

Pandemic: the explosion point of the capitalist relation?

The growth of production has been entirely verified until now as the realization of *political economy*: the growth of poverty, which has invaded and laid waste to the very fabric of life...

In the society of the over-developed economy, everything has entered the sphere of *economic goods*, even spring water and the air of towns, that is to say, everything has become the *economic ill*, that “complete denial of man”...

Guy Debord, *The sick planet*

The outbreak of the pandemic and its spread all over the world is the most recent expression of what Debord has identified half a century ago as the “economic ill”. Capital is not only a class relation of exploitation and domination but also a relation of alienation of society from nature in which both the producers of social wealth and non-human nature as an autonomous productive force are transformed into objects that are dominated and plundered by it. The continuously expanding process of the subsumption of nature under capital is conflictual and contradictory. The consequences of this subsumption emerge as phenomena like global warming, the infestation of farmland with superweeds, the slowdown of agricultural productivity and, today, the coronavirus pandemic.

As Rob Wallace notes in his book, *Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Infectious Disease, Agribusiness, and the Nature of Science*, the expansion of land grabbing by agribusiness has driven the acceleration of deforestation and of the conversion of forests into arable land, which is overexploited in order to increase productivity and to reduce the cost of agricultural production. The conversion of vast areas into food production factories creates ideal conditions for the emergence and the rapid transmission of new pathogens, as “wild viruses”, which were formerly controlled within primary forest ecosystems, come into contact with livestock and humans. For example, it is highly probable that the Ebola virus epidemic was caused by the destruction of wild forests and the planting of vast monocultures of palm trees for the production of palm oil. Palm oil plantations make a great home for fruit bats which were the initial “reservoirs” of the Ebola virus. As far as the coronavirus is concerned it is not yet sure what was its actual source. According to a false racist narrative the jump of COVID-19 from its animal hosts to humans was due to the “bad and unhygienic habits” of the Chinese people who consume wild animals, since it is presumed that it had originated from a wild animal market in Wuhan. However, this racist culturalist narrative obscures the fact that wild life breeding is a huge industry in China with a 73 billion dollars annual turnover that employs more than 14 million people, i.e. it is the result of the imperatives of the reproduction of capital. It is the only resort for farmers in the poorest provinces of China, which was promoted and encouraged by the Chinese capitalist

state through programs for “wildlife domestication”, “ecotourism” and “poverty alleviation”.¹

The capitalist management of the pandemic in Greece

The outbreak of the pandemic is the product of the capitalist plunder and devaluation of nature, which is an expression of the basic contradiction of the capitalist relation: the contradiction between value and use value.² An uncontrolled spread of the virus would result to an uncontrolled disruption if not to the complete rupture of the circuit of the reproduction of capital. A very high number of infected patients would lead to the total collapse of the health system, which in turn would cause a chain reaction and an even higher number of losses in human labour power. Such a development would trigger uncontrollable social upheavals that could assume a class or even an anti-state character. In the worst case for us, it would trigger interclass conflicts of a racist / individualistic type. This could lead to an uncontrolled rupture of the accumulation circuit and to the delegitimization of the state. For this reason, most of the states around the world shut down a part of the productive and reproductive (education, tourist, entertainment, etc.) activities and imposed restrictions on the movement of the population and on public gatherings.

Certainly, these measures will trigger the manifestation of the latent contradictions of the global accumulation of capital –which, during the previous years, was postponed for the future mainly through the persistent low interest rate monetary policy followed by the central banks– and have already resulted in a significant destruction and devaluation of capital and to the slip of the economy into deep recession. However, in order to avoid the uncontrolled collapse of capitalist social relations, states were forced to opt for an, as far as possible controlled, devaluation of capital.

Regarding the measures of the restriction on the freedom of movement and of the ban on public gatherings, many comrades are talking about an alleged imposition of the Chinese paradigm of the control of the population, about the imposition of a totalitarian regime and greatly emphasize the question of surveillance. We consider such positions mistaken since they **turn the surveillance of the population from a means to an end in itself**.³ In general, the concept of “biopower”⁴, which is often misused in such texts, refers to techniques of

¹ «Virus Pushes China’s Poor Rat Meat Farmers to Brink of Despair» *Bloomberg News*, 14 March 2020 and «Why China’s wildlife ban is not enough to stop another virus outbreak», *Los Angeles Times*, 2 April 2020.

