



Thinking  
Blue

Marxism and the (Post)Human

Writing

Red

Stephen Tumino



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# 13.

## Covid

The global COVID-19 pandemic is not a causeless ‘event’, nor a return of repressed ‘nature’, but the intensification of the underlying conflict between the global organization of labor and private ownership for profit. Millions have lost their jobs and health care as companies downsize or go bust from what was not only a foreseeable but foreseen global health problem because of an economy that puts profits before needs. Such a crisis would not have been allowed to occur in a centrally planned socialist society run by the workers, who are becoming all too aware of the dangers posed by the commodification of human needs for profit. And yet, the revelation of this basic economic truth in the wake of the pandemic is occulted by the post-al left, who use an ‘event-al’ logic that disconnects effects from their underlying causes lying in the exploitation of labor by capital, to make the pandemic seem a break from the ‘normal’ order rather than its inevitable result.

### The War Against the Virus is a Class War

Alain Badiou, for example, who in his ‘new communist’ writings turns orthodox Marxist theory into a ‘State-fiction’ that tries to contain ‘the rupture of the revolutionary event’ (35) defined as the ‘aleatory, elusive, slippery, evanescent dimension’ of the ‘political real’, now says that the pandemic has revealed ‘a major contradiction of the contemporary world’, showing how the global ‘mechanisms of Capital’ exceed the power of any one nation-state.<sup>1</sup> And yet, confronted by a social reality that pressures his belief that social transformation occurs as a result of

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1 Alain Badiou and Peter Engleman, *Philosophy and the Idea of Communism*, trans. by Susan Spitzer (Boston and New York: Polity Press, 2015), pp. 35, 239; Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (New York: Verso Books Books, 2010), p. 247; Alain Badiou, ‘On the Epidemic Situation’, *Verso Blog*, 23 March 2020, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4608-on-the-epidemic-situation>.

the spontaneous eruption of events rather than by the revolutionary praxis of workers who have acquired global class-consciousness, he cynically dismisses the idea that the epidemic situation might be the 'founding event of an unprecedented revolution' on the grounds that the connection between ending capitalism and 'the extermination of a virus remains opaque'. Instead, using 'simple Cartesian ideas', he declares that the pandemic is 'a nature-society intersection', between 'ill-kept markets that followed older customs' in Wuhan, China in which at 'a certain moment the virus found itself present, in an animal form itself inherited from bats, in a very dense popular milieu, and in conditions of rudimentary hygiene', and, 'a planetary diffusion of this point of origin borne by the capitalist world market'. In other words, what one learns from Badiou's cynical viral ontology is that this crisis is not a cause for revolution because the 'traditionally' regulated market (of the cultural other) is its cause and thus future prevention simply requires more 'hygienic' regulations.

Leaving aside the dubious science behind Badiou's tabloidy rhetoric, this is how Badiou's 'event-al' logic simply reinscribes bourgeois common sense as the limit of knowing by disconnecting the social and political effects from their underlying economic causes.<sup>2</sup> In place of an analysis which uncovers the historical and material conditions which produce pandemic, Badiou ontologizes these now causeless effects as novel 'events' that emerge spontaneously and without class-conscious direction as a disruption of the existing. This is why he says without a trace of irony that while the cause of the crisis is not an unprecedented event, it is still 'event-al' in that while its cause remains 'opaque' ('a certain moment the virus found itself present in an animal') it has 'transversal' effects ('planetary diffusion of this point of origin borne by the capitalist world market').<sup>3</sup> In other words, the 'real' can only be known at the level of its effects and the causal world-in-itself is 'absent'. On this logic, the event-al origins of the virus are, at best, only known in their local manifestations and therefore cannot be connected to the global logic of capitalism inscribed in the law of value.

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2 Jon Cohen, 'Wuhan seafood market may not be source of novel virus spreading globally', *Science*, 26 January 2020, <https://www.science.org/content/article/wuhan-seafood-market-may-not-be-source-novel-virus-spreading-globally>.

3 'On the Epidemic', n. pag.

