Where to Begin? Growing Seeds of Liberation in a World Torn Asunder

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It never fails that, at momentous world historic turning points, it is very difficult to tell the difference between two types of twilight—whether one is first plunging into utter darkness or whether one has reached the end of a long night and is just at the moment before the dawn of a new day. In either case, the challenge to find the meaning—what Hegel called "the undefined foreboding of something unknown"—becomes a compulsion to dig for new beginnings, for a philosophy that would try to answer the question, "where to begin"?

—Raya Dunayevskaya, "Why Hegel's *Phenomenology*? Why Now?" (May 1987)

I.

The shock that has been delivered to global politics and economics by the spread of the coronavirus clearly places us on the edge of a precipice. The economic "recovery" that was touted only months ago in the U.S. and elsewhere has been rendered hollow by a contraction in the global economy greater than in a century, while the political instability that has defined world politics for the last decade is becoming increasingly acute. The Chinese government's effort to conceal the extent of the virus is matched only by the willful ignorance and inhumanity of the Trump administration, which has shown itself to be more intent on blaming "foreigners"—and everyone but itself—for the illness than providing adequate testing and treatment. The breakdown in commerce, schooling, international travel and social interaction of all kinds in the face of efforts to contain the contagion may prove to be temporary expedients, but they also reveal the fragility of the social and human connections that are supposed to bind us together.

A striking sign of this is the lack of international coordination in combating the pandemic, despite the fact that fifteen years ago the World Health Organization (WHO) revised its International Health Regulations by creating a series of regulations aimed at responding to exactly the kind of pandemic now facing us. Although almost every country in the world signed onto the new regulations, few have followed them—including the U.S., which ignored the requirement to inform the WHO before imposing quarantines and travel bans. The "globally interconnected world" promised by neoliberal capitalism is increasingly illusory.

Most importantly, the pandemic is expanding the divide between the "two worlds" *within* each country, between rulers and ruled, haves and have-nots, the privileged and the dispossessed. Tens of millions who have lost their jobs due to quarantines and physical distancing are without the means to pay rent, purchase food, or obtain the healthcare needed to deal the crisis. In the U.S., the most vulnerable include undocumented immigrants, among them two-and-a-half million agricultural laborers, who are denied access to government assistance; prisoners, whose infection rates are

skyrocketing; and those confined to nursing homes and assisted living facilities. The pandemic is amplifying not only the class but also *racial* divide that has long defined capitalist societies; 70% of those who have so far died from COVID-19 in Chicago are African American.

U.S. healthcare workers are being subjected to serious risks—both medical and *social*. Utah's largest medical provider, Intermountain Health Care, is *cutting* salaries of doctors and nurses on grounds that it needs "flexibility" in dealing with the crisis. The corporate bottom line always matters more than human life. Meanwhile, hundreds of billions of dollars have been pumped into international financial markets by the Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank to aid corporations that spent the last decade handsomely rewarding their shareholders with stock buybacks. To give but one of many such examples, thousands of workers at airports on the East Coast were told without warning by their employer, OTG, that they were being terminated on the spot in March without severance pay and had to leave the premises immediately. Some had worked for OTG for thirty years. When the workers complained of their callous mistreatment, they were told to ask for assistance from local governments. Yet this very same OTG will be on the receiving end of billions of dollars now being doled out by the federal government's $2 trillion-plus "economic stabilization plan" that became law on March 26.

That plan does provide for an extension of unemployment benefits and a modest cash payment of $1,200 for individuals making less than $75,000 a year. But the vast bulk of the money will be used to enable the Federal Reserve to buy up U.S. Treasury and other bonds as a way to prevent a collapse of the international financial system. This sounds like a repeat of 2007-2008, when trillions were spent propping up the banks while virtually nothing was done for homeowners facing foreclosure and workers being laid off. Yet the current bailout is in many respects even more egregious, since "The Fed will effectively lend money directly to large corporations, *something it has never done before*."[1]

Meanwhile, Trump has been reluctant to issue *national* guidelines requiring social distancing—the only known way of controlling the spread of the virus—since he apparently views the careening stock market as a greater danger than tens of thousands of deaths. Small wonder that on February 10, almost a month after the first case of coronavirus was reported in the U.S., he submitted a 2021 budget that called for a $693 million *reduction* in funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—a cut of 9%. Clearly, the crisis surrounding the coronavirus has laid bare the social contradictions that define American and *world* capitalism.

