

# **The Year the World Went Viral**

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Until the early days of 2020, when they spoke of "viruses", Westerners usually meant something was wrong with their computers (Asians were arguably better informed). Of course, everyone knew the medical meaning of the word, but these viruses remained far away (Ebola), relatively silent despite the 3 million annual deaths from AIDS (HIV), even banal (winter flu, cause of "only" 10,000 deaths in France each year). And if sickness struck, medicine worked miracles. It had even done away with space: from New York, a surgeon could operate upon a patient in Strasbourg.

Back then, it was mostly the machines that got sick.

Until the first days of 2020.

## YOU DIE THE WAY YOU LIVE

Covid-19 is a contagious disease with a rate of spread much higher than that of influenza: it causes few serious cases, but their severity is extreme, particularly for at-risk individuals (especially over 65), and requires intensive care hospitalisation of patients in danger of death. Hence also the need to test on a large scale.

Epidemics and pandemics are nothing new.

In the Roman Empire, the plague probably claimed nearly 10 million victims from 166 to 189 AD. In the aftermath of 1918, between 20 and 100 million deaths were attributed to the "Spanish" flu. At the same time, typhus killed 3 million Russians during the Civil War. In 1957-1958, the "Asian" flu caused the death of about 3 to 4 million people worldwide. The "Hong Kong" flu is estimated to be globally responsible for 1 million deaths (31,000 in France) between the summer of 1968 and the spring of 1970.

Impressive figures indeed, often uncertain (20 to 100 million, or even 3 to 4 million, that's quite a gap), sometimes erased from collective memory: in France, before February 2020, no-one remembered the 31,000 people who died in 1968-70. (At the time, there were no general public health measures, and the press ignored or minimized the epidemic.)

We are flooded with Covid-19 statistics that are all the more incomprehensible as their criteria vary. Everything changes whether one notes the tally of deaths since the beginning of the epidemic or on a specific day, the number of contaminations, the increase in the number of contaminations compared to a given date, the rate of transmission, hospitalisations or beds occupied in intensive care. The more tests there are (in most countries, they were very rare in the early months), the more people are registered as infected, irrespective of whether the death toll decreases or increases.

We are now familiar with the difference between morbidity, mortality and lethality, the latter being the most significant, as its rate indicates the number of disease-related deaths relative to the total number of patients. Not forgetting the distinction between apparent and actual lethality rates. Only the latter gives the ratio of the number of deaths to the number of cases actually tested positive; the former is based solely on the estimate of those who have been infected.

It is equally difficult to understand the "R number", which measures the capacity of an infectious disease to spread. In the case of Covid-19, the notification rate of new cases is easier to define (there are three definitions in France) than to calculate, and estimates vary considerably from country to country.

Figure-wise, it is true that 9 out of 10 people who die from Covid are over 65, but all causes of death combined, the proportion of old people now dying is not that much higher than what it was in non-Covid-19 times – they die of old age, illness, poverty and related diseases.

In sum, we are left with a welter of constantly updated and conflicting data. As important as they are, Covid-19 figures miss the broader picture: while they tell us about the scope of the pandemic (over 1,7 million deaths in 2020), they overlook its social causes and their effects.

Like any serious disease, Covid-19 is likely to kill people weakened by age, another disease, and/or a debilitating lifestyle: poor diet, air pollution (estimated to kill between 7 and 9 million people worldwide), chemical pollution, sedentary habits, isolation, old people out of work and therefore out of society - all factors contributing to effects such as diabetes or cancer... favourable ground for Covid. Out of the 31,000 deaths recorded in France at the end of August 2020, at least 7,500 are reckoned to be due to co-morbidity (25% caused by arterial hypertension, 34% by cardiac pathology).

Various non-measurable factors together create a non-quantifiable excess mortality with a class dimension: unemployment, insalubrious housing, junk food (obesity is more common among the poor). Tuberculosis (1,5 million deaths worldwide in 2014) re-emerged in the 1980s and 1990s because of unsanitary urban conditions and increased poverty. If you're sick, it's better to be rich... and White, usually: "When White man has a cold, Black guy gets pneumonia," they say in the US. All these conditions are made worse by the human cost of lockdown: lower income, anxiety, depression, deprivation of visits for those living in old people's homes, etc.

