

CROWNED PLAGUE

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by Phillip A. Neel

The Saint of Crowns

In spring the winter weight of snow trickles off the stone steps of the basilica in small, shimmering rivulets, a microcosm of the many streams glittering through the foothills of the unyielding Dolomites, or maybe more a mirror of the intricate alpine network of *alpe vie* and *vie ferrate*, narrow, high walking and climbing paths hewn into the mountains during the first world war when other routes were made impassable by mines. The winter rarely clears quickly through these foothills where Feltre and its basilica lie, the town's most famous rendition given by a few lines from an anonymous Roman author: "Feltria, condemned to the rigor of eternal snows / from me too, who henceforth will scarcely approach you, farewell!"¹ The words are often attributed to Caesar himself, though of course this might be apocryphal. But the apocryphal is also somehow natural to this place: the basilica which contains the relics of Saint Corona, whose historical reality is itself an open question.²

More recently, another apocryphal attribution arose, with rumors spreading that Saint Corona acted as a guard-

ian against epidemics. It wasn't true in any proper, historical sense.³ But this doesn't matter much, given the inherent populism of sainthood. Hagiography tends to follow the vernacular, after all, and a female saint with the name of a global pandemic whose emblem is a pair of lush-but-ominous palm trees—the implements of her execution—is well-placed to become an icon of our era. The historical reality of her patronage is equally interesting, however, since Saint Corona has traditionally been a patron saint not associated with relief from disease but instead with money, gambling, and treasure hunting. Her name, meaning "crown," derives from an alleged vision she had of crowns descending from heaven for her and her affiliate martyr-saint Victor. This led future treasure hunters, gamblers and speculators to invoke her in their dealings and attribute to her their windfalls. This is fitting in its own way, since so much of the existing economic crisis is not simply the result of some exogenous shock in the form of the pandemic, but is instead the initial breaking point in a long build-up of risky speculation conducted with all that surplus capital that had nowhere else to go.⁴ There's more

1 *Feltria perpetuo niveum damnata rigore*

2 This is the sanctuary of SS. Vittore e Corona, allegedly containing at least some of the relics of these two saints. Other relics, alongside a shrine of intricate goldwork, are held in a cathedral in Aachen, Germany.

3 It appears that the association of Saint Corona with disease prevention can be traced to a specific village in Austria, and doesn't appear to have caught on beyond that until now. For more detail, see: Matthew Taub, "Is Saint Corona a Guardian Against Epidemics?" *Atlas Obscura*, 31 March 2020. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/saint-corona-epidemics>

4 This point has been made to death elsewhere. The best articles on the topic are these: John Smith, "Why the coronavirus could spark a capitalist supernova," *Open Democracy*, 31 March 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/why-coronavirus-could-spark-capitalist-supernova/>;

Aaron Benanav, "Crisis and Recovery," *Phenomenal World*, 3 April 2020. <https://phenomenalworld.org/analysis/crisis-and-recovery>;

Bue Rübner Hansen, "Pandemic Insolvency: Why This Crisis Will be Different", *Novara Media*, 26 March 2020. <https://novaramedia.com/2020/03/26/pandemic-insolvency-why-this-economic-crisis-will-be-different/>;

than a little irony, then, in imagining the virus and subsequent economic collapse as something like the inverse of Corona's patronage: the crowned saint as creditor for a social system long overdrawn in its accounts, finally coming to collect her due. And at the same time, as patron of treasure-hunters, we might add that Corona is, technically, the patron saint of looting.

This motif of crowns also indicates a more vicious undercurrent in the present plague and the rebellion that has finally burst up from beneath it, made simultaneously economic and political by the bloody blessing of Our Lady in the Palms. Because the crown is not only the symbol of treasure-hunting, gambling and speculation, but also, of course, the emblem of the state. Just as both themes are here unified in a single symbol, so too did the pandemic begin to unveil the long-observed fusion of state power and market necessity. Then, as if the point were not made clearly enough, the figure of the looter careening through tides of teargas in an anti-police riot underlined the same point with a delightful decisiveness. We now witness all at once how expansive action coordinated beyond the market is obviously possible, and yet is still ultimately performed only for the short-term protection of the lives of the rich and the long-term protection of their economic interests. It's a telling parallel when the exact multi-state mobilization of money and time and resources deemed

impossible for medical workers or rent-and-mortgage relief is at the snap of a finger funneled into both substantial bailouts eaten up by the wealthiest corporations and the multi-state deployment of massively over-supplied police and National Guard units, who seem to suddenly have no shortage of gas masks. Meanwhile, calls to abolish the police are reframed by all the prominent liberals into calls to trim their budgets a bit, but even this triggers the release of a swarm of staggering infographics showing just how much of the local tax base in literally every American city is funneled into repression of that city's own population. More and more clearly, masses of people are beginning to see how this state capacity is, in fact, quite expansive and quite efficient—and how it is mobilized for nothing other than the protection of the wealthy and their property.

