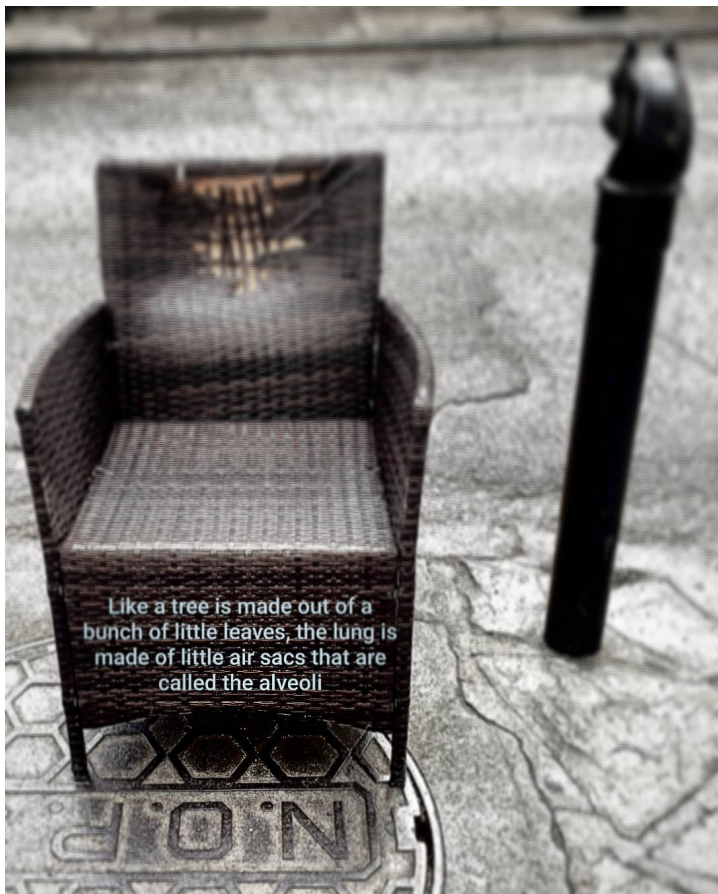


Insurgent Life: The Covid Revolution and the Ecology of Fear

Dalton Anthony Jones



There is a microfascism of one's own body, of one's organs, the kind of bulimia that leads to anorexia, a perceptual bulimia that blinds one to the value of things, except for their exchange value, their use value, to the expense of the values of desire.^[1]

– Felix Guattari, 1975

I sincerely doubt that a lethal virus is what Guattari had in mind nearly half a century ago when he called for a planetary “molecular revolution.” His words may have sounded rather abstract at the time, like the impatient musings of a philosopher whose theories are meant to compensate for the failure of more direct forms of political action. But after what we've been through over the past three years, I think they ought to be taken as a clarion call. Guattari's point was simply that we needed a new conception of radical politics, a vision of politics that encompasses the entire spectrum of human life: that the well-spring of all revolutionary social movements – be they among women, among workers, among students, queers or the racially

oppressed – must begin at the cellular level. He was asking us to recognize that the locus of systemic oppression, and thus a crucial site of our emancipation from its grasp, is not only found at the level of despotic political, economic, or social structures, but along a continuum whose reach extends all the way down to the very essence of our being. Liberation, he was insisting, begins with a kind of “micro-politics” of desire, a “nano-politics” of the body and soul that ultimately entails a rebellion against even the most subtle forms of capitalist regimentation and semiotic authority.

