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Covid-19 pandemic

Pandemic, capitalism and climate

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1. This pandemic is a real Event (with a capital E!), a historic event: there will be a before and an after on a global scale, not so much in relation to the number of victims, even though this number is significant. It will, however, undoubtedly be much lower than that of the "Spanish" flu after the First World War, which caused more than 20 million deaths. Fortunately, we are far from that today.

What gives the event a historical significance is that the capitalist profit machine has almost stopped on a world scale, because there is a little thing which is not even an animal, which is a virus, hardly a living form, which is destroying the whole machine and threatening human health. It is therefore necessary to protect life, to protect the sick, to treat them: it is also necessary to protect the workforce for the capitalist economy. And this very, very deep crisis comes in a particular context: it comes at a time when capitalism had started a recession already in 2019. This recession had begun, and the pandemic is amplifying it in an absolutely extraordinary way.

An important point is that this situation is shifting the media and political focus:

- In normal times, what do they say to us? We are told about GDP growth, the balance of payments, we are told about inflation, the exchange rate, interest rates, etc. All abstract indicators of the accumulation of capitalist profit, of the accumulation of abstract value... And today, with this pandemic, the focus is quite different: political and media attention is completely focused on the work of nurses, on their overwork, on the sick who die, on those who recover, on the work of garbage collectors or staff in food stores, on species the fate of confined people, non-confined people, etc.

In summary, in normal times we are told about the abstraction of non-life, and at present we are told about life and death, that is to say about the living. There is a very important change in the general ideological atmosphere, a change to which we will return.

2. The epidemic is not a regression towards the epidemics of former times, it is not a return to the Black Death of the Middle Ages for example, it is quite another thing. Viruses of a particular type have multiplied for several decades. We first knew about AIDS, then zika, then swine fever, avian flu, chikungunya, Ebola, MERS- Cov SARS-1 in 2002, now SARS-COV2. All these viruses have the particularity that they are born in natural environments that have been attacked and wrecked by human action, or in industrial farms. These are called zoonoses, that is to say that the virus that lives in animals jumps the species barrier and contaminates Homo sapiens. There is therefore a completely new and specific origin of this pandemic compared to those of the past.

The virus itself is a product of the contradictions of capitalism. The mode of dissemination of the epidemic is also particular. The epidemic moves very quickly, it very became global - the epidemics of the past were never global, they were continental - and it is being diffused thanks obviously to the modern means of communication, in particular air transport, and it spreads all the more quickly as humanity is grouped in enormous cities, megacities, like Wuhan itself, which is a city of several million inhabitants.

These two factors, the particular origin of the virus and its mode of diffusion, mean that we have no archaic virus, we have no archaic epidemic, we have, on the contrary, as Bruno Latour puts it, modern epidemics, epidemics of the Anthropocene.

3. It is not only a health crisis. There is obviously an aspect of health crisis which is acute and very important, but this health crisis is in fact part of a much wider ecological and social crisis. In fact, the Covid-19 crisis is the first global crisis - social, ecological and economic - of the Anthropocene.

There are scientists who, a few years ago, at the beginning of the 2000s, began to study what is called the great acceleration and global change. They identified the parameters of the sustainability of human existence on this Earth:

1. climate change;
2. the decline in biodiversity;
3. freshwater resources;
4. chemical pollution;
5. air pollution by fine particles;
6. the state of the ozone layer;
7. the state of the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles;
8. ocean acidification;
9. soil use.

At the conclusion of their report, submitted in 2015, these scientists estimated that the sustainability ceiling had been crossed for four of these parameters: climate, biodiversity, nitrogen and soils. To use biblical language, we could say that these four parameters are the four horsemen of the Anthropocene apocalypse and the pandemic that we are experiencing is sending us a message. It signals that these four horsemen are today joined by a fifth, which is the epidemic risk.

4. This epidemic risk does not fall from the sky; it is a known threat. Because we are fortunate today to benefit from an absolutely extraordinary progress in science, with magnificent capacities of anticipation. Scientists have warned us of the risks - not only of an epidemic in general but even very precisely of the risk of an epidemic of this type. After the SARS epidemic, which was already a coronavirus, in 2002, several scientists came to these conclusions which were translated into official reports, notably two reports to the French National Assembly (2005 and 2009), which pointed to the great likelihood of repeating a new epidemic like that of SARS, caused by a zoonosis, a virus which jumps the species barrier, which is of animal origin and which spreads within the species *Homo sapiens*. The World Health Organisation (WHO) itself, as recently as 2018, was drawing up a list of the health threats hanging over the globe with a series of known pathogens, in which it had inserted disease X, because the WHO considered probable the appearance of an unknown pathogen capable of causing an epidemic with very serious consequences, a complete disturbance of society worldwide, and it considered it probable that this new pathogenic agent would still be of the coronavirus type.

