

Coronavirus and social issue

La Oveja Negra

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We find ourselves in a state of exception although it is within capitalist normality. State reason knows not of exceptions but of rules. It is not the end of the world. And it is not necessary to suspend reflection or action due to force majeure.

Capitalism is an everyday catastrophe. However, it only presents as a serious problem that which it seeks to solve immediately. What has already naturalized as being inevitable becomes part of its normality. Hence, all proposals that do not aim to fight capitalism only aim to manage its catastrophe.

Among the accepted facts of this society is the “statistic” that 8,500 children in the world die every day from malnutrition as estimated by UNICEF, the World Bank and the World Health Organization. It is written quickly, four digits... but it is an unspeakable horror. Isn’t this enough to fall into desperation? To consider this society dysfunctional? Doesn’t that mean that everything must be changed? Doesn’t it finally make evident what kind of world we live in? Or perhaps a pandemic must arrive to the cities where those of us who have the voice and the means to act and complain about this live?

Clearly, and unfortunately, for a long time now, these deaths from hunger are not an exception. Those figures seem even more abstract because of the distance, geographical and of all other types, that we have with the African continent, the undisputed centre of global hunger. There, capitalism exploits not only through wages, as it usually does here, but particularly through semi-slave labour, while at the same time dispossessing and destroying in a brutal way.

The pandemic first began to affect countries that are important centers of capitalist production: China, Italy, Spain, and the United States, threatening to paralyze the production and circulation of commodities in its global spread, and to cause the collapse of the health system.

It is precisely because it has reached such regions, with a productive population that has access to medical and hospital systems, that it became so alarming. However, most of us are outside of that circuit, and barely linked to formal jobs.

It is worth remembering that capitalist society is the society of wage labour and domestic work which is not directly paid, as well as slave labour in the Democratic Republic of Congo or in northern Argentina. There is not a good side and a bad side, they are necessary aspects for the functioning of capitalist normality.

On the other hand, we should ask ourselves: how it is possible, with such a stop in productive economic activity, for the banks to keep getting richer? In the absence of a vaccine for COVID-19, the United States Federal Reserve, for example, injected billions of dollars to calm markets and prevent the pandemic from threatening growth. The United States has lowered its annual interest rates to 0%.

Today capitalism is sustained on the basis of the continuous production of fictitious capital, of debts and through all kinds of financial injections that allow it to continue. The bourgeoisie is beginning to be aware of this fiction, and therefore this dominant widespread fear is nothing more than the fear which the dominant class has.

To return to our most tangible and macabre global reality, we make it clear, if need be, that we are not belittling this pandemic that scourges us. One situation does not remove or obscure the other, even worse, they reinforce each other. There is no such thing as the “privilege” of having coronavirus in Italy as opposed to the possibility of dying of hunger in Burundi. But we do see that some dead are worth more than others, which should not be overlooked when analysing a problem that is supposed to be global.

As we write these words, the pandemic is beginning to prey upon India. There, compulsory confinement will have its own characteristics since it is the second most populated country in the world, and because according to the International Labour Organization (ILO) at least 90% of the labour force in India works in the informal sector.

The coronavirus pandemic, the panic that has taken hold of the population and its corresponding quarantine are a living experience shared by millions of people. The Chuang collective, in their article Social contagion. Microbiological Class War in China, points out that “quarantine is like a strike hollowed of its communal features but nonetheless capable of delivering a deep shock to both psyche and economy. This fact alone makes it worthy of reflection.” With this special issue of La Oveja Negra we want to contribute to the necessary reflection on the situation we are going through.

6th of April, 2020

The virus is capitalism?

Viruses are infectious agents that cannot be seen with the naked eye, in fact, they are microscopic. Since they are acellular they can only multiply within the cells of other organisms. They infect animals, fungi, plants, and bacteria. Because of their apparent “parasitic” activity, there are some who metaphorically link them to capitalism. But capitalism is not an external agent that lives through us, not even the bourgeois are simply parasites. To insist on the innocence of the victim and the external character of the “capitalist virus” does no more than to engage in useless schemas to understand the nature of capitalism and to affirm the passivity of a “working class” that does not want to abolish itself but to improve itself.

The emergence of this pandemic is a reminder, as alienated as we are, that we are biological beings. Both we and a member of the British Crown can become ill. Some famous “untouchable” person can be touched by the most famous virus of the moment, because they are also and above all a human body.

The thing is that without viruses, there would be no life as we know it. Although it is generally believed that viruses and bacteria are our enemies, life exists thanks to balance and “mutual support,” not competition.

The development and spread of the coronavirus on the present scale can only happen within capitalism. And not simply because tourism and a globalized world exist, but because they are inherently related to the way capitalist society, which is totalitarian and global, produces and therefore distributes commodities. Because we are affected by a society that puts profit ahead of life, and this has a direct impact on our food, housing conditions, relations and mental health. Every illness arises and develops under specific material conditions.

Getting sick in this capitalist society means many things: not being able to get enough rest, sleeping in a cold, damp place, working while sick, carrying on with our duties with our legs shaking, not having what we need to eat available, suffering in complete loneliness, or surrounded by too many people. Our immunity is directly related to the environment and the way we live, but this does not mean that there is a possibility that we humans can be free of disease.

As Alfredo M. Bonanno points out in *Illness and Capital*: “Things are a little more complicated than that. Basically, we cannot say that there would no longer be such a thing as illness in a liberated society. Nor can we say that, if such a wonderful event were to occur, illness would

reduce itself to a simple weakening of some hypothetical force that is still to be discovered. We think that illness is part of the nature of man's state of living in society, i.e., it corresponds to a certain price to be paid for correcting a little of nature's optimal conditions in order to obtain the artificiality necessary to build even the freest of societies. Certainly, the exponential growth of illness in a free society where artificiality between individuals would be reduced to the strictly indispensable, would not be comparable to that in a society based on exploitation, such as the one in which we are living now. So illness would be an expression of our humanity just as it is an expression of our terrifying inhumanity today."