"A 'person with pre-existing medical conditions' is often just another term for 'older worker/proletarian'. [...] A middle-aged man 'with low qualifications' has an eight times higher risk of taking early retirement due to cardiovascular disease than a man of the same age 'with high professional qualifications'." (Wildcat: reference in "Further reading")

This combination of social and environmental factors, despite its considerable role in the spread of diseases, is difficult to quantify and therefore escapes statistical scrutiny.

Did a pangolin meet a bat ? Or did some lab experiment go wrong ? Maybe we'll never know. One thing is certain: capitalism is co-morbid. Capitalist civilisation did not create Covid-19, but it has promoted its spread, through the ever-wider circulation of people and goods, accelerated unhealthy global urbanisation, factory farming favourable to pathogens, and the degradation of social security systems in so-called developed countries. Since the beginning of the 20th century, out of 11 worldwide viral pandemics, 5 have occurred during the last 20 years.

"To govern is to foresee": a rule that capitalist society does not ignore, but which it applies according to its own logic. Whenever prevention is an obstacle to competition between firms, to the search for the minimum cost of production, to the profits and short-term interests of the dominant class, prevention takes second place. The precautionary principle will never be a priority in this society.

## **MAKING THE WORST OF THE BAD**

The tragedy that has unfolded was not biologically preordained to take the forms it has. Although more contagious and lethal than seasonal flu, Covid-19 is benign for a vast majority of the population but very serious for a small fraction, probably 1 out of 100 people infected. It could have been relatively easy to contain the pandemic by systematically screening infected

people as soon as the first cases appeared, tracing their movements and placing the (few) people concerned in quarantine. The technique of screening tests requires the organisation and equipment that highly industrialised countries can manufacture and set up in a few weeks. Plus mass-distributing masks to the entire population likely to be contaminated. The dismantling of the European and North American health care systems, however, helped turn this virus into a catastrophe.

This is well-known, but begs the question:

Why was one Earthling in three locked down for weeks, months sometimes, and why is it happening again, albeit differently, whenever the States deem it necessary (Israel in September, 2020, later Wales and Ireland, then England, France and more countries...)?

If it is true that the internationalisation of capitalism makes it vulnerable, this is not enough to explain the partial paralysis of the world economy. Why has the fight against contagion taken the form of locking up populations, with the forced closure of a large number of businesses?

### **Phase One: Cassandra calling**

“In early 2018, during a meeting at the World Health Organization [...], experts [...] coined the term “Disease X”: They predicted that the next pandemic would be caused by an unknown, novel pathogen that hadn’t yet entered the human population. Disease X would likely result from a virus originating in animals and would emerge somewhere on the planet where economic development drives people and wildlife together. Disease X would probably be confused with other diseases early in the outbreak and would spread quickly and silently; exploiting networks of human travel and trade, it would reach multiple countries and thwart containment. Disease X would have a mortality rate higher than a seasonal flu but would spread as easily as the flu. [...] In a nutshell, Covid-19 is Disease X. » (Michael Roberts, March 15, 2020)

### **Phase Two: Cassandra unheeded**

The 2018 warning fell on unreceptive ears. Less than two years later, when a disease that had all the features of “X” came along, the States started by downplaying or flatly denying the issue.

As early as 31 December 2019, the Taiwanese authorities had warned the WHO of the dangers of the virus, but the WHO chiefs contested the seriousness of the situation. So did most governments, and the pandemic remained invisible for a long time in Asia, and also in European countries which detected it several weeks late. On 30 January, the director of the WHO visited China, declared everything was under control and praised the Chinese authorities. He also advised against any restrictions on travel and movement, when Taiwan had already been closed for a month.

Nearly all States prioritized economic interests and took no protective measures, such as cutting air links with China.

The Bergamo province is a case in point. It was one of the world’s regions hardest hit by the virus. In its textile industry, most firms today are Italian-Chinese joint ventures. “Chinese technicians and subcontractors constantly travel back and forth between China and Bergamo [...] some of them are even weekly commuters. The virus probably came to Italy via this traffic in December or January. When the Italian government banned direct flights to China, the companies organised connecting flights via Moscow or Bangkok - people entered the country without

any controls [..]" (Wildcat) On 28 February, the bosses launched a "Bergamo keeps working !" campaign: they apologised (only five weeks later) but managed to keep production going almost until the end of March.

In France, on Sunday 14 March, it was a civic duty to leave one's front door to go and vote in the municipal elections.

