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THE ABSENT CAUSE: TIME, WORK AND VALUE IN THE AGE OF CORONAVIRUS

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Making ‘good use’ of Covid-19 is without a doubt illusory, not to mention offensive for those who – as always the weakest social groups – die, suffer and are now preparing to face a devastating economic recession. However, the virus provides us with an increasingly rare object: a *time* at least partially freed from the conformist hyperactivity that binds us to our world. Suddenly it becomes possible, even inevitable, to escape the imperatives that regulate our lives. The fixity of the space in which we are confined is offset by a temporality somewhat liberated from the ideological regimes of compulsive behaviour typical of post-industrial turbo-capitalism. Whether we like it or not, we are forced to stop and listen to the silence of a world that, at least for now, no longer belongs to us.

The jamming of this immense assembly-line that globalized capitalism is, can open up a small tear in the ideological blanket, which makes us all complicit in a reproductive mechanism grown toxic. The current regime of self-isolation shows us how passive we are not so much in our seclusion, but in our feverish participation in a socio-economic narrative heading swiftly towards its own collapse. In other words, the virus conjures up the fantasy of our potential release from *the obligation to enjoy*, which is always *the obligation to enjoy on behalf of capital*. Reflecting on the trauma of Covid-19 means trying to emancipate our existence from those forms of perverse ideological enjoyment through which we subject ourselves to the dogma of productivism. Our political elites – whether by dusting off (not so) old eugenic solutions or through the bazooka of central banks – are now desperate to hide the systemic contradiction that the pandemic did not cause but certainly accelerated. Today, however, we have an unprecedented opportunity to imagine a more humane future *beyond* the logic of profit.

Contra Marx, Walter Benjamin wrote that revolutions are not necessarily “the locomotive of world history”. Rather, they are “an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.”^[1] If the main concern of our politicians today is to restart the global productive locomotive, the current deadlock at least relieves us from the superegoic pressure to participate at all costs. Anyone who approaches capitalism critically – and can afford to do so in these dramatic days – should not miss the chance for a reflection on what is at stake in societies held in check by a virus that has been born from the womb of what is widely regarded as the most efficient economic system we can think of. In what follows, I will attempt to correlate our current state of ontological

suspension with the logic of a mode of production that is approaching its expiration date. Arguably, the virus is revealing not so much the sinister intentions of biopolitical (totalitarian control of human lives) or financial (neoliberal greed) regimes, but none other than the void around which the increasingly worn-out belt of the capitalist dialectic spins.

First of all, we cannot limit ourselves to thinking that neoliberalism, as it has affirmed itself over the last forty years, is the aberrant deviation of a fundamentally efficient mode of production. Rather, the no doubt destructive financialisation of economy was capital's *stricto sensu* necessary response to the systemic profit crisis which, since the 1970s, had been undermining the foundations of the real economy. The ongoing elimination of wage work, without the possibility of reabsorbing it at the same employment levels, turned into an increasingly daunting systemic contradiction since the third industrial revolution (microelectronics, information technology, digitalization), while today, at the dawn of the fourth industrial revolution (AI), the destruction of the 'substance of value' (human labour) appears irreversible. To understand the reasons for the financial industry's disproportionate expansion we must, therefore, place it in the fold of the original production mode. Paraphrasing Marx, we could say that the anatomy of finance is the key to understanding the anatomy of the real economy. Financial capitalism, in other words, reveals the elementary mechanism through which the economy acquires social effectiveness in the modern world. Its sleights of hand (money that magically creates new money) replicate at a simpler level the elementary ruse of capitalism since its inception. Let us see how.