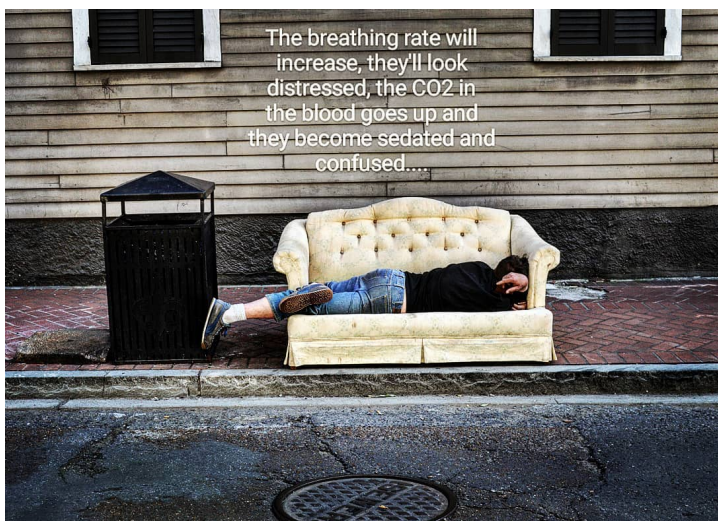
We are not accustomed to attributing political agency to anything as amorphous as a virus: not accustomed to thinking of life itself, molecular life, as a theatre of revolutionary struggle. But a reasonable argument can be made that no event triggered by a biological entity since World War II, including HIV Aids, has posed a greater set of challenges to humanity than the pandemic unleashed by the Covid virus. The pandemic forced us to examine

more than just the integrity of our own personal health; it called into question the integrity of our intimate relationships and the structures of social organization that bind us together. And nothing in recent history has made us more aware of our delicate environment than this submicroscopic agent. Unlike other ecological catastrophes, the raging fires, torrential hurricanes, and devastating earthquakes that are increasing with such alarming ferocity, this crisis impacted us all. Covid 19 was a non-respecter of boundaries, a force of nature that no fence or single nation's public policy could contain. It had universal citizenship, defying trade agreements and territorial sovereignty. Our global imaginary was forced to reckon with the simple fact that an inhalation and exhalation taken by an organism living a world away could threaten our very existence and destroy the very fabric of the world we share. The emergence of SARS CoV-2 introduced a politics of time, space, and bodies unprecedented in the modern era.

At the larger, macroscopic level, the structural austerities imposed were easy enough to see. International borders on lock down. Institutional quarantines. Non-essential businesses shutting their doors. Stay-at-home orders. School closures. Compulsory vaccination cards. Mask mandates. Social distancing requirements and cities around the world implementing the type of nightly curfews ordinarily reserved for periods of the most extreme civilian unrest. But even as these severe measures were put into place, the disfunction and inefficiency of federal, state, and local agencies was plain to see. If we saw the extent of the government's reach, we also saw the finite outlines of its grasp. The bureaucratic and administrative chaos unfolded around us in real time. We witnessed the limited parameters and constraints of institutional power. And we recognized that this crisis was about more than just a health care system in shambles: the world's economic structure was exposed as fragile. When faced with the stark choice of saving human life or preserving the economy, the caretakers of nation states hemmed and hawed. Cracks in the surface of capital's operation emerged and we were able to see, played out before our eyes, how tenuous the formal bonds that hold us really are. Rigid frameworks of power were exposed as constructed, as unnatural even: some of them as entirely unnecessary. Capitalist lines of production, distribution, and surplus value accumulation were thrown into disarray, and we were able to clearly discern the systemic priorities that governed us. We were able to see, in other words, how the biological field is intimately entwined with the social, political, economic, and geographic fabric of the world we live in.