What is revealed is the basic fact that the crown has never graced the head of "the market" understood in this pure sense, nor has it ever in our history sat on the head of "the state" as some sort of autonomous bureaucracy capable of driving the progress of society through that quasi-magical procedure called "policy."⁵ In reality, both "market" and "state" are mere appendages of that greater body, which most people vaguely understand to be "the economy," but which is also more expansive than this name might imply. The unity can be illustrated in a very concise image re-

Michael Roberts, "The post-pandemic slump", Michael Roberts' Blog, 13 April 2020. <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-post-pandemic-slump/>

5 This illusion has a much older history, of course, and it's rooted in a particularly degenerated form of "Marxism" as filtered through the great Russian tragedy. This is because the only times when "the state" alone has ever worn the crown of real power were when every other appendage of the economy was slaughtered in the great bloodletting of war and revolution. Spared, it seized the crown from the gore-splattered earth and danced across the battlefields of the 20th century, painting the mirage that the state was the abode of socialism, until it fell, exhausted, at the feet of the reincarnated global economy.

peated with minor iterations throughout every American city in the recent riots: a squadron of police swarming in to protect the hallowed sanctity of a half-looted Walgreens. But it's bigger than this, of course, because it is, after all, an entire planetary system—at heart a social system bending every human being in the world to its machine-logic of endless accumulation but at the same time more than this, since it also shatters every integument of the non-human world until each shard can be pieced back together into the system's own monstrous world-spanning body as commodities animated with the undead energy of exchange. This is the beast we call capitalism, which spreads its hellworld over the entirety of the crust of the earth and up into the highest echelons of the atmosphere and down into the deepest caverns of microbiology. In every realm, it spawns its multitude of monstrosities, all of which have behind them the ultimate power of its crown and each of which wield some fragment of it like a blade, their crises cutting new scars into the history of the human species.

So it is fitting that we face a crowned plague, and that this crowned plague has unleashed across the world a symmetrical plague of crowns, as every state—but especially those imagined to be most capable—demonstrates a magnitude of incompetence in response to the pandemic matched only by their equally horrifying capacity for brutality in response to the rebellion. The result is that all the traditional coordinates of politics have become unmoored, as everyone grasps for new ways of speaking politics and pandemic in a single breath. The two paths that at first seemed most

self-evident (and were therefore the most suspect) were the emphasis on localist measures—epitomized on the smallest scale by left-wing mutual aid and, on larger scales, by radical right-wing exclusionism—and those measures which envisioned an aggressive refortification of the state as the only possible basis for a future politics capable of dealing with the reality of a crisis simultaneously economic, microbiological, and climatic. Ultimately, Our Lady in the Palms will demonstrate the ways in which both paths lead to their own particular destruction. The sheer size and scope of the rebellion has already begun to invalidate the appeal to the state (which is, after all, the thing doing the repressing) while also forcing localist measures to simultaneously show their political colors (by siding with or against the more violent edge of the riots) and to scale far beyond their initial communitarian focus—tasked now, for example, with re-distributing the stores of looted goods to those in need or managing a multi-block permanent protest encampment. The challenge, for us, then, is not just to show how these initial political articulations were wrongheaded or doomed to failure, but instead to conceive of a communist politics capable of confronting this crowned plague and the many that follow, each trailing its daughter rebellions.

Agony

To begin, it's of course necessary to understand that this is as much a social contagion as a microbiological one, both in the sense of how the pandemic itself was produced and in the unevenness of

its spread.⁶ As with anything, it's true that the effects of the virus will break down more harshly along class lines. Much of this has been covered extensively already: skyrocketing unemployment leading to a *de facto* mass rent strike and growing labor unrest within the sectors that are still functional—where on average poorer, younger, less white and more contingent workers are being literally sacrificed in order to appease the eldritch desires of the S&P 500. This economic context explains, at least in some small part, the ease with which the present rebellion immediately slid over into looting—and not simply luxury goods (though those too, of course—my favorite chant witnessed firsthand: “Gucci Store! Gucci Store!”), but also simple food goods, enormous amounts of medicine, and everyday household items. At the same time, if class sculpts our lives in all their excruciating detail out of the raw, rough stone of our social reality (itself long ago reduced to the machine body of the economy), then race is its necessary chisel, drawing the lines of division that define the marbled agony of the sculpture. Thus, it is no surprise that, when the economy has been placed under

such extreme strain—the stone in some places over-brittle and shattering at the slightest touch, and yet in others suddenly unyielding—this chisel seems to be wielded with precise and shocking violence.

This is because, beyond the exclusion from the wage system (i.e. uneven distribution of unemployment globally and within particular countries along racial lines) and the now more clearly recognized excess of oppression that attends this—domestically: the surplus violence of policing, surveillance, incarceration; and internationally: the long histories of colonization, imperial subordination, and attendant active underdevelopment—race is also defined by a less familiar excess of violence, but one with far deeper roots. Unlike race itself, this violence is, at its core, biological. In technical terms, we can say that it involves the maldistribution of negative health outcomes and, on top of this, the cultivation of psychosomatic stressors that create a further negative feedback, reducing general health unequally across a dividing line that, in the process and *after the fact* becomes a “racial” divide. But this divide *is race itself*, or at least one major component of it.⁷

