

Corona Crisis in the Mekong: From Extractive Imperialism to a New Bloom

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INTRODUCTION

As of January 2021, over 88 million covid-19 cases had been recorded worldwide leading to 1.9 million deaths. Countries in the Mekong subregion have managed the health aspect of the crisis far better than much wealthier counterparts such as the United States and United Kingdom. The US has recorded 66,660 cases per million compared to 6, 15, 23, and 141 cases per million in Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand respectively. Having weathered the first wave, Myanmar became a regional outlier with 128,772 recorded cases (2358/million) and 2,799 deaths after a mutated strain (D614) first detected in March that can multiply 20 percent faster and is 10 times more infectious began spreading locally.¹ This may lead to a second wave sweeping through the subregion after new infections were discovered in Laos and Thailand in December. Despite relative success containing the virus, the political, economic, and social implications of measures to constrain its spread have been devastating for many and borne disproportionately by the poor. This will have long-lasting effects on the livelihoods and wellbeing of people across the region.

This paper provides an introduction to the initial impacts of the corona crisis on some of the most vulnerable populations across the Mekong at the end of its first year. Part one highlights uneven fortunes of different social class fractions, from low paid workers in export-oriented industries to those participating in informal economies, immigrant workers and displaced persons. These fortunes are contrasted with those of salaried workers, big firms, and investors in financial markets.

Part two situates the corona crisis and its impacts in the Mekong within broader global and regional trends related to expansion of capitalist social relations of production, capitalism's internal and external dynamics,

and inherent crisis tendencies. It connects these to processes of class formation generated through the ongoing capitalist transformation of the subregion, noting those most affected by the corona crisis are those societies have disempowered as social relations and state forms have been reorganised towards expanded production of commodities for export. It argues this has been an essentially extractive process whereby natural and social wealth has been commodified, expropriated, and exploited, in pursuit of monetary wealth mostly accumulated elsewhere. This process is inherently imperialist, as social relations in dominated countries across the region have been restructured to meet the needs of dominant countries and class fractions, leaving subaltern class fractions especially vulnerable to shocks and disruption.

Part three argues the corona crisis has once again exposed the limitations of capitalist social relations of production and presents an opportunity to renew struggles towards more rational and democratic forms of social organisation. To this end, it highlights diverse social groups across the subregion, from peasants and factory workers to progressive youth, resisting concentration of power and wealth and the demands they have made on their respective states. The paper concludes by arguing long-lasting change and genuine social transformation can only be achieved by struggles from below led by such diverse subaltern class fractions, aiming toward progressive transformation of diverse state forms so that we may rationally re-order our societies to better serve the interests of people and planet. This task is to be pursued through political education and movement building.

01

**The Corona
Crisis in the
Mekong**

As of January 2021, Cambodia had reported few cases and no deaths, leading to speculation about the reliability of the government's testing and reporting. While the infection rate remained low, international borders were closed in March and schools shut nationwide. 400 factories suspended operations, leaving around 150,000 workers unemployed.³ The Tourism Ministry reported in September around \$US 5 billion in tourism revenue had been lost.⁴ Karaoke parlours, beer gardens, and entertainment venues were closed in November. The garment sector employs the most workers after agriculture and suffered a significant decrease in global demand during the pandemic. Overall salaries decreased by 30 percent from January to April, with those in the entertainment and sex industries hit the hardest at 84 percent.⁵ The government pushed through emergency powers to deal with the pandemic, criticised as "a pretext to enact emergency measures that stifle dissent, side-line political opposition, and consolidate power".⁶ At least 30 people, including twelve linked to the dissolved opposition party, were arrested for spreading "fake news" about the virus.⁷ In March, Prime Minister Hun Sen was given even greater powers to deal with the virus and between \$US 800 million and \$US 2 billion was allocated to address economic impacts. This was supposed to help small farmers and workers but may have ended up subsidising big business instead, funds may have ended up in the pockets of big rice millers, agribusinesses, micro finance institutions, and banks.⁸ According to the Cambodian Labour Federation, only 15,000 of 150,000 known suspended garment workers had been receiving the monthly stipend of \$40 promised to them in May.⁹

Despite an almost non-existent health system, Laos had only reported 41 cases and no deaths. International travel was banned from 30 March and a national stay at home order issued. The country declared victory over the virus on 11 June with just 19 reported covid-19 cases. Yet unemployment surged from 2 percent to 25 percent, foreign exchange reserves were sapped, national revenue decreased, and loans ballooned. The country risks being unable to meet external debt obligations and faces the possibility for a sovereign debt crisis in the near future.¹⁰ The massive Mohan-Boten cross-border special economic zone under construction on the Laos-China border was ordered to close for 14 days in December after two cases were discovered among Chinese migrants transiting home from Myanmar via Laos.¹¹

Myanmar's case load remained low until August. A task force was established by the elected National League for Democracy government to oversee the crisis response in mid-March 2020 but was soon undercut by a separate military-led task force established by the armed forces. This was empowered to investigate covid-19 cases, conduct contact tracing, and clamp down on the press and social media and did not answer to Myanmar's de facto elected leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. The United Nations Special Rapporteur claimed the military used special powers as cover to conduct war crimes against the country's long-suffering minorities.¹² With one of the weakest public healthcare systems in the world, more than 45,000 people, including covid-19 patients, were housed in school buildings, monasteries, government offices, and tower blocks, cared for by thousands of volunteers who generally received no compensation and were provided with little protective equipment.¹³ Extreme poverty at the

national level tripled under lockdowns, from 16 percent in January rising to 62 percent by the end of the year, posing huge risks for food insecurity and malnutrition.¹⁴ International lenders such as the International Monetary Fund and the Japan International Cooperation Agency committed up to US\$ 1.25 billion loans to help mitigate the economic damage, and the government has distributed 20,000kyat (approx. \$15) cash handouts to households.¹⁵

Thailand had the first wave under control in May following a super-spreader event at a military-owned boxing gym in March. Few local transmissions were recorded until early December 2020 when returnees from an entertainment venue in Myanmar skipped quarantine and a cluster of cases were discovered among migrant workers in an industrial port south of Bangkok. Several further clusters emerged at the end of December linked to illegal entertainment venues that had not been closed by authorities. Borders were closed on 22 March and a state of emergency declared four days later that remains in effect. This allowed authorities to restrict domestic travel, ban gatherings, and censor the media, forcing a brief hiatus on youth-led pro-democracy protests that had erupted nationwide in January.¹⁶ Protests resumed in July following the abduction and presumed enforced disappearance of an exiled critic of the Thai establishment in Phnom Penh. A “state of extreme emergency” was declared on 15 October following an extraordinary day of protests directed at the military and monarchy culminated in thousands marching on Government House, encountering a royal motorcade en route. The order was ignored by protestors and rescinded a week later. The economic impact on Thailand will be among the worst in Asia, with the most globally integrated economy in the subregion forecast to contract by at least 8.3 percent in 2020.¹⁷ Highly dependent

on exports and tourism, up to 14 million people - a quarter of all working age Thais - could be made unemployed as a result of drought and the pandemic, and an additional 9.5 million made poor.¹⁸ This includes 2.5 million working in tourism, 1.5 million in the industrial sector, and 4.4 million in other service sectors.¹⁹ A US\$ 12.7 billion stimulus package was approved in March after the stock market tanked, followed by a US\$ 58 billion package (10 percent of gross domestic product) approved in April. This endowed Thailand’s central bank with US\$ 12.1 billion to stabilize financial markets by purchasing corporate bonds, and enabled the government to provide some support for low-income workers and distribute handouts to middle classes to boost domestic consumption. Around US\$ 33 billion in public partnerships projects are planned for 2020 to 2027 to stimulate the economy.²⁰