It does not take a conspiracy for a virus to appear in a country and spread around the globe, this happens "naturally" in the artificial world we live in. To address the issue of the virus behind the current pandemic (SARS-CoV-2), we recommend the previously cited article by Chuang, given its synthesis and clarity. It states that it was, "like its 2003 predecessor SARS-CoV, as well as the avian flu and swine flu before it, gestated at the nexus of economics and epidemiology. It's not coincidental that so many of these viruses have taken on the names of animals: the spread of new diseases to the human population is almost always the product of what's called zoonotic transfer, which is a technical way of saying that such infections jump from animals to humans. This leap from one species to another is conditioned by things like proximity and the regularity of contact, all of which construct the environment in which the disease is forced to evolve."

Faith in Science

In this context, it seems that it is science that has taken command of the situation, that comes to bring certainty in the midst of chaos, to save us from catastrophe. But this idea, cinematic by the way, of a science that displays all its potential to guarantee people's health, is something that we need to crush definitively. Technoscience, as we characterize the current state of rational knowledge, is a complex business-technical-scientific system and constitutes one of the multiple and simultaneous facets articulated by the capitalist machinery. It is not neutral at all. There is no science separated from Capital. Both have developed synergetically, nourishing each other.

We cannot forget that these envoys of Science on Earth are the same ones who justify the use of agrochemicals in the Argentine region, who develop not only the weapons for wars but also the medicines that make us sick and kill us, as well as an endless number of elements that reinforce this apparently irrational system.

Capital produces scientific experts as a full expression of the division of labour. They define the problem and define the strategy, taking advantage of one of the many dispossessions that sustain modern society: the taking of the knowledge of self-care and preservation away from the dynamics of the living. The specialists quantify the world, exercise a mathematical reduction of reality, creating models of understanding-domination of human and non-human nature. A knowledge that, by transcending the discursive field and becoming concrete action, violates materiality in an irreversible way.

This view of the world assigns "properties" to the "objects of study," in this case the virus, as possessing certain absolute characteristics, independent of the environment in which they emerge and unfold their existence. Everything is focused on the agent. The operation erases the material conditions where the action takes place. We talk about the virus, the illness and the mea-

asures for the mitigation of the consequences, but never about the social relations of production and reproduction that incubate the occurrences.

Another aspect of the codification that dominant knowledge makes upon the world is that of identifying the strange as an enemy. It is the totalitarianism imposed by the military metaphor, the macabre game of defense and attack, the systematic destruction of the other. Governments apply the tactic, the how to of the what to do that is imposed by the rational army, and thus execute decisive decisions such as declaring a quarantine, stopping a line of production, closing a particular establishment, forcing and depriving work, persecuting, locking up and torturing those who do not obey its directives.

The subordination of actions to a certain techno-scientific branch is temporary and ever-changing. When another type of action on reality is needed, the expert knowledge that best suits the management of that particular social situation will take over. They are exchanged as easily as a spare part is replaced. Because they are part of the same thing. Gears of this system that are alternately placed in command or at disposal. If necessary they refer to people, the environment, the past, the future or life, but always with the calculator at hand.

The State's reaction

As the Angry Workers of the World collective points out in their recent article *Discussing the COVID-19 regime from a revolutionary working class perspective* in seven steps, the debate oscillates between a justified distrust of the state's motivation ("the state uses the crisis to experiment with counter-insurgency and repressive measures") and criticism of the state's own inability to do what it should ("austerity has destroyed the health infrastructure"):

"We can assume that the repressive measures and the lockdowns are also imposed in order to cover up and counteract the lack of general medical support and equipment, e.g. for mass testing. The state measures have also to be seen on the background of recent popular protests, from the Yellow Vests to the street protests in Latin America: all anti-government protests in Algeria have been banned; the military is on the streets in France; a three months state of emergency has been declared in Chile, before any fatalities occurred and before any other medical measures have been taken. The current Corona regime is not a conspiracy against these protests, but the state knows that they have to be seen as regaining control in the interests of the general public."

The State measures contradict each other. Each government is pressured, on the one hand, to control its population (curfews, border closures) in order to avoid the collapse of the health system; and, on the other hand, to keep production going (forcing people to go to work, rescuing companies). The important thing is to protest as best we can in these circumstances and fight for our immediate needs without further strengthening the state and allowing it to become even more reactionary in its reaction. Undoubtedly, the demands to strengthen confinement contribute to this, not to mention the widespread tendency to turn a blind eye to police brutality towards those who momentarily break that mandate, usually out of necessity.

But there is no need to go into the supposed excesses done by the forces of law and order who defend private property, and therefore defend the bourgeoisie. Confinement is already a repressive measure, "a measure of reclusion, which consists of imposing limits on someone and

not letting them out. It has to do with the static, with inhibition and confinement. It can be used, for example, as a political measure of prevention or of punishment.”¹

In Argentina, for example, the government has threatened us with a state of siege, and although it has not come to that, the situation is strikingly similar. The difference is the official loss of constitutional guarantees. However, the police and military apparatus take over the streets and are emboldened to do as they like. Governments tell their citizens how, where and with whom to circulate. One of the attributes of the sad citizen is “free movement,” but well, even that is being lost. If being citizenized is already a punishment, perhaps we will soon be less than that.

“Keep moving” says the cop on the street usually. Now in quarantine he changes it to “go home.” And if he considers it necessary, he deals out blows, forces people to do sit-ups and sing the national anthem, like in the neighborhoods of the Argentine Republic.

This kind of desperate and aggressive measures at a global level resemble, as Chuang points out, those of counter-insurgency cases, very clearly recalling the actions of the military-colonial occupation in places like Algeria or, more recently, Palestine. Never before have they been carried out on this scale, nor in megalopolises that are home to a large part of the world’s population. The character of the repression offers then a strange lesson for those who have their mind set on world revolution, since it is, essentially, a simulation of an international level reaction, coordinated between States.