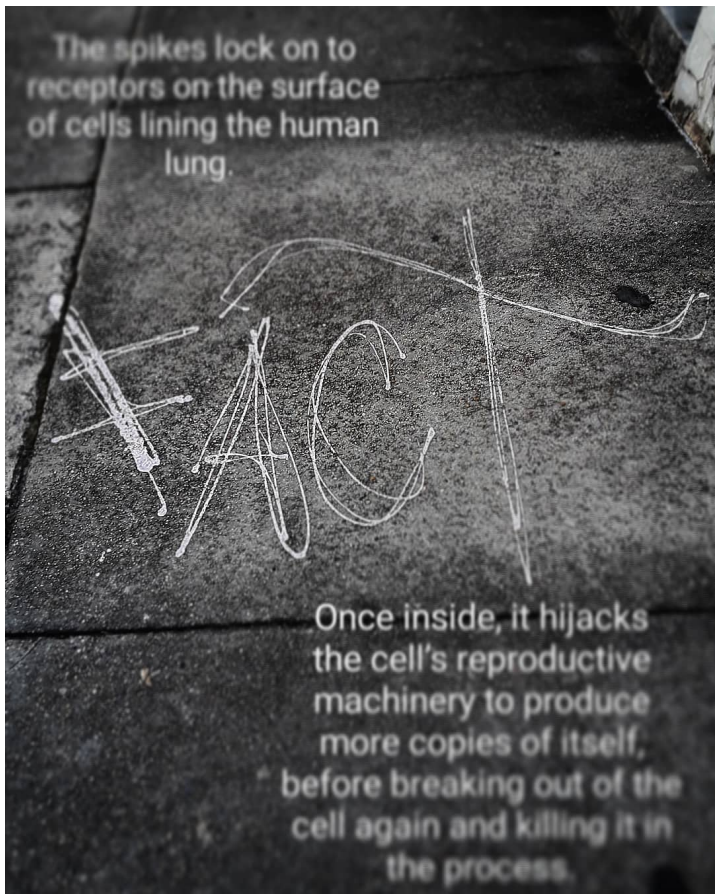
From the outset this crisis *felt* differently than other disasters we have endured together – such as hurricane Katrina or the home foreclosures that brought the financial system to the brink of collapse at the end of the first decade of the century. Whereas these crises forced hundreds of thousands of people out of their homes, creating legions of refugees, the Covid pandemic forced millions of us into isolation, imposing a unique state of introspection. As the fog of Covid settled over us, a heightened, surreal awareness penetrated our psychic and emotional lives just as surely as the pathogen penetrated the cells of our bodies. It felt as if someone had pulled the collective rug from beneath our collective feet. This is to say that if the virus presented us with an urgent biological challenge, it also provided a distinctly existential one. Some of our soul searching clearly wasn't pleasant. During the first year of the pandemic the nation experienced a 30% rise in homicides. The number of fatal drug overdoses increased by a third. And the virus exposed some unmistakable fault lines running through our society; disproportionately impacting the elderly, the poor, women, and people of color. Suicide rates (while declining somewhat for whites in 2020) increased noticeably for blacks, latin@s and indigenous communities. We were able to recognize a broken health care system, but we were also able to see with new clarity our reliance on a low wage service economy whose cashiers, delivery people, nurses, and home care attendants,

disproportionally labored on the front lines of the pandemic. The reality of how ageism has marginalized our elderly citizens also became apparent. And we could no longer ignore the ways that white supremacy had not only created but policed the structural ordering of racial inequality.



For a rare moment, capital's synchronization of time faltered; the hands on the clock of productivity were frozen and the resulting disorientation provided a unique purview of our civilization and our place within it. The raw frenetic energy of our capitalist lives became still, and lines of power, with their attendant processes of subjectivation, became more pronounced. Briefly liberated from the systems of organization that bind us together (the police, the military, government bureaucracies, schools, health care institutions, factories, entertainment stadiums, shopping malls, etc.), we were able to recognize our status as subjects more clearly; we were given a glimpse of what it might feel and look like to be free. Given a certain objectivity that allowed us to assess the influence of these systems we were, ironically, able to see the limits and potential reach of our own power, of our own imaginations: the limits and reach of our own autonomy. We were able to recognize our desires as an untapped force; we were able to acknowledge dreams undreamt. Aspirations outside of and beyond the constraints of capitalist acquisition and accumulation were set free. We had the opportunity to recognize desires within us (what Deleuze and Guattari would call our unconscious libidinal investments) that had been repressed for so long that we failed to even claim them as valid.

Covid, enforcing the retreat of capital, gave us time to replenish our desires. In this clearing we were given the chance to see ourselves and, seeing ourselves, see the outlines of our relationship with the world. Our relations with all structures of civil authority were temporarily open for renegotiation. Meanwhile, ties to family, friends, and, most importantly, our inner selves, became more legible, more tangible, more real. The world was put on a collective "time out" and, huddled in our corners, some might say with our dunce caps on, we had a rare opportunity for reflection. Social distancing gave us the time and space to examine the value of our everyday lives. It gave us time to reassess and reorient our social relations. In doing so it helped nurture an idea that has been simmering for a while now: the notion that another world is, indeed, possible. For those of us who ordinarily feel swept away by the tides of our civic obligations, the demand

