

# Viral Capital and the Limits of Freedom

KELLY SHARRON

**Abstract** This article considers the strained conditions of freedom under capitalism that are further inflected by COVID-19. Taking seriously the calls to reopen the economy as necessary steps to survival, the larger relationships of production must be called into question. Just as capitalism can ensure basic needs for some, it has always ensured the death of many. When spaces of production become both necessary for the working class and rampant with risk, Marx's "double bind of freedom," as well as the cyclical crises and contradictions of capital warrant heightened attention and contextualization.

**Keywords** capitalism, Marxism, pandemic, public health, COVID-19

COVID-19 has laid bare some of the central tenets of capitalism, namely, the focus on the health of value, business, and markets over the physical health and well-being of people. COVID-19 has been spurred and spread through global capital—a pandemic of an increasingly connected world, a world connected by its markets. Nevertheless, we are also told that the market can be the cure, or that many more will be affected by market slowdown than the virus itself, making clear the ever-perilous relationship to capitalism—it is necessary for us to live but causes us to be unwell. Moreover, this dangerous relationship to capital is unevenly distributed. For some, pandemics and crises represent an opportunity to consolidate wealth and power (Klein 2020). For others, this has exacerbated precariousness: high-risk groups and people with HIV have been forced to halt daily life; trans\* people and others have been forced to delay medical attention and surgeries deemed “inessential”; and incarcerated people remain structurally at risk while producing hand sanitizer to be shipped out. The distribution of risk and care illustrates the disparities essential to capitalism, demonstrating how discriminatory viruses can be.

Karl Marx (1977) describes this paradox through freedom: workers are free to sell their labor, and labor is their only means of exchange. With what Saidiya

Hartman (1997) calls “dark humor,” Marx (1977: 272–73) describes freedom under capitalism as “free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realisation of his labour-power.” Capitalism requires a working class for whom labor is their only commodity, and who must continually “freely” exchange that commodity to subsist. This article explores that relationship through the market and government responses to COVID-19: that one must work to continue to live, even as work endangers one’s life. While this relationship between labor and capital is persistent and omnipresent, our current political moment structured by COVID-19 allows for a moment of pause at the nexus of marginalized populations, care, and capitalism to think about how to organize life in resistance to the deadly and endangering relationship to wage labor.

The central class struggle of capitalism, and its underlying tensions, are exacerbated only through external pressures. COVID-19 has made clear that Marx’s analysis of capital is still very much relevant to contemporary conditions: living labor is necessary to value, capitalism’s most essential workforce is underpaid, and compounding growth is a fiction. Capitalism is punctured by its crises, which offer a moment to either reveal its impossibility or concentrate wealth and power. The particularities of COVID-19 are its expressions of two foundational contradictions of capitalism, the tyranny of exchange value over use value and the expression of free will in laboring.

David Harvey (2014) explains the contradiction of use vs. exchange values through the example of housing. Houses provide a use value, but they also to a greater extent have exchange value. In other words, houses are not just a means for living, but they also become a means for savings and profiteering. The larger the gap between use and exchange values, the more likely an economic crisis. The “use” value of home ownership has shifted away from shelter and toward savings and profit. In 2008 speculative capital caused a bubble in the housing market, which then reorganized exchange values, causing many to be unable to afford shelter. Harvey asks pivotal questions post-2008: Why do we organize basic needs through a capitalist system of exchange? Why prioritize exchange values over use values?

Similarly, there have been calls to rethink the organization of use and exchange amid COVID-19 and shifting and shaky markets. While we have not lost the ability to make or produce exchange values and basic needs, speculative capital has shaken financial markets built off exchange value. Andrew Liu (2020) explores this contradiction:

Such dynamics expose a basic absurdity at the heart of our global society. It is not a system aimed at satisfying our desires and needs, at providing humans with greater amounts of physical utility. It is instead governed by impersonal pressures to turn goods into value, to constantly make, sell, buy, and consume commodities in an endless spiral. Unlike an earthquake or famine, the coronavirus outbreak has not destroyed our capacity to make *things*; indeed, it has resulted in perhaps the greatest ever accumulation of two of the most useful substances known to humanity, oil and steel. But several weeks of quarantining have decimated their value, tanking currencies, stock market indexes, and personal savings. Instead of enriching us and relieving us of natural wants, this glut of goods is only making us poorer. Given this irrational social system of organizing wealth and value, it is no wonder that so many societies have found it impossible to contain the coronavirus by asking citizens to limit commercial activity.

The virus has not short-circuited our ability to live, produce, meet society's needs, and create use value. Instead it has altered the system of exchange values, which relies on the premise of persistent and compounding growth and constant circuits of consumption and production. The calls to limit commercial activity have spurred a domino effect of lost jobs, unemployment, and closing businesses. We can't simply pause the economy, because capitalism has been structured so that we all depend on its ongoing circulation.

These underlying problems of capital are shouldered by the working class, particularly in times of hardship. In the last few months, the responsibility to keep small businesses and restaurants afloat has demanded that individuals shop online and order takeout. The particularly crafty among us can make masks and personal protective equipment for frontline workers. And, to receive any benefits from the tattered social safety net left by neoliberalism and buoyed from stimulus packages, we must be persistent as systems are overrun with requests. As the market looks more and more grim, personal responsibility, not mutual aid, has filled the gulf left by capitalism.

