

The Middle-Class Leviathan: Corona, the “Fascism” Blackmail, and the Defeat of the Working Class

Elena Louisa Lange
and Joshua
Pickett-Depaolis

Abstract: After months of an unprecedented global economic shutdown in the spring of 2020, whose political orchestration by elite liberals and conservatives kept the world in suspense, it all suddenly seems like a memory from the past: within days, the same liberal elites, now hitching themselves to the riots against racist police violence in the US, put social distancing measures on the line. The volatility of the liberal imaginary, which can be seen in the view of the police as the beneficial state enforcer of the “Stay at Home, Save Lives” -policy in one minute, and a “structurally racist” institution in the next, is not incidental, however. In fact, as this article will argue, at no point in history has society been so unequivocally submitted to the Leviathanic “mood swings” of the professional-managerial class, historically known as despotism, which express the helpless discontent of this strata, while reinforcing the dictatorship of capital and the political absence of the working class.

The authoritarian excesses of left-liberal elite thinking however, find their logic in the need to construct a spectacle of mass consensus around continued neoliberal restructuring through the deployment of an alleged ‘fascist’ threat. Today, a left which represents the interests of the professional middle classes demands unity around its agenda of therapeutic authoritarianism in the name of struggle against the ‘extreme right’. We counter both the Middle Class Leviathan and the populist right by making the case for an exit from the culturalist class war from above, and a return to the defence of working class interests.

Keywords: Marxism, Populism, Public Health, Coronavirus, Neoliberalism, Labour Movement, Fascism, lockdown,

Lockdown Enthusiasm and the European Left

The spring of 2020 was a great time for the authoritarian personality. Political commentators from *The Guardian* to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, television hosts of the BBC, the ARD and ZDF, TF 1 and France 2, reported and listened attentively as experts and pundits from respectable institutions became the new frontier of political decision-making – while the likes of Macron, Merkel and Johnson barely registered in the splendour of the new philosopher kings.¹ In a moment of the biggest global health crisis since the Spanish flu of World War I, the outbreak of a deadly virus of animal origin in China that spread all over the world within three months, these virologists and epidemiologists – Prof. Christian Drosten of Charité Berlin, the now infamous Prof. Neil Ferguson of Imperial College London, and Jérôme

.....
¹ Except for Boris Johnson who during his recovery from a Covid-19 infection received roughly as many speedy recovery as passionate death wishes on social media.

Salomon, managing director for Santé— seemed naturally appointed with the mission to simply tell everyone what to do, with politicians, administrators, even EU officials acting at their mercy. In the short moment between frenzy and panic, when it seemed that even Frau Merkel was out of her depth, a sudden inner state of emergency caught on in the public sphere. While this new level of enthusiastic submission to experts was surely pandered to by an unhinged and clueless political apparatus, it also surpassed it: a German journalist, looking pastoral and grave, yet calm and collected, spoke in the name of the many, not the few, when he announced on March 19th on the German national broadcaster ARD that “while curfews have always been associated with dictatorships we correctly pride ourselves to have fought against, we should also recognise when the time has come to make an exception.”²

This newly discovered love for curfews, the ‘rule of state’, and social distancing rules has however been quite popular with the left and the left-liberal side of the political spectrum. Even for observers who have long noticed the topsy-turvy appropriation of culturalist, originally right-wing views on the self-proclaimed left, this seemed slightly unsettling. Police actions in parks against individuals reading books on benches, police using drones to shame individuals walking their dogs in the Derbyshire Peak District with not a soul in sight, police control of ‘social distancing’ measures – notice how the WHO’s brief attempt to replace the term with ‘physical distancing’ was a stillborn idea – were deemed necessary, especially by the members of society who could afford a house with a garden. Needless to say, the obedience to social rules in a situation that seemed exceptional and unprecedented for many, was also reflected in applauding the NHS and other national health care providers – unless they were on strike for better working conditions and higher pay which was met with ‘disappointment’ that they refused to care for patients.³ Likewise, for the educated, left leaning middle class, reflecting on the plight of women and ‘people of colour’ was an *affaire d’honneur*, except for those living in refugee camps. Accordingly, COVID-19, viewed under the aspect of neoliberal competition between genders and races, was soon instrumentalised as a victorious field for women in the gender war, and female political leaders were painted as ‘the secret weapon in the fight against Coronavirus’⁴. And anyone who thought that the pandemic would induce the end of the neoliberal order as we know it, and thus the somewhat (one may be inclined to think) less urgent obsession with identity, could be quickly corrected by pointing

.....
2 “Tagesschau”, March 19th, 2020.

