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NICHOLAS DE GENOVA

# Life versus capital: COVID-19 and the politics of life

Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. (Marx 1976: 342)

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a global public health crisis commands that we reflect anew on the relations between human life and state power. Likewise, as the public health crisis has summarily provoked a global economic crisis, we similarly cannot afford to contemplate human life and health without interrogating the sociopolitical relations of labour and capital.


One of Michel Foucault's decisive contributions is his identification of the historical emergence of a form of power that 'exerts a positive influence on life ... endeavors to administer ... and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations' (1978: 137). Bio-power, in Foucault's analysis, arises as 'without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism' (1978: 140–1). That such a power over life itself becomes indispensable to capitalism should come as no surprise. For, human life – in all its vigour and ingenuity – is indeed the real secret of labour, which for capital is the indispensable source of all value.

The constitutive and irreconcilable antagonism of labour and capital is central to Karl Marx's thought, but the endemic struggle of labour against capital is fundamentally a struggle of life against death. From the standpoint of capital, everything is (at least potentially) capital, such that labour itself is reframed (and disfigured) as 'human

capital'. From the standpoint of labour, in contrast, everything that enters into the scope of human social life is always already intrinsically *socialised* by purposeful human activity: labour. Hence, all of social life is either a manifestation of human productive powers and creative capacities, or the product thereof; it is either living labour, or the product of past labour (which Marx instructively depicts as 'dead' labour). Capital, as an accumulation of the wealth produced by labour performed in the past, is therefore dead labour, which nonetheless can only sustain itself by constantly feeding on the vitality of the living. Labour, consequently, is merely a particular form and expression of human life itself.

Giorgio Agamben suggests that the classic Marxian concept of the 'mode' (or form) 'of production' must be complemented by the concept of the 'form-of-life', which coexists with the mode of production but renders its workings inoperative and facilitates putting those works to new uses (2016: 94). Inoperativity, in Agamben's thought, signals the intrinsic potential of human life to *not* be defined by any particular work, its inherent open-endedness, its undecidability. 'In inoperativity,' Agamben contends, 'the classless society is already present in capitalist society' (2016: 94).

By escalating the intrinsic antagonism of human life and capital, and thus exposing capital's absolute dependency on human life-as-labour – which is to say, more precisely, capital's constitutive requirement for the subjection of human life as subordinated (alienated) labour – the pandemic elucidates the inoperative potential power of human life, our capacity to not be defined by our labour. The immediacy of the requirements of our collective survival and self-preservation have revealed the utter superfluity of so much of our ordinary work and threaten a cataclysmic collapse of the global capitalist economy, while also summoning a long overdue confrontation between the demands of cultivating life and the sheer irrationality, brutality and perversity of capitalist social relations.

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