

Homo Pandemicus: COVID Ideology and Panic Consumption

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Abstract: This essay reflects on the current social crisis by arguing that panic has become an object of mass consumption. By forcing us to consume panic, capitalist ideology facilitates the acceleration of the economy's main drivers while strengthening its authoritarian grip over the terrified masses. Our "health emergency" is therefore discussed as a historical event that has little to do with the nature of the virus, and everything to do with the nature of capitalism.

Keywords: COVID-19, capitalism, panic, consumerism, death.

"An epidemic of panic is spreading throughout the circuits of the social brain. An epidemic of depression is following the outbreak of panic."¹

The current state of the coronavirus emergency should prompt us to reflect on the power of ideology in an era that was too hastily defined as post-ideological. The fall of the Berlin Wall, *ça va sans dire*, did not free us from ideologies. Rather, stepping out of traditional ideology makes us vulnerable to the tyranny of a one-dimensional thinking calibrated on the anonymous brutality of economic calculation. Through globalization and the emancipation from the Grand Narratives of the past, we have given ourselves over to increasingly subtle forms of manipulation that intercept the visceral dimension of our being. The dissolution of the old symbolic ties has thrown us into the flat and invisible dictatorship of the economy, which is disguised as freedom. This spurious freedom resolves itself in the obligation to produce and consume value (commodities) and consent to official narratives, no matter how unfounded, delusional, or criminal they might be.

Resisting the devastating force of unbounded capitalism is increasingly arduous. Our info-sphere circulates news and data at ever-growing velocity. These signs overwhelm us, breaking down our capacity to absorb them intellectually, thereby condemning us to a semi-permanent state of hypnosis. We might find the moral strength to denounce exploitation, but we are reduced to impotence when it comes to imagining new social structures that could guarantee us a space of autonomy from the capitalist matrix. Hence the perception of a historical time that is both *irreversible* and *inexhaustible*, in which all human experience folds back into a destiny where every event is both posited and presupposed by the metaphysics of capital.

1. I panic, therefore I am

Although cynical and disenchanting in appearance, the contemporary subject is, as Walter Benjamin guessed,² a believer. The inflexibility of

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¹ Berardi 2011, p. 43.

² Benjamin 1991 [1921].

our faith manifests itself in a Pascalian way, that is, in the practical act rather than the work of the spirit.³ If our moral and spiritual life is now devoid of militancy, the active one continues to be devoted to a single cult: the cycle of capitalist accumulation. Elevated to a universal religion, capitalism feeds on the discipline of millions of believers who are persuaded that the meaning of life lies in the satisfaction of its purchasing power. For this reason, the subliminal order not to disturb the law of profit is the ideological figure of our time. And capitalist ideology is particularly effective in the context of a “post-growth” economy that is now desperately intent on denying its ongoing structural implosion. When entire populations are crippled by uncertainty or are falling into poverty, the hypnotic power of a well-rehearsed *narrative of salvation* may work wonders. Most importantly, it allows for the implementation of a Great Reset aimed not so much at global sustainability and social justice,⁴ but at reaffirming the ferocious assertiveness of capital.

We should not forget that over the last decades a merciless type of mass conformity has imposed itself, passed off as the only way to achieve personal fulfilment. In colonizing the unconscious, global consumerism has become sovereign, weakening our symbolic bond with others and consigning us to the solipsistic relationship with capital. The virtualisation of experience has bolstered consumer conformity. The basic problem with our enslavement to the virtual machine and its numbing utopia (an infinite space where countless intelligent agents meet to share and create their realities) is that it deprives us of our potential to establish symbolic relations, thus paving the way for the coming dystopia of authoritarian capitalism. More and more we inhabit a flat ontology without breaks or ruptures, where the subject of the unconscious (the subject defined by its radical inconsistency, which triggers the search for meanings and connections) is abolished. It is therefore truly naive to think that, in the midst of our coronavirus crisis, *homo pandemicus* can change its fate through (class) solidarity. Rather, we must begin by noting that panic is now an object of consumption, and as such it is harmoniously inserted in the anthropological architecture of *homo economicus*. Consuming panic is the new frontier of capitalist ideology.

