

Notes on the ongoing epidemic

These days in which we're forced to stay home seem to us an excellent opportunity to try to reflect and write down some considerations on what is happening, potential near-future scenarios and which issues, as comrades, we should be focused on.

These notes come from the spur of the moment: we will try to come back and reflect on them again later, so the present document does not claim to be exhaustive or final.

An initial clarification is required regarding those voices which seek to minimize this epidemic. We are neither doctors nor nurses, but in our opinion the absurdity of this position can be challenged within the context of revolutionary theory. For those whose aim is the abolition of the present state of things should know that the relationship between Capital and Nature inevitably causes disasters and catastrophes which, despite the dominant narrative, are anything but "natural". Indeed, depending on the historical period, they occur with a certain frequency, like economic crises. Earthquakes in populated areas, desertification, groundwater pollution, flooding and epidemics are phenomena born of the same logic. The epidemic we are now facing, despite all its specificities, does not seem to us fundamentally different to the other disasters produced by the capitalist regime. These specificities are of course considerable, and it is worth dwelling on them in these notes.

The origins

The disease developed in an open-air market in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, one of the most populous regions in China. A region that has become the country's furnace: this is where the beating heart of blast furnaces and cement factories that have supported the industrial growth of the Asian giant are located. The large quantity of building materials and the training of qualified engineers, of which Hubei is the cradle, have supported the whole post-crisis period of 2008: the Chinese State has in fact launched an impressive number of infrastructure and construction projects in that time.

Healthcare coverage throughout China is practically minimal: a very large number of workers from other regions are in fact illegal in those in which they work (thanks to the diabolical system of the *hukou*) and therefore live in a state of semi-clandestinity without any protection. It is important to underline that this is a structural situation, and not attributable to the severity of the politicians who happen to be on duty. As we have pointed out on other occasions

[<https://macerie.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/03/def-tuttattorno.pdf>] one of the reasons for the end of Keynesian policies is the decrease in global profits, a phenomenon accentuated by the recession that began in 2008. An interesting article on Chuang blog [<http://chuangcn.org/2020/02/social->

contagion/] – which we highly recommend – highlights how, if companies in the Dongguan region were to take over the healthcare coverage of their workforce, they would see their profits halved and would therefore be forced to relocate production elsewhere.

The concentration of the population in unhealthy and crowded places and the lack of a decent healthcare system have contributed to the spread of Covid-19. Various studies have shown that the transmission of viruses from animals to humans will be increasingly likely and, we might add, increasingly lethal, in the future.

The shock

China, followed by Italy and many other countries, has responded to this pandemic by quarantining the entire population. The effects and impact of these measures on national and world economies are still a matter of debate. Newspapers have published impressive satellite images of CO2 emissions taken before and after the lock-down in China, which show that for “just” one month the Asian giant has almost completely stopped

[https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20_marzo_02/coronavirus-cina-misure-contro-lepidemia-fanno-calare-l-inquinamento-dell-aria-eceb67ba-5c8a-11ea-9c1d20936483b2e0.shtml]. It is unclear what a stop to the Chinese economy, which brought the world out of the quicksand of recession, would mean. The central banks are certainly absorbing this shock, which many compare to the bursting of the subprime bubble, with a shortness of breath. **Ten years of forcibly-injected liquidity into national markets and interest rates kept consistently low to keep the dying financial system alive leave little room for further manoeuvre.** Confirmation of this comes via the reaction of the markets, with historic falls in Piazza Affari coming just after statements that should have offered reassurance were made by the new President of the ECB, Lagarde on March 12.

We must be careful to interpret financial world tremors, as they often are the result of speculative manoeuvrers, but it seems fairly safe to predict that many national economies will be brought to their knees from these months of quarantine: many companies may find themselves having to close their doors and many of those that survive will have to face a deep, multi-level restructuring. Everything suggests that this crisis will in fact be the cause, and also the opportunity, with the necessary time, for a restructuring of the economy in the direction of further automation, with all that this entails in terms of employment, working conditions and the concentration of capital.

