

Last Resorts: Jottings on the Pandemic State

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Abstract: This essay explores various theorists' response to the hypertrophies, failures and antinomies of state power brought to the fore by the political response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It reflects critically on the thesis that the pandemic has served as a wedge for an epochal consolidation of a biosecurity state, as well as on the contention that a return of the state's potentially progressive biopolitical prerogatives is currently in effect. In order to excavate our contradictory desire and/or fear of the state, as well as the politically confused imperatives of lockdown and liberation, it explores the arguments advanced by value-critics regarding the complementary hostility of state and capital, and the political-economic crisis tendencies behind the contemporary 'primacy of politics'. By way of conclusion, it puts these critical arguments against state-fetishism into dialogue with the 'tragic instrumentalist' thesis that it is only by refunctioning the state's capacities for action that our chronic emergencies might find some emancipatory outlet.

Keywords: Covid-19, critique of value, pandemic, Anselm Jappe, Andreas Malm, the state

Countless commentators have remarked upon the revelatory virtues of the ongoing pandemic, acting, to select a particularly felicitous metaphor, in a manner akin to 'a radioactive element injected into the veins for an x-ray of blood flow'.¹ If these months have been apocalyptic, it has also been in the etymological, Biblical sense (the Greek *apokaluptein*) of uncovering things unseen – though the uncovering has often implicated that which was hiding in plain sight.

Among the dimensions of our material and psychic life that have been intensely magnified by the protracted emergency is our relation to the state. From a certain vantage, this is entirely unsurprising, as the legitimacy of the modern state has largely hinged on its (differential, exclusive, racialised, gendered, and sometimes lethal) capacity to secure the reproduction of the biological bases of political life, a function that has been repeatedly crystallised and augmented in historical encounters with pandemics. The legitimacy of the modern age and of the modern state is in great part a biopolitical and an epidemiological legitimacy.² To cite authorities from Cicero to Hobbes, to numberless constitutional and regulatory documents, *Salus populi suprema lex esto* – in other words, political authority is indissociable from public health. That Latin motto is arguably hardwired into our common sense regarding the very rationale for the concentration and centralisation of power.

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¹Winant, 2020.

²Toscano, 2020.

According to the most dire diagnoses of our moment, the SARS-CoV-2 has witnessed an acceleration in our own investments and complicities with this biopolitical form of legitimacy, together with a formidable augmentation in the state's powers of both individual discipline and individual control, to allude to a Deleuzian distinction that seems to be largely collapsing in the technologically dense and layered world of (self-)isolation measures. This would be the 'Great Transformation' of 2020, in which sovereign and administrative powers have seized the occasion of a state of exception pervading our social atmosphere like the airborne droplets we so dread, in order to engage a wholesale mutation in our paradigms of political life – compelling each and every one of us (*omnes et singulatim*), through a 'juridical-religious obligation' to health, to comply with the infinitely plastic and undeniable demands of *biosecurity*.³

Largely resonating with this vision of an epochal turn – in which the spectacular isolation of social atoms whose only religion is health converges with a state bent on fully expropriating any residue of agency from its simulacrum of citizenry – is the view that the pandemic is the moment of the full actualisation of sovereign power's own utopian scenarios. With an acerbic nod to Macron's turn as the Napoleon of Covid, Julien Coupat and his co-authors declare:

We have seen the Sovereign of the republic realize his dream of gathering into a mass all of his subjects—perfectly separated between the four walls of their homes and in front of their screens—reduced finally to his exclusive contemplation. We have seen *the Leviathan realized*.⁴

It might be worth noting that Agamben and Coupat write from within regimes of epidemiological emergency profoundly marked by particular *habits* (and not just *reasons*) of state – the penchant of the French and Italian state to militarise the public sphere at all opportunities, and to imagine that machine guns may be an apt response to regulating a public health response, surely playing a role. It is difficult to gainsay an acceleration – in a context of often rational and indeed even altruistic, if not unambiguous, compliance – in the colonisation of our life-worlds by the joint manoeuvres of the security state and surveillance capitalism (the 'coronopticon'⁵). A dose of sobriety is in order, however about the threats but also the potentials that this 'return of the state' involves. In an early text about the pandemic, castigating a certain obsession of the

3 Agamben, 2020, pp. 12-13.

4 Coupat et al., 2020.

5 The Economist, 2020.

French Left with the malevolent figure of Macron, Alain Badiou noted that:

Faced with an epidemic this kind of statist reflex is inevitable. That is why, contrary to what some say, the declarations by Macron or Prime Minister Edouard Philippe regarding the return of the 'welfare' state, spending to support people out of work, or to aid the self-employed whose shops have been shut, demanding 100 or 200 billion from the state coffers, and even the announcement of 'nationalisations' – none of this is surprising or paradoxical. It follows that Macron's metaphor, 'we are at war', is correct: in war or epidemic, the state is compelled, sometimes trespassing the normal run of its class nature, to undertake practices that are both more authoritarian and more generally targeted, in order to avoid a strategic catastrophe. This is an entirely logical consequence of the situation, the aim of which is to stifle the epidemic – to win the war, to borrow once again Macron's metaphor – with the greatest certainty possible, while remaining within the established social order. This is no laughing matter, it is a necessity imposed by the diffusion of a lethal process that intersects nature (whence the preeminent role of scientists in the matter) and the social order (whence the authoritarian intervention, and it couldn't be otherwise, of the state).

We can also add to this Marco D'Eramo's important correction to Agamben's metaphysical framing of emergency powers in a unilinear philosophy of history, namely that 'not all states of exception are the same' – not least because, contra Agamben (and as we'll explore further below), 'domination is not one-dimensional. It is not just control and surveillance; it is also exploitation and extraction'. To realise the latter is also to be sensitive to the ways in which the pandemic, far from serving as a welcome crisis to enact a further monopolisation of (bio)power, 'has caught the ruling classes off guard', especially to the extent that 'they have not yet grasped the recession that awaits us and its capacity to upend economic orthodoxies'.⁶ Some of this has also manifested itself in what could be termed the depressive phase of the desire for the state, the moment that reveals 'the *sad passion of being well-governed* as the obligation to be *perpetually disappointed*'.⁷

What I'd like to briefly explore is this statist reflex, in its political, economic but also ideological dimensions. Contrary to interpretations that would see our moment as one of the untrammelled affirmation of

6 D'Eramo, 2020, pp. 25-7. See also Watkins, 2020.

7 Coupat et al., 2020.

invasive biopower under the cover of public health, the role of the state in our conjuncture – as well as how it is perceived, repelled or demanded – is marked by deep ambivalences, we might even say contradictions. Many have noted, for instance, the curious ideological chiasmus whereby the political bearers of some of the most concerning authoritarian trends in the present (Trump, Bolsonaro and their coteries) have been the least interested in turning a public health emergency into an occasion for the militarisation of everyday life, while many Leftists and liberals have been clamouring for a greater use of the state's repressive and juridical resources to secure collective well-being.

None of this is entirely mysterious – after all, contemporary fascistic reflexes are entangled with neoliberalism's most anti-democratic instincts, its anti-social Darwinism (fascisms of freedom are all the rage), while the experience and idea of the *welfare state* remains the residual horizon of most progressive politics. Yet it does point to the intersection of (at least) two contradictions – namely the one between the *desire for the state* and the (often all-too justified) *fear of the state*, on the one hand, and between the (momentary) *primacy of the state* and the (structuring) *primacy of the economic*, on the other. Before considering what I think is the most illuminating intervention to date in what concerns the diagnosis of the lived antinomies of the pandemic state, Anselm Jappe et al.'s *De Virus Illustribus*, it is worth mentioning one often neglected dimension of the practical contradictions faced by state power in the Covid conjuncture. Notwithstanding what initially appeared as a centralisation and nationalisation of the public health crisis, giving the lie to horizons of coordinated imperial governance (which some might have erroneously imagined as revenant, against neo-populist and sovereigntist temptations, in the face of a *global* pandemic), the virus's course through the circulatory system of the body politic has increasingly revealed the fault-lines internal to the nation-state.

Not just in federal states, biopolitical legitimacy has turned out to be deeply contentious across different levels of administrative and coercive power, and only seemingly or fleetingly monopolised by the executive centre. Mayors, governors, local health authorities, alternative bodies of epidemiological expertise, or even gangs and militias (as in the well-publicised case of Brazilian *favelas*⁸) have vied for control over the handling of the public health response – something which is in keeping with the importance of local, grassroots or communal knowledge and agency to epidemiological responses.⁹ For all the pomp and pastiche of sovereign power, no medical monarch has arisen. What we've seen are at best locally and provisionally persuasive performances of an authority

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8 Jappe et al., 2020, pp. 57-8.

