

## To the Pillars of Hercules? C.B. Macpherson, Antonio Gramsci, and the pandemic as an “organic crisis” of the global neoliberal order\*

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*C.B. Macpherson developed the concepts of «possessive individualism» and «transfer of powers» in his highly influential work on seventeenth-century English political thought, wherein he found core elements of doctrines of property that exerted a lasting influence over the global liberal order. Antonio Gramsci devoted many pages in his Prison Notebooks to the contradictions inherent in that order, which if combined in a given conjuncture, might constitute its «organic crisis», in which capitalism’s consistent contradictions are qualitatively transformed by new elements so that the entire system itself is placed in question. Covid-19 can be represented as an organic crisis of the global neoliberal order which, since the 1970s, has made possessive individualism a veritable secular religion: it presages, although it does not itself inaugurate, a systemic challenge to bourgeois civilization.*

*Macpherson; Possessive Individualism; Gramsci; Organic Crisis; Covid-19.*

### 1. *Transcending the limits of liberalism*

A pandemic sweeps the world. Although unlikely to outrival its most famous twentieth-century predecessors – the influenza epidemic of 1918-9 or the still-active scourge of HIV-AIDS – it may still come to be seen as a highly instructive, perhaps transformative event. Yet, what has it taught?

In the Global North at least, the predominant answers to this question are those drawn from the liberal tradition. They come in a variety of forms. On the low-brow level of sensationalist tabloids and digital platforms, we are bombarded with heroizing biographies, uplifting narratives, conspiracy theories, voyeuristic vignettes of suffering, sensational statistics of variable reliability. At the middlebrow level of the quality newspapers: an equally perplexing blend of the despairing determinism and resolute voluntarism. Representations of the pandemic often treat it as incomprehensibly sublime – as something bleakly uncontrollable, invisible, and unknowable – yet also a challenge that strong, self-possessed individuals can rise above (or, in the eyes of a good percentage of the social-media-saturated population of North America, expose as a hoax). Individual politicians and health professionals become the heroes (or villains) of the hour. Patriotic national histories are revisited to provide suitably inspirational metaphors. Many Britons re-stage the Blitz,

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\* I dedicate this essay to the memory of the esteemed socialist scholar Leo Panitch, who died of Covid-19 on 19 December 2020.

Americans the “Yellow Peril”, India’s Hindu nationalists the Partition, Russians the Space Race (their fledgling vaccine proudly bearing the name “Sputnik V”).

And near the top of this hierarchy of pandemic representations we find many writers, particularly historians, keen to prove their social relevance with stories of pandemics past, perhaps inadvertently conveying a subtly comforting message: bad as 2020 has been, 1347 in Florence or 1545 in Tenochtitlán were so much worse. There is nothing new under the sun, is the subtext of much of this historiography (more specifically, how it has been typically popularized in a neoliberal order): humans respond to mass death according to their inherent nature; their favoured tactics, such as the Venetians’ “quarantino” of 1348, have become hardy perennials<sup>1</sup>.

At all three levels, forms of liberalism predicated on the ontological and epistemological primacy of the individual mediate how the raw facts of death and suffering are imagined and become ideologically salient. Identifying their worldview with the enlightened progress of the species as a whole, liberals – whether “classical”, “new”, “corporate”, “Fordist” or “neo-” – depict themselves as carriers of universal values, followers of science, defenders of the individual’s liberties, and guardians of “western civilization”. Although the pandemic might seem to provide compelling counter-evidence demonstrating how dated their worldview has become<sup>2</sup>, liberals will resist any challenge to their certainties. Yet, it could well be that the current crisis is so profound that it will finally undermine, or at the least profoundly unsettle, them.

This article argues that two thinkers indispensable for a reconnaissance of our current crisis are C.B. Macpherson (1911-1987) and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), whose very dates caution us against treating them as infallible gurus for a present crisis they could not have fully anticipated. The first, an immanent critic of this liberal tradition, left us with useful ideas about «possessive individualism» and the «transfer of powers» in a liberal order lastingly centred on privileging owners of private property. The second, working within the Marxist tradition, left us with subtle reflections on the place of science in modern capitalism and its moments of «organic crisis». Taken

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<sup>1</sup> HARRISON 2012; MCNEILL 1998; RANGER — SLACK 1992; SNOWDEN 2019; WALTNER — TOEWS 2020; WUTHNOW 2010 (interesting on the fear aroused by pandemics).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, PINKER (2018), who was unlucky enough to end his paean to the triumph of the liberal enlightenment with a conclusion hailing the final disappearance of pandemics from the planet.

together, I argue, they might help orient the next left as it absorbs the challenges of 2020-1 and struggles to master the pandemic's implacable logic.

## 2. *Metabolic Rift and the Annihilation of Space by Time*

A host of scholars, such as Renata Ávila, Mike Davis, Andreas Malm, and Rob Wallace have explored that logic; a brief outline of their key hypotheses follows<sup>3</sup>. The most important of them is that this pandemic must be placed in the context of global capitalism. Covid-19 did not hit humanity like a meteor from outer space. Whatever “accidental” factors contributed to its first emergence – a beleaguered bat biting a fatally inquisitive pangolin, perhaps? – global capitalism’s wholly “non-accidental” project of space-time compression has shaped its subsequent career. As David Quammen puts it in *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic* (2012),

«We live at high densities in many cities. We have penetrated and we continue to penetrate, the last great forests and other wild ecosystems of the planet, disrupting the physical structures and the ecological communities of such places. We cut our way through the Congo. We cut our way through the Amazon. We cut our way through Borneo ... We shake the trees, figuratively and literally, and things fall out ... Ecological circumstance provides opportunity for spillover. Evolution seizes opportunity, explores possibilities, and helps convert spillovers to pandemics»<sup>4</sup>.

For Malm, «It is unrestrained capital accumulation that so violently shakes the tree where bats and other animals live. Out falls a drizzle of viruses».<sup>5</sup>

The drizzle has become more of a downpour since the global ascent of the politico-ethical matrix called neoliberalism in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Wendy Brown has brilliantly analyzed «neoliberal reason», which has been applied in a staggering number of spheres:

«These include deregulation of industries and capital flows; radical reduction in welfare state provisions and protections for the vulnerable; privatized and outsourced public goods, ranging from education, parks, postal services, roads, and social welfare to prisons and militaries; replacement of progressive with regressive tax and tariff

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<sup>3</sup> ÁVILA – HORVAT 2020; DAVIS 2006, 2020; MALM 2016, 2018, 2020; WALLACE 2016, 2020; see also SHAH 2016; TESTOT 2020.

<sup>4</sup> QUAMMEN 2012, pp. 515-6.

<sup>5</sup> MALM 2020, p. 50.

schemes; the end of wealth redistribution as an economic or social-political policy; the conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise, from college admissions preparation to human organ transplants, from baby adoptions to pollution rights, from avoiding lines to securing legroom on an airplane; and, most recently, the financialization of everything and the increasing dominance of finance capital over productive capital in the dynamics of the economic and everyday life»<sup>6</sup>.

This neoliberalism, free from anything like effective regulatory restraint, whether stemming from religious precepts, social conventions, class struggles at the point of production, or even (as property has become more and more abstract) physical restrictions – this supercharged variant of Samir Amin’s «liberal virus» has truly «gone viral»<sup>7</sup>.

It is not the vast numbers of pathogens in the wild – with 1,200 species of bats constituting, along with rodents, a prime reservoir of them – that in themselves cause global health emergencies. Most historic zoonotic spillovers introducing new viruses to humanity seem to have done relatively little damage to it, since historically they were apt to occur in backwoods areas with little human traffic in or out. Whether given zoonoses become “world-historic”, in short, depends in part on their transmissibility and lethality and, in larger part, on the social and political contexts in which they emerge.

Since the advent of global neoliberalism in the 1990s, that context has been one of the annihilation of space by time, entailing a feverish assault on the world’s forests to satiate a seemingly unlimited appetite for commodities. *Big Farms Make Big Flu*, argued epidemiologist Rob Wallace in 2016: world agribusiness has created «an ecology nigh perfect for the evolution of multiple virulent strains of influenza»<sup>8</sup>. Mike Davis titled his chilling 2005 study of H5N1 *The Monster At Our Door*, in which he warned of the «human-induced environmental shocks – overseas tourism, wetland destruction, a corporate ‘Livestock Revolution’, and Third World urbanization with the attendant growth of megaslums» that provided ample scope for a disease with «extraordinary Darwinian mutability». And «our terrifying vulnerability to this and other emergent diseases has been shaped by concentrated urban poverty, the neglect of vaccine development by a pharmaceutical industry that finds infectious diseases “unprofitable”, and the deterioration, even the collapse, of

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<sup>6</sup> BROWN 2015, p.28; see also BROWN 2019.

<sup>7</sup> AMIN 2004.

<sup>8</sup> WALLACE 2016, 38.

public-health infrastructures in some rich as well as poor countries»<sup>9</sup>. His 2020 revised edition of this classic is titled, appropriately enough, *The Monster Enters*:

«Forest destruction, whether by multinationals or desperate subsistence farmers, eliminates the barrier between human populations and the reclusive wild viruses endemic to birds, bats, and mammals. Factory farms and giant feedlots act as huge incubators of novel viruses while appalling conditions in slums produce populations that are both densely packed and immune compromised»<sup>10</sup>.

Six years before the present pandemic, economist Jamison Pike and his associates published an influential paper that estimated the enormous economic benefits – potential savings between \$344 and \$363 billion – that would accrue from addressing viral zoonoses at their source<sup>11</sup>. The neoliberal responses to such hard-headed cost/benefit analyses were eloquent: leading states disabled major components of their pandemic alert systems. As Malm dryly puts it, «If there was one feeling scientists working on zoonotic spillovers did not express when Covid-19 took off, it was shock»<sup>12</sup>.

By 2019, much of the scientific literature agreed that the rate of infectious diseases, the majority of them zoonoses, was accelerating. In stark contrast to its lazily spreading predecessors, SARS-CoV-2 took barely two months in 2020 to transform a localized epidemic into a pandemic sweeping the world, hitching a ride on a global transportation network linking every continent<sup>13</sup>. Tourists did their bit: as in the still-unfinished HIV-AIDS pandemic, some of the disease has been spread by them. But more important than tourists as causal drivers have been the global supply chains, with their “just-in-time” specifications. As Malm notes, such patterns could emerge «*only because global tendencies were present in concentrated form*», with «circuits of capital spinning in the markets, wildlife from all continents newly accessible through the ligaments of trade»<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> DAVIS 2005, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> DAVIS 2020, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> PIKE *ET AL.* 2014, p. 18519.

<sup>12</sup> MALM 2020, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Even Antarctica, free of actual Covid-19 cases before December 2020, that month witnessed 36 new infections at a Chilean research base: SULLIVAN 2020.

<sup>14</sup> MALM 2020, pp. 61-2, 67. On the planetary environmental consequences of China’s rise, see SMITH 2020; WALLACE *ET AL.* 2020. It will take many researchers over many years to arrive at a definitive account of Covid-19’s precise origins, which are presently the subject of debates strongly reminiscent of the Cold War.

Covid-19 was, in short, not only *predictable*, but *predicted*. In the Capitalocene, a novel articulation of «capitalist time, bio-chemical time, meteorological time, [and] geological time»<sup>15</sup>, capitalists reprogram the planet's ecosystem to accumulate more capital, with effects likely to persist long after the demise of their class itself. To the two fundamental and well-known contradictions of capitalism, i.e., those internal to the generation of surplus-value (capital's inherent tendency to invest in more capacity than the market can absorb) and those resulting directly from it (workers struggling against both their dehumanization and their material vulnerability) is added a third, "organic" one: capitalism's remorseless self-subversion, as the frenzied quest for present profits undermines the natural preconditions of future ones. This ecological contradiction at the core of capitalism, well-explored for decades as the "metabolic rift" by such scholars as Ian Angus, John Bellamy Foster and Alan Thornett, was forgotten by many self-declared state-building Marxists in the twentieth century<sup>16</sup>. After 2020-1, it will likely be remembered. The debilitation of humankind and the despoliation of nature are two sides of the same capitalist coin. We now learn to our cost that ecologically unequal exchange has become a "deep driver of deforestation, hence of biodiversity loss, hence of zoonotic spillover. Some bats and other hosts will be sucked into those trade winds»<sup>17</sup>.

Those trade winds – transformed under capitalist modernity by almost instantaneous communications across the globe, the containerization of shipping, the creation of free-enterprise zones, and so on – mean that, to an ever-increasing extent, capitalist accumulation comes at the cost of the lives of people all around the world. The social has «saturated the hazards themselves», with social drivers active on both the "human" and "natural" sides of our predicament<sup>18</sup>. The pandemic has shown us that human beings swim in a vast viral sea far beyond their reckoning or full control. Yet collectively they also have a distinct place within, and some responsibility for, its evolutionary trajectory: as Malm wittily puts it, «bats didn't one day tire of their forests» and «pangolins didn't offer themselves for sale»<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> MALM 2016, p. 391.

<sup>16</sup> ANGUS 2016; FOSTER 2020; FOSTER — BURKETT 2016; FOSTER — CLARK 2020; SAITO 2017; THORNETT 2019; for lively debates aroused by "Capitalocene" as a concept, see MOORE 2016.

<sup>17</sup> MALM 2020, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> *Therein*, p. 100, emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup> *Therein*, p. 173.

### 3. Macpherson's Immanent Critique of Possessive Individualism

Bats and pangolins and innumerable other species, along with the vast tracts of their hitherto undeveloped habitats, entered these trade winds in part because of a conceptual breakthrough registered in seventeenth-century England – i.e., a plausible and ever-more-widely accepted ideology of property that justified private possessions with the claim that their owners had worked for them. That which was left “unimproved” was valueless<sup>20</sup>. Malm himself recalls the words of John Locke: «Land that is left wholly to Nature, that hath no improvement of Pasturage, Tillage, or Planting, is called, as indeed it is, *Waste*, and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing»<sup>21</sup>. The emergent materialist consensus on the pandemic suggests that much of its destructiveness lies in the neoliberalism's full instantiation in theory and practice of Locke's philosophy of property – which, when first enunciated, came with restrictive caveats that were progressively relaxed over time<sup>22</sup>. By the *fin-de-siècle* heyday of the robber barons, they were scarce remembered at all. In the 1930s and 1940s, the useful fiction of the corporation-as-individual attained even more power when elaborated within a powerful complex of ideas and practices calculated to counter socialism: “free enterprise”. Fettered in the interest of social peace during the post-1945 *trente glorieuses*, free enterprise was liberated in the neo-liberal counter-revolution of the 1970s, an unbound Prometheus freed from all the state planners whose mild palliatives were melodramatically depicted by F.A. Hayek as so many milestones on the “Road to Serfdom”<sup>23</sup>.

Ownership over things became the pith and substance of cultural belonging and citizenship. “Possessive individualism” was the term coined by theorist C.B. Macpherson to capture this compelling ideological matrix<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> ARNEIL, 1966; MEHTA, 1999. This was the rationale English colonizers often deployed when dispossessing Indigenous peoples in the Americas.

<sup>21</sup> *Therein*, p. 77; cf. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Civil Government* [1690] at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/politics/locke/ch05.htm>

<sup>22</sup> SREENIVASAN, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> For which see especially BAUMAN 2013; CALLISON — ZANFREDI, 2019; HARVEY 2008; JOHNSON — SAAD — FILHO 2005; KOTSKO 2018; LEYS 2001; MIROWSKI 2009, 2013; PIKETTY 2014; PISTOR 2019; PLEHWE *ET AL.* 2020; SLOBODIAN 2018; THERBORN 2013, 2020; WHYTE 2019; ZAMORA — BEHRENT 2015; ZEVIN 2016.

<sup>24</sup> For an overview of his thought, see RAY (1999); for an excellent contemporary analysis, see CUNNINGHAM 2019, and for a twenty-first development of «possessive individualism», see BROMLEY 2019. In 2020-21, policies adapted by neoliberal states

Macpherson's "signature concept" received its fullest treatment in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (1962), based on a close reading of these two theorists and some of their contemporaries. Possessive Individualism's "basic assumptions" were that «man is free and human by virtue of his sole proprietorship of his own person, and that human society is essentially a series of market relations»<sup>25</sup> – that is, as an assortment of free, equal individuals related to each other through their possessions. The relation of exchange (the market relation) is seen as the fundamental relation of society. And «political society comes to be interpreted as a rational device for the protection of property, including capacities; even life and liberty are considered possessions, rather than as social rights with correlative duties»<sup>26</sup>.

Macpherson heretically critiqued Locke especially for his errors in fact and logic. It was true that, confused though it often was, Locke's doctrine did tally with the realities of a largely agrarian early-modern capitalist world. But, after the coming of steam power, the rise of democratic movements, the consolidation of vast pockets of wealth (much of it inherited) and the emergence of starkly inegalitarian industrial zones, it no longer sufficed, at least not as a persuasive "justificatory argument" for modern liberal regimes. Moreover, it inescapably entailed, contrary to the democratic pretensions of some liberal theorists, the net "transfer of powers" from the many to the few. Drawing on Hobbes, Macpherson observed in *The Real World of Democracy* (1965) that

«Human beings are sufficiently unequal in strength and skill that if you put them into an unlimited contest for possessions, some will not only get more than others, but will get control of the means of labour to which others must have access... So in choosing to make the essence of man the striving for possessions, we make it impossible for many men to be fully human. By defining man as an infinite appropriator we make it impossible for many men to qualify as men»<sup>27</sup>.

Because they did not emphasize, indeed could not see, these extractive relations lodged deep in the heart of their theoretical and political practice, twentieth-century liberals were unreliable defenders of the very liberty they

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have typically proceeded on possessive-individualist assumption that all worthwhile citizens have properties within which they can shelter (at a safe "social distance" from each other) from the pandemic.

<sup>25</sup> MACPHERSON 1962, p. 271.

<sup>26</sup> MACPHERSON 1973, p. 199.

<sup>27</sup> MACPHERSON 1965, p. 79. Macpherson persisted in using «man» in this generic sense until the 1980s, although his sentiments were firmly feminist.



professed to champion. In *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (1973) Macpherson declared he aimed to «get clear of the disabling central defect of current liberal-democratic theory, while holding on to, or recovering, the humanistic values which liberal democracy has always claimed»<sup>28</sup>. Macpherson saw liberalism as threatened, at its core, by those who insisted upon «capitalist social relations and the transfer of powers they entailed»<sup>29</sup>.

