

# Coronavirus- Is this our Microbiopolitical Moment?

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Despite following the early emergence of coronavirus with zeal — a combination of intellectual intrigue and morbid fascination with the science fiction potential of pandemic — it took me some time to fully digest the wholesale impact of the current contagion. I can't deny that this may also have been somewhat facilitated by the pantomime of leadership on the issue, which can only be described as dark satire; fronted by a warbling narcissist full of the delusion of his pedigree.

But arriving at the supermarket a few days ago I felt the last efforts of my dissonance fall away — it was time to wake up and smell the dystopia.

Anything of real sustenance in the supermarket had been squirreled away and I was forced into considering the few obscure articles remaining — oven ready duck confit for seven quid? Sounds reasonable... Amongst the carnage, stacked and gleaming along a whole aisle were over a hundred cute little chocolate shapes and creatures waiting for their ride with the easter bunny. Yet another ritual of commodity put on hold — the lost tokens of the free market; pandemic has a way of adjusting priorities.

Welcome to Covid UK — as many businesses close this week for an undetermined amount of time, the urban becomes a place of fear, uncertainty and yet perhaps, even the promise of a new world.

Here the pandemic has come helter skelter into a domestic context of misery, poverty and deficiency — deepening an already fertile crisis seeded by a ten year Tory assault on the welfare state. In these “low foothills of the contagion”, still nowhere near its projected peak, already hospitals sound the alarm about the limits of their capacity. And just a few weeks into this new brand of “stay at home” it seems the public conscience has now been wholly funneled into digital social policing; memeing people into compliance with social isolation in lieu of a decisive “lock down” by the state.

If I seem meandering here, I own it. In fact I claim my right to the kind of tentacular meandering fitting of Haraway's (2016) influence in the exposition of this global drama.

And if Haraway was to say anything here, I expect it would be that the threat of pandemic is hardly new. Indeed, whilst there has been a distinct lack of preparedness entailed by the parodic improvisation of states to the crisis, it is not as though we haven't been primed for this event through the concern of the scientifically invested, an entourage of Netflix docuseries to similar warnings or more importantly, the apocalyptic visions of our science fiction heroes. Yet as the pandemic scrapes back the frail skin of dissonance to the precarity of our globalised lives — I find myself moving away from the I and into the forced speculation of the WE on the state of things and the future.



There's no denying that pandemic provides some fascinating intellectual mulch to tend. Global contagion is a biopolitical carnival — the orientation of the state to life and to order finds its contemporary locus at the level of the virus. We are microbiopolitical subjects now (Paxson 2014). In the sense that microbiopolitics attempts to explain the process whereby “dissent over how to live with microorganisms reflects disagreement about how humans might live with one another” (Paxson 2014, 115) — coronavirus opens up a modern frontier of pandemic in late capitalism, catalysing and reorienting the concern of the state to devise and legislate for a set of “pure relations” (Paxson 2014, 116) for the way people live with one another. Abruptly, a new code for life emerges from the anthropocentric evaluation of virus and we are called to work upon ourselves in observance of a new microbiopolitical regime.

Who will this regime serve? If coronavirus reveals anything, it is how deeply stratified life under capitalism is — and how the effects of the virus are far from horizontally distributed. Casal's (2018) work on ‘immunitary privileges’ may be further instructive here — which raises questions about how coronavirus is “embodied differently” depending on socio-economic status. Even in these early stages, there are hints that access to Covid related healthcare is stratified. But moreso, the suffering entailed by such global economic turmoil will be felt differently across the board. The poor and precarious will suffer unreservedly. Make no mistake, we are definitely not all in this together.

Yet perhaps there is some solace to be had. Whereas free market ideology would prefer to keep the ghost alive of understanding humans as myopic, individuated, mechanistic contributors to the status quo — coronavirus describes something quite different. Much like the increasing popularity of the science of the microbiome, virus and contagion speak to our ecological interdependence and interconnectedness. Yet another lesson in a long string of recent environmental crisis that warns we must awaken to how nature is a state of being, not an external commodity. There

will be changes now, changes debated for so long as impossible — changes that shake the very core of Telegraph readers as they find themselves awash in a kind of socialist renaissance.

And from our pits of self isolation, with untold time for existential reflection we are watching. One hopes that this long pause will allow for a vast incubation of communitarian ideas and exchange; that once embodied will be very hard to disinfect. Indeed that perhaps, as it becomes easier to breathe in London — we'll be more inventive in our imagining of a reality beyond the tightly sealed and surveilled edges of late capitalism. Perhaps then, this is our moment of emancipation? Our microbiopolitical moment.

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Image Courtesy of Vakis Demetriou

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