Counter-insurgency is, after all, a kind of desperate war that takes place only when more solid forms of conquest, appeasement and economic incorporation have become impossible. It is a costly, inefficient, rearguard action. The result of the repression is almost always a second insurgency, bloodied by the crushing of the first one and even more desperate. But we can add that this kind of counter-insurgency happens in a particular way, because it is not simply against a population but with the population, making every home a headquarter and every citizen a soldier for himself and to his neighbour. Their weapons: whatsapp, cameras, “social networks”; and their trenches can be their windows or balconies.

Our rejection of the State and all its measures is not based on ideological principle, but on our material reality of exploitation and domination. There are already plenty of voices that love to say what the State should do, hoping to be able to do it themselves. On the contrary, it is necessary to criticize State action and fight for its necessary suppression. When faced with problems that it cannot solve, we will remember that it is part of the problem, and never its solution, no matter who is in charge.

Coronavirus is exemplary in this regard. We do not deny the existence of the problem of the spread of a virus worldwide. Nor do we deny the fact that there are measures less destructive than others for the proletarian class. What we do point out is that what is intended as a solution is making the situation seriously worse.

Politicians will tell us that there is no alternative, that these are measures that can be criticised, but it would be worse if nothing were done. The few who criticise mass quarantine speak of the need to carry out large-scale testing, to isolate only the sick and people with symptoms, to focus care on the at-risk population. Those who go a little further, demand strong decisions against the private health sector, as well as economic measures ranging from massive subsidies for informal workers to impositions on companies as a brake on layoffs, full payment of salaries, even productive reconversion of some factories to produce ventilators and other health implements.

¹ El terror a lo invisible, Susanna Minguell.

These needs, which seek to be reduced to rights by the State: the right to meet, to circulate, to demonstrate... as long as the State considers it appropriate. With our needs traded for rights, the struggle comes down to what “the State should do.” That is the trap that has allowed this massive confinement while the largest assault on the proletariat of the last decades is being made on a worldwide scale.

State of isolation

There is less and less to be revealed. States talk openly about imposing measures of “social distancing.” It would be enough to talk about physical distancing, but they prefer to be more transparent.

In Argentina, like a premonition, Alberto Fernández had been repeating since September last year, when he was not yet president: “We should avoid being in the streets.” That was the recommendation to his constituents: not to protest in the last months of Macri’s government because the solution was in the ballot box and not in the streets, that is, in the individualized citizen (one person/one vote) and not in the collective. He didn’t want anyone to get into the habit of protesting because the Argentine peso would continue to devalue against the dollar, unemployment would increase, and our lives would get worse. With or without a pandemic, as General Perón said, “From home to work and from work to home.” Of course, this applies to those who have a job and a home.

A few days ago, already in office, and as he doubled the length of the quarantine, the president reassured that “it is a war against an invisible army that attacks us in places where we sometimes do not expect it.” Again, politics as war by other means. That is why, in the face of a pandemic, they provide political solutions that quickly become military.

They chose to wait, to then later confine and repress us, as much those who are infected as those who are not. The usual practice in history has been to quarantine infected people. Isolating millions of people who do not have the illness that triggers the quarantine is a new model of crisis management.

It is remarkable how impossible it is today to refer to what is specifically national. Events are repeated, sometimes precisely, in different regions with a difference of only days. This is an unprecedented situation, in which proletarians in so many countries are living a similar reality.

The COVID-19 pandemic is being used as a global social control laboratory. This possibility has been publicly planned by NATO and the European Union since at least 2010. There is no need to conspiratorially create a laboratory virus. For decades, states have widened the motives for which they can militarily intervene in a territory. To the situations of insurrection, revolt or even terrorism, they have added those related to “natural disasters” or epidemics. They put all of them on the same level because for them it is simply a question of military operations to restore order, makes no difference to them where the disorder comes from.² The specialists are already talking about fighting the virus globally just as they fight terrorism.

This is the social prevention that the bourgeoisie all over the world implement in the defense of their profits. It clearly does not have the capacity to prevent phenomena such as earthquakes,

² As mentioned, this can be read in their public documents. See the book *Army on the Streets* by Italian collective *Rompere le Righe*, originally published in 2010 and subtitled precisely: *Some aspects of NATO’s “Urban Operations in the year 2020” report*.

although we could not say the same for others such as fires or floods. But in any case, it also fails to prevent the social consequences. Equally, it cannot prevent an epidemic and stop a disease from spreading rapidly across the planet. Its purpose is not to defend our health, unless it is a question of a health management that is aligned with their profits.

As Marx pointed out: “Capital takes no account of the health and longevity of the worker, except when society forces it to take them into consideration. To the claim against physical and spiritual atrophy, against premature death and the torment of excessive labor, capital answers: Should we be tormented by this torment, when it increases our pleasure (profit)? But in general terms this does not depend on the good or bad will of the individual capitalist either. Free competition imposes the immanent laws of capitalist production on the individual capitalist as a coercive external law.”

Those who make up the exploited and oppressed class, the proletariat, need to, and often do, reason like their masters. And they will start to care about this or that disease when the state and the Capital point it out as a national health problem. Not that the coronavirus pandemic is not a big problem, but as it happens it's not the only one.

Panic and clichés spread faster than the virus. Contrary to what we are led to believe, the coronavirus cannot be the main problem on the planet when, according to official figures, there are 925 million malnourished people.

Without going very far, Argentina is starving and millions have not died but are malnourished. According to data from the INDEC (Argentine National Institute of Census and Statistics) itself, one out of every three Argentines is poor, that's to say, more than 14 million people. Even so, the State and its human extensions order thousands of people in this country who do not have drinking water to wash themselves with water and soap, or, without going any further, tell them to go and fetch drinking water outside their homes, while at the same time ordering homeless people to stay at home, or to apply for miserable subsidies over the Internet.

So it's not Argentina's main problem either. Just in reference to health, let's remember that not even the cancer deaths linked to the use of agro-industrial waste on the Argentine coast managed to unite so many people or trigger such attitudes of shock and vigilance as those observed in the current situation.