### **Phase Three : Health management takes momentary priority over economic imperatives**

When official assessments were belied by conditions in the field, governments could no longer brush aside the issue, and they coped with it according to their own logic and with the means at their disposal. In a country such as France, the event revealed the extent to which modern pseudo-abundance masks a real shortage: the "world's 7th largest economy" lacks nurses, hospital beds, tests, means of protection... Therefore, on Tuesday 16 March, the French citizen was required to stay at home, under pain of fine or possible imprisonment.

In most Western countries now, the health service operates on a fee-for-service principle: i.e., treating the ratio before the patient. Hospitals are run on a just-in-time basis: like in a textile factory or a supermarket, they only maintain personnel and equipment that are strictly necessary, regard an unoccupied bed as a waste of money, they outsource whatever is deemed unessential and, if need be, they hire temporary staff on short-term contracts. In September 2019, just a few months before the crisis, the French NHS introduced bed managers in order to "smooth the flow of patients into and out of the various wards".

Consequently, since the first phase (mass screening) had been missed and human and material resources were lacking, lockdown and curfew were imposed: they did not protect so much the population from the virus as the State from its own mishandling of the epidemic. Staying indoors gives people a protection of sorts, in the same way as State-organised civil defence saves lives during an aerial bombing caused by the war unleashed by that same State.

Because governments were unable to deal with the effects of a crisis they had helped to create, their only way out was to scare the population into submission, while resorting to successive expedients. Official talk treads the thin line between reassuring and scaremongering, with help from the "scientific community" and resonance in the media.

In most of the world, lockdown - leading to the partial halt of production and trade - proved to be the only way to temporarily limit the epidemic. What you can't master, you have to mis-manage, and if no contingency plan is ready, you improvise, dressing up the debacle as policy. The key is to keep control - or fake it, with negative effects upon small as well as big business.

### **Phase Four : Return to business as usual - Not quite**

After about two months, the pandemic, though far from over, and even proving now deadlier in some countries, seemed manageable enough without any serious socio-political effects. Moreover, it was noted that the vast majority of the dead had passed the age of going to work: in the US, by September 9, 2020, 78% of Covid victims were over 65; in France, this was the case of 90% of the deceased between 1 March and 28 August. For those of working age, however, the probability of dying from the Covid was low: it was therefore urgent to send them back to the workshop or office - with the promise, of course, of adequate protection. People had restricted

or no access to restaurants, “unessential” shopping was difficult or impossible, partying was restricted or banned, but crowds had to pile up in suburban trains on the way to their job premises. Work is not just a means to earn money, it is the main social regulator and it disciplines people.

The “Spanish” flu and “Hong Kong” flu both lasted two years. Instead of gradually and evenly phasing itself out, Covid-19 may be decreasing in a few areas, but others are seeing spikes. While daily life constraints and prohibitions are partially lifted in some countries, they are toughened elsewhere. Vaccine or no vaccine, governments impose tier-system makeshift measures, reintroduce curfews, close and re-open borders, tighten or loosen the screws, depending on the spread of the epidemic, the needs of the capitalist economy in general and shopping in particular.

## WAGING WAR

Governments and institutions proclaim themselves at war against an “invisible enemy”. Let’s take them at their word.

War is the continuation of society (in the present world, of capitalist society) by other means, but also the temporary disruption of fundamentals. Whether a country wins or loses a war, for its ruling classes, the cost is not negligible, and often proves to be exorbitant: they can leave all or part of their wealth or power behind. But the rationality of a conflict cannot be understood or measured in dollars or yuan. A State does not go to war to make money, and what determines it differs from an entrepreneur’s logic: it is the result of social and political forces and (im)balances, both inside and outside the country. The decision to go to war will be taken in the interest of the dominant classes... in so much as they conceive it. The ruling elites of the four empires (German, Austrian, Russian and Ottoman) which were dismantled after 1918 had embarked four years before in a war which they hoped would further their interests. Nor had the invaders of Iraq in 2003 foreseen the Islamic State. In each case, whatever the costs, capitalist leaders reckon that not going to war would be worse. Once the process is launched, if solving a particular issue brings about a fresh one, then they proceed to deal with it. Take one crisis at a time, and stick to the possible in order to calm more crises than are generated.

Most governments are aware of the causes and effects of global warming, against which they only come up with palliative measures. Why would they act otherwise faced with a pandemic ? Since they were unable to take precautions for elderly people already suffering from serious illnesses, to test massively, to quarantine any infected person, to adequately hospitalise extreme cases, and provide us with personal protective equipment, they were left with the good-bad but easiest solution: to implement what amounted to a social shutdown.