9 Toscano, 2020.

infused with generally cautious claims of scientific expertise (contra Agamben's bombastic claims about the current 'religion' of scientific expertise and its attendant heresies, the authority of public health experts seems far too couched in precaution and probabilism to count as faith).

While some (generally affluent) states and their leaders – through a deft balancing act between the imperatives of care and control – have temporarily managed to accumulate political capital from their pandemic management, contentions over jurisdiction,¹⁰ authority and expertise, overlaid on the protracted hollowing out of investment in political representation, suggest more acephalous visions of the Leviathan. As Massimo De Carolis has judiciously observed:

in no case will a conspiracy, a Spectre, or some more or less hidden personification of Power dissolve our doubt. Social phenomena do not have a director [*regia*], but are the result of an indeterminate number of independent forces and drives. There are no puppeteers, but only puppets that push the theatre, each in his own way, with more or less force, in one direction or another, often in spite of their own conscious intentions.¹¹

If the current conjuncture of planetary emergency politics does not betoken simply a monolithic phase-shift in the monopolisation (and therefore expropriation or alienation) of social power, is there a better way to ground and understand the antinomic character of both states' actions vis-à-vis the pandemic and of our own perception thereof? Anselm Jappe and his co-authors, building on the 'critique of value-dissociation' elaborated by Robert Kurz and Roswitha Scholz, have provided a fruitful framing of this question, which can contribute to elucidate our predicament, as well as the limits of extant theoretical responses. The starting point is limpid enough: drawing on a Marxian critique of political economy (albeit one that does not subsume a critique of patriarchy and the 'dissociation' of a feminised sphere of reproduction,¹² something I cannot further explore in these notes), *De Virus Illustribus* argues that the tenet of a 'return of the state' – whether viewed in anti-authoritarian horror or in welfarist hope – is all too often based on the fallacious notion that the state is somehow 'outside' of capital and its regimes of valorisation. The antinomy or oscillation that characterises our pandemic conjuncture – desire for the state and hatred of government, monopolisation and abandonment, etc. – is written into the very structure of capitalist society.

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10 Jappe et al., 2020, p. 57.

11 De Carolis, 2020.

12 Jappe et al., 2020, pp. 148-57.

As Jappe et al. write, glossing Kurz's analysis of the 'complementary hostility' of state and market-production:

In reality, there exists a polar relation between the economic sphere and a state-political sphere which is its functional subsystem. Capitalism is not only the market, it is the state *and* the market-production (as well as other derived spheres). ... States are far more immersed in the world of capital than is suggested by the fetishist vision of the state as a mere instrument. ... On the one hand the state is in no way an action of society on itself which is auto-determined and self-grounded, because its conditions of existence and its social capacities totally depend on the drainage it operates in the form of taxes on the economic sphere. ... On the other hand, states in their historical genesis and the logic of their functioning constitute themselves in the role of 'ideal collective capitalist'. ... In other words, states take charge of the overall conditions of reproduction of capitalist societies that the competitive logic of the corporate economy cannot, by its very logic, assume.¹³

It is on this basis that our pandemic antinomy is viewed not as the state recouping space lost to the market but as an affair immanent to a structural contradiction, or better an internal polarity, of a capitalist society.

Rather than an embedding of economy in society by the state – to borrow a Polanyian lingo – what we are witnessing is the 'state-political self-seizure [*auto-saisie*] of capitalist society for the sake of surviving itself'.¹⁴ What *is* unique about this crisis is that, rather than endogenously emerging from the primary and determining domain of market-production, we are confronted with a planetary economic crisis that is state-political in nature. In this crisis context, both to shore up their own residual biopolitical legitimacy and to assure, after the painful parenthesis, the resumption of accumulation, states have been forced to plunge the valorisation process into an artificial coma – often converging, albeit in a contradictory manner, with a certain resurgent neo-populist discourse of productivist national sovereignty (including with surreal slogans, such as Macron's 'nationalisation of salaries').¹⁵

But the uniqueness of this crisis is also determined, in this account, by the way in which it has inherited the baleful legacy of the financial and credit crises that followed in tight sequence from the 1990s onwards. For Jappe and his co-authors, we are in the midst of another wave of massive

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¹³ Jappe et al., 2020, pp. 70-1.

¹⁴ Jappe et al., 2020, p. 74.