Vietnam had recorded 1,509 cases and 35 deaths as of January 2021. A state of emergency and ban on all flights to and from China was declared on 1 February 2020. A national lockdown began on 1 April, lifted gradually toward the end of the month. Borders were cautiously and selectively reopened in May and July. Having effectively contained the first wave, a second wave spread from the central city of Danang in July. People were evacuated and a local lockdown implemented. Less draconian measures were employed to tackle this wave, emphasising economic recovery and manageable transmission rates. The resilience of the socialist republic is reflected in the fact it is the only Southeast Asian economy forecast to grow in 2020 and managed to send large donations of medical supplies including masks, test kits, and personal protective equipment worldwide from early April to much richer nations including the United States.²¹ The pandemic has nonetheless negatively affected 31 million workers, with 900,000 out of work and nearly 18

million on reduced incomes. The services sector has been most affected, particularly hospitality and tourism, followed by industrial and agricultural sectors respectively.²² A US\$ 1.1 billion fiscal stimulus drawn not from international loans but Vietnam's contingency budget was announced on 3 March, including tax breaks and infrastructure investments. Around US\$ 7.6 billion tax revenues and land rent owed to the state was deferred in early April for five months and plans were announced for a US\$ 2.6 billion support package for those affected by the pandemic.²³

Uneven Impacts

Despite relative success containing the virus, health measures imposed to constrain its spread have strained and magnified structural dynamics, inequities, and cracks existing prior to the pandemic. The socio-economic fallout for the Mekong subregion is proving more devastating than the virus itself, with its impact on different social classes varying dramatically.

Export-Oriented Industries

The virus has disrupted the approach to economic development encouraged by development partners, financial institutions, and preferred by ruling classes across the region: export-led and reliant on deep integration into global commodity chains. Lockdowns and subsequent halts to "business as usual" in mature/developed markets severely impacted industries reliant on global demand with livelihoods and security of low-paid workers worst affected. As Tran notes, the pandemic has revealed flaws in the

argument in favour of national economic strategies based on low-wage labour and outsourced manufacturing.²⁴ Taking the garment sector as an example. The Asia-Pacific region is the largest global hub for garment production, employing around 65 million workers, approximately 40 million of them in Southeast Asia.²⁵ Workers and supplier firms have long been squeezed by subordinate positionally in hierarchical, exploitative global commodity chains. A 2019 report by Oxfam found that even before the pandemic, 99 percent of Vietnamese garment workers were paid below a living wage and as low as 2.4 cents per piece.²⁶ In contrast, brands headquartered in advanced economies and tax havens performed very well in recent years. The CEO of Mango said 2019 was an "extraordinarily satisfactory year," with the highest sales figures in the company's history and the largest increase in profit in a single financial year.²⁷ Zara reported a net profit of US\$ 1.3 billion over just three months at the end of 2019, up 14 percent on the previous year.²⁸ As firms continued to dole out dividends to shareholders, the pandemic had a devastating effect on workers. Brands cancelled orders, refused to pay for them, and demanded up to 50 percent discounts on existing contracts, forcing locally based supplier firms to cover costs already incurred for wages and raw materials, effectively robbing suppliers in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Cambodia of US\$ 16 billion.²⁹ As factories were closed, the workers who toiled to produce the clothes and footwear that brands profited from were abruptly cast aside, suffering job losses and reduced incomes, often forced to wait for salaries to be paid, or laid off without proper compensation. Many of the factories that remained open used the crisis as an excuse for union busting.

Job Losses

More than one million of 4.3 million workers in Vietnam's garment industry lost their jobs while remaining employees were forced to accept 50 percent fewer hours and a 40 percent reduction in income.³⁰ Women make up approximately 80 percent of the industry, most of whom young internal migrants from rural areas.³¹ More than 130,000 Cambodian garment workers lost their jobs by June, with unionists among the first dismissed.³² Many of Myanmar's 1.1 million garment workers, around 90 percent of whom are women, were laid off while factory owners fled without paying salaries for work already completed.³³ By July, around 300,000 had lost their jobs, with many more at risk as a second wave sweeps the country.³⁴ In Thailand, companies used the pandemic as an excuse to close down businesses, fire workers and union leaders without compensation or taking steps required by law.³⁵ An estimated 750,000 workers could be laid off in the automotive sector due to the pandemic, exceeding the number during the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis.³⁶ Farmers, fishers, and traders have also suffered considerable disruption. Close to 1 million jobs are at risk in Myanmar's fishery industry as major buyers in the United States and China cancelled orders and \$US 750 million export earnings vanished. Producers were unable to sell produce locally because seafood had been processed for export, which locals could not afford to pay for.³⁷ Over US\$ 581 million worth of cattle were officially exported from Myanmar to China through the Muse border from financial year 2017-18, but restrictions on livestock imports left 10,000 cattle stranded, burdening traders who became responsible for mounting wages, feedstuff, and healthcare costs. Monetary value of official exports plunged to \$US 40.5 million in financial year 2019-20 and US\$ 13 million in financial year 2020-2021 as of 27 November.³⁸

Labour Rights Abuses

Workers in factories that remained open faced wage cuts, unsafe working conditions, and union busting. Management has dismissed unionised workers while retaining non-unionised workers, and unionists have been arrested, charged, and imprisoned, leading to accusations by unions against employers of collusion with authorities to purge activist workers.³⁹ Workers rely on overtime to make ends meet because of extremely low wages but most factories can no longer provide this option. Others have had wages withheld by factory managers.⁴⁰ Arrest warrants were issued for eight union leaders in Myanmar in February 2021 who took to the streets to lead resistance to a military coup.

Informal workers

Approximately 78 percent of the total working population in Southeast Asia remain in the informal economy, among the hardest hit and least supported.⁴¹ This includes the self-employed, those reliant on irregular daily wages, taxi and *tuk tuk* drivers, subcontractors, waste recyclers, street vendors, domestic workers, and sex workers.⁴² They enjoy neither regular salaries nor social protections and often fall through the cracks of modest government support mechanisms, making them especially vulnerable to shocks. Many are women and migrants who face additional discrimination and hurdles. Even in Thailand, the most developed economy in the subregion, 54 percent of the workforce remained in informal employment in 2017. 70 percent of the Thai workforce has seen falling incomes during the pandemic, a shockwave that is pulsing through sectors well beyond exports and tourism.⁴³ In Vietnam, 57.2 percent of workers outside the agricultural sector are found in the informal

economy, amounting to approximately 18 million people.⁴⁴ Another 18 million can be found toiling in Myanmar's informal sector, approximately 83 percent of the country's workforce.⁴⁵

As the formal sector continues to contract through layoffs and a slow recovery, the informal economy will balloon, exerting further downward pressure on labour income, working conditions, and households across the region. Lockdowns in Cambodia meant 80,000 nightlife industry workers, including bartenders, cleaners, waitresses, and hostesses, went months without a stable income.⁴⁶ The 2019-20 drought meant farmers in Laos were unable to produce enough rice to cover even household consumption and lack the option of off-farm employment due to the crisis. Short of money for food, some have been forced to forage to survive.⁴⁷ In Vietnam, parents have been forced to send their children to home provinces to be raised by their parents because it is too costly to raise them themselves. A similar plight is faced in Karen State Myanmar, where most of the young travel to Thailand for work, resulting in broken family structures and communities where only the old and children are left to care for one another.⁴⁸

