

CAPITALISM IS NOT BIOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE FOR HOMO SAPIENS:
THOUGHTS WITHIN THE CORONISING SIEGE (3,750, Aug. 2020)*/

Cheerful people in bad times write pessimistic texts. The pessimists don't write.

Words of a Sage

We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist.

Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, draft for
The German Ideology (1847)

this series of fragments arose from e-mail debates with comrades in March, including a memorable Skype call. i've left it in a mildly oral tone.

A/ long duration -- scattered notes tending to a center

This is the 2nd major and global pandemic of global capitalocene (first was/is the temperature and sea-level rise, but it's so slow banks don't worry). So we're in kinda „medical pre-fascism,“ for the rulers a very welcome excuse for the future: only police and pass-holders on the streets, no unruly demonstrators, approaching total control -- in Chinese cities apparently reached, certainly on most Italian streets.

With our level of possible medical technology and production in general, any sane society would have many more cheap hospitals, better fed people, and plans for meeting such pandemics. Ergo: we live in an insane society. Also a very incompetent one, except where profits and violence are involved. The worst case is, of course, the leading imperial power of the USA under the bluff-and-bluster present presidency. Strikes me as familiar.

The next “pandemia” (major global blight) will be, rather soon, water consumption. Water shortage – drought, desertification, and so on – is caused (surprise!) by capitalist big business and its political enforcers. Sterling examples: Colorado river wiped out by California agribusiness, also water wars in the Amazon basin and in Israel/Palestine now for 50 years. "Climate refugees," displaced by rising waters and by desertification, have

been for the next 3d of century estimated at up to one billion people (think of those hundreds of millions, each one an embodied being in need and desire).

Certainly, the present partial repudiation of the “neoliberal” dogmas forced down the world throats for the past half a century, and nicely encapsulated in Mrs. Thatcher’s great line “There is no such thing as society,” was obviously needed: a quasi-socialism in the worst State form without popular control and for the crisis moment only, but still at least coordinated and overriding zoological individualism. Yet I’ve seen NO government or leading politician say so, because they expect to return to the old muck asap. There’s no hint of confessing they were totally wrong for many decades, nor that the only way out from a crisis of over-production is redistributing wealth from billionaires to the masses so that they can buy the products. On the contrary, there is every chance that if and when the medical emergency is over, a huge economic emergency of the kind that banks again don’t see -- that is, a sharp widening of the gap in class income or well-being between the upper minority and the huge lower majority -- will emerge. Regarding that gap, Greece, the ex-Yugoslav statelets, and Russia may come to resemble Africa, Italy and maybe Spain will resemble Greece, and the USA, especially its South and its poor everywhere, will not be so much better than much of Latin America. Since both the USA and the Russian Federation have nuclear bombs, the temptation to use them for diversion of national attention from class tensions will be great.

It is most probable that this crisis is going to radically change world (and most national) politics. True, as Christine Berry observes, “[it’s] clear that our society is only as strong as its weakest link. Contrary to the austerity-era rhetoric pitting strivers against skivers, if we don’t guarantee a secure livelihood for everyone – including those unable to work – we all suffer” (www.versobooks.com/blogs/4613-the-covid-19-pandemic-will-change-everything-for-better-or-worse?utm_source=Master+List&utm_campaign=53bb38c6d5-UK+Direct%3A+Verso+blog+response&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1f96ba5fab-53bb38c6d5-410267917&mc_cid=53bb38c6d5&mc_eid=f5c325b601). There is no alternative to wars and terrorism but the effective universalisation of basic human right, such as a citizenship income and realistic admission of immigrants from poorer to richer countries (without them there’ll be no pension funds for anybody). This implies that every human being has "a right to rights" – that is, civility, Balibar’s *droit de cité*. At present, there are some tendencies toward a “solidarity” (non-market) economy of swaps and donations, in poorer countries or classes. But given both the near certainty of an economic recession soon (estimates I saw were around 5-6% fall of GDP, and since this is a fake measuring rod the consequences would be much deeper) and the absence of organised and intelligent plebeian, i.e. Left, forces, all chances are for a turn to the etatist Right (see more in the Berry link above). Our analogy is not 2008 or SARS but 1929 -- without Leninism. According to epidemiology Prof. Michael Mina at Harvard, it’s “completely unknown” how many people are actually infected. Instead of more than

one million cases in the world right now, “there could be anywhere from 10 million to perhaps 100 million” (<https://medium.com/@robertroybritt/covid-19-pandemic-has-just-begun-e23a4b5694bb>)