Marx’s *Capital* begins with the following observation: “The wealth of the societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities.’”⁵ In our epoch, the world dominated by commodities institutes both a global governance dictated by competition between fewer and fewer capitals, and a typically

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3 “Custom is the source of our strongest and most believed proofs. It bends the automaton, which persuades the mind without its thinking about the matter.’ Hence ‘we must kneel, pray with the lips, etc.’ in order to believe (Pascal 1958 [1670], p. 73).

4 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/building-blocks-of-the-great-reset/>

5 Marx 1990 [1867], p. 125.

obtuse brand of individualism that inhibits critical thinking while at the same time fomenting a delusion of omnipotence in the subject/consumer. Narcissistic disorders overlap with the omnipresent injunction to enjoyment, and the effects are there for all to see: cultural desertification (matching the desertification of the planet), and the normalization of psychopathological behaviours of various nature, all attributable to the hardening of an ego unable to sustain the complexity of symbolic relationships. Our (increasingly virtual) capitalist utopia lures us into a false sense of security for it is built on the illusion of eternal time. Yet, predictably, the step from this atemporal illusion to anxiety and panic is very short: “There is no such thing as a time of virtuality, because time is only in life, decomposition, and the becoming-death of the living. Virtuality is the collapse of the living; it is panic taking power in temporal perception.”⁶

The *asocial* model touted as the highest form of individual freedom, in other words, is prone to produce depression. For the subject incapable of introspection – for whom connecting with others amounts to exhibitionistic rituals of virtualised self-promotion (from sexting to food selfies, through a heterogeneous typology of standardised mini-perversions) – life can only contract into a mechanical performance, whose other side is anomie and existential emptiness. Overwhelmed by the speed of information and numbed by simulated over-stimulation, the contemporary subject gives in to “capitalist realism”.⁷ The bottom line, then, is that behind today’s debilitating mass conformity there lies the “mad rationality” of a mode of production whose aim is to transform the entire human experience into exchange value.

By identifying with the object-commodity, contemporary subjects willingly abolish their own singularity. The Cartesian distance between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* evaporates, since thinking subjects (*cogitans*) flatten into the empty objectuality (*extensa*) of commodities, from which they can no longer distinguish themselves. The cause of all this, however, is not to be found in epiphenomena like dystopian technology or political corruption/incompetence, but in a centuries-old process of socialization based on the dogma of the production-consumption of countless things and experiences, most of which are entirely superfluous. Today, at the peak of this historical process, people find themselves not only increasingly immiserated and deprived of fundamental rights (home, food, health), but also *reified*, reproduced serially as extensions of the very commodities they (wish to) consume. Without collective symbolic ties, the mind collapses into the thingness of the object. What until a few decades ago still created a social bond – the

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6 Berardi 2011, p. 40.

7 Fisher 2009.

so-called “work society” – today brings about the decomposition of the human community.

As Ralf Dahrendorf wrote back in the 1980s, “the work-centered society is dead, but we don’t know how to bury it”⁸ – and, we should now add, the stench is becoming unbearable. In other words, we remain defined by capitalist productivism, but we are increasingly unable to extract new wealth (surplus-value) from a living labour now increasingly ousted by unstoppable processes of technological automation. However, the unproductive and atomized individual of neoliberal globalization is today *completely* dominated by capitalist relations. Never before has the fetishistic theology of consumption asserted itself as a totalising ideology, extending to all areas of life, including media, education, and health.

Prey to an economic compulsion perceived as destiny, when faced by a health alert deviously magnified by the capitalist media, *homo pandemicus* can only withdraw into his fragile shell, paralysed by the fear of losing, with life, its purchasing power. No longer able to face the perception of his own transience – which is the only way to live intensely, and imagine a real process of transformation – *homo pandemicus* relies on apotropaic rituals such as the wearing of a mask, finding in mute terror the only comfort and sense of social belonging. Thus, the consumption of panic turns out to be the hallmark of contemporary ideology, expressing the will of the people to continue to be defined by capitalist inertia, despite the real-time collapse of the “society of opulence”. Ultimately, consuming panic implies the stubborn denial of death as the only “object” capable of giving meaning to life. The enthusiasm of living, the love of life, can only arise from the perception that one day we will no longer be here, and from the symbolic processes (desires, aspirations, affects) that this perception brings into existence.

