

Life versus Capital: The COVID-19 pandemic and the politics of life

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Abstract

Like all ostensibly “natural” disasters, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic unceasingly reveals the depths of social inequality and political myopia or governmental recklessness that predictably exacerbate the effects of a more strictly natural calamity. The pandemic thereby exposes the grotesque disparities in how illness, death, and suffering are unevenly distributed. As the COVID-19 public health crisis has summarily provoked a global economic crisis, furthermore, it is simply unthinkable to comprehend the real ramifications of the pandemic outside of the sociopolitical relations of labor and capital, more generally. Furthermore, the global public health crisis commands that we reflect anew on the relations between human life and state power. Both for those who have historically and enduringly been subjected to expulsion from gainful employment, as for those whose labor-power is a commodity of choice for capital, exceedingly selected for hyper-exploitation, the coronavirus pandemic is a toxic matter of both class and race. These dire and increasingly desperate circumstances, however, reveal not only what is most barbaric about capitalist social relations but also the opportunity latent within this crisis.

Keywords

capitalism, class, COVID-19, inequality, race, state power

Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.

—Marx 1867[1976: 342]

Death confronts us with the fragility of life. Early in Camus’ (1947/1972) *The Plague*, following one of the first deaths, the narrator remarks, “The perplexity of the early days gradually gave place to panic. . . And it was then that fear, and with fear serious reflection, began” (p. 22). This is all the more poignant when we confront the bitter absurdity of

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unnatural, premature death. The horror of mass death produced by our own sociopolitical arrangements, moreover, converts this existential absurdity into an unfathomable travesty of human fallibility and hubris, if not sheer cruelty.

Like all ostensibly “natural” disasters, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic unceasingly reveals the depths of social inequality and political myopia or governmental recklessness that predictably amplify and exacerbate the effects of a more strictly natural calamity, and thereby exposes the wildly exaggerated and grotesque disparities in how illness, death, and suffering are unevenly distributed. As the public health crisis instigated by the pandemic pandemonium has summarily provoked a global economic crisis, furthermore, it is simply unthinkable to comprehend the real ramifications of the pandemic outside of the sociopolitical relations of labor and capital, more generally.

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In the midst of this pandemic, the global public health crisis first of all commands that we reflect anew on the relations between human life and state power. It is well known that one of Foucault’s (1976/1978) decisive contributions is the identification of the historical emergence of a form of power that “exerts a positive influence on life . . . endeavors to administer . . . and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (p. 137). This biopolitical impulse and mandate for state power to cultivate human life and superintend the parameters for human wellbeing presents us with a paradox, confounding classic examples of sovereignty as a definitive power over life and death (as epitomized in the state’s customary reliance on its capacity to kill, torture, or execute), with historically unforeseen governmental duties of care. In the face of the coronavirus pandemic, many of our critiques of incompetent or self-serving politicians, of inept governments, and even of the state as such—recapitulate the fundamental biopolitical expectation that the obligation of the state is indeed to take care of us, to safeguard our wellbeing, and to provide the necessary predicates and protections for our collective thriving.

Public health is intrinsically and inextricably a discourse of the state. Any analysis of the comparative achievements and failings of one or another government’s management of the COVID-19 public health crisis therefore compels us to assess and reconsider our own often-unexamined presumptive expectations of the state. Confronting furthermore the sociopolitical problems instigated by this and other pandemics—massive-scale problems of planning, organization, coordination, distribution, and delivery of goods and services, as well as regulations on mobility or restrictions to our liberties—begs the question of how things might be done differently, and by whom or with what organization of power? In this respect, we are instructively reminded of Foucault’s (1997) discussion of “counter-conduct” in the essay “What is Critique?” in which he considers efforts to short-circuit the modern arts of governing not in terms of “how not to be governed *at all*,” but rather, “how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them” (p. 28; emphases in original). What indeed might be alternate forms of “governing” life and “managing” resources?

Bio-power, in Foucault’s (1976/1978) analysis, notably emerges as “without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism” (pp. 140–141). While biopolitics operates, for Foucault (1975/1979), as an emphatically *regulatory*

power (p. 139, 144) over populations as such, it is also inextricable from the government of bodies:

“The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labor power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated, and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (pp. 25–26).

At both the collective or societal scale of “populations” as well as the micropolitical scale implicated in the disciplining of individual bodies, then, it should come as no surprise that such a power over life itself becomes indispensable to capitalism. For, human life—in all its vigor and ingenuity—is indeed the real secret of labor, which for capital is the indispensable source of all value.