To add insult to injury, the coronavirus quarantine did not stop the toxic agro-chemical spraying, but this seems to matter very little to the upright citizen, who entered a state of suspended reason and now has only one issue to busy themselves with, to panic and to wait for the State's solution. “This has been going on for a few days now, it would seem that they are taking advantage of the presidential decree that forces social isolation in order to fumigate rampantly,” said a local resident of Ramayn (Santa Fe) who preferred to protect his identity.

Entrenched in their homes, and via “social networks,” millions of citizens raise the call to stay at home, with insults if needed, snitching and endorsing the actions of State security forces, who have been seen to be emboldened to abuse, bully and repress neighbors in the streets. They are afraid to come into contact, to infect each other.

The commemoration of the 1976 coup d'état involved threats of a *state of siege* by *Captain Beto*. On 24 March, the Argentine State celebrated with more than 16,000 people held in detention in just the first three days of the emergency measures put into effect by the Need and Urgency Decree 297/2020, and with deaths that ensued in the riots at the prisons of Coronda and Las Flores (Santa Fe), which followed in the wake of the prisoners' fears of catching the virus from

prison guards, which could lead to a massacre due to overcrowding, poor health and sanitary conditions.

Supporters of the government, and not exactly from the left, were eloquent with respect to the whole national situation: “The fight against the coronavirus pandemic came as an abrupt reminder that States are there to protect their citizens. (...) that without the State “you would be at each other’s throats.” (...) We must finally accept the limits of the sacrosanct free enterprise. The fight against the pandemic has come to remind us that the general interest can justify the imposition of limits on any human activity.”

It should be clear to liberals that there is no possibility of saving their profits in an emergency except through a State control and repression.

“Understand that this is an exceptional moment, we do not have to fall into the false dilemma of either health or the economy, an economy that falls always rises, but a life that ends does not rise again,” said the Argentine president. Obviously, with a calculator in hand, the bourgeoisie thinks it is better to stop a large part of production than to have to face a possible sanitary collapse. In less exceptional moments this “dilemma” does not seem to be so important, when thousands of people die of cancer from toxic agro–chemical spraying. As well as one worker fatality every 14 hours due to what they call “occupational accidents.”³

In this social crisis, now aggravated by the pandemic and fundamentally by the adopted measures, we must fight against the increase in repression and the complicit silence of the citizenry. We must fight against the justification of any abuse, be it in the name of the economy, “health” or the “unity of the nation.”

Public health and workforce

At a moment when it is politically incorrect to unreservedly defend progress, the most destructive aspects of industrialisation, “intelligent” weapons, the obsession with speed or the clock itself, the example of medicine is often used to justify the benefits of progress and science, putting into practice the ideology of efficiency: an illness is cured at any cost, even if the solution involves other, less beneficial elements, even if the way in which it is produced causes more illness, even if brutal experiments are carried out on humans and other animals. In spite of this “high cost” not all of the sick are cured, and the same non–healing process sickened and killed more people than it could heal. Therefore, the alleged effectiveness is not really so, it is a deception not only because of its short and long term consequences, but also the immediate ones.

For institutional medicine, the sick person is a passive element, a patient (from the Latin *patris*: sufferer) who is received at the hospital like a broken machine that needs an effective intervention to return to normal. Even when the doctor, nurse or student wants to do otherwise, the conditions are so fundamental that it is very difficult to break from the mould.⁴

Just as medicine functions like the best alibi for science and progress, so public health does in defense of the State.

“We are not heroes, we are workers,” say those who work in health care in different parts of the world and suffer from the exhausting shifts in the face of the pandemic, with scarce resources

³ This is the figure reached by Basta de Asesinatos Laborales in its annual report for 2019.

⁴ Extracted from the section *Ciencia y Enfermedad*, in *Cuadernos de Negación* No. 8: *Crítica de la razón capitalista*.

and minimal safety conditions. This martyrdom to which the workers are being subjected is part of the sacrificial logic that Capital imposes on life in this world, even if it wants to sell us the opposite.

When we are told that life is the number one priority, skeptics wonder what life they are talking about. Specialists often overwhelm us with figures like infant mortality rates or life expectancy in order to sing praise to capitalist development. In this case, over the last weeks they have been hammering us with three figures with which they try to eclipse any other aspect of reality: the number of sick people, the number of dead people and of those who have recovered from the coronavirus. These numbers say nothing about the living conditions of the proletarian class, how we were before and how we will be after the pandemic is over. We are subjected to the subordination of the qualitative to the quantitative, of the concrete to the abstract.

If life can be reduced to figures on a screen, it is due to the fact that, under the reign of Capital, the vast majority of human beings matter only as a labour force. Health systems have been transformed in accordance with the needs for reproduction of the labour force in the service of exploitation. Of course we are facing this reality and in fact our present is the product of successive defeats of our class against the onslaughts of Capital. But as long as we have to sell ourselves in exchange for a salary to live, health practices cannot escape from the logic of performance, addressing the symptom and not the cause, seeking to prolong our useful life, taking care of the labor force in the same way as any other production input.

Once again slogans are heard from the left such as “our life is worth more than their profits,” which remind us precisely that the left does not aspire to go further than disputing the value of our labour force, when the real issue is that nothing in life should have a price tag! The dismantling of the health care system during the last decades is used to bombard us with criticism of neoliberalism, which increasingly operates as a discourse in defense of state interventionism rather than as a rejection of capitalism. Criticisms of the health systems of countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom, as well as their liberal rhetoric that is replicated in characters such as Bolsonaro, are guided by a fervent statism, where the coronavirus figures seem to be part of a repugnant ideological war over how to run the State. Defences are even circulating for the Chinese government and its “ability” to control the disease, on the grounds that it is “not yet fully capitalist “. The construction of a giant hospital in 10 days speaks of a country’s shocking productive capacity, not its concern for health. In fact, the current situation seems to end up being an opportunity for China to strengthen its economic position in the world market.

Chuang’s article warns us that the spread of the coronavirus “cant be understood without taking into account the ways in which Chinas last few decades of development in and through the global capitalist system has molded the country’s health care system and the state of public health more generally. (...) the coronavirus was originally able to take hold and spread rapidly because of a general degradation of basic healthcare among the population at large. But precisely because this degradation has taken place in the midst of spectacular economic growth, it has been obscured behind the splendor of glittering cities and massive factories. The reality, however, is that expenditures on public goods like health care and education in China remain extremely low, while most public spending has been directed toward brick and mortar infrastructure —bridges, roads, and cheap electricity for production.”