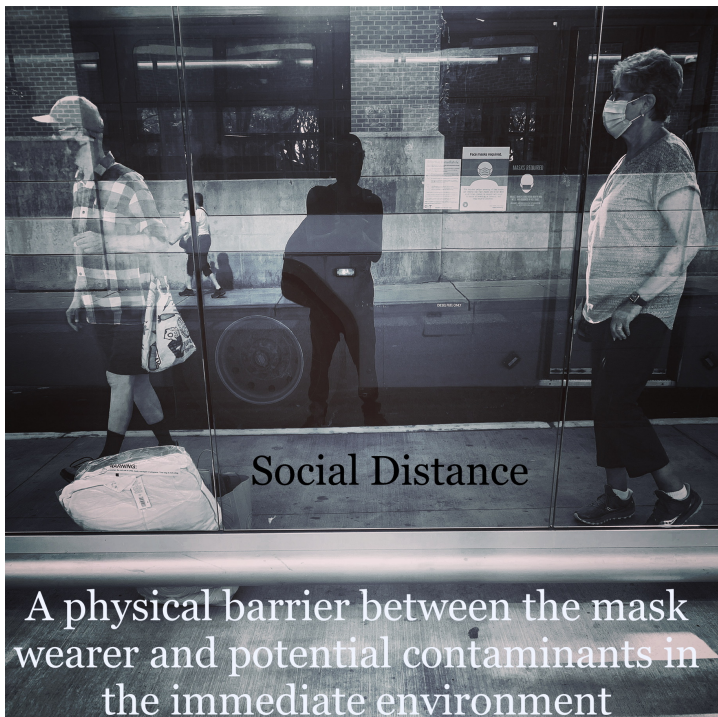


to earn a living, to navigate a public sphere that can often feel oppressive if not outrightly hostile, the Covid holiday came as a respite. Social distance allowed us the freedom to be with ourselves and many of us discovered an already present fullness they had not been honoring. In this regard, the intervention of Covid provided, ironically, a sigh of relief. I baked bread for the first time in years and experienced a serenity ordinarily reserved for my meditation cushion. Indeed, if one were listening, one could almost hear a shimmering “om” in the presence of this invisible pestilence, as if several decades of Sabbath were rolled into one. In many respects it was a precious time.

To be sure, the virus – along with the official measures taken to contain it – unleashed a wave of fear, a culture of apprehension and anxiety rippled through all our lives. For many of us, the gravity of our situation became apparent in the tense postures of the medical professionals and talking heads we saw on our televisions and computer

screens – in the shifting opinions of the experts who could not hide the depth of their concern over the rapidly evolving crisis. Fear, too, infiltrated the calls we made to loved ones, hoping they were safe and taking appropriate precautions against contagion. This fear was, of course, real, and not entirely unfounded. We heard of people dying within hours of admittance to the hospital, of patients suffocating on their mucus as nurses and doctors stood helplessly by, as family members watched hopelessly from a safe distance. We knew there were shortages of the hospital beds, ventilators, N95 masks and even syringes they said would protect us. We saw the infection and mortality rates spiral out of control. We saw bodies being stored in refrigerator trailers outside of emergency rooms. We watched in our confinement with a frightening sense of inevitability as the virus drew closer and closer to our states, our counties, and, eventually, inevitably, the neighborhoods we lived in. We watched the government’s fumbling attempts to develop a vaccine and coherent response to the crisis even as the president unconvincingly declared that everything was going to be “just fine” and encouraging us to shoot bleach. It was, in short, a hypochondriac’s wet dream. One could feel the general paranoia that spread throughout our society, ranging from a distrust of government to a skepticism of science and even, ultimately, one another.