It is no coincidence that philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists have been telling us for decades that our age of material wealth *represses* death.⁹ It is quite clear that this is an ideological type of repression, since it is functional to the imposition of the enchanted temporality of capitalist utopia. Dissociating life from death characterizes all modern culture, because it opens the way for the economic valorisation of every fragment of our existence. The only value that matters is the capitalist pseudo-vivification of life. The abolition of the symbolic link with death, still central in pre-modern societies, allows political economy to establish the repressive socialization of life via its ubiquitous reduction to exchange value. The success of the current emergency narrative feeds on this repression by instrumentally exploiting its *return*, the sudden reactivation of the ghost of our mortality. The shock effect of the

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8 Dahrendorf 1984.

9 See, among others, Ariés 1974; Baudrillard 1993 [1976]; Elias 2001 [1982]; Redeker 2017.

coronavirus *memento mori* is not (at least for now) the solidarity of a humanity aware of its own fragility and finitude, but the intellectual *rigor mortis* of *homo pandemicus*, already mortified by the obsession for security. Sadistically confronted with their own potential demise at the hand of an invisible enemy, consumers fattened by the cult of their own self turn speechless, or stammer (under their masks, behind their screens, or inside their sarcophagus-like homes) an endless series of tragicomic clichés.

2. Ideology today

The media hype around the pandemic has an easy time inoculating the panic-virus in an increasingly anaemic social body, whose identity is nurtured within the magic circle of a grotesquely egocentric individualism. The long history of capitalist social relations today flows into the total commodification of the human being, who is as hyperactive as psychically empty, and therefore helplessly delivered to manipulation. Technology and politics are but *extensions* of the economy’s global domination, and the specific ideological alienation it engenders. Their “biopolitical” purpose (control of life) is ancillary to the power of capital, which today requires entire populations to be docile and meek (that is, isolated, insecure, and scared) vis-à-vis the violent accelerations that rule their lives.

Among these accelerations are the digitization of all sectors of social life (work, education, leisure, etc.), the collapse of the real economy and the expansion of debt (with further austerity measures and cutting of public services),¹⁰ the political normalization of the state of emergency, new and more explicit forms of censorship, and the pervasive and invasive medicalization of life. We are sliding into a new fascist order that replicates at a different level the old objective: using the State to shield and advance the interests of the wealthy elite. The virus provides contemporary capitalism and its politics with the opportunity of a colossal *emotional blackmail*: either with us (lifesavers), or with the ineffable micro-killers and the conspiracy theorists who try to sabotage the official narrative. In the meantime, the usual suspects accumulate wealth and power more and more casually.¹¹ Not happy with seeing their fortunes double or triple over a few months, some of them also have the audacity to tell us, with a philanthropic hand on their bleeding hearts (and the invisible one, of which Adam Smith wrote, on their wallets), that they are working for the common good. With half a billion human beings now falling below the poverty line,¹² it will soon come as no surprise that even starving people are passed off as coronavirus victims.

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10 <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/imf-paves-way-new-era-austerity-post-covid-19>

11 <https://ips-dc.org/billionaire-bonanza-2020/>

12 <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/pandemic-profits-companies-soar-billions-more-poor-est-pay-price>

Mired in panic and hypnotized by the media fanfare orchestrated by the wealthy, we opt for blind faith instead of legitimate doubt. According to various world-renowned immunologists (including Michael Ryan, Head of Emergency at the WHO),¹³ the mortality rate of the virus, all variables considered, is likely to be between 0.1 and 0.2%, that is, at the level of a “strong seasonal influenza”, as claimed by Anthony Fauci back in March 2020.¹⁴ This means that at least 99% of those who are “infected” carry on with their lives either without a sore throat (the vast majority), or with normal flu symptoms. But numbers can do precious little if they are not inscribed in a winning narrative.

Within the current scenario, it is difficult to ignore the ideological acceleration of mainstream media, which speaks to us with an increasingly arrogant and dogmatic voice in order to censor or delegitimize those who, in a Socratic vein, dare to doubt the uniformity of the narrative. Apart from the resistible rise of censorship, the most common media strategy was captured by Vladimiro Giacchè as a “false synecdoche”,¹⁵ a rhetorical figure describing how a fragment of a factual occurrence (often an insignificant detail) is inordinately amplified in order to spread terror and justify draconian measures. Initiatives such as the recent open letter signed by thousands of Belgian doctors and health professionals,¹⁶ are systematically ignored by the information oligopolies, despite the detailed evidence they muster and their legitimate request for an open debate.

