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## *Editorial Perspective*



### The State of the Pandemic

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#### Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has further intensified a crisis in the functions and the perception of the state. It has also revealed underlying contradictions in both mainstream and radical ideologies of the state. A desire for the state as guarantor of public welfare vies with fear of the state's hypertrophic capacities for surveillance and control. Following a brief exploration of the intimate modern connection between plagues and the state, the article tries to map some of the ways in which the state has been at stake in political and theoretical commentaries on the pandemic. Is an epidemiological politics from below, beyond the plague state, possible? Can recent emergency measures be seen as incomplete or inverted anticipations of a communist use of the state of exception? Or is the primacy of the political we are currently experiencing a mere fetish, indissociable from the rule of capital?

#### Keywords

COVID-19 – Foucault – Jappe – Malm – public health – the state



The State as organised tuberculosis; if the germs of the plague were to organise, they would found the world Kingdom.

GEORG LUKÁCS, *Notes on Dostoevsky* (1915)



## 1 Lineages of the Plague State

It is commonplace when commenting on crises of various stripes to note their capacity suddenly to reveal what the seemingly smooth reproduction of the *status quo* leaves unremarked, to frontstage the backstage, rip the scales from our eyes, and so on.<sup>1</sup> The character, duration and sheer scale of the SARS-CoV-2/Covid-19 pandemic is a particularly comprehensive illustration of this old, 'apocalyptic' truth. From the differential exposure to death engineered by racial capitalism to the foregrounding of care work, from attention to the lethal conditions of incarceration to a drop in pollution visible to the naked eye, the 'revelations' catalysed by the pandemic seem as limitless as its ongoing impact on our social relations of production and reproduction.

But the widespread, incessant, mediatised acknowledgment that we are living through an unprecedented crisis can also fool us into thinking that our political and ethical imaginaries are already capable of distinguishing the old from the new, that our recognition is not a misrecognition, our sight an oversight, our *connaissance*, to put it in French, a *méconnaissance*. The pressure that an epidemic, as both reality and allegory, can put on our cognitive and moral mappings is something that Albert Camus had incisively captured in his *Notebooks*, in preparatory remarks towards the writing of *The Plague*:

Develop social criticism and revolt. That they are lacking in imagination. They settle down to an epic as they would to a picnic. They don't think on the right scale for plagues. And the remedies they think up are barely suitable for a head cold.<sup>2</sup>

1 This text incorporates revised versions of 'Beyond the Plague State', originally published in *Sick of the System: Why the COVID-19 Recovery must be Revolutionary* (Toronto: BTL, 2020), as well as the *Historical Materialism* blog, and 'Last Resorts: Jottings on the Pandemic State', published in *Crisis & Critique*, Volume 7, Issue 3 (2020). I am grateful to Panagiotis Sotiris, Benjamin Noys, Andreas Malm and Michael Ma for their comments and encouragement.

2 Camus 1958, p. 3. On *The Plague* in the light of the novel coronavirus, see Rose 2020.

The imaginative blockage is arguably intensified today, as pandemic conditions intersect with and are exacerbated by other social and material processes whose visibility and intelligibility are in no way transparent, not least the economic dynamics of capitalist globalisation and the vicissitudes of political power. Value and virus – differently and differentially visible, and, to everyday perception, *violently* abstract.

The political dimension of our collective life under global pandemic conditions certainly seems to abide by a crisis logic of intensification and revelation, at the same time as it is haunted by its own opacities and failures of imagination. States of alarm and emergency proliferate, veritable sanitary dictatorships are spawned (most egregiously in Hungary), a public-health emergency is militarised, and what *The Economist* dubs a ‘coronopticon’ is varyingly beta-tested on panicked populations.<sup>3</sup> And yet it would be far too simple merely to castigate the various forms of medical authoritarianism that have appeared on the contemporary political stage. Especially for those invested in preserving emancipatory futures in the aftermath of the pandemic, it is crucial to reflect on the profound ambivalence towards the state that this crisis brings to the fore. We witness a widespread *desire for the state* – a demand that public authorities act swiftly and effectively, that they properly resource the epidemiological ‘frontline’, that jobs, livelihoods and health be secured in the face of an unprecedented interruption of ‘normality’. And, correcting a hopeful progressive conceit, whereby all repression is top-down in origin, there is also an ambient demand that public authorities swiftly repress those engaging in imprudent or dangerous behaviour. In the unsettling words of one of the characters from Maurice Blanchot’s ‘plague novel’, *The Most High*: ‘The sickness contaminates the law when the law cares for the sick.’<sup>4</sup>

