

# Covid-19 and the End of the Modern Working Body

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In recent years, ecofeminist movements in Latin America have been exploring in depth the idea of *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory).

They have reflected on how mining companies “masculinize” the territories to which they lay waste, devaluing the multiple ways ecological relationships are sustained.

They have exposed the historical links between the colonization of lands and the colonization of female bodies.

Not least, they have insisted that struggles to defend territory must go hand in hand with struggles to recover the body – not only the bodies of women, but the bodies of Indigenous, black and peasant peoples as well as the bodies of non-humans, including stones and spirits.

Now, as the Covid-19 crisis expands across the world, it may be time to apply this idea more widely.

In a recent book,<sup>1</sup> James C. Scott, the great anarchist scholar, contributes some useful background from an unexpected direction.

Examining the rise of the earliest states of the Middle East between 8,500 and 3,600 years ago, Scott notes that supporting political hierarchies of soldiers, aristocrats, priests, artisans and clerks required the production of surpluses of millets and cereals.

How else to get these surpluses except by concentrating “as much arable land and as many people to work it as possible within the smallest radius”<sup>2</sup> within state boundaries?

That encouraged the growth of territories where a whole range of living things were pulled together and “domesticated,” including food plants, livestock, fodder species and nomadic humans. Attracted to the biological feast that such permanent concentrations supplied were gate-crashers like oats (an agricultural weed that later became a crop) and animal hangers-on like rats, sparrows, dogs and pigs, trailed in turn by an army of parasites including fleas, mosquitoes, lice, weevils and viruses.

It was all about territory. To oversimplify a bit, on one side were state-builders’ semi-enclosed territories of relatively unfree labour and tilled soil. On the other were the borderless territories of “barbarians” who tended to prefer an independent, mobile life more closely keyed to the rhythms of migratory animals and ripening wild plants.

But it was also all about the human body. For example, “women in grain villages had characteristic bent-under toes and deformed knees that came from long hours kneeling and rocking back and forth grinding grain.”<sup>3</sup>

Living in one of the new agrarian states, Scott concludes, “involved a lot more drudgery than hunting and gathering and was not at all good for your health.”<sup>4</sup> Grain crops didn’t provide the same nutrients as wild plants. People got shorter. Even their animals were sicker and smaller.

Worst of all, microbes got fabulous opportunities to jump and multiply among the different species crowded together under the rule of the new states. Humans, animals and crops could all be devastated by unprecedented epidemics.

Scott’s research helps remind us that today’s vast new “territory” of transnational capitalism, too, is partly constituted by particular kinds of human bodies.

One of those bodies is the body of the wage worker. The worker who is supposed to show up on time every day. The worker who gets only so many sick days each month. The worker who can be relied on to come in and make money for the boss, year in and year out.

Business is used to assuming that this body’s health is predictable. Just as it has taken for granted that the steady unpaid work performed by the world’s “women, colonies and nature”<sup>5</sup> will always be there to exploit – including even the unpaid work of the prehistoric organisms that created the world’s coal, oil and gas.

One message of the Covid-19 crisis is that this predictability may no longer be there.

All of a sudden, it turns out that the worker’s body behaves predictably only when it is embedded in a particular kind of global territory. A territory not yet devastated by agribusinesses’ monocultures and vast feedlots of factory-fed animals where pandemics emerge. A territory where many potentially dangerous viruses “stay home,” to quote a recent interview with an Indonesian woman shaman.

The problem for business is that this territory is pretty much gone.<sup>6</sup> Microorganisms are jumping species, leaping continents, and mutating rapidly to disrupt the lives of all sorts of fresh bodies at random. Capital’s free ride on a worldwide territory where viruses “stay home” is almost over, just as the free ride it has enjoyed on the back of cheap fossil fuels is almost over.<sup>7</sup>

A sort of “memory” of the old territory may well have lived on inside the labourer’s body for a while, as forests were levelled and monocultures expanded. But, as Covid-19 has abruptly made clear, the working body that made modern business rich has been living on borrowed time. As the pandemics keep coming, capital’s calculations will be upset again and again – and in a far more immediate way than they are being upset by, say, climate change. Labour may be becoming almost as “precarious” for capitalists as it is for workers themselves.

To what extent are capitalists gearing up for this historical challenge? Are they preparing for the kind of upheaval in elite-worker relations that followed, say, the Black Death of the middle ages? Are they looking around for a new, different kind of labouring body that will work for them?

The answers aren't yet clear.

Of course, the first reflex of some capitalists has been simply to deny that any fundamental changes are taking place at all.

Thus Donald Trump advises workers to drink bleach in the hope that will be enough to get them back to work. Electric car tycoon Elon Musk demands that the state end lockdowns immediately so that labourers can clock into his factory just like in the old days. Plantation and mining companies force their 'essential workers' to stay on the job despite the health risks. Wall Street meanwhile "still sees the world through pre-pandemic-tinted lenses,"<sup>8</sup> assuming that the US Federal Reserve Bank can resolve any future *cuervo-territorio* crises just by printing more money to hand out to big corporations.

But behind the scenes, more far-sighted capitalists can be assumed to be pondering other ways of dealing with the crisis of the modern working body.

Which prompts the question: what about popular movements? How should they prepare themselves for the coming changes?

That is surely one of the questions of the moment.<sup>9</sup>

- 1 James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017, <https://book4you.org/book/3401043/600996>.
- 2 Ibid., p. 124.
- 3 Ibid., p. 83.
- 4 Ibid., p. 18.
- 5 Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*, London and New York: Zed Books 2014, <https://book4you.org/book/2711883/1c4255>.
- 6 John Bellamy Foster and Intan Suwandi, "COVID-19 and Catastrophe Capitalism: Commodity Chains and Ecological-Epidemiological-Economic Crises," *Monthly Review*, 1 June 2020, <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/06/01/covid-19-and-catastrophe-capitalism/>.
- 7 Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017, <https://book4you.org/book/3502583/b22c20>.
- 8 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/29/stock-market-rally-coronavirus-pandemic/>,
- 9 Thanks to Ivonne Yanez, Soumitra Ghosh, Nick Hildyard, Hendro Sangkoyo, Joanna Cabello and Jutta Kill for helpful suggestions.