The ideological power of mainstream media lies in instigating fear by exploiting the return of what had been repressed for decades: our finitude, or ontological insufficiency. For *homo economicus*, the death of the producer-consumer is either a positive numerical abstraction (body counting, statistical calculations) or an object of morbid media spectacularization – two sides of the same coin. Death is the exact opposite of the frenzied ubiquity of capital, which grinds all lived experience into economic value. We are told *ad nauseam* that life is sacred. Yet, it is so only as an abstract, dematerialized and economically computable idol. By comparison, dying is an inhuman and inadmissible obscenity, for it is not amenable to exchange. As Jean Baudrillard stressed, “today, *it is not normal to be dead* [...]. To be dead is an unthinkable anomaly, nothing else is as offensive as this. Death is a delinquency, and an incurable deviancy.”¹⁷

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13 On October 5, 2020, Dr Ryan stated that at least 10% of the world population (around 780 million people) are likely to have contracted COVID-19. These WHO “best estimates” put IFR (infection mortality rate) at 0.14%. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-who-idUSKBN26Q1SI> and <https://swprs.org/studies-on-covid-19-lethality/>.

14 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7121221/>

15 Giacchè 2016.

16 <https://docs4opendebate.be/fr/open-brief/>

17 Baudrillard 1993 [1976], p. 147.

The shock we are made to experience today is ideological because it forces us to panic over a traumatic event that was cynically exploited rather than investigated as a *symptom of structural failure*. This failure has many names: the decline of public health systems; the devastating impact of agribusiness and air pollution; the diagnostic and therapeutic errors; the lack of preventive campaigns; the concentration of the elderly and the ill in nursing homes and hospitals at high risk of sepsis; the constant contradictions of “experts” and the politicians they represent, all in turn representing social relations managed by a single impalpable master: the anonymous, ruthless and dehumanizing apparatus of the economy. Because capital as an “automatic subject” (Marx) is not a flesh and blood individual, but instead embodies the *form* of our life by determining its content a priori. The dull compulsion of the “will” of capital dominates the entire management of the health emergency (particularly through the profiteering intercession of Big Pharma), and comes true in the packaging of its ideological text.

But then, what about all the deaths? Any instance or peak of excess mortality *from* or *with* coronavirus (the difference is crucial, though never fully investigated) must be framed precisely as a disturbing failure of the health system and its global political and economic governance. The most blatant evidence of this failure is the cramming of the sick (especially old people with comorbidities) in environments rich in pathogenic microorganisms such as (understaffed and underfunded) hospitals and nursing homes; with the ensuing chaos presented as a “world war against the virus”. Official data say that, already in 2016, hospital infections alone caused 49,301 deaths in Italy,¹⁸ which suggests that an increase in debilitated subjects’ exposure to such a high concentration of pathogens could only result in tragedy. This predisposition to the risk of sepsis is common to many countries where funds to national health systems have been drastically cut.

When we repeat such inane slogans as “our life will no longer be the same”, then, we should remind ourselves that we are speaking through the *capitalist form*, i.e., through the law of profitability that frames us. Furthermore, we should consider that capital survives the contradictions it engenders through violent internal technological-managerial revolutions, famously described by Joseph Schumpeter as the “gale of creative destruction”.¹⁹ This suggests that our life (the “new normal”) is exactly what it was before – only worse. What makes it worse is the terror of contagion and sanctions, isolation from the loved ones, increase in unemployment, misery and depression, suspicion of others, pervasive digital alienation, and so on. The point, however, is that COVID-19 did not

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18 https://www.ansa.it/english/news/science_tecnology/2019/05/15/49000-hospital-infection-deaths-in-2016_27242eaa-bffd-43d6-8ff8-6718fe9db5ed.html

19 Schumpeter 2010 [1943], p. 76.

cause these degenerative phenomena; it *accelerated* them. Even before the arrival of the virus, for example, death had been reduced to a private and purely biological fact, as there was no hesitation in letting the sick die anonymously in hospitals or the elderly in care homes, exactly as it is done (even more inhumanely) in the COVID era. Similarly, *a-social* distancing had already been imposed on us through *a-social* networks. From this perspective of “accelerated continuity”, the triggering of a new frontier of ideological manipulation is perhaps the crucial aspect of the current emergency, especially when justified as a humanitarian act. In fact, it would appear that despite years of “humanitarian wars” we have not yet learned that (borrowing from H. L. Mencken) behind every desire to save humanity there is the desire to dominate it.