Hence, any “retrieval” of liberalism’s principle of liberty would require a comprehensive rethinking of the concept and practice of property. “Property” in everyday speech often denoted a physical object or tract to which someone claimed exclusive ownership – yet behind each such thing was a complex set of relationships necessary for that entity to be so categorized. Macpherson thought that by accepting Locke’s labour derivation of the property right, liberals had blundered into two profound errors: they had come to argue for a reductionist notion of human nature and they had become complicit in socio-economic relations that made a mockery of the very liberty they supposedly upheld. He recommended that the definition of property be changed, so that it become «an individual right not to be excluded by others from the use or benefit of something». Macpherson thought this provided a tidy resolution of the contradictions afflicting liberals and «most of their critics», at least those in quest of a convincing justificatory for «liberal-democratic society»<sup>30</sup>. «All roads lead to property», Macpherson proclaimed, which was «always a political phenomenon»<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> MACPHERSON 1973, p.vii.

<sup>29</sup> *Therein*, p.312.

<sup>30</sup> MACPHERSON 1978, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Therein*, p. 1. Of course, Macpherson’s treatment of “property” and his relative neglect of “capital” leaves him open to the justified critique that he has deployed in his historical analysis a relatively static concept, one moreover that conflates the smallholders’ attachment to their tiny plots with the interests of industrial enterprises pursuing capitalist accumulation on a world scale. Figuring both as “property holders” obscures the appropriation of surplus value that distinguishes the latter from the former. Although Macpherson was sympathetic to Marxists’ politico-ethical critique of capitalism, that did not extend to any commitment on his part to a rigorous class-based economic analysis or a coherent plan for capitalism’s overthrow. Yet, in terms of making corporate property ideologically attractive, this powerful doctrine of property *does* perform crucial ideological work to encourage those who cherish their cottages to imagine themselves to be “ratepayers” or “property-holders” playing on the same field as the plutocrats. “Property rights” is a legal and political concept upon which both may rely.

Such Depression-era “new liberal” insights, many inspired by the rich tradition of Idealist thought in Britain as developed by T. H. Green<sup>32</sup>, seemed more and more out-of-place as neoliberalism strengthened its grip after the 1960s. Acolytes of what came to be known as the “Cambridge School” treated Macpherson as “Exhibit A” of the sort of intellectual inquiry (allegedly ahistorical, determinist, and “Marxist”) they opposed. Rather than elucidating the «point» or «force» of any given political text «by placing it in its convention-governed linguistic context», Macpherson’s *longue durée* interpretation had placed «the independent life of ideas in history ... in danger»<sup>33</sup>. Such critics seemed intent, in Joseph Femia’s words, on ruling out «any form of historical interpretation predicated on a distinction between the “manifest” and “latent” content of a body of thought»<sup>34</sup>. Kenneth Minogue of the Mont Pèlerin Society brought this ideological counter-offensive to a thundering crescendo in the mid-1970s, in a blast attacking Macpherson as a deluded totalitarian intent on foisting a scheme of blighted collectivism upon the planet<sup>35</sup>. To a point, such Cold War critics succeeded in making Macpherson, someone who might be reputedly cited by mainstream scholars in the 1960s, seem dated and ideologically problematic in the market-infatuated 1980s<sup>36</sup>.

From a Marxist standpoint, Macpherson’s “philosophical history” of liberalism omits some basics: the transatlantic slave trade that drew the speculative interest of John Locke himself, the repression of the workers’ movement, and so on<sup>37</sup>. As his more discerning left critics came to realize, Macpherson was an immanent critic of liberalism, intent not on burying it but, rather, “retrieving” it from capitalism<sup>38</sup>. Yet, they too often missed what was valuable about his work overall, the deftness and precision with which he brought out the extent to which rugged individualism and property ownership had

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<sup>32</sup> DEN OTTER, 1996.

<sup>33</sup> TULLY 1988, p.102; see also LASLETT, 1960.

<sup>34</sup> FEMIA 1988, p. 161.

<sup>35</sup> MINOGUE 1976.

<sup>36</sup> See TOWNSEND 2000, for the “state of play” in the various controversies surrounding his work, many of them on fine points of detail and none of them, in turns out, all that conclusive as damaging critiques; and LINDSAY (1996) and CUNNINGHAM (2019) for nuanced interpretations of his political theory.

<sup>37</sup> See especially LOSURDO 2011 2012; MCKAY 2014; SHOIKHEDBROD 2019; WOOD 1995; ZAFIROVSKI 2009. For leading Marxist critiques of Macpherson, see LEVINE, 1976; PANITCH, 1981; SVACEK, 1976; WOOD, 1978.

<sup>38</sup> For a broader discussion, see MCKAY 2014; 2021. Voltaire was one of Macpherson’s favourite authors, whom he considered a model for his own pellucid prose.

become core attributes of the theory and practice of liberalism, both as enduring components of an elaborate ideology and as elements of everyday life.

For instance, millions of working people, and not only in the U.S., have bought into the “American Dream” of material abundance and individual liberty. Inherent in The Dream, especially as it was intensified in the Cold War<sup>39</sup>, is an all-embracing common sense perspective about property. To acquire property means security and respectability; to be propertyless means insecurity and stigma. Failure to “live the Dream” is a sign of personal weakness. Failed human beings deserve, not government hand-outs, but the rigorous discipline of the marketplace, which may well rule thousands of them (and their entire communities) economically redundant, incapable of contributing to the accumulation of capital. (A select few might be suitable objects of our charitable impulses). That legions of critics and skeptics have lampooned the “Dream” of possessive individualism has not rendered it less potent; in fact, after Macpherson’s death in 1987, and with the collapse of much of the Communist bloc, it became (and still is) globally hegemonic.

Today, as the “American Dream” turns sour for many and fatal for some, Macpherson provides one way of grasping its extraordinary longevity and its deep-seated contradictions. His contested thesis that an enduring feature of liberalism has been its privileging of property, rebuked in the 1980s for disregarding the “quasi-market states” providing both social welfare and market efficiency, looked less implausible in 2007-8, after a good many of those “quasi-market states” had plunged into a financial crisis, aggravated by the toxic sub-prime debts racked up by people in their own anxious pursuit of The Dream. And the pandemic has confirmed his insight: the securely propertied stand a far better chance of survival than their precariously situated counterparts, and the quest of a return to post-pandemic “normality” generally means the recovery of an unfettered right to acquire and enjoy commodities.

#### 4. *Gramsci and the Concept of Organic Crisis*

Macpherson, liberalism’s intrepid and erudite immanent critic, offers particularly powerful and intuitively sensible arguments for those who, still embedded in liberal ideology, have started to suspect its dire insufficiency as a

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<sup>39</sup> WALL 2008 reveals how Free Enterprise began in the U.S. as a corporate public relations exercise.

guide to the twenty-first-century capitalist world order. The pandemic suggests that Possessive Individualism – construed as both a deeply-rooted tendency in the theory of liberalism *and* a driving force in the psyches of many denizens of neoliberal states – is in crisis. As though awakening from a neoliberal stupor, we now realize, *pace* Margaret Thatcher, that there *is* such a thing as society; indeed, as individuals, we rely upon it for our existence. And entire spheres, such as mass tourism, the neoliberal industry *par excellence*, which once offered the propertied an enjoyable way to demonstrate their financial and cultural superiority, have withered.<sup>40</sup>

Those roused from their dogmatic slumbers by Macpherson often found that his immanent critique of liberalism suggested the need for a more all-embracing post-liberal paradigm, one towards which he gestured but did not furnish. Some took its absence in Macpherson to be a sign that his excursion off the path of mainstream liberalism led only to impenetrable thickets<sup>41</sup>. Others, though, saw in unorthodox Marxism a promising alternative. Antonio Gramsci's star rose in the Anglosphere a bit later than Macpherson's, and was plainly located in a different intellectual galaxy: only under duress can the militantly undialectical Macpherson be made to sound like a journeyman happily at work in Gramsci's «dialectical workshop»<sup>42</sup>. Still, the liberal and the Marxist shared some ground. If for Macpherson, «all roads lead to property», for Gramsci property was the «centre of gravity and the core of our entire juridical system»<sup>43</sup>. Both devoted much intellectual energy to the close examination of leading liberal luminaries. Both emphasized the need to rethink the fundamentals of democratic theory, especially because the crisis-ridden capitalism upon which “liberal democrats” had so heavily relied since the nineteenth century was plainly in crisis<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> ZUELOW 2016 provides an overview and arresting statistics.

<sup>41</sup> LEISS 1988.

<sup>42</sup> THOMAS 2009, p.136.

<sup>43</sup> *PN*, Vol III, p.125 (Q6§167). Gramsci is citing, by and large approvingly, Alessandro Chiappelli (although he reproves him for forgetting that in the Creed, God is lord «dominus: master, owner») of heaven and earth. See also *PN*, Vol. III, p. 10 (Q6§10), where Gramsci writes of the state intervening «at every moment of economic life, which is a continuous web of transfers of property».

<sup>44</sup> In a conversation with Herbert Marcuse shortly before his friend died in 1979, Macpherson guessed the system might well endure – but only another forty years (Marcuse gave it a century). MACPHERSON, *Herbert Marcuse—A Parting Glimpse*, typescript, University of Toronto, C. B Macpherson Fonds, 887-0069/005, Folder, *Note on Marcuse*.

From the perspective of 2020–21, one of the most arresting products of Gramsci's dialectical workshop is his concept of «organic crisis»<sup>45</sup>. To grasp what this concept meant for him, and what in turn it might mean for us, it is useful first to trace his underlying stance towards science and then assess the role within it of his deployment of the vocabularies of organicism.