Given our cramped political imaginaries and rhetoric – but also, I will argue, the very nature of the state – this desire is overwhelmingly articulated in martial terms. Our ears have grown dull with declarations of war on the coronavirus: the ‘vector-in-chief’, as Fintan O’Toole has nicely termed him,<sup>5</sup> tweets that ‘The Invisible Enemy will soon be in full retreat’, while a convalescent UK Prime Minister talks of ‘a fight we never picked against an enemy we still don’t entirely understand’; wayward nationalist analogies to the ‘Spirit of the Blitz’ are trotted out, while wartime legislative powers are enacted temporarily to nationalise industries in order to produce ventilators and personal protective equipment. Of course, waging war on a ‘virus’ is ultimately no more cogent

<sup>3</sup> *The Economist* 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Blanchot 1996, p. 169.

<sup>5</sup> O’Toole 2020.

than waging war on a noun (i.e. terror), but it is a metaphor deeply embedded both in our thinking about immunity and infection, and in our political vocabulary. As the history of the state and of our perceptions of it testifies, it is often exceedingly difficult to tease apart the medical and the military, whether at the level of ideology or of practice. Yet just as detecting the capitalist 'hotspots' behind this crisis does not exempt us from facing up to our own complicities,<sup>6</sup> so castigating the political incompetence and malevolence that is rife in responses to Covid-19 does not grant us any immunity from confronting our own contradictory desire for the state.

The history of political philosophy can perhaps shed some partial light on our predicament. After all, the nexus between the alienation of our political will to a sovereign and the latter's capacity to preserve the life and health of its subjects, especially in the face of epidemics and plagues, is at the very origins of modern Western political thought – which, for better and very much for worse continues to shape our common sense. This is perhaps best exemplified by a dictum coined by the Ancient Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero and then adopted in the early modern period – that is, the era of the gestation of the modern capitalist state – by Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, John Locke and the Leveller insurgent William Rainsborowe: *Salus populi suprema lex esto* (the health of the people should be the supreme law). In this deceptively simple slogan can be identified much of the ambivalence carried by our desire for the state – it can be interpreted as the need to subordinate the exercise of politics to collective welfare, but it can also legitimate the absolute concentration of power in a sovereign that monopolises the ability to define both what constitutes health, and who the people are (with the latter easily mutating into an *ethnos* or race).<sup>7</sup>

Revisiting our political history and our political imaginaries through Cicero's slogan rather than, say, through a single-minded focus on war as the 'midwife' of the modern state, is particularly instructive in our pandemic age. Pick up a copy of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) and look at the famous image which likely graces its cover (in the original it was the frontispiece, which faced the title page). You will probably be transfixed by how Hobbes instructed his engraver to depict the sovereign as a head gazing out atop a 'body politic' composed of his subjects (all gazing inward or upward at the king). Or you might scan the landscape to observe the absence of labour in the fields and distant

6 Wallace 2020.

7 Tellingly, the motto also makes up the last words of Frank Snowden's monumental *Epidemics and Society*, where it stands for the demand to embed and constrain the market for the sake of public health. Snowden 2019, p. 505.

signs of war (roadblocks, war ships on the horizon, plumes of cannon-smoke). Or you might wander about the icons of secular and religious power arranged on the left and right sides of the image. What you are likely to miss is that the city over which Hobbes's 'Artificial Man' looms is almost entirely *empty*, save for some patrolling soldiers and a couple of ominous figures donning birdlike masks, difficult to make out without magnification. These are plague doctors. War and epidemics are the context for the incorporation of now-powerless subjects into the sovereign, as well as for their seclusion in their homes in times of strife and contagion. *Salus populi suprema lex esto*. Viewed through this prism the state can be seen to lie between but also combine the metaphysics of the plague and its epidemiology: the people as a symbolic and iconic entity, on the one hand, and the population as a viral reservoir or vector, on the other.