This awakening to a deeper sense of being, triggered by collective trauma, is not, of course, a new phenomenon. The unmoored feeling associated with the threat of mortality is not unknown to us as individuals or as a society. Those of us old enough to remember the Cold War might recognize the floating sense of detachment. It was a time when the fear of nuclear fission, produced by a reaction at the atomic level, resonated through our daily lives, a time when the ominous threat of invisible radiation waves not only made us aware that we are all, on some very core level, interconnected and vulnerable, but also that our lives rested on the unpredictable behavior of nation

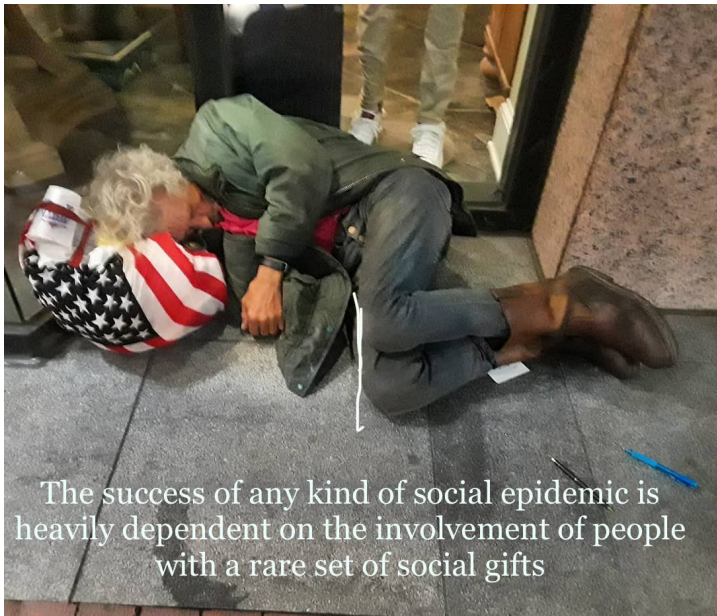


states encumbered by impersonal bureaucracies and selfish geopolitical interests. People living in war zones are familiar with the experience of disassociation that comes from having their world turned upside down. A visceral, dreamlike feeling must be permeating the people of Ukraine. The survivors of the earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria must still feel it. It was experienced when the planes struck the twin towers on 9/11 and I am sure that those living in the occupied territories of Palestine in the Middle East as well as those living near the East Palestine railroad derailment in the Ohio River Valley, must be feeling it as well. Indeed, this feeling emerges periodically in waves, in different locations, but rarely does it come upon the entire world at once.



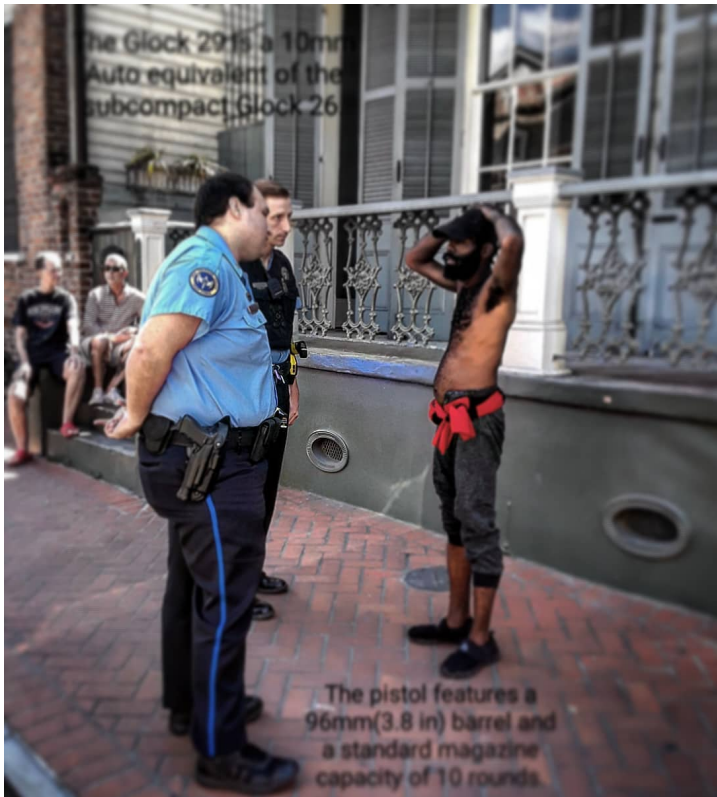
Although the fear we experienced during Covid is already receding into the past, let us acknowledge that we are still living with its residual trauma and grief. I believe it is a shared wound we would do well not to ignore but process diligently lest it become a permanent form of collective psychosis: lest it become the type of self-imposed “micro-fascism” of the self that Guattari spoke of. If we are not to let our trauma transform into repression – be it in the form of a repression of our own desires or the more concrete repression we may experience at the hands of the capital-state alliance – it is important that we continue to assess this experience with care. This means seeing beyond the one-sided narrative of “Covid-as-trauma” and recognizing the actual vitality of the experience we shared and indeed are still sharing.