[https://www.repubblica.it/economia/affariefinanza/2020/03/16/news/l_impatto_del_coronavirus_sull_italia_spa_possibile_un_danno_da_641_billion-251367463/]

In Italy

Here in Italy a sort of curfew has been in force since March 10th. All shops are closed by Government decree; only grocery stores, tobacconists, hardware stores, factories, essential services (e.g. garbage collection, waste disposal and public transport) and a few others are still operational.

The Conte government, backed by the EU – which making considerable concessions in terms of the tolerated national deficit – is legislating frenetically to patch up this situation of forced lockdown: the plan is to try to collect as much liquidity as possible and to rain it down on companies. Special fund, loans and “shock absorber” payments seem to be part of this program. Almost everyone agrees that these funds will not be enough. The reality of Italian industry is marked by a plethora of small and medium-sized companies whose profitability has been low for at least a decade. The high level of debt suggests, as we have pointed out, that the repercussions of this pandemic in terms of job losses and company closures could be violent indeed.

With regards to workers, a series of social parachutes are being arranged: a special three-month derogation redundancy fund, a stop on mortgages and bills for those who are laid off and the suspension of certain municipal taxes. **These measures seem insufficient in many respects.**

The Italian working environment is largely made up of so-called atypical contracts: the government is working on a three month fund of just €500 for self-employed workers and *false self-employed* (typical of the Italian working environment); what will happen to those who have on-call contracts or those who are completely off the books is not known. There is generic talk of incentives for rents, but even here they are linked to those who can prove they have stayed at home because of the current crisis. Thousands of workers have been under severe pressure since March, and without seeing a penny, with expenses that will soon be unsustainable.

A separate discussion concerns those who are forced to go to work in spite of the health emergency.

Nurses and healthcare workers are under great pressure: some are forced to work exhausting shifts and others, as they were employed in hospital wards that have been closed due to the emergency, are forced to take time off. From the point of view of expenditure control, hospitals and healthcare cooperatives have few reserves of gloves and masks, and often discourage or prohibit their use altogether.

Workers in factories or strategic sectors are sent into the fray without the minimum necessary protection or contractual compensation. In such a gloomy climate, where public assembly is prohibited, as are “active” strikes, there are still many production sites where the workforce has decided to put down their tools. In fact, the confederal trade unions have been forced to put pressure on the government to engage in dialogue with the relevant parties. After these meetings, the closure

of the factories was formalized for a few days in order to allow the reorganization of the workspace in accordance with the Government decree and the acquisition of individual protective equipment for workers.

The framework outlined for the future seems particularly disturbing, looking to the horizon beyond the current coronavirus emergency. In the speeches of Prime Minister Conte there are constant references to national unity, to the Italy which overcome this difficult moment all together. Nothing could be more false. The virus affects everyone, but the consequences, both for public health and the economy, will be felt differently: those who have accumulated reserves in recent years will be able to get by, while those who have only lived on their wages will be forced to make enormous sacrifices. Covid-19 casualties may be defined not just by age, but by class: the ferocious privatization of the health sector over many years has led to the loss intensive care units and we imagine that those who can afford it are already using private clinics enjoying a more or less “golden” quarantine. Not to mention all the other diseases which are not currently receiving any treatment as the attention is focused on coronavirus cases: some may have access to private facilities, but most are abandoned to their fate.

The State will play their game on a fundamentally ideological level. The government, led by Conte, seems to have regained their pulse on governance after some initial bloopers, and moreover these measures of extreme Chines-style quarantine seem to find support among the population. Economic measures, even if clearly insufficient, will probably be warmly welcomed as a little more breathing space. But this aid will cost the State dearly, so it is difficult to predict future scenarios with precisions: if the EU demands all the newly-printed rescue money back, with interest, a series of policies of fierce austerity and Greek-style memorandum will follow, crushing Italy; on the other hand, this crisis could shake the EU definitively, substantially redrawing its contours and balances.

