

Virus and Enjoyment of Capital

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Virus and Capital

Just as a virus is something inert that lives on the living cells it infects, so too is capital something inanimate that lives on those whom it exploits. The human lives of workers, exploited as labour power, are what keep capital somehow alive. The result is capital as a process: a life, like that of viruses, which is no longer exactly a “life” in the full sense of the term, but rather something much more elementary.

For capital, living is the same as it is for the virus: it is multiplying itself. Like the virus that only appears alive because it is contagious and spreads, capital only appears alive because it accumulates and expands; its life consists of becoming more of what it is, adding more to itself, increasing quantitatively.

Finally, where there was once the full and diverse life of cells, only the replication of the virus remains. Similarly, the fullness and diversity of human existence has been replaced by the accumulation of capital. Marx shows us how this accumulation implies the transmutation of living labour into dead wealth: of the pulsating existence of workers into the inert being of capital, and of the qualitative variety of life experience into the quantitative sum of ever-increasing, qualitatively homogeneous money.

Behaving like a virus, accumulated capital is something that multiplies, replicates, or repeats itself by absorbing life’s complexity and transforming it into its own inert simplicity. The dissolution of the complex and the suppression of the living are inseparable from capitalist accumulation. This replaces the profusion of life in all its diversity with a

simple, monothematic, and monochromatic reiteration of the same, of ever more money, and of more and more dead dividends.

Repetition and Death Drive

The repetition of capital, like the multiplication of the virus, irresistibly leads us to think about the Freudian idea of repetition and its essential link with the death drive. The very concept of this drive is based on Freud's observations about the repetition compulsion. Repetition is, for Freud, a way to satisfy the death drive. This drive makes us repeat decisions, actions and situations because it seeks to "reproduce an earlier state," ultimately aspiring to reverse life, to "return to the inorganic," to the "inanimate that was there before life."¹

The death drive makes us repeat to return to a moment before life. Repetition is a way to go back in the face of life experience that does not stop moving forward, branching out, and complicating itself. Faced with the turmoil and complications of life, the death drive either folds us into immobility or locks us into an incessant repetition of the same.

The death drive turns the effervescence of life into compulsive, mechanical, monotonous repetition. This repetition is the same as that we observe in the capital that accumulates and in the virus that replicates. There is here a suspicious coincidence that justifies a reflection on capital and viruses through the Freudian hypothesis of the death drive that underlies the repetition compulsion.

Ontological Abstraction

It may seem fanciful to suppose that the death drive governs capitalist accumulation and viral replication, as if the virus and capitalism could obey the same drive. It would be as if this drive could affect all spheres of what exists! But, is this unrestricted incidence not part

of Freud's hypothesis? If we see fantasy here, it is perhaps because we continue to conceive drive as something concrete and empirically given, as an objective natural force of a biological and psychological nature, but not as what it is: something abstract, a theoretical and conceptual entity, an ontological concept of life and its relationship to death.

Lacan already warned that Freud's drive was a kind of "absolutely fundamental ontological notion" and neither a pure "psychological notion"² nor a simple "biological function."³ If drive is irreducible to the spheres of life and mental life, that is because it is located on a more abstract, more fundamental plane—that of ontology. This plane must be presupposed not only when distinguishing the two psychic and somatic forms of life, but also when contrasting the animate and inanimate, as happens in the death drive, the drive of return to the inanimate.

The interesting thing about the death drive is that it transcends psychology and even biology, referring not only to physical or psychic life but also to the inert. This was well understood by Luria and Vygotsky. Hence, they became enthusiastic about the death drive, which—according to their own terms—connected "inorganic matter" with "the origins and development of organic life."⁴

Everything that exists can be considered when thinking about the death drive. The ontological abstraction of this concept causes it to traverse different spheres of being: the cultural and the natural, the mental and the physiological, and the animal, vegetable, and even mineral. It is not exactly that the various spheres constitute an empirical totality designated by the Freudian concept. Rather, the concept is not concrete; it is not immediately designating any empirical reality but, instead, a mediating ontological idea with which one can think of the most diverse empirical or non-empirical realities and relate

them to one another. This is, for example, how we have associated capital and viruses in conceiving their deadly and repetitive existences through the death drive and its repetition compulsion.