It is no coincidence that in the last twenty years, starting from the attack on the World Trade Center, the political discourse accompanying the crisis of globalization has employed the oldest and most consolidated ideological weapon: to sow terror in respect of an external agent deemed capable of penetrating and destroying our world. If the War on Terrorism had concrete foundations – the economic and geopolitical contradictions triggered by globalization – its implementation was purely ideological, aimed at justifying a series of nefarious military interventions as a response (violent as well as desperate) to those contradictions. The ideological effectiveness of any catastrophic narrative, however, depends on its flexibility, that is, on the ability to innovate itself creatively. For this reason, the ancestral nightmare of heads severed by hordes of hooded jihadists, which terrorized the Western collective imagination until a couple of years ago, has now been replaced by a new but complementary model of “shock therapy” (Naomi Klein), that of the pandemic virus. It is a model capable of evoking even more devastating apocalyptic scenarios in order to prevent us from realizing how *our epochal crisis – which reduces millions of humans to misery despite the enormous technical potential available to us – has nothing to do with the nature of the virus and everything to do with the nature of capitalism.*

As the reader will recall, the narrative of the deadly virus had already been trialled in 2009, when the H1N1 (“swine flu”) pandemic was declared. However, that narrative only had little traction, resulting in something of an anti-climax.²⁰ Today, however, on the second attempt, panic spreads like wildfire, so much so that we all are, quoting Canadian researcher Alan Cassels, *pre-sick*.²¹ In other words, we belong to tracing and tracking statistics, having become nothing but, as Ivan Illich put it,²² *algorithms* of a health system that frames us within probabilistic

20 <https://www.webmd.com/cold-and-flu/news/20100907/h1n1-swine-flu-no-worse-than-seasonal-flu>

21 Cassels 2012.

22 Illich 2010 [1976].

calculations. In this sense, the daily “war bulletins” have the simple objective of activating a pre-existing identification mechanism: we, anonymous populations at the mercy of anonymous abstractions, are where medicine (or, rather, the economy that directs it) wants us to be. This triggers a phenomenon that is more unique than rare: for the first time in the history of humanity, it is not the sick who go to doctors, but doctors who look for the sick.

On the other hand, as the saying goes, “he who seeks, finds”: medicine enslaved to the economy (Big Pharma) elevates us all to the noble rank of *predestined*. It would probably help to note, however, that the inventor of the RT-PCR test himself, Kary Mullis, Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1993, had reiterated in no uncertain terms that the test has *no diagnostic value*.²³ The problem is that the genetic material taken from the swab must be massively amplified to be able to demonstrate viral load (several “amplification cycles” are required). This means that, by amplifying this material beyond a given threshold, the PCR test will classify as contagious completely harmless genomes, such as leftovers of infections that are now totally inactive.²⁴ The reasonable doubt about the reliability of the swab with respect to a virus that has not yet been isolated according to Koch’s postulates, has been reiterated by numerous multi-accredited virologists (all duly ignored by mainstream information). It is clear that *homo pandemicus*, riddled with fear and anxiety, prefers to take refuge in faith or superstition. If Jesus multiplied loaves and fish, today we multiply infections and contagions.

The “monster-slammed-on-front-page” logic that characterizes the corona bulletins relies on the widespread perception that the monster is already on our doorstep. The para-religious ritual of numerological information aims to make us believe that we are all, at least potentially, already victims of such monster. This Orwellian assault on our singularity strengthens the ideological character of mass information systems, whereby the problem of the End – of our lives, of our civilization, and therefore of a *derelict model of social reproduction* – is magically transformed into the trauma carried by a dark pathogen embodying Absolute Evil, against which we can only (as it were) “fight together”, though of course the poor and the weak are left to pay the highest price.