This crisis is not only political and economic, but also *ideological*. And it impacts leftists as well. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, seen by some as a successor to Michel Foucault, recently criticized what he calls "the frenetic, irrational and entirely unfounded emergency measures adopted against an alleged epidemic of coronavirus." He asks, "Why do the media and the authorities do their utmost to spread a state of panic, thus provoking an authentic state of exception with serious limitations on movement and a suspension of daily life in entire regions?" He condemns the measures to combat the virus as "once again manifesting the tendency to use a state of exception as a normal paradigm for government…the disproportionate reaction to something not too different from the normal flus that affect us every year is quite blatant. It is almost as if with terrorism exhausted as a cause for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic offered the ideal pretext for scaling them up beyond any limitation."[2] Trump would have us die for the sake of the stock market; Agamben would so do for the sale of his theory of "the state of exemption." Such is the ideological pollution of our times.

II.

Of course, the roots of our current crisis long predate the coronavirus. Thrown into disarray by the 2008 global financial meltdown, neoliberalism is increasingly being disavowed around the world—including by some of the agents of capital, who have decided to drop the veneer of "democracy" and "civil society" by openly embracing xenophobic nationalism, protectionism, and unabashed authoritarianism. This is seen from the rise of the neo-fascist Right in Europe and the fascistic policies of Modi in India, to Russia's Putin, Turkey's Erdogan, and China's Xi Jinping's grab for permanent one-man rule and the racist and misogynist rule of Brazil's Bolsonaro. The more social relations become indirect and frayed by capitalist alienation, the greater is the drive by state powers to impose direct social control over recalcitrant parts of the populace. This is becoming even further accentuated by rulers worldwide who are using the restrictions needed to contain COVID-19 to further cement unilateral, authoritarian rule—by closing borders, increasing government surveillance, restricting free expression, etc.

Yet as dire as all this is, we must not lose sight of the fact that the past year has experienced a remarkable upsurge in mass protests and revolts. They include spontaneous movements in Sudan, Algeria, and Lebanon, the first of which brought down its government; large protests and strikes against economic austerity in France, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Iran, Iraq, Zimbabwe, and Indonesia; and a massive pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong that involved up to two million at a time. The movement in Chile typifies what characterizes many of them. It began with high school students jumping turnstiles in response to a hike in subway fares, and was soon followed by hundreds of thousands pouring into the streets to support them. When President Sebastian Piñera tried to suppress the protests, people responded by creating citizen assemblies. Dozens of these decentralized, highly democratic forums have sprung up in Santiago and elsewhere in the country, involving men and women, workers and the unemployed, gays and straights, Mapuche Indians as well as immigrants from Brazil, Haiti, and elsewhere. They have maintained these assemblies for months in pressing for a fundamental change of society.

One report stated, "Just as during Argentina's crisis in 2001, neighbors are meeting to comment about their reality and take concrete measures against the repressive model" embodied by the government. One participant in the assemblies explained the moment as follows: "We are living a total break with the everyday life to which we were subjected. That's why the atmosphere is very special, invigorating and very joyful. We are recovering a sense of humanity from the rebellion, the appropriation of spaces in our communities."[3] Identical sentiments can be heard from many other movements of the past year. What drives them is anxiety over mounting personal debt, growing social inequality, environmental destruction, and a sense that everyday life is losing any connection to a common space in which to share ideas and values. As Carne Ross, the author of *The Leaderless Revolution: How Ordinary People Will Take Power and Change Politics in the 21st Century*, states, these revolts "all represent a crisis of agency—of people who feel unrepresented. For that reason, philosophically, they tend to not be top-down movements. If people want their own voice, they're not happy if someone stands up and says they represent you. 'We represent ourselves' is a common feature of these protests."[4]

Virtually all of these struggles have been halted for now by the restrictions imposed to stem the spread of the coronavirus. But that does not mean they are ancient history. This crisis is so rapidly tearing the veil from illusions that capitalism is a viable system that it is implausible to believe that things will return to "normal" once the epidemic recede. Consciousness of the need to supplant this system by a totally different one is bound to grow and develop, for which the struggles and movements of the past year have already planted many seeds.

