

The Pandemics of Capital

Grupo Barbaria

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It's difficult to write a text like this one right now. In the current context, in which coronavirus has busted – or soon threatens to – the living conditions of many of us, the only thing you want to do is go out to the street and set everything ablaze, with a mask on if needed. That's what it deserves. If the economy is worth more than our lives, it makes sense to delay the containment of the virus until the last moment, until the pandemic is already inevitable. It also makes sense that when it's no longer possible to halt the contagion and it's needed to disturb – to the bare minimum – the production and distribution of commodities, it be us who are fired, who are forced to work, who remain confined in the jails and the Foreigner Internment Centers, who are obliged to choose between the sickness and the contagion of loved ones or dying of hunger in quarantine. All of this with patriotic cheers and the call for national unity, with social discipline as the executioner's mantra, with the elegies to the good citizen who bows the head and keeps quiet.

The Only thing that you want to do in moments like this is to smash everything.

And this rage is fundamental. But what's also fundamental is to comprehend well in order to fight better, in order to struggle against the very root of the problem. To comprehend it when everything explodes and the individual rage converts into collective potential, in order to know how to use that rage, to really put an end, without stories, without deviations, to this society of misery.

The virus is not just a virus

Since its beginnings, the relationship that capitalism has with nature (human and non-human) has been the story of a never-ending catastrophe. It is in the logic of a society that is organized through mercantile exchange. It is in the very reason for being of the commodity, in which its natural, material aspect is of little importance, only the possibility of obtaining money for it.

In a mercantile society, the ensemble of the species of the planet are subordinated to the functioning of that blind and automatic machine which is capital: the non-human natural world is no more than a flow of raw materials, a means of production of commodities, and the human natural world is the source of labor to exploit in order to get more money from money. Everything material, everything natural, everything alive is in the service of the production of a social relation – value, money, capital – which has become autonomous and needs to permanently transgress the limits of life.

But capitalism is a system fraught with contradictions. Every time it tries to overcome them, it only postpones and intensifies the next crisis. The social and sanitary crisis created by the spread of the coronavirus concentrates all of them and expresses the putrefaction of the social relations based on value, on private property and the State: their historical depletion.

In the measure in which this system advances, the competition between capitalists propels technological and scientific development and, with it, an increasingly more social production. More and more, what we produce depends less on a person and more on the society. It depends less on local production, rooted in a territory, in order to become increasingly more global. It also depends increasingly less on individual and immediate effort and more on the knowledge accumulated throughout history and applied efficiently to production. All this it does, however, while maintaining its own categories: although the production is increasingly more social, the product of the labor continues being private property. And not merely so: the product of labor

is a commodity, meaning, private property destined for exchange with other commodities. This exchange is made possible by the fact that both products contain the same quantity of abstract labor, of value. This logic, which constitutes the basic categories of capital, is put into question by the development of capitalism itself, which reduces the quantity of living labor that every commodity requires. Automation of production, expulsion from work, a decline in the profits which the capitalists can obtain from the exploitation of this work: a crisis of value.

This profound contradiction between social production and private appropriation is manifest in a whole series of derivative contradictions. One of them, which we have elaborated on more extensively in other moments, takes into account the role of the earth in the exhaustion of value as a social relation. The development of capital tends to create an ever stronger demand for land usage, which causes its price – the land rent – to historically tend to increase. This is logical: the more that productivity increases, the more the quantity of value for each product unit declines, and therefore, the more commodities that must be produced in order to obtain the same profits as before. As there are increasingly less workers in the factory and more robots, production requires more raw materials and energy resources. The demand on the land, therefore, intensifies: mega-mining, deforestation, and intensive extraction of fossil fuels are the logical consequences of this dynamic. On the other hand, the concentration of capital at the same time leads to concentrating great masses of labor power in the cities, which pushes the price of housing in the cities to permanently rise. From there follows the worst living conditions in the metropolis, the overcrowding, the contamination, the rent which eats up an ever larger portion of the salary, the workday which is indefinitely prolonged by transport.

