

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6461>



Pandemic and social reproduction

# **Covid-19 crisis: give priority to reproduction over production**

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV542 - March 2020 -

Publication date: Tuesday 24 March 2020

---

**Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved**

---

**In Volume I of *Capital***, Marx compares capitalism to a vampire which never stops sucking the life out of workers: with this image, he shows how the "natural" movement of capitalism is to consume labour power to the maximum, since ideally labour, to generate profits, should never stop, and be in operation 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Throughout part of the 19th century, it was a question of working until death, according to the testimony of Marx and Engels, among others. Historically, it was the class struggle that helped regulate the appropriation of labour power by the capitalists. But this is also due to the internal limits to the reproduction of labour power. [1] If the capitalists "spend" the workers' lives too quickly without allowing new generations to reach working age, then we see a crisis in the reproduction of the workforce. And without labour, there is no surplus value.

While there is a fundamental contradiction between production and reproduction under capitalism (the reproduction of the labour force necessarily requires its protection, which reduces production), nevertheless, the latter is a kind of limit that cannot be overcome by capitalism. There is therefore indeed an imperative necessity for capitalism to reproduce labour power, as well as to produce surplus value. But ordinarily this need is disguised, including - indeed especially - in the eyes of the majority of workers. Reproductive labour, mostly still done in the home, is invisible. By extension, we attach little consideration to reproductive work, that is however vital to our very survival.

Right now, in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, when the whole economy is on hold, and we are worried about what we are going to eat tonight, if we are going to be able to see our parents, our children, and so on, the question comes back very acutely before our eyes. But while it is becoming visible and material on an individual scale, it is also visible to the capitalists. It takes the form of a warning bell as to the disproportionate progression of neoliberalism, which endangers even the very conditions of our lives. If production is limitless, the necessary reproduction must follow it. The coronavirus crisis can be interpreted in this sense.

Thus, the French government's measures to deal with the coronavirus are indicative of the crisis situation that we are in. Because even if they arrive criminally late, precisely because the capitalists have favoured production for many months over reproduction (here, the health of workers), their level of reaction is an indicator of the extent of the threat.

Closure of educational establishments, of non-vital businesses, maximum replacement of work by telework, then the start of confinement. The measures are important and impressive. What is more, on the social networks, many have ironized about President Emmanuel Macron's "left" turn: praise for public services outside the law of the market, suspension of redundancies, a promise to later draw "all the consequences" of the situation. In reality, this policy reveals two things.

First, this "Keynesian flash", as Romaric Godin calls it, is a political gamble. [2] Macron has made a wager: while he is one of the most hated presidents of the Fifth Republic, if he can manage the crisis, he will save his mandate. So, it costs him nothing to praise the public services which he inherited and which he even tried by to destroy - now that they are in place, he has every interest in defending them in his discourse (because the reality is something else). If this is what allows France to manage the coronavirus crisis, he can add it to his balance sheet.

It is also in this sense that we must interpret the confection of his new image as father of the nation, above social conflicts. He appeals to the workers, he appeals to the bosses, in a pure Gaullist tradition. He promulgates general guidelines on containment, leaving to his ministers the practical details: he is above these trivial questions. He can

even afford to postpone pension reform. Which is clever, because it can even leave the door open to postponing it sine die, if he considers the political cost too high: he can always point to the coronavirus.

In short, for Macron, the coronavirus can be a political boon and we must not be fooled by his presenting himself as the saviour. However, we must recognize that it is a good performance. Putting in place progressive measures, based first of all on conviction less than on repression (as evidenced by interior minister Castaner's leitmotif: "Our objective is not to sanction") is clever, but insufficient. These measures should have been taken two weeks ago, as remorseful former health minister Agnes Buzyn has suggested. Taken only now, they will not prevent thousands of deaths, which could have been avoided.

In the same way, how can we explain the incompetence of a government that was unable to anticipate what the situation was for the coming pandemic? Weren't there all the cries of alert from China and Italy? How is it that we are currently unable to do what doctors have deemed most effective: detect and treat massively? How is it that we lack the most basic medical equipment, masks and hydroalcoholic gel, and the most necessary, such as ventilators?

Second, these measures are indicators of the scale of the crisis. They are, in a way, capitalist emergency measures to prevent a major reproductive crisis. But the limits that capitalism meets to save reproduction are always the same: they are those of production. So, while Macron's call is for everyone to be responsible, he sends the opposite signal by continuing to push people to go to work, even in nonessential sectors. And in terms of essential sectors, the measures are not up to par for caregivers or people working in food, sectors which are enormously feminized because they participate in reproduction: it would be necessary to equip all workers with FFP2 masks and hydroalcoholic gels, and endow these sectors with billions that will nevertheless go to businesses.

Capitalism alone cannot resolve its own contradictions. It is up to the workers to impose their conditions. Right now, priority should be given to reproduction over production. Money must be injected as a priority in the health and food sectors. We need to nationalize the companies that manufacture essential medical equipment in the situation.

Finally, having been late, given our limited medical and technical capacities and the speed of the virus's spread, another central measure must be total containment outside sectors essential to collective survival. Obviously, this confinement should ideally be the result of a collective decision, from below, and not authoritatively imposed by the government. But we note the double difficulty of both mobilizing in a period when mobilization goes against security and raising the level of awareness of people in the face of danger.

This is also the result of a global ignorance of medicine and health in general, which is not considered to be a field of general knowledge and should be genuinely instilled in everyone. We are paying the cost today, and that should prompt us to rethink our societies' relationship to medical knowledge in general.

However, in this situation, we, as activists and trade unionists, are not unarmed. Information, first, is essential, especially informed information. We must make available and accessible reliable information for our social camp. Next, strike action must make it possible to impose the closure of non-essential sectors, to demand working conditions which respect safety standards for essential sectors, as Italy has shown us.

This is already the case in many workplaces, and it is spreading like wildfire, with strikes in the aeronautical sector, in the Atlantic shipyards, in the assembly plants of Le Havre, in General Electric in Burgundy, at PSA Mulhouse and at Amazon. This is how we must continue

Finally, we are obliged, since the production sectors are closed, and after having denigrated this mode of organization for a long time, to think about the self-organization of reproduction. It is at the level of buildings,

## Covid-19 crisis: give priority to reproduction over production

---

neighbourhoods, that solidarity initiatives are being launched today. There may be unprecedented experiences, even in times of extreme crisis like today, of reorganization of reproduction. These are also the last spaces of politicization with the exception of social media and the rare workplaces that will remain open, since the home, the building, are the last space for possible social relationships, while maintaining of course the safety rules.

More than ever, the personal is the political!

Translated by **International Virwpoint** from [Contretemps](#).

PS:

*If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.*

---

[1] We refer here to the theory of social reproduction. We define as reproductive labour any work of (re)production of labour power. It is deployed in three main areas: the family (domestic labour), public services (education, health), and personal services.

[2] Médiapart, 11 March 2020 "[Gare À l'effet d'optique : un «flash keynésien» n'est pas un changement de paradigme](#)".