Although Gramsci is not generally considered a philosopher of science, many readers of the *Prison Notebooks* will be struck by his appreciation of scientific discussions. In his boyhood, he preferred the exact sciences and mathematics to “softer” school subjects<sup>46</sup>. He lamented the re-introduction (with liberal connivance) of religion into Italy's elementary schools, on the apparent assumption that pupils were in a «backward stage of history». A truly progressive educational policy would, on the contrary, encourage a scientific, secular stance toward the world<sup>47</sup>. He paid close attention to deforestation in Sardinia<sup>48</sup>, the new physics<sup>49</sup>, the scientific status of psychoanalysis<sup>50</sup>, the fetishization of certain natural sciences at the expense of others (such as the social sciences and history)<sup>51</sup>, and the thorny problem of how to characterize «the scientific» itself<sup>52</sup>. Resolutely opposed to the mechanical and determinist teleology he detected in such Italian evolutionary thinkers as Enrico Ferri, Cesare Lombroso, and Achille Loria, all of them influenced to some degree by Herbert Spencer's teleological evolutionism, Gramsci is rightly seen as the scourge of leftists naively drawn to models strictly derived from the natural sciences, controversially including among them such eminent figures as Robert Michels, Nikolai Bukharin, and Henri De Man. Yet he also deserves to be seen, unconventionally, as a revolutionary committed to the ideals he associated with the Enlightenment and to a Marxist sublation, not elimination, of the tools of conventional logic and the traditions of scientific evolutionary analysis. Just as the image of Marx as a one-dimensional celebrator of a planet-reshaping capitalist Prometheus has not withstood the test of time, so

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<sup>45</sup> For evidence of a contemporary resurgence of interest in Gramsci's concept, see DAWSON 2018; FAZI 2018; JESSOP 2016.

<sup>46</sup> In 1928, he remembered surprising a pompous physics professor with his own original and arduous working-out of a complex equation, *LP*, VOL. I, 195–6.

<sup>47</sup> *PN*, Vol. III, p. 350 (Q8§<200>).

<sup>48</sup> *PN*, Vol. I, p. 333 (Q2§65).

<sup>49</sup> *Therein*, p. 331 (Q8§<170>).

<sup>50</sup> *LP*, VOL. II, p. 29.

<sup>51</sup> *PN*, Vol. III, p. 131 (Q6<180>).

<sup>52</sup> *Therein*; also, *PN*, Vol. III, p. 159 (Q7§6).

Gramsci's converse image as a cultural theorist uninterested in, even opposed to, political economy, the rigorous study of social structure, and scientific explorations of humankind's evolution is surely up for substantial revision.

In his outstanding introduction to the English-language version of Vol. I of the *Prison Notebooks*, Joseph Buttigieg limns some of the complex issues entailed in sorting out Gramsci's position on these contested questions. Underlining the «attacks on positivism that pervade all of Gramsci's writings», Buttigieg focuses in particular on Georges Cuvier, the esteemed French naturalist, whose miraculous reconstructions of giant beasts (such as mastodons) on the basis of tiny bone fragments aroused much nineteenth-century enthusiasm. Cuvier, often considered a founding father of palaeontology and an early explorer of the phenomenon of catastrophic species extinction, had inspired an entire school of positivists in Italy. Gramsci nicknamed the most egregious of them the «Lorians», after Achille Loria, whom he considered an absurdly credulous and crude thinker. «Lorianism» exemplified «crude positivism, opportunism, perverse thinking, and careless scholarship». It was a fundamental error to reduce «a conception of the world to a mechanical set of formulas which gives one the impression of holding the entirety of history in one's pocket»<sup>53</sup>. It was typical of such positivists that they elaborated generalizations that swallowed the particular in their quest for a free-floating grand theory.

Marxists like Bukharin, on Gramsci's reading, could also be seen as unwitting acolytes of a kind of Lorianism. They uncritically adopted «methods and paradigms from the dominant culture»<sup>54</sup>. Bukharin's notion that sociology «explains the general laws of human evolution», thereby providing a «method for history», left historians and philologists with the lesser tasks of mechanically applying them. Many such sociologists were, without being aware of it, applying a methodology rather like that of Cuvier:

«Armed with a set of methodological principles they place each item in its proper place within the predetermined totality. Since they mistake their mechanistic formulas for history itself, there is no historical experience, no event to which they attend in its specificity. Every item unearthed by historical research serves only to fill in the details and to confirm the accuracy of the general picture»<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> BUTTIGIEG 1992, pp. 57; 43, 51.

<sup>54</sup> *Therein*, p. 52.

<sup>55</sup> *Therein*, pp. 52, 55, 58.

Their naïve empiricism coexisted with an equally credulous approach to ahistorical categories of analysis. He found many of his socialist contemporaries confused science with a purely empirical approach and tended to repeat a fact, describe it, generalize it in a formula, and treat this reformulation of the fact as a «law of the fact itself»<sup>56</sup>. They naively relied upon rafts of statistics – we should remember this well from 2020-21! – and upon applications of «the law of large numbers», which might be used (carefully) in venturing comparisons, but were not themselves representations of the «“law” of social affairs»<sup>57</sup>.

Yet, alongside all his denunciations of crude evolutionism lies compelling evidence of his quest for a way of thinking social evolutionism that eschewed simplicity, vulgar reductionism, and teleology: that was, in a word, dialectical. Even on the subject of Cuvier himself, Gramsci did not condemn his projects of heroic reconstruction; rather, he feared that those less scrupulous than Cuvier would, when they found the equivalent of his «little bone», be tempted to craft «arbitrary and “bizarre” generalizations»<sup>58</sup>. Nor was he dismissive of evolutionary sociology *per se*. It seemed, if one asked whether Cuvier’s «principle of the correlation of the individual organic parts of a body, according to which one can reconstruct the whole body from one of its particles» could be «useful, correct and fruitful in sociology», the answer was clearly, «yes». But, Gramsci immediately adds, «one must be clear: in the case of past history, the principle of correlation (like the principle of analogy) cannot replace the document, that is it cannot provide anything other than hypothetical history, probable but hypothetical»<sup>59</sup>. Buttigieg adds: «This does not mean that sociology is useless; only that its claims need to be held in check, its totalizing power has to be delegitimized, its uses should be carefully circumscribed, and its “scientific” results must always be subjected to historical criticism and not the other way round»<sup>60</sup>.

For all his attentiveness to detail, writes Derek Boothman, Gramsci might be considered a Kuhnian *avant la lettre*, given his insistence on

«the “period of struggle and polemics” in which one outlook tries to establish itself against an older one, followed by (in typically Gramscian terminology) a

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<sup>56</sup> *FSPN*, p. 450 (Q11§66, excerpt).

<sup>57</sup> *PN*, Vol III, p. 309 (Q8§<128>).

<sup>58</sup> BUTTIGIEG 1992, pp. 52-53 (Q28, §3); see also *LP*, Vol. I, p. 302.

<sup>59</sup> *Therein*, p. 61 (Q14§29).

<sup>60</sup> *Therein*, p. 60.

“classical period of organic expansion”; this may fruitfully be compared with what Kuhn calls a struggle between rival paradigms, followed by a period of “normal science”, devoted to solving the problem of reality as posed within the “winning” paradigm»<sup>61</sup>.

It was a measure of Gramsci’s sophistication that he resisted the temptation to make the «fetish sciences», i.e., those derived «from the natural and physical sciences», the models for all intellectual inquiries. No: «each type of scientific research creates a method that is suitable to it, creates its own logic, which is general and universal only in its “conformity with the end”»<sup>62</sup>. History and philology, for example, had their own scientific methodologies. For an individual or a political tendency arbitrarily to impose one interpretation on them could never provide the basis for an «objective science» but only for «immediate political ideology»<sup>63</sup>.

Given all the many and various definitions of “science”, Gramsci nonetheless thought a common theme among them was that of «conforming to the end” insofar as such “conformity” is rationally (methodically) pursued after the most minute analysis of all the elements (down to the capillary level) that are constitutive (the elimination of the emotive elements being part of the calculation)»<sup>64</sup>. One can further infer what Gramsci meant by science by his description of description of what a scientist *is not*. One was safe in saying

«someone is not a scientist if he is unsure about his criteria; if he does not fully grasp the concepts he is using; if he has a poor understanding of the history of the problems he is dealing with; if he is not very cautious in his assertions; if he does not proceed in the required manner but is arbitrary and illogical; if, instead of taking into account the gaps that exist in the current state of knowledge, he silently ignores them and contents himself with purely verbal solutions and connections, without saying anything about the provisional nature of his positions, which may be taken up again, developed etc.»<sup>65</sup>.

And genuine scientists, Gramsci intimates, should also be conscious of the framework within which they are working: not merely repeating its conventions but grasping that all the theories arising within it are not emanations of

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<sup>61</sup> *FSPN*, p. lviii (introduction by DEREK BOOTHMAN).

<sup>62</sup> *PN VOL. III*, p.131 (Q6§<180>).

<sup>63</sup> *FSPN*, p.376 (Q10II§41xiv).

<sup>64</sup> *PN VOL. III*, p.123 (Q6,§<165>).

<sup>65</sup> *Therein*, p.351 (Q8§<202>).



the eternal and natural, but transitory and replaceable elements of a historically-determined body of thought<sup>66</sup>.