Agriculture and livestock production are faced with with these two big competitors for the land, the sector linked to the utilization of the land rent, and the one linked to the extraction of raw materials and energy. If the agricultural or livestock farms are to be found in the periphery of the city, perhaps their parcel of land would be more profitable for the construction of a housing complex, or for an industrial zone for which its proximity to metropolis is convenient. If they are more far removed, but their piece of land contains minerals that are useful and in demand for the production of commodities, or even worse, some hydrocarbon reserves, they can't be realized either in this terrain which capital has destined for more succulent aims.¹ If they want to remain in the same place and continue to pay the rent, they will have to increase productivity like industrial capitalists do. Furthermore they have the incentive of the incessant increase in urban mouths to feed. The agroindustry is the logical consequence of this dynamic: only by increasing productivity, using automated machinery, producing in monoculture, making an ever greater use of chemicals -fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture, pharmaceuticals in livestock production-, even by genetically modifying plants and animals, can sufficient profits be produced in a context where the land rent increases unceasingly.

All this is necessary in order to enframe the emergence of pandemics. As the comrades of Chuang explain well, the coronavirus is not a natural occurrence removed from capitalist relations. Because it's not just an issue of globalization, meaning, of the exponential possibilities for expansion of a virus. It is capital's very form of producing which fosters the appearance of pandemics.

¹ The substitution of fossil fuels for renewable energy doesn't resolve the problem, all to the contrary: the renewables require much wider surfaces in order to produce inferior levels of energy.

In the first place, in order to be able to make agriculture and livestock production more profitable it's necessary to implant much more intensive forms of production, much more aggressive for the natural metabolism. When many members of the same species – like pigs, for instance, one of the possible sources of COVID-19 and the confirmed source of Influenza A (H1N1) which appeared in 2009 in the United States – are crowded together in industrial farms, their living conditions, their feeding and the permanent application of pharmaceuticals on their bodies weakens their immune system. There's no resilience in the small ecosystem that constitutes a very numerous population of the same species, immunologically compromised and crowded in confined spaces. Furthermore, this ecosystem is a training camp, a favorable space for the natural selection of the most contagious and virulent of virus. And much more so if this population has a high mortality rate, as occurs in the slaughterhouses, given that the swiftness with which it's capable to transmit the virus determines its possibility to survive.

It's only a question of time that one of these virus manages to be transmitted and persist in a host of another species: a human being, for example.

Now let's say that this human being is a proletarian and lives, like the pigs in our example, crowded in an unhealthy home with the rest of their family, goes to work in a train or bus where it's hard to breathe at peak hours, and they have a weakened immune system because of fatigue, the poor quality of food, and the air and water contamination. The permanent ascent of the price of living and transport, the increasingly more precarious jobs, the poor eating, in short, the law of the growing poverty of capital causes our species to have very little resilience.

The agriculture industry's quest for a larger profit and competitiveness in the world economy also has its effects in the proliferation of epidemics. We have a good example in the epidemic of Ebola that spread out throughout all of western Africa in 2014–16, which was preceded by the implantation of monoculture for palm oil: a kind of plantation which bats – the source of the strain that produced the outbreak – are very attracted to. The deforestation of the woods, in virtue of not only the agro-industrial exploitation but also the logging and mega-mining, forces many animal species – and some human populations – to plunge even deeper into the woods or to stay close to them, exposing themselves to carriers of the virus such as bats (Ebola), mosquitoes (Zika) and other reservoir hosts – meaning, pathogen carriers – that adapt to the new conditions established by the agroindustry. Furthermore, the deforestation reduces the biodiversity that makes the forest a barrier for the chains of transmission of pathogens.