Enjoyment of Capital

The concept of death drive allows us to know something about different empirical realities by thinking through each and taking our thoughts beyond their immediate appearances. We can, thus, cross the spectacle of capital to venture into its incessant accumulation, discovering that it operates as a kind of viral replication, compulsive repetition of the same, insatiable satisfaction of the death drive, enjoyment of the return to the inert, transmutation of human life into more and more dead money.

The articulation between the Marxist idea of capitalist accumulation and the Freudian concept of the death drive allows us to think about the deadly enjoyment of capital. This enjoyment can be deepened, in turn, through the complex Lacanian notion of *jouissance*. What Lacan conceived through his notion mysteriously corresponds to what we glimpse within capital. There is a *jouissance* of capital. It is *jouissance* not only for its deadly and repetitive aspect, but also for its legal core in terms of possession, to which Lacan refers.⁵ Possession is a subjective core component of the enjoyment of capital. This enjoyment is experienced by the capitalist as *a possession for possession's sake*, by which the incessant accumulation of capital is ensured.

Marx exposes how capital accumulates by its own logic because “it is born by accumulation,”⁶ because—for it—to exist is to grow, and “to grow” is “to accumulate,”⁷ because the accumulation process is “necessary” for capital and is “presupposed” in its “becoming.”⁸ Marx also explains that capital “has only one vital instinct: the instinct to

increase.”⁹ He finally shows how this instinct lives in the heart of the capitalist, who is nothing more than “personified capital” and whose soul is “the soul of capital.”¹⁰

Hoarder, Capitalist, Labourer

Once the soul of capital becomes the soul of a subject like the capitalist, accumulation can no longer manifest itself objectively, but must take a subjective form. This form can be that of enjoyment, *jouissance*, understood as possession for possession. The voracious capitalists who do not stop enjoying, who cannot stop their compulsion to possess for possessing’s sake, are themselves possessed by capital as defined by its instinct to grow and accumulate. The cumulative and the possessive are the two faces—objective and subjective, respectively—of the same enjoyment of capital. Marx studied, above all, the objective face, but he left us invaluable ideas with which to study the subjective face. Such is the case with his ideas on the figure of the hoarder, which—although not corresponding exactly to a capitalist—may be one of the best ways to understand the subjectivation of the enjoyment of capital.

According to Marx’s explanation, the hoarder is caught between the qualitative limitlessness of money, which can buy all commodities in their unlimited qualitative variety, and money’s quantitative limitation, since one can never have enough money to buy all those commodities. The hoarder will try to compensate for this lack by not spending money and by accumulating it, pushing back its quantitative limit indefinitely and, meanwhile, savouring the fantasy of its qualitative limitlessness. This is how the “contradiction between the quantitative limitation of money and its qualitatively unlimited character, incessantly pushes the hoarder to the Sisyphus’s torment of accumulation.”¹¹

Marx's Sisyphian metaphor can help us appreciate at least three aspects of the enjoyment of capital: (1) its repetitive aspect; (2) its unstoppable, insatiable side; and finally, as torment, (3) its unsatisfactory, painful, even unbearable character, which is about enjoyment and not pleasure. Far from being a pleasurable activity, possession for possession is a torment that is constantly repeated by the insatiable capitalists, but not only by them, because they are not exactly hoarders.