3 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-07/coronavirus-marks-the-best-and-worst-time-for-workers-to-strike>

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/11/secret-weapon-fight-against-coronavirus-women>

out that “Your ‘strange’ crush on Rishi Sunak could actually be a racist fetish“, as the *Independent* noted on April 9th, and the lament that ‘The key decisions about lockdown and containment are all being made by men.’⁵ The lockdown itself, incidentally, has never been subject to debate, to the contrary: “Stay Home, Save Lives” became the new social order whose transgression, except for the unlucky majority of the workforce deemed essential, the state force was allowed to fine and sanction, backed by left-leaning middle class consent.

Lockdown enthusiasts on the political left, such as uncalled-for opinion-promoter Owen Jones, became experts on social rules and top-down advice to ‘prevent the death of 250 K people’, as Neil Ferguson put it, before he himself became a victim of the lockdown rules he designed and helped to set up. However, especially for poorer people with school age children who, in order to benefit from social benefits, are required to perform ‘mini-jobs’ deemed ‘essential’, or workers whose access to the job market is defined by their ‘system-relevant’ character (retail, logistics, production), homeschooling and parenting are excruciating tasks and, more often than not, simply impossible. Yet, the most outspoken propagation for the extension of school closures and zero tolerance for calls to reopen schools came precisely from left-wing outlets such as Novara Media whose Ash Sarkar, in various Tweets, aggressively advocated homeschooling, completely ignoring the question of class in that private schools will ensure the education of their pupils, while working class families struggle on⁶ – not a great look for a ‘literal communist’. And Keir Milburn, keen on a counter-factual moral elevation of the lockdown as the ‘realm of freedom’, suggested, in a grotesque non sequitur, that ‘the left’s embrace of lockdown comes from a more democratic mode of thinking which starts by recognising how our actions impact on others and how other people, in turn, affect us, but then moves to recognise more impersonal structures, such as racism, sexism, and capitalism, that constrain our lives and make one course of action more likely than another’⁷. Our actions impact others, and other people’s actions impact us: forget Marx, Weber or Durkheim, here comes the real exegesis of the individual in late capitalism.

In fact, however, educated and left-leaning people’s enthusiastic embrace of authoritarianism during the Corona pandemic bizarrely reveals their deep agreement with the world as it is. The left’s newly discovered love for state authority and organs enforcing these measures, a love in the name of the ‘vulnerable’, precisely reflects

.....
5 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/11/memo-to-the-uk-womens-voices-can-also-be-useful-in-this-crisis>

6 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/15/2m-children-in-uk-have-done-almost-no-school-work-in-lockdown>

7 <https://novaramedia.com/2020/06/01/the-pandemic-is-changing-how-it-feels-to-be-free/>

a *radical indifference* towards the precariat and 'underclass'. The unfortunate debate over "life" vs. "the economy" reveals this. In a recent article, written by no one less than revered Marxist icon Paul Mattick Jr. and aptly titled "Their Money or Your Life"⁸, this strange acceptance of the false dichotomy of life and money, under capitalist relations of production no less, comes to the fore. One would think that a verified Marxist knew better than to think that 'life' bare and simple stood in opposition to moneyed interests, whether from capitalists or workers themselves whose sale of labour power presents the sole means of survival. Instead, Mattick somewhat idealistically advocates the great opportunity the lockdown presents for 'rethinking our lives' and organising 'our' resources: "There has been an explosion of mutual aid in myriad forms, from amateur mask-making to bringing food to health workers to something as complex as improvising a computerized health-care system (in Cape Town, South Africa). In Spain 200 taxi drivers, many of them from Pakistan, organized themselves to provide free transportation for doctors and other medical workers."⁹ This romance with communizing forms for organising poverty apparently sees no cognitive dissonance of a specifically cynical type with people dependent on food banks for survival who are "finding them overwhelmed from one day to the next" and the strange optimism evaporating from the contention that "[everyone] is forced to rethink what life is about, not to mention how to keep it going." In fact, we learn, the "shutdown of business as usual has had other (sic) positive effects: blue skies over Beijing; dolphins in the canals of Venice; a relatively traffic- and smog-free Los Angeles", a remark that can be repudiated for its guilelessness alone, were it not for its naive reproduction of fake news.¹⁰ This bizarre fetishisation of a disruption to regular economic activity however seems to think the spread of the virus is giving workers 'something bigger to fear than their boss'¹¹, when revolting Latin Americans in late May identified this fear not as the virus, but as starvation.¹²