Although the most probable source of the coronavirus is situated in the hunting and selling of wild animals, sold in the market of Hunan in the city of Wuhan, this is not disconnected from the process described above. In the measure in which the livestock production and the industrial agriculture spread, they push the hunters of wild foods to penetrate ever more deeply into the woods in search of their merchandise, which increases the possibilities of contagion with new pathogens and therefore of their propagation in the big cities.

The king disrobed

The coronavirus has stripped the king bare: the contradictions of capital are seen and suffered from in all their brutality. And capitalism is incapable of managing the catastrophe that derives from these contradictions, because it can only escape them by resolving them momentarily so that they break out with a greater virulence later on.

To identify this dynamic, essential to the story of capitalism, we can place our gaze on technology. The application of technoscientific knowledge to production is perhaps one of the features which has most characterized this system. Technology is utilized in order to increase productivity with the goal of extracting an above-average profit, in such a way that the company that produces more commodities than its competitors with the same amount of labor time can choose between reducing the price a bit to gain market space or to keep it the same and gain a little more money. However, insofar as their competitors apply similar improvements and all have the same level of productivity, the capitalists find that instead of obtaining extra profits, they have still less profit than before, because they have more commodities to place in the market – which in conditions of competition lowers their price – and less workers to exploit in proportion. That's to say, what had been presented at first as a solution, the application of technology to increase productivity, rapidly becomes the problem. This logical movement is permanent and structural in capitalism.

The development of medicine and of pharmacology follows this same motion. Capitalism cannot avoid, since its earliest beginnings, sickening its population. It can only try to develop the medical and pharmaceutical knowledge to control the pathologies that it itself facilitates.

Nevertheless, in the measure in which the conditions that make us sick don't disappear, but even increase with the ever more pronounced crisis of this system, the role of medicine is inverted and can function as a fuel for sickness. The use of antibiotics, not only in the human species, but also in livestock, fosters the resistance of the bacterias and encourages the appearance of strains increasingly more difficult to combat. Something similar occurs with the vaccines for virus. On one hand, they often arrive late and insufficiently in the emergence of an epidemic, given that the mercantile logic itself, the patents, the industrial secrets and the negotiation of the pharmaceutical companies with the state delay their quick application to the infected population. On the other hand, natural selection will cause the virus to be each time more prepared to overcome these barriers, favoring the appearance of new strains for which the vaccines are still unknown. The problem, therefore, is not in the development of medical and pharmacological knowledge, but in that while the social relations which permanently produce the virus and facilitate its rapid expansion continue to be maintained, this knowledge will only encourage the appearance of increasingly more contagious and virulent strains.

In the same way that the technological and medical development conceal a strong contradiction in capitalist social relations, so it occurs also with the contradiction between the national and international plane of capital itself.

Capitalism is already born with a certain global character. During the Late Middle Ages, long distance networks of commerce were developed which, added to the new pulse of the conquest of the American continent, allowed the accumulation of an enormous mass of mercantile and usury capital. This would serve as a trampoline for the new social relations that were emerging with the proletarianization of the peasantry and the imposition of wage labor in Europe. The black plague that devastated the European continent in the 16th century was precisely a fruit of this globalization of commerce, proceeding initially from the Italian merchants coming from China. Logically, the immune systems of the different populations in that era were less prepared to bear sicknesses from other regions, and the tightening of ties at a global level facilitated a spreading of epidemics as grand as the networks of commerce were wide. A good example of that were the epidemics that the colonists would bring which would finish off the majority of the indigenous population in large zones of America.

However, these global networks of commerce would serve, in a paradoxical and contradictory manner, to encourage the formation of national bourgeoisies. This formation went hand in hand with the efforts over many centuries to homogenize a single national market, a single state, and with them two centuries in which one war after another would occur without end, until the point where there were hardly any years of peace in Europe during the 16th and 17th century. The global character of capital is inseparable from the historical emergence of the nation, and with it, from imperialism between nations.