Faced with such a level of impoverishment of the minimum conditions of survival around the world, added to the worsening current situation, the proposal to reform the State, its institutions, its policies, with the banner of public health at the head, is reinforced. We must remember that

it is the State that is subject to economic development and not the other way around. And that health and life will only be above profit when it is swept away from this world.

“We are at war”

“The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis unlike any other. It looks like a war, and in many ways it is. People are dying. Health professionals are on the front lines. Those working in essential services, food distribution, delivery services and public supplies are working overtime to support these efforts. And then there are the hidden soldiers: those fighting the pandemic who are confined to their homes, unable to contribute fully to production.

In a war, massive spending on arms stimulates economic activity and essential services are guaranteed by special provisions. In this crisis, things are more complicated, although a common feature is the increased role of the public sector.” (*Economic policies for the war against COVID-19*, from the IMF blog on Latin American economic issues)

The Argentine president pointed out that “we are fighting an invisible enemy.” This was not so original... as other presidents did the same. “We are at war,” said President Emmanuel Macron in a speech to the French people in which he defended national unity. The same president who has been repressing the struggle of the “yellow vests,” leaving people crippled and mutilated in the wake of his non-lethal repression.⁵ Pedro Sanchez, the Spanish socialist president, solicited a historic mobilization of resources from the European Union in order to confront the coronavirus with the same alibi: “We are at war.” This is obviously more civilized than openly declaring war on the population, as Sebastian Piñera did last year in Chile.⁶

One of Argentina’s richest people, Claudio Belocopitt, who chose not to grant paid childcare leave to employees of Swiss Medical, one of his companies, said: “We are leading actors but we are not directors of the theatre. This is a war.” And he added: “The president needs to understand that we’re going to give him everything. Everything that is needed. But we have to work together, this is a war, we have to work together.”

Some bourgeois refer to and make use of the exceptional situation to fire employees, avoid paying days and reducing wages, others prefer to openly recognize the class war and point out their allies.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said the coronavirus pandemic “is the most complicated crisis the world has faced since World War II.” The comparisons sound excessive and we begin to wonder why so much emphasis is placed on war rhetoric.

War is Capital’s most drastic response to its crises of valorization. When other mechanisms such as fictitious capital, productive restructuring and successive economic crises do not permit a sufficient reactivation, it is war that opens the way for a new and more lasting stage of valorization. Capital reaches the paradoxical point of needing a brutal de-valorization to give a new impulse to valorization.

⁵ See La Oveja Negra No. 68: Heridas internacionales

⁶ See La Oveja Negra No. 66: En tiempo de revueltas: Chile y Ecuador

We bring this up because many are surprised that in this context of pandemic so many companies have folded without much complaint to the production stoppage, with the economic losses that this implies. That fact seems to be the best argument to make us believe that “we are all in the same boat,” that life would indeed come before profit.

We believe it is necessary to reflect on whether this scenario of world war in the face of the pandemic, of massive layoffs, adjustment, confinement, repression and social control, of reconfiguration of various sectors of the productive sector, of transformation and pauperization of forms of work and employment, responds but only to a need inherent to the economy in crisis, which has found in the coronavirus the ideal enemy to justify a series of measures upon which to base the much desired reactivation.⁷

As we said before about counter-insurgency, both the “invisible enemy” and the staging of the “internal enemy,” favour the settlement and expansion in the territories of new or improved systems of control and repression. If war is the continuation of politics by other means and the health issue is established as the policy of highest priority, health takes on the stature of war. What does not change is that war only expresses the economy by other means. And the invaded, disciplined, repressed and massacred are always supplied from the ranks of the exploited and oppressed.

We can see the extent to which this society of competition and violence faces any event as if it were a war. Even in the face of a virus, it acts tactically in terms of defence, attack and domination. A disease can bring suffering, death and pain, but that does not make it into a war. And it is not fought with guns, tanks and patrol cars as the states of the world are doing. We must take it on whole, together and strong, and that is made impossible with the confinement and terror to which we are being subjected.

The “collateral damage” of this so-called war is in sight. The president of Uruguay, Luis Lacalle Pou, stated that the so-called “femicides” are “collateral damage” imposed by the quarantine. From the first day of compulsory confinement, the number of women murdered in their homes by their husbands or companions began to sum up. But there are many more “collateral damages” that are impossible to count: “non-lethal” household aggressions, sexual abuse, cases of depression and worsening of mental health, imposed solitude, overcrowding, the suffering that confinement causes on children.

So, what further worsens the living conditions of the proletarians all over the world is not just a virus, but the panic induced by state terror, confinement, isolation, the criminalization of direct human relationships and therefore necessarily bodily relations, open repression and militarization. Brutal conditions that, “in the face of the horror of the virus,” Capital imposes in the cities, in the countryside, in proletarian neighborhoods, in hospitals, prisons, psychiatric hospitals and refugee camps. All this is added to the unemployment, the debts and the misery that in the short term begins to explode, showing that the remedy aggravates the disease.

The total or partial isolation of our loved ones implies the suspension of the emotional ties that make up our lives. This not only weakens us emotionally, but also leaves us at the mercy of the strange company of various technological devices. Screens, tactile or not, that bombard us with their information overload and that act as mediators between us and the world, keeping us in touch only through virtuality. The inactivity of confinement leads us to physical exhaustion and

⁷ In regards to this we recommend the pamphlet of Proletarian Internationalists: Against the Pandemic of Capital: Social Revolution!

therefore also to gradual psychological exhaustion. Likewise, the uncertainty about the future and the dominant panic exhaust us emotionally, which also produces physical exhaustion. It should be remembered that in the wars of recent decades the post-war dead, the sick and the suicidal, double the number of those fallen in confrontation.