The constitutive and irreconcilable antagonism of labor and capital is well known to be a central thesis of Karl Marx’s thought, but it is less well appreciated that the endemic struggle of labor against capital is, for Marx, fundamentally a struggle of life against death. From the standpoint of capital, everything is (at least potentially) capital, such that labor itself is reframed (and disfigured) as “human capital.” From the standpoint of labor, in contrast—which is also to say, therefore, from a Marxian standpoint—everything that enters into the scope of human social life is always already intrinsically *socialized* by purposeful human activity: labor. Hence, all of social life is either a manifestation of human productive powers and creative capacities, or the product thereof; it is either living labor, or the product of past labor (which Marx instructively depicts as “dead labor”). Capital, as an accumulation of the wealth produced by labor performed in the past, is therefore dead labor, which nonetheless can only sustain and replenish itself by constantly feeding upon the vitality of the living. Labor, consequently, is merely a particular form and specific expression of human life itself. The famous class struggle of labor against capital, then, is merely one manifestation of the endemic and irreconcilable struggle of capital, vampire-like, to cannibalize the creative energies of human life, and the struggle of human life against its objectification and alienation—*our* struggle, to preserve, protect, and promote our own flourishing. By escalating the intrinsic antagonism of human life and capital, the COVID-19 pandemic exposes capital’s absolute and utter dependency upon human life-as-labor—which is to say, more precisely, capital’s constitutive requirements for the subjection of human life as subordinated (alienated) labor.

Capital accumulation requires all labor to be ultimately disposable. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the historical condition of enslaved labor must be recognized to be the defining and constitutive limit figure for how we comprehend labor itself under capitalism, and slavery thus names the ultimate condition of labor’s subordination and subjection to capital. In what I propose as “a racial theory of labor” (De Genova, 2018)—starting from the recognition that Blackness, as a racialized construct that is historically specific to our (colonial capitalist) modernity, is inextricable from slavery—there is a tendency for *all* labor under capital to be pressed toward a sociopolitical condition approximating

racial Blackness. The utter and abject disposability of human life is the enduringly manifest result.

This is not to say, of course, that the conditions of all labor are equal, or that this disposability is distributed evenly. On the contrary. Poor people everywhere are disproportionately relegated to conditions of precarity, abandonment, and expulsion, and under the conditions of this pandemic, they are very predictably abandoned to the perils of inordinate exposure to the virus, from the homeless, to slum dwellers, to migrants and refugees crossing borders, stranded on boats or confined in makeshift camps, imprisoned in detention prisons, or living in over-crowded barrack-like workers' dormitories. The hierarchies of class inequality have been demonstrated in remarkable ways, moreover, as many of those characterized as "essential workers" are expected to continue working with no adequate health and safety protections. Among transit workers in New York City, it has become commonplace to sardonically remark, "We are not 'essential'; we are sacrificial."¹ With slavery as the horizon and ultimate limit figure for the abject disposability of human life, the pandemic has generated sometimes shocking examples of people being driven by what Marx (1976) depicts as "the silent compulsion of economic relations" (p. 899) to potentially work themselves, literally, to death. Alongside healthcare and emergency response workers in every category (from doctors and nurses, to paramedics, police, and firefighters, to hospital orderlies and cleaning staff), the health of a much wider cross-section of the working class—namely, the working poor—has likewise been flagrantly put at risk. As people are made to gamble with their lives (and also those of their loved ones) in exchange for the brute necessities of sustaining their livelihoods, the pandemic has demonstrated the grim truth that those whose labor is indispensable are among those whom capital renders permanently disposable.

From farmworkers, to grocery store employees, to meatpacking and other food processing factory workers, to warehouse workers and delivery drivers, to mass transit and other transportation workers, to janitors and sanitation workers, to nursing home staff, to home-based elderly care workers—the fact that so many of these essential categories of labor are also among the lowest paid and least protected (often including no sick-leave benefits whatsoever) ensures that they are disproportionately reserved for racially subordinated "minorities" and migrants. In the United States, where meatpacking plants have more or less universally become hotspots of mass coronavirus infection due to the spatio-temporal organization of the labor process, Donald Trump issued an executive order commanding this industry to keep its workplaces open rather than shutting them down as a clear and present danger to the wellbeing of their employees and more generally to public health. Republican governors in states dominated by the meatpacking industry likewise threatened workers that if they refused to go to work for reasons of their health and safety, they would be denied access to unemployment benefits. The mercenary efforts of these state officials to coerce such workers to risk their lives on the job in order to bolster the profitability of their employers have been brazen. The contemptuous disregard for their health cannot be separated from their racial subordination, however. Meatpacking is notoriously dangerous work under "normal" circumstances, and is overwhelmingly dependent in the United States upon the exploitation of Mexican and other migrant labor.