3. *Denkverboten* and faceless humanity

The rhetoric of the “world war against the virus”, popularised with perfect timing by Bill Gates and his philanthropic foundations, and underscored by politicians miraculously revitalized by the unexpected opportunity, implies that the only goal is to win the war, regardless of how

23 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGvkG86Yw7U&feature=youtu.be>; see also <https://www.creative-diagnostics.com/sars-cov-2-coronavirus-multiplex-rt-qpcr-kit-277854-457.htm>

24 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/29/health/coronavirus-testing.html>

much it costs, who pays for it, who benefits from it, and what happens next. Because the war on such a monster – which exists primarily as a media representation, just as hell existed in the altarpieces of medieval churches – requires first of all *obedience*, to be understood not only as further limitation of our civil liberties, but above all as *denkverboten*, a prohibition against articulating critical thinking that deviates an inch from the official line.

When airing such views, one can immediately hear the accusation of conspiracy, which is normally made by the “useful idiot” who does not know (or pretends not to know) that *power has always conspired and plotted*. If the course of human history is replete with dazzling evidence of power’s sinister machinations, today the prime suspect for this role is the transnational Moloch known as financial capitalism. However, it is not merely a matter of ruthless figures moved by personal interests or Malthusian persuasions; instead we are referring to a historical and *logical* configuration of the capitalist mode of production whose prerogative is to slip into every corner of our lives, domesticating and softening them to its interests. Whoever holds economic power is, as Marx wrote, a “functionary of capital”, so we would be wrong to personalize blame without recognizing the real enemy in the automatic process that authorizes and directs our lives. It is almost trivial to observe that, today, it is the interests (literally) of capital in its financial version that make the world go around: they hold in their grip entire populations, shape their ideas and actions, and therefore exercise absolute power over that increasingly liquid and naked form of life that we have become. All this while politics, reduced to accountancy exercise or corporate housekeeping (even when rekindled by ancient passions), continues to genuflect to the economy’s diktats.

But it should be added that the coronavirus acceleration also concerns the implosive nature of our form of life: it is precisely the hegemony of the financial industry over the real economy that decrees the defeat of a social model based on the exploitation of human labour (extraction of surplus value from living work organized in countable units of labour time). This is regardless of the fact that exploitation, of course, continues, both in increasingly obscene forms of underemployment and through the creation of those that the late David Graeber with ingenious simplicity called “bullshit jobs”.²⁵ More clearly stated: the financial sector – where not the human being but money is put to work in order to magically create more money – has now achieved almost complete independence from the real basis of the economy, whose profitability has plummeted. To the point that, as Graeber claimed, the system is forced to invent perfectly useless jobs (*bullshit*, in fact) in order to maintain a semblance of structural consistency and viability.

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25 Graeber 2018.

Both in the *Grundrisse* and in the third volume of *Capital* Marx had outlined, albeit with various disclaimers, his theory of the *tendency of the rate of profit to fall* in relation to the increase in *organic capital*, calculated as the ratio between *constant* (machines) and *variable* capital (living labour). Today, after the third and at the dawn of the fourth industrial revolution (from microelectronics to artificial intelligence), Marx’s intuition hits us with the force of a final and undisputable verdict: the more investments in hi-tech increase, the more the profitability of capital falls *in absolute terms*, since, given the impact of automation, the human labour that is eliminated can no longer be reabsorbed at the same levels of employment and intensity of production. Like it or not, this internal contradiction of political economy marks the end of the anthropology of work that has characterized the reproductive model of capitalism since the dawn of modernity.

From a “work society” our world is inexorably mutating into a “society without work”, or at least into a “society of shitty work” (to take up Graeber), and it is for this reason that it delivers itself more and more willingly to financial alchemy and related risks. Although as a (precarious) category work continues to define our age, it is clear that the fate of mass wage-labour, presupposition to the creation of societal wealth, is only one: to disappear, or more realistically, to continue to morph into more or less explicit forms of slavery. We are faced with an almost deterministic mechanism that undermines the foundations of our societies, and which pushes capital to seek profitability in the financial/speculative sphere. The “faceless” power of financial capitalism is the power of capital in its *latest disguise*, through which it desperately tries to escape the self-destructive nemesis triggered by its own “moving contradiction”,²⁶ which is now unmanageable. In defining this form of financially leveraged capitalism as “liquid”, we should specify that it is so because it liquidates the anthropological foundations of our social ontology.