While hoarders only condemn themselves to the torment of accumulation, capitalists condemn especially those who work for them and produce what they accumulate. The labourers suffer more than the capitalist from compulsive and repetitive possession; they are the ones who pay for the enjoyment of capital. This is why Engels had used the torture of Sisyphus to describe the routine of the labourers, not of the capitalist.¹²

Money, Signifier, *Sinthome*

The Sisyphus metaphor teaches us a lot, not only about the way we are linked with capital and money, but also about our link with language. This is so because we bond with the signifier as we do with money, which should not surprise us. After all, money is a signifier, the most perfect and powerful of signifiers, the one that can buy or signify the most, the one that is most independent of any meaning, the one that is "most annihilating of any significance."¹³

As powerful as it is, money is as impotent as any other signifier. This is what makes us fall into the trap of wanting to accumulate more and more money. Now, just as we are trapped in accumulation because money is as capable as it is insufficient to buy everything, so are we also chained to language for its constitutive capacity and irremediable insufficiency to mean everything. This double aspect of the signifier, revealed by Marx in

the subjective face of money, is what makes the subject's link with language as compulsive and repetitive as Sisyphus' torment of the hoarder.

Like hoarders who compulsively accumulate at the cost of their own life, subjects consume their life in words that they continue to multiply in a compulsive, repetitive, and deadly way. This repetition compulsion is inherent in the signifying chain and displays a form of satisfaction of the death drive that is ultimately mortal for the subject. This *jouissance* is what makes Lacan say that "the subject is led to behave in an essentially signifying way by indefinitely repeating something that is properly mortal to him."¹⁴

The signifier certainly consumes the life of each individual, but it also ensures that life itself subsists in a transindividual symbolic form. This form is the one adopted by sexual relations that are converted into those relations Lacan calls, first, "inter-signifying,"¹⁵ and then, "inter-*sinthomatic*."¹⁶ Here, Lacan sees relationships established through the "*sinthome*," whereby subjects distinguish themselves from others at the same time that they relate to them by inserting themselves into language in a way as singular as obstinate, compulsive, repetitive, or "neurotic."¹⁷

When referring to inter-*sinthomatic* relations, Lacan speaks significantly of the "virus of the *sinthome*."¹⁸ The virus metaphor here designates the contagious, transmissible, relational aspect of the *sinthome*. It is the same aspect by which Lacan speaks of the "social" as of an "infection," an infectious "form of blindness,"¹⁹ which seems prescient of Saramago and of his image of a society composed of "blind people who see without seeing."²⁰

Repetitive and Deadly Functioning of the Coronavirus

The social-contagious aspect of the virus should not cause us to forget what underlies it. The replication of the viral agent, by which it is transmitted at the expense of living cells, must be remembered. We must keep in mind what allows us to associate the virus with repetition compulsion and to explain it by the death drive.

The repetitive and deadly functioning of the viral agent has become particularly evident in these times of coronavirus pandemic. The rows of tractor-dug graves and mass-produced cardboard coffins, as well as the numbers and charts reporting deaths by day and by country, offer a mysterious and revealing image of the essential link between death and repetition.

The virus repeats, replicates, and spreads throughout the world, killing hundreds of thousands of people. We count the dead because everyone dies from the same thing that is repeated in each person. Their unique lives can be equated because they are all victims of the coronavirus, which nullifies any qualitative singularity. This virus makes people equivalent to each other and allows us to count them. The result is a quantity that we associate with other quantitative measures such as medical expenses or the impact of confinement on the economy.

Live and Die in Capitalism

Money and death are involved in the same arithmetic operations. We can calculate, for example, how many lives will be lost and how many dollars will be earned if we shorten a lockdown. This calculation, which allows us to determine how many dollars each life is worth, is the basis of government decisions and, consequently, the cause of many deaths from coronavirus. Tens of thousands of deaths could have been avoided if human life had

been worth more money, not only for those who delayed lockdowns in the United States or the United Kingdom but also for those who previously privatized or ruined public health systems, thereby decreasing the number of hospitals, beds, respirators, and doctors per inhabitant in Spain²¹ or Italy²². In all cases, the neoliberal governments put the health of the capitalist economy before the health of the people. Worse still, they favoured the enjoyment of capital at the expense of human life. This caused people to die of capitalism when dying of coronavirus.²³

What killed them was not the virus, but the lack of value of their life in relation to capital. Texas Lieutenant-Governor Dan Patrick has summed it up: “there are more important things than living.”²⁴ In reality, the fundamental problem is not that our life has been devalued so much against the dollar, but that it has a value like that of a currency and that there is a conversion rate between its value and that of the dollar. The problem, in other words, is that our life is not invaluable; it has a price, an exchange value, a value exchangeable for the universal equivalent of money.