The dominant classes cannot address the causes of a crisis which is largely their doing. Responses have varied in the extreme, from Germany to Brazil, with sanctions ranging from 6 months’ imprisonment in France to 7 years in Russia. But in all cases, managing the epidemic and controlling the population are one and the same thing: in France, forest walks were forbidden during the (first) lockdown, because these vast spaces, although favouring “physical distancing”, make surveillance more difficult. The price to be paid by the dominant classes (risk of political discredit, loss of production and therefore of profit) was not negligible, but secondary compared to the imperative of maintaining order - social, political and sanitary at the same time.

And even trade-dependent South Korea and Taiwan, although they could test and distribute masks on a large scale and therefore limit “confinement” to proven cases, were forced to slow

down their highly export-driven economies, because importing countries were closing up. Similarly, Germany, despite a restrained lockdown, had to scale down its trading activities.

Capitalism develops through a succession of downturns and upswings. This time, a global standstill did not result from a worldwide depression, but from what seemed to be the only option left and, all present things considered, a rational decision: a large number of countries injected themselves with a dose (fairly strong but temporary) of forced rest, before setting off again in good health, hopefully.

## **“I MUST ADMIT THAT EVERYTHING CONTINUES.”**

So Friedrich Hegel wrote two centuries ago.

Capitalism is not made up of people, oil barrels, machines, motorways and credit cards. It is the social relationship that animates the dockworker, the saleswoman, the cargo ship, the pub, the derrick, the metal lathe and the cash dispenser, with a dynamism unequalled by previous social systems. In itself, the temporary stoppage of productive activities interrupts them without bringing down what formerly set them in motion. The capitalist relation of production is partially suspended, but does not cease to function. Despite the development of baseline solidarity where one does not “count” one’s money and time, commodity exchange remains, as well as the profit system and motive. Some companies carry a huge debt, may go bankrupt, others are born (on-line services), or prosper (Amazon). Most lose money and are forced to adapt.

Whereas the banking and financial crisis of 2008 had stopped parts of production, immobilising rows of cargo ships in the estuaries of big rivers, this time it is directly the so-called real economy that is being hit.

Nevertheless, this does not prove that our society only functions thanks to the nurse, the garbage collector, the postwoman, the delivery man, the roofer, the crane operator, the garage mechanic, the farmer..., as if all we had to do was promote these “real” producers and get rid of the rest, i.e. the company executives, the bankers, the bureaucrats, self-labelled creatives and other “bullshit job” holders.

True, it is indeed the ordinary productive workers who have kept society running during lockdown: so-called “unskilled” workers are entitled to say “We keep you alive”.

In that sense, the crisis confirms the centrality of work... but not work in general: wage-labour. In present society, the garbage collector and the paramedic depend on money as much as the trader does. Far from exposing the failure of a tottering capitalism, the current crisis and its management reveal the flexibility of a social system that still succeeds to make itself indispensable. Money remains the necessary mediator of our lives: whoever has lost his job during lockdown has nothing left but his savings, family assistance or public aid - all expressed in money.

Huge public rescue packages (loans to companies and to a much lesser extent to individuals, plus tax breaks and exemption from social security contributions) are meant to preserve the status quo and prepare for more capital accumulation. Although the world has temporarily slowed down, its underlying long-term trends are intensified by the health crisis, as in other circumstances by war.

The possibility of a major financial collapse cannot be ruled out, all the more so as the current sanitary crisis has occurred at a time when world capitalism is still confronted with the unresolved problems of a slump in profitability and a debt crisis.



Still, let's remember that in the United States, between 1929 and 1932, stock market shares had lost 90% of their value, and industrial production fell by 50% between 1929 and 1933: this was the year when 25% of the American working population were unemployed, and 2 million people were homeless. Nevertheless, capitalism continued : the reproduction of its social relations sometimes requires enormous material and human sacrifices.

Unless the entire human species is eliminated, no gigantic and devastating epidemic will be enough to put an end to capitalism. It will upset the balance of big powers, reshuffle political and social cards in the most unexpected and opposite directions, but this does not necessarily entail the breakdown of the whole system. The 1929 crisis resulted in the New Deal, Nazism and Popular Fronts, while the USSR consolidated itself and Sweden brought to power a long- lasting, reforming social democracy.