Capital is not an empirical object (money, market, banks, individual companies, etc.) and, therefore, it can only be understood as *capitalism*, a historical formation that socializes those who buy and those who sell labour-power. As a social bond, capitalism entails the institutionalized mediation of money that buys work to create more money, which in turn buys more work to produce further value, in a theoretically infinite spiral. This dialectic, now aggressively eroded and simultaneously taken over by the financial markets, which sidestep human labour, has a precise origin. The capitalist narrative was established through a systemic transition concerning the role of money. For the sake of brevity, we can summarize this through Marx quoting Aristotle: it is the passage from pre-capitalist economy, where money is the mediator of goods, to chrematistics, or the art of moneymaking, where money becomes narcissistically infatuated with itself, activating that drive to self-expansion we call *capital*, which hinges on the 'rational' mediation of that unique commodity we call *labour*. The latter is the special ingredient that makes money rise into the capital-pie. In philosophical terms, we would say that capitalism is a logical and dialectical totality where capital and labour are two sides of the same coin. With respect to this correlation, we must go back to interrogating the role of work.

In relying on Hegel's speculative dialectics, without which we would not have had the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* (i.e. the Marx that counts, in every sense of the word), we can argue that work is retroactively seduced by money that aims to become capital. But Marx ends up failing to recognize the constitutive role of money-capital in *retroactively* subsuming labour force. That is to say, he underestimates what Hegel calls *Setzung der Voraussetzungen*, the dialectical figure of 'positing the presuppositions': in order to assert itself as a social form, capital posits labour as a narrative presupposition and condition of possibility for its own (capital's) self-deployment.

Think of the opening montage in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). The film begins with the image of a huge clock covering the entire screen, marking the passage of

time; this is followed by the shot from above of a flock of sheep running neatly in the same direction, which dissolves into the frame of a crowd of workers overflowing from an underground station and hurrying towards the factory gates. Modernity is captured by Chaplin as a specific mode of regimentation through the measurement of work. This means that work counts (for capital) only when it can be counted via the cult of labour-time, from which surplus-labour is extracted, in turn feeding into surplus-value and, eventually, crystallising in profit. In capitalism, whatever exceeds labour-time is basically a waste of time, or the time it takes one to prepare to sell or buy work. This is exactly what concerns our heads of state and economic policy experts today: we are wasting time.

But going back to Marx, to what extent can we agree with him that labour is the 'substance of value'? While this is, no doubt, true if we think of capitalism as a social form, a speculative approach takes us to a deeper level of complexity. Let us think 'abstract labour' as the epochal invention through which money-capital posits itself as its own externalised substance in order to be able to determine itself as capital. The word 'invention' must be taken literally, since we are referring to the *autopoiesis* of capital, a truly creationist act: money ejected from the feudal mode of production becomes capital as a self-causing effect. According to Hegel, the history of the world is self-caused and self-realized reason (*Vernunft*). That is to say, human history emerges through the capacity of reason (or Spirit) to organize itself out of its own real inconsistency, which does not disappear but returns at a different level of notional mediation. This is what Hegel means by *Aufhebung*: to both overcome and preserve the contradictory (negative) status of reality through its conceptual abstractions. More generally, this implies that we are able to affirm the cause of our actions only on the basis of the absence of the cause, the radical inconsistency of all that is.

This counterintuitive perspective invites us, first of all, to think of the causal relationship between the dysfunctionality of a normative order and the birth of a new one. But in truth, our relationship to the absent cause is ontological. Put differently, trauma as in-existent cause is by definition inherent to the norm. Walking is the other side of the fall, just as swimming is an effect of drowning, and life itself begins to make sense for us humans only in response to the sentiment of death. Human existence is by definition in a state of fragile equilibrium over its 'groundless ground' – and the same goes for capitalism. To claim that capital is *causa sui*, means to say that it is the effect of a cause (abstract labour) which it signifies *ex nihilo*. Only by creating its own symbolic presupposition in work as a countable entity did capital become a social link, acquiring historical and ontological meaning. Labour then is not, as Marx maintained, "an eternal natural necessity" as "creator of use-values". Rather, as expenditure of "brains, muscles, nerves, hands etc." [\[iii\]](#) it must be signified and 'put to work' literally out of nothing.