No such mass revolts have occurred recently in the U.S., although the same seeds of radical self-

organized liberation have grown within numerous grassroots movements, from Standing Rock to tenant organizing and mutual-aid during the COVID-19 crisis. Yet something no less important has emerged—growing interest, especially among youth, in the idea of socialism. The roots of this remarkable burst of interest lie in the Occupy Movement of 2011, but it gained a powerful impetus with the presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders. More people in the U.S. today openly identify with socialism than in many decades. To be sure, much of this interest is superficial and undeveloped; when it comes to Sanders, it is largely defined by the call for a "New Deal Workers' Bill of Rights" that Roosevelt championed in his last inaugural address in 1944.[5] But that is not the crucial issue. The crucial issue is that the idea of socialism is at least becoming part of public discourse, which makes it possible to develop an open, ongoing discussion and debate that takes the idea further than presently articulated.

This was precisely the development that scared the Democratic Party establishment into rallying around Biden—one of the weakest candidates in the field and much further to the Right than not only Sanders but also Elizabeth Warren. Nothing is more alarming for those who imagine that the neoliberal order that dominated the last 40 years can readily be restored than the growing attraction of socialist ideas. At the same time, the primaries show that there is a long way to go before even the moderate socialism of Sanders is widely accepted, as seen in the lack of a high turnout for him, especially among women and Black voters—due at least in part to Sanders' lack of a sufficiently close engagement with those sectors.

Nevertheless, despite his limitations, Sanders won a plurality of the under-35 vote in *every* demographic—Black, Latinx and white, women and men, working class and middle class. This did not translate into many primary victories, largely because there wasn't a high turnout of young voters and the over-50 vote went overwhelmingly for Biden. But even the low turnout among youth is reflective in some cases of a radicalized social consciousness: as Deonte Washington, a Black youth who served 18 months in Florida (including part in solitary confinement)—and then had his voting rights restored by the 2018 referendum—put it, "I'm not going to vote, I don't care about this government and this government doesn't care about me."[6]

Revolutionary opponents of capitalism clearly have their work cut out for them. But as the young Marx wrote, we do not confront today's realities "in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it *has to* acquire, even if it does not want to."[7]

Marxist-Humanism contains critical historical and theoretical resources that can illuminate both the logic of capital and the content of a socialist alternative that transcends the failed variants which dominated in the past. Integral to this is its view that racism and sexism are not secondary features of class society but are integral to capitalism's ability to reproduce itself in ever more nefarious forms.

III.

The effort to develop an alternative to capitalism always begins with the question, what is the *specific* nature of capitalism as it presents to us most immediately *today*?

The irrational exuberance with which Trump touted the economic "recovery" prior to the coronavirus crisis was expressed in a speech on December 16, 2017 which stated, "The economy

now has hit 3% [growth per year]. Nobody thought we'd be anywhere close. I think we can go to 4, 5, and maybe even 6%." Yet as Michael Roberts writes, "Trump's boast turned to dust in 2019. U.S. GDP grew by 2.3% in 2019, well below President Trump's promise of 3% and more growth. The most recent GDP number proved that the tax cuts championed by Trump had no sustained impact on U.S. growth… Actually, cumulative growth under Trump has been lower than under both Obama and Bush Jr."[8]