This two-fold in permanent contradiction, the strengthening of the ties at a global level with the national rootedness of capitalism, is expressed in all of its force in the current coronavirus situation. On one hand, globalization permits the pathogens of different origins to migrate from the wildest isolated reservoirs to population centers all over the world. Therefore, for example, the virus Zika was detected in 1947 in the Ugandan forest where it received its name, but it wasn't until the development of the global agricultural market, with Uganda as one of its links, that Zika could arrive to the north of Brazil in 2015, helped along without a doubt by the monoculture production of soy, cotton, and corn in the region. A virus, with certainty, that climate change – another consequence of capitalist social relations – is helping to spread: the carrier mosquito of Zika and of dengue – the tiger mosquito in its two variants, the *Aedes aegypti* and the *Aedes albopictus* – has arrived to zones like Spain due to global warming. Furthermore, the internationalization of capitalist relations is exponential. Since the epidemic of the other coronavirus, SARS-CoV, between 2002 and 2003 in China and Southeast Asia, the quantity of flights coming out of these regions has multiplied by ten.

Hence, capitalism promotes the appearance of new pathogens that its international character extends rapidly. And nevertheless it is incapable of managing them. In the imperialist dispute between the major powers there's no space for the international coordination that increasingly more global social relations require, and even less, the coordination that this pandemic already requires. The inherently national character of capital, as globalized as you like, entails that the national interests in the context of the imperialist struggle prevail against every kind of international consideration for the control of the virus. If China, Italy, or Spain delayed the taking of measures until the last moment, as France, Germany, or the United States would later do, it's precisely because the measures necessary to contain the pandemic consisted in the quarantine of the infected and, having arrived at a certain level of contagion, in the partial paralyzation of the production and distribution of commodities. In a context in which the economic crisis that is now breaking out had been gestating for two years, in an ill-out trade war between China and the United States and during the course of an industrial recession, this stoppage could not be permitted. The logical decision of capital's functionaries was then to sacrifice the health and a number of lives among the variable capital – human beings, proletarians – in order to stick it out and maintain competitiveness in the global market. That it has been revealed to be not only ineffective but even counterproductive doesn't exempt the logic of this decision: from a national bourgeoisie, sensitive only to the ups and downs of its own GDP, you can't ask for international philanthropy. That must be left to the discussions of the UN.

And this thing is that the grand contradiction which the coronavirus has pointed out is this: that of the GDP, that of the wealth based on fictitious capital, that of a recession constantly postponed on the basis of liquidity injections without any material foundation in the present.

The coronavirus has disrobed the king, and has shown that in reality we never exited from the crisis of 2008. The minimal growth, the posterior stagnancy and the industrial recession of the last

ten years have been no more than the barely noticeable response of a body in coma, a body that has only survived thanks to the permanent emission of fictitious capital. As we explained earlier, capitalism is based on the exploitation of abstract labor, without which it cannot obtain profits, and nevertheless by its own dynamic it is pushed to expel labor from production in an exponential fashion. This extremely strong contradiction, this structural contradiction that reaches its most fundamental categories, cannot be overcome but by aggravating it for later by means of credit, that is to say, the recourse to the expectation of future profits in order to continue feeding the machine in the present. The businesses of the “real economy” have no other way of surviving than to permanently flee further on, to obtain credits and to keep the shares in the stock market high.

The coronavirus is not the crisis. It is simply the detonator for a structural contradiction that has come to express itself since decades ago. The solution that the central banks of the major powers gave for the crisis of 2008 was to continue to flee and to use the only instruments that the bourgeoisie currently has to face the putrefaction of its own relations of production: massive injections of liquidity, meaning, cheap credit on the basis of the emission of fictitious capital. This instrument, as is natural, hardly served to maintain the bubble, given that in the face of the absence of a real profitability the companies utilized that liquidity to reacquire their own stocks and continue to put themselves in debt. As such, today the debt in relation to the global GDP has risen by almost a third since 2008. The coronavirus has simply been the gust of wind that has toppled the house of cards.