Unlike Bukharin, genuine scientists, then, should be dialectical: not in the sense of the “dialectical materialism” that was soon to become the tyrannically-enforced doctrine of the Soviet Union<sup>67</sup>, but meaning that they should be acutely self-reflexive, aware of their place in history, reliant on empirical evidence judiciously assessed in the light of both traditional and dialectical logical analyses, yet always cognizant that any “scientific certainties” were conditioned by their socio-historical context and destined to be made less “certain” by different ones.

The sophistication in his scientific assessments is equally evident in his critical support for the concept of objectivity. Once again, a balance must be struck, for Gramsci’s writings resound with critiques of scholars who, invoking their supposed status as value-free “objective scientists,” imagine themselves to be above the fray. As Buttigieg remarks,

«Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis demanded a criticism full of passionate intensity, a criticism that takes sides – not only could he not have endorsed, much less adopted, the cultivation of “Olympian serenity”, but he actually berated Croce for affecting it. In order to be “disinterested” in the common sense of the term, Gramsci would have had to conduct his studies in an apolitical key; this he could never do»<sup>68</sup>.

He derided quasi-religious attempts, discernible in «philosophical materialism, of positivism, and of a certain scientism», to make «objectivity» into an absolute, a quest that was a hold-over from «mystical concept of an “unknown god”»<sup>69</sup>. Yet, far from deriding objectivity, Gramsci deemed the struggle for it «the struggle for the cultural unification of the human race», while insisting that the true meaning of the term «objective» was «*humanly* subjective», i.e., always contingent on humanity’s developing history<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> *Therein*, pp. 308-9 ( Q8§<128>).

<sup>67</sup> Gramsci defended the «free initiative of individual scientists» as they perfected «the task of researching after new truths», hardly an ideal reminiscent of the brutalities of “Diamat”. *FSPN*, p. lix (BOOTHMAN introduction).

<sup>68</sup> BUTTIGIEG 1992, p. 11.

<sup>69</sup> *PN*, VOL. III, p.369 (Q8§<219>).

<sup>70</sup> *PN*, VOL. III, p.337-8 ( Q8§<177>). For an up-to-date discussion with overlaps with Gramsci’s conception, see ORESKES 2019.

In Gramsci's hands, then, objectivity is not a risible illusion nor a transcendent ideal: it is, rather, a social practice. It does not equate to neutrality<sup>71</sup>. Perhaps the most telling trope in which Gramsci suggests both objectivity's value and situatedness is that of «reconnaissance», as when he concludes his famous note on the different revolutionary terrains offered by the «East» and «West» with a call for «an accurate reconnaissance on a national scale»<sup>72</sup>. Nobody would mistake a scout on a mission of reconnaissance to be a neutral party in a military conflict: the whole point of the exercise is that it contribute to victory as our side understands it. The scout, then, is hardly impartial. Yet if that scout arrives back at home base with a report filled by untested hypotheses, fanciful extrapolations on the basis of isolated observations, or merely emotional evocations of the landscape to be occupied, then that scout's report will be judged less useful, less “scientific” in Gramsci's specific sense, than a rival, more accurate representation. On this interpretation, Gramsci was a sophisticated realist: a mission of reconnaissance cannot proceed unless there is minimal agreement that an actual conflict exists, involving actually opposed forces, whose verifiable success in it depends on precise evaluations of the actual situation<sup>73</sup>.

Central to Gramsci's own reconnaissance of the interwar capitalist world were terms drawn from evolutionary biology. Notwithstanding their predominance in his writings – one thinks of «molecular», «capillary», «development», «parasites», «progressive», «saturation», «birth», «morbid symptoms», etc., etc. – it is striking how Gramsci's most influential interpreters staunchly resist any sustained reckoning with the patently evolutionary undergirdings of his revolutionary thought. The most conspicuous of these terms are «organic» and its many cognates: «disorganic», «inorganic», «organization», «organic equilibrium», «organic struggle», «organic deficiency», «organic structural change», «organic passage», «organic liberty», «organic complement», «organic period of history», «organic reform», «organic centralism», and «organicity» [*organicità*], to name just some of them. In Gramsci's hands, “organic” is both an essential term and a somewhat slippery one. At the risk of unduly abbreviating his subtle reflections, his concept of the “organic” can be summed up under five headings.

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<sup>71</sup> HASKELL 1998.

<sup>72</sup> SPN, p.238 (Q7, §16.)

<sup>73</sup> Following the lead of JOSEPH (2002) and MORERA (1999); see also SCHWARTZ-MANTEL 2015.

In the first place, as the *Dizionario gramsciano* suggests, Gramsci sometimes deploys “organic” as a synonym for coherent, intelligent, comprehensive, and systematic (in a word, “scientific”) especially when critiquing merely empirical or idealist treatments of society and history<sup>74</sup>. Benedetto Croce, for example, failed to provide a scientific treatment of nineteenth-century European history. He neglected to undertake «an organic treatment of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars»<sup>75</sup>. University students, to cite another example, might well be consigned to «fog and chaos» thanks to an «inorganic, pretentious and disorienting culture», and prone to entertain a «number of truths or sophisms as the case may be, and one is as good to [them] as another». A proper university (and, one imagines, a modern socialist party awakened to its responsibility to serve as the pedagogical “Modern Prince”) would combat this elitist dilettantism with an inculcation in students of a profound appreciation of history and of their indebtedness to past generations and responsibility for future ones<sup>76</sup>.

Second, for Gramsci, Marxist analysis must distinguish what is organic, that is to say of the whole system and relatively permanent, from what is conjunctural, that is to say specific to a given moment. Kate Crehan very helpfully points out the influence here of Gramsci’s training in philology, within which the term “organic” means of, or pertaining to, the etymological structure of a word<sup>77</sup>. The organic is that which is permanent, intrinsic, functional, stable, and structural – as juxtaposed with that which is impermanent, discontinuous, dysfunctional, episodic and merely speculative. The key to an advanced historical comprehension was to grasp «the dialectical nexus between the two types of inquiry», i.e., those focused on the intrinsic properties of a socio-economic system and those detailing particular phenomena<sup>78</sup>.

Third, “organic” has the connotation of representativeness and connectedness, with direct bearing on how the forces of the people’s enlightenment are structured. (Here the antonyms of “organic” might be non-comprehensive, arbitrary, narrow, and partial.) The most famous manifestation of this sense of the term is that of the (widely misunderstood) «organic

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<sup>74</sup> LIGUORI — VOZA 2009. I thank Christina Vani for her translations.

<sup>75</sup> *SPN*, p. 118 (Q10I§9)

<sup>76</sup> *FSPN*, p. 151 (Q15§46). Gramsci is drawing upon Cardinal Newman.

<sup>77</sup> CREHAN 2016, p.20.

<sup>78</sup> *PN*, Vol. II, p.178 (Q4§38).

intellectuals»<sup>79</sup>. If it was «the task of the intellectuals to bring about and to organize the cultural revolution», and few readers of Gramsci could doubt that it truly was, not all “the intellectuals” were equally capable of doing so: «crystallized» intellectuals, who held the equivalent of a Ptolemaic worldview when new developments were rendering it redundant, were bound to play a reactionary role, one corresponding to a «strata ... still steeped in the culture of past historical situations». Those in the movement still trapped in undialectical, dogmatic ways of thinking and lacking a developed historical sense were incapable of «grasping the different moments of a process of cultural development»<sup>80</sup>. Although such phraseology might tempt the unwary to see Gramsci as a conventional *fin-de-siècle* evolutionary determinist, he insists throughout on the dialectic of quantity and quality, a developmental “process” punctuated by moments of revolutionary transformation<sup>81</sup>.

Fourth, “organic” can describe a social movement that grasps the paramount need for careful preparation before any onslaught on the seats of the mighty. If there is no parthenogenesis in politics, then the success of any insurgent movement depends not on dashing leaders in pursuit of an «instantaneous form» of struggle, but rather a «long ideological and political preparation», organically devised in advance to reawaken popular passions and enabling them «to be concentrated and brought simultaneously to detonation point»<sup>82</sup>. In such a careful reconnaissance of the terrain of struggle, scouts must distinguish between that which is «arbitrary» and what is «necessary», what is «individual» and what is «social or collective»<sup>83</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> A feature of Gramsci’s North American reception was that such intellectuals were seen as inherently progressive; they are, on the contrary, defined by the organizing functions they perform that are of foundational significance to society as a whole. PIOTTE (1970) valuably added the complication that the “organic intellectuals” of one epoch may well turn into the “traditional intellectuals” of the next: priests were “organic intellectuals” in a feudal order but became “traditional” ones under industrial capitalism.

<sup>80</sup> PN, Vol. III, p. 333 (Q8§<171>).

<sup>81</sup> I thank *Materialismo Storico*’s anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this point: he or she draws especially on Q11§26; Q8§216; Q11§25 and the first draft of Q7§6. To my knowledge, no one has explored the shared terrain between Gramsci and such theorists of “punctuated equilibrium” as Stephen Jay Gould; the contemporary re-emergence of “dialectical epidemiology” in such authors as Rob Wallace suggests the timeliness of such a discussion.

<sup>82</sup> SPN, p. 110 (Q15§85).

<sup>83</sup> *Therein*, p. 57 (Q19§24).