Migrant Workers

Migrant workers are a sub-group of informalised labour, comprising a significant portion of the region's workforce and among the worst affected of all the diverse fractions of the Mekong's working class. Thailand is a major destination country and Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia are major origin countries. Partial lockdown of Bangkok and orders to close 18 border points in March 23 resulted in a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers.⁴⁹ Many of those who remained had little allowance made for the pandemic, stuck in cramped

housing with limited access to healthcare.⁵⁰ Others had wages and identity documents withheld, often afraid to approach authorities for assistance due to punitive immigration policies in host states.⁵¹ Loss of income for tens of thousands left many destitute.⁵² Many were routinely paid below the minimum wage and indebted even before the pandemic. A pre-covid survey found 70 percent of Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand suffered symptoms of depression due to economic pressure and poor housing linked to insufficient income.⁵³ Those returning home often faced discrimination as local communities feared they may spread the virus. In some areas, such as Shan State and Wa region in Myanmar, returnees were compelled to spend 14 days quarantine in ramshackle huts as authorities improvised with the little resources available to them.⁵⁴

Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons

As hundreds of thousands of migrants returned home, others remained trapped by lockdowns. Immigration detention centres became hotspots for transmission, where refugees and irregular migrants are routinely detained in overcrowded and squalid conditions, sometimes indefinitely.⁵⁵ 350,000 internally displaced persons throughout Myanmar's ethnic states and 90,000 refugees along Thailand's border with Myanmar faced even greater restrictions on mobility and access to livelihoods, leaving them solely dependent on humanitarian assistance, contributing to unhealthy coping mechanisms including drugs, alcohol, and in some cases suicide, as well as increased incidence of domestic violence.⁵⁶ Displaced persons on the Myanmar side of the Thai border rely on cross-border trade for basic necessities including rice, salt, and medicine. With borders closed, over 500 children

went hungry.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, on Myanmar's border with China, not far from 172 internally displaced person camps housing 106,000 people sheltering from civil war, farmers dumped spoiled crops in the Shweli River due to export restrictions.⁵⁸

Insufficient Support

Loss of income for the most vulnerable workers across the region forced many to find ways to become even more resilient in the absence of social safety nets. Official support has been uneven, insufficient, and constrained by lack of resources available to states.

Workers in Myanmar received 40 percent of their salary, rather than 60 percent as promised, arriving late or not at all for those not included in the social welfare system.⁵⁹ In Cambodia, government support has been "neither equal nor fair," because assistance was not provided to all, mostly available only to bigger companies with thousands of workers.⁶⁰ Cash handouts to informal workers in Thailand were massively oversubscribed, chaotic, and linked to suicides among economically distressed people.⁶¹

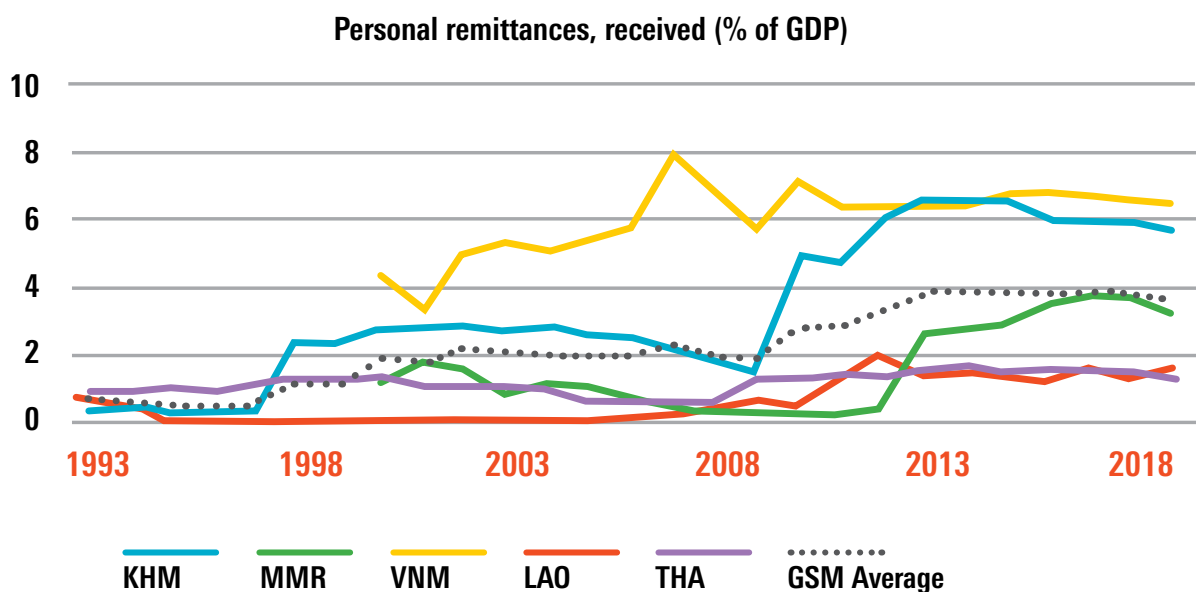
Many workers were forced to return to the land to survive, putting additional pressure on already stretched rural communities who face obstacles imposed on their ability to access society's resources in pursuit of economic growth. Remittances are a crucial lifeline for the poor, comprising a significant portion of gross domestic product in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. More than 200,000 migrant workers returned to Laos from factories in Thailand, disrupting remittance flow that could push as many as 214,000 people into poverty.⁶² Despite low wages, Cambodian workers in Thailand managed to send an

average of \$1,225 home to their families per year pre-pandemic, funds that were “crucial in maintaining or improving living conditions”.⁶³ Yet farmers across the region are now supporting family members upon whom they may have previously depended for financial support. As remittances dried up, farmers were starved of capital needed to re-start production, exacerbated by a drop in demand for cash-crops such as rubber and sugarcane. Thai workers were able to return to the land during the Asian Financial Crisis, but uneven industrialisation, drought, and declining commodity prices wrought this safety net from them, leaving 14 million on the brink of survival.⁶⁴

Commodification of land and expansion of massive infrastructure investments including hydropower dams have left fisherfolk in Cambodia, Thailand, and the southern Vietnam Mekong Delta region struggling with record low water levels and freshwater shortages.⁶⁵ Many farmers face food insecurity and rising food prices. A survey of 104 small and medium scale farmers in Cambodia found 59.8 percent did not even have enough food to eat.⁶⁶ This plight is exacerbated for those who

have previously suffered land grabbing, who now lack even this meagre means of subsistence. As one Cambodian farmer put it “the disease we suffer during this pandemic period is not covid-19 but landlessness”.⁶⁷

The corona crisis has compounded existing financial distress of the poor. Cambodia had 2.6 million micro loan borrowers owing a total of US\$ 10 billion before the pandemic. The average micro loan size is \$3,804, the highest in the world and more than double the average annual household income of \$1,376 in 2017.⁶⁸ 72.8 percent of 104 Cambodian small and medium scale farmers were already in debt pre-pandemic and 29.2 percent were forced to take out loans from micro-finance institutions and commercial banks as a result of it. Around 50 percent reported difficulties repaying loans, 60 percent reported cases of land grabbing.⁶⁹ Distressed farmers and garment workers have been forced to sell the few assets they still have - chickens, pigs, and cows - to avoid having their land taken away. As indigenous Khmer farming communities sheltered from the virus, they suffered land grabbing for rubber plantations.⁷⁰



Hunger, Hardship, and Distress for Some, Opulence and Profit for Others

As millions face hunger, hardship, and destitution, others saw out the lockdown in comfort. United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres said the pandemic: “has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built.”⁷¹ These are most apparent along class-based lines. Classes are relational and multifaceted social and cultural formations rooted in exploitative relations of production, formed, interacting, and reproducing through relations with other classes across global, national, regional, and local scales. Class formation revolves around the capital-labour relation, which influences the relative material power of different groups in society. The working class as a whole is further segmented into fractions of labour differentiated by the type of work, form of employment, gender, ethnicity, and a variety of other social factors. Class fractions extend beyond just the production of commodities on the farm or in the factory to the whole world of work, including often unpaid labour of domestic work necessary for social and societal reproduction, such as cleaning homes, nurturing children, nourishing bodies, and caring for the sick.⁷² The people our societies have empowered, such as fractions of capital and privileged fractions of labour, were able to weather the crisis with minimal disruption. Some even luxuriated and profited from it. While those our societies have disempowered, predominantly fractions of labour, have borne the brunt.