The lack of significant improvement in living standards helps explain the 2019 strikes at General Motors, as well as the Chicago and Los Angeles teachers strikes that won strong community support—which focused not only on stagnant wages, but also conditions of labor and the need for better services for students. The economic growth that occurred prior to COVID-19 clearly was insufficient to reverse growing social inequality. According to recent report by OXFAM, "The world's richest 1% have more than twice as much wealth as 6.9 billion people. Nearly half of the world's population—3.4 billion people—is living on less than $5.50 a day. Every year, 100 million people worldwide are pushed into poverty because they have to pay out-of-pocket for healthcare. Today 258 million children—1 out of every 5—will not be allowed to go to school. Globally, women earn 24% less than men and own 50% less wealth."[9]

Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* and *Capital and Ideology* confirm this tendency, but a confirmation is not an explanation. To explain it, we have to turn to the mechanism of capitalist production. Profit is generated in the process of production through the creation of surplus value, which must be realized in money. In order to realize more profit, the production process must grow, and this cannot happen unless investment grows. However, long before the coronavirus capital investment was falling in the U.S. and elsewhere. The reason is not "changes in interest rates" or in "business confidence," as many mainstream economists argue. Those are usually the consequence, not the cause of, low demand. The fundamental cause is profitability and the movement of corporate profits. Evidence for that is in abundance. As Roberts writes, "the U.S. rate of profit on productive capital remains well below where it was in the late 1990s. It was hardly boosted by the depreciation of assets in the 2008-2009 recession." This also applies to real GDP growth. "Growth is much lower than Trump hoped for because businesses have not invested productively but used the extra cash from tax cuts to pay larger dividends to shareholders; or buy back their own shares to boost the price; or to shift profits abroad into tax havens. They have not invested as much in new structures, equipment etc. in the U.S. because the profitability of such investments is still too low historically; and especially relative to investment in the 'fictitious capital' of the stock and bond markets, where prices have reached all-time highs."[10] Non-financial sector profits have fallen 25% since 2014! Although Trump's corporate tax cuts boosted post-tax profits, pre-tax profits continue to fall.

Low profitability in productive investments and the flight to fictitious capital is a global phenomenon. As Angela Klein writes, the global economic situation is akin to "dancing atop the volcano." She adds, "anything can happen in the current situation of declining production [in terms of] world trade and the financial markets; all it takes is a spark for the hut to burn again. This can easily be triggered by political decisions." Or by a virus? She writes, "The main problem is: there are no reserves left. This is all the more so since fundamental problems that led to the 2008 financial crisis have not been solved: global debt has reached a historic high—namely $250 trillion, which is three times as much as is produced in the world; according to the IMF, corporate debt, fueled by low interest rate policies, is higher than ever and surpasses the peaks of 2008-2009, 2001 and 1990, all of which were accompanied by recessions. The debts are held in the form of bonds on the capital market. If they have to be repaid at a higher interest rate in coming years, it will be expensive."[11]

This afflicts even the most "successful" capitalist enterprises, such as Amazon and Uber, which actually have yet to earn significant profits but get those with excess cash to throw money at them

with promises of future rates of return. As Ross Douthat put it, “It has done all this using the awesome power of free money, building a company that would collapse into bankruptcy if that money were withdrawn…The dearth of corporate investment also means that the steady climb of the stock market has boosted the wealth of a rentier class—basically, already rich investors getting richer off of dividends—rather than reflecting rising prosperity in general.”[12] In a word, stagnation rules the day. This did not result from the coronavirus; that was instead its proximate cause. Capitalism has been producing a lot of rotten fruit that was just waiting to fall.

As a result, a sizeable section of the global ruling class is losing confidence that it can oversee a substantial improvement in the productive power of capital. Faced with internal barriers to increasing the size and rate of growth of capital accumulation, the elites are increasingly interested in looting the system of its assets so as to line their pockets before the next deluge. This is starkly expressed by such personages as Israel’s Netanyahu, Britain’s Boris Johnson, Brazil’s Bolsonaro, and Trump. The lines that separate personal acquisitiveness from government have long been fuzzy, but at no time are they being erased at such a prodigious pace by an array of narcissistic politicians that are often labeled “rightwing populists.”