Workers in Chile, Columbia, Mexico, Libya, and India, for instance, could only hope for a level of 'normality' that the enforcement of global economic shutdown so enthusiastically embraced by PMCs and leftist

8 <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/05/field-notes/Their-Money-or-Your-Life?>

9 <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/05/field-notes/Their-Money-or-Your-Life>

10 <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-fake-animal-viral-social-media-posts/>

11 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-07/coronavirus-marks-the-best-and-worst-time-for-workers-to-strike>, quoted in Mattick above.

12 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52717402>.

intellectuals in the West made impossible. With whole industries disrupting production and a literal expulsion of workers onto the streets of Mumbai, Delhi, Santiago, Tripoli, and Mexico City, from street vendors to factory workers, from sex workers to the retail and hospitality sectors, the abstract sanctification of 'life' vs. cold economic interests begins to look pale. For Marx, needless to say, 'to be a productive worker is ... not a piece of luck, but a misfortune'¹³ - but a misfortune, no less, that secures daily survival. In fact, this disinterestedness in the concrete lives of - dare we say it - black and brown people in the Global South parodies the interest in the 'dignity' of an abstract 'human being' that feigns consideration of the plight of non-Westerners, as it parodies the alleged concern over racism and sexism. According to Adorno and Marcuse, it is precisely bourgeois, and, indeed, middle class bourgeois consciousness that generates an abstract apotheosis of the human being, while being succinctly disinterested in his or her daily survival. The talk and apotheosis of "man" (Mensch), or "life" bare and simple, in fact, "simply defect us from seeing how little it is here a question of man, who has been condemned to the status of an appendage."¹⁴ And since Marcuse we know that "[culture] ... exalts the individual without freeing him from his factual debasement. Culture speaks of the dignity of 'man' without concerning itself with a concretely more dignified status for men."¹⁵ The outrage at individuals transgressing social distancing measures - "you want people to die!" - ironically expresses this disinterestedness in the actual lives of people, paralleled by the indifference towards actual social change for the stratum of society that suffers most under the class politics of lockdown. As though they lived in an alternate reality, for the liberal, and sometimes the radical left,¹⁶ the lockdown became the site of struggle of a science-guided paternal state against 'selfish people' enjoying themselves in outside spaces like parks and beaches. In the name of the 'vulnerable', it absorbed an authoritarian *Kulturkampf* on its own terms, that at best disregarded the ramification of total economic shutdown for the poorest, and at worst whipped up a classist resentment against ordinary, often working, individuals to whom the often-used label 'vulnerable' mysteriously never applies. In the spring of 2020, in short, the authoritarian personality found a safe harbour in the left middle class.

13 Marx, 1976, p. 644.

14 Adorno, 1973, p. 60-61.

15 Marcuse, 1968.

16 <https://www.marx21.de/hygienedemos-die-brandstifter-sitzen-in-den-chefetagen/>

