regulated and guided, through some kind of government policy or program, so that it gets back to working properly. (Again, the implicit assump-

tion here is that we were satisfied with the normal workings of the economy before the breakdown, and that such a state of normality is what we all desire moving forward.)

If we continue with the machine metaphor, we can demonstrate, first, that the existing machine, in the midst of the novel coronavirus pandemic, is simply not working. It is an unproductive machine. For example, the U.S. economy-as-machine hasn't been able to protect people's health—for example, by providing adequate personal protective equipment for nurses and doctors, ventilators for patients, and masks for everyone else. Even more, it has put many people's health at additional risk by forcing many workers to continue to labor in unsafe workplaces and to commute to those jobs using perilous public transportation. Finally, it has expelled tens of millions of American workers, through furloughs and layoffs, and thus deprived them of wages and health insurance precisely when they need them most.

Second, we can read the decisions of the Trump administration—both its months-long delay in responding to the pandemic and then its refusal to enact a nationwide shutdown when it finally did admit a health emergency—as precisely enacting the general logic of the economic machine: that nothing should get in the way of production, circulation, and finance. It fell then to individual states to decide whether and when to shut down parts of the economic machine and to distinguish between “essential” and “nonessential” sectors.

Finally, we can interpret the repeated calls to

reopen the economy—not only by Trump and his advisors but also by a wide variety of others, from Lloyd Blankfein, the billionaire former CEO of Goldman Sachs, to Republican Senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin—as a rational but unconvincing gesture, based on no other reason than that the machine needs to keep operating. It expresses the rational irrationality of the existing economy-machine.

All of which leaves us where? It seems to me, their continued reference to the economy as a machine creates the possibility of our demanding, in the first place, that the machine should remain closed down—for health reasons. People’s health should not be put under any further stress as long as the pandemic continues to ravage individual lives and entire communities.

And in second place, it becomes possible to imagine and invent other assemblages of the existing economy-machine, and even other machines, instead of obeying the logic of the current way of organizing economic and social life in the United States. In fact, while many of the changes to people’s lives have been designed to keep the existing machine functioning (for example, by working at home), it is also possible that people are taking advantage of the opportunity to experiment with how they work and live and are creating new spaces and activities in their lives.

If the common refrain these days is that “nothing

will be the same” after the pandemic, perhaps one of the outcomes is that the economy-machine will finally be seen as an empty signifier, unmoored from the reality of people’s lives and incapable of organizing their desires.

Then, maybe, the existing economy-machine will stop functioning. Before it kills hundreds of thousands more of us.

**MADRA:** In a way, rather than refusing it tout court, you suggest messing with the high modernist metaphor of “the economy,” shall we say

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disassembling it, in order to reassemble it to fit our need to shape the emerging new common sense. This deconstructive engagement with the modernism of economic discourse has been an area where you have done (on a number of occasions, together with your coauthor Jack Amari-

glio) very important contributions to the critique of political economy. In particular, your work on the corrosive role that the concept of “uncertainty” exerts on the structure of economics has been very important for me. The moments of economic crisis like the one we are in seems to provoke the return of the repressed.

**RUCCIO:** Indeed, the U-word has once again reared its ugly head. The idea that we simply do not know is swirling around us, haunting pretty much every pronouncement by economists, virological scientists, epidemiological modelers, and the like.

How many people will contract the novel coronavirus? How many fatalities has the virus caused thus far? And how many people will eventually die because of it? Do face masks work? How many workers have been laid off? How severe will the economic meltdown be in the second quarter and for the rest of the year?

Uncertainty, it seems, erupts every time normalcy is suspended and we are forced to confront the normal workings of scientific practice. It certainly happened during the first Great Depression, when John Maynard Keynes used the idea of radical uncertainty (an idea originally introduced by Frank Knight in 1921)—as against probabilistic risk—to challenge neoclassical economics and its rosy predictions of stable growth and full employment. And it occurred again during the second Great Depression, when mainstream macroeconomics, especially the so-called dynamic-stochastic-general-equilibrium approach, was criticized for failing to take into account “massive uncertainty”—that is, the impossibility of predicting surprises and situations in which we simply do not know what is going to happen.

The issue of uncertainty came to the fore again after the election of Donald Trump, which came as a shock to many—even though polls showed a race that was both fairly close and highly uncertain. This was in part because the enormous gap between what we claimed to know and what we actually knew was repressed in an attempt to make the results of the models seem more accurate and to conform to expectations.

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And that’s just as much the case in the social sciences (including, and perhaps especially, economics) and the natural sciences as it is in weather forecasting. Many, perhaps most, practitioners and pundits operate as if science is a single set of truths and not a discourse, with all the strengths and failings that implies. What I’m referring to are all the uncertainties, not to mention indeterminisms, linguistic risks and confusions, referrals and deferences to other knowledges and discourses, embedded assumptions (e.g., in both the data gathering and the modeling) that are attendant upon any practice of discursive production and dissemination. Science is always subject to discussion and debate within and between contending positions, and therefore decisions need to be made—about facts, concepts, theories, models, and much else—all along the way.

As it turns out, at least according to a study recently published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of the Sciences*, acknowledging that uncertainty, and therefore openly disclosing the range of possible outcomes, does not greatly undermine public trust in scientific facts and predictions.<sup>1</sup> But, even if communicating uncertainty does decrease people’s trust in and perceived reliability of scientific facts, including numbers, that in my view is not a bad thing. It serves to challenge the usual presumption (especially these days, among liberals, progressives, and others who embrace a theory of capital-*t* Truth) that everyone can and should rely on science to make the key decisions. The alterna-

<sup>1</sup> A. M. van der Bles, S. van der Linden, A. L. J. Freeman, and D. J. Spiegelhalter, “The Effects of Communicating Uncertainty on Public Trust in Facts and Numbers,” *PNAS* 117, no. 14 (2020): 7672–83, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1913678117>.



tive is to admit and accept that decision making, under uncertainty, is both internal and external to scientific practice. The implication, as I see it, is that the production and communication of scientific facts, as well as their subsequent use by other scientists and the general public, is a contested terrain, full of uncertainty.