Since today’s growing inequality manifests what Marx called the law of the tendential fall of the rate of profit, the only solution is to create a human society that ends production based on value and surplus value. For that reason, the notion shared by both Piketty and socialists who focus on *redistributing* value can, at best, only bring some temporary improvement in the living conditions of working people but cannot end exploitation, alienation and dehumanization.

IV.

Creating a new society requires masses of people aspiring to create one, which involves first of all listening to and learning from new developments coming from below. We are certainly not without such developments in the recent period.

The Middle East and North Africa have entered a new era in comparison with even a couple of years ago. As the organizers of a recent forum on “The Second Arab Spring” wrote, “in December 2018, a new uprising in Sudan inaugurated what has taken in 2019 the shape of a second revolutionary shockwave engulfing Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon, along with an outburst in Iran and tremors in Egypt. The second wave confirmed that the Arab Spring was but the first ‘season’ in a long-term revolutionary process.”[13] Contrast this to even a couple years ago, when Egypt’s military and the Saudi monarchy were riding high.

In Algeria, the Hirak movement immobilized the country for over a year, also bringing millions onto the streets. The Hirak put the regime on the defensive, but without achieving any major victories up to now. By the fall of 2019, the mass revolt had spread to Iraq and Lebanon, though not on the scale of Sudan or Algeria, with similar results to those in Algeria. Further east, Iran experienced a serious mass revolt in late 2019, which was ruthlessly repressed, after which the Trump administration threw the regime a lifeline by its illegal and reckless assassination of the popular military leader Qasem Soleimani.

A progressive development that inspired leftwing movements worldwide concerns the Kurdish forces of the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The gender equality in the Kurdish forces, where women could be officers in mixed-gender units, not only helped defeat ISIS and laid the ground for the creation for the Kurdish Rojava enclave, but also freed thousands of Yazidi women from enslavement by ISIS at a time when the rest of the world stood by and did nothing. In their battle against ISIS,

the YPG was backed by limited air support from U.S. forces. This gave Rojava and the Kurds a degree of protection from the Turkish regime, which views all struggles for Kurdish autonomy as "terrorism." Yet Trump allowed Erdogan to send in troops to push the Kurds out of much of Rojava.

Although the least discussed, Sudan experienced a most notable revolt with the overthrow Omar al-Bashir, in power since 1989. Bashir is now in prison, some of the most egregious forms of state oppression of women in the name of religion have stopped, and negotiations are underway with the Darfuris and other oppressed African minorities. Given its location at the southern borders of the Arab world, Sudan's revolt also resonated with unrest outside the Arab world, especially with the ferment in neighboring Ethiopia, underway for several years. Since the Bashir regime combined authoritarian Islamism with nationalist military rule, both military nationalism and Islamism emerged totally discredited, unlike in Egypt after 2011. A space for the left may have opened up. But at the same time, the new civilian leaders, who enjoy considerable popular support, have in no way crossed beyond the horizons of neoliberal capitalism, let alone capitalism itself. This is the agenda of a self-limiting revolution, one that stops at the political sphere. Positive change in the conditions of life and labor will occur only with the development of a radical class politics independent of the current civilian leadership, let alone the holdovers from Bashir who still control a major part of the state.

We have also witnessed social ferment in Europe, especially in France. A massive and persistent strike wave halted transport and many other state functions for nearly two months in December and January. Hundreds of thousands shut down their workplaces and joined street demonstrations week after week in the face of the neoliberal Macron government's proposal to cut pensions. France has one of the highest levels of life expectancy in the world, in large part because of the hard-fought struggles by working people after the 1944 liberation from Nazi occupation to make sure that many high-stress jobs allowed for earlier retirement without severe poverty, along with universal healthcare. The mass workers struggle of 2019-20 was preceded the year before by the militant Yellow Vests movement in more rural parts of the country, some of whose energies spilled into the recent strikes. 2019-20 has led in turn to the creation of militant leftwing networks not only among the youth, but also among transport workers. For now, the strike wave of 2019-20 has been defeated in the sense that the government may have outlasted them and has enacted its retrogressive new pension plan. Two possible reasons for this defeat stand out: One is that organized labor has not been able to tap into the vast reservoir of class and anti-racist anger that permeates the African and Arab communities in the big urban areas. A second is that French labor was left to struggle alone, with no other Europeans joining in with mass labor struggles of their own. However, in Ireland, a different sort of opening occurred in February, when the left-of-center Sinn Fein Party came out about even with the two big conservative parties, a breakthrough based upon anger over housing and medical costs.