Social Distancing No More: the rise of the Middle Class Leviathan

In late May, debates around the Coronavirus-induced economic shock suddenly seemed like a remnant of the past: in the wake of the atrocious murder of George Floyd by a Minnesota police officer, one more in a series of gruesomely violent murders of unarmed black men and women by state officials in the US in recent years, people took to the streets. Within days, mass lootings and riots in Minnesota spread across 50 major cities, and the Black Lives Matter-movement whose political force had temporarily waned, was spectacularly resuscitated in the several million strong global protests against police violence. 'Punching cops', sneered at as a white working class hobby in protest of lockdown measures, suddenly became a noble thing to do. Nurses who only weeks ago urged everyone to 'flatten the curve' and held up signs that read 'Stay home for us' have switched to signs reading 'White coats for black lives' and joined the ranks of worldwide protest against racist police violence. As *Politico* magazine has noted, 'some of the most prominent public health experts in America, like former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director Tom Frieden, who loudly warned against efforts to rush reopening ... is now supportive of mass protests. Their claim: If we don't address racial inequality, it'll be that much harder to fight Covid-19.'¹⁷ This new signalling of solidarity with the protestors stood in clear contrast to the condemnation by the same professionals of the (mainly white) so-called 'public health gatherings' from a few weeks earlier. As could be expected, the disparaging of these earlier protests had a political motive, as an open letter, signed by nearly 1300 public health professionals, infectious diseases professionals, and community stakeholders, revealed: 'As of May 30, we are witnessing continuing demonstrations in response to ongoing, pervasive, and lethal institutional racism set off by the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among many other Black lives taken by police. A public health response to these demonstrations is also warranted, but this message must be wholly different from the response to white protesters resisting stay-home orders. Infectious disease and public health narratives adjacent to demonstrations against racism must be consciously anti-racist, and infectious disease experts must be clear and consistent in prioritizing an anti-racist message.'¹⁸

What happened? How could this open cognitive dissociation – 'we oppose protests and support lockdown, except for the lockdown violating protests we support' – be rationalised? Does anti-racism beat an infectious disease on the social urgency-scale? Because there is

17 <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/06/04/public-health-protests-301534>

18 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jyfn4Wd2i6bRi12ePghMHtX3ys1b7K1A/view>

no objective in the nature of the offense, nor in the reactions to it, that justifies the spread of Covid-19 – especially because '[black] people are ... more likely to develop COVID-19', as the letter contends – , the signatories are unequivocal in their *political* motivation to support one kind of protest while condemning the other, compromising their own concern for public health. To be sure, at the very beginning, the quasi-insurrectionary explosion against police violence and racism in the US were not orchestrated by the educated middle class, but came from the underclass, the so-called 'surplus proletariat' of a mostly precariously employed black urban population whose per capita wealth ranks alongside that of an adult in Palestine.¹⁹ But just as quickly, two notable appropriations of the riots took place, one by geography, and one by social stratum. The first took off immediately after Floyd's murder became news in Europe, with London, Manchester, Berlin, Paris - "Black Lives Matter *ici aussi!*" - Copenhagen, Stockholm, but also major cities outside Europe, as in Australia, mobilising the biggest mass protest since the anti-Austerity revolts of ten years ago and, in France, defying the police ban over health concerns. As Alex Hochuli has recently written²⁰, this export of social problems emblematic of the US to 'rich-world countries' in Europe and Australasia 'involves a short-circuit between American and non-American identities', paradoxically identifying their mostly middle class social being with that of 'underdog' Americans. This is hardly surprising in the face of a political elite in Europe, and especially in the UK, that 'has been at great pains to recast itself as post-racial and multicultural for decades'²¹, often in open abhorrence of the working class. The recent mobilisation, therefore, of mostly young, liberal, 'instinctively cosmopolitan', well-educated people from the middle strata of society denotes the final victory of the globalisation of wokeness that has filled the void of protests against austerity, refugee governance, and the EU's handling of the crisis from the last decade. Most of all, however, it demonstrates the victory of a new political agitator-subject: the left liberal PMC. Its power to impose lockdown 'to save 250 K lives', and just as quickly to lift it when it can appropriate a movement to shape it in its own image, no longer follows any rational agency nor political guidelines, but its own interest as the ideologically most powerful class, which widely determines political and medial debates, decisions, legal implementations, and reception of events, historical or actual. As political scientist Philip Cunliffe has noted, 'The global BLM protests – i.e. those outside the US – are

19 <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/what-if-black-america-were-a-country/380953/>

20 <https://damagemag.com/2020/06/17/the-triumph-of-american-idealism/>

21 Ibid.

a tremendous demonstration of global middle class power. They're clearly announcing to the world, 'We get to decide when lockdown ends, and governments will let us do what we want, because as you can see.'"²² The Middle Class Leviathan, born out of the failure of the political class to deal with political disillusionment, now 'gets to decide', filling the void of the orchestrator of political decision-making, dictating its own neoliberal policy in the 'interest of all.' Here is where Jeff Bezos, Unilever's Ben and Jerry, AirBnb, Apple, and Google step in to present their own policy in the light of concerns about racism, while systematically undermining demands for higher pay, punishing strikes, attacking workers rights.