Coronavirus did not cause the economic crisis

Rather, it darkens the horizon of forecasts that bourgeois economists had already made, insofar as the plan to contain the virus worldwide is produced at the cost of further deepening the slowdown in economic activity.

As Raul Zibechi recently pointed out in his article *The coronavirus as a cover-up for the systemic crisis*: “the conjunction of trade war, Brexit, public and private debt, and growing inequality was already wreaking havoc when the coronavirus appeared. Therefore, the epidemic is not the cause of the economic crisis but its catalyst.” Needless to say, the world’s leaders, especially those of the economically emerging countries, can use the pandemic as an explanation for the economic crisis and its consequent exceptional measures.

Notwithstanding, already in January of this year, the International Monetary Fund published its forecasts at the 50th annual meeting of the Davos Economic Forum, checking and correcting with lower values than expected in its previous growth forecast for 2020–21. Its main conclusion was that the world economy is in a “dangerously vulnerable” situation. At these meetings the IMF analyses the development of world economic activity according to its different political, commercial, geopolitical and cultural facets, as well as the “natural” disasters that are intensifying (hurricanes, fires, floods and droughts).

Finally, a fact which should not be overlooked regarding the “economic slowdown” is the development of massive social protests during 2019.⁸ The situation that was being experienced in some 20 countries, some of which we have mentioned, has entered a different terrain, given the experiment in social control in almost 200 countries that we are enduring.

Various economists agree that since the end of the crisis of 2008–09 and until last year, the situation of the world economy has not been one of depression or recession, but neither has it been one of strong growth. The economies of the eurozone and Japan remained stagnant; growth was weak in the United States and Canada; and relatively strong in the developing countries. Since 2009, there has been a prolonged period of weak or semi-stagnant global growth, and of low investment.

The outbreak of the coronavirus is inserted into this particular situation, of financial instability and weakening of the accumulation process, in which the shrinkage in production and demand, and the intensification of financial difficulties, have an effect of feedback and amplification on the same crisis.

With the economic downturn underway, it is very likely that our exploitation will deepen. Times of rising unemployment, declining wages and worsening living conditions are ahead.

⁸ In this regard, we recommend the publication *A propósito de las revueltas de 2019* (On the revolts of 2019), published by the La Caldera library in Buenos Aires.

Work, work, work!

The crisis is going to make working conditions worse. It will have far-reaching adverse effects on those entering the labour market and on employees in general. According to an ILO assessment, an estimated 5.3 to 24.7 million people will lose their jobs, while 22 million people were made redundant by the 2008–2009 global financial crisis.

The ILO also estimates that between 8.8 and 35 million more people will be in working poverty worldwide, compared to the original estimate for 2020 which predicted a decline of 14 million globally.

Underemployment is also expected to increase exponentially, as the economic consequences of the virus outbreak will translate not only into reductions in working hours and wages, but also into shifts to other areas of work.

Currently, Capital is restructuring itself, subjecting the proletarian class under the humanitarian pretext, in order to adapt to the needs of accumulation and reproduction.

Capitalist destruction creates new products and market opportunities, such as the biotechnology sector, which up til now is extremely concentrated in Asia, especially in Israel. Home delivery services are expanding and also online trade grew to such an extent that it led Amazon, for example, to start looking for 100,000 more workers for its warehouses in the United States in order to meet the growing demand.

Telecommuting is also becoming more popular. Internet portals provide information and tips for setting up the home office. It will certainly be cheaper to have employees working from home than at the workplace, while certain software makes effective monitoring possible.

Regardless of who pays for and risks their life in this crisis, which is not a minor issue, the employers are systematically worsening the working conditions in the so-called “essential jobs.” In any case, negotiations on wages and working conditions are being postponed and made more flexible in ways that would have been unthinkable. Pay cuts are prepared and suspensions are increased.

A return to normalcy?

Obviously this is a critical situation which, imposed from above, finds us hyper-atomized. Therefore, before sloganeering or establishing projects of social struggle let us remember that this situation was not unleashed by large or small struggles but by the treatment that a handful of states applied to a disease that was beginning to spread.

Surely there are those who see the true face of this society when such a shock —relatively sudden and above all foreseeable— occurs. Others have already been perceiving and enunciating the characteristics of capitalist society as a whole. Now then, it is time to meet up and discuss together. It is not a time to suspend reflexion or action because we simply need to isolate ourselves, to sanitize ourselves and to close ourselves off. On the other hand, thinking in confinement leads to constricted conclusions. While there is always a moment for personal reflection, it is not enough. Even the so-called self-knowledge must also include others.

The bourgeoisie has acknowledged in many articles in its press that “the world we knew will not return” and it will obviously be for the benefit of Capital. The picture is not rosy. (see box)

This brutal worldwide blow to the proletariat has increased isolation, individualism, mutual distrust, as well as sweeping away jobs with one stroke of the pen, and might modify the forms of work, as Capital has done several times since its inception. Finally, confinement and contact reduced to the virtual have spread out over long weeks, where millions of people could not meet, touch, or smell each other, but remained connected. We emphasize again that in this worldwide quarantine, directly human and therefore necessarily bodily relationships have been criminalized.

For their part, thousands of employers were finally able to cut costs by sending their employees to work from home. Many others were sent home either without work or without pay. States are intensifying their techniques and technologies of control. Increased travel controls, smartphone applications, behavioral monitoring, and mandatory health tests. Not surprisingly, China is also beginning to export, and in these matters is ahead of the game, its meritocratic state system developed with technology to measure the “social value” of each citizen.

China’s already implemented credit system is made possible by the combination and integration of various technologies such as big data, facial recognition and internet monitoring, further aided by more than 600,000 artificial intelligence surveillance cameras. This is what they unabashedly call “communism.”

Most national governments have come out strengthened in an adverse health situation to which they have only been able to respond with repression and confinement. And the notion of the state has come out even stronger, because either it has done what it should have done or because someone should come along who does.