The issue, however, is that being alive can enter into the calculations of the capitalist economy. How is it possible that capitalism is the framework for deciding how many have to die? Perhaps we have reached this point because our lives have been subsumed into capital, thus becoming variable capital, human capital, human resources, productivity, commodity, current expenditure, income, consumption, credit, purchasing power, economic fact, or data per capita.

Finally, our lives are confused with the accumulation of capital, with this one-dimensional and quantitatively expressible existence, which is as elementary and repetitive as a virus. Like the virus that only seems to live because it replicates, we unfold the

existence of capital that only seems to live because it accumulates. This existence is our life, which only seems to count for its role in accumulation, its productivity, its consumption, or its possession for possession.

Capital and Devastation of the Planet

It is not simply that our lives are worth less than capital. It is, rather, that capital reabsorbs our lives, which, as a component of capital, may be worth less or more than other components, but are always worth less than the whole of capital, although this whole is, itself, a part of human life. This part masquerades as the whole and reduces the whole to a part of it.

The complexity and diversity of the living whole is subsumed into the quantitative and cumulative functioning of a dead part of the whole. Capital is like a virus that transforms our lives, which are even more complex and diverse than those of cells, into simple moments of capitalist accumulation. This is how the virus can turn us into satisfiers of the enjoyment of capital, executors of possession for possession, insatiable capitalists, possessive speculators, compulsive buyers, or obsessive workers. In all cases, when we are infected by the capitalist virus, our lives are reduced to the repetitive movement of zombies, of mechanisms of the system, and of clones of capital.

Capital imposes on us its elemental, undead existence. We are already half-dead before we die of coronavirus. What dies from COVID-19 is not everything that our life could be, but only that simple and mechanical thing our life has been converted into. This one-dimensional and quantifiable thing is what has been devalued against the dollar. This is what can be delivered to the coronavirus, which only ends up suppressing what capitalism has, for the most part, already suppressed.

If the coronavirus work can continue and finish the work of capitalism, it is perhaps because in both cases it is the same work: the work of the death drive and its repetition compulsion. It is the same compulsive and deadly work that is devastating nature. It is this work that is incessantly repeating the same operation of returning to the inanimate in each species that is extinguished, in each soil layer that is eroded, in each deforested mountain, in each poisoned river, and in each destroyed ecosystem.

It is highly significant that ecological devastation appears to be at the origin of the coronavirus pandemic. The virus may have been released when the capitalist economy destroyed the complex ecosystem in which the virus was trapped.²⁵ Then, the very destruction of biological complexity in advanced capitalism has favoured the spread of this virus and others through spaces as simplified, uniform, and repetitive as concrete and steel cities, factory farms, and vast fields cultivated with agrochemicals.²⁶ These spaces, which offer repetitive images such as the rows of graves for victims of the coronavirus, already have the shape of viral replication and logically favour the precipitous movement of the death drive in a straight line and in a short circuit, instead of a path with the “detours” that Lacan associated with life.²⁷

Life is made of detours that divert us from the straight path—the shortest—towards our deaths. Capitalist efficiency, in contrast, seeks this straight path—the most economical—in its production, designs, organization of society, and arrangement of the world. Everything in capitalism shortens distances and times.

Capitalism tries to follow the straight path. This path, through which the coronavirus has travelled, is the same route that is leading us to the abyss of the total annihilation of

humanity. Either we deviate from the straight path, going astray once more, or we will end up falling into the abyss.

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