

Foreword

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Covid, Global Warming, Exploitation – The Same Struggle

From today's standpoint, the period of the first Covid panic appears almost in a nostalgic light: true, we were in quarantine, but we expected the quarantine to last for a month or two and then life will return to some kind of normal – even Dr. Fauci told Americans they should look forward to enjoying their Summer vacations. We perceived quarantine as a limited time of exception, almost a welcome standstill in our all too busy lives when we were able to afford some peace with our families, read books and listen to music, enjoy cooking our meals, knowing it will be over soon... Now we are in what some call the “whack-a-mole stage”, clusters are constantly popping up here and there, not to mention countries like the US, Brazil and India, where they are exploding. Only now we are forced to accept that we are entering a new era when we will have to learn to live with the virus. The situation is open, there

is no clear prospect of what direction the epidemics will take – or, as the German virologist Hendrik Streeck succinctly put it: “No second or third wave – we are in a permanent wave.”¹

But we are still all too focused on Covid statistics, many of us regularly checking the numbers of infected, dead and recovered on Worldometer. This fascination by Covid numbers automatically makes us forget the obvious fact that many more persons are dying from cancer, heart attacks, pollution, hunger, armed conflicts, and domestic violence, so that if we get the Covid infection fully under control, the main cause of our troubles will disappear... But human life will remain full of miseries – in some sense, human life IS a misery which ends in a painful way, often with meaningless suffering.

Furthermore, the link between the Covid epidemics and our ecological predicament is getting clearer and clearer. We may get Covid under control, but global warming will demand much more radical measures. Greta Thunberg² was right when she recently pointed out that “the climate and ecological crisis cannot be solved within today’s political and economic systems.” The same global mobilization that we were able to enact apropos Covid crisis is even more needed with global warming and pollution where millions die every year – but we continue not to act in this direction, or, as she put it in a wonderful reversal of the title of the Andersen’s fairy tale: “The emperors are naked. Every single one. It turns out our whole society is just one big nudist party.”

Let’s just mention a case of global warming which should convince even the greatest sceptics: the prolonged heatwave in Siberia which caused wildfires, a huge oil spill and a plague of tree-eating moths: “Russian towns in the Arctic circle have recorded extraordinary temperatures, with Nizhnyaya Peshya hitting 30C on 9 June. Thawing permafrost was at least partly

to blame for a spill of diesel fuel in Siberia this month that led Putin to declare a state of emergency. The supports of the storage tank suddenly sank”.³ Just think about all the long-frozen bacteria and viruses waiting to be reactivated by the thawing of permafrost!

The same goes for the link between Covid and the exploding anti-racist protests. The only true answer to the ongoing debate about “Black lives matter” (why should we not rather say “All lives matter”?, etc.) is a wonderfully-brutal photo-montage that now circulates in the US; it depicts Stalin holding a poster in his hands with the inscription: “No lives matter.” (I leave aside here the polemics about Stalinist murders in Australia which gave birth to this version of the motto) The moment of truth in this provocation is that there are things which matter more than bare life – is this not also the ultimate message of the protests apropos the police violence against Blacks? The Blacks (and others who support them) are not demanding mere survival, they are demanding to be treated with dignity, as free citizens fully equal to whites, and for this they are ready to risk a lot, including (sometimes) their lives. That’s why they gather to protests even if participation in collective protests raises the risk of Covid infection.

Does this mean that Giorgio Agamben was right when he rejected the state-imposed lockdowns and self-isolation as something that implies our reduction to bare life: when we follow these orders, we attest that we are ready to renounce what makes our lives worth living for the chance of bare survival? Do we have to risk our lives (by way of exposing ourselves to possible infection) in order to remain fully human? The problem with this stance is that today the main proponents of abolishing lockdowns are to be found in the populist new Right: its members see in all similar restrictive measures, from lockdowns to obligatory wearing of masks,

the humiliation of our freedom and dignity. To this claim, we should reply by raising the key question: what does abolishing lockdowns and isolation effectively amount to for ordinary workers? It means that, in order to survive, they have to go out into the unsafe world and risk contamination...

This brings us to the key point: the contradictory way the Covid epidemics affected our economy. On the one hand, it forced authorities to do things which sometimes almost point towards Communism: a form of Universal Basic Income, healthcare for all, etc. However, this unexpected opening for Communism is just one side of the coin. Simultaneously, the opposite process is going on with all violence: states saving big companies and big companies amassing wealth. The contours of corona-capitalism are gradually emerging, and with it, new forms of class struggle – or, to quote Joshua Simon⁴:

“US cities have seen the largest rent strike in decades, at least 150 worker strikes and walkouts (most notably by Amazon warehouse workers), and hunger strikes in refugee detention facilities. At the same time, research shows that US billionaires increased their collective wealth by \$282 billion in just twenty-three days during the initial weeks of the coronavirus lockdown. We are forced to recognize the immense inequalities proliferating with the pandemic and lockdown, with people losing their jobs, with gigantic bailouts that overwhelmingly benefit the biggest corporations and the already extremely wealthy, and with the ways those deemed essential workers are forced to keep working.”

The main form of the new exploitation which characterizes work in the conditions of pandemic is “the shifting of costs to workers. From people having no sick leave, to teachers using their broadband and laptops at home to teach, households

are performing all reproductive and productive labour.” In these conditions, it is no longer primarily the capitalist who owns the means of production and hires workers to deal with them: the worker brings with her the means of production. Directly, this happens with the Amazon delivery person or Uber driver bringing to work their own car, filled up with gasoline, with insurance and driver’s license all taken care of.” Simon evokes the poster held by Sarah Mason at an anti-lockdown protest: “Social Distancing equals Communism.” What we get when distancing is abolished is this “freedom” of workers who own their means of production, running around on errands for the company and risking infection. The paradox is here that both main versions of corona-economy, working at home in lockdown and delivering things like food or packages out of lockdown, are similarly appropriated by the capital and imply extra-exploitation.

So our reply to Sarah Mason should be: yes, and that’s why we need social distancing. But what we need even more is a new economic order, which will allow us to avoid the debilitating choice between economic revival and saving lives.

References:

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