The case of India is especially significant, because the Modi government has moved in an openly fascist direction and the resistance movement has been so massive and succeeded in breaking down some religious and caste divisions among the oppressed classes. In the past year, Modi removed all autonomy from Kashmir and placed it under lockdown; enacted an immigration law that excludes Muslims, who are 14% of the population; and developed a draconian law that would remove tens of millions from the citizenship rolls, mostly Muslims and members of the poorest and most oppressed parts of the working classes. At the same time, the resistance of Indian women, workers, students and intellectuals, and elements of the Muslim community has reached proportions not seen in decades. One of the most important actions was the occupation since December 16 of a major road in New Delhi's Shaheen Bagh neighborhood by women from the local Muslim community, who have received support from many sectors of the population. Significantly, they were joined by the young Dalit leader Chandrashekhar Azad, who underlined, "This is not only a political agitation" but one

that gets to the core of what India will be as a country. Elderly Muslim women stood for weeks in the cold at the frontlines of the Shaheen Bagh occupation, with one of them declaring: “Let the police come, let them use their lathis [long batons], we will not budge until we have obtained justice.”[14]

As our Indian comrades wrote recently, in the face of harsh repression against the protesters, “it is Muslim women who are at the forefront of the protests. They have not only shown extraordinary courage to come out of their houses challenging the extremely patriarchal society to which they belong, but have also shown enough maturity to continue their protest tenaciously as well as peacefully in spite of several provocations. As a consequence, they have succeeded in gaining support from different quarters of society besides students. One shining example is opening of Langars (free kitchens) for the protesting women by poor Sikh peasants from around Delhi… The unique feature of these protests lies in the fact that they are neither led by any political party nor by any charismatic leader but by the collective leadership of the women and students. Similar protests are being held at several other places of Delhi along with the protests at Calcutta, Lucknow, Patna, Gaya, Bhopal, Raipur, Nagpur, Allahabad, Bombay, Jaipur, Chennai and countless other cities as well as villages.”[15] Modi’s total ban on all public gatherings and transport at the end of March is surely seen by him as a way to put an end to all that, but anger at the government’s complete mismanagement of the coronavirus, which it initially ignored for months, may lead to a different result.

Meanwhile, the global environmental movement is surely not going away. Although it includes tendencies from anti-humanists who advocate drastically reducing the number of people on the planet to those who argue for a green capitalism, a deepening radicalization within it is evident. For example, on her recent trip to the U.S., 17-year old climate activist Greta Thunberg and her friends spoke with Native American activists at the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North and South Dakota to get inspiration for how a society without emissions could be organized. In the talk delivered to the UN Climate Summit in New York, just after her trip to Standing Rock, she said, “You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying; entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

For many, the Trump presidency is not only evidence of a failed democracy but also a frightening indication that the evils we knew existed in the U.S. would intensify and become acceptable. This has led to an increase in hate crimes, misogyny, displays of white supremacy (as in the horrific scenes in Charlottesville), nationalist policies such as the hyper-persecution of the undocumented, Muslim travel bans, and the separation and caging of families seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border.[16] The separation of migrant children from their parents and the conditions under which they were jailed is an especially disturbing display of inhumanity that stands out even amidst a sea of unconscionable acts of violence. It shows once more that some forms of inhumanity cannot be justified for any reason and bring people together to fight across class, gender, race, and other markers of difference.