In the agribusiness sector for instance, as small and medium sized farmers struggled with food insecurity and land grabbing, earnings of a subsidiary of Thailand’s largest company and one of the world’s largest conglomerates jumped 87 percent: the highest in the company’s history. Profits grew 36% to \$US 593 million in the first

nine months of 2020.⁷³ Institutions lending to distressed farmers also did very well. A major Cambodian micro-finance institution posted net profits exceeding \$US 21 million in the first half of 2020, up from \$US 17.6 million. It’s parent company agreed to sell it’s 70 percent share in Cambodia’s biggest micro lender in 2019 for \$US 603 million, booking a large profit. Another made \$US 25 million profit in 2016, \$US 27 million in 2017, and \$US22 million in 2018. This reportedly allowed it to pay \$US 5 million in dividends to shareholders, many of which are development agencies supposed to help poor Cambodians.⁷⁴ As an academic was quoted as saying:

The main beneficiaries of microcredit in Cambodia are quite clear. They are the chief executive officers and senior managers of leading microfinance institutions and their core shareholders and wealthy foreign investors, who ... have been making out like bandits.⁷⁵

As Lao migrant workers returned home, remittances dried up and farmers forged for food, the stocks of a Malaysian holding company with investments in the country hit record highs, up 230 percent from June 2019 after it’s “cash cow” Laos dam came online. The project is expected to yield investors net profit of \$US 60-70 million per year for 25 years, or dividends of around 16 percent.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the \$US 27 per month allowance paid to thousands of destitute Laotians living in relocation centres displaced by the collapse of another dam in 2019 dried up.⁷⁷

A whole range of essential but low paid frontline workers, healthcare professionals, those who could not work from home, or rely on extra income to pay the bills, faced occupational health and safety risks and discrimination. Those better paid, able to work from home, or with alternative sources of income such as rental income or savings, remained ensconced in comfort. For instance, dozens of brave young nursing students volunteered to travel to the front line to care for suspected virus patients among returnees on the Thailand - Myanmar border.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, their fellow nurses and doctors in Yangon and Mandalay were shunned and treated like “dirty monsters” by private landlords, with some forced to stay in monasteries while they battled the virus.⁷⁹

Many sheltering at home ordered takeout food via mobile applications delivered by informal employees via online platforms. As demand grew, foreign companies extracted increasing revenues generated by local businesses and workers. Restaurants using a popular food delivery app in Thailand were charged 30 percent commission, with drivers also paying 15-25 percent of their income to the Singapore based company. Despite laying off employees during the pandemic, the firm’s valuation rose 27 percent: from US\$ 11 billion in 2018 to \$US 14.9 billion in 2020, attracting new institutional investors from across the globe grasping for a piece of the pie.⁸⁰ Up in the stratosphere of the wealthy elite, some luxuriated in opulence. During the pandemic millionaires in Bangkok could order Wagyu beef, seafood, and dim sum delivered and served by white-gloved butlers from luxury hotels and Michelin Guide restaurants, real estate valued at \$US 1-5 million continued to sell well, and high-end vehicle manufacturers such as Ferrari, Rolls-Royce, and Lamborghini launched top-end models.⁸¹

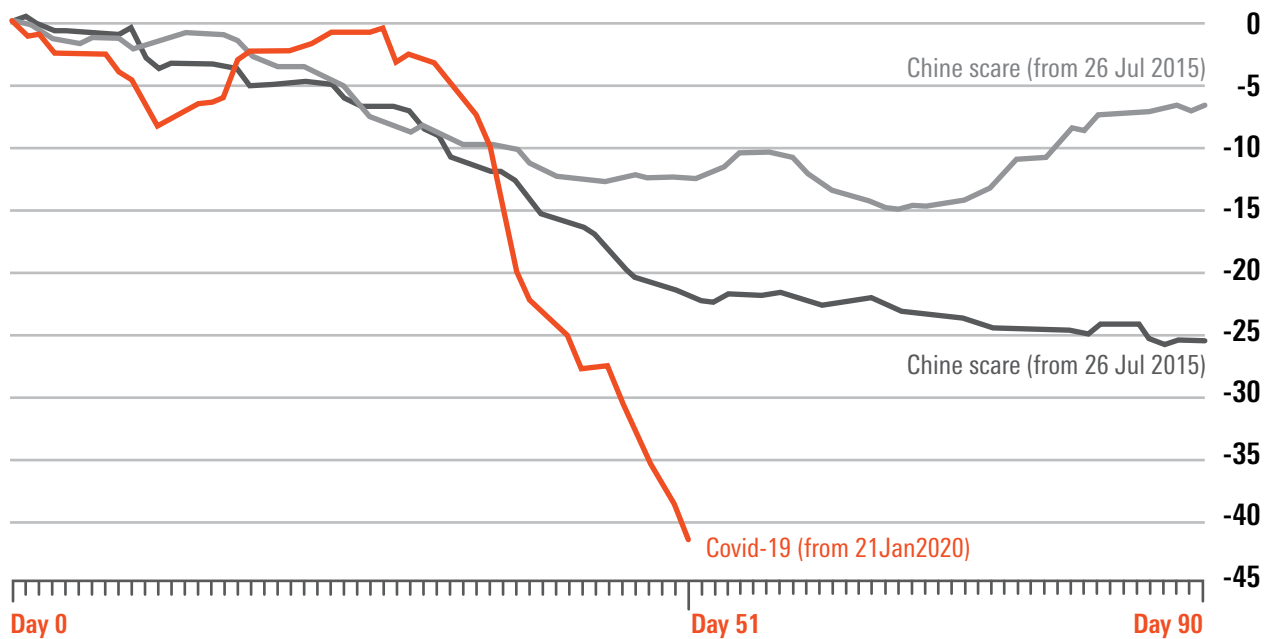
The pandemic punctured global financial

markets, leading to a massive withdrawal of \$US 42 billion from so-called emerging markets, double the rate of capital flight during the Global Financial Crisis.⁸² The shock was compounded by a crash in commodity prices, upon which many developing states depend. Central banks around the world such as Thailand’s responded by shovelling money into financial markets at the cost of budget sector deficits and public debt, improving access to credit for large firms and allowing overvalued financial assets to continue appreciating. This will contribute to even greater extremes of capital concentration and centralisation, as cashed up conglomerates and the super-wealthy pick up distressed assets recycled on the market at discount prices from struggling small and medium sized enterprises.⁸³

Volatility in financial markets catapulted total billionaire wealth to \$US 10.2 trillion in July 2020, up around 500 percent since 2008 and 19.1 percent since 2018. Between April and July 2020 combined billionaire wealth ballooned 27.5 percent following central bank interventions. An employee of Swiss investment bank UBS credited this to the super-rich “having the stomach” to buy shares as markets were crashing; as if billionaires were the ones to be commended for bravery and risk taking during a pandemic.⁸⁴

Capitulation on emerging markets

Accumulated non-residential flow to/from EM debt and equities from start date, \$bn



02

Capitalist Transformation and Class Formation

The previous section provided an overview of the impacts of the corona crisis on some of the most vulnerable groups in the Mekong, contrasted with the fortunes of the more powerful. The current section offers a critical analysis of the crisis, situating it in broader structural trends related to the expansion of capitalist social relations.