Screens and treadmills

Referring now to all those comrades who have long decided to fight against the State and the capitalist system we live under, we must begin with a harsh self-criticism: **this crisis has caught us off guard.**

We are unprepared from several points of view: we will try to analyse them in order to find a remedy, or at least to recover the lost ground, and to understand if we will be able to intervene if the widespread discontent turns into anger and then into action. We are unprepared not only because of our limitations and incapacity, but also because of a lack of widespread social conflict among the exploited sections of the population which has certainly influenced the possibility of intervention by

comrades. These difficulties are partly caused by the ideological work carried out by the State since 2008 in the post-crisis decade; whereby it has forced people to accept increasing levels of exploitation and the repressive measures put in place from time to time. These difficulties have created few opportunities for confrontation or conflict, as well as limiting the osmosis between revolutionaries and that portion of the working class which is willing to struggle.

But as so often happens, a new crisis generates processes of acceleration regarding the material conditions of life as well as in the perceptions of people around us which lead us to think that all is not lost...on the contrary. We must roll up our sleeves before it is too late. The first step and primary objective must be to come out of the other side of this emergency phase (if we can talk about coming out of it) with a good understanding of this unfolding phenomenon and the challenges it poses.

Even we, in our city, couldn't immediately understand what was going on. How dangerous is this virus? How is this danger linked to structural characteristics of the healthcare system and the socio-economic system? How will the phenomenon develop around us? What measures will the State take?

Let us not hide the fact that in the first two weeks we were following events, forced to review our ideas and draft proposals every day, coming to no conclusions. The explosive reaction in prisons around the country disrupted every plan, perhaps most clearly demonstrating our inadequacy in this situation, our inability to respond to events and to support this struggle.

At this point, it is indisputable that the effects of the epidemic are closely linked to the compacted life in increasingly crowded cities, and to a healthcare system that is increasingly devoted to goals other than caring for the exploited. The epidemic does indeed exist indeed is another indisputable fact. It is naïve, or rather, irresponsible, to carry out a plan of confrontation, discourse or proposal for combating the virus that does not take into account the very real danger of contagion. We cannot, to say the least, give a leaflet to a 70-year-old man who lives next door without taking the necessary precautions to avoid spreading infection: that is not acceptable. In the same way it would be reckless—both from a sanitary and legal point of view—to propose a neighbourhood assembly to discuss how to deal with economic matters.

Obviously, the task of comrades is to avoid the widespread paranoia and to engage in a considered and precise analysis of the events, and then to share that analysis with those around us. This analysis has intrinsic difficulties due to the complexity of the phenomenon, which certainly cannot be compared to, for example, to the study of social housing policies in a given city, the level of

militarization of a nation, or the effects on the territory of a large construction project. Analysis is made even more difficult by the fact that the State and its research institutes are the owners of data and information, as well as the proponents of decisions and criteria by which they're made (let's think, for example, the criterion of how many tests to carry out, and on whom).

Allow us a brief digression to focus on the problem. We could say that in the debate among the "movement" [of the extra-parliamentary left, *ed.*], readings and positions are divided among two poles. On the one hand, an attempt to minimize, if not deny, the seriousness of the situation, on the other hand, an attempt to embrace the State rhetoric on the emergency, to which everything should be subordinate. This polarization comes from afar, and is certainly not the product of the current epidemic, though it certainly makes it more evident. It concerns a large part of revolutionary activity and the production of revolutionary theory, at least in this era, and oscillates between 1) the possibility of discerning and trying to forge an autonomous path with respect to the capitalist system and 2) the requirement to satisfy a series of needs for which, as long as there is no revolution, we rely on the this system. It's a contrast between the need to struggle to obtain, albeit within the current order of things, what we need to live in the best possible way, and trying to understand in the meantime what autonomous paths are "constructible" as the struggle grows and spreads. Within these autonomous paths, material and theoretical/imaginary aspects should intertwine and be self-sustaining.