The culture war, clear as daylight to anyone with eyes to see, was a class war to begin with – but a class war from above.

The Party System as the Echo Chamber of the Leviathan

If the classical social democratic and post-Stalinist parties represented the corporatist integration of the workers as a class within bourgeois society, today's centre left, like its populist nemesis, is a playground for the fractured middle strata.²³ Decades of restructuring have successfully returned the working class to its "natural state" as an atomized mass of precarious and disposable bearers of labour power increasingly unfamiliar with even the most basic forms of self-organisation.²⁴

This void not only forms an omnipresent barrier to any renewed emancipatory mass politics, but by the same token takes any possibility of truly radical reaction off the table. Fascism and National Socialism emerged historically as a response to the direct and indirect effects of the October Revolution, as a counter-movement to a global working class offensive for state power. Today's working class is hardly able to aspire to the "partial autonomy" of corporatism, let alone the "complete autonomy" of class dictatorship.²⁵

In this environment, fascism as a movement of "revolutionary conservation"²⁶ is left without a credible enemy to mobilize against and

.....
²² Philip Cunliffe on Twitter, June 6th, 2020.

²³ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/09/16/the-brahmin-left-vs-the-merchant-right-a-comment-on-thomas-pikettys-new-book/>

²⁴ <https://lbo-news.com/2018/09/10/sadly-there-is-no-strike-wave/>, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/may/30/strikes-in-uk-fall-to-lowest-level-since-records-began-in-1893>.

²⁵ Gramsci Antonio, 1996, Volume 2, p 92.

²⁶ As Nikolai Bukharin observed at the XII Congress of the Bolshevik Party: "More than the representatives of any other party, the Fascists have embodied and put into practice the experience of the Russian Revolution. If we consider them from a formal perspective, that is, from the perspective of the strategy of their political methods, we see a perfect application of Bolshevik tactics, and specifically, of Russian Bolshevism, in the form of a rapid concentration of forces and a vigorous action carried out by a steady and compact military organisation." Cited in Losurdo Dominic, 2004, p 44.

therefore stillborn as a state project. Even in those underdeveloped countries such as Turkey and India where movements closest in form and content to classical fascism have seized power, their disinclination to abolish the parliamentary regime is indicative of the lack of any enemy worthy of the name. In the developed world, fascism as a paramilitary movement for the abolition of bourgeois democracy is noteworthy for its total absence from the political mainstream. In the West today, the dream of right wing revolution is restricted to a marginal underground which like its Islamist co-thinkers is more fodder for security service manipulations than a threat to "constitutional order".

This absence of fascism poses a problem for left liberalism which closely parallels that of the deficit in worker radicalism for the right. After all, in the absence of a reactionary offensive, the left liberal program of multiculturalism, feminism, anti-ableism, trans activism, etc. increasingly comes to appear as exactly what it is: passive submission to the dictatorship of capital in its now stale post 68' rebrand as pluralistic liberation.

Thankfully, this particular form of historical development provides an elegant if not completely satisfactory solution. The triumph of post-modern liberalism among the cultural elites creates a counter-movement in the form of a diffuse resentment, especially among the impoverished middle classes and parts of the working class, which stretches from building contractors and car dealership owners to pensioners and manual workers. Feeling bereft of not only the economic stability they enjoyed prior to restructuring but even the empty symbolic recognition which liberalism grants its favourite minorities in lieu of any respite from the continual material brutalization it cheerfully inflicts, these malcontents assert their discontent in the form of "populism".

What emerges, in consequence, is a cross class coalition of atomized resentment, anchored in middle class fractions without the cultural capital of the PMC and workers unmoored from traditional worker politics. If populism in power is little more than business as usual, performed with a melodramatic flair and a taste for the absurd, paradigmatic in Trump, that in no way deters left liberalism from making the best of the situation and christening it "fascism" or at least a terrifying slide towards the same.

The core of the contradiction between liberalism and populism is not political at all, but aesthetic. Little more can be expected in the post-historical void created by the defeat of the working class. The liberal prefers the marching orders of big capital to be dictated to her by a calm and neutral technocrat with the gravitas of a statesman. The populist on the contrary wants an entertainment product worthy of stand up-comedy or reality TV to distract him from his gray abjection. What is crucial is not the substantially identical political content, but its discursive packaging. Will the totalised real domination of capital

market itself as “government by nerds” or an “anti-establishment” circus act? In either case living labour is so much flesh for the slaughter.