² This position is explained in our article “On the ecology of capitalism” which is available online at: <https://antithesi.gr/?p=272>.

³ The 30th position of Guy Debord’s *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* are particularly relevant: “It is in these circumstances that we can speak of domination’s falling rate of profit, as it spreads to almost the whole of social space and consequently increases both its personnel and its means. For now, each means aspires and labors to become an end. Surveillance spies on and plots against itself” (from the translation of Malcom Imrie available at <https://libcom.org/files/Comments%20on%20the%20Society%20of%20the%20Spectacle.pdf>).

⁴ This concept has been introduced by Michel Foucault and the theory that he has developed around it is extremely problematic if not hostile from a proletarian standpoint. In the lecture given on the 17th

power which aim at the increase of the productivity of the population and at its adjustment to the organization of the accumulation of capital. It is not an end in itself. In the current moment, the policy of the restriction on the freedom of movement, of the ban on public gatherings and of the control of people moving in public spaces is, in our view, a means for the achievement of the following basic specific ends.

1. **Limiting the spread of the virus:** to the extent that a large part of production and transport continues to operate in order to avoid the complete collapse of the social reproduction of capitalist society and of the most important capitalist enterprises, movements that play a secondary role in this reproduction are being restricted.
2. **Apportion of the responsibilities from the state and capital to the individual – promotion of the ideology of “individual responsibility”:** the spectacle of the “antisocial individual” – folk devil is produced in an attempt to lay the blame to a part of the population, if the progression of the epidemic does not go well. In this way, the state attempts to be absolved from the responsibility, on the one hand, for the understaffing and the underfunding of the health system which has taken place within the previous years in the context of the reduction of the social wage and, on the other hand, for its unwillingness to financially support it even belatedly. The basic direction for the reduction of the direct and of the indirect wage is not modified in any way. Likewise, it is attempted to absolve capitalist enterprises from the responsibility for the completely inadequate measures for the protection of workers from the transmission of the virus. More generally, it is attempted to absolve the capitalist system for being the actual and ultimate source of the pandemic.
3. **Reproduction of the separation and atomization of the population:** the atomization of the population and its alienated collectivization (on the basis of nationality, profession, citizenship, etc.) is a basic function of the state. The state of capital is obliged to preemptively prevent the formation of the class as the subject of the negation of existing social relations (and therefore of its self-negation). In this context, the state attempts to prevent the development of class struggles for the satisfaction of needs around the consequences of the pandemic. Furthermore, the state consolidates and reinforces existing separations within the class through isolating and exposing to the risk of death immigrants/refugees which are confined in the detention centers and prison inmates. It’s maybe needless to say that the attempt of the state to prevent struggles in workplaces, supermarkets, prisons and detention centers, and their violent repression, has nothing to do with “health protection”, as people are cramped on top of each other in all of these places.
4. **Legitimization of the capitalist state:** in a society of separated individuals and families the state appears as the sole guarantor of the life of the population as the

of March 1976, which is included in the collection *Society must be defended* (Picador, 1997, p. 262-3), he presents class war as form of racism against the bourgeoisie!

individuals appear to be irresponsible and self-serving. The state attempts to affirm its essence as the “illusory community” of the separated individuals. To the extent that relations of class solidarity and struggle are not created, the aforementioned social form of the individual as separated and selfish has real existence and on this basis constitutes a factor for the legitimization of the state within the population.