It is important to recognise the people who have struggled the most during the current crisis are those that have been disempowered by their societies in the course of the subregion's capitalist transformation. Encouraged by multilateral financial institutions including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, nature has been commodified and investments directed toward infrastructure, economic corridors, and industrial zones. People have been driven from the land and means of subsistence and into low-paid wage-labour in labour intensive industries including natural resource extraction, contract farming, urban manufacturing, and myriad informal jobs to keep society functioning: construction, domestic labour, street hawking, day labour, and sex work.

Uneven geographical development compelled people to migrate to towns, cities, and special economic zones, occasionally across international borders, subjecting them to further discrimination and labour segmentation by local governance regimes. Informal employment is often the unintended outcome for many migrant workers unable to find work in the manufacturing sector, which often first attracts them to cities. Those who promoted this approach claimed moving peasant smallholders from farms to factories would be accompanied by industrial upgrading and gradual transition from informal to formal labour, stable employment and incomes adequate to satisfy workers' livelihood and consumption needs. Instead, transitions have stalled leaving the subregion's economies trapped in "patterns of jobless growth, 'saturated' industrial labour markets, the informalisation of industrial production and

the growth of surplus populations lacking access to formal waged employment".⁸⁵

Those who have shown resilience and even opportunism during the crisis are those able to snaffle the surplus workers created during this transformation. They managed to do so by being well placed to capitalise on the process, able to assert social and economic power over the means of violence and societal control, and the production, circulation, and consumption of commodities. Many of these actors are located outside the subregion, but those inside it include militaries and militias; bureaucrats, state officials, well connected elites; land owners, industrialists, traders and merchants; brokers, compradors, and emergent middle classes. They managed to assert claims over living and non-living labour: people, populations, and political posts; land, natural resources, and new technologies. Their privileged positions enabled them to accumulate wealth and prestige as capital was set into motion, especially during the boom years, in turn allowing them to shape processes of state formation and transformation: writing laws and building and bending institutions to protect their power and interests. As a result, a variety of diverse ruling class coalitions are ensconced in the upper echelons of societies across the region. While distinctive to each society, they are predominantly comprised of rich old men and draw on networks of business elites and tycoons, old aristocracies and lingering patronage structures, security forces, and emergent networks of politicians, using wealth to consolidate power and resist struggles for progressive reform.

This is the process of class formation that accompanies the inauguration and expansion of capitalism, a process through which our societies allow some to become rich and powerful while others are marginalised and impoverished. Capital is wealth that grows through the process of circulation over time. It is not a thing but a dynamic living relation, a social relationship between individuals

and groups that provides a foundation for more complex social structures. Capital gets transformed, from ecological, to money, to fictitious/finance capital, and codified into laws and other structural features of society: formal and informal institutions, the state, its organs, and other political, social, and economic arrangements which we are all collectively subjected to. Class is not a static and pre-determined social formation, rather an experience and a process revolving around the capital-labour relation. As capital is set in motion, society's natural wealth is commodified and people are pushed into wage-labour. Social relations are reorganised toward production of commodities to exchange for money: industrialisation of agriculture for food crops, for example, or expansion of labour intensive manufacturing of consumer goods. Commodities produced in the Mekong are exchanged in markets to be consumed locally, nationally, and globally, making it a process with distinctive local effects but increasingly international and global dimensions. Local workers and states manage to capture some of the surplus workers create through wages, rents, and taxes, but most has been captured by commodity traders and transnational corporations. This is an essentially extractive process, whereby accumulation of monetary wealth in faraway places depends on the generation of socio-economic and environmental consequences at the point of extraction here in the Mekong, including enclosure, dispossession, poverty, environmental despoilation, labour exploitation, and ill-health.⁸⁶

Classes are created during this process, with aggregate capital influencing the formation of social groups as a means towards the realisation of profit through the labour process. Contract farmers, agricultural labourers, seamstresses, entrepreneurs and traders, have all been sent to work to earn an income to pay for food to eat, a roof over their head, raise their children, and care for their families. Although they play very different roles in the production of what

society needs and wants, diverse fractions of labour share certain experiences and develop common interests through this process and their collective subjugation to the daily drudgery of work. Farmers and factory workers may share the experience of being pushed off land they once lived on and cultivated for sustenance; agricultural labourers and seamstresses may share the experience of being exposed to toxic chemicals, pesticides, or dyes. All breathe air that has been polluted in the process of capitalist transformation, perhaps compelled to wash in water befouled by it. Many will share the experience of being mistreated by their bosses; of having pay deducted for unexpected reasons, of having employment terminated at short notice. Many young women will share the experience of trying to avoid unwanted advances; those with different skin tones, of racial prejudice and discrimination. Migrant workers engaged in all kinds of work will share the experience of being extorted by officials, of being fearful when they encounter checkpoints, or when they must entrust important documents to employers or officials. All fractions of labour are made vulnerable to economic shocks and rising prices for housing and food, and share interests in better social protections and access to basic services like education for their children and decent healthcare when they get sick. Many will know the feeling of being ignored by the rich and powerful, their voices deemed unimportant to those running their countries, and of being intimidated and suppressed when they mobilise to struggle for better lives.

Each these formative experiences are deeply personal but inescapably social, arising in the course of interaction between fractions of labour and fractions of capital. The latter comprising, for instance, those able to assert property claims over the land on which crops are grown and the homes workers live in, technology involved in the seeds planted, machinery used to harvest and process produce, designs of t-shirts

that young women toil to make. Private property claims allow fractions of capital to appropriate most of the value created by workers in the process of production and circulation, through rent paid to landlords, protection money paid to officials; incomes captured by managers and factory owners allowing them to live comfortable lives, along with the claims of others based in the region and beyond on the final sale price of commodities: such as transportation fees, dividends, and taxes. Under capitalism, this fluid, dialectical, interactive process is all directed toward one thing: making profit. It is a process animated by struggles between various class fractions over the who gets to claim the lion's share.

