

Insubordinate Conviviality and COVID-19¹

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There is no escaping COVID-19. And by now, most agree we all must contribute what we can to minimize the impact of this pandemic. Unfortunately, there is less agreement about what has changed and even more uncertainty about what will be our “new normal” as we pass through this crisis. The battle lines over what is or isn’t “normal” have never been more clearly drawn. Do we return to the system as it once was, resurrecting what brought us to this moment, or do we engage some other way of living, working, and celebrating together? As far back as March of 2020 many believed we would be well past the crisis by the end of summer. As we fast approach the winter holidays, we are told by state authorities to brace for another onerous three-week lockdown. The production of a vaccine and its eventual distribution promise some relief, but the confrontation with the pandemic has exposed the ill health of capitalism raising critical questions about our system and our humanity. “It is not wrong to say then,” declares Sandro Mezzadra, “that the current pandemic has hit a point of no return in the development of global capitalism.”²

Despite the grim reality of the outbreak and its spread as well as the insufferable response of political leaders in the U.S., from venal attempts to profit from the virus to outright denial,

¹ An earlier version of this essay first appeared in *Convivial Thinking* at <https://www.convivialthinking.org/index.php/2020/04/24/insubordinateconviviality/>.

² Sandro Mezzadra, “Politics of Struggles in the Time of Pandemic,” Verso blog <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4598-politics-of-struggles-in-the-time-of-pandemic>, accessed December 7, 2020.

what we have observed more and more, and may have forgotten was possible, are people cooperating and working together, affirming that we are and always have been connected. Part of a dense web of relations, we no longer have “the luxury” to imagine ourselves outside a thick, tangled skein of sociality. Before COVID-19, our interdependence may have been less visible, poorly understood, or dismissed as a result of the relentless interference typical of commodity intensive society. Although we are mired in the static from everything in place to prop it up, we remain connected. COVID-19, and, more importantly, the failed institutional response to it has not only revealed our underlying habits of cooperation and shared desires, it has also brutally exposed the limits and corrosive impact of racial patriarchal capitalism as a social mediating system.³

Even before the virus started to wreak havoc, capitalism had been dying.⁴ Robert Kurz and the *wertkritik* school of Marxist critique, for example, have long since warned that the shelf life of the current mode of production has expired.⁵ Autonomist Marxists of different stripes have also been sounding alarm bells about capitalism’s final stage.⁶ “If capital is to function as a historical concept,” McKenzie Wark suggests, “then the question of how and when it ends has to be an open one.”⁷ COVID-19’s rapid spread has not only disrupted just in time production and supply chains, it has also exposed the system’s multiple, intertwined fictions, especially, and

³ By referring to capitalism as a social mediating system, I am drawing from the work of Moishe Postone. See, for example, Moishe Postone, “The Task of Critical Theory Today: Rethinking the Critique of Capitalism and Its Futures,” *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 33 (2015): 3-28.

⁴ There has been some disagreement about whether or not capitalism is actually dying, or what we are experiencing is simply a “crisis.”

⁵ For a succinct introduction to the work of *wertkritik*, see Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson, and Nicholas Brown, eds., *Marxism and the Critique of Value* (Chicago: MCM, 2014). Anselm Jappe, *The Writing on the Wall: On the Decomposition of Capital and Its Critics* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2017).

⁶ The archive of autonomist Marxism is extensive, however for a discussion of capitalism’s most recent crisis from an autonomist Marxist perspective, see for example, Sandro Mezzadra, “Politics of Struggles in the Time of Pandemic,” Verso blog <<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4598-politics-of-struggles-in-the-time-of-pandemic>>, accessed December 7, 2020.

