

Essential Services

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When we named Counterfutures it was with the idea that there might be alternatives to the futures that are currently on offer: business as usual on the one hand, apocalypse and dystopia on the other (with the first, indeed, leading straight to the second). We were to be a place to analyse and critique the present, yes, but also to discover, now, other ways the world might become.

For many, Covid-19 is already becoming a name, not only for the virus itself and its very present realities of death and suffering, but for a permanently changed world. What does it mean to feel, alongside a mourning of the dead and the lives we already, under lockdown, miss, a hint of optimism? For many, of course—including those worldwide who have lost loved ones—it will be unthinkable. And maybe it is right that Covid-19 only names horror, a horror not just descending from the gods but encouraged by the continuing intensification of globalisation and agribusiness.

But other images and thoughts are circulating. I don't mean dolphins in the Venetian canals and clear skies over Chinese cities, which are less hopeful images than melancholic fantasies of a world without humanity. If Covid-19 encourages calculation about the future world, this can't simply involve the subtraction of people from it.

Better are Naomi Klein's thoughts about disaster and the

opportunities it offers for nationalism and capital—and alternatively for anti-systemic movements.¹ Closed borders and bans on public assembly already, of course, overlap with so many of the repressive fantasies of the Right; and lockdown feeds the dreams of the police, who love the power to move people on, send them home, keep them in their place.² There is no reason, yet, to think that these measures will be made permanent, at least in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, there is no doubt that patriarchy and capital will have these, and other oppressive, extractive, and exploitative measures set aside for just such a crisis, to sneak through as slowly normalising emergency measures—which is to say the identity of dystopia and business as usual writ ever larger. And by the same token, crisis and instability offer the opportunity for the Left's own efforts. It offers the ground for 'disaster socialism', for mutual aid, for new practices of solidarity, autonomy, and opposition.³

What specific counterfutures are embryonic within lockdown? It might be, of course, that a successful eradication of the virus—something to be wished for—will leave people so desperate for a return to a false normality that it comes to seem all the more normal. It is probable that all the affordances of the internet, for mutual aid and for profit, will be further solidified. Hygiene and its products may get a lasting boost. There may, sadly, be continued resistance to casual encounters with others, sexual or otherwise.

And what else, other than modifications of habit and redistributions of capital? Under the pandemic, preservation of life is the ultimate goal. It would be nice, of course, if we had such an emphasis under 'normal'

1 See, for example, Naomi Klein, "'Coronavirus Capitalism': Naomi Klein's Case for Transformative Change Amid Coronavirus Pandemic," *Democracy Now*, 19 March 2020: https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/19/naomi_klein_coronavirus_capitalism

2 See Jacques Rancière's definition of the Police in *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). For the doubling of necessary response to real viral spread with repressive imaginary relations, see Phil Cohen, 'Going Viral: Panic, Precaution and the Allegories of Neoliberalism,' *LW Blog*, 18 March 2020: <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/blog/going-viral-panic-precaution-and-the-allegories-of-neo-liberalism>

3 For a piece on mutual aid in the United Kingdom context, see Adam Quarshie, 'Solidarity in Times of Crisis,' *Verso Blog*, 26 March 2020: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4619-solidarity-in-times-of-crisis>

conditions. At the same time, this goal further reduces life towards mere life, biological life, to blunt and depressing survival, at the expense of a political life, a life of meaning and flourishing.⁴ We are now in a position to raise the question of what is survival and what is flourishing—what is necessity and what is freedom. Anyone asked to live a limited life inside or within a limited range of their residence, asked to choose only a handful of people with whom to bodily interact, understands this in their bones.

A series of small equations is, under lockdown, part of our lives. We find ourselves asking of the state what we are allowed to do, where to go. Similarly, we find ourselves turning to the state to decide what is, and what is not, an ‘essential service’. There are absurdities and inconsistencies in all of this. Walking to the park is okay, but kicking a ball there is not. Can we cycle? Swim in the sea? Drive on empty roads? Supermarkets and pharmacies are essential (as they should be) but so—presumably as a result of some serious lobbying—are liquor deliveries.

The public health measures are two things at once: repressive and necessary. When people follow the rules so nicely it is both heartening and concerning. It is heartening insofar as we follow them out of concern and care for our fellow beings; but concerning if we do so mostly out of respect for authority.

Somewhere out of sight the state is allowing itself to undertake its own calculations about the necessities of life. It is a calculation that has, for years, been obscured by the promise that self-interest can guarantee everything, biological life and human flourishing, so fully that we can forget the difference.⁵ It is a calculation that people can now remember, collectively, and take for their own. It is a calculation about what work is essential, and

4 For more on bare life, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

5 ‘In the utopian 1960s, in the era of Herbert Marcuse and Rudolf Bahro, [the] necessary working hours were reckoned to be something like three or four hours a day: I don’t know what the calculations would be today, in an age of far greater productivity, but I find it symptomatic and a little sad that the question is never posed anymore and is felt to be of absolutely no practical or theoretical interest’: Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (London: Verso, 2016), 44.

what work is frivolous. What is there for the maintenance of the human as an ecological organism, what is there for something over and above survival, what is there for the provision of meaningless trinkets. Such a calculation will, I think, be best when it does more than distribute activities under the headings of necessity and freedom. Taken seriously, this question might at best allow survival, biology itself, to be understood as more than just the ticking over of its mechanisms—to be informed and infused, say, by mauri and whakapapa.

Through the lockdown, though so much ‘productivity’ is halted, we live. The question of how this is possible, without the full functioning of the great market mechanisms we have been told are so necessary, can now be asked. It is the question of how best to live, arising at a point where life itself is so curtailed. It is not a question to hand over only to experts, to the state and its allies.

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