Neoliberalism has conflated the interests of the government and capitalism so that they are indistinguishable in moments of hardship. Elected leaders acted swiftly based on stock market collapse, and they measure their success based on how markets respond to political action, day by day, hour by hour. Moreover, there are ongoing questions about the divisions between state and capital as allegations of insider trading and a stimulus "slush fund" fill our headlines. Austerity and privatized, for-profit health care are structured on the premise that worthiness among people is based on their market share and productivity. These systems are being stretched to their logical end, making clear what the original stakes have always been, and what kinds of lives are considered

worthy, productive, and valuable. The promises of success are individualized, while the comforts of neoliberalism are privatized. The responsibility to uphold societal norms, protection, and mutual aid depend on the strength of nongovernmental networks.

COVID-19 is a particularly capitalist crisis. It was brought to many nations through markets, trade, and a globalized traveling business class. While the flu of 1918 was a wartime pandemic, coronavirus is a capitalist one. Each nation's response has often depended on how quickly and thoroughly countries can halt production and provide relief and basic needs to its citizens and workers. But the United States is "not built for this," as President Trump continues to remind us. We are not built to shutter or halt capital because the lives of the workers depend on low-wage labor that produces, at best, barely enough to live. This pandemic has exposed that most people cannot go a month, or even two weeks, without a paycheck. While this is in some ways devastating, and surprising, given the ongoing concentration and production of wealth, it is also what Marx saw as foundational to capitalism. For wage labor to function, the laboring class must depend on work every day; it is the limit to freedom under capitalism. Many workers are forced to confront this in new ways as their low-paying jobs in the gig economy, at retailers, or in the caring economy force them to reckon with a level of exposure that is increasingly risky. Yet, the options are thus: to be exposed in order to work, or to go without pay. For many, losing a paycheck is worse than the risk of contracting the virus. Marx's double freedom takes a dark turn: one is free to risk their lives at work, or to risk their access to housing and food by not working. To be deemed a nonessential worker is to lose pay, and to be deemed essential is to be at risk.

As news of COVID-19 spread, and before widescale public health measures, including social distancing and shelter-in-place orders, the population was immediately split into those at high risk (immunocompromised, older, and those with existing respiratory illnesses) and those who were potential carriers but not at risk for long-term effects. As knowledge and cases rise hand in hand, these distinctions have become more porous, yet the organizing principle stands. Some bodies are deemed "higher risk" than others and told to act accordingly, while others are told to act with the public's best health interest in mind. For many (particularly in the United States), HIV/AIDS is the most recent cultural and historical touchstone to consider the language and response of a "pandemic." Yet the current pandemic is the first time many people outside targeted populations are being told that their bodies may contain a contagion that can be unknowingly and easily transmitted and can cause others severe harm. Much has also been made about what or who the "Rock Hudson" of COVID-19 is (with answers ranging from the National Basketball Association to Tom Hanks), meaning the

person/case that spurs public action and recognition of the severity of the pandemic. These comparisons to HIV illustrate two things: first, there is a limit to care and response in the face of harm to unknown others; and second, COVID-19, much like HIV, exploits preexisting socioeconomic conditions. Under capitalism, economic security is necessary for health.

COVID-19 has differentiated not only the at-risk among the population but also essential from nonessential kinds of medical care. This affects a number of people that require medical care for noncoronavirus conditions, including mental health and trans-related health care. It becomes evident not only what kinds of care are essential, but also who. Again the pandemic exposes already existing conditions and societal values. Not only are there newfound barriers to health care but also disparities in conditions that exacerbate the virus—diabetes, smoking, heart conditions; violence at home; and low-paying jobs that require ongoing labor—that disproportionately affect marginalized people. Thus it is no coincidence that the death rates are unevenly distributed by race and class.

The pandemic, and other instances of disaster, create a moment to foster a critical relationship to the structures of power that limit and demarcate our responses. The cure for the virus does not stand apart from our needs in other times: economic, racial, and environmental justice. The terms of freedom have been manipulated by capital. As Malcolm Harris (2020) writes, “If employees in essential industries had agreed to their job contracts freely, because they were fair deals, then except those with unusual loyalty or love for their work, and barring large raises, all of them would have quit. Their working conditions just got much, much worse, to the point of mortal danger, and yet there haven’t been many walkouts or strikes yet.” Some workers must work to the point of exposure to a deadly and unknown virus, while the capitalist class structurally withholds systems of care and mutual aid. The working class must exist after the virus, and for that to happen, people must depend on wage labor. Our response must question the underlying assumptions about the terms on which we enter the labor market: free to work, and free of anything but the capacity to work. These conditions will always only make us sick.

---

**Kelly Sharron** is lecturer in the Department of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at California State University, Long Beach. Sharron completed her PhD in gender and women’s studies at the University of Arizona in 2019. Her current project, “The Caring State: The Politics of Contradiction in Ferguson, Missouri,” considers the multiple state tactics at play in police brutality, including the extension of a feminist ethic of care in producing violent effects.

## References

- Harris, Malcolm. 2020. "Take Care." *Commune*, April 1. [communemag.com/take-care/](http://communemag.com/take-care/).
- Hartman, Saidiya. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, David. 2014. *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Klein, Naomi. 2020. "Coronavirus Capitalism—And How to Beat It." *Intercept*, March 16. [theintercept.com/2020/03/16/coronavirus-capitalism/](http://theintercept.com/2020/03/16/coronavirus-capitalism/).
- Liu, Andrew. 2020. "Chinese Virus, World Market." *n+1*, March 20. [nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/chinese-virus-world-market/](http://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/chinese-virus-world-market/).
- Marx, Karl. 1977. *Capital*. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage.