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Introduction

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Introduction: 2020 – The Year of the Virus. SARS 2 / COVID 19

Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza

It is more than trivial to note that 2020 could have turned out to be(come) just another year, just one of those calendrical dates of which the world has seen so many already. Years that in advance may have given rise to expectations only to forget or forcefully oblivate them in their unfolding or to replace them with forms of disappointment that create newer, sometimes lowered, sometimes heightened expectations. 2020 could have become a year to take a rare and merely arbitrary and coincidental constellation of calendrical dates as opportunity for thought: since in 2020 we could all of reflected on what it may mean to celebrate Hegel's and Hölderlin's 250th anniversary in the same year in which we celebrate Engel's 200th and Lenin's 150th. Such a peculiar concatenation of the birthdays and anticipated later birthdates of absolute idealism, dialectical poetry, and two of the most influential and significant forms of (dialectical) materialism in the 20th century, to use highly abstract and poorly informative labels here for the purpose of brevity, could itself have presented a chance for speculative genealogies, reconsidered filiations and self-correcting self-critiques that may have led into burning questions of dialectical thinking that are still pressing today. But (very) little of (and almost no time for) this in 2020.

2020 also could have turned into a year in which, speaking in broad, and potentially even only vaguely political terms, we could have followed, endorsed, been enthusiasm, disgusted, or disappointed by the processes happening on a representational and state level, especially – depending on one's leaning or interpretation of them – if one were to consider them significant enough to determine the future of a country, of a continent or the entire planet. The elections held in the USA, in Bolivia, Kosovo, Poland, and New Zealand, to name but a few, may each belong in one or more of the above-mentioned categories. All these would have happened alongside, against the background of, in support of, or in stark contrast to the referendum in Chile, the yellow vests, Hong Kong protests, Brexit, LGBTQ+ movement(s), persistent climate change activism and rebellion, anticipated and devastating conflagrations, disastrous storms, some of which may have led to novel and media-orchestrated pseudo-decisions to plan changing things at some point in the not too distant future.

Yet, 2020 turned out quite differently; it turned into a year in which a virus became the real protagonist (or antagonist) and that immediately on a number of different levels. Economically, the virus did produce some astounding effects – it precipitated “the largest economic shock of our lifetimes”, as Goldman Sachs commented.¹ For the first time in at least a hundred years – recall that in April 1920 the previous and terrifyingly deadly Avian flu ended² – there was a state-imposed

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¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/30/coronavirus-goldman-says-pandemic-will-permanently-alter-oil-markets.html>

² Davis 2020a.

and state-defended halt brought to the national and international market dynamic and therewith to economic growth in many countries. For months we witnessed a suspension of previously untouchable economic credos and a pandemic forcing measures upon all kinds of governments that some wished should have been forced upon them by emancipatory movements long ago. This was not only a demonstration that actions were possible that previously were repeatedly deemed not possible, even though this is an undeniable fact. But the virus thereby also and contingently produced what previously was supposed to be the conscious action of an emancipatory organization or agent, notably an increasing condensation of the existing contradictions – which was therefore previously referred to as politicization. But can viruses politicize in this sense of the term? Did the virus operate like an unwilling Leninist party? Certainly not. Yet, it produced a crisis, a crisis of a new and different type, and this very crisis produced a series of unanticipated insights.

One was that states can operate not only as protectors and guardians of capital, but also for other purposes, including that they can actually stop or determine capital fluctuations and become the guardians and protectors of the people – even though there are many debates to be had on that front. States appeared to effectively protect their populations when they did not simply liberate themselves from economic prerogatives, but when they served as (un)willing instruments of scientifically produced knowledge (or they did not, when they decide not to). Another insight was that it seems necessary to have a debate around, ultimately, can counted and in the situation of crisis was counted as “essential work” and what should, can or did not.³ Even though this discussion mostly remained latent and implicit, this might have been something that could have been politicized: what can count as relevant work for and within a society, what kind of work does a society deem useless or what kind does it regard as a luxury that it nonetheless would never want to give up on.⁴ Even though, the acclamation-rituals, i.e. people applauding the workers deemed essential were quite present at first they subsequently disappeared, even though promises were made that, if we are once living under ameliorated conditions these conditions would also certainly imply an improvement of the working conditions of the “essential workers” (many of them working in lesser or even low paid jobs thus far), this was forgotten almost immediately when things calmed down a little and then (i.e., now) things got worse again (at least in Europe).

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3 Hallward 2020

4 In this sense, Hegel for example referred to philosophy as being luxury – and otherwise being a harsh critique of luxury and the more trivial and material sense of the term (as sign of depravity and decadence).