Contrary to what social-democracy proclaims, according to which we would find ourselves in this situation because neoliberalism has given a free pass to the greed of the speculators on Wall Street, the emission of fictitious capital – that is to say, of credits that are based on some future gains which will never come about – is the necessary organ of artificial respiration for this system based on work. A system that, nevertheless, through the development of an extremely high level of productivity, has increasingly less need for work to produce wealth. As we have explained earlier, capitalism develops a social production that collides directly with the private property on which mercantile exchange is based. We have never been a species as much as we are now. We have never been so globally linked. Humanity has never recognized itself as such, has needed to as much at a global level, independently from languages, cultures and national barriers. And nevertheless capitalism, which has constructed the global character of our human relations, can only confront it by affirming the nation and the commodity and denying our humanity, can only face the constitution of our human community by means of its logic of destruction: the extinction of the species.

Hobbes and us

A week before this text would be written, in Spain they decreed a state of emergency, the quarantine and the isolation of us all, save for if it's to sell our labor power. Similar measures were taken in China and Italy, and they have already taken at the moment in France. Alone, in our homes, at a distance of one meter between every person that we meet in the street, the very reality of the capitalist society is made present: we can only relate with others as commodities, not as people. Perhaps the image that best expresses this are the photographs and the videos that have circulated on the social networks at the beginning of the isolation: thousands of people

crowded into train and metro carriages on route to work, while the parks and the public streets are closed off to anyone that can't present a good excuse to the police patrols. We are labor power, not people. The state has that very clear.

In this context, we have seen a false dichotomy appear based on the two poles of the capitalist society: the State and the individual. First of all was the individual, the social molecule of capital: the first voices that made themselves heard facing the alert of the contagion were those of every man for himself, those of let the old die and to each their own, those of blaming each other for coughing, for fleeing, for working, for not doing so. The first reaction was the spontaneous ideology of this society: you can't ask a society that is constructed on isolated individuals to not behave as such. On the basis of this and of the social chaos that was being produced, there was a general relief at the appearance of the State. State of emergency, militarization of the streets, control of the routes of communication and of transport except for what is fundamental: the circulation of commodities, especially including the commodity labor force. In the face of the incapacity to organize ourselves collectively against the catastrophe, the State is revealed as the tool of social administration.

And it doesn't cease to be that. An atomized society needs a State to organize it. But it does so by reproducing the very causes of our atomization: those of profit against life, those of capital against the needs of the species. The models of the Imperial College of London predict 250,000 deaths in the United Kingdom and up to 1.2 million in the United States. The predictions on a global level, accounting for the contagion in the countries which are less developed and with a much more precarious medical infrastructure, will arrive foreseeably to many millions of people. The coronavirus epidemic, nevertheless, could have been stopped much sooner. The States that have been the center of the pandemic have acted in the way they had to: placing business profits above all during at least a few weeks more, at the cost of millions of lives. In another kind of society, in a society ruled by the necessities of the species, the quarantine measures taken at their due time could have been punctual, localized, and rapidly superseded. But it is not so in a society like this.

The coronavirus is expressing with all of its brutality the contradictions of a moribund system. Out of everything that we have tried to describe here, this is the most essential: that of capital against life. If capitalism is rotting because of its incapacity to confront its own contradictions, only us as a class, as an international community, as a species, can put an end to it. It's not a cultural issue, of consciousness, but of a pure material necessity that pushes us collectively to struggle for life, for our life in common, against capital.

And the moment to do so, even if it's just the beginning, has already begun. Many of us are already in quarantine, but we are not isolated, nor alone. We are preparing. Like the comrades that have risen up in Italy and in China, like those that have been on their feet for some time already in Iran, Chile or Hong Kong, we are going towards life. Capitalism is dying, but only as an international class, as a species, as a human community, can we bury it. The coronavirus epidemic has toppled the house of cards, has disrobed the king, but only we can reduce it to ashes.

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