Minus a few correctives, just-in-time, "zero stock", subcontracting and outsourcing will rule. In Europe, the local chemist might soon be selling some – not many - medicines manufactured in Paris or Madrid, but the Parisian or the Madrilenian will still buy a smartphone which has travelled all the way from Asia in a ship loaded with 3,000 containers, before being transported in a truck or UPS van. And it will be some time before the laptop used in Penzance comes out of a factory similar to the one which decades ago produced the radio and TV sets for the Baird company in Bradford (once the largest television factory in Europe). Only a few productions deemed "strategic" will be relocated, but there will be no end to cost-cutting international value chains. Nor will there be State-sponsored pharmaceutical companies. Just like the automobile industry, Big Pharma needs to cut costs and maximise profits.

What we can expect is a very limited moderation of the prevailing trends. The bourgeois have gone too far in deregulation, privatisation, the running of public services on business lines, and out-and-out everything-for-the-market and as-little-State-as-possible policies. However, capitalist society needs non-capitalist sectors, as well as a political central power that does not operate solely on market logics. As a US president declared in 2008 : "I've abandoned free market principles to save the free market system."

Curbing excesses: that's all. It does not mean less bourgeois domination in its present forms, notably the predominance of finance and banking. Covid-19 will not put an end to lower wages, pension cuts, the casualisation and individualisation of the labour market, and the tearing- apart of social welfare safety nets.

The society that prides itself on sending robots on Mars and endlessly expanding warehouse space to keep up with growing e-commerce, is unable and unwilling to put the same resources in a public health system. At the time of writing (January, 2021), though the pandemic has been going on for nearly a year and hospital staff have received a (modest) wage rise, little else has been done to improve the health service : neither a large recruitment drive nor a major investment programme has been launched. Despite bellicose rhetoric, no country has put itself on a war footing against the virus.

More importantly, preventive medicine remains low in the list of priorities : no wonder, because this would require no less than an altogether different way of life. Bluntly put, we are in for more of the same.

## “A NEW OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE”

This is how the surrealists qualified science in 1958. They were targeting nuclear physicists for their responsibility in the atom bomb. Nowadays there is a broad consensus that biologists work for the common good, and people generally respect the medical profession: doctors save lives. True, but they could also be described as a more lethal occupational group than soldiers: in the US, inaccurate diagnoses and adverse effects of treatment are among the major causes of death, and overdoses due to prescription opioids have killed 200,000 people since 1999.

Whenever people question the authority of medical experts and institutions, it is usually for their positions on social or “societal” issues, sexuality particularly (until the 1970s, the WHO regarded homosexuality as a disease, a view it only officially abandoned in 1990). In contrast, public opinion tends to trust the supposedly objective domains of so-called hard or exact sciences, all the more so as these are based on computation (you don’t argue with an algorithm) and remain beyond the understanding of the layman (the educated person is prone to comment on the Oedipus complex, rarely on quantum theory).

It is not for us to take a stand on the validity of hydroxychloroquine and alternative therapy to Covid-19, but these polemics have at least the merit of emphasising the power struggles within the “scientific community”, its conflicting narratives, and the intimate relationships between governments’ science advisers and corporate interests. “Peer review” barely masks the carving-up of territory between the medical luminaries who claim their turf in the scientific-industrial complex.

Still, in spite of the undeniable contradictions and inconsistencies of officially approved science, dissent is treated as uncivic, and circulating “false information” is tantamount to “high treason” (French Health Minister, November 10, 2020). Now, who decides what is “science” and what is not? As Humpty Dumpty told Alice, “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean.”

Let’s just point out an overlooked aspect of the dispute. What is called a “health crisis” is made up of categories used as mental boxes in which data have been computed, therefore rationalised. Figures look neutral, non-debatable. “It’s very hot” sounds like a feeling: “It’s 39° C” is taken as fact. “Figures speak for themselves...” : do they? Quantification always presupposes definitions, i.e. qualification, choices. On what criteria? Because social and environmental factors playing a major role in the spread of the disease are difficult to circumscribe, modelling minimises them: only the measurable is accepted as “scientific”.

Contrary to what the words suggest, “evidence-based medicine” does not refer to treatments grounded on substantiated truth and medical experience : it means facts turned into figures.

This reductive process is all too familiar in political campaigns - contestants never agree on unemployment or poverty figures – but it is less plain to see in medical matters, despite the fact that medicine uses metrics that depend on preconceived judgments. Declaring that respiratory diseases cause 2.6 million deaths worldwide per year implies a definition of “respiratory disease”. So what is meant by “Covid-19”? We are provided with daily perfectly accurate figures, down to the last comma : as of January 2, 2021, 14 : 10 GMT: 1,837,294 deaths, worldometer informs us. But how many die of Covid-19? And how many die with Covid-19, that is, of co-morbidity, Covid-19 adding its effect to other causes?