Last year, even before the coronavirus pandemic, *Scientific American* published an interdisciplinary symposium titled “Truth, Lies, and Uncertainty.”<sup>2</sup> George Musser, writing on physics, argues that even though the field “seems to be one of the only domains of human life where truth is clear-cut,” practicing physicists operate with considerable doubt and uncertainty. But Musser is not troubled by this. On the contrary, his view is that accepting uncertainty in physics actually leads to a better scientific practice, as long as physicists themselves are the ones who attempt to point out problems with their own ideas.

So, if physicists are willing to live with—and even to celebrate—uncertain knowledge, and even if the general public does lose a bit of trust when a degree of uncertainty is revealed, then it’s time for the rest of us (perhaps especially economists) to relinquish the idea of certain scientific knowledge. Then, instead of waiting around for “absolute, unequivocal facts” to decide our fate, we can get on with the task of making the “big, serious decisions” that currently face us.

**So, if physicists are willing to live with—and even to celebrate—uncertain knowledge, and even if the general public does lose a bit of trust when a degree of uncertainty is revealed, then it’s time for the rest of us (perhaps especially economists) to relinquish the idea of certain scientific knowledge.**

**MADRA:** Let’s talk about those “big, serious decisions” a little bit. Let’s go back to the \$2 trillion CARES Act and place it into the context of some of the more central debates in macroeconomic theory, and in particular, to the arguments made by the Modern Monetary Theorists. On the one hand, the fact that the Federal Reserve is simply creating the necessary money by buying an unlimited amount of Treasury bonds and government-backed mortgage bonds seems to confirm the advocates of MMT. But on the other hand, as many have argued, what is actually happening is a subsidization of Wall Street rather than a support for Main Street. Can you sort this out for us?

**RUCCIO:** Let me back up for a moment. I’ve been an advocate of Modern Monetary Theory ever since I began to study it. In particular, from the perspective of the Marxian critique of political

economy, two formulations that represent both critiques of and alternatives to those of mainstream economics are particularly useful: government deficits and bank money.

Perhaps the best known (and, in many ways, most controversial) aspect of Modern Monetary Theory is the logic of running budget deficits. The mainstream view is that the government imposes taxes and then uses the revenues to pay for some portion of government programs. To pay for the rest of its expenditures, the state then borrows money by issuing bonds that investors

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.scientificamerican.com/magazine/sa/2019/09-01/>.

can purchase (and for which they receive interest payments). But, neoclassical economists complain, such borrowing has a big downside: budget deficits increase the demand for loans—because the government competes with all the loans that private individuals and businesses want to take on—thus leading, in the short run, to the so-called crowding-out effect and, in the long run, an increase in government debt and the potential for a government default.

Advocates of Modern Monetary Theory dispute both of these conclusions: First, they argue that governments should never have to default so long as the country has a sovereign currency—that is, so long as they issue and control the kind of money they tax and spend (so, e.g., the United States, which has its own currency, but not Greece, which does not). Second, taxes and bonds do not and indeed cannot directly pay for spending. Instead, the government creates money whenever it spends. Clearly, this is useful from a left-wing perspective, because it creates room for government spending on programs that benefit the working class—including, but certainly not limited to, the much-vaunted jobs guarantee.

The second major contention between mainstream economics and Modern Monetary Theory concerns the role of banks: in particular, the relationship between bank lending and money. According to mainstream economics, banks

are seen as financial intermediaries, funneling deposits and then (backed by reserves) allocating a multiple of such deposits to the best possible, most efficient uses, and in this endeavor they are constrained by the reserves they are required to hold. But from the perspective of Modern Monetary Theory, private banks don't operate in this way. Instead, they create money, by making loans—and reserve balances play little if any role.

This is exactly the opposite of the mainstream story, with the implication that banks create loans (and therefore money) based on the profitability of making such loans, an activity that has nothing to do with the central bank's adding more reserves to the system.

Both points—concerning the financing of government spending and endogenous bank money—are well-known to anyone who has been exposed (either sympathetically or critically) to Modern Monetary Theory. In my view, they fit usefully and relatively easily into modern Marxian economics, especially in terms of both the theory of the state (especially government expenditures and revenues) and the theory of fiat (i.e., non-commodity money). Marxists have tended to rely on a quite mainstream view of state finances and have found it difficult to integrate fiat money into their theory of value.

**From a Marxian perspective, then, the crucial distinction—both theoretically and for public policy—is not that between FIRE and the so-called real economy (think Wall Street and Main Street) but between classes that appropriate the surplus and otherwise “share in the booty” and the class that actually produces the surplus.**

The problem with Modern Monetary Theory, it seems to me, arises in the terms of the major complaint registered by the likes of Michael Hudson and his colleagues: namely, that government stimulus plans have mostly been directed to the finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) sectors, which are considered unproductive and extractive, and not to the “real” economy, which is not.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, these productive/unproductive and extractive/nonextractive distinctions have a long lineage in the history of economic thought and can be traced back, first, to the French physiocrats and, later, to Adam Smith—in other words, to the beginnings of modern mainstream economics.

Using his *Tableau Économique*, François Quesnay attempted to show that the proprietors and cultivators of land were the only productive members of the economy and society, as against the unproductive class composed of manufacturers and merchants. It follows that the government should promote the interests of the landowners, and not those of the other classes, which were merely parasitic. Smith took up this distinction but then redeployed it to argue that any labor involved in the production of commodities (whether agricultural or manufacturing) was productive, and the problem was with revenues spent on unproductive labor (such as household servants and landlords). The former led to the accumulation of

capital, which increased the wealth of nations, while the latter represented conspicuous consumption, which did not.