In a recent commentary on Hobbes, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben nicely noted that the frontispiece of the *Leviathan* is a powerful clue to a defining aspect of that modern state which Hobbes's thinking did so much to shape and legitimise: the absence of the people, or, in Greek, *ademia*. Hobbes's plague doctors thus suggest a kind of secret link between, on the one hand, the absence of the people, the *demos* (as anything other than a multitude to be contained by and alienated into the state's sovereign), and, on the other, the periodic crises elicited by epidemics (literally, 'on the people', *epi + demos*) and pandemics (literally, 'all the people', *pan + demos*). The modern state, with its monopoly of power, is a plague state. We could also note that it is a state of *separation* – Camus's notes on *The Plague* are again suggestive, where he writes: 'What seems best to characterise this epoch, is *separation*. Everyone was separated from everyone else, from those they love or from their habits. ... At the end of the plague, all the inhabitants [of the city] had the look of migrants.'<sup>8</sup>

But this separation is not simple, its political arithmetic of individualisation is more insidious and productive than might at first appear. In his lectures on the modern emergence of the social figure of the 'abnormal', Michel Foucault asked himself under what conditions Europe witnessed a shift from forms of rule that excluded, prohibited and banished, to techniques of power that sought to observe, analyse and control human beings, to *individualise* and *normalise* them. His suggestion was that we turn to the transition between two ways of dealing with infectious disease, from the politics of leprosy to the politics of the plague. According to Foucault, the move away from a separation between two groups, the sick and the well, as materialised in the leper colonies or *lazzaretti*, to the meticulous governance of the plague town, household

<sup>8</sup> Camus 1958, p. 4.

by household, signalled a momentous shift in the governance of our behaviour, ultimately serving as the precondition for our understandings of political power and representation, citizenship and the state. Foucault's description of the deployment of power in a plague town bears uncanny testimony to the idea that we still largely live in the political space that emerged in eighteenth-century Europe, in what he called the 'political dream' of the plague (the 'literary dream' of the plague was that of lawlessness and the dissolution of social and individual boundaries):

The sentries had to be constantly on watch at the end of the streets, and twice a day the inspectors of the quarters and districts had to make their inspection in such a way that nothing that happened in the town could escape their gaze. And everything thus observed had to be permanently recorded by means of this kind of visual examination and by entering all information in big registers. ... It is not exclusion but quarantine. It is not a question of driving out individuals but rather of establishing and fixing them, of giving them their own place, of assigning places and of defining presences and subdivided presences. Not rejection but inclusion. You can see that there is no longer a kind of global division between two types or groups of population, one that is pure and the other impure, one that has leprosy and the other that does not. Rather, there is a series of fine and constantly observed differences between individuals who are ill and those who are not. It is a question of individualization; the division and subdivision of power extending to the fine grain of individuality.<sup>9</sup>

Where the enclosure of lepers operated on the stark group division between the sick, that is the contagious, and the healthy, the medical policing of the plague works on gradations of risk, mapping individual behaviour and susceptibility onto cities, territories and mobilities. It is not a moral or nosological norm that is at stake here, but a continuous effort to normalise the behaviour of individuals, each and every one becoming the bearer of a potential threat that can only be managed through data collection (the big registers carried by the watchmen). The government of the plague is thus a precursor of the political obsession with the 'dangerous individual', which brings together (and confuses) phenomena of contagion, crime or conflict. In the age of surveillance capitalism and algorithmic power, normalising practices targeted at the dangerous individual accrue enormous computational force, finer and finer grain. But they are also, like Daniel Defoe's narratives of self-isolation in *A Journal of*

<sup>9</sup> Foucault 2003, pp. 45–6.

*the Plague Year*, an increasingly voluntary affair, while the prolongation of the pandemic and its threat to individual and collective health can serve as a compelling argument not just for the intensification in the powers of the state, but for that examination and registering, that relativisation of ‘privacy’, of which Foucault’s plague town was the dramatic precursor.