6 See: “Social Contagion”, *Chuang*, February 2020. <http://chuangen.org/2020/02/social-contagion/>

7 The other major components, such as subjection to excessive violence at the hands of the state and far greater exposure to exclusion from the waged economy, have been documented in vast detail elsewhere, and are the more standard reference points for most communists' understanding of race. These points are in no way wrong, but they are sometimes mobilized in a way that tries to over-reduce capitalism to mere “economic” or “political” explanations, emphasizing exclusion from the wage (speaking of “racialized surplus populations”) and exposure to direct state violence (speaking of the management of these populations through a type of “necropolitics”) and treating questions of health, environment and even general geography as secondary. Instead, a properly communist understanding of race should see through these political-economic factors to grasp the much grander social-ecological scale of the capitalist hellworld, in which both economic and political exclusion are buoyed by a much more fundamental, indirect violence in the long, and often literally inherited, maldistribution of health outcomes derived from the uneven geography of environmental devastation (here including both the large-scale environment of ecosystems, watersheds, etc. but also the small-scale environment of the human body and its microbiome, both of which are included in Marx's concept of the severed metabolism between humans and non-human nature). It is important to remember Marx's own emphasis on the fact that all forms of production fundamentally entail a metabolic interaction between humans and the non-hu-

It is not a coincidence that so many police murders, including that of George Floyd, are later denied by corrupt doctors performing botched autopsies, where they ascribe the deaths of the unarmed, handcuffed, immobile victims to “pre-existing health conditions.” The pandemic has made increasingly clear how unequally such conditions have been distributed in the first place.

In other words, the class system is built on a massive, system-wide siphoning of strength. One form of this siphoning is familiar: workers giving labor, often at a rate and intensity that literally destroys their bodies. Who among us does not have some sort of joint pain past 30, induced by repetitive work? And who doesn't know at least one fellow worker (maybe a second-order acquaintance, a friend of a friend, if you are lucky) killed or maimed in “the line of duty,” to borrow a turn of phrase beloved by bootlickers? If you don't—if such things seem unfamiliar or improbable—we suggest you look in the mirror of your family's bank accounts. But beyond this direct vampirism there is a second kind of siphoning of strength, which might be better described as a massive, distributed system of polite eugenics geared toward the engineering of a milder massacre palatable to the average coastal billionaire. In its more active form, it takes on that liberal Malthusianism

promoted by many an NGO after the model of the Gates Foundation, which quite openly advocates for the depopulation of Africa (albeit through gentle means of political policy, drug-and-seed patents, and educational propaganda, rather than explicit extermination). But it's also a latent violence that inheres in class society at large: strength is siphoned from the poor through a program of mass poisoning, malnutrition, and psychological terror that generates increased sickness and death and even epigenetic damage that extends beyond a single generation.⁸

While it's true that at a fundamental or abstract level we can see clearly that the basic dynamic is driven by the continual maintenance of the class divide, this, more than anything, is one of those cases where it's impossible to properly perceive the phenomenon without noting the way in which class is sculpted by race. According to the CDC, Black Americans are on average twice as likely to have and die from almost all the major chronic diseases.⁹ Meanwhile, there is an equally clear racial disparity in exposure to lead and other toxic chemicals. The undrinkable water in Flint, Michigan is probably the most well-known example, but the reality is that such industrial pollution is the norm, rather than the exception, in the heavily segregated cities of the rust belt.

man world, and that capitalism unbalances this metabolism. It follows from this that such an unbalancing will produce uneven geographies of destruction, which break down along many of the same lines of social inequality seen elsewhere. A few scholars, however, stand out for emphasizing these points, such as the geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore, writing on the connection between race, environment, and public health, and like Kohei Saito, who has provided the best detailed theoretical account of the more general context of capitalism's drive toward environmental devastation.

8 The exact mechanisms that condition such epigenetic changes have only recently begun to be systematically studied, but the racial disparities that underlie them are already clear. See: Alexis D. Vick and Heather H. Burris, “Epigenetics and Health Disparities”, *Curr Epidemiol Rep.*, Volume 4, Number 1, 2017. pp.31-37. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5327425/>

9 See the CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, May 5, 2017: https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/mm6617e1.htm?s_cid=mm6617e1_w

This is not just an effect of deindustrialization and left-over pollutants, either. Cancer Alley in Louisiana is an 85-mile stretch of active chemical plants and oil refineries that have long exposed the disproportionately Black locals to assorted toxins, resulting in outbreaks of rare ailments and massively elevated chronic disease and cancer rates (with people as much as 800 times more likely to get cancer as elsewhere in the US). It's hardly a coincidence that this part of Louisiana is precisely where the coronavirus outbreak struck hardest in its early months, with parishes within the zone reporting the highest death rates per capita of any US county.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the various terrors that accompany everyday life contribute to even worse psychosomatic effects as well as a thousand ancillary plagues of mental illness. Suicide rates among teens on the Pine Ridge reservation (where unemployment is 70 percent and 40 percent of the population lies below the national poverty line) are more than twice as high as the national average, and overall life expectancy is extremely low, comparable only to that found in the most war-torn or famine-ravaged regions of the world.¹¹ It's also often forgotten that America's reservations have served as some of the primary dumping grounds for radioac-