Marx criticized both formulations, arguing that the productive/unproductive distinction had to do not with what workers produced but rather with how they produced. Within capitalism, labor was productive if it resulted in the creation of surplus value, and if it didn’t (such as is the

case with managers and CEOs who supervise the production of goods and services, as well as all those involved in finance, insurance, and real estate), it was not. So the Marxian distinction is focused on surplus value and thus exploitation.

And that, it seems to me, is the major point overlooked in much of Modern Monetary Theory. FIRE is extractive in the sense that it receives a cut of the surplus created elsewhere in the economy. But so are industries outside of finance, insurance, and real estate, since the boards of directors of enterprises in those sectors extract surplus from their own workers. And those different modes of extraction occur whether or not there’s a jobs guarantee provided by the creation of money by governments or banks.

From a Marxian perspective, then, the crucial distinction—both theoretically and for public policy—is not that between FIRE and the so-called real economy (think Wall Street and Main Street) but between classes that appro-

<sup>3</sup> M. Hudson, D. Beze-mer, S. Kern, and T. Sabri Öncü, “The Use and Abuse of MMT,” *CounterPunch*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/04/13/the-use-and-abuse-of-mmt/>.

SCHEME OF  
Quesnay's  
"TABLEAU ÉCONOMIQUE"

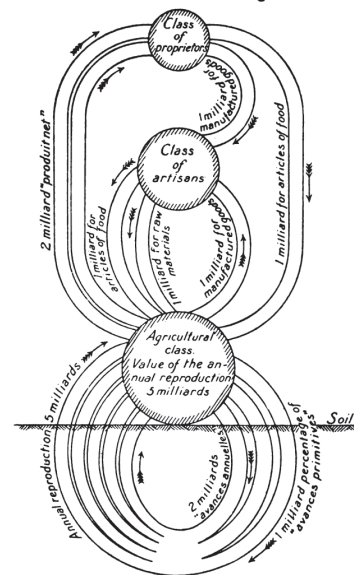


Image Credit: Jan Stanisław Lewiński (1885-1930). *The founders of political economy*, 1922, p. 52. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Scheme\\_of\\_Quesnay%27s\\_Tableau\\_Economique,\\_1921.jpg#metadata](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Scheme_of_Quesnay%27s_Tableau_Economique,_1921.jpg#metadata).



priate the surplus and otherwise “share in the booty” and the class that actually produces the surplus.

Right now, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the class that is working to produce the surplus and provide the commodities we need is the one that is carrying the burden—either because they have been laid off and mostly left to their own devices, without paychecks and healthcare benefits, or been forced to continue to labor under precarious and unsafe conditions.

It’s that class, the American working class, that is suffering from the ravages of the current economic crisis precipitated by the pandemic. They’re the ones, not their employers (whether in FIRE or the “real” economy), who deserve to be bailed out.

**MADRA:** This brings us to the question of unemployment. On your blog you have been tracking the unemployment rate by looking at initial unemployment claims, and by the end of May 2020, you noted that 42.6 million American workers had filed initial unemployment claims during the past ten weeks. But then, suddenly, in the midst of the insurrection, Donald Trump claimed that the unemployment rate dropped from 14.7 percent in April to 13.3 percent in May. What is going on? Are U.S. unemployment numbers rigged?

**RUCCIO:** Sure, they are!

They may not be rigged in the way Trump continually asserted before he was elected. But they’re rigged—in a very specific methodological manner—in terms of the ways the various

categories are defined and measured and the manner in which the data are collected. And, of course, the ways values are imputed to the rising and falling numbers.

Let’s start with the last point: why should we believe that the much-publicized recent fall in the official unemployment rate is a good thing? We’re still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when workers should be paid to stay home. Instead, they’re being forced to have the freedom to return to selling their ability to work—because their employers want to make profits by hiring them and workers themselves are finding it difficult to get by on unemployment benefits (when, that is, they’ve been able to obtain them). Why is that something we should applaud?

Moreover, even according to the unadjusted numbers, there were still 21 million unemployed American workers in May. Let’s remember that, at the worst point of the Second Great Depression (in October 2009), the highest unemployment rate was 10 percent, and the largest number of unemployed workers was 15.4 million.

As for the rest, the first sign there may be a problem with the unemployment numbers is the admission, in the text of the official report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, that many workers may have been misclassified. Workers who were “employed but absent from work” were supposed to be counted as “unemployed on temporary layoff,” but many, it seems, were not.

If the workers who were recorded as “employed but absent from work” due to “other reasons” (over and above the number absent for other

reasons in a typical May) had been classified as “unemployed on temporary layoff,” the overall unemployment rate would have been about 3 percentage points higher than reported (on a not seasonally adjusted basis).

Fixing that error would have raised the official unemployment rate in May to 16.3 percent.

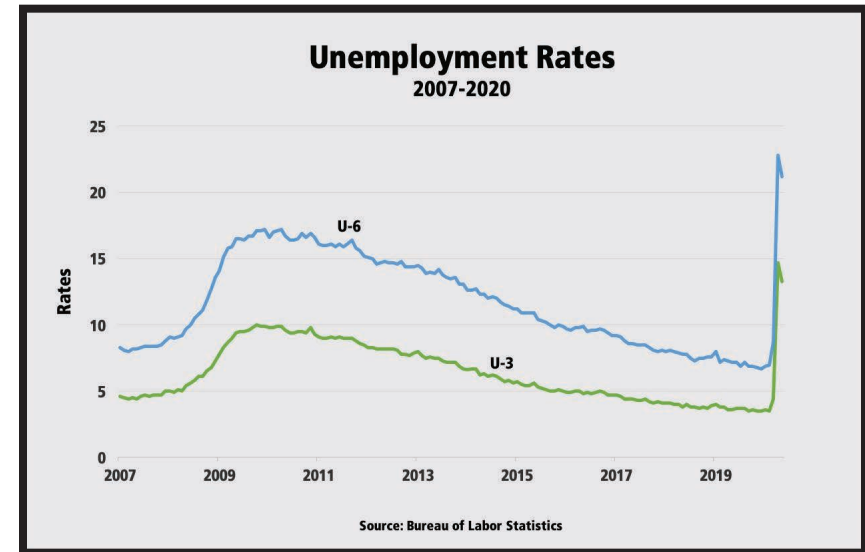
Now, let’s consider what the official statistics mean and don’t mean. This is an exercise I used to do with all of my students, most of whom had no idea how the unemployment numbers were defined and calculated, even after taking many mainstream economics courses.