If Eastern Bloc protestors helped inaugurate the “end of history” by taking their yearning for novel consumer brands to the streets, Trump voters gave it a new lease on life by showing their preference for a novel political brand in the polling booth. However, this aesthetic opposition is all the liberal left needs to rally its support base in an unending and exceedingly low intensity struggle against its own mirror image.

In the liberal left imaginary, Trump’s violations of the right to asylum or possible post-Brexit restrictions of immigration become Nazi-like atrocities to be fought whatever the cost. EU concentration camps in Libya? Not so much. Trump’s Twitter tirades against protesters are seen as Klan-like outbursts, Obama’s dismissal of protesters as “thugs” is forgotten.

Just as populism substitutes for an absent fascism in the paranoid imaginary of the liberal left, it in turn plays the same role for its right wing partner in crime. Within this logic, woke capitalism is denounced as “cultural Marxism” and investment in green energy is abhorred as the first step in a transition to communism. The only thing lacking in this theatre production is authentic antagonism. Not only is the capital relation itself beyond question, the modifications of its accumulation regime open to consideration remain narrowly constricted.

Even on the seemingly contested terrain of immigration, the differences are more apparent than real. If Trump’s wall is merely a finishing touch on what was already one of the most militarized borders in the world, the demand to “abolish ICE” is an act of rhetorical extremism which in practice constitutes a call to - restore the INS.²⁷ Likewise, Corbyn calls for 10000 more policemen on the streets while Johnson in power nationalizes the railways.

If the Chinese ruling class is compelled by its mode of exercising hegemony to conceal its factional differences behind an image of monolithic unity, Western democracy conceals its monolithic unity behind an increasingly dramatic image of existential combat.

Like a television show with falling ratings, the managers of democracy resort to outrageous plot twists to hold on to a diminishing body of viewers. However, despite their best efforts the viewers increasingly recognise that the wild hijinks on the screen correspond to nothing in their own increasingly precarious lives and change the channel. The working class non-voter is essentially a realist.

As Lenin observed of the conflict between Republicans and Democrats in the early years of the 20th century: "Their fight has not had any serious importance for the mass of the people. The people

.....
27The INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) was the agency responsible for immigration enforcement prior to the transfer of this function to the newly formed ICE in 2003.

have been deceived and diverted from their vital interests by means of spectacular and meaningless duels between the two bourgeois parties."²⁸

Social Movements as Mobilization Campaigns and the Leviathan as “Transmission Belt”

The middle class cannot have a politics of its own. In the absence of a worker drive to abolish the value relation it is condemned reluctantly or not, to play the same role in political life that it does in the production process: that of a functionary of capital.

From BLM to the Climate Strike, from the Women’s March to #unteilbar, the social movements of today are constituted by a strata of middle class functionaries who mobilize an inter-class mass around an agenda suitable to big capital which foots the bill for the operations of its cadre via the non-profit sector. Speaking of the opposition between state and civil society in today’s liberal pluralist regime is a mystification. The state *and* civil society are alternating modalities of mass mobilization and control in the interest of the famous “one percent”.

The conspiracy theories of the right who see the “progressive” movements of today as the packaged product of a financial elite are not so much wrong as *incomplete*. They inevitably neglect to add that it is other factions of the very same elite who bankroll their own “organic and spontaneous” movements for the “traditional family” or “secure borders”. In fact, the more the working class is atomized and deprived of any substantive representation, the more actual political life comes to resemble the most paranoid conspiracy theory.

The working class is reduced to disorganized gestures of protest. Whether raiding Paris or burning the Third Precinct, both are almost seamlessly absorbed within the narratives of the bourgeois parties and their middle-class functionaries. Just as Lenin saw the trade unions as a “transmission belt”²⁹ between the proletarian party and the disorganized masses, contemporary civil society functions as the transmission belt between the cadre of state monopoly capital and the workers reduced to citizen-consumers.