tive tailings, with some 200 tons of nuclear waste dumped into the Cheyenne River, a water source for Pine Ridge, in 1962. Similarly, old open-pit uranium mines contaminated the water table in the Laguna Pueblo Reservation in New Mexico, and a series of such mines and ensuing industrial accidents have plagued Navajo lands to the west.¹² In such places, just as in the poorest of white rural areas, mental illness combines with chronic illness and an essentially non-existent public health infrastructure to ensure that people often have little choice but to self-medicate, leading to a proliferation of substance abuse that both exacerbates general conditions of trauma and is then, retroactively and incorrectly, used to place blame on the poor for their own conditions. When all of these factors combine, the results are particularly deadly: the Navajo Nation, with a similar history of systematic disinvestment paired with industrial exploitation (most seriously through uranium mining) leading to long-term toxic contamination (especially arsenic poisoning) and a proliferation of chronic diseases and mental illnesses, had an infection rate that ranked third-highest in the nation in late April.¹³

While some of the industrial pollutants may date back many years, none of this

10 James Pasley, "Inside Louisiana's horrifying 'Cancer Alley,' an 85-mile stretch of pollution and environmental racism that's now dealing with some of the highest coronavirus death rates in the country," *Business Insider*, 9 April 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/mm6617e1.htm?s_cid=mm6617e1_w

11 Life expectancy is 48 years for men and 52 year for women, compared, for instance, to 62.7 and 65.6 in Afghanistan. For an overview of the suicide epidemic, see: Amanda Cordova, "Guest Post: Teen suicide epidemic on Pine Ridge Reservation," *The Colorado Independent*, 25 October 2019. <<https://www.coloradoindependent.com/2019/10/25/mental-health-suicide-teen-pine-ridge/>>

12 For a systematic account of these and many similar cases, see: Dorceta Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution and Residential Mobility*. NYU Press, 2014. pp.56-62.

13 Jeva Lange, "The Navajo Nation outbreak reveals an ugly truth behind America's coronavirus experience," *The Week*, 21 April 2020. <https://theweek.com/articles/909787/navajo-nation-outbreak-reveals-ugly-truth-behind-americas-coronavirus-experience>

is simply “leftover” oppression, envisioned as the remnants of a racist past that’s in the process of being dismantled. On the one hand, it’s clearly not something just generated by a generic “racism” driven by prejudice, since the class basis of the divide is abundantly clear in the case of places like Appalachia, where major coal-producing locales like Perry or Pike counties in Kentucky have for decades been at the bottom of US life expectancy rankings, despite their populations being more than 97 percent white.¹⁴ Race sculpts class, but it never replaces it. On the other hand, the problem has not been diminishing over time among *any* portion of the poor population. Instead, the exact opposite is the case, as is made clear by one overview of the medical literature:

More than 133 million Americans (45 percent population) have one or more chronic diseases. Racial/ethnic minorities are 1.5 to 2.0 times more likely than whites to have most of the major chronic diseases. Chronic diseases account for 7 in 10 American deaths and account for 78 cents of every health care dollar spent. Unfortunately, the problems of chronic diseases seem to be getting worse. For example, between 1960 and 2005 the percentage of American children with a chronic disease almost quadrupled (from 1.8 percent to 7.0 percent) with racial/ethnic minority youth being affected dis-

proportionately. Increased rates of childhood chronic diseases imply that higher rates of these illnesses will occur during adulthood.¹⁵

And as we are seeing now with crystal clarity, chronic illnesses, alongside chronic malnutrition and stress, predispose one to suffer the worst outcomes under a pandemic.

Ecstasy

Our Lady of the Palms has, at least, shocked our lives into a certain, sudden weightlessness. People who might never have contemplated the concept of history now feel it buoying them on its dark and unrelenting tide. Before the rebellion, this gave even the most mundane features of our cloistered lives an almost religious artistry, as if the Saint herself were also a painter and this cascade of moments her masterpiece. But hers is not the art of some great purpose, with figures painted to approximations of perfection. Instead, it is an art of the imperfect portrayed to perfection, of the degenerate, an art that sees holiness in the Baroque crumbling of the world and seeks to replicate it with an equally Baroque precision. It is you and I sitting in our quarantine sweatsuits, reclining like Ribera’s *Drunken Silenus* (1626). Or a fresh hire standing in the ruins of Target, the spitting image of Caravaggio’s young *Bacchus* (1596) with an N95 mask tightened against his reddened cherubic cheeks as he stares at the great disorder of off-brand athleisure lying in

14 Kulkarni, SC., A. Levin-Rector, M. Ezzati and C. Murray. “Falling behind: life expectancy in US counties from 2000 to 2007 in an international context”. *Population Health Metrics*. Number 9, 2011. <https://pophealthmetrics.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1478-7954-9-16>

15 James H. Price, Jagdish Khubchandani, Molly McKinney and Robert Braun, “Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Chronic Diseases of Youths and Access to Health Care in the United States”, *Biomed Res Int*. 2013. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3794652/>

piles of ash left behind by roving looters, holding that same dazed look of infinite pupil-dilating pleasure-in-loss that is the very essence of the experience of the flesh.