The official or headline unemployment rate is actually one of six rates reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, referred to as U-3. To be counted as unemployed according to the U-3 rate, a worker has to (a) have had a job, (b) been laid off from a job, and (c) be actively looking for a new job. (In addition, they’re not counted if they’re in the armed forces, in prison, or undocumented.)

So who is not included in these numbers? The headline unemployment rate doesn’t include workers (such as high school and college graduates) who are looking for their first jobs. It doesn’t include workers who are involuntarily working at part-time jobs (working any number of hours, including one hour a week, counts as “employed”). And it doesn’t include workers who want a job but are “discouraged” and therefore have given up actively looking for a job.

The so-called U-6 rate includes two of those groups, in addition to the unemployed work-

ers that form the U-3 rate: workers who are employed part-time for “economic reasons” and workers who are considered “marginally attached” to the labor force.



As anyone can see, the U-6 rate (the blue line in the chart above) is always much higher than the U-3 rate (the green line). In May, it was 21.2 percent, compared to the rate of 13.3 percent that was widely reported in news outlets.

And then there’s the group of 4.8 million workers who were considered misclassified in the most recent report. Add them all together and the United States actually had a total of 45.4 million workers who were either unemployed or underemployed in May. That’s exactly one-third the size of the entire employed population in the United States.

But that U-6 plus misclassified total still doesn’t adequately capture the dire straits of American

workers. In addition to first-time job seekers who have been unable to find a job (some unknown portion of an estimated 3.8 million high-school graduates, 1 million who graduated with associate's degrees and 2 million with bachelor's degrees), it doesn't include any of the estimated 8 million undocumented workers who have lost their jobs.

The only conclusion is that the official unemployment figures are in fact rigged—not by any particular malfeasance or corrupt intervention into the Bureau of Labor Statistics, but by the way the unemployed are defined, measured, and counted. The reserve army of unemployed and underemployed workers is actually much larger than the figures cited by the White House and widely reported in news outlets.

That's why private employers and right-wing politicians want to cut back on unemployment benefits—so that workers will be forced to have the freedom to go back to work and the reserve army can play its role, forcing workers who are employed to compete with one another as well as with the growing mass of unemployed and underemployed workers for the available jobs.

In the end, what matters for American workers is less that the statistics are biased. It's more that the prevailing economic institutions in the United States—which use and abuse them as wage slaves disciplined and punished by the existence of a reserve army of unemployed and underemployed workers, no more so than during the current pandemic—are rigged against them.

**MADRA:** Let's conclude this interview with the recent protests sparked by the brutal murder of

George Floyd by the local police in Minneapolis, which then quickly scaled up into an unprecedented national insurrection (with a quite diverse racial composition) and even reaching an international scale. How do you make sense of all this from the perspective of the critique of political economy?

**RUCCIO:** We need to go back more than fifty years ago (on 14 April 1967), when Martin Luther King Jr. delivered one of his famous speeches, on “The Other America,” at Stanford University. King patiently explained to the audience of students and faculty members that, while in his view “riots are socially destructive and self-defeating,” they are “in the final analysis ... the language of the unheard.”

In the last couple of weeks, as protestors took to the streets across America in response to the recent murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, King's words speak more loudly than ever. America, he warned, “has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met” and that “large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity.”

The question is, what if anything has changed over the past half century?

In the late 1960s, King spent his time focusing on the key economic and social problems of his time. He began with inequality, the existence of “two Americas”—one America that “is overflowing with the milk of prosperity and the honey of opportunity” and another America that “has a daily ugliness about it that constantly trans-



forms the ebullientcy of hope into the fatigue of despair.” Therefore, he argued, the struggle for civil rights had to change, from eliminating “legal, overt segregation” to demanding “genuine equality.” The new civil rights movement he envisioned had to recognize the fact that black Americans were facing a depression in their everyday lives—of unemployment, segregated schools, housing discrimination, urban slums, and much else—“that is more staggering than the depression of the [19]30s.” Therefore, he worried, “All of our cities are potentially powder kegs as a result of the continued existence of these conditions. Many in moments of anger, many in moments of deep bitterness engage in riots.” King proposed, among other measures, a federal law dealing with the “administration of justice” (after the murders of more than fifty black and white civil-rights workers) as well as a “guaranteed minimum income for all people”—which, he explained, the country could afford if “we can spend \$35 billion a year to fight an ill-considered war in Vietnam, and \$20 billion to put a man on the moon.”

The parallels with the situation today in the United States today are obvious—from the billions spent on Elon Musk’s SpaceX flight to the International Space Station (the company is currently valued at a whopping \$36 billion), through an economic depression reminiscent of the 1930s, to the unequal administration of justice that persists almost six years after Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri. And, of course, the point on which King was far ahead of his time, in calling for a guaranteed national income, which Silicon Valley today has the temerity to think it invented.

Right now, black Americans are disproportionately suffering the ravages of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis that has accompanied it—in terms of confirmed coronavirus cases and deaths<sup>4</sup> as well as escalating unemployment<sup>5</sup> and being forced to have the freedom to commute to and work in the precarious conditions of “essential” jobs.<sup>6</sup>

Black men and women are also suffering much more than their share of the general population from the continued violence meted out by the nation’s police forces, which has continued unabated since Ferguson. According to the statistics gathered by Mapping Police Violence,<sup>7</sup> black people are three times more likely to be killed than white people in the United States.