Precisely the “faceless” (anonymous, rarefied, algorithmic) but omnipotent power of financial capital suggests a final reflection on the symbol of the fight against COVID-19: the mask. There is something desperate and, at the same time, unintentionally comic, in the consumption of such an ordinary object. Beyond its business – which no doubt drives its media obsession – the obligation to wear a mask reminds us of Beckett’s and Ionesco’s Theatre of the Absurd, insofar as it captures metaphorically the essence of COVID ideology. What essence? Precisely the “facelessness” of capitalist power. In its deepest meaning, the obligation to wear a mask that mummifies us should be read as an attempt to make humanity more and more compliant with the anonymity

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26 “Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth” (Marx 1993 [1939], p. 706).

of contemporary capitalism and its cynical as well as criminal needs. Anonymous capital requires anonymous (isolated, depressed, impotent) subjects. And yet the liberal culture in which we dwell, compromised as it is with the current economic determinism, seems to struggle to grasp the authoritarian involution of our capitalist societies. Or perhaps it grasps it perfectly well, but opts to fight it with the blunt weapon of moralism and washed-out slogans like “capitalism with a human (masked?) face”.

The mask as “voluntary servitude” (Étienne de La Boétie) reflects the acceleration of a process of *soft dehumanization* that has been with us for some time, and which needs us to be identical to capital in its financial disguise. It does so by depriving us beyond measure of our singularity, to be understood *not* as the full and assertive uniqueness of life devoted to consumerist gorging, but, in a much more radical way, as a *lack* to ourselves, a gap between *what we are not* and *what we believe we are*. Only by acknowledging this lack, and putting it to work, can we realistically open up to the hypothesis of an alternative future. A humanity which gags itself vis-à-vis the presumed infection of its neighbour is a humanity without unconscious, that is to say, reduced to obedience because deprived of the elementary tools of critical thinking.

Critical awareness arises from the intellectual risk taken by the thinking subject in recognizing and at the same time rejecting their own belonging to the world as object of reflection. If individuals do not acquire *self-distance*, if they do not think *against* their own identity mediated by the Other (i.e., their language, ideology, privileges, etc.), there can be no critical conscience and no real drive toward transformation. This is why the mask, in its miserable banality, becomes a symbol of the reactionary *denkverboten* imposed on us universally so that no one can oppose the power of an “economic rationality” heading straight into the abyss. The mask that takes away the sins of the living represents the dogmatic coma in which we have fallen, which makes us blind, as well as mute, in the face of the operation of creative destruction currently in full swing.

By instituting a prolonged state of emergency, the capitalist Moloch aims to silence the whole planet, without understanding that, by doing so, it risks self-annihilation, thus following its most intimate vocation. Behind the mask of *homo pandemicus* is the cynical and obtuse grin of *homo economicus* who, by destroying its past, vainly tries to save himself from the contradiction that is slowly but surely devouring him. Some on the left are looking eagerly at this implosive acceleration, believing it may finally generate collective awareness of oppression and the push for paradigm change. It may seem a compelling theoretical point, but in truth we are witnessing the successful *masking* of capitalist chaos through an insidious ideological narrative which is conducive to a more or less overt iteration of fascism. Capitalist realism prevails by colonising the economic unconscious and hijacking the State as ideological manpower. Today, capitalist realism prevails through a plea that is almost impossible

to counter: *saving lives*. How long will this narrative last? And, on the back of its success, which other ideological narratives will follow? Without developing a collective critical awareness of the current predicament, we will soon wake up in a neo-feudal society, or a digitized nineteenth-century dystopia. Growing levels of poverty and despair are likely to result in violent mass revolts, followed by further ideological, and military, wars. Repeating Gramsci, it would seem that a long “interregnum” awaits us, where “the old is dying and the new cannot be born”, and “a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”²⁷ After all is said and done about COVID-19, our problem remains our real positivity to the capitalist virus, for which we have not yet invented the vaccine – the only one we urgently need.

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27 Gramsci 1971 [1947], pp. 275-276.