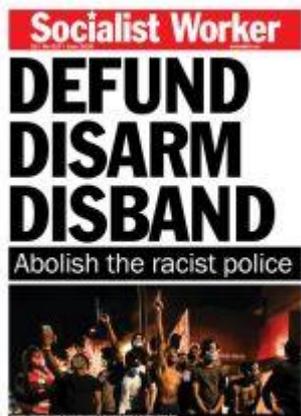
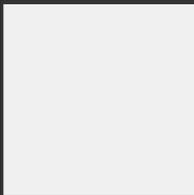




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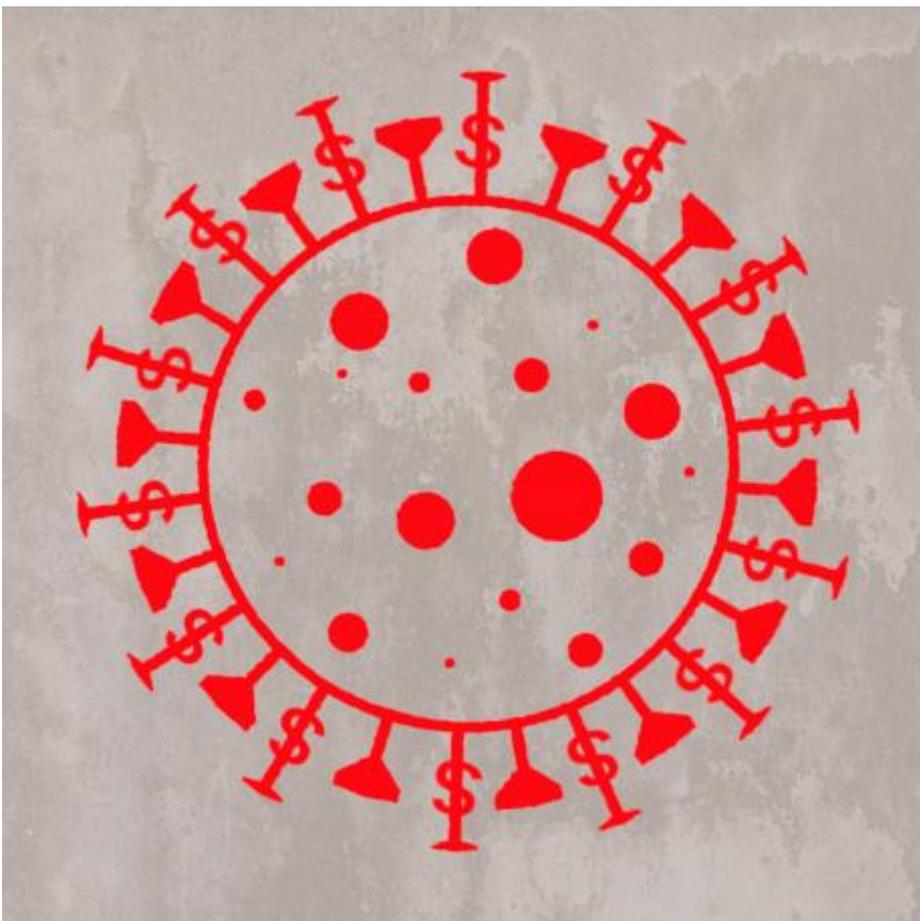
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**COVID-19, capitalism and climate**



**By:**

Brian Champ

July 30, 2020

No one should have been surprised by COVID-19. Epidemiologists have been warning for decades about the increasing danger of novel virus pandemics that could cause major human suffering, disrupt the economy and exacerbate the growing inequalities that characterizes the modern world.

When COVID-19 spread like wildfire, it was clear that the majority of countries around the world were unprepared, failing to heed the recommendations coming out of SARS, MERS and various flu outbreaks. Why? What is it about the system that allows it to continue cutting public health and healthcare infrastructure, even though public health experts have urged better preparedness, more resources and increased integration between all levels of government and internationally?

This situation is reminiscent of the climate crisis; Australia burns while their Tory government finalizes contracts for the world's biggest coal mine; Canada is warming at twice the global rate, yet our government bought a pipeline and stands by while RCMP and CGL violate Indigenous sovereignty to vainly keep pipeline and fracked gas profits going; the US southwest is suffering the worst drought in history, while Trump removes environmental regulations and champions pipelines.

Agribusiness practices have accelerated animal virus emergence and propagation. The proximity of large scale livestock operations to wild ecosystems and to human populations in particular geographies create hotspots where the emergence of deadly human pathogens is more likely. And the ease by which people and goods can be transported internationally via air, sea and land increases the likelihood of deadly pandemics.

Both crises are evidence of the "irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism" – The Metabolic Rift – discerned by Karl Marx as he observed of the crisis of agriculture brought on by capitalism. He observed that nutrients that once would have returned to the soil in a locality, instead were sold to market elsewhere, to be flushed as sewage and creating a crisis in soil fertility. To keep agriculture going, the graveyards of Waterloo were mined for bone meal to spread on fields. Later, Britain and U.S. navies claimed small islands with large bird populations, using slave labour to mine the nutrient rich guano to be shipped home. Ultimately, the capitalist solution to this crisis came with the

development of the artificial fertilizer industry, raising the rift to a new level: extractive industries mine the earth for nutrients, and excess fertilizers runoff fields to create algae blooms downstream. Over the decades, new industrial inputs have been added for crop and livestock production such as pesticides and herbicides, antibiotics, growth hormones and novel genes, and practices have changed to maximize profits for powerful corporations with alarming implications for animal and human health.

### **Dialectical Materialism**

Marx studied the ancient Greek philosophers, writing his Phd dissertation as a comparative study of the atomists, Democritus and Epicurus. Both were materialists, but he was particularly drawn to the non-deterministic materialism of Epicurus, which had been influential in the development of the scientific and industrial revolutions. Also influential on Marx was his study of the German idealist philosopher Hegel, whose dialectic provided a framework for understanding changes in ideas. Marx turned the dialectic on it's head, rooting it in material reality.

Marx and Engels developed historical materialism, explaining how the development of material productive forces and the struggle between contending classes drive historical development.

Less famously, they also argued that the materialist dialectic was crucial for understanding the natural world. These ideas were not fully flushed out, however, as they focused much more on engaging in the political struggles of the day, and writing *Capital*.

Engels did begin work on a manuscript entitled *The Dialectics of Nature* that was unfinished and unpublished in his lifetime and has been the subject of much debate. Ecological thinking blossomed in the years immediately following the Russian revolution in 1917, but Stalin's forced collectivization of the peasantry at the end of the 1920's and the shift to prioritizing industrial and military production in a bid to catch up with the west represented a return to capitalism in an altered form. Unbelievable environmental destruction accompanied rapidly expanding production in the USSR, justified by burying the ecological core of Marxism.

Not much was written on the subject until John Bellamy Foster's *Marx's Ecology* and other works reclaimed this ecological core. Central to this is the Metabolic Rift.

### **Alienation and the Metabolic Rift**

Marx developed the idea of "Alienation" under capitalist society. For Marx this started with the exploitation of labour at the point of production. Capitalists own the means of production - the plant, equipment and raw materials - and hire workers to exploit their labour power. Profits come from the difference between the value produced by workers in a given period, and the wages paid by the boss for the work done. Workers produce goods and services, but they are owned and controlled by the boss – they are alienated from the worker. Other "moments" of alienation flow from this: the alienation of workers from control of the labour process; the alienation of workers from each other; the alienation of workers from a healthy, sustainable relationship with the natural world.

The labour process, for Marx, represents the everlasting, nature-imposed condition of the metabolic interchange between humans and the natural world, of which humans are a part. For much of our existence, we have worked collectively for subsistence, providing for the whole group while maintaining a sustainable metabolic interchange with the natural environment: traditional Indigenous laws are focused on maintaining harmonious human societies that collectively labour to take care of the land, the source of food, water, medicine and spirituality.

Under capitalism, the sustainability of the labour process is completely broken, because only profit matters. To realize profit, goods and services must be brought to market and sold. What happens to production waste and to the product after sale is not the capitalist's concern, and any costs are left to be borne, ultimately, by society in general.

Furthermore, competition for markets is fierce with most companies just fighting to survive while some are able to dominate. Those companies that dominate are able to unduly influence nation states into providing subsidies, protections, guarantees and military assistance to further their economic interests.

When these corporations are food or pharmaceutical multinationals, government regulatory agencies are caught in a conflict of interest between food, drug and environmental safety and the promotion of industry. Cargill, Tyson and other multinationals play dominant roles world wide, and they are able to use their influence to shape agriculture bio-security regulations to ensure they do not affect their profits.