The only conclusion we can draw, in 2020, is that the United States represents a failed economic and social experiment. It has failed to deliver economic justice and it has failed to deliver social justice, not only for black people but for all working-class people—black, brown, and white. It’s based on an economic system that, from the very beginning, has been predicated on disciplining and punishing the bodies of black slaves, and later of a multiracial working class, in the pursuit of profits for a tiny group at the top. It has utilized both cultural institutions and state violence to enforce ignorance of and consent to discriminatory practices and obscene levels of inequality. It has made grand promises—of freedom, democracy, and “just deserts”—and, especially in recent decades, it has failed to deliver on them.

Fortunately, at the same time, there are some

<sup>4</sup> “The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S.,” APM Research Lab, 22 July 2020, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>.

<sup>5</sup> E. Gould and V. Wilson, “Black Workers Face Two of the Most Lethal Preexisting Conditions for Coronavirus—Racism and Economic Inequality,” Economic Policy Institute, 1 June 2020, <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>.

<sup>6</sup> H. J. Rho, H. Brown, and S. Fremstad, A Basic Demographic Profile of Workers in Frontline Industries, (Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2020), <https://cepr.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-04-Frontline-Workers.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> “Mapping Police Violence,” 30 June 2020, <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org>.

glimmers of hope. There is a new generation of remarkable activists (such as Black Lives Matter, which grew out of the Ferguson uprising, and the Poor People's Campaign) and critical thinkers (including Kali Akuno, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and Cornel West).

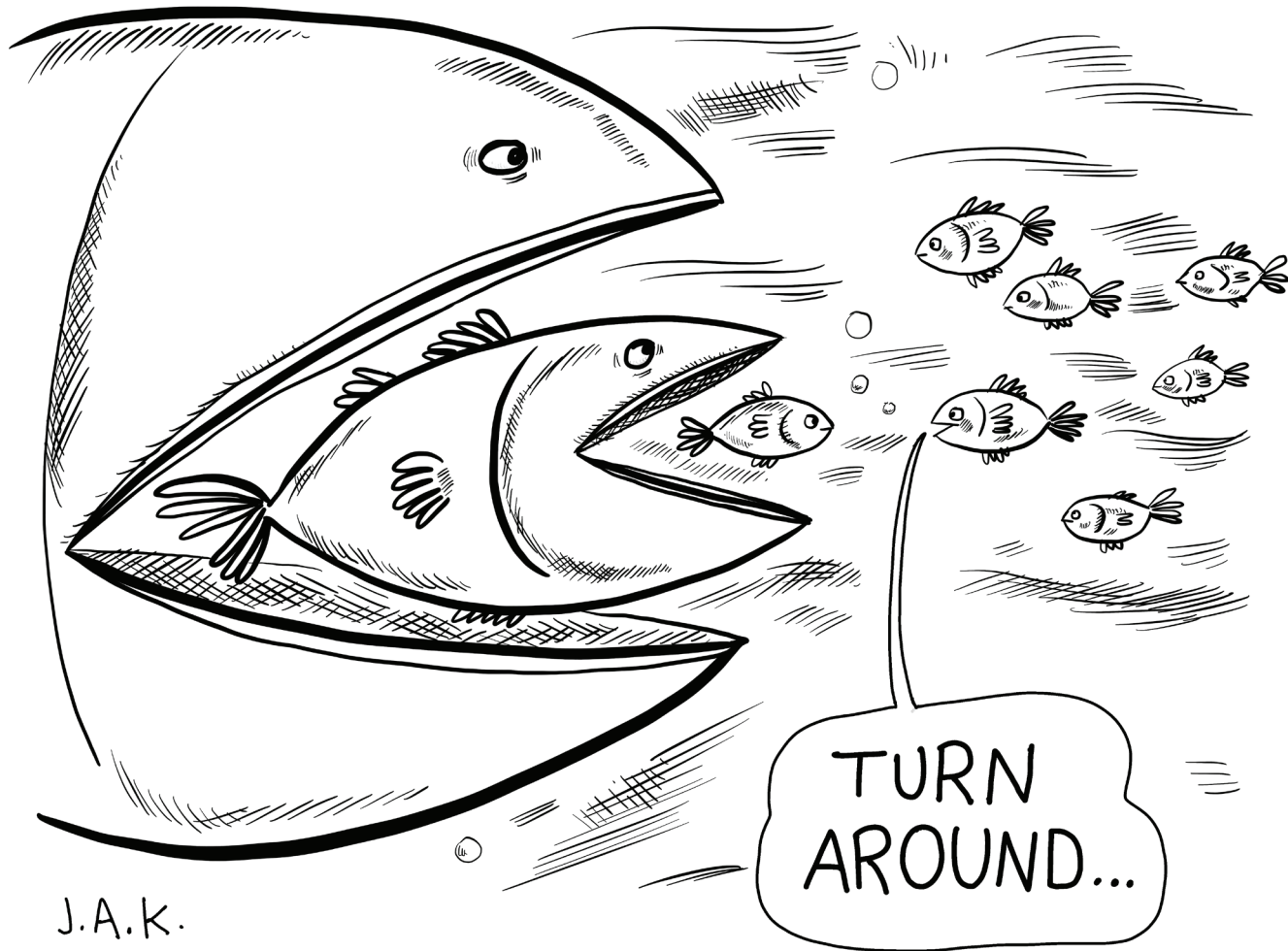
Meanwhile, the participation of many young white people in the demonstrations and protests that have erupted in cities across the country, alongside their black and brown counterparts, is reminiscent of the conditions that encouraged King not to give up the struggle back in 1967:

I realize and understand the discontent and the agony and the disappointment and even the bitterness of those who feel that whites in America cannot be trusted. And I would be the first to say that there are all too many who are still guided by the racist ethos. And I am still convinced that there are still many white persons of good will. And I'm happy to say that I see them every day in the student generation who cherish democratic principles and justice above principle, and who will stick with the cause of justice and the cause of Civil Rights and the cause of peace throughout the days ahead. And so I refuse to despair.