⁷ McKenzie Wark, *Capital is Dead* (London: Verso Books, 2019): 12.

most importantly, that people's worth only depends on what they earn or consume. Western governments like the U.S.'s mad scramble to send out checks to everyone they can along with subsidies and loans for businesses, small and large, further undermines that fiction, even if lawmakers still can't agree who is worthy and who is not, and how much people deserve or should be allocated to keep the system functioning. The point remains: if people don't buy stuff, especially buying stuff that they don't really need, the system collapses. And now, they can't get stuff, especially the basic, life-saving items people actually rely on. The neoliberal conceit that there is no alternative to capitalism and the renewed faith in the free market and the entrepreneurial individual by neoliberal shamans seems foolish now that there is talk of the need for a universal basic income and better coordination within and across industries while also facilitating public and private cooperation to produce badly needed personal protective equipment (PPE) and therapies to confront the COVID-19 threat.

The rush to produce a vaccine illustrates the point. Industry can be put in service of the common good, but the specter of profit haunts the effort. Early in the crisis, Trump's limited application of the Defense Production Act, some argue too little too late, revealed the system's contradictions. Initially it seemed the world's industrial leader and the center of world consumption could not produce sufficient amounts of ventilators, PPE, swabs, and other medical equipment to protect first responders and slow the spread. Even the limited number of hospital intensive care units (ICU) and beds indicates the limits of a system designed around commodities for the privileged few and not health. We have been content to build "a world," according to Max Brooks, "built on comfort and not resilience."⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this essay to

⁸ "All Of This Panic Could Have Been Prevented": Author Max Brooks On COVID-19", *NPR Fresh Air*, <<https://www.npr.org/2020/03/24/820601571/all-of-this-panic-could-have-been-prevented-author-max-brooks-on-covid-19>> accessed on December 7, 2020.

interrogate President Trump’s handling of the Covid-19 moment, it is clear as more information surfaces that Trump and many people in his inner circle may have attempted to profit from the production and distribution of PPE. More to the point, beyond Trump’s corruption and ineptitude, health care and even disasters have long been treated as sources of value. Bonds for disasters often interfere with the needed response to save lives. As the pandemic advanced and demands for PPE increased, supply-chains became, according to Angela Mitropoulos, opaque, underscoring that “PPE is a commodity.”⁹ The twin snakes of the caduceus converted into bio-capitalism and financial capitalism.¹⁰

Of course, the absurdities of neoliberal planners and the brutalities imposed by state and supra-state institutions on ordinary people have long been contested. When the Zapatistas entered the world stage in 1994 they helped mark an entirely new collective refusal, one that advanced in conjunction with a succession of convergences and rebellions that accumulated definitive force in 1999, again in 2006 with the massive migrant marches and Oaxaca commune, and with the Occupations of 2011, up to the present—these few notable moments unfolding alongside the countless insurgencies across the globe contesting structural adjustment, extractivist predation, and operational warfare.

Not surprisingly, governments across the globe, especially highly industrialized ones like the U.S., have followed the well-worn ruts of “war thinking” —mobilizing against COVID-19 as an enemy of the state. Bureaucrats and pundits alike easily mouth the bellicose rhetoric, ballyhooing about wartime sacrifices and cajoling a collective austerity secured through affirmations of national identity to defeat the newest threat to the people, even if the “we” is overdetermined by race and gender and other technologies of difference. As Shaun Ossei-Owusu

⁹ Angela Mitropoulos, *Pandemonium*, (London: Pluto Press, 2020): 99.

¹⁰ Kaushik Sunder Rajan, *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

reminds us, “Covid-19 is not discriminatory as a biological matter, but history and available accounts indicate that the epidemiological fallout has been and will continue to be weighty and uneven.”¹¹ But zealous, national chauvinism can’t hide self-serving interest. The two trillion dollar bailout steered through Congress by Trump’s cabinet and the new package currently under consideration promise to be a massive bailout for industry and as many warn, a transfer of funds to the lever pullers with little to no safeguards. The 2008 crisis is replayed as farce barely a decade later.