## 2 Survival Pending Revolution

In view of this long and deeply-entrenched history of the plague state, of plague power, is it possible to imagine forms of public health that would not simply be synonymous with the health of the state, responses to pandemics that would not further entrench our desire for and collusion with sovereign monopolies of power? Can we avoid the seemingly intractable tendency to treat crises as opportunities for a further widening and deepening of state powers, in the absence and isolation of the people? The recent history of epidemics in West Africa has suggested the vital significance of epidemiologists thinking like communities, and communities thinking like epidemiologists,<sup>10</sup> while critical thinking on the profound limits of the lockdown strategy without the institution of ‘community shields’ moves in a similar direction.<sup>11</sup>

Pandemics need not be thought, by analogy with war, as biological arguments for the centralisation of power. If the post-war period which persists as the lost object of much Left melancholy was characterised by the welfare-warfare state, the ‘exit’ out of our predicament need not accept welfare-as-warfare as its only horizon. This is especially the case once we reflect on the profound contradictions now tearing at the seams of government between epidemiological and public-health priorities, on the one hand, and capitalist imperatives, on the other. In other words, when the health of the people and their social reproduction have been profoundly entangled with the imperatives of accumulation – the very ones determining the contribution of agribusiness to the present crisis and the dereliction of Big Pharma in alleviating it – the state may be congenitally incapable of thinking like an epidemiologist.

One speculative avenue for how to begin to separate our desire for the state from our need for collective health involves turning our attention to the traditions of what we could call ‘dual biopower’, namely the collective attempt

10 de Waal 2020, with reference to Paul Richards’s book based on his research in Sierra Leone (Richards 2016).

11 Costello 2020. For a systematic critique of the limits of lockdown and a compelling proposal for a ‘democratic biopolitics’, see Sotiris 2020.

politically to appropriate aspects of social reproduction, from housing to medicine, that state and capital have abandoned or rendered unbearably exclusionary, in an engineered ‘epidemic of insecurity’.<sup>12</sup> Public (or popular or communal) health has not just been the vector for the state’s recurrent power-grab, it has also served as the fulcrum from which to think the dismantling of capitalist social forms and relations without relying on the premise of a political break in the operations of power, without waiting for the revolutionary day after. The brutally repressed experiments of the Black Panthers with breakfast programmes, sickle-cell anaemia screening, and an alternative health service are just one of many anti-systemic instances of this kind of grassroots initiative.<sup>13</sup> The great challenge for the present is to think not just how such political experiments can be replicated in a variety of social and epidemiological conditions, but how they can be scaled up and coordinated – while not giving up the state itself as an arena of struggle and demands, especially over the meaning and the materiality of ‘welfare’ and of the social wage more broadly.<sup>14</sup> As Sandro Mezzadra and Francesco Raparelli have suggested, a tenable ‘living with’ the virus that keeps spaces of freedom open, involves consolidating and expanding ‘social networks, cooperation around institutions like schools and hospitals, forms of organisation and care in workplaces’ – especially in those sites of living labour at the ‘frontlines’ of social reproduction, in the ‘anthropogenic sectors’ of the economy.<sup>15</sup> A vital precondition for advancing emancipatory projects in our pandemic conjuncture is the one advanced by the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) under the motto ‘Healthcare not Warfare’, namely to *demilitarise epidemiological emergency*.<sup>16</sup> In the wake of the George

12 El-Sayed 2020. For a longer discussion of ‘dual biopower’, see Toscano 2016. Notwithstanding criticisms of this formulation advanced by McQuade and Neocleous (2020), I would want to retain this formulation precisely because – like the formula dual power but unlike McQuade and Neocleous’s rather undialectical juxtaposition of the ‘commons’ to the (medical) police – it does not repeat the libertarian fallacy of avoiding the problem of coercion.

13 Nelson 2011.

14 Mezzadra 2020. Such struggles evidently also concern the historical imbrications of welfare with warfare, racialisation and patriarchy. They are also increasingly entangled with the *de facto* if not *de jure* introduction of various forms of guaranteed or basic income, however temporary in intent.