As noted earlier, it is the profit motive and the monetising of every medical act that urge hospital managers to favour ratios over patients. Galileo’s wish is fulfilled: “Measure what is

measurable, *and make measurable what is not so*". In a world obsessed with turning facts into digits, benchmarking, and creating mathematical models supposed to give a true image representing reality, medicine "naturally" submits to prevailing norms.

Just for the record:

ICER: Incremental Cost-Effectiveness Ratio of a therapy.

QALY: Quality Adjusted Life Year (one year in "perfect health" = 1 QALY; being deceased = zero QALY; other health states fall in between).

There existed no biostatisticians as such in Marx's time, but there were already economists who made a rule of working with averages, and he commented: "But what do these averages prove ? Only that one abstracts more and more from mankind, that one dismisses more and more real life [...] Averages are real offenses inflicted upon real, particular individuals." (1844 Manuscripts)

## A THREE-WEEK RESPITE

"The post-Covid-19 world will be more digital and less carbon-intensive. Circular economy, local community banking, resource-based production, short supply-chains, re-use, repair, eco-design and responsible consumption are going to contribute to an emerging real sustainable development....."

This amounts to wishful thinking.

Theoretically, "reasonably", Covid-19 proves how deeply fragile modern society is, and how poorly adapted it is to its own crises. Reason, however, has never ruled history. Covid-19 will not help make the world anew. On the contrary, the current situation demonstrates both capitalist vulnerability and resilience.

None of the causes of global warming will be diminished by the management of a health crisis that is itself part of the environmental crisis. The current pandemic expresses the contradiction between the capitalist mode of production and its indispensable natural bases. Pollution, deterioration of biodiversity, deforestation, over-urbanisation, industrial livestock farming... will persist, only mitigated by piecemeal measures.

Admittedly, in 2020, the economic slowdown caused by the pandemic pushed forward by three weeks the Ecological Debt Day (or the Earth Overshoot Day), i.e. the approximate date by which humanity consumes all the resources that ecosystems can produce in a year. But nobody seriously believes that such a deceleration will go on and lead us to a future ecological "planning" or "bifurcation". There will simply be more organic food in school meals, more local vegetables in the supermarket, more people will live in an eco-friendly neighbourhood in a "zero-carbon" city in a "positive energy for green growth" region, and drive an electric car to a McDonald's where a sustainability department helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions. And as they browse on the worldwide web, Google ("carbon neutral" since 2007) will inform them that "researchers are using Artificial Intelligence to reduce air pollution in Uganda".

The world is not slowing down, it is being greenwashed. London, a typical "globalised" metropolis that took up a third of the jobs created in England between 2008 and 2019, will vegetalize its roofs, ban petrol-powered vehicles, introduce electric buses and trams, increase its "green belt" and multiply the number of allotments for city dwellers. In the meantime, most of Londoners' food will not come from the surrounding countryside, but from all over the world.

In today's Britain, an acre is a hundred times more profitable when used for construction than for agriculture: only a social-ecological revolution could turn the tide.

Faced with the economic downturn, government contingency plans naturally give high priority to big business (aeronautics and automobile, in particular), and only marginally help wage-earners hit hard by partial unemployment. Competition and profit rule, so it is normal to subsidise production despite its negative effect on the environment. Capitalism diminishes consequences while aggravating their causes. Energy is saved here so that more can be used there. The all-electric is the way of the world, whether electric power mostly comes from nuclear stations (as in France), or from a "mix" combining high doses of fossils with a growing proportion of renewables... all the while with ever-increasing energy consumption in industry and daily life. (Where does a remote control battery come from ?) Using less plastic packaging does not prevent the growth of global plastic production and consumption. Etc. The cure is the illness.

And this comes with the illusion of a lighter capitalism, therefore less polluting, because now it would be going digital. In fact, virtuality requires a ponderous process, implying a lot of raw materials, metals, fuel, manufacturing, transport, data-processing consumables... not mentioning human labour. The pixel image of your favourite cat on a screen weighs heavily on increasingly limited resources.