An odd thing happened during the pandemic. A whole new politics (on the right and left) was enacted, a vibrant politics that took advantage of the sudden reorganization of social space. Social movements emerged on multiple fronts to challenge the structures playing such a decisive role in determining our well-being. Faced with an attack on our biological integrity, somehow the presence of human trafficking patriarchs and some long-revered icons from the genocidal dawn of Western expansion became untenable. Statues that had stood for over a century came toppling down. Street and building names were changed. Our immune systems were compromised, and we responded from the depths of our



The success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a rare set of social gifts

are natural.

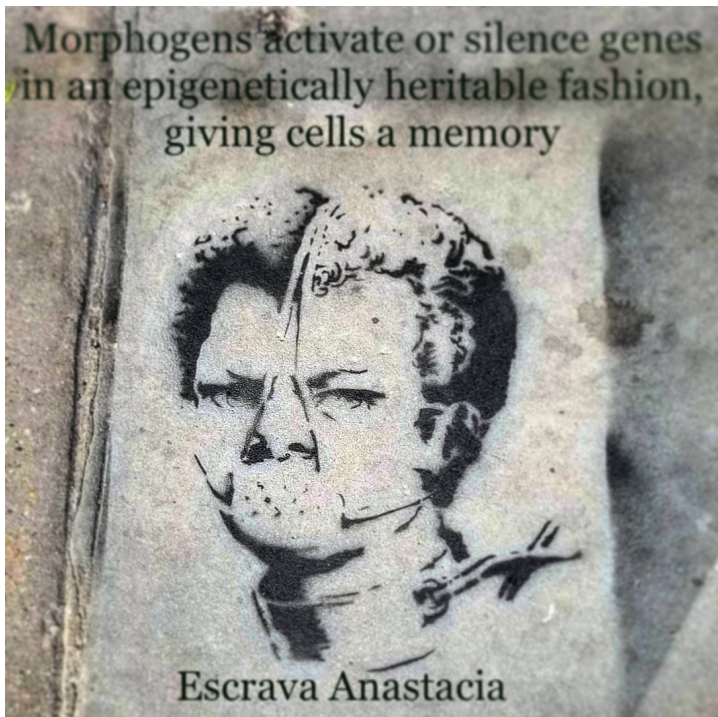


The pistol features a 96mm(3.8 in) barrel and a standard magazine capacity of 10 rounds

collective being. If we mobilized our antibodies to defend the integrity of our health, we also organized some of the most militant, broad-based, and effective popular mobilizations in modern history. In the name of social justice and the defense of the earth we developed new political tactics and strengthened some older ones that had become stale or ineffective. We brought a new level of intensity and focus to a wide range of issues, presenting platforms with far-reaching political agendas. In building our resistance to the virus, we wound up coalescing our resistance to an entire network of unhealthy regimes of oppression. We began to challenge in a serious way several centuries of capitalist indoctrination teaching us that the conditions in which we live, love, and labor