And yes, she also paints for us that over-armed reopen protestor on the footsteps of the Michigan capitol, screaming for the governor to let him have his lawn-care company, begging beneath all the weight of all the tactical gear he so caringly placed in his Amazon cart that the governor call him a good handsome boy and allow his employees to risk their lives for him, the pettiest of the petite-bourgeoisie—the face in her painting comes just after this, though, once the blood has faded from the yelling and the adrenaline ebbs like a mud-stinking tide revealing that singular look, the patchy beard, the square dumbness, like the face of Gentileschi's Holofernes, mildly confused but almost resigned to his own beheading. There are still-lives of looted groceries piled on the street in the dark, pale jugs of milk dew-glistening against the black night of smashed streetlights. There is Philly Elmo, his face red as a comunard flag, black fist raised against a burning backdrop.

In each of these images we see with a stunning clarity the absurdity of our present hellworld. This is not a world made for you or me or anyone who might call themselves human. It is a machine world built for a different species—for the creature called capital, the commodity its larval form, assumed briefly before its million limbs blossom and its sharp palpi reach out to seize anything and everything, to feed it all into the circuit of endless accumulation. Maybe you have been having bad

dreams, as many of us have. Maybe in the early months you felt a certain presence, your brain saw the empty streets and the veiled people and could not help but assume that the herd of humanity was hiding and that you should be too. That there is something among us. At the level of intellect, you of course concluded that the threat is, indeed, invisible, but only because of its micro-biological scale. And yet that presence still haunts you, like a shadow sitting just behind your periphery, causing that sensitive skin where the neck meets the shoulder to prickle as if it senses another reaching flesh. This presence is not the virus, though, and it is not imagined either. It is the shadow body of the great beast capital, made almost visible in the corner of your eye because of the way that *Our Lady in the Palms* has frozen the world for us. Capital is a chameleon creature, most apparent when it is made to move against a frozen backdrop, when the economy stalls and all the absurdities pile up for everyone to see: food destroyed en masse as lines stretch miles long for food-banks, small cities-within-cities built by the homeless in the ditches and the alleyways beneath larger cities filled with empty condominiums.

Now all the dividing lines are cut with an increasingly stark brevity, as some of us turn to face this beast, attempt to seize it and it of course slips from our grasp again because we are not quite strong enough yet, though we are powerful in our burning, looting glory—truly a Baroque work, then, the slivers of light cutting through a dark world with that chiaroscuro precision. The golden crowns and glowing palms shimmer against this pitch black background that seems to yawn ever further

as the year goes on. Such images are built from the intertwining of terror and beauty, every agony measured by an ecstasy. The agony is self-evident. The ecstasy is today only a minor hint of light, the sharp glow of some bonfire lying ahead in our future. You can see it maybe in the streets of every burning American city, where the plague at first had drawn the most conservative of the peace-police liberals back into their homes, leaving only hope and hurling stones. Now the politicians and the activists and the “community leaders” have come out of hiding to herd all the anger out of us, by force or by carefully allotted appeasement—an invitation to “continue the conversation” or to join the activist teach-in has always been far more repressive than a police baton in its ultimate effect. Nonetheless, if the pandemic has shown us the absurdity of our present world, it has also made evident that the power exists to change it.

The Holy Division

We were already divided from ourselves and from one another, but now Our Lady in the Palms has placed us decisively into three castes: the monks, the soldiers, and the bastards. Maybe you are a monk, forced to live a life of anxious grace. Your cloister is backlit by a thousand swirling Zoom windows as you work your way through the labyrinthine text of your state’s unemployment website. If you read about the plague, the monk is the presumed audience, the consumer *par excellence*, really, with everything else stripped away. And if you are a monk maybe you have begun to sense the hollowness of such things, as many have. The early flurry of online shopping has ended, Prime packag-

es scattered like dice on the doorstep now grown scarce, as if the bets must be placed with more care as you realize the game is not in your favor. In most places things have reopened entirely or in part, and yet so much remains empty. Not only has consumption lost the therapeutic character it once had, but as this induced desire began to drift you also realized how much of your life was moored to it—how much of social experience itself was held hostage to the commodity.

Isn’t it a curious thing, after all, that your social life ended not because you couldn’t bear two meters between you and your friends, but instead because so much of your sociality was predicated on experiences entirely mediated by economic consumption? And now is it not evident, at least at the intuitive level, the extent to which our landscape has been shaped not for human life but instead for the communion of objects? At a certain point in isolation you almost lose awareness of your own body, which is a social creature, after all. And then when you do sneak out to see your friends in a park, or maybe lift weights in a speakeasy gym, there is an ecstatic shock as you realize how intense actual social contact can be. You realize that six feet is a grave, and that you are entombed.

This cloistering is what has conditioned the particular communal joy of our present rebellion. Is it really just coincidental that this strange moment in which all our lives were reduced to the pure isolated consumption of commodities would be capped by such a massive ecstatic outburst, in which commodities *en masse* in every city were rapidly decommmodified—not just looted, we

must remember, but looted and then handed out between people for free? This looting has been in places driven by necessity and survival, of course (as in the cases of food, medicine, diapers, etc.), but in equal measure it has been almost a basic communistic compulsion regardless of need. A desire for communal luxury, maybe. Another favorite scene glimpsed firsthand was when the Men's Warehouse downtown was broken into even though no one seemed to actually want the goods. One lone looter afterwards simply went up to every passing car, handing out the khaki golf shorts to all with an open window and an open hand.