Capitalism's Crisis Tendencies

Crises are an intrinsic feature of capitalism, rooted in the productive sphere of the economy. Productive labour transforms existing use values into new use values, which, under capitalism, is geared toward realising a profit when commodities are exchanged for money. Clearing land to plant crops, to be harvested and sold in markets for a price higher than the combined costs incurred producing them. This requires renting land, buying seeds and other inputs, paying workers to plant and harvest, and transporting goods. The difference between the cost to produce the commodity and the value that commodity is exchanged for is the surplus, usually appropriated by the capitalist to use as she sees fit: for personal consumption or for reinvestment in expanded reproduction. In developed economies a huge amount of social labour time has been moved into non-productive sectors of the economy, which David Graeber has provocatively called "bullshit jobs".⁸⁷ Time and energy devoted to buying and selling produce, speculating which crops

might fetch the highest prices in the future, advertising and marketing commodities, providing security for warehouses and supermarkets, form filling in bureaucracies, and protecting the interests of ruling classes. Some may be socially necessary activities but labour time expended must nonetheless be compensated for by surplus first generated elsewhere. Crises ultimately occur as a result of a falling rate of profit in productive sectors, itself caused by insufficient production of surplus value and the expansion of claims upon it by non-productive sectors of the economy. This is a long term structural trend under capitalism, consequent of the process of capital accumulation itself. Increased accumulation (more land, more machinery, more money, more knowledge) leads to increased productivity as fractions of capital produce more commodities with less labour. This in turn means fewer workers are needed in the labour process, which leads to less surplus value being produced. Crises are therefore unavoidable under capitalism, a structural feature of relations of production predicated on the private ownership of the means of production and the wage-labour relation, where workers are forced to labour for longer than they need to in order to reproduce their labour power.⁸⁸

Over the years numerous attempts have been made by people and states to promote the interests of fractions of capital and maintain profitability by squeezing out more surplus for less. These commonly involve social and spatial restructuring, leading to concentration of capital, intensified exploitation of labour and non-human nature, and outward expansion to access new production inputs such as land, labour, and natural resources at low prices. The roots of the crises of 2008/9 and 1997 for instance may be traced back to earlier capitalist crises in the Global North between 1973-1982 when fractions of capital sought to return profitability through intense restructuring at home and abroad. Crises in Japan and Thailand in the 1980s and 1990s linked to falling rates of

profit encouraged fractions of capital to pursue efforts to expand capitalist relations of production from relatively advanced capitalist centres to less developed economies across the Mekong. A relative latecomer, China has joined this push to keep its economy expanding.

Some take an even longer view of capitalist crises. Samir Amin, for instance, argued we are in the midst of the second long crisis of capitalism, beginning with the social and spatial restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s, but preceded by the first long crisis of capitalism from 1875 to 1945. Following ten centuries of incubation, capitalism enjoyed just a short century of triumphant flourishing. But by the end of the nineteenth century, falling rates of profit spurred fractions of capital into imperialist expansion, contributing to inter-imperialist rivalries, particularly among the old European powers, culminating in two immensely destructive world wars. Widespread devastation tilled the ground for a new wave of capitalist expansion led by the United States during the so-called "Golden Age" of capitalism from 1945 up to the 1973-5 recessions. In each case, capitalist expansion relied on barbaric primitive accumulation and labour exploitation, including imperialism through colonial subjugation. Existing political and economic relations in and across Southeast Asia are an effect of these processes. The crises of the 1970s were themselves directly related to the Cold War in Southeast Asia⁸⁹, one outcome of which was a new wave of capitalist expansion centred on East Asia, itself running out of steam in the late-1990s, culminating in financial crises across the region.⁹⁰ As Amin observed, fractions of capital responded to each long crisis with the same triple formula: "concentration of capital's control, deepening of uneven globalisation, and financialisation of the system's management."⁹¹ Although competition may flourish for a while as capitalism matures and takes over the

production process, over time capital becomes increasingly reliant for its survival on state intervention, accumulation by dispossession, and imperialism in each epoch of decay.

The Coronavirus as a Crisis of Capitalism

Some mistakenly view the covid-19 virus as "black swan event," an unforeseeable and exogenous cause disrupting our economies from the outside to precipitate a crisis. This is not the case.⁹² The corona crisis must instead be recognised as the latest in a long succession of crises we have been collectively forced to endure. It is distinctive in that it confronts us with a twin crisis. The immediate manifestation and proximate cause is a health crisis following the emergence of a new strain of coronavirus in southern China in 2019. The second is an economic crisis precipitated by restrictions imposed to contain its spread. This distinguishes it from recent crises catalysed by bubbles bursting in the financial sector of our economies. What they share are structural drivers related to the internal contradictions of the capitalist mode of production.

Covid-19 and other emergent diseases have been linked to land-use change associated with deforestation, illegal logging, clearing, mining, agribusiness, and infrastructure construction. This has led to the destruction of natural barriers preventing spill-overs and heightened risks of transmission. Wildlife in rural and wild areas host previously isolated and unknown viruses and bacteria. As land has been cleared for plantations, livestock farming, energy generation, and access to mineral deposits, microbes infect new hosts such as human beings and livestock. This is known as spill-over. If viruses thrive in their new hosts they may then infect others, known as transmission.⁹³ Spill-overs

and transmission have been happening for many years. The HIV virus spread in the mid twentieth century from chimpanzees and gorillas slaughtered for bushmeat. Ebola outbreaks occurring since the mid 1970s have been passed on by bats to primates and humans; swine and avian flu outbreaks occurring for decades have spread from pigs and birds to humans. Yet new viruses have been emerging with increasing frequency. This century alone we have encountered new strains of African swine fever, *Campylobacter*, *Cryptosporidium*, *Cyclospora*, Ebola, *E. coli* O157:H7, foot-and-mouth disease, hepatitis E, *Listeria*, Nipah virus, Q fever, *Salmonella*, *Vibrio*, *Yersinia*, Zika, and a variety of novel influenza A variants, including H1N1 (2009), H1N2v, H3N2v, H5N1, H5N2, H5Nx, H6N1, H7N1, H7N3, H7N7, H7N9, and H9N2.⁹⁴ These have been linked to humanity's increasingly destructive relationship with nature. Scientists presenting at the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity in September 2020 declared: *"when we destroy and degrade biodiversity, we undermine the web of life and increase the risk of disease spill-over from wildlife to people."*⁹⁵

It is worth clarifying this destructive relationship is not an expression of an essentially human frailty. Human beings sustainably coexisted with the natural world for tens of thousands of years until the so-called "Great Acceleration" coincided with capitalism's "Golden Age" of expansion after World War II, which sent us hurtling into ecological overshoot from the 1970s. Neither is it because there are too many people on the planet. Rational organisation of our societies based on existing resources and genuine human needs would help avoid dangerous imbalances between human beings and the rest of the planet. Rather, it is a symptom of the development of the forces of production under capitalism and expansion of productive output where the drive to profit overrides all else, including scientific warnings about social consequences and

natural limits. It is also important to note that neither "China" nor "the Chinese" are responsible, as racist demagogues have claimed to deflect attention from their own failings. As the epidemiologist Rob Wallace reminds us, the United States and Europe have both served as ground zeros for new influenzas such as H5N5 and H5Nx; multinationals and their proxies drove the emergence of Ebola in West Africa and Zika in Brazil.⁹⁶ These outbreaks are not driven by our "humanity" but by market forces: land use change driven by expansion of global commodity chains by multinational corporations expanding food production systems for global markets accompanied by corporate control over otherwise necessary industrialisation of agriculture. This has led to growing dominance of problematic production techniques such as genetic monocultures, over-reliance on pesticides, and antibiotics, which keep costs low but at the cost of "externalities" that include adverse effects on public health, biodiversity, and hastening the emergence of increasingly deadly and resistant diseases.⁹⁷ As Wallace concludes, the cause of covid-19 and other emergent diseases is therefore to be found "in the field of ecosystems relations that capital and other structural causes have pinned back to their own advantage". Corporate profitability is secured, while damage is externalised onto "livestock, crops, wildlife, workers, local and national governments, public health systems, and alternative agrosystems."⁹⁸

Pandemic as a Trigger

The covid-19 health crisis emerged in the midst of a long economic crisis. The core of the global capitalist system has been gripped by decades of stagnation consequent of a falling rate of profit in productive sectors.⁹⁹ The last expansion of the global economy was during a commodity price boom from 1995-2008/9. It has been trapped in a long recession since, marked by slow growth rates and falling levels of productive investment. Recovery following the 2008/9 crisis was remarkably slow, as reflected by the longest economic expansion on record from June 2009 to 2020.¹⁰⁰ The 2008 profitability crisis was not resolved because fractions of capital and government officials acting in their interests refused to permit the huge devalorisation of capital required to rehabilitate the profit rate. Instead, costs were forced onto fractions of labour. Huge financial losses were socialised through massive expansion of public debt, followed by imposition of austerity measures including deregulation, tax cuts, assaults on working conditions, cuts to public services, and hacking away at the social wage hard won over generations of class struggle.¹⁰¹ Tearing at the social fabric of industrialised societies left the populace increasingly susceptible to right wing demagoguery and its scapegoats, itself precipitating a tragic backlash in 2020 when incompetent leaders of hollowed out states proved woefully inept at handling the health crisis.