And so it remains in our own time: racism and racist violence are rampant in the United States. That much is plain for all to see. But the national uprising occurring right now suggests the possibility that, with the guidance of a new generation of committed activists and thinkers, real social change may be achieved.

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*Yahya M. Madra is associate professor of economics at Drew University and is the current coeditor of Rethinking Marxism. His book Late Neoclassical Economics: The Restoration of Theoretical Humanism in Contemporary Economic Theory is available from Routledge (2017).*



*Jason Adam Katzenstein is a cartoonist and comedy writer for The New Yorker and Current Affairs. He is the illustrator of the graphic novel series Camp Midnight for Image Comics, and the writer and illustrator of the autobiographical graphic novel Everything is an Emergency for HarperCollins.*

See also page 4.



## Conjunctural Politics, Cultural Struggle, and Solidarity Economy: An interview with Kali Akuno

*Boone Shear*

In the first half of an expansive interview, Kali Akuno explores the current political-cultural conjuncture in the United States. Thinking through the responses to the pandemic and the Floyd Rebellion, Akuno analyzes the violence of and tensions between an escalating white supremacy, on the one hand, and an intractable (neo)liberalism that is attempting to capture and channel the energies and ideas of the Left, on the other. Akuno locates direction for the Left amid the flourishing of mutual-aid projects and the possibility of a politicized solidarity-economy movement that can fight for and build institutions beyond the limitations of the market, state, and what is deemed to be practical.

**Key Words:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Disposability, Radical Politics, Solidarity Economy, Struggle

## The Right to Existence

*Antonio Callari*

The essay begins by interpreting current events as a moment in a long duré crisis of neoliberal capitalism and by reviewing the expansion of class struggle dynamics to citizenship realms in the biopolitics-mode of contemporary capitalism. It then asks whether Marxism's ana-

lytical tools are adequate for an effective intervention in the determination of the scope and direction (moving within or crossing beyond bourgeois parameters and perimeters) of the social-movement struggles characteristic of this crisis. The essay argues that, to be more theoretically perceptive and politically adequate, Marxism needs to reconfigure its value categories so as more properly to capture the operations of citizenship limitations and

exclusions through which the very identity of the commodity nature of wealth was historically and continues structurally to be instantiated. The essay ends suggesting the Lacanian theory of subjectification, structured around concepts of repression and foreclosure, as a fertile framework for such a reconceptualization.

**Key Words:** Crisis, Materialism, Marxist Politics, Socialism, Social Movements

### Abstract and Key Words

## The Other Side of the Portal: COVID-19 and the Crisis of Social Reproduction

*Drucilla K. Barker*

The world is at a conjuncture: a fragile and globalized economy, a frayed or nonexistent social safety net for the vast majority of people, and a deadly pandemic. The crisis of production wrought by the pandemic is also a crisis of social reproduction. This is not a new phenomenon to capitalism, but the unique properties of COVID-19 pose a particularly difficult challenge. This essay argues that resolving the dual crisis will require us to valorize the voices, experiences, and work of those on the margins and to replace “I” thinking with “we” thinking in the social imaginary.

**Key Words:** Capitalism, Contradiction, COVID-19, Racism, Social Reproduction

## Pandemonium: The International Situation after COVID-19

*Ramón I. Centeno*

The Black Death is a natural benchmark for the COVID-19 pandemic and indicates that, after the present catastrophe, each place will undergo reconstruction on its own terms. However, a better reference is the pandemic that decimated the Americas in the aftermath of the arrival of Spanish conquistadores. This was the first time since the rise of capitalism that no Western power prevailed in an international crisis. In the current pandemic, the United States has lost to China. Liberal democracy has lost the seductive power it once enjoyed, as a posttotalitarian polity has

done better in “the battle of COVID-19.” Rather than sparking a new Renaissance, as happened after the Black Death, the current pandemic signals a different aftermath in which the powers that be feel the pressure of a rising outsider, as with the Conquista that changed forever the political landscape of the Americas.

**Key Words:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Geopolitics, Imperialism, U.S.-China Relations, World Hegemony

## COVID and Capitalism: A Conversation with Richard Wolff

*Vincent Lyon-Callo*

How do we make sense of the ways in which COVID-19 has developed and been responded to in the United States? How can nondeterminist class analysis help us to understand why the pandemic has impacted the United States so severely compared to other nations? What do these policies and experiences reveal about current capitalist economic and social relations within the United States today? Are there possibilities for interventions through a nonessentialist Marxist analysis and understanding? On a beautiful June afternoon, Rethinking Marxism coeditor Vin Lyon-Callo discussed these questions via zoom with his former professor, long-term RM board member, and host of the quite popular public intervention Democracy at Work, Richard Wolff, to discuss these questions.

**Key Words:** Capitalist Crisis, COVID-19 Pandemic, Class Analysis, Nondeterminist, Profit Motive

## Trouble with Donald J. Trump

*Alex Betancourt*

The COVID-19 pandemic context has moved from rising death tolls tracked by the CDC to the single languishing body of the murdered George Floyd, and liberalism cannot assuage America's guilty conscience. Only socialism and participatory democracy can. To that end, this essay attempts to explain the ideological character of Trump's presidency, his mishandling of the global pandemic, and the insurrection against racial injustice. Contra many progressives, in order to comprehend Trump, we have to take Marx at his word and discard the explanation of Trump as an evil man and also the liberal chastising of young socialist democrats for being socialists. But there are some lessons that socialists need to learn. First is not to dismiss religion and religious people's concerns. Second is not to expect victory from having the best political platform. The problem is how to sell it, about which socialists can learn more from Trump than from progressive liberals.