15 Mezzadra and Raparelli 2020. See also Sotiris 2020, p. 15.

16 M4BL 2020. It is worth noting the articulation of abolitionist, environmentalist and class demands in this policy platform. Among the demands are: ‘Immediate Amendment of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) to be mandatory based on independent criteria that [prioritize] the preservation of life and no longer at the President’s discretion.’; ‘Ensure emergency powers of a formal disaster declaration do not result in the heightened surveillance, policing, criminalization of

Floyd Rebellion and in the context of the disproportionate lethality of Covid-19 among African-Americans as well as other racialised groups,<sup>17</sup> the abolitionist imperative to break the continuity between the pandemic state and the racial state can also echo beyond US borders. Across these various contexts, the slogan that the Panthers adopted for their programmes is perhaps a fitting counter and replacement for the Hobbesian link between health, law and the state: Survival Pending Revolution.

### 3 Leviathan Resurgent?

As the pandemic has advanced, through the uneven political rhythms of lockdowns and the syncopated geography of second and third waves, countless commentators have remarked upon its revelatory virtues 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’.<sup>18</sup> 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, not least the massively differentiated vulnerability to illness and disease rooted in ‘racism, exploitation and deprivation’.<sup>19</sup>

Among the dimensions of our material and psychic life that have been intensely magnified by the protracted emergency is our relation to the state.

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individuals or communities, militarization, and abuse of power in marginalized communities and protected classes of people.’; ‘Redirect federal policing and military dollars to agencies and groups providing medical, emotional, and other types of support.’; ‘Forbid the police, national guard and others to detain or arrest people for breaking curfews, stay at home orders, shelter in place orders or other provisions enacted as part of state of emergency.’; ‘Suspend arrest for all poverty-related offenses, including sex work and drug trade as well as [...] crimes of petty theft that may occur during this pandemic as supplies are scarce and people are losing money.’; ‘Include the immediate cessation of all petrochemical, toxic, and polluting industry construction as part of any declaration of a state of emergency.’

17 As Sotiris observes: ‘Racism may be considered a major “underlying health condition”, in the sense that prolonged inequality, deprivation and over-exploitation, combined with unequal access to health services that leads to increased occurrence of untreated or unregulated health conditions have played an important role in increased vulnerability and susceptibility of Black Americans in the US and of the BAME population in the UK, along with the fact that they were over-represented in exposed “front-line” or “essential” occupations’. Sotiris 2020, p. 8.

18 Winant 2020.

19 Sotiris 2020, p. 7.

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.

According to the most dire diagnoses of our moment, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic 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*, to cite Foucault), through a 'juridical-religious obligation' to health, to comply with the infinitely plastic and undeniable demands of *biosecurity*.<sup>20</sup>

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 realise 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 realised*.<sup>21</sup>

20 Agamben 2020, pp. 12–13. For a much more compelling and nuanced exploration of the coercive nexus of health security and medical policing, as it relates to Covid-19, see McQuade and Neocleous 2020. While the authors' historically-informed attentiveness to the capitalist parameters of medical policing is welcome, their contention that 'the plague is exposing the strategic orientation of the state' (p. 6) perhaps underestimates the strategic impasses the pandemic is also bringing to the fore.

21 Coupat *et al.* 2020.

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. A dose of sobriety is in order, however, about the threats but also the potentials that this ‘return of the state’ involves. An epoch of change might not amount to a change in epoch. In an early text about the pandemic, castigating a certain obsession of the 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).<sup>22</sup>

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 shall explore further below), ‘domination is not one-dimensional. It is not just control and surveillance; it is also exploitation

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22 Badiou 2020.

and extraction'. To realise the latter is also to be sensitive to the ways in which the pandemic, far from simply 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'.<sup>23</sup> Some of this has also manifested itself in what could be termed the depressive phase of the desire for the state and the related 'formation of the pacified subject',<sup>24</sup> namely the moment that reveals 'the *sad passion of being well-governed* as the obligation to be *perpetually disappointed*'.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4 Antinomies of the Pandemic State

What I would like briefly to 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 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 swathes of 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 these days), while

23 D'Eramo 2020, pp. 25–7. See also Watkins 2020. Consider also Slavoj Žižek's rejoinder to Agamben's suggestion that the pandemic is being instrumentalised for the sake of maximising state power. As he observes: 'Agamben is describing an important aspect of the functioning of state control in the ongoing epidemic, but there are questions that remain open: why would state power be interested in promoting such a panic which is accompanied by distrust in state power ("they are helpless, they are not doing enough ...") and which disturbs the smooth reproduction of capital? Is it really in the interest of capital and state power to trigger a global economic crisis in order to renovate its reign? Are the clear signs that state power itself, not just ordinary people, is also in panic, aware of not being able to control the situation – are these signs really just a stratagem?' Žižek 2020, pp. 74–5.