Perhaps the most profound change to emerge from Covid was how many of us began to fundamentally question our relationship with labor. The Covid timeout allowed us to distinguish between capitalist-imposed regimes of labor and that labor which emerges from within us as an organic, if you will, expression of our creative passions and desires. Anarchists and artists have long rebelled against what they see as the imposed tyranny of the clock, against the regimentation of our time, sweat, and blood to the authoritarian demands of the marketplace. The Dadaists, Lettrists and Situationists all argued for our need to break free of the capitalist and communist romanticization of labor. As far back as 1919, German Dadaists called for the "introduction of progressive unemployment through comprehensive mechanization of every field of activity." Only by unemployment, they argued, "does it become possible for the individual

to achieve certainty as to the truth of life and finally become accustomed to experience."^[2] A Lettrist leaflet from 1967 put it this way: "Our aim is to move toward an ideal society in which men (sic) will live much more – having reduced *the curse of work* to a minimum for an unbroken joy, for an over-growing ecstasy." The alienation we experience as paid laborers, an alienation which we have long grown accustomed to accepting as a natural state of our existence – the alienation of worker from worker, of worker from product, as worker from self – long a

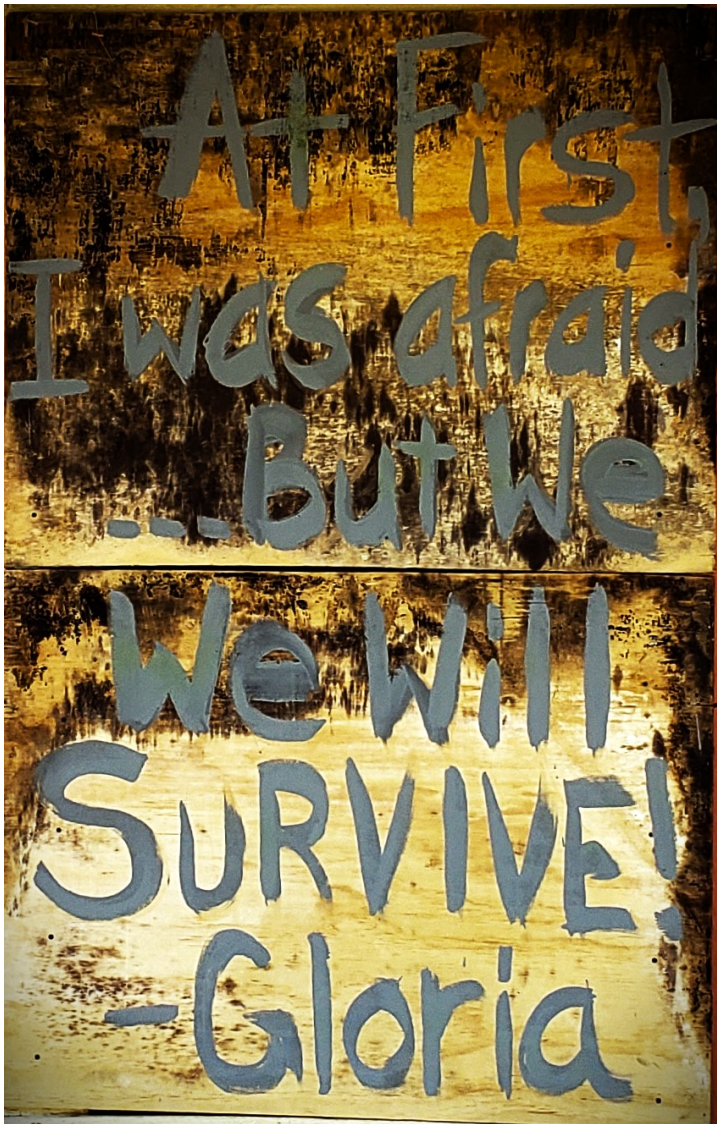


fundamental critique of the capitalist system, or, modes of production, became pronounced. And as labor retreated, refusing to work at occupations they filled before the pandemic, wages actually increased, revealing the true value to capital of the compromises we were making for the exchange of our efforts on its behalf. The anxiety of unemployment, traditionally harbored by the workers themselves, was suddenly thrown onto the capitalist system and recast from a threat made by the capitalist to a revolutionary claim, indeed a right, of the worker. Even the stimulus checks we received merely served as evidence that the state-capital alliance could produce the resources we needed to live freer, happier, more fulfilling lives. The Covid timeout helped us move towards the recognition that the abolition of work as we know it may be something other than a deluded, utopian fantasy.