Until now, the main citizen reaction, from left to right, has been to ask the State to be effective in its health measures (asking for isolation, quarantine and, if necessary, repression to be reinforced). In addition, although to a lesser extent, they are asking for drinking water and food, a brake on the layoffs, payment of salaries, better conditions for those who must work in these quarantines, and even demands for the cessation of payment of rents and taxes. But requesting isolation and/or confinement is not the best scenario to impose our needs. Even more than on other occasions, there is no struggle, but rather demands that strengthen the legitimacy of the State.

But not everything is peace and silence. In this situation, strikes in the automobile industry in Spain, Italy and Canada are commencing. Protests are being made by Amazon workers in France, Spain and the United States because of exploitative conditions. There are rent and occupation strikes in some cities in the United States.

There has also been looting in different countries, and prison and detention centre riots in Italy, France, Spain, Germany, Lebanon, Argentina and Brazil, among others.

And this doesn’t look like it’s going to go away but rather to increase. Despite fear, mistrust and control, solidarity does not bide its time, nor does self-organization to fight the social consequences of a pandemic in a capitalist world. But public or discrete networks among neighbors and friends, as well as soup kitchens, are still a minority. The question is how we can prevent these struggles from being strangled by the desperation or from being mere gestures limited in time and space.

From a radical point of view, in order to get to the root of the problem, it is not a matter of proposing measures that the State and the rest of the bourgeoisie should carry out in order to simply fulfil their function, but of imposing what is necessary, in spite of the State, which is only here to make profit prevail over life.

Assuming that life under Capital is a life of death, of pandemics, of diseases produced by this mode of production, we have to start acting and thinking about how to fight against these conditions of life in this new scenario. We have to reflect on why the bourgeoisie, with the States at the helm, threw itself into these kinds of measures in this particular case. And of course we have to discuss what to do, how to combat the media idiotization and, above all, how to counteract the increased austerity and control that is coming.

Meanwhile, this generalised halt in production and circulation brought about drastic changes which, although they will not last long, may give us some clues. There has been a drastic reduction in the emission of polluting and greenhouse gases, with the consequent improvement in the quality of life of the people who live in the affected regions, even lowering the number of respiratory diseases for that reason. For example, there has been a significant reduction in road accidents and so-called “occupational accidents,” the “normal” death figures of which are not at all enviable in comparison to those of a pandemic. This unexpected situation should lead us to reflect on the correlation that feeding the monster of the economy has in relation to the destruction of the habitat where we live, or at least we should try. As the quarantine passes, the air is cleaned and the water becomes crystal clear. We are not obtuse, we are aware of how limited and exceptional these phenomena are, and that they coincide with monoculture, megamining, logging and so many other nocivities, which have not stopped. We simply see and note how the world can be transformed in such short periods of time.

Unfortunately, as it was the State’s decision to paralyze the economy in certain regions, the power to restart it will also lay in the hands of the State, and for this reason, the momentary benefits of such a suspension will be reversed in a matter of days as well. However, these examples teach us a lesson about the priorities of a system in which the production of value reigns supreme over the health of both people and the earth’s ecosystem itself. And it drives us to affirm that the current productive system must be dismantled for the survival of the species.

The reality is so perverse that, confined and fearful, we wish to return to normality, but as they cry out from all the regions engaged in a revolt which these measures have momentarily put to a halt: Normality is the problem!

Notes:

Box/ No need for a conspiracy

Many “explanations” for the emergence of the pandemic have been fed by paranoid ideas of conspiracy as well as racist prejudices. Supporters of the former do not understand states as guarantors of a world order that kills, weakens and sickens us, but as dark characters who must introduce certain diseases in order to make our lives truly terrible. Obviously, there is no need for such a conspiracy. States effectively coordinate with each other, even discreetly, to ensure this order that brings profit to some and ruins the lives of the majority.

We live in a system where the people in decision-making and management positions are, for the most part, perfectly interchangeable, which means that the real problem lies with the system itself, and not with the “actors.” Saying this is nothing new, just like saying that capitalism brings

war, hunger and crisis without the need for anyone from the shadows, from hidden and occult groups to be provoking these things.⁹

Although conspiracy “theories” are closely linked to racism, there is a directly racist explanation that has been based on a socio-cultural prejudice: the alleged taste of the Chinese for eating strange foods such as bat soup. Both attempts at explanation forget the social dimension of the issue.

The obedient citizen fears a virus that he thinks comes from the outside, because for him the bad always comes from the outside, it is an external problem. He is afraid of a virus (from the Greek *ιός* *toxin or poison*). “Toxic,” a word so fashionable that it expresses everything that is supposed to be external to the individual and of which one lives in fear. Thus, relationships are labeled as toxic, people who don’t like him are toxic, and those of us who protest are toxic. And so the individual, free of guilt and charge, takes no responsibility for the world in which he lives and avoids mixing with the rest so as not to be intoxicated.

Box/ There are no “posh people,” there are social classes

There is an attempt to explain not only the spread of the virus but also its social consequences. This explanation, at the same time a tirade, arrives to tell us that it is a disease of *chetos* (or *cuicos*, *pitucos*, or *pijos* depending on the country) that is spread by travelling around the world on holiday. There is more and more talk of class, not to speak of the existing class antagonism, but of socio-cultural classes. Social class is thus reduced to the personal tastes of a sector of society and already seems to be a state of mind rather than a material condition of existence. Although today it seems to be from a very distant past, until a month ago the gang of rugby players that had beaten Fernando Báez Sosa to death in a nightclub in Buenos Aires was almost the only news circulating in the media. There are ten people charged with the killing. It is a story where the good guys are good and the bad guys are bad. Fernando was an argentinian-born child of immigrants, from a working class family. And the rugby players were unpleasant, racist and from what is considered the upper middle class. There are those who have wanted to see some form of classism in this. And there may be something, but as with those who come from outside the country, it is a sociological classism.

Classes are not spoken of in terms of capitalist exploitation, but from a cultural and identitarian point of view. On the other hand, it is a classism that orbits around what in Argentina is considered the middle class. When the racism of the rugbiers is pointed out (“fucking nigger we’re going to kill you”), their classism is immediately pointed out, but it is the classism of young people who do not come from the highest bourgeoisie and we do not even know if they come from the bourgeoisie, it is the classism of some *chetos*. For their part, Fernando’s family is not poor or marginal either, like the majority of young people who are murdered in this country, mostly at the hands of the state security forces, or in crimes linked to drug trafficking, for which they have surely generated greater empathy.