The fact that the largest part of the population chose to isolate itself should not be attributed only to state propaganda and repression. There are many people that have a very good awareness of the state of the health system, that do not trust the state and the capitalists, and understand very well that the capitalist organization of production and everyday life would put them under serious risk. Despite the laments and the accusations of some militants for the supposed subordination of the population to the rule of the state, people cannot be deprived of their agency.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the measures for “social distancing” and for the restriction on the freedom of movement are not something new which signifies the advent of a new “totalitarian system”. During the “Spanish Flu” pandemic in 1918-19, governments all around the world had taken similar measures: closure of schools, bars, churches, and theaters; restrictions on public gatherings; isolation and quarantine.⁵ It is also important to mention that there are similarities between proletarian mobilizations during the period of the “Spanish Flu” and what’s going on today. For example, seamen, waterside and transport workers in Australia went out on strike to demand: wage increases, insurance for families of workers killed by the flu and full pay if they were quarantined or in hospital, enforcement of quarantine on ships carrying infected passengers, improvement of the hygienic conditions and of the safety measures in workplaces, extension of insurance protection to nurses, ambulance bearers and other occupations likely to be at risk, etc. The militancy of class struggles during that period is shown by the fact that conflicts in a number of ports culminated in a four-month-long maritime strike.⁶

Certainly, state and capital are taking advantage of the situation in order to take measures against the proletariat, measures that they have been planning for a long time: e.g. the further deregulation of “labour law” (more correctly: the “exploitation of labour law”) in terms of redundancies, overtime, severance pay, shifts, distance work, employment contracts, etc. At the same time, extremely exhausting hours and shifts are imposed on those who are still working, workers are not allowed to take time offs and to go on leave. Furthermore, workers whose companies have suspended their operation receive an allowance which is even lower than the minimum wage (whereas workers with no legal

⁵ M. Balinska and C. Rizzo, «Behavioural responses to influenza pandemics», *Plos Currents*, 9 September 2009 and A. Aassve, G. Alfani, F. Gandolfi, M. Le Moglie, «Pandemics and social capital: From the Spanish flu of 1918-19 to COVID-19», *VoxEU*, 22 March 2020. Certainly, such measures had not assumed at that point a global and coordinated character, but this has to do with the completely different organization of the global supply chains, with the nonexistence of transnational organizations such as the World Health Organization, with the existence of conditions of war and revolution in many countries around the world, etc.

⁶ See S. Bloodworth, Class war in the Spanish Flu pandemic, *Red Flag*, 20 March 2020 (<https://redflag.org.au>).

contracts receive nothing at all). The agreement that was reached in the last Eurogroup meeting for the provision of financial support to the member states through the European Stability Mechanism shows that capital will attempt to transfer the cost of the recession due to the pandemic to the European proletariat, through the imposition of structural adjustment programs, which are provisioned by the conditionality terms of the ESM. Furthermore, confinement at home is a much worse experience for penniless proletarians living in a few square meters, under miserable conditions in comparison to people who have a home and an income that minimally cover their needs – not to mention of course the luxury villas of the capitalists. For women and children living in abusive environments such a confinement turns into a nightmare.

It is certainly probable that some of the surveillance and control practices will be continued after the pandemic is over: for example, the massive and systematic police checks on public transport and on the public space of the cities as well as the complete confinement and isolation of the immigrants/refugees in the detention centers. However, in western democratic capitalist regimes surveillance and control cannot surpass the limit over which the freedom of contract and the free circulation of commodities will be hindered (including the labour power commodity) or the limit over which private property will be violated, as private property necessitates the separation of the private from the public sphere and the “protection of personal data”.⁷ We do not consider probable a transformation of the western democratic regimes into autocratic regimes like China or Iran, with the state turning into a kind of Orwellian “big brother” – which would presuppose a highly centralized exercise of power and an one-party or similar system (like the Islamic Republic). On the contrary, in a multipolar democratic state, *“thousands of plots in favor of the established order tangle and clash almost everywhere [...] Each part of [the state] now starts to interfere with, or worry, the others, for all these professional conspirators are spying on each other [...] In the same network and apparently pursuing similar goals, those who are only a part of the network are necessarily ignorant of the hypotheses and conclusions of the other parts, and above all of their controlling nucleus [...] Since sources of information are in competition, so are falsifications”*.⁸ The Chinese capitalist regime may have been liberalized over the spectacular choice of commodities, but it is still inferior to the western democratic states in terms of the freedom of choosing rulers and, therefore, the retention of power in the hands of the party–collective capitalist remains precarious.