Global energy consumption is still growing... so is the amount of energy needed to produce energy. In 2018, watching online videos reportedly generated as much greenhouse gas emissions as a country like Spain. Business has little interest in developing more fuel-efficient methods, nor in their customers opting for environment-friendly habits. GAFA's (or its Chinese equivalent BATX's) prosperity depends on everyone getting used to turning on the light by talking to a connected loudspeaker, rather than pressing a switch. The ecological cost of these two operations differs a lot: the first requires a sophisticated electronic device with a voice assistant, the development of which has consumed a lot of raw materials, energy and labour. Promoting the 'Internet of Things' and 5G networks is incompatible with battling against the climate crisis.

Billions of "communicating" objects are about to surge into our lives. The "train of progress" was partly suspended for a short while: now it resumes its course, humans are still reduced to producers and consumers – preferably digital consumption - and global warming is preparing new tropical pandemics. There will be other "Diseases X".

## **IS THERE LIFE WITHOUT THE INTERNET ?**

The coronavirus has ushered in a new step in the evolution towards tele-existence. Staying at home, willingly or forcibly, shows how difficult it has now become to live a "normal" life outside the realm of digital technology. The Internet has been as much a means for States to impose lockdown, as it has been for the people to make do with lockdown.

Access to public services, education (home schooling and on-line classes), family and friendship relations, sexuality (dating sites and pornography), leisure, shopping, work (albeit to a much lesser extent than is often said), even political activity... lockdown enabled the "going digital" to take a quantum leap forward. Thanks to smartphone communication and omnipresent screens, the society of individuals socialises them at a distance, and "conversational intelligence" spawns a new "shared reality".

Over the last thirty years, computers have proved indispensable for the circulation of capital, goods... and labour power. As capitalism takes over everyday life, it is also installing digitality in the bedroom, in the car, in the fridge, and is preparing to implant it inside the body. What was merely presented as "simpler and quicker" is increasingly necessary and on the way to becoming compulsory. Humans now live "on line". They may soon have a virtual assistant which interconnects all their personal data, does their shopping, monitors their health by reminding them to take their medication, manages their diary, gets in touch with a friend they haven't spoken to for a while, and therefore knows their needs better than they do.

Slow food is something of a fad: digital detox will not be that fashionable.

In less than fifteen years, smartphones have become a vital prosthesis for at least 3 billion people, and 1.5 billion were bought in 2019. When hundreds of millions go hungry, yet have state-of-the-art apps on their phones, is this what Adam Smith called "the wealth of nations", or an irrefutable sign of modern poverty ?

For the first time in history, the computer, i.e. a work tool is also the indispensable medium for emotional, family and intellectual life, and a paramount means of social, political - and therefore police - control. Needless to say, always in the name of collective well-being: a place watched by cameras is said to be "under video protection". "Security" is a multitasking concept and reality, imposed upon us against an expandable variety of threats: antisocial behaviour, mugging, housebreaking, theft, terrorism and now viruses. The pandemic shows to what extent the State obtains our submission in the name of healthcare: "You can't argue against health", a French minister said. Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea are apparently doing better at dealing with the pandemic, all the while increasing digital surveillance. In addition to facial recognition (in that matter at least, China is a harbinger of things to come, a blending of Brave New World and 1984), radio-identification will flourish in the next decades. Though now usually reserved for pets, the subcutaneous chip will be implanted in humans, whose bodies will literally carry personal, medical, criminal, etc. records, and, apart from a few resisters, modern citizens will adopt this system as they have done with biometric passports or dematerialised tax returns.

This should not come to us as a surprise. In order for the net surfer to find out "in just a few clicks" about her financial details, the weather in Vilnius, Francisco Ferrer's death or the real name of the author who signed "Baron Corvo", billions of data have had to be collected and constantly updated, to which this user's search will inevitably be adding its own traces. One cannot instantaneously know everything about everything without being part of it all, and being "tracked" at every moment.

## **SOCIAL DISTANCING**

In *Years and Years*, a BBC drama broadcast in the spring of 2019, the England of 2029 is ruled by an authoritarian (and eventually criminal) government which, in the midst of an epidemic transmitted by monkeys, locks up "sensitive" neighbourhoods behind police-controlled barriers and forbids their access at night.

One year after the release of the series, for three billion people, this political fiction has become a reality: restrictions on movements, curfews, police omnipresence.

Whether hard, soft or medium, top-down imposed or bottom-up embraced, lockdown confirms the disunity that is the daily lot of proletarians, all the more so in our time of divided

struggles and confined identities. Despite acts of refusal and resistance, there has been a massive worldwide acceptance of this reinforced atomisation.