Fifth, organic might denote the living as against the dead, the vibrant as opposed to the fossilized, the innovative as opposed to the formulaic. (Here the *Dizionario gramsciano* discerns the influence of Bergson)<sup>84</sup>. It means attentiveness to the «perennial flux of life and of consciousness», rather than a preoccupation with the «old rationalistic ideologies» that had erroneously sought to confine such living fluidity to mechanical and static categories<sup>85</sup>. A sign that one was dealing with an organic and expansive state and not a dying one could be found in how broadly it conceived its cultural role. The latter tended to neglect its pedagogical function and allow its citizenry to persist in pre-scientific and fatal ignorance (one thinks of all the “educated” citizens of the West whose dire ignorance of the basics of scientific methodology have been on vivid display in 2020-1). A living expansive movement, both before and after it attains state power, «facilitates and promotes growth from the bottom upward, ... raises the level of national-popular culture and thus enables the emergence of a variety of “intellectual heights” across a more extensive area»<sup>86</sup>.

The concept of «organic crisis» can now be grasped more precisely<sup>87</sup>. Gramsci himself suggests an «organic crisis» emerges when a series of overlapping «conjunctural crises» combine to become so transformative that even relatively constant elements in the system are modified, as «incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity)». The political forces generally committed to the survival of the system make «every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them», whereas those committed to its overthrow «seek to demonstrate that the necessary and sufficient conditions already exist to make possible, and hence imperative, the accomplishment of certain historical tasks»<sup>88</sup>. A crisis becomes «*organic*, and not *conjunctural*» when various specific crises merge into a mega-crisis «so

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<sup>84</sup> LIGUORI — VOZA 2009.

<sup>85</sup> PN VOL. I, p. 183 (Q1§<78>).

<sup>86</sup> PN VOL. III, pp.126-7 (Q6,§<170>).

<sup>87</sup> For contemporary uses of the term, see, for instance, Bob JESSOP 2016, writing on the «Organic Crisis of the British State», who sees Thatcherism as, in Gramsci's words, an attempt to solve «an overriding problem of its existence and fending off a mortal danger» (SPN, 1971, p. 211 (Q13§23); or the “Trotskyist Fraction” made up of representatives of movements in 16 countries gathering in Buenos Aires, which also noted that aspects of the financial crisis of 2007-8 met some of the criteria of an organic crisis by shaking loose some as-yet-unradicalized supporters of the mainstream parties. TROTSKYIST FRACTION 2018.

<sup>88</sup> SPN, pp. 178-9 (Q13§17).

transformative that even relatively constant elements in the system are modified»<sup>89</sup>.

Liberal capitalist civilization can be interpreted as one in which conjunctural crises erupt periodically as a result of its inherent contradictions. Not only does its political economy generate vast populations of producers unable to buy the very commodities they make, but it also irrationally condemns to precarity those charged (women, typically) with the vital task of nurturing the future bearers of labour-power, the very commodity upon which its existence depends. Not only has it entailed near-endless war since the 1780s, on an ever-more-global and species-threatening scale, but it has robbed countless subalterns of their futures. On the model of the Middle Ages, one might predict this civilization's inherent contradictions might well persist for decades, even centuries<sup>90</sup>, until they become "organic" in a different sense: that is, when new elements change their interaction and when a disorganic ruling class is out-thought and displaced by a living social force endowed with the scientific capacity to bring such a system-challenging crisis to an emancipatory conclusion. It was possible, Gramsci thought, that world capitalism was in the twentieth century reaching its «pillars of Hercules»<sup>91</sup>, portending, if not its imminent dissolution, then its entry into unknown territory. It could be, on the evidence of the Great Depression, that capitalism had reached a point beyond which its contradictions could no longer be contained: its organic crisis. The future depended on correctly analysing this crisis and using it to humanity's advantage.

Revisiting our earlier discussion, we might say indications a system has entered an organic crisis include (a) the emergence of a coherent and systematic counter-hegemony with the intellectual capacity to grasp, without vulgar oversimplification, the essential (organic) features of the world it seeks to change; (b) the permanence and intractability of leading elements of the crisis, analysed by a stable and well-functioning political formation, in a reciprocal relationship of leaders and led; (c) the capacity of that formation to respond

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<sup>89</sup> PN, VOL. III, 366 (Q8§<216>).

<sup>90</sup> The «medieval crisis», for example, lasted for «several centuries, until the French Revolution» (PN, Vol. III, p. 9 (Q6§<10>).

<sup>91</sup> FSPN (Q10II§33). The *Columnae Herculis* or Ἡράκλειαι Στήλαι were likely comprised of Gibraltar to the north and perhaps Morocco's Jebel Musa to the south (the latter is debated). The metaphor was hardly a triumphalist one – Ulysses was rewarded by Dante with eternal tenure in the Pit of the Fraudulent Counsellors for his chutzpah, and his sailors for their pains perished in a whirlwind.

to the generality of that crisis by representing it comprehensively and simultaneously creating new political organizations broadly representative of those affected by it; (d) its commitment to undertaking objective projects of reconnaissance that will work to map the social terrain in crisis; and (e) ability of that formation to grow, and on the basis of the homogeneity and coherence of its analysis, to become an active, intellectually alert, and vital element in the lives of millions of activists, vesting in it their hopes for the future.

In a fuller sense, one might even say that “organic crisis” is a term that not only describes a serious crisis but prescribes a connected, socially-grounded, holistic, disciplined and popularly accessible response to it, effectively combining the short- and long-term, effecting the “the dialectical nexus” between the conjunctural and the organic. Such a crisis demands a *systematic* approach on the part of that leadership, capable (because it is drawn from a functionally-necessary and ascending group) of responding as a living organism to its analytical and political challenges: by advancing a holistic analysis attuned to all the aspects of the crisis, from the material to the spiritual; by actively recruiting new organic intellectuals representative of and answerable to subaltern strata, prepared to make the new formation a central part of their identities<sup>92</sup>; and by grounding in those strata a program linking immediate with transitional and ultimate demands, connecting the conjunctural and the organic.

An organic crisis is thus “made” as well as “found”, evident not just in the data of economic downturn and human suffering, but in the strength and intellectual capacity of those who seek its revolutionary resolution. It will entail actively directing attention away from the merely conjunctural – the flotsam and jetsam of party intrigue, electoral calculation, the pursuit of corporate advantage – to the organic, to evidence that an entire civilisation is dying and a new one, however painfully and imperfectly, is struggling to be born. A sound revolutionary movement capable of effective response to an organic crisis would be characterized by a form of leadership fully responsive to the mentalities, needs, weaknesses and strengths of the “led”, in a dialectical

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<sup>92</sup> In an effective «collective organism», single individuals were incorporated in it «in so far as they are given and actively accept a hierarchy and a particular leadership». Yet, once a good number of them came to consider «the collective organism to be a body extraneous to themselves», the organism itself could be judged disorganic, not longer existent in reality, but «a phantom of the intellect, a fetish ... Individuals expect the organism to act, even if they do nothing and do not reflect that, since their attitude is widespread, the organism is of necessity inoperative» (*FSPN*, pp. 14-5 (Q15§13; see also Q3§56).

relationship in which leaders, grasping the urgent need to teach and inspire, make it possible for ordinary members to attain consciousness of their place in history, with the result that leaders and led might ultimately (and “organically”, i.e., as a matter of course) democratically trade places.

A subaltern movement, capable of growth and expansion and endowed with the evolutionary advantage of being able to critique itself historically, would demonstrate with the sobriety of its analysis and the steadfastness of its revolutionary purpose its superiority over its crisis-ridden and self-absorbed competitors. Its analysis must be organic – that is, coherent, stable, representative, intelligent, and systematic. As the crisis deepens, traditional intellectuals, deserting their well-worn ideological ruts and their normal class allegiances, will gravitate to it. That desertion might well be a sign that «the crisis of the state» is attaining its «decisive form»<sup>93</sup>. In his highly evolutionary reflections on the transition from one way of life to another, Gramsci noted that when one «existing cultural world was decaying and falling apart», one might well find «embryonic elements of a new culture» emerging, one created by new social forces «expelled from that prior world and reacting against it»<sup>94</sup>.

Building on his sophisticated insights into science, Gramsci also considered it possible, and for leftists necessary, to strive for a sober, objective reconnaissance of a given crisis. Many Marxists espoused the opposite approach. They were inclined to demagoguery, theatrics, magical thinking, imagining the «immediate economic factor» would automatically disorganize the bourgeoisie and generate armies of resisters. Such revolutionary chiasm was little more than «historical mysticism through and through, the anticipation of some sort of dazzling miracle»<sup>95</sup>.

In an organic crisis, then, the chronic (and hitherto mainly manageable) contradictions of the bourgeois order are transformed into something far more system-threatening and potentially transformative: «It is impossible to control this crisis, precisely because it is so broad and so deep; its scale is such that quantity becomes quality. In other words, the crisis is now *organic* and not *conjuncturals*»<sup>96</sup>.

We might note five of its most salient attributes. The first, formative on both national and global scales, is that pitting ruling classes against ruled

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<sup>93</sup> PN, VOL. III, p. 9 (Q6§10.)

<sup>94</sup> *Therein*, p. 97 (Q6, §<116>). Gramsci's specific point of reference is fourteenth-century Tuscany.

<sup>95</sup> PN, VOL. III, pp. 161-2 (Q7, §≤10>).