Usually, one tends to either be crushed by the pole of necessity, becoming *more realistic than the king* (Italian wordplay), and at best invoking a "return to the past" in which the welfare state "worked better", or one dabbles in talking about autonomy and the unknown, taking no account of the sphere of material needs whose provision is essential for our existence. Thus one forgets that the condition for being able to live in a world of free and equal subjects is being able to live at all. This issue is extremely clear in the current situation, where problems tend to emerge naked and raw, without the usual patina, at least in this corner of the world. Unless we deny the current seriousness of the healthcare situation or hypothesize that, fatalistically, under current conditions, there is nothing else to do but accept our death at the hands of of capitalism, **we should make an effort to elaborate and support a practical discourse that aims to safeguard our own and others' health and take healthcare needs into account, without allowing ourselves to be crushed by the rhetoric of the State.** We realise this statement seems little more than a slogan, certainly simpler to say than to do or even to be properly reasoned. But there is nothing simple about this type of problem, and the structural difficulties we are facing should be made explicit and should accompany us on every step of our reflections and attempts to explain it. Evidently, it is not a question of accepting in any way the rhetoric of the State and its emergency logic, which is useful

in enforcing discipline on the population, as well as the its preparation in advance for the emergence of discontent and conflict. It is also an important experiment which the authorities will certainly try to learn lessons from for the future. We do not necessarily need to envisage a dystopian situation of total normalisation of current restraining measures in the near future in order to understand the seriousness of the situation. But it's worth remembering that States have been studying counter-insurgency and military crisis-management techniques of various kinds for decades. For example, it is possible that governments will take advantage of this situation to relaunch 5G (by making an appeal for and legitimising a Korean-style management of the epidemic: <https://ilmanifesto.it/alta-diagnostica-e-controllo-sociale-il-modello-coreadel-sud-ribalta-i-numeri-per-ribaltare-i-numeri/>) or to apply curfews in other critical situations.

This logic of emergency, however, also responds to the undeniable need for containing the contagion; this is the profound difference between the current situation and other situations of social emergency or catastrophes related to so-called natural phenomena. Neglecting or minimising this data or pretending to forget it will certainly not strengthen our ability to criticise and counteract the tools and the self-legitimation process used by the authorities. It would be interesting, for example, to see what kind of criticism we could make regarding the UK's strategy to create a so-called herd immunity against Covid-19...

Criticism and opposition to a so-called state of emergency must at least come alongside a discourse and struggle that succeeds in putting damaging government healthcare policies under the lens. Over the years and especially now, these policies, guided by the ferocious logic of profit, have made the possibility of receiving treatment for those with few economic resources an extremely selective luxury. This does not mean claiming the role and logic of public healthcare as the ultimate revolutionary goal, but the struggle to *live freely*, we repeat, starts with *the possibility of living*; the restructuring of the healthcare sector have been and continue to be real acts of war against the exploited. A lack of healthcare access in a capitalist world, structurally hostile to any form of autonomy, is equivalent to a death sentence, even beyond Covid-19. Fighting to broaden access to healthcare, in parallel with the construction of forms of logic and knowledge other than those of public healthcare, is a fundamental element for a revolutionary perspective that does not want to ideologically oppose freedom and material needs. How to articulate concrete proposals in this regard is a problem that certainly goes beyond this short text, and, at least now, beyond the skills and experience of the writers. We will learn to do it, we think, if we are able to put our critical thinking into practice in the struggles that follow (and that we are able to build).

Trying, so far as possible, to analyse the phenomenon correctly has both ethical and strategic repercussions: on the one hand we cannot contribute to endangering other people and potential comrades by exposing them to the risk of contagion. We, already few and with limited energies, cannot afford to get sick, and nor can we afford for our potential comrades to get sick. Let the rich, the rulers and the bosses get sick, at least. On the other hand, we must try to understand how the situation may evolve step by step and what kind of scenarios may occur.

Surely we can't afford to wait because, in spite of any superficial determinism or desire to imagine the certain catastrophe ahead of us, the point is to turn the catastrophe into a revolution.

Struggle... but how?