Varufakis (www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLfHpvJKNg0 -- best argument I’ve seen, even if I disagree with his electoralist illusions) thinks a repetition of 2008-09 financial rescues might be endangered if Trump is in power and instinctually, as a true predator, wants to put conditions on the “dollar swap” at that time tendered to all other world banks. In that case these would collapse. Then all bets are off, probably stark fascist nationalism and neo-feudalism spreads rapidly, prefigured on a much lower level of technology in the 1936 b-&-w movie from H.G. Wells’s text *Things To Come* and innumerable SF texts. Its decisive Orwellian feature would be many dirty wars, declared or not (most probable: US intervention in Venezuela and bombing of Iran).

I should point out, with pride turning to sorrow, that my Muse (subconscious if you prefer) wrote in 2009 in the headnote to a long poem in the style of the Hebrew prophets: “*The words of the Assembler of Sayings, one of the defrocked ones in the lineage of Benjamin. The word of the Muse our Lady came to him in the days of rebellious Mazdak the Liberator, & throughout the days of betrayal & ruin when Mazdak was killed & of the murderous Warring States, & until the crash of the Great Plague coming from above by the power of inhumanity & its followers* [bolded for this occasion], *when Jerusalem went into exile & the Assembler too died.*” There follow 300+ lines of short verse. It really ought to be published in these days but don’t know where... (can send to anybody interested).

In fact, we on the Left cannot use “capitalism” as our antagonist any more except with an adjective modifying it: neofeudal? rentier? even with traits of slave-owning gleefully appearing today in both economies and the police + military control, with lots of helots dying? We have a first attempt in London’s “Iron Heel” concept, need 2-3-100 attempts!

Any work on the long duration must be compatible with and must, at whatever remove, lead to short-duration diagnoses and proposals of strategic intervention.

B1/ short duration -- situation

In Italy, the beautiful chaotic country i opted to retire to, chances for contracting the disease seem under 6%; in the whole world (except probably China) nobody knows, because there’s been haphazard testing so we don’t know what the 100% really is – except that it is 2-3 or more times larger than the statistics on TV. However, people over 65 -- or is it 55? – are in Italy overtly *not given scarce breathing support* but left to survive at home if they can (but the ruling class can go to private hospitals in Switzerland or

wherever). So in case of being hospitalised with a strong form of Covid, the oldsters' chance of surviving is 40% maybe. Everywhere else I strongly suspect that this holds, covertly, not only for the oldsters but for all the poor. One quite typical US ruling-class example: "On March 23, as the coronavirus pandemic sent shock waves across the nation, Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick told Fox News host Tucker Carlson that lots of grandparents would be willing to die from the coronavirus to save their grandchildren from another Great Depression" (editor@theragblog.com, Apr. 1, 2020). In brief, even where crass survival is at stake, class appurtenance (wealth and power) allows the rulers and privileged to isolate themselves comfortably, to arrange Internet and credit card deliveries, and to have faster and better access to medical help. The poor and other "marginals" -- such as, 1st, those who live closer to or on the street, 2nd, women who will be tending to the sick in their families and -- like medical personnel -- will likely fall sick in large numbers, 3^d, the older and already ailing, and 4th, the *sans papiers*, immigrants without papers or with only provisional ones -- have a much lesser chance: quite often (I've been told of such cases), they're simply left to die. Back to slaveowning: those that cannot physically work (produce superprofits) are dispensable.