Fractions of capital also responded to the 2008/9 crisis with revitalized attempts to deepen uneven globalisation as a conjunction of financial, climate, and food crises triggered renewed interest in farmland and agribusiness investments around the world.¹⁰² Finance capital scoured “emerging” and “frontier” economies in search of higher yields. China was presented as a new engine for growth, expected to heroically drag the global economy out of the doldrums and stimulate a new wave of economic expansion geographically centred

on “Factory Asia”. Multilateral financial institutions encouraged governments to implement policy reforms to entice inward investments in infrastructure, power generation, agricultural commodities, and natural resources. More special economic zones popped up, economic corridors expanded, large hydroelectric dams and coal fired power plants were built, and the Belt and Road Initiative was launched. The global capitalist system was kept on life-support between 2009-2020 by escalating despoilation of nature and exploitation of labour. Yet despite the damage inflicted, attempts to revive it were unsuccessful: global economic indicators were deadlining even before the health crisis hit.¹⁰³ As one economist put it: “covid did not cause the crisis, the crisis caused covid.”¹⁰⁴

The Metabolic Rift

Capitalism’s systemic crisis tendencies are traceable to its internal contradictions as a mode of production. Namely those between a) use values and exchange values and b) elemental natural processes and the capital accumulation process.¹⁰⁵ These lie behind capitalism’s failure to maintain conditions of ecological and social reproduction, leading to spoliation, squandering, and robbing of the earth, workers’ bodies, and our societies. Central to Marx’s oeuvre is his critique of the capitalist value form based on the distinction between real wealth or the “natural form” of commodities, and their “value form,” or exchange value associated with capitalist production. Today we often conflate value with price, so that the value of a house or an apartment is equivalent to what someone is willing to pay for it: i.e. it’s exchange. As Foster and Clark explain, this understanding of value has roots in the rise of neoclassical economics and its rejection of the labour theory of value of classical political economy in favour of marginal utility / productivity.¹⁰⁶ According to the

value theory of the classical economist David Ricardo, the price of a good is in a proportional relationship to its value. Then, the price of a good is equal to its value and includes all its production costs. What was lost at the same time was the distinction between a commodity's exchange value and wealth, or its use value: the intrinsic social use value of a home as a place to raise a family, or the intrinsic ecological use value of a forest as a haven for biodiversity. This is the source of humanity's alienation from nature and one another. By reducing social and ecological wealth to price and treating nature as a "free gift" to capital, capitalist commodity production introduces an "alienated mediation" between humanity and the "universal metabolism of nature," or natural processes as a whole. One-dimensional pursuit under capitalism of the "value form" (exchange value) at the expense of the "natural form" (use value) results in rapacious mining of nature for exchange value. As Marx vividly wrote to his collaborator Engels: "The earth is the reservoir, from whose bowels the use-values are to be torn."¹⁰⁷

The result is the widening of a great metabolic rift between humanity and nature. This is not confined to the expropriation of land/ecology but extends also to the expropriation of the physical bases of human existence, including human bodies themselves: through disease, suffering, and shortened lives. Both human and non-human nature are deprived of conditions vital for their reproduction. As Marx argued: not fresh air and water but polluted air and water had become the mode of existence of the worker.¹⁰⁸ This has particular resonance as one of us lives in Bangkok, another Hanoi, two cities enveloped by hazardous air pollution that fills our lungs and courses through our veins. Capitalism is thus understood to be a system of production predicated on the endless accumulation of exchange value, an alienated form of wealth, even at the expense of real wealth. Labour exploitation

cannot be understood in isolation from twin processes of expropriation of nature. The two are mutually dependent and dialectically entwined: exploitation is the inner dynamic of the system, expropriation the external.¹⁰⁹ This is why Marx evocatively characterised capital as vampire: a kind of living death maintained by sucking the blood from the world.¹¹⁰

In summary, pursuit of monetary wealth under capitalist relations of production is based on the expropriation of nature and exploitation of labour, which generates systemic crisis tendencies as it undermines metabolic conditions of reproduction. Capitalism is a system of creative destruction that develops forces of production until its dynamic processes become retrogressive. This is happening today as aggregate capital pushes against the system's fundamental boundaries, including the Earth system, undermining our fragile and interconnected web of life, the very basis of human existence on this planet.¹¹¹

Extractive Imperialism in the Mekong

The outward expansion of capitalism is intrinsically imperialist. Imperialism is the stage of capitalism in which particular countries cannot be understood outside the context of their world relationships and their social relations are shaped by the world economy.¹¹² Imperialism is a form of unequal exchange that results in the drain of real wealth from dominated countries to dominant countries, contributing to the immiseration of producers. International trade and investment take on an imperialist dimension when surplus is sucked away to faraway lands, realised in the form of monetary wealth used to sustain consumption and expanded reproduction elsewhere, rather than being reinvested in

substantive development of the dominated country. The economics of imperialism works through transfer of value created by exploited workers in the south by capitalists of the south, followed by the transfer of some of that surplus value appropriated to capitalists in the North through international markets and global value chains. Value is thereby extracted by imperialist states / corporations from dominated / peripheral economies characterized by low technology, low productivity commodity production, mainly raw materials and labour-intensive manufacturing, through relations of unequal exchange. The periphery of the global system therefore plays an important role in the consolidation of relative surplus value in the core. Although China and Thailand are not core imperialist countries in the sense the United States, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom are, they may nonetheless be considered what Marini called “sub-imperialist”: dependent economies compensating for the drain of wealth to imperialist centres by developing their own exploitative relations with even more underdeveloped and peripheral economies.¹¹³

Expansion of capitalist social relations across the Mekong has enabled the drain of wealth and accumulation of monetary value in dominant countries based on processes of expropriation and exploitation and expansion of structural drivers connected to the emergence of new diseases such as covid-19. The Mekong is one of the most biologically diverse places on the planet with remarkable forest and freshwater ecosystems sustained by the Mekong river, upon which approximately 70 million people directly depend for food, water, and livelihoods.¹¹⁴ Yet capitalist transformation has had devastating effects on the region’s natural wealth. Biodiversity is in decline across all types of ecosystems, including forests, rivers, and oceans, with a rate of species loss twice the global average. According to the World Wide Fund for Nature “future projections for the

region’s natural ecosystems are potentially catastrophic.”¹¹⁵ Around 15 percent of the world’s forests are found in Southeast Asia but it has become a major global deforestation hotspot, with undisturbed forest areas in the Mekong subregion plunging from 70 percent to 20 percent in just forty years.¹¹⁶ Croplands, pastures, and plantations are expected to expand for the next 30-50 years, replacing much of the natural forestation that remains. Scientists believe there to be as many as 3,000 coronaviruses circulating among bat species and that the number of “emerging infectious disease events” will rise by more than five per year globally, while deforestation across Southeast Asia is expected to force 99 percent of the region’s bats to migrate by 2050.¹¹⁷

Extractive Capital and State Transformation

States have been persuaded to internalise the interests of capital through a range of regulatory reforms including expanded protection for private property rights, deregulation, and provision of financial incentives to encourage investment. A major challenge confronted by subaltern class fractions in the Mekong is that low tax revenues and lack of democratic accountability has allowed state power to be crafted to serve the interests of elite networks including business tycoons and state officials reliant on corruption and “grey economies” of illicit extraction to build coalitions and consolidate political power. As notes the World Wide Fund for Nature: “illegal resource exploitation has gone unchecked, sometimes at a grand scale and on occasion involving people at the heart of government or the military”.¹¹⁹ The fact the powerful are complicit makes it especially hard to resist expropriation. Several examples across the subregion can be highlighted.