The pandemic, however, should be understood as fundamentally an indictment of the global capitalist system. Leaving aside the fact that zoonotic epidemics have and will break out in more regulated markets — just look at the numerous well-documented violations of New York City’s ‘wet markets’ — the conditions found in Wuhan are not due to ‘older customs’ or Badiou’s thinly veiled racist pandering about ‘dangerous dirtiness’ and ‘rudimentary hygiene’ in China.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the conditions there are due to emerging contradictions between the tremendous productivity of labor in China — which is resulting in urbanization and development on a historic scale — and the introduction into the country of the most modern forms of ‘market regulation’ that are designed to keep the costs of labor in China low in order to attract the biggest capitalist firms of the global North. Economics, to spell it out, is not about ‘markets’, which is where commodities are exchanged after they have been produced from exploited labor, but the mode of production. Market regulations are merely ‘rules’ for distributing the surplus-value added to the commodity by the labor-power of workers into the hands of the biggest transnational capitalists, and their implementation is determined by their effects on the rate of profit. Making the cause of the crisis seem like a contingent local event, as Badiou does, fails to explain why the commodification of nature for profit, no matter how it is regulated, always serves the law of value which puts profit before need. While advances in science, medicine, technology, and agriculture make it possible for everyone in the world to have access to safe (and nutritious) food, the commodification of food production means that profit always comes before safety. As Badiou echoes the imperialists’ displacement of their own failed response to the pandemic on the ‘ill-kept’ food markets in Wuhan, even workers in the United States, the most advanced of capitalist markets, are also subject to deplorable working conditions while food-borne illnesses are on the rise and are said to ‘cost’ the US economy \$3 billion dollars a year.<sup>5</sup> The connection

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4 ‘Not Just China, New York Too Has Over 80 “Wet Markets” That Sell & Slaughter Live Animals’, *india.com*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.india.com/news/world/not-just-china-new-york-too-has-over-80-wet-markets-that-sell-slaughter-live-animals-3989281>; ‘Origin of 2009 H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu): Questions and Answers’, *CDC.gov*, 25 November 2009, [https://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/information\\_h1n1\\_virus\\_qa.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/information_h1n1_virus_qa.htm).

5 Laura Reiley, ‘2018 saw the most multistate outbreaks of foodborne illness in

between ending the pandemic and ending capitalism that Badiou says is too 'opaque' because it violates his 'simple Cartesian ideas' is not a more or better regulated capitalism, but the replacement of the anarchy of capitalist market regulation with socialist economic planning according to need not profit. And the only class that is materially positioned so as to advance such a global revolutionary project is the working class, led by workers who have become 'socialist theorists', in other words, the workers 'of every country' who 'bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality' because 'theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement'.<sup>6</sup>

Because Badiou has established his leftist credentials by defending the 'idea of communism' (which is just an idealist desire for abstract equality in his discourse), he has to disguise his support of capitalism under the guise of 'new communism'. This he does by, on the one hand, cynically mouthing that President Macron 'is correct [...] the state is compelled [...] to undertake practices that are [...] more authoritarian [...] while remaining within the established social order', while, on the other, claiming that in order to effectively 'manage the situation', French imperialism is 'integrating the interest of the class whose authorised representative it is with more general interests'.<sup>7</sup>

How to explain Badiou's faith in the bourgeois state as guarantor of the 'general interest' given that it stands in direct contradiction to his own 'event-al' theory that the state cannot reconcile 'two into one' because it must subsume 'the truth of the collective' under some 'identitarian assignation' of a 'racial or sexual [...] or [...] social status' nomination?<sup>8</sup> It is because Badiou's 'new communist hypothesis', in which all radical

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more than a decade, CDC says', *The Washington Post*, 25 April 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/04/25/cdc-releases-its-annual-report-card-foodborne-illness-did-not-have-passing-grade>.

6 V. I. Lenin, 'What Is To Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement', *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, 45 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 5, pp. 347–529 (p. 384); Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The Manifesto of the Communist Party', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 6, pp. 477–519 (p. 497).

7 'On the Epidemic', n. pag.

8 Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. by Jason Barker (New York: Verso Books, 2005), pp. 81, 93–94.

politics are ‘event-al’, is really a way to make bourgeois apologetics seem ‘radical’. How else to understand his dismissing the revolutionary communist idea of turning the pandemic into the ‘founding event of an unprecedented revolution’ as merely the ‘apocalyptic’ rhetoric of ‘revolutionaries’ while still embracing bourgeois hegemony as the precondition for making an ‘epidemic interlude’ necessary for thinking about ‘new figures of politics, on the project of new political sites, and on the trans-national progress of a third stage of communism’?<sup>9</sup>

It might be laughable that the philosopher of the event, in encountering what is by his own parameters an ‘event’, declares it uneventful. But, it is a manifestation of the wider left’s abandonment of revolutionary theory and praxis, the consequences of which have been devastating for the struggle to abolish the class relations that prioritize profit over social need.