A perpetual activist mobilization which ensures the continued demobilization and isolation of the majority is the governing logic of contemporary “social movements”. The dynamic of party competition and of opposition allows for the minimum of vitality and flexibility required to sustain the system. The bourgeois monopoly of the political party system finds its necessary support in the repetitive mass campaigns of the apparatus of managed discontent.

.....
28 Lenin V.I, 1975 Volume 18, p 402-3.

29 Lenin V.I, 1975, Volume 42, p 382.

The middle class which staffs this Leviathan resents the real managers of the system to the same extent it depends on them to pay the bills. Therefore, all elements of this machine share a faux radicalism of the lowest common denominator, indicated by attacks on the “corrupt political establishment” or moralistic outrage against “racial capitalism”. Whatever its diverse forms of appearance, this radicalism encounters a common destiny in the helpless reproduction of the established order it claims to abhor.

Every popular democratic demand finds its organized expression monopolised by the middle class functionaries of big capital. In this context, democratic movements are turned towards the reactionary end of perpetuating the political nullification of the working class and the unchallenged leadership of the bourgeois over the public sphere.

The sectarian left, surviving from the October Revolution far from seeking to reconstruct independent worker politics as a precondition for leadership over civil society, embarrass themselves by playacting as the extreme left of petty bourgeois democracy. The struggle against oppression replaces the abolition of exploitation in their conceptual horizon. And particularly activism in popular movements eclipses the organization of workers power in their practical activity. On the other side of the coin, the spontaneist trend simply endorses the primitive forms of protest remaining in the aftermath of working class defeat. Both converge in subordinating themselves to the “reactionary democracy” through which the petty bourgeois and its capitalist paymasters monopolise discontent.

Finally, those who look towards a renewed social democracy hope to break the PMC monopoly on the brokerage of popular discontent in favour of a renewed labour aristocracy. Like in the “good old days” before neoliberalism, the bourgeois will once more be cajoled to pay a hefty sum to whole categories of privileged workers as the price of hegemony. The PMC Leviathan will be replaced by a labour bureaucratic Behemoth integrating the workers within bourgeois society not as atomized individuals, but an estate. Unfortunately for these dreamers, the compromise they seek to restore only emerged as a side effect of the revolutionary struggle.

The tendencies described above are not simply subjective errors, but a reflection of the comprehensive defeat of the working class in the realm of ideas. Facing this catastrophe the temptation to find an easy way out – whether in identifying petty bourgeois protest with revolution, or hoping for the state to turbocharge worker reformism from above – is immense.

Back to Basics

Breaking the monopoly of the Leviathan over public life is a precondition for any new sequence of emancipatory mass politics. The only force capable of producing a rupture from the “stasis within activity” of

petty bourgeois mobilization is a working class conscious of its historic interest in the negation of capital organized concretely as a party. As a protracted and dynamic relation between mass democracy and centralized leadership, which progressively displaces the petty bourgeois in leadership over civil society, it advances towards unmediated antagonism against the state.

Such a party will never be built starting from activism in cross-class social movements. Still less by the abstract proclamation of a “correct” program. It requires systematic activity in neighbourhoods and workplaces to build democratic and independent organizations of economic struggle. Without such a basis, Marxism is either liquidated into bourgeois politics or dissolves into a repetition of empty abstractions.

To build this basis, we must exit from electoral politics and hashtag movements in favour of a protracted experimentation with new forms of worker organisation adapted to the harsh terrain produced by capital’s historic offensive. We need to prepare to make our modest contribution to the renewal of worker combativity from below and outside of schematic legal formalisms. This is not an easy task, but a daunting, perhaps even discouraging prospect. However, it remains the only way to give communist commitment a concrete content.

Refusing the distractions offered by the managers of permitted discontent and the get-rich-quick schemes of parliamentary speculators, we must take the long road of workers democracy. We cannot escape the end of history through a Lassalian appeal to the benevolence of established power or a dark Sorelian dream of collapse.

The movement of capital is the essence behind the fluctuations of political form and we must master this movement at its heart in the reversal of the domination imposed against living labour. Till then the post political spectacle will continue, while the social fabric degrades not so much into fascism as the algorithmic management of passive isolation. Or as the WHO puts it “every generation has a higher purpose. Ours is to stay home”.