### **Novel Virus Emergence and the Metabolic Rift**

The usual focus of public health authorities during outbreaks is primarily on emergency responses to provide healthcare and on testing, isolating and tracing contacts to known

cases. Beyond that, preventative measures are used, such as the preparation of vaccines and other public health measures that help prevent outbreaks from overwhelming healthcare capacity. But novel virus emergence involves interactions between human beings and other species along with geographical and other factors. These species can be domesticated livestock, related wild animals or as yet undiscovered species living on newly encroached wilderness. In the last few years, there has been a recognition of this with the promotion of “One Health” by mainstream organizations like the WHO. “One Health” is an approach to designing and implementing programmes, policies, legislation and research in which multiple sectors communicate and work together to achieve better public health outcomes.’ Ensuring this approach means veterinarians working with medical doctors, epidemiologists, biologists, geographers, etc. to share information and knowledge and help build a collective response to the threat of these health dangers.

This is a step forward, but will fail to prevent more deadly pandemics because it leaves important connections to economic factors unexplored; the global commodity chains, banks and investors and government subsidies that play key roles in Agribusiness practices. This has led critics to develop an approach they call the “Structural One Health” approach “incorporating broader inputs, including deep time historical and cultural infrastructure and circuits of capital”. This approach is critical of current Agribusiness practices, as explained in an article “Covid-19 and Circuits of Capital”, published in [\*Monthly Review\* in May:](#)

“However unintended, the entirety of the production line is organized around practices that accelerate the evolution of pathogen virulence and subsequent transmission. Growing genetic monocultures—food animals and plants with nearly identical genomes—removes immune firebreaks that in more diverse populations slow down transmission. Pathogens now can just quickly evolve around the commonplace host immune genotypes. Meanwhile, crowded conditions depress immune response. Larger farm animal population sizes and densities of factory farms facilitate greater transmission and recurrent infection. High throughput, a part of any industrial production, provides a continually renewed supply of susceptibles at barn, farm, and regional levels, removing the cap on the evolution of pathogen deadliness. Housing a lot of animals together rewards those strains that can burn through them best. Decreasing the age of slaughter—to six weeks in chickens—is likely to select for pathogens able to survive more robust immune systems. Lengthening the geographic extent of live animal trade and export has increased the diversity of genomic segments that their associated pathogens exchange, increasing the rate at which disease agents explore their evolutionary possibilities.”

So while President Trump deflects attention from his administration's disastrous response by calling it the "Chinese disease", COVID-19 has more to do with standard, worldwide agriculture practices. Hot spots for pathogen emergence in China have to do with a confluence of factors that bring these factory farms close to wild species and large human populations:

"The virus emerged at one terminus of a regional supply line in exotic foods, successfully setting off a human-to-human chain of infections at the other end in Wuhan, China. From there, the outbreak both diffused locally and hopped onto planes and trains, spreading out across the globe through a web structured by travel connections and down a hierarchy from larger to smaller cities.

Other than describing the wild food market in the typical orientalism, little effort has been expended on the most obvious of questions. How did the exotic food sector arrive at a standing where it could sell its wares alongside more traditional livestock in the largest market in Wuhan? The animals were not being sold off the back of a truck or in an alleyway. Think of the permits and payments (and deregulation thereof) involved. Well beyond fisheries, worldwide wild food is an increasingly formalized sector, evermore capitalized by the same sources backing industrial production. Although nowhere near similar in the magnitude of output, the distinction is now more opaque.

The overlapping economic geography extends back from the Wuhan market to the hinterlands where exotic and traditional foods are raised by operations bordering the edge of a contracting wilderness. As industrial production encroaches on the last of the forest, wild food operations must cut farther in to raise their delicacies or raid the last stands. As a result, the most exotic of pathogens, in this case bat-hosted SARS-2, find their way onto a truck, whether in food animals or the labor tending them, shotgun from one end of a lengthening peri-urban circuit to the other before hitting the world stage."

In a deadly irony, government regulations and bio-security measures can benefit companies directly responsible for factory farm viral outbreaks:

"Thailand's CP Group operates joint-venture poultry facilities across China, producing as of 2005 600 million of China's 2.2 billion chickens annually sold. When an outbreak of bird flu occurred in a farm operated by the CP Group in Heilongjiang Province, Japan banned poultry from China. CP factories in Thailand filled the market gap by increasing exports to Japan. A

supply chain arrayed across multiple countries can compensate for the interruptions in business, even as it also, ironically enough, increases the risk of influenza spread.