Whether we consider those working poor who are disproportionately forced to continue working at risk of infection and potentially death, or those whose lives are disproportionately ravaged by marginalization, endemic underemployment or permanent unemployment, and poverty, the heightened risks of COVID-19 infection and severe medical repercussions are concentrated on the Black and Brown. In many U.S. cities, such as Chicago, for instance, the repugnant but utterly unsurprising fact is that Black Americans are seven times more likely to die from the coronavirus than whites. In the state of Georgia, 80% of all people hospitalized for the coronavirus have been African American. Gilmore (2007) poignantly proposes that this sort of unequal distribution of “vulnerability to premature death” may indeed be taken as the very definition of racism (p. 28). Both for those who have historically and enduringly been subjected to expulsion from gainful employment, as for those whose labor-power is a commodity of choice for capital, exceedingly selected for hyper-exploitation, the coronavirus pandemic is a toxic matter of both class and race. Thus, we cannot afford to contemplate how human life and health become inseparable from labor exploitation and class inequality outside of a critical scrutiny of how capitalism itself is incomprehensible outside of its global sociopolitical configuration as a racial/(post-)colonial regime. The entrenched legacies and enduring logics of the racialized coloniality of our modernity have, for centuries, never ceased to enforce the conditions by which some human lives and bodies—and more specifically, particular categories of human life—have been systematically degraded and devalued, and continue to be.

Within a global regime distinguished by the permanent and routine disposability of human life, the coronavirus pandemic sheds a glaring light upon realities that are ordinarily taken for granted or derisively disregarded, while also intensifying the reach of that regime’s ruthlessness by extending precarity and disposability dramatically. In the United States, where new unemployment claims rose by more than 39 million over a 9-week period from March through mid-May 2020, the anachronistic absence of any genuine public healthcare system as such and the widespread reliance upon employment-based private health insurance dramatically illustrate how, for tens of millions, losing one’s position as labor-for-capital is tantamount to expulsion from any dependable access to healthcare. While people wait in 3-mile lines for hours at food pantries, many of the businesses that produce food (farms, ranches, and dairies) have been left to destroy massive quantities of their products in the face of the collapse of their commercial markets. The raging pandemic and the mounting economic crisis are therefore inseparable, and this is increasingly palpable in the immediate lived experience of countless people.

These dire and increasingly desperate circumstances, however, reveal not only what is most barbaric about capitalist social relations but also the opportunity latent within this crisis. In the face of the sudden collapse of a wide cross-section of economic life, and therefore the abrupt disappearance of gainful employment for so many, the bleak predicament of having little or no means to buy food and other necessities has quickly befallen a very large portion of the general population, alongside the imminent prospect of being unable to pay rent or mortgage and other debts. Simultaneously, particularly in the United States and other countries where there is no public provision of universal health care, the pandemic presents everyone, more or less immediately, with the exigencies of access to care. Consequently, many of the elementary contradictions of life under

capitalism are brought into excruciatingly sharp focus. Suddenly, universal healthcare, a universal basic income (or some other form of assurance of all the necessities of life), a moratorium on all debts, including a suspension of rents and house mortgages, free public transportation and health and safety protections for all whose labor is deemed essential, etc.—to ever larger numbers of people, these all seem like simple common sense. A radical rethinking of the totality of capitalist social relations is more timely than ever.

Reflecting on an aporia in Marx's thought, Agamben (2014/2016) suggests that the classic Marxian concept of the "mode" (or form) "of production" must be complemented by the concept of the "form-of-life," which coexists with the mode of production but renders its workings inoperative and facilitates putting those works to new uses (p. 94). Inoperativity is a key concept in Agamben's thought, signaling the intrinsic potential of human life to *not* be defined by any particular work, its inherent open-endedness, its undecidability. If power, in its "most oppressive and brutal form," "separates human beings from their potentiality, and in this way renders them impotent," Agamben (2011) argues, a "still more insidious operation of power . . . does not immediately affect what humans can do—their potentiality—but rather their 'impotentiality,' that is, what they cannot do, or rather, what they can not do" (p. 43). This "impotentiality" is precisely the "specific ambivalence of all potentiality—which is always the power to be and not be, to do and not do—that defines, in fact, human potentiality. This is to say that human beings are the living beings that, existing in the mode of potentiality, are capable just as much of one thing as its opposite, to do just as to not do" (44). Agamben reframes this capacity to *not* do as "inoperativity," as notably exemplified in the abstention from productive labor involved in festivity. "Inoperativity . . . coincides with festiveness itself in the sense that it coincides precisely in neutralizing and rendering inoperative human gestures, actions, and works, which in turn can become festive only in this way" (p. 109). Festivity, then, is defined by the fact that "what is done . . . becomes undone, rendered inoperative, liberated and suspended from its 'economy'" (pp. 110–111). "What is essential here," he continues, "is a dimension of praxis in which simple, quotidian human activities are neither negated nor abolished but suspended and rendered inoperative" in order to "open them to a new—or more ancient—possible use" (112). "In inoperativity," Agamben (2014/2016) therefore contends, "the classless society is already present in capitalist society" (p. 94). Thus, amidst the glaring class inequalities of the coronavirus pandemic—whereby the conditions of mass quarantine for some exist alongside the compulsion for others to put their lives at risk for the sake of earning their meager livelihood—what is nonetheless exposed for many is the latent *potentiality* of a society, or form-of-life, no longer subordinated to the exigencies of labor and the merciless requirements of the regime of capital accumulation.

