Ten Aphorisms on Capitalism, Covid-19, and the Climate Crisis

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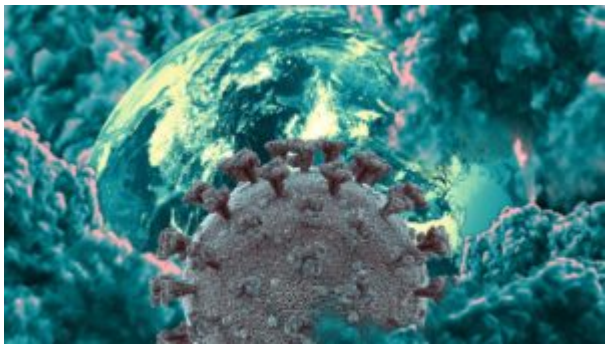

1. The end is also a continuation. Even as the coronavirus crisis cuts the feet out from under capitalism while exposing and embodying its horrors, capitalism finds its lifeline in further extraction. Not the extraction of value from workers or of oil from the earth, but of the political conditions of its own perpetuation. Capitalism relies on egalitarian public powers to legitimize exploitative private norms. Ideally, the public political sphere would be a place where those who create the social surplus—workers—could debate how it should be spent. Yet corporate bailouts such as the CARES Act—arranged by bought politicians and passed despite public opposition—ensure that actual control of that surplus remains within the private confines of the market. Political power is again siphoned out of the commons, and just when it is needed there the most.

2. The extent of capitalism's integration into daily life is also a measure of its self-dependence. It is well known that industrial agriculture, for example, is required to fully exploit labor since it produces cheap food that allows employers to keep wages down and still ensure that workers do not starve. Yet capitalism's internal dependence also extends to its climate-related externalities; cheap food can be cheap in part because capitalism doesn't have to include the methane produced by cows or the carbon sinks cleared for farmland on its balance sheets. This is what makes both Big Macs and melting ice caps not just unfortunate consequences of the system but structurally essential to it as well.

3. Climate change, in other words, is not something that capitalism is only indirectly responsible for. It is prefigured by capitalism as a logical end result of the latter's refusal to adequately pay the social costs of its private gains. The climate crisis—as something that is now beginning to affect those corporate balance sheets—is, as Jason W. Moore has written, the reality of those unpaid costs finally coming due. The coronavirus crisis represents a similar reality. Like climate change, it was largely caused by capitalism—industrial agriculture-induced habitat loss spreading disease, undersupplied for-profit hospitals leaving patients vulnerable. But it is also contributing to capitalism's diminishing returns by making it harder to reproduce the work force, maintain supply chains, and ensure effective demand for products and services. This is why, despite the fact that the COVID-19 crisis was enabled in part by climate change, it can also be seen as a metaphor for it.

4. The most common image of capitalism in the popular imagination—factory workers toiling away for a pittance, factory owners reaping the rewards—does as much to conceal as reveal the true extent of capitalism's horrors. What is not shown in these images is what capitalism itself disavows: the deeper yet equally essential forms of exploitation that it can't acknowledge because the theft involved is outright rather than merely contractual (waged workers "agreeing" to be underpaid, etc.). These include the unpaid care work of (largely) women, essential to reproducing the "official" paid workforce; the securing of laws that ensure the private economic control of the public surplus; the pillaging of raw materials from non-human nature; and the entire history of what Marx called primitive accumulation— the seizure of land through enclosures, the seizure of human labor in colonial servitude—upon which present-day capitalism continues to build its gated palaces. To paraphrase Moore, behind the textile workers of Manchester lay the cotton pickers of Mississippi.

5. Crises like COVID-19 and the disasters associated with climate change will only occur more frequently throughout the century. From the perspective of capitalism, which is inherently crisis-prone precisely because it doesn't adequately pay for the work it demands, nothing about this should be surprising. It is the predictable result of a system whose ability to exploit new frontiers is rapidly closing in part because the costs that it could formerly externalize (carbon in the atmosphere, species displacement) are now folding back to affect the system itself. The repressed has returned.

6. Yet this is not to endorse the Malthusian claim that we are the virus and that COVID-19 and climate change are both here to cleanse the earth of humans, which are the real problem. Assigning agency and intent in this undialectical way to non-human nature is more a projection of misplaced self-loathing than it is a clarifying act. If we do concede that the virus and climate change have something to say about human hubris, it is only the hubris of those humans who knowingly perpetuate the violence of capital and the continued profit-driven enclosure of the earth.

7. Climate should not be thought of as something separate from capital but as something always already internalized by it; crop choices and diets, for example, are entirely contingent on long-term weather conditions that we tend to take for granted. To this extent, we might say that we have immunity to the so-called normal climate, just as we have immunity to many diseases, which are invisible to us as such but that also exist as things folded into capital in this way. What we call the adaptation to new diseases and new climates is also the cultural and political internalization of them. What we call "nature" is our ideological way of forgetting this.

8. The enmeshment of capitalism, climate, and disease is nothing new. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a nascent capitalism brought colonizers to the Americas, who brought disease to the indigenous population, whose deaths contributed indirectly to a changed climate that affected the entire globe. In the 150 years after Columbus's arrival, disease and colonial violence killed so many indigenous people—95% by recent estimates—that vast swaths of land re-greened to become a carbon sink, contributing to a period of global cooling that drastically affected agricultural yields. Today, we can see the variables as rearranged: green habitat has been cleared for the sake of capital-driven agriculture, which, along with changing the temperature of the planet, is enabling the propagation of disease. Yet the only meaningful

entry point into these webs of interdependence is capitalism itself, whose compulsion to seek out and exploit new frontiers is what sets these processes in motion.

9. COVID-19 is a biological wildfire that, even with much of the connective underbrush cleared, has proven difficult to contain. And just as a spark matters less than the drought that makes it a blaze, so does disease matter less than the habitat loss and species displacements that put it in proximity to humans. Capital-driven climate change is responsible for this drought and this displacement. But if a blaze mostly propagates radially from a single node, COVID-19 radiates from multiple nodes along the vectors of globalization as victims fly the flames to one another. From there, it propagates along the contours of political disenfranchisement—the kindling of crowds and immobility found in our prisons, warehouses, and slums.

10. The climate crisis, and by extension, the COVID-19 crisis, is a prolonged act of violence perpetrated on the 99% by capitalism's accumulation for accumulation's sake. This is not a democratic crisis; it is largely workers being thrown to the wolves. But if there is hope here, it is in the fact that these crises are also Earthly insurrections of a sort, provoked by decades if not centuries of ecological exploitation, in which the disenfranchised multitude can find perverse inspiration for reclaiming their own share of what is owed. This would be to align the vectors of planetary and public revolt in a way that acknowledged capitalism's assaults on human and non-human nature alike. It would also emphasize the connectivity of labor and other fights at their most provincial with ecological struggle at its most universal and existential. Only on these ecosocialist grounds will we be able to understand and adequately fend off the coming catastrophe.