¹⁵ Jappe et al., 2020, p. 107.

planetary indebtedness, one marked – as a kind of bequest from the 2008 crisis – by the state and central banks' overwhelming role in shoring up the production of fictive capital which is complementing the secular decline in capital's productivity. *De Virus Illustribus* thus rests much of its critical analysis of the surge in the 'primacy of politics' through the pandemic on its diagnosis of the increasingly pathological role (from the standpoint of capital's reproducibility and its crisis-proneness) of the state in the process of valorisation. If neoliberalism, broadly construed, depended on a substitution of the financial sector as an economic engine in view of chronic sluggishness in the domain of commodity-production, what we are witnessing is states being obliged to substitute the financial sector itself. After 2008, and exponentially so in the context of the novel coronavirus:

States and the central banks of the heartlands of capitalism have come to lose their function of simple support to the private sector in the framework of the multiplication of fictive capital, to ultimately assume a function of substitution vis-à-vis the financial industry, with the aim of renewing the mountains of expired property titles and to assuage the internal constraints to the expansion of fictive capital upon which rests the ensemble of the contemporary regime of accumulation.¹⁶

With the US Fed, for instance, buying up at a discount vast quantities of corporate debt, we thus move 'from the partial statification [*étatisation*] of an already consumed capitalist future, to a socialisation of the great process of crisis'.¹⁷ Accordingly, we are increasingly confronted with a 'mega-state bubble' which is ultimately based on the idea that the state can virtually draw on the promise of future economic growth. Jappe et al. cite a phrase from French Nobel prize in economics winner Esther Duflo, who speaks of state spending during the pandemic crisis in terms of billions that are 'coming from the future'¹⁸ – a striking instance of that time-fetishism which has become second nature to capitalist thought and practice. They observe that what is being consumed here is really a future without a tomorrow, in light of the internal and external (ecological) limits to capital.

While I cannot and do not intend to do justice to the crisis theory that frames this analysis of the contemporary 'primacy of politics' and its antinomies, I think that, even in its rough outline, it provides a significant contribution to the halting debate on the place of the state

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¹⁶ Jappe et al., 2020, p. 106.

¹⁷ Jappe et al., 2020, p. 107.

¹⁸ Jappe et al., 2020, p. 30.

in the pandemic. Above all, it allows us to link ideological contentions and passionate attachments regarding the feared and/or desired 'return of the state' to the systemic dynamics that have turned the state into capitalism's *hope of last resort*.¹⁹ But what are we to make of the fact that it might also be anti-capitalism's hope of last resort?

De Virus Illustribus, possibly because of its attention to dissociation and social reproduction, is not unaware of the material bases of our desire for the state (or indeed for capital); the fact that the economy is not just a matter of profit but a condition of our own biological reproduction, now for the most part radically dependent on value-circuits. The authors tellingly speak of 'the ambiguous feeling of seeing the prison in which you're trapped light on fire, without knowing whether the doors will open'.²⁰ But, as in much of value-theory and value-critique, the dismantling of the political fetishes immanent to capital's reproduction, leaves questions of strategy, broadly understood, struck down by a kind of image ban – with only the almost evanescent horizon of the abolition of capital's 'automatic subject' in their place. If value can't be abolished by halves, as many value-critics contend, one often suspects it might not be abolished at all.

It is an interesting exercise in Marxist parallax reading, thus, to confront *De Virus Illustribus* with Andreas Malm's plea for the state as humanity and ecology's 'hope of last resort' in his formidable *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century*. Malm's book is the best synthesis we have of the link between the ongoing climate catastrophe, the rolling Covid pandemic, and their capitalist aetiology – not to mention a lacerating complement to his critique of 'hybridism' and of Marxism's own blindspots about nature in his previous *The Progress of this Storm*. I am not going to elaborate here on the connections between the Covid pandemic and the Capitalocene, or on Malm's astute observations about the dissimilarities and asynchronies between climate change and the coronavirus pandemic as social and natural phenomena. Nor indeed is the eco-Leninist provocation of 'war communism' as the name of our emergency politics my concern.²¹

Rather, I wish merely to touch on Malm's anti-anarchist (and anti-value-critical as well as anti-communising) contention that it is to the *capitalist* state that one must turn to confront our chronic emergency. Is this, as the critique of value perspective would intimate, just another instantiation of instrumentalism as another variant of fetishistic thinking? My inclination would be to answer in the negative; or rather, to see in Malm's ecological refunctioning of Leninism, what we could

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19 Jappe et al., 2020, pp. 105, 113.