Badiou’s empty radicality is the event-al replication of market logic at the level of ideas. It argues for the spontaneous ‘desire’ for the ‘new’ that emerges out of an ‘interlude’ from the normal made possible by the well-regulated background provided by the violent dictatorship of capital. What makes the ‘interlude’ as well as the ‘normal’ possible of course is the ongoing exploitation of labor, the disruption of which is precisely what is causing the crisis of capitalism Badiou dismisses as the ‘apocalyptic’ rhetoric of ‘revolutionaries’.

## Mourning in America, with Judith Butler

The COVID-19 pandemic has, among other things, provided American intellectuals with a new political opportunity to affirm the order of things while criticizing it. This has, of course, always been their main strategy: to criticize capitalism’s culture from the left and thus acquire ethical and political authority for leaving its economic order intact.

The pandemic has provided a unique cultural target: it has become almost routine for the left friends of capital to say that communities of color have suffered more from the pandemic and the suffering shows that there is a need for a new direction in social justice. The communities of color in the left narrative suffer more, in other words, because race is

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9 ‘On the Epidemic’, n. pag.

the determining factor in who is affected by the pandemic and who gets care. But communities of color do not exist in an economic vacuum: they are affected more not because of race (although that is not irrelevant), but they suffer more because of lack of resources — from loss of work, to absence of health care, to lack of information about the pandemic, to..., to simply the lack of inexpensive disposable masks. The communities of color suffer not because of race but because of class.

To make my argument more inclusive, more explaining of the American social relations now, I will read the article by Judith Butler, 'Why Donald Trump will never admit defeat'.<sup>10</sup> Here Butler updates her anti-transformative social theory, the basic elements of which she articulated in her essay, 'Merely Cultural'.<sup>11</sup> In that essay she argued that class is not the primary source of social relations but race is. Class, she argued, is 'lived' (i.e., it is basically a subjective fact) through 'race'.<sup>12</sup> In her article in *The Guardian* she reiterates this idea by writing that COVID-19 is not a class issue that affects all workers who must work to live and lack workplace protections and health care, but a racial one as 'communities of color are most adversely affected' because 'white supremacy has now resumed an open place in US politics'.<sup>13</sup>

In this familiar narrative, which appears under different signatures across the spectrum of corporate media outlets, the class politics of the pandemic are racialized and the recognition that white working class people die in the same way and for the same reasons as workers of color — because the 'war against the virus' is a class war and, as in every country, the needs of the owning class take precedence over the needs of the working class — is taken to be a denial of the difference of black lives that underwrites an hysterically racist fear of whites 'being "replaced" by black and brown communities, by Jews'.<sup>14</sup> Butler's 'solution' to the social inequality she has racialized is to psychologize it and in a pop-Freudian language she says that whites must learn to properly 'mourn'

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10 Judith Butler, 'Why Donald Trump will never admit defeat', *The Guardian*, 20 January 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/20/donald-trump-election-defeat-covid-19-deaths>.

11 Judith Butler, 'Merely Cultural', *New Left Review*, 1/227, January-February (1998), pp. 33–44.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

13 'Donald Trump', n. pag.

14 *Ibid.*, n. pag.

the 'historical reality' of the death of white supremacy and give up the 'political fantasy' it represents. What is considered 'social justice' here is ending discrimination in the market, in other words, the equalization of the conditions of exploitation, which is how the left friends of capital serve to maintain the basic class oppression of workers by owners whose property allows them to extract profit from their unpaid surplus labor.

But clearly Butler's own argument perpetuates the 'fantasy' of 'white supremacy' by psychologizing it as a racist refusal to face the 'reality' of the death of whiteness. Neither 'blackness' nor 'whiteness' are ontological conditions (essences), but are produced historically under specific material relations through which they come to appear as 'natural' and essential justifications for unequal access to the conditions of life. Unequal access to social wealth between whites and blacks in the US, for example, as evidenced in the unemployment rates and family income of these groups, among other things, are due not to 'extra-economic' factors such as 'white supremacy', but due to the economics of production for exchange in which technological innovation cheapens the value of labor by putting workers in competition with each other over fewer jobs at less pay. The cause of the disparities of outcomes in the market is not explained by race but by the rule of profit over production which insures that not everyone will have access to the means to live.