**Key Words:** Ideology, Liberalism, Racial Injustice, Pandemic, Socialism

## Case Study: COVID-19, Care, and Incarceration in Massachusetts

*Justin Helepololei*

With the COVID-19 pandemic as current context, this essay draws on experiences of local organizing toward "decarceration"—working to decrease the use of prisons and jails—and reflects on competing political economies of

care: one grounded in white supremacy and reform and one oriented toward collective liberation and prison abolition.

**Key Words:** Care, COVID-19, Decarceration, Jails, Prison-Industrial Complex

## The Condition of the Working Class in India

*Anjan Chakrabarti & Anup Dhar*

This essay looks at the condition of the working class in India in the context of India's economic transition as the "old order" premised on global capitalism and a development model based on rural-to-urban migration face a serious meltdown in the postpandemic period. The systemic instability amid an ongoing economic depression has invited a response from the Indian government, which aims to reshape capitalism in the context of a new geopolitical order and, within that ambit, to attempt a cruel recasting of the character and governance of India's working class. But this historically dysfunctional juncture also presents an opportunity and a hope beyond the generalized despair, to rethink Marxian politics beyond the rural-urban division in the world-of-the-third contexts; to rethink it beyond mere anticapitalist critique and toward possible postcapitalist socioeconomic reconstruction.

**Key Words:** Development, Global Capitalism, Migrant Workers, Reconstructive Politics, World of the Third



## The Multitude Divided: Biopolitical Production during the Coronavirus Pandemic

*Stijn De Cauwer & Tim Christiaens*

The past months during the COVID-19 pandemic, many authors have pointed out the relevance of Michel Foucault's theories of biopolitics for the present situation. Foucault's theories of biopolitics were further developed by Italian neo-Marxist thinkers to analyze post-Fordist labour conditions. The current pandemic has emphasized the observation made by Foucault that biopolitics is always a differential exposure to risk, as we have seen that some are allowed to stay in lockdown while others have to keep on working. The pandemic has also revealed how post-Fordist labour has always been dependent on deskilled and often outsourced forms of labour, as exemplified by the current rise in platform companies. The exploitative labour practices of the latter, however, will make resistance more difficult than the Italian neo-Marxists imagine.

**Key Words:** Biopolitics, COVID-19, Michel Foucault, Platform Economy, Post-Fordism

## The Ideology of Work and the Pandemic in Britain

*Samuel J. R. Mercer*

The celebration of “key workers” in Britain during the pandemic forms the basis of what Althusser described as an “ideology of work,” a largely humanistic ideological machinery

deployed in the service of maintaining and reproducing capitalist relations of production in the face of the present crisis. As opposed to a benign expression of national unity in response to a threat, this essay argues that the ideological celebration of key workers in Britain has been crucial to the protection of key accumulation strategies threatened by the crisis and to the neutralization of any potential resistance by those workers endangered by these strategies. This ideology of work has underpinned the implementation of numerous social policies in the service of protecting these relations of production: a fact which this essay argues must be adequately confronted prior to the imagination of alternative social policies and social futures after the pandemic.

**Key Words:** Louis Althusser, COVID-19 Pandemic, Ideology, Social Policy, Work

## The Biopolitics of the Coronavirus Pandemic: Herd Immunity, Thanatopolitics, Acts of Heroism

*Ali Rıza Taşkale & Christina Banalopoulou*

The coronavirus pandemic offers a rare opportunity to critique the biopolitical argument and a chance to reveal the life-and-death nexus, which is often clandestine in its operation. In this context, death rather than life is “put to work” under a biopolitical mode of production. Herd immunity is a case in point, an embodiment of how biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics as a specific means of contemporary accumulation and domination. Important here is to trace how, in the name of COVID-19, herd

immunity exemplifies a thanatopolitical economy that values life based on its sacrificability to capital. Concomitantly, the thanatopolitical aspects of present-day immunity strategies are (re)produced through performative acts of heroism. The performance of “political glorification” and the “collective cheering” of the sacrifice of workers designated as essential together justify and normalize the political sacrifice of life to capital, maintaining life at the expense of those rendered disposable by the thanatopolitical register of neoliberal economies.

**Key Words:** Biopolitics, COVID-19, Herd Immunity, Performance, Thanatopolitics

### Grounded! COVID-19 and Grounding Postcapitalist Possibility in Place

*Stephen Healy, Matthew Scobie, & Kelly Dombroski*

This essay’s point of departure is a short piece by Bruno Latour that argued for the necessity of connecting post-COVID-19 economic recovery to a larger sustained task of responding to climate change. For Latour, the COVID pause in the global economy represents an opportunity for “coming down to earth,” to effect a radical shift away from modernist aspirations. This essay places Latour’s concept of the terrestrial in critical conversation with ecofeminist Val Plumwood’s “mode of humanity” and Glen Sean Coulthard’s (Yellowknives Dene) concept of culture as a mode of life. These authors argue that the future is grounded in place. This essay explores what this might mean in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, which is regarded as having an effective response to COVID-19 but is

also a place in which a down-to-earth politics has been underway for quite some time within Māori struggles for self-determination.

**Key Words:** Aotearoa New Zealand, Climate Change, COVID-19, Grounded Normativity, Indigenous

### Building Where We Are: The Solidarity- Economy Response to Crisis

*Lauren T. Hudson*

Collective and cooperative organizers are familiar with the argument that crises expose the contradictions and brutality capitalism requires. It highlights the urgency of such work: we need to build cooperative institutions not only to weather acute crises but to contradict capitalism itself. The pandemic has led to a rapid growth of new solidarity economy (SE) entities, such as mutual aid networks. However, when these responses thrive, they run the risk of co-optation or of legitimizing state failure and retrenchment. Narratives of their success also risk obscuring the ways that movements struggle in these moments. This essay reflects on the author’s experiences as an SE organizer in New York City, the early epicenter of the pandemic in the United States, and how the crisis reveals the contradictions of such organizing. COVID-19 has not only “exposed” capitalism, it has raised serious questions about formality, geography, and the function of solidarity itself for SE models.

