



en Reflection Original Anti-Capitalism Anti-Colonialism

# A Political Ecology of Covid19 – Some reflections

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Despite the renewed popularity of Foucault's and Agamben's concept of bio-politics to analyse the present crisis, I believe that the framework of Marxist political ecology – which in the last decade has gained considerable influence - offers us a more useful framework. Marxist political ecology considers capitalism not just as an economic or social system, but as a socio-ecology (Moore, 2011). Clashing with his German social-democratic contemporaries, Marx already pointed out that use value has two sources: nature and human labour. The purpose of existence of capital is profit. In the capitalist socio-ecology, capital accumulates through exploitation – based upon a legal framework of wage labour – and primary accumulation or expropriation – based upon the extra-legal framework of destruction, colonization and violence of what is “naturalized”. Capitalism not only structures relations between humans, but also between humans and nature. The processes of capitalist accumulation have various contradictions which create obstacles for capital accumulation and provoke crises. David Harvey distinguished some of these in the sphere of classic political economy, such as insufficient initial capital, difficulties with the labour supply and resistance or inefficiencies in the labour process, inappropriate technologies and lack of demand. Others exist in the so-called natural limits of the accumulation process, such as pollution, difficult environments, depletion of resources or diseases. From a socio-ecological perspective, we cannot speak of a clear distinction between these natural or social limits of capital, as all social limits have a natural component and all-natural limits have a labour-component. The political ecology framework is also useful to tackle the problem of “climate dictatorship” which uses depoliticized technocratic frameworks to transform a scientific consensus on climate change into a form of green neoliberal capitalism which financializes natural assets and carbon emissions and thus opened new markets for accumulation. Diseases are a problem for capitalism insofar as they destroy demand and disrupt the labour supply. Our contemporary covid19-pandemic is such a crisis.

Let us now use this framework to address the present crisis. We could have seen this crisis coming – and some have seen it coming. Pandemics and infectious diseases are near-inevitable and recurring events in human history – as episodes of pest and flu have shown us -, but socio-ecologic systems have very important effects on the social consequences of those pandemics. Crises of these systems are moments of politicization when long-term tendencies become apparent and are attributed to a common enemy. Global capitalism has produced and galvanized different of these tendencies. Among these tendencies: 1. Capitalist globalization compressed time and space to such an extent that not only money and goods, but also passengers and viruses travel around the globe much faster than any time in the history of the planet. For the virus – in many cases spread out by the white traveling cosmopolitan elite to such an extent that in some African countries it has been designated as a disease of the rich - all social and natural barriers – from borders to oceans – ceased to exist. 2. The capitalist meat industry – producing cheap food for cheap labourers - is commonly linked to the outbreak of pandemics. The concentration of too many animals in closed unhealthy spaces creates the perfect breeding ground for viruses which use this chain

of transmission to jump from the animal to the human world. 3. The neoliberal cuts in healthcare have drastically reduced the infrastructure and available personnel to fight possible pandemics. One of the basic needs for fighting pandemics is capacity, in terms of hospital beds, and strategic stocks of basic hygienic material such as masks, disinfectants and reagents for tests – all which were drastically reduced in the last twenty years despite the huge growth of global financial wealth. 4. Privatized pharmaceuticals direct their investments towards the invention of new chemical substances that treat diseases that are financially interesting and avoid research into possible curative effects of chemicals without intellectual property rights for diseases which target the poorest and most vulnerable in the world. Examples are the lack of research into old anti-malaria drugs as Chloroquine and Mefloquine - which seem to have some unconfirmed curative properties for covid19 – and the monopolisation of reagents for covid19-tests by the Swiss pharmaceutical multinational Roche.

Crises play an important role for capitalism to renew itself, to eventually overcome the barriers of accumulation. If the capitalist world-order is not challenged, many of its contemporary tendencies will strengthen throughout this crisis. Among the winners of this crisis will be the platform-economies – such as Amazon, Uber and Glovo - the big retailers and large food industries. The crisis and the imposed quarantines strengthen their positions, instead of being halted, their capital accumulation spiked. In the meantime, their small-scale alternatives, small local commerce dependent on direct interaction with costumers and limited access to new digital technologies will see a destruction of their capital and will have enormous difficulties to survive.

Capitalism most often relies upon the states in such times of crisis, and states have demanded exceptional measures to control the crisis. Carl Schmitt famously stated that sovereignty is defined by the one who rules in the state of exception. While governments quarantined entire populations and robbed them of their social, constitutional and political rights, it provided a ventilator for Western Capitalism - provided by US treasury, the Federal Reserve Bank (1700 billion \$), the European Central Bank (870 billion €) and the German (1000 billion €) government - that cost at least 3.500.000.000.000 Euro – the equivalent of roughly 700 million real ICU ventilators.

It is nevertheless exceptional that capital eventually accepted and imposed the contemporary lockdowns. Conservative leaders such as Trump, Bolsonaro, Johnson and Trump initially played down the possible impacts of the pandemics and argued that the economies shouldn't stop, but they lost their plea. A few weeks later, the majority of the world's population - including most of the value-producing working class - finds itself in a situation of lock-down that affects all the continents. It would have been expectable that capitalism would not stop the global economy to save a few hundreds of thousands of lives from covid-19 (at this moment the official global death-toll is around 50.000), taking into account that none of such measures had been taken for AIDS for example, which still kills around 800.000 people/year. One explanation is that some mighty sectors of high tech capital saw potential profits in the crisis and the state

of exception. Another is that the disease first spread massively in the core capitalist countries, transforming Europe, and later the United States, into hotspots of the disease. It affected countries with “less disposable” people, people which still had a right to healthcare, whose healthcare systems came to the brink of collapse and whose revolt would be more dangerous to the survival of capitalism, provoking unforeseen containment strategies.

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