It may be that “romanticizing the quarantine is a class privilege.” Because illness, fear of illness or the obligation of confinement are not the same for all citizens in Argentine territory, or in any other part of the world. We are equal under the law, which always means being completely different in the face of its application and consequences.

⁹ Hay algo más allá de nuestras narices. Crítica a las teorías de la conspiración. Mariposas del caos, 2009.

But in view of the insistence on “class privileges,” we must take into account what is meant by class, what is meant by privilege and from where classes and privileges emanate. In this sense, it is necessary to pay attention to and understand in a profound and critical way the composition of the capitalist class and not to repeat slogans that appeal to the moral sense, precisely Judeo-Christian and capitalist. If we leave aside the question of exploitation, oppression, and domination we will not understand what kind of society we live in. And we will end up seeing the cheto on the one hand and the pauper on the other, without any kind of mode of production and reproduction. That’s why there are those who think our rulers are not chetos, but that they are with the people. The easy criticism of characters like Macri or Bullrich of the past government, or the criticism of violent and irresponsible chetos, hides the need to criticize the bourgeois and politicians as officials of Capital and the State. A progressive classism that only aims at individuals and not social relations is not only superficial, but very favorable to the dominant order.

Box/ «Let’s face it, the lifestyle we used to know is never going to return»

In 1972, a group of experts from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) published a report, commissioned by the Club of Rome, entitled *The Limits to Growth*, in which they detailed the ecological, climatic and social disasters that capitalist development was bringing. A few days ago, an expert from MIT published an article entitled *Let’s face it, the lifestyle we used to know is never going to return*, where it is explained to us, in a classic calm and neutral tone, how this pandemic is going to change our lives:

“We don’t know exactly what this new future will look like, of course. But it is possible to imagine a world in which, in order to take a flight, you may have to register with a service that tracks the movements of passengers via the telephone. The airline would not be able to see where they had gone, but would be alerted if any passengers had been near people who have been confirmed as infected or disease hot spots. There would be similar requirements for entry to large spaces, such as government buildings or public transportation centers. There would be temperature scanners everywhere, and your workplace might require you to wear a monitor to check your temperature or other vital signs. Discotheques currently do age checks and may, in the future, also require proof of immunity: an identity card or some form of digital verification over the phone that the person has already recovered and been vaccinated against the latest strain of the virus.

We will adapt and accept these measures, just as we have become accustomed to increasingly stringent security controls at airports in the wake of terrorist attacks. Intrusive surveillance will be seen as a small price to pay for the basic freedom of being with others.

As usual, moreover, the real cost will be borne by the poorest and weakest. People with less access to healthcare and those living in areas more prone to disease will also be excluded more often from places and opportunities open to all others. The self-employed, from drivers to plumbers to yoga instructors, will find their jobs even more precarious. Immigrants, refugees, the undocumented, and ex-convicts will face another obstacle to gaining a foothold in society.

Moreover, unless strict rules are imposed on how the risk of contracting a disease is calculated for any individual, governments and companies could choose any criteria: earning less than 30,000 euros a year could be considered a risk factor, as could having a family of more than

six and living in certain parts of a country, for example. That opens the door to algorithmic bias and hidden discrimination, as happened last year with an algorithm used by US health insurers that turned out to accidentally favour white people.

The world has changed many times, and now it is doing so again. We will all have to adapt to a new way of living, working and socializing. But as with all change, there will be some who will lose out more than most.

New Title: Social Contagion. Microbiological class war in China (Chuang)

Social contagion. Microbiological Class War in China presents a comprehensive, forceful and indispensable analysis of the causes of the current COVID-19 health crisis, and its consequences for China and the rest of the world.

On March 19, while massive isolation was being imposed on the Argentine region, we finished preparing the first publication of the article in book format with our editorial project Lazo Ediciones. As a result of the quarantine, until now it has only been able to circulate in its digital version, making possible, however, numerous conversations in virtual spaces.

Originally published by the Chuang group on February 26th of this year, weeks before the quarantine was applied to the rest of the world, the article has not lost its validity, and has the necessary clarity to address the issue in its complexity.

The text shows the social reality and the transformations derived from the economic development of the last decades through which China went from being “an isolated planned state economy to an integrated capitalist production center.” In its social description of the city of Wuhan, the initial focus of the disease, it succeeds in characterizing the conditions in which life is reproduced in the main urban industrial complexes of that vast region. Thus, it shows that the proliferation of new viruses is intimately linked to the profound deterioration, implicit in capitalism, of our link as a species with the natural non-human environment.

On the other hand, the analysis of the policies of the totalitarian Chinese state, the vanguard in several facets of the technology put to the service of social control, allows us to reflect on the impact on the population caused by the measures of isolation and quarantine, which were initially taken in China and later replicated practically all over the world.

And at these latitudes, what do we know about China? We know about the enormous power with which it produces and consumes goods. We also know that it is the main destination of agricultural production in our region. Products made in China are part of homes, offices and workshops all over the planet. But at the same time, the region has witnessed intense conflicts. The current recessive tendency in the world economy invites us to think about the consequences of the potential actions of its working class. What happens then in urban centres and rural areas is of vital importance for all of us.

Chuang makes a great contribution in this regard. This communist group in China is as much a critic of the “state capitalism” of the Chinese Communist Party as it is of the liberal opposition of the “liberation” movements in Hong Kong. In their website, in addition to the blog articles, they publish a thematic magazine, which already has an English edition.

This is the first text of this group translated into Spanish. We hope to release the paperback edition soon, and we hope that this book will be one more cause for meeting up, the exercise of radical criticism and the necessary anti-capitalist reflection.

The complete book is available in spanish on our website: lazoediciones.blogspot.com. One can also check the original article in Chuang's blog: chuangcn.org/2020/02/social-contagion

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