**Key Words:** Community Organizing, COVID-19, Mutual Aid, Pandemic, Solidarity Economy

## COVID-19, the Vanishing Mediator, and Postcapitalist Possibilities

*Jason C. Mueller, John McCollum, and Steven Schmidt*

We are in the midst of a world-historical crisis. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has killed hundreds of thousands worldwide, and the capitalist world economy is convulsing. The United States is the epicenter of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis of capitalism. The country is wracked with widespread racial, environmental, gender, and economic-based injustices that are compounded by COVID-19's disproportionately negative impact on already exploited and marginalized communities. Against these grim circumstances, this crisis moment contains a possibility for envisioning and ushering in a radically new postcapitalist United States. Fredric Jameson's concept of a vanishing mediator, or a catalyst that brings about social change by bridging two disparate historical moments, clarifies this claim. This essay shows how the vanishing-mediator concept offers hope for radical change by helping us identify the foundations of a more equitable future that already exists in our present moment.

**Key Words:** COVID-19, Fredric Jameson, Postcapitalism, Utopian Thinking, Vanishing Mediator

## Welcome to the New Localism

*Iason Athanasiadis*

This photo essay shot in Athens during the COVID-19 quarantine examines how the virus—which has spread through the world's most globalized nodes—is now forcing us to accept a new way of living in a world that is simultaneously vaster, narrower, and more local than the future myths we told each other up until now. The quarantine found the photographer covering two very local stories on the Greek-Turkish border region of Evros and in the island of Samos opposite İzmir. In itself, it was a rather cinematic Great Pause, which plunged us into the kind of mass introspection, or hallucination, that people used to embark on pilgrimages to attain. Just as our new world is likely to see a reshaping of production cycles among regions, this pause will inject renewed meaning into our locales, our cultures, and our ways of living communally.

**Key Words:** COVID-19, Greece, Economic Crisis, Localism, Pandemic



## Theorizing Entrepreneurial Price Gouging: Interdependency, Injustice, and Hand Sanitizer

*Jennifer Cohen*

The same entrepreneurialism that is apparently laudable under usual conditions is shameful under unusual conditions, generating dissonance for the public and for price gouging entrepreneurs, who struggle to reconcile themselves-as-people and themselves-as-entrepreneurs. Price gougers are singled out as “bad apples” but they are emblematic of the basic principle of capitalism: profit seeking. It is only because the pandemic makes apparent, first, interdependency in public health and, second, the injustice of extracting value, that their entrepreneurial activity attracts attention and anger. Injustice is extended beyond the hidden abode of production, where exploitation is mystified, into the sphere of circulation, where it takes on a very visible form. Consequently, price gougers’ profits appear unjust in the social imaginary while exploitation in production as the source of profits remains mystified. Price gouging highlights both the banality of exploitation in production and a kind of non-banal injustice in circulation.

**Key Words:** Capitalism, COVID-19, Entrepreneurialism, Exploitation, Price Gouging

## Counting the Cost: COVID-19 and the Crisis of Utilitarianism

*Neil Vallelly*

This essay examines why utilitarian calculations have come to dominate neoliberal governance—especially through the widespread use of cost-benefit analysis—and how the COVID-19 pandemic has ruthlessly exposed the limitations of utilitarianism as a model for policy making. Dedication to the utilitarian doctrine of cost-benefit analysis hampered many initial governmental responses to the pandemic, most notably with the “herd immunity” theory pushed by the Conservative government in the UK. Drawing on examples from the UK, United States, and New Zealand, this essay illustrates that those pushing utilitarian responses to the pandemic—for example, prioritizing the economy over number of deaths—do so to protect a neoliberal hegemony that depends on the financialization of costs and benefits. In this respect, a crisis of utilitarianism is simultaneously a crisis of neoliberal capitalism and, as such, generates the conditions for an anticapitalist politics to reimagine the relationship between costs and benefits.

**Key Words:** Cost-Benefit Analysis, COVID-19, Herd immunity, Neoliberalism, Utilitarianism

## DISEASE / CONTROL

*Andy Broadey, Félix de Rosen,  
& Richard Hudson-Miles*

This visual essay appropriates the aesthetic of Marxist art historian John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, which constructs an image-driven argument which is radically open and reader centered. Our visual essay brings the current COVID-19 "lockdown" into alignment with similar historical "lockdowns" in a dialectical image of disciplinary society and disciplinary techniques. Foucault recognized in the plague village a vision of a perfectly ordered society where each individual is monitored, isolated, self-regulating, and fixed in their proper place. Following Foucault, Deleuze argued that these disciplinary societies had mutated into anarchic and decentered "societies of control." Yuk Hui has recently demonstrated the hyper-acceleration of this process following the introduction of new media technologies and new forms of disciplinary "modulation." This visual essay seeks to map these mutations visually and textually, bringing the authors above into dialogue with found images from the digital commons.

**Key Words:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Michel Foucault, Lockdown, Pandemic Response, Societies of Control

## Critique of Political Economy—Pandemic Edition: An Interview with David Ruccio

*Yahya M. Madra*

In this interview that restages a selection of posts from his blog ([anticap.wordpress.com](http://anticap.wordpress.com)), David Ruccio discusses the status of mainstream economics and the public discourse around policy responses to the economic consequences of the pandemic, the role of metaphors in economic discourse, the importance of uncertainty in modern life, the promise and limitations of Modern Monetary Theory, the problems with the calculation of the unemployment rate, and the socio-economic conditions underlining the demands for racial justice articulated by the insurrection.

**Key Words:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Modern Monetary Theory, Social Justice, Uncertainty, Unemployment