More to the point, these are the same self-serving paid spokespeople, politicians and pundits alike, who relentlessly promoted a complex, interconnected series of seemingly endless wars: the war on drugs, the war on terror, war against immigrants, and a series of wars on crime. But, it’s really one war, what the Zapatistas call the Fourth World War.¹² It is war fought out to ruthlessly extract what can be taken, one where the U.S. military dollar backs up the new world order of a divided globe organized through what W.E.B Du Bois called a democratic despotism, that is an armed national association propped up by a collaboration between capital and labor that systematically exploits the “darker nations” of the world, at home and abroad, for the luxury of a select few in the global north.¹³

A generation before the Zapatistas issued their clarion call that another world is possible, Ivan Illich warned against a relentless war against subsistence, a war where we are less and less able to recognize the battle lines and determine the real enemy, much less how we are being defeated. A war against subsistence targets the vernacular, the competencies of everyday people

¹¹ Shaun Ossei-Owusu, “Covid-19 and the Politics of Disposability,” in *Politics of Care* (Cambridge: Boston Review, 2020): 116.

¹² El Kilombo Intergaláctico, *Beyond Resistance: Everything, An Interview with Subcomandante Marcos* (Durham: Paperboat Press, 2007).

¹³ Du Bois, W.E.B. “African Roots of War” *Atlantic Monthly* 115:5 (May 1915).

and the knowledges and practices they exercise on a daily basis to live in the localities they claim.¹⁴ This war has been executed since the dawn of capitalism through intertwined criminalizations and pacifications, but more recently has become particularly destructive for targeted groups increasingly treated as disposable. In the U.S. case more so since Vietnam, it has been executed through low intensity warfare and counterinsurgency mostly, but not always, managed through proxies, like the state of Israel, or where governments prosecute it themselves as in India's ongoing occupation and persecution of Kashmir. At home in the U.S., counterinsurgency unfolds through a matrix of state and state-manufactured violence often made more visible in the moment of a police shooting and the repression that follows.

In the end, it is the imposition of market logics and commodity intensive regimes accompanied by a discipline of individuating practices and a repressive apparatus to enforce the production of difference that rip apart the social fabric. It isn't enough that there should be a Walmart on every corner in America, there have to be Walmart Super Centers and Targets across the globe. Illich presciently warned that "even when price tags are attached that reflect the environmental impact, the disvalue of nuisance, or the cost of polarization, we still do not clearly see that the division of labor, the multiplication of commodities, and the dependence on them have forcibly standardized packages for almost everything people formerly did or made on their own."¹⁵

In California, the state government's order for citizens to shutter-in exposes the contradictions neoliberal planners refused to accept. In this new world, grocery store clerks, stockers, and deliverers have been designated emergency or essential personnel. Of course, those able to work at home and shelter in place somewhat comfortably are able do so because of those

¹⁴ Ivan Illich, "War Against Subsistence," in *Shadow Work* (London: Marion Boyars, 1981).

¹⁵ Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1977): 7.

who are more easily put at risk as front-line workers in health care; picking, packaging, and serving food; and even working in Amazon warehouses. Not only precarious and necessary workers but also those outside the labor force all together and on the streets or living along creeks and parks who are more likely to be folks of color and “have been delivered to disease by their history—U.S. history.”¹⁶ When we are forced to stay off the streets, shop close to home, labor from within our homes, and entertain ourselves within confined spaces we are confronted with the excess and waste of a commodity intensive society organized around individual consumption and pleasures even as we may long for a return to normalcy.

The excesses and destructive force of what Illich called industrial mode of production, a.k.a capitalism, have long been known. Worried about over dependence on commodities, Illich proposed a “counterfoil research” to differentiate between industrial and convivial tools and to uncover the corrosive impact of those commodities and industrial systems that impose and circulate them, e.g. transportation, education, and health industry to name just a few. Industrial tools rob us of our ability to subsist outside of market logics and commodity discipline. The battle is to reclaim convivial tools, or those practices and strategies of self-organization that insure all members of a community are involved in the process of coming to agreement about and for the community’s regeneration. We are reminded of our desire to cooperate —“mutual aid!” is now shouted by more than just anarchists across America.