<sup>96</sup> PN, VOL. III, p. 366 (Q8§216).



classes. Today, it is epitomized by the extreme neoliberal makeover of all the advanced industrial countries, as economic inequality attains astounding levels. The second is that opposing the social relations of production, distribution and circulation against the social forces of production: our entire social order, and not only private profit-making, is placed at risk by saturated markets for consumer commodities. The third is the vastly-accelerated displacement of workers by machinery, rendering vast swaths of the world's working population redundant and placing the very essence of surplus extraction in question. The fourth is the contradiction between social reproduction and accumulation, with countless families scrambling to function at a time of mass female wage labour, declining real wages (since the 1970s), and a shrivelling welfare state, with no coherent, equitable or plausible "Plan B" as the male breadwinner model passes into history. And finally there is the global environmental crisis: capital necessarily relates to the natural world as a vast storehouse of potential commodities, all of which must be monetized and sold. Subsumed in a comprehensive ideology of possessive individualism centred on the acquisition of property, not just the *sine qua non* of personal identity but the transcendent ideal of "western civilization", these five contradictions have been managed by neoliberal states without too much strain since the 1970s. The pandemic in 2020-1 has revealed not only their organic interconnections but also their transformation into something new, in a comprehensive organic crisis portending either a reversion to pre-Enlightenment structures and identities (as in the currently influential atavistic nationalist and neo-fascist movements) or a progression to a new way of life, a project realizable only on condition that an insurgent movement, acting globally and guided by science, can qualitatively transform them.

##### 5. *Understanding neoliberal capitalism as a death-trap*

Macpherson's analysis of the transfer of powers inherent in the liberal regime of property and of the extraordinary ideological staying-power of the freestanding individual as a model for all good citizens shows us the deeper roots of so many of the scenes we have witnessed in 2020-21: many working people unceremoniously deprived of their means of life through lockdowns; others ordered back to dangerous factory jobs; and nurses worked to exhaustion and in some cases to death because they could not afford to skip work, thereby transferring not only their powers to their bosses but also their lives.

*Possessive Individualism* is a tract for the times, with contemporary neoliberal states revealing just how tightly they are confined to the syndrome it diagnoses. Thanks to the pandemic's harsh pedagogy, the *formal* equality neoliberalism extends to individuals has been exposed as *actual* inequality founded upon class and refracted through oppressive prisms of gender, sexual orientation, race, and colonialism.

Gramsci gives us yet more: a capacity to distinguish between what is *organic* and what is likely *conjunctural* about the Covid-19 crisis. The conjunctural elements pertain to the specifics of state response: the efficacy or otherwise of various policies; the discovery and distribution of vaccines; the practical measures needed to prepare for the next virus; the political successes or failures of the regimes in question as they respond to the sometimes opaque workings of this particular virus. Its organic elements, though, as memorably brought forward by Malm and his comrades, are not only those stemming from a class structure that exploits (and in 2020 kills) many working people; not only those derived from allowing a capitalism unfettered from social regulation to dictate every aspect of the pandemic response, from compelling workers to die on the job to profiteering from vaccines; not only those that consign caregivers (overwhelmingly women) to a social position vastly inferior to that occupied by parasitic classes of speculators and monopolists. No: they also now include the neoliberal order's wholesale transformation of the natural world, in ways that place the future of human civilization itself at risk. This is then an organic crisis in a dual sense: both in its potential to be system-transforming and in its dire implications for human organisms on a planet the global neoliberal order has illogically and recklessly rendered uncongenial to their survival and its own reproduction. Neoliberal capitalism is revealed to be a self-destructive planetary death trap. There can be no reforming it.

Thanks to Gramsci, we are also able to situate, both sympathetically and critically, the liberals who have written so profusely about the pandemic. Undoubtedly, as Gramsci felt about some of the more conscientious Italian liberals of the 1920s and 1930s, whom he generally declined to denounce, many of their hearts are in the right place. (Like «Ugo Spirito and Co.», they advocate interesting ideas, such as a planned economy, although their justification of them tended to the merely verbal and utopian)<sup>97</sup>. Contemporary liberals genuinely lament the squalid deaths of the elderly, the irrational outpourings of our “leaders”, the manifold social injustices the pandemic has grotesquely exaggerated. Yet, in their capacity as organic intellectuals of a dying social

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<sup>97</sup> PN, VOL. III, p. 366 (Q8§216).

order, they halt their critiques there. Like the new liberals who hoped the carnage of the First World War would generate an irresistible drive to build a “land fit for heroes to live in”, today’s liberals’ belief in inevitable progress is the reverse side of their susceptibility to calls for a post-pandemic order that will perpetuate the very social problems they now ostensibly critique. The innumerable pundits, columnists, lobbyists, and “experts”, for all the crocodile tears they have shed over the old and the homeless and the overworked, will soon revert to their accustomed ideological task: that of normalizing the neoliberal abnormal, presenting as a matter of pure common sense our compulsory allegiance to a system shortening our life-spans and threatening the human species with extinction.

Such intellectuals remain powerful, and one can already overhear them pondering how best to reactivate their favoured austerity agendas as soon as we enter post-pandemic normality. All their talk of a land fit for front-line heroes is as likely to evaporate as quickly as that of their post-First World War counterparts. Many schemes are abroad for universal basic income, for example. They might justly be considered probationary items in a transitional program for a different social order. Insofar, however, as they inherently conflict with the precepts of twenty-first-century neoliberalism, the odds against their implementation are high. As Macpherson might have predicted, the rule of the propertied and the prestige of property will count against all such panaceas: they will glisten as iridescent utopian bubbles, until unceremoniously popped by the grim realists of neoliberal order citing ballooning deficits and the allegedly laziness-inducing effects of social security. Such is the likeliest short-term outcome of this pandemic, which, like the seemingly epochal financial crisis of 2007-8, will on its resolution usher neoliberalism into yet another of its «nine lives»<sup>98</sup>. As Gramsci warned us in the 1930s, even in the midst of a crisis affecting an entire social system, «its defenders are not demoralized; nor do they abandon their defensive positions, even in the midst of rubble; nor do they lose faith in their own strength or their own future»<sup>99</sup>.

In and of itself, SARS-CoV-2 in 2020-21 – like the sub-prime mortgages and their fantastical algorithmic representations in 2007-8 – will not constitute a force for revolutionary social change. If the pandemic is indeed, as many liberals have hopefully proclaimed, a “once-in-a-century” emergency, a Black Swan event, then the crisis of 2020-1 might well be as politically inconsequential as the dot-com bubble of 2000-2, the savings and loan crisis of 1986-95,

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<sup>98</sup> PLEHWE ET AL. 2020.

<sup>99</sup> *PN*, VOL. III, p. 163 (Q7§11).

and a score of other such conjunctural crises: horrific for those undergoing them, minor from the perspective of those who regard themselves as guardians of a neoliberal order they take to be the only conceivable socio-economic reality.

And yet. Suppose the critical epidemiologists and political economists and environmental scientists are right: given the neoliberal logic underlying this pandemic, it is likely to be followed by many more. And even without such likely future pandemics, the consequences of the global climate crisis of which the pandemic is merely a moment will themselves be experienced as a civilizational catastrophe. Moreover, suppose we consider as phenomena of neoliberalism not just the diseases with traceable “natural” causes like Covid-19 but also spiritual and psychological morbidities, such as addiction to opioids, caused both by global neoliberalism’s gutting of industrial and rural communities and by neoliberal entrepreneurs rushing to fill the psychic void with addictive drugs (which by 2020 have killed more North Americans than died in the two world wars put together)<sup>100</sup>. If these and other findings ring true, and are tested against those brought forward by others, they will lend strength to the hypothesis that not only possessive individualism, but global capitalism as a whole, has entered into an organic crisis, its “persisting contradictions” dramatically intensified and rendered unmanageable in the context of global environmental degradation. It is difficult to reconcile possessive individualism with a dead planet.

The organic intellectuals of the next left must build on this possibility, grasping what is organic in the contemporary crisis and crafting their strategies accordingly. They must preserve the present pandemic’s positive pedagogy. For example, in a most down-to-earth way, it has revealed that, when judged by the criteria of human flourishing, some activities are of far greater value and significance than others. The “front-line” workers who tend to our sick, pick up our refuse, cook our food, clean our kitchens, and change the children’s diapers attend to vital and essential – organic – human needs. Their privileged social superiors, whose wealth derives from their property, often merely collecting rents derived not from the exercise of any productive function but from inheritance, lucky stars, skilful manoeuvring, shady speculations, or opaque politics – they are the atavistic holdovers of a dying social order. (This, incidentally, is straight-up Tawney and Macpherson, if also a

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<sup>100</sup> CASE — DEATON 2020

theme developed by Marx and powerfully elaborated by Gramsci)<sup>101</sup>. Some forms of production and commerce serve organic human needs, but a vast number serve no lasting purpose – at least not if measured in terms of contributing to the survival of human civilization and the living human beings who comprise it.

Going beyond the texts of Gramsci and Macpherson, we might say that such a “crisis” is not just “found” (in the objective data of the world around us) but “made”, as leaders organically linked the rank and file create an evidence-based and rational strategy of revolution. As a *systemic* crisis, one that cannot be addressed by changing aspects of the present but calls out instead for changing the operations of the system altogether, it demands a *systematic* approach on the part of that leadership, capable (because it is drawn from a functionally-necessary and ascending group) of responding as a living organism to the analytical and political challenge: by advancing a holistic analysis attuned to all the aspects of the crisis, from the material to the spiritual; by actively recruiting new organic intellectuals representative of and answerable to subaltern strata; and by grounding in those strata a program linking immediate with ultimate demands, connecting the conjunctural and the organic. In this fuller sense, one might say that “organic crisis” is a term that not only describes a serious crisis but prescribes the connected, socially-grounded, holistic and popularly accessible response to it.