At the beginning of his recent book *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency*, Andreas Malm addresses another insight by raising the question as to “why... the states of the global North act on corona but not on climate?... The question was discussed on the online forums to which humanity was condemned in March.”⁵ Why did “states in advanced capitalist countries got so relatively fired up about the virus”?⁶ The list of ultimately unconvincing reasons Malm discusses is long. To name but a few: some argued that only Covid presents a real problem, not climate change (which is obviously wrong), others that Covid presents a more serious danger than climate change, a thesis hardly tenable, especially when taking into account the moment at which governments started rushing to act; at that precise point in time they did not have any appropriate scientific knowledge on their side and “virtually every aspect of the disease”⁷ was still uncertain, whereas the science on climate change is solid and long established. Some argued that climate change is not visible, but it is hard not to see that viruses are no less apparent; some argued that climate change is gradual and Corona appeared as a sudden explosion, but a storm or a locust attack does not appear less explosive or sudden. Is it the mortality rates then? This is also not a very convincing explanation, simply because the climate crisis mortality rates will be far higher than the ones expected because of the virus (and no one knew how high the rates will turn out to be when the state actions began). So what was it that made the states act so swiftly? When these deaths appeared in the center of the advanced Western world, something changed. When those who otherwise do not have much to fear could more or less justifiably get anxious and no one knew if even the most advanced existing health care systems, those of and in rich countries will be sufficiently equipped to care for their respective populations, something changed in the general Western risk assessment. One is justified to act if one might become a direct victim otherwise.

This is to say, this time it did not happen elsewhere, not in some place that one could calmly identify from the distance as a hotspot of something terrible going on. The virus became (for the West) a truly global virus, when the threat was a threat to the West, when it did not threaten only threaten the poor displayed almost a negative egalitarian disregard for particularities – even though it thrives less on the young. Obviously, and more obviously than for a long time, it helps if you are rich and it super-helps if you are super-rich – and it, without any doubt, immediately did not simply stop capitalism as such. Zoom’s, Skype’s, and similar

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5 Malm 2020, p. 12.

6 Ibid., p.18

7 Ibid. p.13

communication software's market value skyrocketed, as did that of HelloFresh and especially Amazon, for that matter. The virus did therefore not suspend the incentives to discover new field for value production or extraction. It did also not make everything better and greener by stopping some things that were otherwise omnipresent for a little while – it was clear that it could not take long until someone instrumentalized the pandemic for a political coup or for an increasing of value extraction.

But the point we want to make here is that the pandemic became a real problem when it seemed as if not even wealth could provide anyone with an absolute guarantee of survival and when the virus did not concern some particularities alone (like with the HIV/AIDS pandemic that led to all kinds of pathologizations of its victims, such as stigmatizations of gender choices, sexual orientations or entire “lifestyles”), but was a universal, one-world threat. Maybe the first vision of the world that has emerged since the meagre one of so called “globalisation”. But does this mean this is a virus that attacks mankind and that therefore can only be combated by mankind working together? The still ongoing race to get a vaccine up to scale and widely available (even though, now there is a potential winner) might symptomatically bring out in what direction we are heading, since the prospect of privatizing something everyone needs is certainly one of the more horrifying aspects of the current situation. Therefore it seems imperative to learn what Mike Davis called the right lessons from this global pandemic that could point to a way if not out, but to one that might lead to a slight amelioration of the situation or might at least not be simply identical to a parachute-free skydive into the abyss.⁸ Not only is it more than ever relevant to defend science and scientificity, and not only must in situations like these – and in this sense, the current pandemic could serve as a significant precedent – state policing and government be oriented, informed and instructed by science and scientific research. Furthermore, the very nature of science must be – and this could amongst other things become a highly difficult, yet relevant task of the state(s) – protected, and this means it must be defended as something that takes place in distance from economic demands and needs, especially from the current global financial system. The right lesson to learn is not that states can only help their peoples when they limit democracy, but rather when they protect what is crucial for the survival of them, from universal health care, maybe even more than just basic, to adequate scientific research that must be shared universally and of which all privatization-attempts must not only be universally prohibited, but also scorned (at least). The tasks of the state could become that of a septum separating not only science (and medicine) from economy, but also politics from economy. All this will certainly become relevant for the imminent ecological disaster we are facing, too.

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⁸ Cf. Davis 2020b

Now, there is, especially for (Western) philosophers, a very specific viral threat in all this, a viral threat of the pandemic. Notably, to finally have come across the one phenomenon that seems to have significance for the entire world and that validates one's own theoretical perspective. We have seen an abundance of interpretations emerging with the pandemic and it may have appeared that the second seconded the first, ultimately proving that sometimes the business of philosophy appears to become manifest in interpreting the world differently and actually simply waiting for another occasion to do so. At times there seemed to be a certain dose of conceptual narcissism involved, following the logic that “if I do not have anything meaningful to say about this virus, my philosophical position might be not really worthwhile.” Others countered this, by emphasizing that a virus has in itself no meaning whatsoever and therefore it is rather indicative of a (narcissistic-hermeneutic) professional deformation to even embark on a search trip for it. The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* brings together an array of thinkers who all in their singular way deal with the effects of the virus, with how the pandemic was registered, with its resonances, with what kind of problems it potentially made visible or what kind of issues it brought to the fore, including the narcissistic tendency of “theory”, broadly speaking itself. Thereby, this issue did not invite people to simply interpret the inexistent deeper meaning of SARS-2, which in its viral-substance as its name indicates does not vary all too greatly from that of SARS-1 or MEARS, but to discuss what follows from it (even if the answer might be: nothing).⁹ In this sense, what you are about to read is an exercise in science-fiction, as we are trying to imagine in 2020 how 2020 will be remembered. But maybe this whole issue will one day be forgotten.

Berlin/Prishtina, November 2020

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⁹We also want to thank Ethan Foore for his support in preparing the present collection of articles.