Subsequent events, then, have proven that the assumed position of the monk is not really the correct one, because, statistically, you are probably a soldier—in one of now many senses. In the letter that accompanied the stimulus check, Trump declared “total war on this invisible enemy.” But, as with any war, there is a great gulf between those declaring it and those waging it. As a frontline worker, you are of course called a hero, and, of course, you are not paid more for the designation. And as that soldier of equally proletarian character, kicking tear gas canisters back past the husks of burnt-out police cars, you are of course called a terrorist, and, of course, you have yet to receive your Soros check. What we call class conflict could hardly be more clear, as your day job now conscripts you into that vast army of the waged, where you risk your life so that all the essential economic circuits continue in their cycle—even as your night job conscripts you into that other

vast army of waged and unwaged alike, where you risk your life so that all the essential economic circuits might snap like the worn rope of the noose that they are.

And this hints at the secret subtext of the war—that maybe the real enemy is not so invisible, after all. None of the symbolism painted for us by our Lady in the Palms is particularly subtle. Each metaphor seems to scream out its meaning into the dark. And we can hope that maybe now, at least, the thin plaster of ideology (the uncritical “common sense” of “the way the world works”) is at last beginning to fissure. This is war and you are a soldier, so you might as well fight like one. But your enemy is not some invisible virus over which you have no power—unless maybe you are in that small minority of scientists who had fought for years to develop a coronavirus vaccine only to be systematically stifled by the large pharmaceutical conglomerates and the politicians they pay to puppeteer the flow of federal research grants—no, instead the war is what we have always called class war, and your enemies today are the same bastards as before.

And what of these bastards? We are told that these people—the rich, the real urban elites, those who own the world of production, who used to and might again one day soon be named “the bourgeoisie”—have added some \$282 billion to their wealth since the pandemic began.¹⁶ Many, receiving early warning from confidential briefings, cashed out of risky stocks ahead of time and poured money into the few indus-

16 For the full study, see: Chuck Collins, Omar Ocampo and Sophia Paslaski, “Billionaire Bonanza 2020: Wealth and Windfalls, Tumbling Taxes, and Pandemic Profiteers,” *Institute for Policy Studies*, 2020. <https://ips-dc.org/billionaire-bonanza-2020/>

tries that boom in such disasters. Jeff Bezos alone had added \$25 billion to his personal wealth by as early as mid-April. It's true, of course, that certain industries are suffering, as the idling oil tankers off the coast of every country in the world make clear. These industries will, in time, be bailed out at your expense, and thereafter continue their long, world-wrecking crisis. But among the lowest ranks of the bastards you also always find the sacrificial bootlicker: the small landlord weeping because they can no longer afford not to work, the insufferable bar-or-restaurant-owner who could hardly make a cocktail or bus a table, the Carhartt-wearing construction contractor living off what are (let's be honest) welfare checks written by some Manhattan real estate speculator. Even as the large conglomerates slide the sacrificial dagger across the bootlicker's throat—what we call clearing the market of uncompetitive firms—a final thank you struggles its way from the lungs of these groveling bastards.

This lowest rung of petty owners and resentful idiots are the ones who staff the most violent of police and vigilante response to the riots. Such rebellions bring out all sorts of people, and while the talk of “outside agitators” continues to unite the left and right wings of formal politics in all its patent absurdity—when every major metro area in the country is on fire, housing the literal majority of the population, literally where do people think these “outsiders” are coming from?—we do have to acknowledge that real rebellions bring out real right wing forces in opposition, and that these forces operate in the street as much as the rebellions themselves. In the most mundane sense, you will

have those particularly docile bootlickers who, for some god-forsaken reason, literally wake up early to go downtown and scrub George Floyd's name off the flame-charred pillars of the Cheesecake Factory. At a more dangerous level, you have the escalating violence of the police themselves. But on top of their own professionalized violence, we've seen with an abundant clarity how police are more than willing to assist the many less formal proto-fascist gangs that have been getting so much press in recent years—and it is from such groups of vigilantes and off-duty klansmen cops that we should expect the most overt and egregious acts of repression. At the same time, though, it is worth remembering that these are not really the dominant forces of repression in America. They are instead more or less localized albeit highly visible threats, made more intimidating by their degree of naked violence, but hardly as expansive or dangerous as the repression offered by the formal legal apparatus, which will begin to siphon so many hundreds or thousands of youths into this country's vast labyrinth of punitive courtrooms and overcrowded prison cells. For every extrajudicial murder of a Black person in America, after all, there are a hundred perfectly legal judicial murders, conducted through the slow death of years, decades, or even life without parole.