True, in the 21st century even more than before, the vast majority of humankind have no other means of living than to sell their labour power. This shared condition, however, only brings the proletarians together if their social struggles start targeting what they have deep down in common : the labour/capital relation.

In the last decades, and especially since 2008, hundreds of millions of proletarians have lost their jobs, have suffered social benefits and pension cuts, and millions of house-owners have been evicted. As the current pandemic further deteriorates working and living conditions, it hinders but does not suppress proletarian resistance, and brings about new demands and protests, sometimes of a wider range, for instance involving ecological issues.

Nonetheless, even when these struggles are victorious, they remain fragmented, unable to get to the heart of the matter. Simultaneity is not synchronisation, nor does juxtaposition entail convergence. Up to now, resistance and rejection combine in demands for reform, and for (sex and race) equality.

The struggle for better wages and working conditions addresses the wage/profit ratio, but does not automatically attack the wage system itself. In fact it rarely does. Refusing to risk one's health for the boss, claiming protective measures, or even asking to be paid without coming to work as long as the health risk persists, is not enough to call into question the coexistence of the bourgeois and the proletariat. There has been little critique of work, and even less critique of the State as a State, French comrades wrote in April 2020. So far, the observation remains valid.

It is not impossible to imagine that diverging criticisms might converge to attack the fundamental structure: the capital/labour, bourgeoisie/proletariat relation. Diverse struggles would "precipitate", as in chemistry when heterogeneous elements hitherto dispersed crystallise into a block. Resistance would move on to strike at the basis of this society. The ruling elites would be all the more rejected because of the discredit caused by their management of the crisis. Taking advantage of the cessation of part of the production, the proletarians would rebel against the forces of the State, attack bourgeois domination, break with productivity and market exchange, sort out destructive productions from useful and pleasant ones, and initiate a dis-accumulation ("A terminal disease requires extreme treatment"- Hamlet, IV, 3).

This is not impossible, but nothing today indicates that multiform struggles are moving in this direction. Whatever social explosions occur, visible signs point to a continuation of identity-based, local, national and religious divisions, each category pursuing its own agenda. Separateness becomes a privileged means of struggle, and it pushes "community building" to the fore with little or no common ground. Fault lines now widen and sometimes intersect but do not meet to get to the core of the system.

## **HYPOTHESIS**

Neither the virus nor its treatment bring about overall change: they reveal and spur on already existing trends.

We are not experiencing the end of the world, nor the end of a world. The pandemic reinforces the existing order: as proved in the past, the bourgeois are quite good at simulating their own class immune defences. They have not exhausted their capacities yet, even for misrule.

Capitalism's only real vulnerability comes from what it feeds on : the proletarians. Otherwise, it digests its own crises, thanks to its surprisingly impersonal and plastic nature, and it is enough for this system to maintain its essentials: the capital/labour relationship, the firm, competition...

Those who live through a time of great upheaval experience it as a period when the possible and the unthinkable suddenly become reality. In January 2020, nobody expected to have to submit to house arrest (granted, with limits). Where do we stand a year later ?

Crises bring about a rupture point, a moment of decision, for better and/or worse: a way out that addresses the causes of the crisis, or a descent into more future disaster, and everything depends on whether we act positively or are acted upon. Insurrectionary times (the 1640s in England, 1789, 1917...) seemed to open up possibilities for us to have control over our lives. In contrast, when the war broke out in August 1914, people felt as if the sky was falling and they had to submit to events beyond their control.

We will suggest a "historical law" (which like any such law admits exceptions):

In the absence of pre-existing radical social movements (i.e. that tend to target the foundations of society), a catastrophe can only encourage the outbreak of partial disputes (of varying intensity), and force the established order to adapt and therefore to strengthen itself.

Things being as they stand, most people experience the pandemic according to their former beliefs, and their convictions are more reinforced than challenged. The left-wing supporter concludes that the solution lies in high-quality public services, the neo-liberal that the State has once again proved its incompetence, the far-right voter that borders must be closed, the trans-humanist that it is time to move towards an enhanced humanity, the research scientist that research should be better funded, the arch-pessimist that we have no grip on anything. The doom-sayer grumbles we must prepare for the worst, the activist repeats that it is urgent to energise struggles... And the proletarians ? They think and will think what their acts and struggles will lead them to understand.

Why do we now live as we do ?

And how could we live differently ?

We only ask ourselves these crucial (theoretical) questions when we have already begun to give them (practical) answers.

G.D., February 1, 2021

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Gilles Dauvé  
The Year the World Went Viral  
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