No doubt, there are also very interesting returns to using the strong power of the State to help everybody (tho "vagabonds" as well as the "unregistered" workers, a huge percentage say in southern Italy, are usually excluded). From what I know a bit better: in Ireland -- and after chaotic hesitation at the beginning, in Italy -- the health-care system either already was or has now been effectively nationalized and centralised, financial support is going to many unemployed, there is strong police control over breaking the shutdown rules; in the Indian state of Kerala, governed by the Left Democratic Front -- as opposed to the horrendous starvation facing untold millions in the rest of India -- the government is opening thousands of camps for migrant workers in Kerala: "As of 28 March, 144,145 migrant workers had been housed in 4,603 camps, and more camps are being opened. The government is also building camps for homeless and destitute people -- 44 camps so far in which 2,569 people are staying. The state has opened community kitchens across the state to provide free hot meals; for those who cannot come to the kitchens, the food is delivered to their homes" ("These Migrant Workers Did Not Suddenly Fall From the Sky", Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, vijay@thetricontinental.org, Apr. 2, 2020). Such clear and sustained measures lead to a unified community spirit that seems to be flattening the statistical curve of sickness.

What can we do? Obviously, as *Candide* said, cultivate our writing and similar gardens. But this will not be enough, *we need collective self-defense*. Thus organising!! How? I have no clue. I do know how not: NOT in the anarchist *Occupy* way, but in an organisation that has historical memory, endurance, persistence: that is, a political party. Leninism 2.0 anybody? It won't win any elections but it may seriously influence power -- if we survive.

In the meantime, watch the “toggle between disease control and the economy” (see the prognoses for up to one million dead in a USA that refused a proper “Chinese” or “Italian” strong initial clampdown in monthlyreview.org/2020/03/27/covid-19-and-circuits-of-capital/?mc_cid=a45d929946&mc_eid=f75a77ef3e, updated to over one million in www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/04/02/experts-trumps-advisers-doubt-white-houses-240000-coronavirus-deaths-estimate/ and the alternatives in <https://medium.com/@tomaspueyo/coronavirus-act-today-or-people-will-die-f4d3d9cd99ca>). If the toggle is done reasonably well, for the surviving it might be a good time for reflection, or even writing – say, either a mega-poem or a mega-pamphlet. If all shuts down and we're cooped up at home with an occasional trip for food or medicines, this sounds like a medieval monastery e.g. for Thomas of Aquinas (well he actually was deeply involved in politics and the Sorbonne, but let's say Duns Scotus or Bede the Venerable). We have it better /?/, we may have erotic partners + internet + books.

Covid vs. Ovid: chances are slim at the moment. I think often of Kafka's aphorism: "There is a lot of hope, but not for us." Brecht called Kafka a Bolshevik writer -- probably meaning going to extreme consequences of a situation regardless of all else. Nonetheless, we should know that there is a lot of sullen resistance and at times protest, e.g. to teacher speed-up and much longer working hours over internet for the same pay. And there is a growing number of strikes (often wildcat) by workers protesting lax health and safety provisions in their workplace or people demanding better economic support when laid off. Unfortunately, our gung-ho media give, so far as one can tell, no or very little prominence or even mention to such plebeian demands, but now we see why we need syndicalism, with much more militance.

Personally, I'm relaxed and fairly cheerful, so far my monastic lifestyle hasn't much changed except that i can't get my massages done now... damn! Wouldn't like to die before my halfway-to-Alzheimer wife does, poor soul... Also have plans for half a dozen more things to write... But then, I should at my age maybe say with Michelangelo (a quite good poet!):

Caro m'è 'l sonno, e più l'esser di sasso,
 mentre che 'l danno e la vergogna dura;
 non veder, non sentir m'è gran ventura;
 però non mi destar, deh, parla basso.

Translation (supposedly spoken by a statue of his, probably the Night) redone by me:

*I'm happy that I sleep, and more that I'm of stone,
 as long as this damage and shame last;
 not to see, not to feel is a great fortune;*

so do not wake me, O speak softly.