Demands that would have once seemed extravagant, if not impossible, were put forward by social movements across the board. What began as a local uprising over the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis soon spread as rapidly as the virus itself. Within months of Floyd's death, millions of people around the world had taken to the streets in defiance of the lockdown. Clearly responding to their own struggles against institutional racism and social injustice, demonstrations and riots took place in fifty cities on six continents: an unprecedented expression of international solidarity. In the United States, police precincts and commercial establishments were burned to the ground. Department of Homeland Security forces were deployed to restore order in Minneapolis, Seattle,

Portland, Chicago and Washington, D.C., pointing to a clear crisis of governmentality. It signaled that with the onset of Covid the strategic position of the governed had shifted decisively. Images of police using pepper spray, stun grenades and tear gas reminiscent of the 1960s filled our screens. In response to both the virus and state repression, citizens developed a diversity of tactics. They deployed horizontal organizing techniques, created affinity groups, and formed mutual aid networks – all of which were also used to confront the virus. Calls to defund and even abolish the police that would have been scoffed at before Covid, shifted from the margins into the



mainstream of public discourse. People began to consider and take seriously the vision of a world without the armed force of the state. Whether or not these popular demands were ultimately met, the fact that we were able to recognize our urge to live unpoliced and ungoverned, to challenge with direct action the pillars of state authority, is itself a radical accomplishment. If the fog of Covid produced a feeling of euphoria, one can be sure that those who took to the streets protesting the state brought this heightened sense of their relation to the world with them. This heightened state was felt in the streets of Paris during the uprisings of May '68; it was felt among the alter-globalization radicals who took to the streets of Seattle in 1999 to demonstrate against the policies of the World Trade Organization, and it was felt at the hundreds of Occupy Wall Street encampments that swept the nation in 2011 in protest of finance capital and its institutions.

During the Covid pandemic, rent and mortgage strikes and struggles against gentrification took place in San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, and Atlanta; in Canada, the UK and Italy. There was talk of student loan forgiveness. There were momentous popular uprisings against the state in Belgrade,

Greece, Naples, Spain, Tunisia, South Africa, and Colombia. Militant environmental movements erupted to defend the earth in Germany, Atlanta and among farmers in rural India. Women in Chile led the way to forging a new transnational feminist coalition. In places like St. Louis, prisoners revolted. Even on the reactionary right, social movements strengthened: one could not help but be struck by the audacity of MAGA supporter's demands to hang the vice president and overturn a certified federal election as they stormed the capital building. Is this convergence between the virus and our activism merely a coincidence? I think it is highly doubtful. I believe we need to respect that surreal feeling we had in the early days of Covid's arrival, to remember that disembodied sensation that comes from living in a world unmoored. If the virus brought a set of easily identifiable negative externalities, it is crucial for us to acknowledge that, in many ways, this time also made us freer, more socially conscious and, hopefully, more responsible global citizens. Those who became infected with the virus faced their own obvious challenges, particularly in its most virulent early stages, however those of us who weren't infected, or who recovered rapidly, experienced something quite transformative as well. Time and space were fundamentally restructured. Our bodies and the very social fabric we navigate were exposed as fragile and pliable. We recognized that we could live richer, more fulfilling lives than the ones offered under the current world system we have built for ourselves. The Covid holiday allowed us breathing room to question and confront some

fundamental assumptions we take for granted about the value of life and the systems of social organization we use to govern it. In addition to fear and anxiety, the virus brought with it a beautiful if eerie calm, a heightened state of perception that was as peaceful as it was profound. Although in a weakened state, this otherworldly feeling, like the virus itself, is still with us should we choose to notice, and I believe that we should. My concern is that as we scramble back to normalcy, as capital scrambles to reorganize itself, in the collective exhale that is rushing out after having, quite literally, held our breaths for so long, we do not forget some important lessons this acute respiratory infection taught us that are worth preserving.

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Credits

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Notes

1. Remarks addressed to the Schizo-Culture Conference organized by *Semiotext(e)* in November, 1975 at Columbia University. "Molecular Revolutions," reproduced in, Felix Guarrari, *Chaosophy: Soft Subversions* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996) p 11.
 2. Dadaist pamphlet, "What Is Dadaism and What Does It Want in Germany?"
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