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Covid-19 pandemic

Capitalist agriculture and Covid-19: a deadly combination

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A socialist biologist explains the tight links between new viruses, industrial food production, and the profitability of multinational corporations.

The new coronavirus is keeping the world in a state of shock. But instead of fighting the structural causes of the pandemic, the government is focusing on emergency measures.

Yaak Pabst, for the German socialist magazine/ Marx21,/ spoke to /evolutionary biologist Rob Wallace, author of/ *Big Farms Make Big Flu*/ (Monthly Review Press, 2016), about the dangers of Covid-19 and the responsibility of agribusiness and sustainable solutions to combat infectious diseases.

You have been researching epidemics and their causes for several years. In your book *Big Farms Make Big Flu* you attempt to draw these connections between industrial farming practices, organic farming and viral epidemiology. What are your insights?

The real danger of each new outbreak is the failure, or (better put) the expedient refusal to grasp that each new Covid-19 is no isolated incident. The increased occurrence of viruses is closely linked to food production and the profitability of multinational corporations. Anyone who aims to understand why viruses are becoming more dangerous must investigate the industrial model of agriculture and, more specifically, livestock production. At present, few governments, and few scientists, are prepared to do so. When the new outbreaks spring up, governments, the media, and even most of the medical establishment are so focused on each separate emergency that they dismiss the structural causes that are driving multiple marginalised pathogens into sudden global celebrity, one after the other.

Who is to blame?

I said industrial agriculture, but there's a larger scope to it. Capital is spearheading land grabs into the last of primary forest and smallholderheld farmland worldwide. These investments drive the deforestation and development, leading to disease emergence. The functional diversity and complexity these huge tracts of land represent are being streamlined. This causes previously boxed-in pathogens to spill over into local livestock and human communities. In short, capital centres, such as London, New York, and Hong Kong, should be considered our primary disease hotspots.

For which diseases is this the case?

There are no capital-free pathogens at this point. Even the most remote are affected. Ebola, Zika, the coronaviruses, yellow fever again, a variety of avian influenzas, and African swine fever in pigs are among the many pathogens making their way out of the most remote hinterlands into peri-urban loops, regional capitals, and ultimately onto the global travel network. From fruit bats in the Congo to killing Miami sunbathers in a few weeks' time.

What is the role of multinational companies in this process?

Planet Earth is largely Planet Farm at this point, in both biomass and land used. Agribusiness is aiming to corner the

food market. Nearly all of the neoliberal project is organised around supporting efforts by companies based in the more advanced industrialised countries to steal the land and resources of weaker countries. As a result, many of those new pathogens previously held in check by long-evolved forest ecologies are being sprung free, threatening the whole world.

What effects do the production methods of agribusinesses have on this?

The capital-led agriculture that replaces more natural ecologies offers the exact means by which pathogens can evolve the most virulent and infectious phenotypes. You couldn't design a better system to breed deadly diseases.

How so?

Growing genetic monocultures of domestic animals removes whatever immune firebreaks may be available to slow down transmission. Larger population sizes and densities facilitate greater rates of transmission. Such crowded conditions depress immune response. High throughput, a part of any industrial production, provides a continually renewed supply of susceptible animals. They are the fuel for the virulent diseases. In other words, agribusiness is so focused on profits that selecting for a virus that might kill a billion people is treated as a worthy risk.

What!?

These companies can just externalise the costs of their epidemiologically dangerous operations on everyone else. From the animals themselves to consumers, farmworkers, local environments, and governments across jurisdictions. The damage is so extensive that, if we were to return those costs onto company balance sheets, agribusiness as we know it would be ended forever. No company could support the costs of the damage it causes.

In many media it is claimed that the starting point of the Coronavirus was an "exotic food market" in Wuhan. Is this description true?

Yes and no. There are spatial clues in favour of the notion. Contact tracing linked infections back to the Hunan Wholesale Sea Food Market in Wuhan, where wild animals were sold. Environmental sampling does appear to pinpoint the west end of the market where wild animals were held. But how far back and how widely should we investigate? When exactly did the emergency really begin? The focus on the market misses the origins of wild agriculture out in the hinterlands and its increasing capitalisation. Globally, and in China, wild food is becoming more formalised as an economic sector. But its relationship with industrial agriculture extends beyond merely sharing the same moneybags. The expansion of industrial production of pigs, poultry, and the like into primary forest places pressure on wild food operators to dredge further into the forest for source populations. This increases the interface with, and spillover of, new pathogens, including Covid-19.

Source [Climate and Capitalism](#).

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