Returning to our shortcomings, we notice a certain gap in our relationship with the exploited who live around us. Some things, which should be the basis for any intervention of ours, are already difficult: building relationships of solidarity with the people most affected by the social and material fallout, bypassing the idiotic government diktats or the dependence on the apparatus of control; opposing the dominant narrative and revealing the future fallout on our quality of life; trying to share tools to understand the virus and the actions of the State with working class immigrants; helping people to understand this type of repression and how to deal with it (think of the widespread application of Article 650 c.p.). The *shock absorbers* applied by the State will certainly only protect the most *salvageable* part of the population, but even the official narrative around the contagion has been selective: a large part of the exploited immigrant population, many of whom have a weak comprehension of the Italian language, are having difficulties in understanding what's going on, even down to the most basic things like how to properly use protective masks or gloves.

Here too, we need to identify the openings that a crisis situation presents, and try to start that process of acceleration, try to rapidly connect with many more people than our specific struggles have been able to do in recent times. It may not be possible to make up for this shortfall. At the same time, we should learn if and how it is possible to reconnect with all those people with whom we've shared some episode of struggle, or with whom we still share them. For example, if the struggles in the CPR (detention centres for undocumented immigrants) hadn't suffered such setbacks, and the police hadn't seized mobile phones from the prisoners, then maybe that would have been a battlefield on a par with prisons, but with more possibilities for interaction.

If we want to examine the challenges we face, **we should start to imagine what to do in the outgoing phase of this health emergency (if and when that happens) and the social fallout it will bring... with the possibility of returning to the street.** Will everyone be happy to return to

normality shouting "Italy is reborn"? Or will there be social landslides capable of channeling a furious collective anger? Will there be a series of conflicts in specific areas of society (catering workers, healthcare workers, the unemployed, people with illnesses aggravated by the coronavirus emergency, a struggle to pay the bills, etc.)? Here, too, we start from our shortcomings.

Over the years, in the various areas of Italy, comrades have developed studies and research on the various aspects of this society which sustain the production and reproduction of the capitalist system, often with the aim of extracting some analysis that would guide and illuminate a proposal for struggle and action. And yet, if the emergency were to end now and the healthcare system were to try and clear the backlog of operations and treatments which had been put on hold, with the risk that the most urgent cases were forced to call upon the expensive private sector, would we even know where to protest? Would we know exactly who is responsible is for this situation, going back decades, centuries? We will to make up for our shortcomings with study and observation, but also through exchange with the potential comrades that we know. We too are immersed in this society and suffer the exploitation it entails: at work, among our neighbours, our student friends, relatives locked down in "red zones" where there is no more space in intensive care units. We may know some such potential comrades already.

Some immediate problems will first of all concern people's health and thus will immediately show a class aspect: what will become of all those chronic conditions and pathologies that have become acute due to the lack of care during the current crisis? What benefit will the diversion of patients from public healthcare to private structures bring to the latter? How will healthcare workers, who have long been forced into degrading contractual conditions and exhausting shifts, come out of this crisis for the healthcare system?

As we have been accustomed over the years to repressive beatings, to the difficulties of social conflict, to the tiny range of struggles, **we are in danger of losing our imaginative and utopian momentum.** A momentum that must be able to imagine and design an ideal world, freed from capitalism, but also and first of all to defeat the obstacle of resignation. We must think big.

This viewpoint oscillates between the ability to attack and the self-management of essential resources for life during an insurrection, not to mention all its organizational issues. Because if we argue that at the root of the coronavirus crisis lies the capitalist world as such, if we argue that the possibility is opening up for lots of people to gain this awareness through hard struggle, then the scope is radical.

Will we be satisfied to "stir things up" or more trivially to support street demonstrations and their level of confrontation? Or will we at the same time ask ourselves how to get food, how to continue to take care of ourselves without reproducing their profit-oriented models, how to use land and agricultural space to produce food? How will we be able to defend ourselves against attacks in a territory that is partially in turmoil? How can we dialogue with far away territories? And if they can cut off the water and electricity to a section of a prison in revolt, why shouldn't they do the same to a whole neighbourhood?

Here a sense of dizziness creeps in; it's better to sleep on it. We only hope that these partial arguments can guide the confrontation to come.

Turin, 16 March 2020