Many are the left lamentations for the parties of an earlier time, bound together as disciplined units in an international capable of offering them strategic and tactical guidance, and with good reason. Yet there is also much to celebrate from 2020-21. The pandemic has been a cruel but effective pedagogue. The gravitation of leading scientists, some of them traditional academics in universities and others organically tied to the state and corporations, to positions critical of neoliberalism’s environmental crisis is a significant matter. So is the emergence of a cadre of intellectuals organic to the functioning of the social order, who now dissent from its plainly irrational trajectory. Many people have been violently shaken loose from their well-worn ideological grooves. Like Macpherson, they have been shaped by three centuries of liberal hegemony; and like him, they now sense that there is something profoundly

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<sup>101</sup> For Tawney, see GOLDMAN 2013; TAWNEY 1920, 1926; 1931; TERRILL 1973. Note Gramsci’s Tawney-like critique of those who make a lavish living without carrying out «any necessary and indispensable productive function», whose siphoning off of money «absorbs a massive proportion of income» (PN, VOL. III, p.101 (Q6§<123>).

mistaken about it. And some of them, after the conjunctural crisis of the pandemic has passed, will be open to counter-hegemonic readings of it that suggest it is a manifestation of the more profound organic crisis of an entire social order, which quick fixes will do little to resolve.

The critical left has an unrivalled opportunity, in this moment of neoliberalism's organic crisis, to ground its critique of possessive individualism (and the property relations it has historically generated) in the most immediate, life-and-death, issues affecting far more people than those usually associated with the traditional organized left. There is, specifically, a widespread subaltern perception that the pandemic has delegitimized age-old patterns of profit-making and the equally venerable patterns of competition among states. (Just as, in the First World War, quite conventional bourgeois customs came to be stigmatized as "profiteering", so too in 2020-1 do we find Big Pharma's vaccine strategies have come to be contested by those with a more humanistic agenda than can be accommodated within a corporate universe). Large numbers of people have crossed a threshold from passivity to activism, and from them may well come demands, «albeit not organically formulated», that «add up to a revolution»<sup>102</sup>.

How might the "teachings of the pandemic" be summarized? First, the pandemic is not an event exogeneous to neoliberalism but has emerged from its underlying logics – deforestation and the steadily rising CO<sub>2</sub> levels linked to fossil capitalism, a commercially-driven and global space-time compression in production and distribution, and a politically-motivated austerity program that saw existing warning systems not as vital to collective well-being but as easy targets for budget-cutters. Rather like SARS-CoV-2, capital should not be blamed for the worldwide devastation it causes. Like many another parasite, as it exhausts one host population and one set of resources, it is intrinsically required to move on to new ones. Just as the virus's motto might be "spread or vanish", capital's might be summarized as «Accumulate, accumulate, that is Moses and the prophets»<sup>103</sup>. It is idle to demand circumspection, compassion or realism from either viral phenomenon. Neither has the conscious intent of despoiling our planet; neither is a sentient being. In the latter case, the "virus" is made up of countless human beings attempting to survive, many of them (perhaps necessarily) unaware of their status as replaceable cogs in its global machinery of dispossession and planetary despoliation. If it is true, as John Vidal argues in «Scientific American», that habitats destroyed by

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<sup>102</sup> SPN, p. 210 (Q13§23).

<sup>103</sup> MARX, Capital, VOL. I, 1867; <https://tinyurl.com/rytumcnb>.

development create the perfect conditions for the spread of coronavirus, then that process of development must either be rigorously controlled or else we shall face pandemic after pandemic, some possibly far more lethal than the relatively clement one of 2020<sup>104</sup>. Covid-19 might be regarded as our «starter pandemic», in the words of sociologist Zeynep Tufekci, and far deadlier pathogens await us, if social and natural viruses are allowed to run unchecked<sup>105</sup>.

Second, the social all-too-frail safeguards and sentinels that protected people against the first kind of actual parasite – beleaguered scientists in whittled-down health services attempting to make their voices heard above the din of commerce – were undermined by the logic of the second, socio-economic form of parasitism that has meant the integration of virtually the entire world in a market predicated on unequal ecological exchange, a radical version of “short-termism” in which planning for future years, decades or centuries is ruled out. Increasingly influential from the mid-1970s, hegemonic throughout the world from the mid-1990s, global neoliberalism is now on the defensive.

Third, contrary to infantile attempts to brand the pandemic as one country’s fault, it has proceeded without regard for the boundaries of nation-states: an illustration of the destructive divide between our well-established nationalistic ways of representing particular histories and global history’s actual drivers. Since the pandemic’s «causation is not local», nor can be an effective response to it. In the words of Rob Wallace: «If landscapes, and by extension their associated pathogens, are globalized by circuits of capital, the source of a disease may be more than merely the country in which the pathogen first appeared»<sup>106</sup>.

Fourth, although the pandemic’s pedagogy has been brutal, it has delivered one unforgettable lesson: a systemic restructuring of the underlying structure of the neoliberal order, once considered a prospect better suited to science fiction than the actual world, is both feasible and urgent, in fact a precondition for the future existence of a complex human civilization. Liberals shaken loose by the organic crisis of possessive individualism, many of them still preoccupied by “fixes” that will help us respond to the next one, are to be encouraged to have the “strength of consequences”, the courage to align their often astute readings of policy failures with more probing analyses of the structural conditions necessarily in place in order for these mishaps to

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<sup>104</sup> VIDAL 2020.

<sup>105</sup> Cited in YONG 2020.

<sup>106</sup> WALLACE 2020, p. 50.

occur<sup>107</sup>. Gramscian critical realism about the prospects of that civilization reaching an inflexion point in its evolutionary trajectory, is to be distinguished from the works in contemporary culture either resigned to that fate or discreetly welcoming it as a solution to the planet's problems<sup>108</sup>. Channeling Gramsci, we might respond to the purveyors of apocalypse by remarking that such are the symptoms of a bourgeois civilization in crisis, not a final judgment on all and every human achievement. And from the moment of the pandemic, we can still preserve, and insist on remembering, the record of states striving for comprehensive and effective social plans to preserve their populations, albeit in the name of mounting a short-term response to a supposedly unforeseen emergency. If these turn out to be recurring "emergency measures", they may yet confirm the old French adage, "Il n'y a que le provisoire qui dure".

If there is ever to be a leap into the realm of freedom, it will not come about because a small revolutionary elite cries "Jump" to a multitude of submissive subalterns. Just as there is «no parthenogenesis in language»<sup>109</sup>, the future is unlikely to present us with a "parthenogenesis in politics". The debate over whether history necessarily proceeded through a process of evolution, or rather by revolutionary "leaps", was badly designed, Gramsci wrote (indicating as he did so that he had closely followed the evolutionary debates over saltation pervasive among leftists before the advent of the neo-Darwinian "modern synthesis" in the 1930s). It was more important to distinguish between that which is "arbitrary" and what is «necessary», what is «individual» and what is «social or collective». Not all movements declaring themselves «revolutionary» merit the name: some might simply be attempting to «endow themselves with dignity and legitimacy»<sup>110</sup>. Genuinely revolutionary movements required a sound scientific analysis of the underlying workings of the societies they sought to transform.

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<sup>107</sup> See especially CHRISTAKIS 2020; HENIG, 1993; HORTON 2020; MACCORMACK 2020; MACKENZIE 2020; NEW YORK DECLARATION ON FORESTS 2020; QUICK 2018; SCHWAB — MALLERET 2020; SIEGEL 2020.

<sup>108</sup>BRINGHURST — ZWICKY 2018; GHOSH 2017; MCKIBBEN 2019; READ — ALEXANDER 2019; SERVIGNE ET AL. 2021. Admittedly some works of "collapsology" are written that way to alert us to the depths of humanity's crisis.

<sup>109</sup> PN, Vol.III, p. 52 (Q6§71). For a revealing discussion of this theme, see GERMINO, 1990, p. 40 who even speaks of the «antipalingenetic character of Gramsci's ultimate vision».

<sup>110</sup> PN, Vol. III, p. 357 (Q8§<210>).



And fifth and finally, the end of the “metabolic rift” separating humankind’s material life from nature will come about only once the socio-economic logic underlying the neoliberal order has been changed beyond recognition. A revolutionary humanism content to propose remedies for the sufferings caused by the pandemic – from non-exploitative wages and working conditions for front-line workers to somewhat less barbaric treatments of the old and infirm – is insufficient if it focuses exclusively on the “vulnerability side” of the equation. It must question the logic generating repeated crises as well as the injustices meted out to their victims.

The pandemic has imposed a “stress test” on neoliberal regimes around the world. Those most governed by the culture and politics of possessive individualism, and in which the neoliberal trashing of the state was allowed to proceed furthest, have conclusively failed it. Countries that radically downsized their states, cut back their welfare apparatuses, and diminished their scientific capacities, have been richly rewarded by the pandemic – by death tolls that are among the worst in the world and the ruination of many of those who, under other conditions, would be the American Dream’s warmest supporters. The pandemic suggests the state, exiled to the margins of much social theory and practice after the 1970s, is still a crucial locus of struggle, and that state planning, long consigned to the attic as a relic of the “old left”, merits a twentieth-first-century dusting-off as a necessary component of any liveable human future. The Pillars of Hercules do not yet loom up before us. But – are they not discernible on the not-too-distant horizon?

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