24 McQuade and Neocleous 2020, p. 6.

25 Coupat *et al.* 2020.

the experience and idea of the *welfare state* remain 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 trajectory 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*)<sup>26</sup> have vied for control over the handling of the public-health response – something which is in keeping with the importance of local, grass-roots or communal knowledge and agency to epidemiological responses, as noted above. For all the pomp and pastiche of sovereign power, no medical monarch is on the horizon. What we have seen are at best locally and provisionally persuasive performances of an authority 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,<sup>27</sup> authority and expertise, overlaid on the protracted hollowing-out of investment in political representation, suggest more

26 Jappe, Aumercier, Homs and Zacarias 2020, pp. 57–8.

27 Jappe, Aumercier, Homs and Zacarias 2020, p. 57.

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.<sup>28</sup>

## 5 The Complementary Hostility of State and Market

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 elucidating 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,<sup>29</sup> 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.

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* market-production (as well as

<sup>28</sup> De Carolis 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Jappe, Aumercier, Homs and Zacarias 2020, pp. 148–57.

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.<sup>30</sup>

It is on this basis that our pandemic antinomy is viewed not in terms of 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 formulation – what we are witnessing is the 'state-political self-seizure [*auto-saisie*] of capitalist society for the sake of surviving itself'.<sup>31</sup> 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 rather surreal slogans, such as Macron's 'nationalisation of salaries').<sup>32</sup>

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 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 pandemic surge in the 'primacy of politics' on its diagnosis of the increasingly pathological role

30 Jappe, Aumercier, Homs and Zacarias 2020, pp. 70–1.

31 Jappe, Aumercier, Homs and Zacarias 2020, p. 74.

32 Jappe, Aumercier, Homs and Zacarias 2020, p. 107.

(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.<sup>33</sup>

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'.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, we are increasingly confronted with a 'mega-state bubble' that ultimately rests on the tenet that the state can continue virtually to 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'<sup>35</sup> – a striking instance of that time-fetishism that 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 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

33 Jappe, Aumercier, Homs and Zacarias 2020, p. 106.

34 Jappe, Aumercier, Homs and Zacarias 2020, p. 107. For a contrasting interpretation of this conjuncture as one of 'non-neoliberal capitalist stabilisation', see the analytical and strategic reflections in Mezzadra 2020 and Mezzadra and Raparelli 2020.

35 Jappe, Aumercier, Homs and Zacarias 2020, p. 30.

have turned the state into capitalism's *hope of last resort*.<sup>36</sup> But what are we to make of the fact that it might also be anti-capitalism's hope of last resort?

*De Virus Illustribus*, with 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 set on fire, without knowing whether the doors will open'.<sup>37</sup> 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 cannot be abolished by halves, as many value-critics contend, one often suspects it might not be abolished at all.

## 6 Our Last Resort?

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 coming emergency politics my concern.<sup>38</sup>

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

36 Jappe, Aumercier, Homs and Zacarias 2020, pp. 105, 113.

37 Jappe, Aumercier, Homs and Zacarias 2020, p. 197.

38 Though see the perspicuous observations in Dale 2020, Tugal 2020 and Sotiris 2020, p. 30.

answer in the negative; or rather, to see in Malm's ecological refunctioning of Leninism what we could 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.<sup>39</sup>

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 over-ripe) for their own obituaries.<sup>40</sup>

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39 Malm 2020, p. 151.

40 Malm 2020, pp. 151–2.

I am 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 ‘clean break’ with the *ancien régime*, as well as in Malm’s 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.’<sup>41</sup> Yet in light of Jappe *et al.*’s 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 neo-Malthusian 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 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 death-throes). 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.’<sup>42</sup> But would not 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

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41 Malm 2020, p. 165.

42 Malm 2020, pp. 163–4.

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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