The difference between the employed and unemployed workers that is historically produced by the mechanism of exploitation is used by pro-capitalist intellectuals to explain (away) the appropriation of social wealth by the owners from its primary producers, the multicultural working class, by deflecting attention onto how the wealth is unequally distributed among the workers as 'cultural capita' (Bourdieu), or, more commonly, lifestyle differences. Although racial difference is physically apparent, it is not natural but social and no longer has 'any distinctive social validity' when 'all are instruments of labour, more or less expensive to use'.<sup>15</sup> Cheap labor has always been racially stigmatized under the property relations of capitalism irrespective of the skin color of the workers so as to keep wages at subsistence levels and block the political solidarity of the workers against the owners. This is why revolutionary

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15 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The Manifesto of the Communist Party', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 6, pp. 477–519 (491).

Marxists have always argued that 'labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded'.<sup>16</sup>

Because the social labor of workers is appropriated by property owners in the form of profit and workers are forced to compete with each other for access to wages to live, not all people can be provided with jobs, despite the democratic promise of equality and opportunity for all. The capitalist system therefore requires an explanation for why, despite the inability of everyone to receive the same opportunity, the wages-system is still the best possible system. Such an apologetic 'explanation' must be grounded in an 'extra-economic' reason for it to justify the class structure of the wages-system, and, in effect, it must blame the workers for the failures of capitalism. Race is one such non-explanatory 'explanation' for why, in a society where there is no objective reason everyone's needs for health care, housing, physical and cultural sustenance, etc., cannot be met, there is yet mass hunger, mental and physical suffering, and millions go houseless, and which instead gives the nonsensical cause that some are more deserving than others because they are made of better 'stuff'. This 'stuff' is the ontological 'matter' whose origin is made 'extra-economic' in bourgeois theory — whether the essentialized 'blackness' of the afro-pessimists (Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson), or, the mysterious 'objects' of the object-oriented ontologists (Graham Harman, Timothy Morton), or, the microbial 'actants' of the transspeciesists (Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway) — to argue for the incoherence of social explanation.

The extra-economic 'matter' that is supposed to immunize capitalism from critique by explaining away its inequalities as natural differences has changed in form historically: from being the 'spiritual' matter of a 'heart' devoted to a god against which some hearts have hardened in the early modern period, to the 'biological' matter that shaped one's physical being as more 'evolved' for survival in the late nineteenth century, to the 'cultural' matter of 'values' as manifest in communal practices that constitute pride in one's identity, as in Butler's (post)modern writings, to the 'vital' matter of today's (post)humanists in which identity is made out to be an effect of a desire immanent to the transspecies commons

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16 Karl Marx, 'The Working Day', Chapt. 10, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983), 35, pp. 239–43 (p. 305).

that one is expected to 'affirm' or be branded as a 'speciesist' enemy of all those historically 'excluded' by Western anthropocentrism. The 'extra-economic' matter that is meant to elude reduction to the calculus of value by the logic of capital has at every turn reflected that logic in how it divides the social into conflicting moral orders and cultural identities and occulted the basic economic arrangements (class) that explain the material history of humans in relation to nature.

'White supremacy' is not a shared 'fantasy' that makes white people 'feel' different from non-white people, as Butler's outdated culturalist framing makes it out to be, but the ideology of a ruling class that can no longer afford to justify its rule as being universally good and so must resort to the violence and authoritarian ideology historically most associated with fascism. The fascist coup attempt of January 6 was after all bankrolled by capitalists and composed of the petty bourgeoisie — 'business owners' and those with 'white-collar jobs [...] CEOs, shop owners, doctors, lawyers, IT specialists, and accountants' — who oppose the 'lockdowns', masks, and social distancing as 'communism' because such measures limit their ability to live off the exploitation of wage workers.<sup>17</sup> Fascism of course is not an aberration of capitalism but one of its most brutal extensions that emerges when the regular periodic crises of capitalism threatens to turn the working people against capitalism, as evidenced by the renewed interest in socialism and Marxism since the 2007–08 crash and even more so during the COVID-19 crisis in the growing strike wave around the world. As Butler's essay shows, however, it is much easier and popular in bourgeois media to pin the fascist tail on the ignorant white (m)asses who have not read enough cultural theory (Freud) and therefore do not know how to properly manage their emotions and need to be trained to do so, rather than critique the roots of fascism in the logic of capital. It alleviates the need to address the social relations which allow the exploitation of the labor of the other and which naturalize it by naturalizing the other's difference.