Essential and Expendable

The pandemic and its sacrificial soldiers have also made abundantly clear something that until recently was a hypothesis relegated to the off-market pages of edgy books distributed by aging anarchist cadre from the bowels of the

Bay Area: there exists what is called an “essential proletariat,” composed of all those workers who are necessary to run the most basic, skeletal infrastructure of society. This is not the bulk of workers who, altogether, contribute to the overall profitability and stability of the system—i.e. those who might be thought of as “working class” in a broader sense. No, these are people in seemingly disparate jobs, unified only by the fact that their particular activity has been made necessary by capitalism’s fusion of its own survival with the survival of the human species:

the essential proletariat is that group of workers who can halt vast areas of the economy by stopping their work. [They] are employed in the economy’s core industries, industries that can only operate with a relatively high level of labor input into their processes [...] Core workers include factory workers, dustmen [i.e. garbage collectors], power workers, distribution workers (post, rail, road haulage, ferries, dockers, etc.) [...]¹⁷

The quote comes from an obscure text (*Nihilist Communism*) only popular among a certain substrata of doomer communists, few enough and sparse enough that their only influence beyond the internet would be to ensure that the little black book with the grim photo on its cover might at least scatter itself across the globe to settle in squats and infoshops and personal libraries on every continent, there to sleep until history dredged from its pages the few most lucid predictions such as this.

Today, we can see the fact without the necessary mediation of an obscure glob-

al sub-sub-culture, as if the film rights were purchased by CNN and *The Year of Our Lord 2020* was hired to record the audiobook in its terrifying baritone. Of course the term used in the text and that used in popular parlance today are not perfectly symmetrical. Nonetheless, before our very eyes we can observe the entire global proletariat divided into essential and expendable. We see how the two overlap and how they don’t, and how this pattern is so strongly determined by race—so evidently, indeed, that even the most obstinate and ignorant must now at least glance on the bare process whereby race is produced and reproduced daily. Moreover, we see unveiled the great global division of suffering: what happens, exactly, when that portion of the essential proletariat located in the great factory complexes of China and Vietnam stop working? This cannot help but imply the question: what would happen if *you* stopped working? If the Amazon warehouses shut down? If the garbage was no longer collected? If the millions of frontline food-workers one day refused to be hostages to the economy, and the shattering crown of the state was confronted with the hard cement of class conflict?

Meanwhile, some basic facts about the necessity of communist organizing have now become at least dimly visible, signaled by the emergence of that latent, invariant communism that’s always vaguely implied in emergent unrest. First, in regards to the “essential” proletariat and its power, it seems that many people who once either ignored politics completely or founded their entire political practice on the pursuit of marginal and ephemeral reforms alongside

¹⁷ Monsieur Dupont, *Nihilist Communism*, Ardent Press, 2009. p. 22

“consciousness raising” are now faced, ironically, with the basic thesis put forward by the churlish, obscure authors of *Nihilist Communism*:

Everything in the world is made, and power derives from the control of this making. If the making is stopped, then the source of this power is interrupted [...] When industry stops everything in society, otherwise absolutely determined by it, floats free from its gravity. In this particular crisis of capitalism all hell breaks loose; then comes the time for organization. You can call that consciousness if you want, we don't care.¹⁸

In other words, the necessity of organizing as and amongst members of the essential proletariat has become self-evident, and conditions, of course, are ripe. At the same time, the question is now necessarily inverted, because the pre-rebellion stirring of industrial unrest has now been washed away by a series of riots that have so far been largely limited to the most ephemeral heights of circulation—meaning they have been limited to the downtown corridors and the big box stores that act as the final clearinghouse for commodities, or to the traditional symbols of government from the city hall to the literal White House, all of which have always served as somewhat empty halls of power that, even if seized and looted, ultimately prove themselves hollow.

This rebellion, formed of many riots and many acts of mutual aid, has now begun to meet the same limit that all riots or mutual aid activities ultimately meet. It has run up against the “glass floor” which separates us from the very productive apparatus that the pandemic has made so visible.¹⁹ In part, this is a matter of the international division of labor, as explained by the communist collective *Chuang* half a decade ago, in reference to a previous cycle of struggles:

Riots in Athens, Barcelona, London and Baltimore, for all that they signify, have little chance of breaking the “glass floor” into production. Even if they did, the result would be people filling simple logistics spaces—ports, big box stores, railyards, universities, hospitals, and skyscrapers, all quickly reduced to deserts of empty rooms and shipping containers after the good stuff is looted—or at most a handful of hi-tech factories making specialized goods, with no access to the raw materials or knowledge required to run them. In China, however, engineering knowledge and basic technical acumen is widespread, supply chains are tightly-knit and redundant within industrial agglomerations, and the blockage of a single factory complex's output can prevent significant portions of global production from going to market.²⁰

18 Ibid, pp. 25 and 27

19 The term “Glass Floor” dates back to another obscure communist group, this time French, who were writing on the limits of one of the first major riots that took place in recent decades of unrest, itself triggered by a police murder in Athens, Greece: Théo Cosme, “The Glass Floor”, *Les Émeutes en Grèce, Senonevero*, April 2009. English translation here: <http://libcom.org/library/glass-floor-the-orie-communiste>

20 “No Way Forward, No Way Back,” *Chuang*, Issue 1: Dead Generations, 2016. <http://chuangcn.org/journal/one/no-way-forward-no-way-back/>

Since there seems these days to be little probability of such events spreading to China, however, it appears that these predictions are stepping off of the page and into the streets, as so many of us in the first month of this hot summer have found ourselves in just such deserts of empty rooms and shipping containers, picking through the arms of mangled mannequins after all the good stuff has been looted.