This push towards a social void in which technocratic totalitarianism reduces the worker to a machine without class identity is the nihilism which underpins every “good intention” of middle class civil society. The struggle against this desert, to constitute class politics within the struggle for the wage, is the emancipatory alternative which remains embedded in the structure of modern society itself. This struggle is our heritage and our hope.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adorno, Theodor W., *The Jargon of Authenticity*, transl. by Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will, Northwestern University Press 1973.
- Bennett, Catherine, "Memo to the UK: Women's Voices Can Also be Useful in this Crisis", April 11, 2020, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/11/memo-to-the-uk-womens-voices-can-also-be-useful-in-this-crisis>.
- Daly, Natasha, "Fake Animal News Abounds on Social Media as Coronavirus Upends Life", March 20, 2020, *National Geographic*, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-fake-animal-viral-social-media-posts/>.
- Diamond, Dan, "Suddenly, Public Health Officials Say Social Justice Matters More Than Social Distance", June 4, 2020, *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/06/04/public-health-protests-301534>.
- Eidelson, Josh, "When Working Means Deadly Risk, Backlash Brews", April 7, 2020, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-07/coronavirus-marks-the-best-and-worst-time-for-workers-to-strike>.
- Gramsci, Antonio, *Prison Notebooks*, transl by Joseph A. Buttigieg, Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Henwood, Doug, "Sadly, there is no strike wave", September 10, 2018, *Left Business Observer*, <https://lbo-news.com/2018/09/10/sadly-there-is-no-strike-wave/>.
- Hochuli, Alex, "The Triumph of American Idealism", June 17, 2020, *Damage*, <https://damagemag.com/2020/06/17/the-triumph-of-american-idealism/>.
- Johnson, Theodore R., "What If Black America Were a Country?", October 14, 2014, *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/what-if-black-america-were-a-country/380953/>.
- Lenin, V.I., "The Results and Significance of the U.S Presidential Elections" *Collected Works*, Volume 18, 402-404, Progress Publishers, 1975.
- Lenin, V.I., "Draft Theses on the Role and Functions of the Trade Unions Under the New Economic Policy", *Collected Works*, Volume 42, 374-386, Progress Publishers, 1975.
- Losurdo Dominic, "Towards a Critique of the Category of Totalitarianism", *Historical Materialism*, 12,2: 25-55.
- Mahdawi, Arwa, "The Secret Weapon in the Fight against the Coronavirus: Women", April 11, 2020, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/11/secret-weapon-fight-against-coronavirus-women>.
- Marcuse, Herbert, 'The Affirmative Character of Culture', in *Negations. Essays in Critical Theory*. Transl. by Jeremy Shapiro, Allen Lane, Penguin Press 1968.
- Marx, Karl, *Capital*. Volume One. Penguin London, 1976.
- Mattick, Paul, "Their Money or Your Life", May 2020, *The Brooklyn Rail*, <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/05/field-notes/Their-Money-or-Your-Life?>.
- Milburn, Keir, "The Pandemic is Changing How it Feels to Be Free", June 1, 2020, *Novara Media*, <https://novaramedia.com/2020/06/01/the-pandemic-is-changing-how-it-feels-to-be-free/>.
- "Open letter advocating for an anti-racist public health response to demonstrations against systemic injustice occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic", 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jyfn4Wd2i6bRi12ePghMHtX3ys1b7K1A/view>.
- Pabst, Yaak, "Hygienedemos": Die Brandstifter Sitzen in Den Chefetagen", May 14, 2020, *Marx 21*, <https://www.marx21.de/hygienedemos-die-brandstifter-sitzen-in-den-chefetagen/>.
- Partington, Richard, "UK Worker Strike Total Falls to Lowest Level Since 1893", May 30, 2018, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/may/30/strikes-in-uk-fall-to-lowest-level-since-records-began-in-1893>.
- Rovny, Jan, "The "Brahmin Left" vs the "Merchant Right": A Comment on Thomas Piketty's New Book", September 16, 2019, *European Politics and Policy Blog*, London School of Economics, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/09/16/the-brahmin-left-vs-the-merchant-right-a-comment-on-thomas-piketys-new-book/>.
- Weale, Sally, "Four in 10 Pupils have had Little Contact with Teachers during Lockdown", June 15, 2020, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/15/2m-children-in-uk-have-done-almost-no-school-work-in-lockdown>.

C
R
I
S
I
S
&
C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E

/
Volume 7
Issue 3