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17 Rebecca Ballhaus, Alexandra Berzon, and Shalini Ramachandran, 'Jan 6 Rally Funded by Top Trump Donor, Helped by Alex Jones, Organizers Say', *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/jan-6-rally-funded-by-top-trump-donor-helped-by-alex-jones-organizers-say-11612012063>; Robert A. Pape and Keven Ruby, 'The Capitol Rioters Aren't Like Other Extremists', *The Atlantic*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/02/the-capitol-rioters-arent-like-other-extremists/617895>.

Recently when Butler has turned to address Marx's theory of class, which it has become impossible to ignore any longer, she makes Marx speak Freud to justify her performative theory of 'class' as 'lived' (race).<sup>18</sup> She hollows out Marx's theory of class as the exploitative social relation inscribed in the production process by turning the proletariat, which is the 'special and essential product of modern industry' that explains the source of profit and the end of capitalism, into the 'precariat', which is a merely descriptive sociological category for 'the collective for whom work is elusive, temporary, and debt has become unpayable'.<sup>19</sup> Here again cultural differences among workers that have arisen in the market are used to obscure the social being of the proletariat as the propertyless class which must sell its labor for wages to live so as to increase the value of capital. Despite what Butler says in defense of critical theory against Latour et. al. in this essay she reconfirms their anti-critique-al social theory with her own descriptive cultural theory which remains on the surface of the social as 'lived' while refusing to inquire 'into the hidden abode of production', what Latour dismisses as 'the deep dark below'.<sup>20</sup> One of the consequences of her rejection of Marx's critique-al theory, which explains the experience of oppression in relation to its roots in the daily exploitation of working people, is a surface-al theory of capitalism. For example, in 'Capitalism Has its Limits' she argues that because 'the virus demonstrates that the global human community is equally precarious', it shows that the 'limits' of capitalism are 'spatial' (i.e., demographically discriminatory).<sup>21</sup> There is in short no core problem with capitalism as the root cause of inequality in production relations (class), only local problems in its unequal distribution of outcomes in the market (race). The unequal distribution of 'life chances on the market' (Weber) do not of course have an extra-economic source in ideology ('white supremacy'), but an economic cause in the logic of exploitation — the law of profit — of class relations. The

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18 Judith Butler, 'The Inorganic Body in the Early Marx', *Radical Philosophy*, 2.06, Winter (2019), pp. 3–17.

19 'Manifesto', p. 494; Butler, 'Early Marx', p. 10.

20 Karl Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983), 35, p. 186; Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30, Winter (2004), pp. 225–48 (p. 229).

21 Judith Butler, 'Capitalism Has its Limits', *Verso Blog*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits>.

end of 'whiteness' that results from the equal immiseration of whites alongside non-whites in the US will not end racial injustice, which is a means to regulate the workforce among competing nation-states to insure the global supremacy of capital over labor. The cultural form of social inequality has and will change, so long as its function in the totality to maintain class rule remains. Racial justice therefore demands international socialist revolution, as Marx was the first to argue.

At the core of Butler's recourse to universal precarity and mourning lessons is the ontologizing of 'loss' that is produced in the relations of wage labor. The only way to adequately respond to the present crises, she suggests, is to accept the loss of 'white privilege' as part of the wider 'precarity' of 'all'. There are those who 'accept' loss and appropriately 'mourn' and those who do not and are subsequently filled with resentment. Loss, however, is not ontological nor psychological but historical and material. People lose family and friends unnecessarily due to COVID-19; they lose the ability to pay their mortgages and feed their families; they are deemed 'essential' workers and then denied the basic safety equipment to protect themselves as they save the lives of others, etc. — not because loss is the condition of life, as in religious discourses, but because life is conditioned by material relations (property). The people who lose are working people; what they lose is an outcome of their relation to the means of production. Under the relations of wage labor, the lives of those who do not own the means of production are put at the material mercy of those who do. Butler's gospel of mourning preaches acceptance of economic precarity to the white working class as the precondition for social justice among the already equally immiserated.