⁷ Of course, the “protection of personal data” may be removed when there are concerns for the security of the capitalist order and of the state. This is already the case, for example when the cops publish the photographs of demonstrators that have participated in a riot so that they will be identified and arrested. However, such a removal of protection is an integral part of the capitalist democratic “rule of law” and should not be confused with the practices of autocratic regimes. All indications show that a similar approach will be followed in the case of coronavirus health data, which in addition will be based on the active collaboration and consent of the atomized, “responsible” citizens.

⁸ Guy Debord, *op.cit.*

What is to be done?

When this question is put forward in terms of moral exhortations and imperatives for the supposedly “subordinated moral majority” it simply betrays the latent (or open) vanguardist and separated position of those who pose it in such a way. But in this case, it is nothing more than a self-delusion of the wannabe avant-gardes, since the drawing up of plans on paper by small groups which essentially do not possess any actual power to lead workers, as, for example, the worker parties of the past, does not even have any meaning or reality. Of course, we are well aware that when such “avant-gardes” acquire such a power they ultimately work to sustain the world of capital.

Our critique must be connected with the real struggles and not confront the world with doctrinaire principles and proclaim: *Here is the truth, on your knees before it!* What matters is to recognize the real movement and if possible to connect, participate and support the existing radical tendencies within it, i.e. the tendencies that put forward the satisfaction of our needs against the interest of capital and against all kinds of political and trade unionist falsifiers, who strive for the reproduction of their role and, therefore, for the reproduction of this world.

The global character of the pandemic has led to the outbreak of struggles around the same issues and with the same content around the world:

- Official and wildcat strikes in factories, grocery stores and in the transport and logistics sectors, in Brazil, Italy, USA, New Zealand, Spain, Cameroun and elsewhere, demanding the shutdown of operations with full payment of the wage (e.g. in the Mercedes factory in Spain), the provision of means of protection, the compliance with hygiene and safety regulations, as well as the increase of the wage (e.g. in the American online grocery store Instacart), to mention just a few.
- Strikes and mobilizations of doctors and nurses in Pakistan, Argentina, Greece and elsewhere demanding additional staff recruitment, the provision of masks and other means of protection, the creation of additional Emergency Care Units, etc.
- Expropriations of grocery stores in Chile, South Italy and Mexico, as a significant part of the proletariat and especially the one working in the informal economy has been left entirely high and dry. Actually, despite the fact that very few expropriations have taken place in South Italy, the threat of their expansion alone forced the local authorities to distribute food stamps and the local shop owners to start gathering food for those who cannot afford it.
- Revolts and hunger strikes in prisons and immigrant/refugee detention centers in Italy, USA, Greece and elsewhere, that in the first case demand the decongestion or the opening of prisons and, in the second case, the closure of detention centers and the transfer of the confined people to homes with decent living conditions.
- Creation of solidarity groups that, however, have mainly a humanitarian character and are not built on the basis of class solidarity, apart from some exceptions.
- Last but not least, in the case of Chile which had been in a state of revolt during the previous five months, the inhabitants of Chiloé, a big island with a population of

180.000 people escorted the police off the island, organized themselves and went out and cut off the roads to prevent the circulation of labour power and other commodities, whose flow alone would spread the pandemic in highly precarious conditions: for the 180.000 inhabitants of the island there are only 6 respirators available. Also, in Colombia the indigenous communities in Santa Elena and La Sierra Nevada have gone out to cut off tourism and agribusiness trucks.

This account includes some indicative examples of everything that is going on. The struggles that have erupted clearly show that in the next period, with the certain worsening of the conditions of life and of the conditions of exploitation for a huge part of our class, many people will take gain to the streets. As the comrades from Grupo Barbaria have written: *“Unlike the crisis of 2008, which caught us all more isolated, fallen prey to the shock, in this new crisis there is no self-blame, **that we have lived beyond our means, that we must tighten our belts, that this is what it is all about: on the contrary, there is a very clear awareness that we are sent to the slaughterhouse to preserve the proper functioning of the national economy**”*.⁹ It is up to us to seize the opportunity for a truly global proletarian movement that will reopen the prospect of the world revolution.

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⁹ Grupo Barbaria, «Los títeres del capital» (<http://barbaria.net/2020/04/01/los-titeres-del-capital/>)