So, we are in a known scenario, like that of climate change, for which scientists have been sounding the alarm for more than 50 years, saying that if we continue to send greenhouse gases into the atmosphere we are going to

completely unbalance the climate system and that this could have absolutely dramatic consequences. Again, governments absolutely ignored it, as we know, and greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase - except that now, with the pandemic, they are being reduced substantially.

The height of absurdity or the blindness of policymakers is that concerning the pandemic, in 2003, Belgian and French researchers arrived at the conclusion that the coronaviruses constitute a very stable category of virus and it would therefore be possible, quite easily, to find a treatment which would be valid not only for SARS-1 but also for other coronaviruses which would come afterwards. They estimated the cost of this research at 200 or 300 million euros. Obviously, they needed public subsidies which they did not obtain, because governments consider that research on medicines belongs to the pharmaceutical industry, whereas the latter does not do research for the good of the people or public health, but for profit. It therefore needs a market and solvent customers. The SARS epidemic was over, so there was no more market, no more customers, so they did not do the research. This illustrates the mark of the political attitude of decision-makers and economic leaders in the face of major ecological threats, of which the pandemic is now a part. It is this inability to heed what is known and the warnings issued to them.

This deafness, or this blindness, is due, firstly, to the fact that political decision-makers are completely subordinated to the dictates of capitalist imperatives of short-term profit and they therefore have their "nose to the wheel". Second, there is a more ideological reason, that they are themselves intoxicated by the ideology of capitalism, the neoliberal ideology: they consider that the laws of the market are stronger than the laws of biology for the virus or the laws of physics when it comes to climate change. They consider that the laws of their economic system are superior natural laws and that the market will settle everything in the event of a problem.

Now we see more than ever that the market does not regulate everything: if we count on ordering masks in China to protect caregivers in our countries but China is blocked because of the pandemic, there are no more masks and we don't protect the caregivers or the population. It's that simple.

5. The management of the pandemic: all politicians today are forced to resign themselves to this management, even those who did not believe they should, like Trump, Johnson or Rutted, who wanted to let the virus spread and the community become immunized. Even they are forced to backtrack hastily. Indeed, doing nothing - as they advocated at the outset - will not only cost more financially to the capitalist system, but will also cost them dearly from an electoral point of view. And for Trump, for example, that is not a minor consideration, far from it. So, they all tell us the same thing: that it is a question of the common good, and that we must all be united around our enlightened leaders to fight the virus.

Obviously, we have to respect the safety instructions: stay confined, respect physical (rather than social) distancing ... Not to do so would be irresponsible. But respecting the safety instructions does not mean that you have to submit to the political logic behind these instructions.

This logic is a logic of class, of pure and hard capitalism. The first priority of this logic is to minimize the impact of the pandemic on the productive sector, where profits are made, which is the heart of the capitalist economy. That is the reason why they are going to send workers to work in sectors that are not essential production. The second priority of this management of the pandemic is not to question the anti-social policies, the austerity plans that they have imposed until now, especially in the care sector, leading to the overwork of all personnel in these sectors. Obviously, the condition for this equation to be able to balance itself is to put the lid on all social, cultural or personal activities which do not fall into these categories, hence the lockdown and confinement.

There is also a political concern which is added to these considerations, namely that all governments (or most of them) are facing a terrible crisis of legitimacy: people no longer believe in them and want change. The pandemic offers leaders an opportunity to present themselves as war leaders - as Macron does on television. Strong power

mechanisms are being established with the pretext of fighting the pandemic. The case study is Orban in Hungary, who has established himself as dictator for the management of the epidemic. We are in the logic described by Michel Foucault: biopolitics coupled with “monitor and punish”. This is a serious warning, because the pandemic is serious, but it is nothing compared to the impact of climate change, if we have a tilt towards a climatic cataclysm with a rise in sea levels of 2 or 3 metres. But the management of the pandemic gives us an image of what capitalist management of a situation like this would be, which they obviously will not have seen coming, and which they will be obliged to manage, and they will give priority to the same kinds of means: priority to production, putting under wraps liberties, social life, cultural life, and, in the name of the fight against the scourge, grant themselves special powers, to create a strong state.