In contrast, many small farmers suffer catastrophically from this virus dumping, even when they're under contract to agricultural companies. Smallholders typically can't afford the biosecurity changes needed to protect themselves from such outbreaks in the first place or the wholesale repopulation of their livestock in the aftermath (even when subsidized in part by their government). Living market day to market day, they can't afford the losses incurred upon their already thin margins when their operations are disrupted by the government-imposed quarantines and culling campaigns that follow"

### **Covid-19 and Public Health Responses**

The inadequacy of public health and healthcare efforts to identify, test, isolate, trace contacts and develop effective treatments is an example of the metabolic rift as well. Physical distancing measures to break the chains of community spread have been adopted in many countries around the world, because the disease has overwhelmed the healthcare systems of countries like Italy, Sweden, the US, Brazil and the UK. Not enough hospital beds, ventilators and PPE have been available throughout the world to care for those infected, and protect those who are trained to provide the necessary care. Black and Indigenous people are more likely to contract Covid-19 and are also more likely to die from it than the general population. Many front line workers who are being exposed to the virus every day are from BIPOC communities.

Trump downplayed the seriousness of the pandemic initially saying it would "disappear" losing crucial time early in the pandemic curve and continually presses for reopening of the economy. Similar laissez-faire attitudes with elites willing to sacrifice people to keep the economy running has been rampant, and it's only because workers have gone on strike for PPE, to close factories and building sites and to uncover other unsafe practices that essential workers have been supplied with PPE. Rent and debt strikes have been organized to provide the means for workers and students to cope during isolation.

The response of governments has varied, with some heeding the warnings and implementing lockdowns and providing emergency benefits to people, and others downplaying the dangers and trying to keep the economy going. But nowhere have emergency benefits to people been enough, or available to enough people to ensure the contagion ends and aid to industry has been much more forthcoming. And PPE for front line health care workers is still not available

in enough quantities, even in Canada where cases remain somewhat in control. Those countries that locked down now are pushing hard to get people back into workplaces again, even as we see the disastrous results of opening too early as in the US, Brazil and other places. This shows that our governments are more concerned with profits rather than the ramped up public health response we truly need:

"We must establish a massive pandemic corps to provide the work force—from research to care—that approaches the order of demand the virus (and any other pathogen to come) is placing on us. Match the caseload with the number of critical care beds, staffing, and equipment necessary so that suppression can bridge the present numbers gap. In other words, we cannot accept the idea of merely surviving COVID-19's ongoing air attack only to return later to contact tracing and case isolation to drive the outbreak below its threshold. We must hire enough people to identify COVID-19 home-by-home right now and equip them with the needed protective gear, such as adequate masks. Along the way, we need to suspend a society organized around expropriation, from landlords up through sanctions on other countries, so that people can survive both the disease and its cure."

Because while Covid-19 is ravaging humanity planet-wide, it is merely a symptom of the real underlying disease of capitalism. The profit motive drives capitalists to dominate "the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere."

Scientists have identified nine planetary boundaries for a livable planet: ozone depletion, biodiversity loss and extinctions, Chemical pollution, Climate Change, Ocean acidification, Freshwater consumption, Land system change, Nitrogen and phosphorus flows to the biosphere and oceans and Atmospheric aerosol loading. In a few hundred years of capitalist domination of the world, all nine have been or are in danger of being crossed.

Geographer Jason Moore put it this way: "Capitalist production does not have an epidemiology so much as it is an epidemiology".

Fighting for reforms that can help people, preserve the environment and contribute to better outcomes is not optional.

Socialists who help organize to win struggles from below in workplaces, schools and communities against the system build confidence in the ability of ordinary people to change the world, and aim to organize the movement.

But ultimately, we can't reform a system whose logic is to pursue every possible profitable enterprise, regardless of what it does to the health of animals and the natural environment or human beings. It is a system that will produce new killer pandemics along with the food we eat. It is a system that rewards the cutting down of the Amazon Rainforest, the earth's lungs, to produce more meat that we don't need. It is a system that will allow oil companies to extract every drop from the earth despite the fact that this will surely make the planet unliveable for humans and many other species. It is a system that controls, tortures and kills Black and Indigenous people and justifies it with racist mythologies to keep the profits going.

The power to change the system lies with the working class, the overwhelming majority. But to lead a working class of millions we urgently need a revolutionary party comprised of the most class conscious elements linking the struggles against the system together and fighting for unity against racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic divisions. The IS makes no pretense of being a mass party, but remains committed to the task of building such a revolutionary party in so-called Canada.

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