A similar example is the growing indignation and resistance of women. The misogyny evidenced by Trump during his campaign led to the Women’s March, which brought women across the country in the hundreds of thousands and was supported by women across the world. In addition, the #MeToo movement gained significant appeal, beginning with the drive to end college rapes, followed by the move to denounce sexual assault and harassment in the workplace and the conviction of powerful, high-profile rapists such as Harvey Weinstein. Yet an important concern that continues to haunt these women’s movements is the lack of attention and incorporation of these issues as they affect women of color.[17] For example, the contradictions that sometimes come between the interests of white women and women of color were evidenced in the Women’s March. Originally organized by

Black women, it was subsequently taken up and popularized by white women who proceeded to seek assistance and support of the police to maintain safety and "order." For women of color these images remind us of the very different ways in which the police interact with us.[18] Similar problems persisted in the #MeToo movement, which was initially organized by Tarana Burke, a Black woman, seeking to develop a project of healing for Women of Color. With little initial attention to this foundation, #MeToo was appropriated by predominantly white professional women and public figures. While there is no doubt that women publicly "coming out" to curtail the power of men who use their status, money, and positions to intimidate, harass, and assault women is not only commendable but necessary to challenge existing patriarchal relations, this does not change the fact that it was done without initial acknowledgment of Burke. Nor did they do enough to seek out the voices and insights – or *Reason*—of women of color or working-class women.

V.

Although a complete breakdown of the global economic and political order cannot be ruled out today, that does not mean a new society will arise to take its place. The truly critical question is this: Once the COVID-19 pandemic recedes, will the social distancing, break-down in fac-to-face communication, and increased atomization that define the current reality become the new norm that defines the future? Or will movements arise that put an end to the abstract and indirect character of human relations under capitalism? For a positive outcome to take place, the system has to be *brought down*, through a conscious *movement* of masses of people. Socialism is the first form of society that arises from the conscious, purposeful activity of living *subjects* of revolution. It is not brought into existence by some blind force operating behind people's backs.

The *objective*, material condition for socialism remains the inherent non-viability of capitalism; the *subjective*, material condition for socialism is the struggles of masses of people against racism, sexism, class domination, and environmental destruction—of which many new manifestations are bound to emerge. But there is also an *immaterial* condition for socialism—the availability of a cogent conception of what life can be like without the domination of capital. *Ideas matter*; there can be no forward movement to freedom without them. And ideas are as immanent in the historical process as any material factor, as we can see by the unexpected resurgence of interest in socialism in the capitalist-imperialist heartland, the U.S. This provides a vital foundation for Marxist-Humanists to engage in today's discussions of socialism, as part of the effort to develop a viable alternative to capitalism that transcends the dead-ends of the past. To this end, we are working to publish a new edition of Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*.

In doing so, it is vital to pay heed to Marx's notion that "the transcendence of self- alienation follows the course of self- alienation." It is impossible to get to the absolute like a shot out of a pistol. Subjects of revolution first come to consciousness by battling the most immediate forms of oppression facing them. One of the most important of these is today's glaring social inequalities, which explains why the default option for most radical theoreticians remains advocating one or another form of "fairly" redistributing value. This should not be simply dismissed out of hand, since there *is* a need for a thoroughgoing redistribution of wealth. At issue is whether it can be achieved and sustained so long as we remain prisoners of a system based on augmenting value, or wealth in monetary form, as an end in itself.

As Martin Hägglund puts it in *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, "It does not make much sense to argue that the problem is capitalism and at the same time argue that the solution is the redistribution of capital wealth. Yet this argument is routinely made on the Left today. The form of the argument is a contradiction in terms: it asserts that the problem is capitalism and that the

solution is capitalism. The contradictory form of the argument is covered over by a sleight of hand, whereby capitalism is tacitly defined as neoliberalism and redistribution is tacitly defined as an alternative to capitalism…Redistributive reforms can certainly be a helpful *means* for political change under capitalism. But even in order to understand the substantial challenges that our redistributive reforms will encounter…we need to grasp the contradictions that are inherent in the capitalist production of wealth."[19]

Such a perspective is not utopian, since many in today's movements oppose all sorts of economic inequality without stopping there, since they aim to recover a sense of humanity from the rebellion, the appropriation of spaces in their communities. New organizational forms have arisen that create community and shared responsibility in the face of an increasingly atomized and alienated world. In doing so, they are reaching to reconnect with the essence of what it means to be human—the capacity for conscious, purposeful, *collectively driven* activity.

For decades an assortment of theorists of the postmodern mode have held that separation and loss of unity is to be celebrated. *Différance* was upheld in opposition to abstract universals imposed by racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes and structures. But lost sight of in this was the notion of a shared human project, without which any of our other projects, be they around class, race, or gender, ultimately fail to realize their potential. Marx referred to this as a "positive humanism"; Frantz Fanon called it a "new humanism." The quest for a *new* humanism continues to show itself today, even if many remain under the ideological thrall of the celebration of difference over universality. We must distinguish the abstract, *oppressive* universals that *claim* to be emancipatory (such as liberalism) from the *concrete universalism* expressive of what Marx called our *species-being*. To be sure, many claims to "universality" continue to exclude those who do not fit the default model of a white, male-dominated world. But we can hardly challenge the increasingly fragmented and alienated character of modern life by assuming away the need to recapture the *communal*. Only then can what Marx called "the realm of free individuality" arise. Our tasks center on articulating and developing a conception of new human relations opposed to the false universals of capitalism-racism-patriarchy. This is just as important as theorizing the transcendence of the capitalist law of value; in fact, one depends upon the other.

Footnotes

[1] Jeanna Smialek, "The Fed Plans to Do Whatever It Takes, and More than It Ever Has," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2020, pp. B4-5.

[2] Giorgio Agamben, "The Invention of an Epidemic," in *Quodlibet,* Feb. 26, 2020 (https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia).

[3] Quoted in Juan Manuel Boccacci, "Citizen Assemblies Are Challenging the Neoliberal Model in Chile," *Orinoco Tribune*, Feb. 3, 2020.

[4] Robin Wright, "The Story of 2019: Protests in Every Corner of the Globe," *The New Yorker*, Dec. 30, 2019.

[5] Sanders addresses his debt to FDR's speech in "What Democratic Socialism Means Today," in *An Inheritance for Our Times: The Principles and Politics of Democratic Socialism*, edited by Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker and Michael J. Thompson (New York and London: OR Books, 2020).

[6] Richard Casey, "Does Florida Really Want Ex-Felons to Vote?" in *The New York Times*, March 17, 2020.

[7] Karl Marx, “Letter to Arnold Ruge” (September 1843), in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 144.

[8] Michael Roberts, https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2020/02/04/trumps-trickle-dries-up/

[9] https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/issues/extreme-inequality-and-essential-services.

[10] Roberts, https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2020/02/04/trumps-trickle-dries-up.

[11] See Angela Klein, *Sozialistische Zeitung*, No. 4, 2019.

[12] Ross Douthat, “The Age of Decadence,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 9, 2020.

[13] See “Special Panel Event: The Second Arab Spring: Seasons of Revolution, University of London,” featuring Janan Aljabiri (Iraq), Rima Majed (Lebanon), and Gilbert Achcar (SOAS University of London) (https://www.soas.ac.uk/development/events/devstudseminars/21jan2020-special-panel-event-the-second-arab-spring-seasons-of-revolution.html).

[14] Quoted in *Le Monde*, January 19, 2020.

[15] https://imhojournal.org/articles/citizenship-amendment-act-caa-and-national-register-for-citizens-nrc-are-violent-attacks-against-the-working-and-oppressed-masses-of-india/

[16] Monzó, L.D. & McLaren, P. “Red love: Toward racial, economic and social justice,” *Truthout*, Dec. 18, 2017 (http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/28072-red-love-toward-racial-economic-and-social-justice)

[17] “Women of Color Assess the Impact of The Women’s March,” *Here & Now,* March 24, 2017 (https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2017/01/24/women-of-color-march).

[18] Chen, Tanya. “People Have Strong Feelings About Cops High-Fiving People in the Women’s March in Atlanta,” *BuzzFeed News*, Jan. 23, 2017 (https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tanyachen/cops-highfived-womens-marchers).

[19] Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon, 2020), p. 383.

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