The Melting Snows

The cold winter of the first quarantine has now decisively melted in the fires of a hot summer not seen for generations. Even in icy Feltre the snowpack runs clear and cold as water through the foothills of the Dolomites, and we all wonder how long it might be before Our Lady in her basilica feels the heat from other burning cities—if maybe this rebellion is not so uniquely American, but could return the rose of flame to Northern Italy where once it burned so brightly among the brigades of other fallen soldiers, their flags as red as the face of Philly Elmo. It's true that there are limits to these events, and it's true that, like any cycle in history, rebellions only grow and learn through a frustrating sequence of failure and repetition. None of this means that such things are hopeless.

Instead, every new wave of riots and rebellions circling the globe has advanced that more general undercurrent of activity—what we call the “historical party”—adding new tactical repertoires to the field and making once-rare activities like looting all but natural for new generations of ever-more-radical youth.

Every wave deserves support, and any communist worth the name ought to be providing that support not only in word, but also in deed, rather than sitting behind the dull safety of a screen and pointing out the obvious limits of every struggle that currently exists. In the long term, the possibility of breaking through the glass floor really only becomes even dimly possible after a series of such rebellions in which that glass floor is made visible to people. When the basic limit is hit and such venues are emptied, the time comes to distribute the looted goods and repurpose whatever territories have been seized—despite the heady proclamations from the CHAZ in all its cringeworthy early glory, we are not even here yet, not even close. But the fact remains that those who treat mutual aid activity or small-scale permaculture projects as a sort of ends in and of itself will ultimately be humbled by the gargantuan process and its wholly inadequate results.

Because when this is complete another limit is immediately hit, wherein people must confront the question of production, which presents itself first not as a problem of manufacturing capacity but instead as a question of food supply. As a few angry workers have argued elsewhere: “The communisation-fun might last three days max before you start getting hungry.”²¹ In an ideal scenario, this realization comes accompanied by renewed waves of workers organizing up and down the production chain, or at least with some form of revived radicalism among some key segment of that “essential proletariat.” In reality, the advance and burnout of the riot and the progress of workplace organizing

21 AngryWorkers, *Class Power on Zero Hours*, PM Press, 2020.

are likely to be disjointed, particularly when it comes to the more skilled or more geographically dispersed forms of labor that are necessary types of support in the midst of an actual insurrection. Saying more beyond this, or dreaming of a vast international revolution, is purely speculative, and not particularly useful. But the fact remains that, today, the vast majority of the remaining unions and “socialist” organizations that actually organize among such workers not only take the side of the counter-insurgency in word (while mumbling about reform), but also help to actively suppress every such rebellion that occurs.

At the larger scale, though, the question is at least now illuminated by *Our Lady in the Palms*. Quarantine is a funny thing, in many ways inducing the type of transformations in individual consciousness that are normally only engendered during collective actions:

In a strange way, the subjective experience is somewhat like that of a mass strike—but one which, in its non-spontaneous, top-down character and, especially in its involuntary hyper-atomization, illustrates the basic conundrums of our own strangled political present as clearly as the true mass strikes of the previous century elucidated the contradictions of their era. The quarantine, then, is like a strike hollowed of its communal features but nonetheless capable of delivering a deep shock to both psyche and economy.²²

Many millions of people are at least contemplating some of the questions that, up until very recently, have been

the exclusive purview of sci-fi utopias and communist study groups. Foremost among these is the realization that, despite so much of the economy seemingly collapsing, the most important, most *human* things, have nonetheless remained. Some of us might (quite stupidly) feel guilty admitting it, but that brief moment of not having to work (or not having to work very hard), while still being able to eat and have shelter was actually really fucking cool, and isn't it strange that we've all convinced ourselves for so long that advocating for this basic capacity of a society at our level of productive competency (where we can, in fact, feed, house, and make everyone healthy, for free) is simultaneously utopian and totalitarian?

Certainly, we all also feel as if we are on the edge of a cliff, and there are looming questions of what happens to the food supply, what happens to those who don't already have shelter, what happens to me or you or our friends and family if the landlord does actually try to call the sheriff to come kick everyone out. And all of these things are now aggravated by the question of what happens when the stores are looted or burnt to the ground, or when flames inadvertently spread to residential neighborhoods, or when the charges start piling up after the progressive city council people and community leaders have suppressed the popular demand for amnesty. Yes, this is real dread, because these are real threats. And suddenly there is a strange kind of new motivation that many are beginning to feel: the motivation to help, to defend, to protect this eerie grace that exists like a brief opening, a brief glimpse to something beyond revealed

22 “Social Contagion”, *Chuang*, February 2020. <http://chuangcn.org/2020/02/social-contagion/>

only momentarily through the forest of towering dread. What else can we think, really, when we see that carbon emissions have, for maybe the first time in all our fucking lives, actually gone down an increment—and yet not enough? That the fossil-record-level-slaughter of the sixth mass extinction may, for a moment, be feeling the ever-so-slightest ebb in its seemingly never-ending tide of blood? Again: reality seems now to scream the word communism at us in every waking moment. Our Lady in the Palms has painted the picture, and you can only squeeze your eyes shut for so long.



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