20 Jappe et al., 2020, p. 197.

21 Though see the perspicuous observations in Dale, 2020.

term a *tragic instrumentalism*. It is tragic, to my mind, like any serious thinking of transition, all the more so in view of the baleful temporality of climate catastrophe. And its tragedy is a function of its realism about the inescapability of coercion in political affairs. In Malm's own words:

Nothing from the past decades of stalled transitions indicates that ExxonMobil would like to metamorphose into a cleaner and storekeeper of unsalable carbon, or that meat and palm oil companies would gladly let their pastures and plantations be rewilded. It appears tautologically true that an actual transition would require some coercive authority. If anarchists would ever wield influence in such a process, they would quickly discover this circumstance and, just like anybody else, have to avail themselves of the state.²²

But the temporal determinants of our warming world, the way in which, to quote Malm's previous book, '*We can never be in the heat of the moment, only in the heat of [the] ongoing past*' of fossil capital, mean that classic Leninism, like anarchism, must be foregone – a revolutionary state, a commune-state or non-state-state is not a relevant watchword today. To the question, what state then for an ecological Leninism, Malm answers with this reflection:

We have just argued that the capitalist state is constitutionally incapable of taking these steps. And yet there is no other form of state on offer. No workers' state based on soviets will be miraculously born in the night. No dual power of the democratic organs of the proletariat seems likely to materialise anytime soon, if ever. Waiting for it would be both delusional and criminal, and so all we have to work with is the dreary bourgeois state, tethered to the circuits of capital as always. There would have to be popular pressure brought to bear on it, shifting the balance of forces condensed in it, forcing apparatuses to cut the tethers and begin to move, using [a] plurality of methods ... But this would clearly be a departure from the classical programme of demolishing the state and building another – one of several elements of Leninism that seem ripe (or overripe) for their own obituaries.²³

I'm largely sympathetic to the Marxian vein of tragic realism that Malm has infused with ecological urgency. It is also evident in his contention that, as the Bolshevik experience itself suggests, there is never any

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22 Malm, 2020, p. 151.

23 Malm, 2020, pp. 151-2.

'clean break' with the *ancien régime*, as well as in his recognition of the potential boomerangs of emergency politics, however emancipatory in intent – his proposal that we '*stay with the dilemma*, to adapt a phrase from Donna Haraway: the dilemma of how to execute control measures in an emergency without trampling on democratic rights, but rather by securing, building on and drawing force from them'.²⁴ Yet in light of Jappe et al. diagnosis of the complementary hostility of state and capital, we may still ask how realist the realism about the *capitalist* state as the hope of last resort might be.

While the horizon of capital's current state-induced artificial coma is indeed the patient's recovery (with all the practical contradictions about forms of mitigation or indeed recurrent fantasies of herd immunity), a capitalist state forced by mass pressure to transition out of fossil capital with the requisite amount of haste would arguably soon see itself as being forced to transition out of capital altogether. Inasmuch as the political economy of the state is such that it relies on capital's future vitality for its own revenues and resources, indeed for its own *power*, any (perceived) threat to that future is more than likely immediately to turn into that state's rapidly falling material power and consequently plummeting legitimacy.

Malm is entirely correct that at the level of everyday life or indeed use-values, a radical transition out of fossil capital is far less drastic than the privations that billions of people have largely complied with for months now. But these latter measures can be translated, in a futural calculus, into value-terms (economic artificial coma versus economic agony). Given the inextricability of fossil capital from our regime of accumulation, and of the state from the latter, how long would a capitalist state remain capitalist in such a transition (and, strictly following the value-critical logic, remain a state)? I am persuaded by Malm's contention that '*during the transitional period* there is no escaping outlawing wildlife consumption and terminating mass aviation and phasing out meat and other things considered parts of the good life, and those elements of the climate movement and the left that pretend that none of this needs to happen, that there will be no sacrifices or discomforts for ordinary people, are not being honest'.²⁵ But wouldn't the clear and present threat to productive and fictive capital alike, the evident curtailing of future value – especially in the context of the mega state-bubble growing apace – quickly force the transition out of fossil capital altogether? Perhaps this is another dilemma that thinking ourselves through and out of our emergencies will force us to stay with.

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24 Malm, 2020, p. 165.

25 Malm, 2020, pp. 163-4.

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