B2/ short duration – politico-epistemological rethinking needed

I know most about the European countries, now the focus of the pandemic. In many, the sabotaged health systems are or were near to collapsing after decades of underfunding and neo-liberal “austerity,” meaning transfer of trillions from the poor and middle classes to the upper 2-5%. European political and financial bureaucracies – the EU, various State governments, and the European Central Bank -- allocate the bulk of their resources to safeguarding financial and business activities. Timid actions strengthening the capacities of States in the crisis – targeted re-nationalisations, temporary public control of health service providers – or palliative measures – limited exemptions from the payment of rent and housing mortgages – do not represent a decisive commitment to guaranteeing the labour and health of the working people. This holds also for those most exposed to the devastating effects of the pandemic: healthcare workers, women and other caregivers, employees of the food industry and basic service’s companies, etc.

C/ a culmination of sorts: THIS CHANGES ALL

(title from Naomi Klein on first capitalocene pandemic, the “climate change”)

Corona: what about the billions of poor people exposed to it? We inside the “new Trilateral” of North America, West-cum-Central Europe and East Asia easily, but most culpably, forget them. Yet a mega-holocaust of possibly hundreds of millions dead is on the horizon in India and the rest of S. Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Russia anybody?). True, since this Covid-19 virus seems largely seasonal, in the southern hemisphere its path may seriously begin only around July. But it is there, South and East of the “metropolises,” that the new Trilateral imperialism, with its demented belief that society has no claim on capitalists (see Section A), has resulted in deepest and unimaginably wide impoverishment. This included the worldwide systematic cutting down of public health systems, all on their last legs and either collapsed or now in danger to collapse. Mike Davis has precisely called this the “disinvestment in public health” (see his books and the speech at <https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/mike-davis-on-coronavirus-politics/>). All planning for the working people and its welfare was (rightly) deemed communist and spurned. Corporate Big Pharma does not invest in research on infectious diseases or prevention in general: as already Fourier knew, “the sicker we are, the more they thrive” (in this vein, no hard data can be found on rumours that Big Pharma has a reagent needed to complete Covid tests still under patent that is, strangely, critically less available). Obviously, Big Pharma is the first candidate that ought to be put under

thorough public supervision and opening of its dirty secrets in order to eliminate all profit-based obstacles to combating diseases, including to begin with this one. The second and simultaneous candidate is mega-food suppliers now falling flat on their collective faces and leading US farmers to plough crops over. Both are real crimes against humanity.

On a wider scale, “compensatory consumerism” is probably dead, and with it a very large part of existing capitalist economic circulation (David Harvey in https://jacobinmag.com/2020/03/david-harvey-coronavirus-political-economy-disruptions?utm_source=Jacobin).

The options are: severe lockdown of whole country for 2-3+ months or a truly massive epidemic, with end in sight perhaps, tho nobody knows this, for seasonal reasons but then dormant until the next Spring. Which countries were until now refusing lockdown: so far, most prominent were the USA, the UK and Switzerland -- that is, where private corporate capitalism and demented Malthusian individualism are strongest. QED.

Also, it is not at all clear why the Covid pandemic should not return to the Northern hemisphere at the beginning of 2021, in a race with developing an effective serum against it for everybody (not bought by Trump for the US rich only).

In sum: *global capitalism is not biologically sustainable for the species Homo sapiens* (see to begin with Victor Wallis, *Red Green Revolution*). It actively sabotages biological balance – one example: the forcing of hundreds of millions of small peasants into city slums, with attendant collapse of the peasant food chains. Capitalism has since its inception practiced mass despoliation of the “lower realms”, nature and plebeians, coercing the latter by arms and hunger. But as different from most people, most nature cannot be coerced. Ursula Le Guin wrote me maybe two years ago, "ah well, Earth will purge itself of Homo sapiens and recuperate after half a million years" -- the long view. What with temperature rise and pandemics, Gaia may well have begun. But this should not make us happy.