6. The strategic objective of health management is obviously to revive the capitalist machine, which has for the moment completely broken down due to the pandemic. The situation will lead to a very serious economic crisis, worse than the financial crisis in 2007-2008. Today, governments, to face the situation, must let go of some ballast in their neoliberal policies: the European Union has put on ice the fiscal stability pact and its zero debt/zero deficit objectives. They are obliged to go even further, they are obliged to challenge not only a certain number of neoliberal dogmas but even to challenge a certain number of capitalist rules, for example the sacrosanct freedom of enterprise for companies: they talk about nationalizations and requisitions. In other words, capitalism, endangered by capital, must be saved.

This does not at all mean that there is already a break with neoliberalism and even less with capitalism. It does on the contrary mean that a very large-scale social offensive is being prepared, against which the popular classes must prepare to fight back.

I limit myself here to the ecological impact of the revival of the capitalist economy. This impact is very dangerous. François Gemenne - member of the IPCC, co-author of the Anthropocene Atlas [\[1\]](#) is not wrong when he declares that the coronavirus crisis is a climatic disaster. Because the discourse that we are going to hear on to is that of priority to the economy, to recovery, taking the pretext of employment. So, to revive the economy, it will be necessary to tone down the climate objectives, to soften environmental regulations which are too rigid, etc. But François Gemenne is not right either, because all this is not due to the coronavirus, on the contrary this crisis today proves to us that we could reduce CO2 emissions quite radically by about 7 per cent per year, on condition that we produce and transport less goods around the planet. The danger does not come from the coronavirus crisis but from the capitalist response to this crisis. And it is all the greater since the coronavirus crisis is used as a pretext or a screen to respond to an economic crisis that had started before the pandemic.

We must prepare for a very harsh attack because they will put in the balance, as is very often the case in capitalism, employment on the one hand and environmental protection on the other. However there is a very important contradiction in this determined offensive: it is that the will to revive and to give priority to capital and its profitability goes against the feeling in the population, which thinks that things went too far with the economy, with profit, and that we forgot the social dimension, health, care of people. This contradiction constitutes a major obstacle for the capitalist offensive that the governments want to conduct.

Because “taking care” in the light of the pandemic crisis takes on very concrete content today. It is a question of avoiding other pandemics which could be more serious and which would have the same origin in the destruction of ecosystems.

7. The conclusion is obvious: if we want to avoid other pandemics, we must get out of agribusiness, industrial farming, we must stop deforestation, we need a long-term urban reform that deconstructs all these mega-cities and which builds cities more interconnected with natural or semi-natural environments. To fight pandemics, we especially need clean water, to which hundreds of millions of people do not have access. The water must be publicly-owned

and not be used to irrigate agro-industrial plantations. Likewise, if we want to institute robust health systems capable of coping with the new pandemics of the Anthropocene, they must be radically refinanced. To do this, it is necessary to make the shareholders pay and cancel the debt in the countries of the South. Forty-six countries spend more on interest on debt than on health care. Debt cancellation is a sine qua non condition for fighting pandemics.

There is also climate change itself: we know that the melting of the permafrost will most likely release old viruses or bacteria which will spread through workers who are employed in mines in these regions. This is why it is absolutely necessary to respect the objective set in Paris of 1.5°C of maximum warming, therefore to socialize energy and finance.

In short, it is a matter of drawing on the thread of “taking care” - a theme developed by (eco) feminists - to unwind all of the anti-capitalist objectives. It is a question of reformulating the ecosocialist alternative starting from this point of view, starting from this major change: today people draw from the crisis the conclusion that it is necessary to give a much stronger priority to health, to well-being, to taking care of each other and that it is necessary to put the means for that on the table. This represents a major strategic turning point, because for decades ecosocialists have been faced with a problem: ecological struggle, although social in the long term, appears to contradict social well-being in the short term. Here, with this major change, the emergence of “taking care”, the two issues overlap, the social and the ecological coincide. To lead the social fight is to lead an ecological fight.

It is this turning point that we must try to capture and whose opportunity we must see. It has consequences immediately and we must start now this fight, by fighting against this system and the productivist projects like 5G, by fighting so that health is definitively taken out of the market, refinanced, that the pharmaceutical industry is confiscated, banks are socialized, etc.

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*This transcript of a talk given during a video conference of the Anticapitalist Left in Belgium published in **Inprecor** was translated by **International Viewpoint**. The talk as well as the questions and answers: <https://www.facebook.com/gaucheanticapitaliste/videos/530976537793375/> .*

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[1] François Gemenne, Aleksandar Rankovic, *Atlas de l'Anthropocene* (preface by Jan Zalasiewicz, afterword by Bruno Latour), Presses de Sciences Po, Paris 2019, € 25.00