Here, the COVID-19 pandemic and the regnant politics of life and death compel us to reexamine how we in fact live—what we do, and can *not* do. It is noteworthy that Agamben's discussion calls us to reflect anew upon "simple, quotidian human activities," and the possibility for them to be re-directed toward new or discrepant uses. As Agamben (1996/2000) explains, the concept of "form-of-life"—which he juxtaposes to, yet embeds within (and against), the "mode of production"—is meant to designate:

"a life that can never be separated from its form . . . a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself . . . never prescribed by a specific biological vocation, nor . . . assigned

by whatever necessity; instead, no matter how customary, repeated, and socially compulsory, it always retains the character of a possibility; that is, it always puts at stake living itself. That is why human beings—as beings of power who can do or not do, succeed or fail, lose themselves or find themselves—are the only beings for whom happiness is always at stake in their living” (pp. 3–4).

In short, the inoperativity of human life, which signals the radical open-endedness of human potentiality, is inextricable from an existential gambit for happiness rather than mere survival (p. 8). It refuses to accept that there should ever be a politics of life separate from the quality of our way of living.

The politics at stake in the COVID-19 pandemic surrounding the quality of our way of living—and ultimately, the politics of our happiness—must therefore also revisit key insights of Lefebvre’s (1947/1958; 1961; 1968; 1972; 1981) critique of everyday life. For Lefebvre, everyday life is that residual space-time of our pervasive alienation (1947/1958[1991:3]; 1968[1971:33])—the mundane common denominator (1972[1987:10]) that remains, apart from any of the specialized operations or functionalities of our modern way of life under capitalism, yet serves nonetheless as the connective tissue that encompasses them all. As such, everyday life is chiefly characterized by repetition, routine, passivity, triviality, mediocrity, boredom, privation, humiliation, dissatisfaction, disappointment, disillusionment, and disaffection. “What could be more meaningless than everyday life?” Lefebvre (1968[1971]) provocatively demands (p. 27). And yet, within the misery, monotony, and opacity of everyday life, Lefebvre was intent to discern its power and potentiality (p. 35): “there was a power concealed in everyday life’s apparent banality, a depth beneath its triviality, *something extraordinary in its very ordinariness*” (p. 37; emphasis in original). Precisely as the site where we experience most viscerally and excruciatingly all of modern life’s bitter disenchantments, everyday life represents a fertile terrain of creative ferments—the space of our desires. Indeed, the critique of everyday life that Lefebvre (1947/1958[1991]) sought to articulate and explore is itself something that arises spontaneously from within (and against) the actuality of everyday life’s unmet needs and wants, and therefore always already “plays an integral part in the everyday” (p. 29; cf. 40). Everyday life is therefore “the inevitable starting point for the realization of the possible” (1968[1971: 14]). Further, inasmuch as everyday life is the quotidian space-time of social reproduction, where ordinary social relations and their larger organization are constantly re-established and re-stabilized, Lefebvre contends that “a revolution takes place when and only when . . . people can no longer lead their everyday lives” (p. 32).

In this moment of the multifarious COVID-19 crisis, everyday life has undergone a profoundly unsettling disruption. The massive destabilization and defamiliarization instigated by the coronavirus has surely been a watershed occasion whereby we can simply no longer go about our customary routines. Hence, we begin to appreciate that such an abrupt and far-reaching dislocation of how we actually live may signal a momentous confrontation with the ordinary abjection and poverty of everyday life, and thereby also expose it to unforgiving critical scrutiny. The immediate requirements of our collective survival and self-preservation, by threatening a cataclysmic collapse of the global capitalist economy, have revealed the utter superfluity of so much of our ordinary work,

while also summoning a long overdue confrontation between the demands of truly cultivating life and the sheer irrationality, brutality, and perversity of capitalist social relations. Thus, the pandemic elucidates the inoperative potential power of human life, our capacity to *not* be defined by our labor, and our dire need for a form-of-life where what is at stake in our way of living is living itself.

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1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/05/opinion/coronavirus-nyc-subway.html?referringSource=articleShare>

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