It is perhaps a cosmic sarcasm of Stapledonian (Olaf W.) proportions that the humblest biological being, a virus, then upends this teetering edifice. But I prefer to think of this as a possible world-historical turning point towards the Iron Heel, equivalent in scope to the first primitive globalisation of mercantile capitalism, so well described (in triumphal tones we can no longer share) by the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848. It is quite remarkable that the two huge world centers of infection I know of so far, Hubei and Lombardy-cum-Veneto, are the meeting points of turbocapitalism (small and middling capitalists frenziedly competing at any cost, on pain of being bankrupt and gobbled up) and frenzied urbanisation with strong remnants of grasping primitive accumulation mentality (see on Wuhan, i.e. Hubei, <http://chuangcn.org/2020/02/social-contagion/>, and on capitalised wild food industry the Monthly Review article cited above).

If we add, as we must, to the four centuries of rising sway of capitalism up to 1917, 1st the defeat of the first world insurrection against it, the Leninist one, and 2nd the huge new technologies of control and destruction at the ruling classes' disposal, how long could one expect the Iron Heel to last? Probably until its collapse from bio-ecological factors. But the price would be many times lower if it happened through revolts by working people. We shall either organise or be ground down into a new slavery plus eco-catastrophe.

Thus, in the little interval left to us before a probable clampdown on any dissidence, including the internet, as the wise old query says: What Is To Be Done? Only a group can answer that, and I'd be happy to be its member if anybody organises it. In the meantime, let us start exchanging info on how to hinder the Iron and Teflon Heel. As student of literature, I can offer this first, very limited advice: read the young Karl MARX on "metabolism with nature", read OGAWA Yoko's *Memory Police*, Jodi DEAN's *Comrade*, and perhaps (there's no modesty facing death) SUVIN's *Communism, Poetry*.

One of the mottoes in my book is: "People for the most part (99 per cent of the bourgeoisie, 98 per cent of the liquidators, about 60–70 per cent of the Bolsheviks) don't know how to think, they only learn words by heart. They've learnt the word "underground." Firmly. They can repeat it. They know it by heart. // But how to change its forms in a new situation, how to learn and think anew for this purpose, this we do not understand." (V.I. Lenin, "Letter to Inessa Armand," 1913, transl. A. Rothstein) Read also Lenin, say the (wrongly titled) *Philosophical Notebooks* on Hegel, as a main intellectual resource.

In the final essay of my book, "Using Negativities: Brecht, Politics of Death", I worry at death, attempting to transcend personal reasons for doing so. This holds especially for the difficulty of dying well in capitalism. Written more than one year ago, I had no idea how soon this could become undeniable in all headlines about tens and hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people dying visibly or invisibly around all of us. This is a huge lesson for all thinking people. It is the *facies hippocratica* of the dying capitalocene. I cite Rimbaud:

...industrialists, rulers, senates:

Die quick! Power, justice, history: down with you!

This is owed to us.... Enough!

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... I'm there, I'm still there.

The obverse of this aporia (the *assez* vs. *j'y suis toujours*, that is, Enough! vs. I'm still there) is Thomas More's great coinage of utopia: the radically different good place

which is in our sensual experience not here, but must be cognised – today, on pain of extinction.

Who is the antagonist of mass misery and ugly mass death? Not the armies, not anal-retentive power-wielders, not corporate capitalism with its insane time-scheme of “big profit now”. Obviously, only the Creative Eros.

*/ Note: I cannot fail to point out that these “thots” had its source in e-mail discussions with and stimulations by (alphabetically) Babette Babich, Jodi Dean, Zorica Djergović-Joksimović, Nenad Jovanović, Lech Keller, Colleen Lanki, Vedran Lukačić, Patricia McManus, Tom Moylan, and Tamara Prošić, also by an indication from Joseph Ramsey on the mlg-ics blog. Tho I cannibalized some of their expressions, they are in no way to be held responsible for my conclusions.