Marx was not mistaken in theorising the universality of work as organic metabolism between humankind and nature. Still, he did not take into account the fact that work is a negative determination rather than the revolutionary hero of a teleological narrative culminating in the triumph of communism and the end of class struggle. In fact, the ontologisation of labour is the elementary ideological template through which all capitalist societies affirmed themselves, as indeed did socialist ones. Differently put, the dogma of labour-time is the specifically modern form of alienation without which *homo economicus* loses its ontological compass, no longer knowing what to do with themselves. In this respect, Covid-19 impacts our lives by depriving them, at least momentarily, of their symbolic substance. But this specific traumatism, which disrupts our hubris (the Fukuyama-esque belief that global capitalism inaugurated the end of history) has been with us for a

while, and the virus has only made it explicit. Covid-19 can, therefore, be regarded as a metonymy of capital, which is now 'becoming itself' qua negative substance. The increasingly unmanageable dimension of our economic crisis is evidenced by the embarrassment accompanying any political attempt to contain it through warmed-up neo-Keynesian recipes or (worse) calamitous neoliberal injunctions.

The crisis of globalized contemporary capitalism is a crisis of surplus-value production, which originates in the pervasive and unprecedented levels of automation since the 1970s. It is the crisis of a blind and impersonal mechanism that puts work to work in order to quantify it and wrest from it a surplus of productivity which is elevated to the Holy Grail of the entire reproductive system. But, as anticipated, in order to extract surplus-value, capital must first signify work. It must first seduce it (and, eventually, abandon it) so as to impress upon it a social character. Marx tells us that the capitalist extracts from labour-force a certain amount of surplus-labour, an additional working time not covered by the wages, which as such informs surplus-value and profit. However, here Marx ends up endorsing, unwittingly, the conditions of possibility of the capitalist narrative, for his definition of surplus-value is based on a fundamentally positivistic ontology of work as eternal human necessity and creator of use-values. By claiming that surplus-value originates in the extortion of the worker's surplus labour-time, Marx is, of course, right in uncovering the exploitation ruse. But his emancipatory categories ('use-value' and 'concrete labour') remain caught within the valorisation narrative. What he overlooks is that surplus-value is the signifier of the lack of value, of the impossibility for labour to produce any value whatsoever. Labour as value-producing substance is a capitalist category through and through. While Marx's 'substantialist critique' perfectly captures the internal contradiction of capitalist accumulation, it remains inadequate to overcome it.

For it is around a *minus* passed off as a *plus* (surplus-value) that the entire system of profit-creation whirls. Is it not true that the capital-form we call profit (the concrete aspect of surplus-value) is by definition perceived as lacking? The reproductive secret of capitalism as social bond lies in not having enough of it, and this lack, or negative trigger, is engendered by the original movement of the dialectic through which money-capital and labour interact and signify each other. Surplus-value is therefore a negative signifier, radically devalued by definition. It is the meaningless remainder of the capitalist narrative, rather than a measurable quantity of labour-power. Precisely because it circuits around a lacking object, capital has the structure of the Freudian drive: it is resolutely beyond the pleasure principle, it enjoys by missing the target. In the same way that smoking or gambling are compulsive, capital as process valorises itself by relating to surplus-value as its absent substance. While Marx resolved the riddle of surplus-value within the context of capitalist exploitation and profit-making, he did not see that the answer to the riddle posed by surplus-value is that there is no answer – surplus-value makes the world tick as the signifier of an impossibility.

Through its chilling silence, Covid-19 tells us the truth about labour and the value it produces: by taking them away from us so abruptly, the virus brings to light their real inconsistency and the astute expedient through which our world reproduces both itself and its own prejudice. The point, however, is not merely to denounce the capitalist ploy. We urgently need to become aware of the fact that this specific artifice is losing its socio-ontological efficacy. For the structural crisis of capitalism, accelerated by the virus, makes us increasingly naked and defenceless in the face of the central void around which our model of life has been organizing itself for centuries as a particular form of social immunization.

Barbarism is now the only way in which this form of life can survive by denying the emptiness of its foundation in surplus-value creation. The empty foundation, however, must not be ignored or rejected, but assumed and re-signified as the ground of a new social bond emerging against and beyond the moribund capitalist narrative.

Notes:

[i] Walter Benjamin (2003), *Selected Writings, vol. 4 1938-1940*, ed. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP), p. 402.

[ii] Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy vol. 1* (London: Penguin), 1990, pp. 133-135.