Butler appeals to the ontology of loss because that which 'appears in the worker as an *activity of alienation, of estrangement*, appears in the non-worker as a *state of alienation, of estrangement*'.<sup>22</sup> To make material loss the state of loss is of course to affirm the negation of the lives of working people, which is another way of saying that to insist that the most radical way to address race is to treat it experientially and affectively is to perpetuate the conditions of racism lying in the division of workers

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22 Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 3, pp. 229–346 (p. 282).

into productive (currently employed) and unproductive (contingently unemployed) on a global scale.

Butler's story in *The Guardian* about the racial fragility of the white precariat is part of the manufacturing of the new affective condition of capital in crisis. Her writing absorbs class relations into moods and feelings, and reproduces class divisions in its mood(y) cultural politics. It divides the social not according to a material logic (class, exploitation, profit, etc.), but according to an immaterial desire (affect, values, race,...), between those who attend to and 'affirm' their moods (i.e., accept 'loss' by reaffirming faith in bourgeois democracy's commitment to diversity) and those who refuse to do so, 'negate' them and become 'destructive'. In the new moody cultural divisions, mourning, joy, and reconciliation represent the progressive moods, while anger is a right-wing mood. There is no place for class critique in Butler's woke capitalism except as a form of white *ressentiment* (Nietzsche). No basis, in other words, for grasping class as an objective social category that explains the universal interest of the global working class in ending their common exploitation by capital.

Butler explains Trump's fascism in terms of Freud (libidinal economy) not Marx (political economy) because Freud psychologizes class contradictions and turns them into the human condition beyond history, beyond transformation and preaches abnegation and mourning, which sells at a time of crisis when millions are forced into poverty, hunger, and death so as to profit the few.

But affect has in Butler's writings become even more spiritual — less 'bodily' and more 'ambient' — it is 'in the air' she says — the 'atmospheric' condition of 'spirit' that mediates the social. She has moved from *Bodies That Matter* (1995) — the matter of language and signification — to bodies that feel — the matter of sensation and impression — now that the old discourse theory has lost its cachet with the fading of neoliberalism. 'Matter' of course represents the 'outside' of the social as 'beyond' comprehension and transformation, the bare reality with which we must learn to live. What it denies is the social as historically produced through labor from which is manufactured the 'limits' of the 'real' in ideology.

The discursive play of what 'matters' that traces itself through Butler's writings are badges of class distinction that are taken as signs that she

is a 'subtle' and, above all, a 'non-dogmatic' thinker which proves that she can be reliably called upon to provide the up-to-date ideological cover for what capital requires. Under the sclerotic measures proposed by the Biden administration to monetize solutions to the health and economic crisis through deficit financing while 'raising' the minimum wage to poverty levels under the most diverse cabinet the US has ever seen, this means representing such measures as socially progressive acts of 'healing' the nation through the public performance of cultural reconciliation while failing to do what is minimally required to prevent the loss of millions of lives, by, for example, instituting a federally guaranteed jobs program and federal lockdowns at full pay while raising taxes on those grown obscenely wealthy from their immiseration of the workers.

Butler's writings on the pandemic therefore display her class allegiance by refusing to penetrate to the root of the issues in class — the economics of the pandemic and the fascist policy of 'herd immunity', actually 'social murder', favored by capital as a whole to force the workers back to work — and instead set the requisite tone of mourning and melancholia in the lite tabloid style of the popular genre of 'woke' storytelling.<sup>23</sup>

What explains Butler and Badiou's reversals is of course nothing new — they are what Lenin called the 'hysterical impulses' of the 'petty bourgeois driven to frenzy by the horrors of capitalism'.<sup>24</sup> The true communist response to the opportunistic vacillations of these left thinkers can be found in Lenin's slogan against the first world war:

**'TURN THE WAR [AGAINST THE VIRUS] INTO A CIVIL WAR!'**

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23 Kamran Abbasi, 'Covid-19: Social murder, they wrote—elected, unaccountable, and unrepentant', *BMJ*, 372:n314, 4 February 2021, <https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n314>.

24 V. I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing" Communism – An Infantile Disorder', *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, 45 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), 31, pp. 17–118 (p. 32).