The COVID 19 conjuncture requires a counterfoil research. As we discover new ways to cooperate and reclaim what had been mediated, we rebuild our social networks, increase our interactive capacities, and expand our reservoir for empathy taking advantage of whatever platforms and spaces might work. Zoom is overwhelmed, but it has been commandeered to bring

¹⁶ Colin Gordon, Walter Johnson, Jason Q. Purnell, and Jamala Rogers, “Covid-19 and the Color Line,” in *Politics of Care* (Cambridge: Boston Review, 2020): 119.

together the dense network of relations we often take for granted or forget about when we are stuck in traffic and isolated in our cars in the race to get to our jobs. Our appropriation of that and other digital platforms can be an opportunity to seek out non-privatized alternatives, as May First Movement Technology (<https://mayfirst.coop>) proposes. The proliferating digital encounters not only map out our need to be connected, even if only virtually for the time being, they have also been used to organize—to postpone or end rent, student loans, and other usurious debts, as well as coordinating efforts to get food, shelter, and health care to those who desperately need it. But, it is also an opportunity to reorganize life outside of commodities—food, shelter, health, and learning claimed as human rights, not operated as markets.

The challenges of working from home or virtual learning, as companies, school systems, colleges, and universities desperately try to maintain their authority and control over laborers and learners, expose a critical dilemma in this particular conjuncture, namely the challenges we face in managing information and converting it into knowledge to insure, for example, we are all well informed and able to make effective, collective decisions as we navigate the COVID-19 conjuncture. As privatized and government systems break-down, we are tasked with reclaiming commons, e.g. knowledge commons, as so many have been advocating amidst the long-standing environmental catastrophe that has been further laid bare by COVID-19. The question of how we will organize our learning to intellectually enrich ourselves, serve our communities, and collectively steward the planet becomes more urgent as we confront university degrees increasingly commodified and education converted into a site of consumption on campuses shamelessly privatized. How might we learn what we need to learn to survive? More importantly, how do we learn, as Fred Moten asks, to tread lightly on the planet?

The lesson of COVID-19 is not demanding universal health care, although that is long overdue. It is making clear we need to more fully, collectively transition to a new comprehensive system that is not racial patriarchal capitalism. In this breach, we should consider conviviality, not as the alternative or the teleological end to capitalism's demise, but as a praxis to facilitate our transition. Conviviality's focus on interrogating the current system, distinguishing between corrosive and convivial tools, and emphasizing community regeneration is vital as we research, learn, and experiment with new tools, systems, and practices in our shared effort to rebuild the social infrastructure that was brutally destroyed by phases of capitalist accumulation. Modes of conviviality that include a commitment to interrogate the epistemology of the current system through, for example, convivial research and insurgent learning, a commitment to distinguish between corrosive industrial tools and those convivial tools that make community regeneration possible, and an embrace of a politics of (re)subjectivization, or the possibility of a radical transformation, can point to autonomous alternatives. It can re-orient us to the self-organized efforts of (re)building a social infrastructure of community that includes practices, knowledges, grassroots institutions, and convivial tools. Conviviality embodies the circulation of reliable information, informed collective decision making, shared obligations of coordinated action, and deliberate assessment of success which are not separated and carried out by bureaucracies, corporate/non-profit boards, or CEOs outside of a self-organized community.

The point is that there must be a strategy for active members of a locally-rooted community to generate their own information determined by local experiences, filter competing knowledges, determine shared obligations, make strategic decisions, act out of "fierce care," and assess the success of the strategy.¹⁷ Decisions that impact a community cannot occur at the top or

¹⁷ Callahan, Manuel and Annie Paradise. "Fierce Care: Politics of Care in the Zapatista Conjuncture." *Transversal* (2017), <<https://transversal.at/blog/Fierce-Care>>.

outside of the community nor exercised exclusively by elites. All elements have to be integrated. A community, or as Wendell Berry describes it, that “commonwealth and common interests, commonly understood, of people living together in a place and wishing to do so,” is necessarily a decision-making body. Conviviality is about reclaiming or inventing tools, that is tools that make it possible for a community to claim and assert its dignity and regenerate itself while insuring everyone in the community is able to participate making informed decisions and entering into agreements that advance the community without negatively impacting any one member. One prominent example of a convivial tool is the assembly. Not an organization or congregation, not an aggregation of individuals, not an event, but a collective subject. Now, more than ever is the time to relearn the habits of assembly.

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