Thai overseas investment has aimed at market expansion, access to low-cost labour and natural resources, and circumventing resistance to extractive and environmentally damaging industries. Approximately 50 percent of Thai outbound investment is in resources (energy, utilities, and mining), industrials, agribusiness, and food.¹²⁰ A handful of massive politically connected corporations have secured dominance over a range of sectors domestically and internationally, including those producing commodities for domestic and global markets such as livestock feed, corn, sugar, cassava, poultry, swine, and seafood. While corporate valuations of major Thai firms have risen propitiously on the back of interests in mining, cement, hydropower dams, and agribusiness, costs such as deforestation, air and water pollution, precarious employment and rural unemployment have been externalised initially domestically but increasingly also transnationally.¹²¹

Furniture manufacturers have moved to Vietnam from industrial cities near Hong Kong due to lower labour costs, heavier subsidies, bigger tax breaks, being viewed as a “frontier” market where inputs can be sourced cheaply, and a rising middle class. Around 80 per cent of the wood used in this industry is sourced in Laos and Cambodia, often from protected areas, then smuggled into Vietnam. According to the London-based Environmental Investigation Agency, officials have turned a blind eye because the furniture export trade is worth more than \$US 2.4 billion annually to Vietnam alone.¹²²

A study of land leases and concessions in Laos between 2014-17 found land deals contributed to significant deforestation. Although these created 40,000 new jobs, most (85 percent) were seasonal and only 5 percent involved fixed term contracts or monthly salaries.¹²³ Expanded land conversion overlapped with a boom in monoculture plantations for bananas, watermelons, corn, and cassava after 2012,

accompanied by reports of workers being poisoned due to overuse of pesticides.¹²⁴

A ban on new banana plantations in Laos in 2017 was followed by a land rush in northern Myanmar where an estimated 170,000 hectares of land was converted to monoculture plantations in contested ethnic areas. The prospect of profitable cross-border investments led to the development of business networks involving foreign investors, the Kachin State government, Myanmar military, and militia groups. 734,000 tons of bananas were later exported to China while locals suffered adverse environmental impacts including soil degradation, erosion, and chemical runoff negatively affecting the health of humans, livestock, and biodiversity. In southern Myanmar, rapid expansion of commercial agriculture contributed to unprecedented ecological devastation as thousands of acres of pristine forests were razed. Ostensibly this was to allow expansion of monocrop plantations of rubber, betel nut, cashew, and palm oil by private and military owned agribusiness companies for sale in domestic and international markets.¹²⁵ Between 2011 and 2016 no less than 769,000 hectares of land was reportedly granted for plantations.¹²⁶

Satellite data show an uptick in forest loss in Cambodia in 2020 including in protected land, possibly linked to “wealthy land speculators in cahoots with local authorities” with interests in timber, rubber plantations, and infrastructure development.¹²⁷ The country’s Phnom La’ang limestone mountains, described as “species factories” rich in biodiversity, including one of Cambodia’s largest bat colonies, have been blown up and devoured to meet increased demand from the construction industry. Cambodia’s Ministry of Mines and Energy is apparently reluctant to intervene because the company has “powerful connections”.¹²⁸

Human rights activists and environmental defenders, often ordinary people from indigenous or ethnic minority groups, usually bear the brunt of confronting the elite networks profiting from the destruction of our planet. As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples noted in 2018:

Intensified competition over natural resources led by private companies, at times with government complicity, has placed indigenous communities seeking to protect their traditional lands at the forefront as targets of persecution.¹²⁹

and land conversion for plantations and agriculture all contributing to gutting natural wealth so that monetary wealth can be accumulated elsewhere.¹³⁰ In 2015 alone the Greater Mekong Subregion generated approximately US\$ 89 billion in agricultural commodity exports.¹³¹ This has generated huge profits for agribusiness companies and their shareholders, yet even though economic growth has averaged 6.5 percent annually, the subregion remains relatively poor: poverty levels range from 9.8 percent in Thailand to 37.5 percent in Myanmar. Growth has been based on intensified resource extraction, especially in Myanmar, where every US\$ 1 additional gross domestic product output is fuelled by extraction of 3.4 kilograms of raw materials from nature.

There have been numerous cases of harassment, enforced disappearances, and murders of people that have exposed corporate abuses and official complicity: people like Sombath Somphone in Laos, Cambodian forest activist Chut Wutty, Karen land rights activists Saw O Moo in Myanmar, and “Billy” Rakchongcharoen in Thailand.

The rate and type of economic development has been identified as the main cause of biodiversity loss and deforestation in the Mekong, with poorly planned infrastructure including large scale-hydropower, logging,

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Alternatives to Extractive Imperialism

The corona crisis has yet again exposed the systemic failures of capitalism as a mode of production and form of social organisation. Its internal contradictions bear at least partial responsibility for the emergence of the covid-19 virus and the unfolding crisis; it's systemic tendencies will produce more. We now face the tragic prospect of governments attempting to resuscitate economies by doubling down on the exploitative and extractive practices that led us into it and once again forcing its costs onto people and the planet.

In the wake of the corona crisis, progressives must refuse to settle for reforms that merely blunt capitalism's sharpest edges but fail to address its structural shortcomings, and grasp instead the opportunity to engage in a renewed push to transcend its limitations and escape its oppressions. Revolutions in relations of production need not be led by the bourgeoisie or a bloody coup, such as when domestic elites, colonial powers, or multilateral financial institutions have forced capitalist relations onto societies from the top down. Rather, they can and must be achieved through peaceful, democratic, and emancipatory struggle from below led by diverse fractions of the working class as they exist today: for a more progressive, inclusive, and democratic future, through the democratic transformation of state forms.

Political Education

Yet while capitalism is in midst of yet another epoch of delay, a socialist alternative is not obvious. The brutalities of regimes in the USSR and the PRC and the 1989 collapse have left millions of people with material interests in the necessary transition to a more rational form of social organisation but who are nonetheless vehemently opposed to pursuing it. A new strategy is needed. To this end, there is renewed interest in the importance of political education.

O'Connell astutely reminds us a sustainable, emancipatory, and socialist future can only be won through the principle of working class self-emancipation, as there are "none so fitted to break the chains as those who bear them."¹³² Recognising that dispensing the "truth" of an exploitative system will have little purchase unless it is one arrived at by the working classes themselves, he argues we must develop "organic forms of political education that equip activists to meaningfully grasp the nature of the reality that confronts us (the nature of capitalism, of state power, the role(s) of ideology, and the place of the working class) in order to work intelligently, strategically and effectively."¹³³

The process of capital expansion and accumulation has generated a diverse assortment of class fractions across the Mekong, most with an objective interest in alternative social relations of production. Disparate societal groups have been formed as a means towards profit in the labour process as ruling classes have built coalitions to capture the surplus workers produce. The former includes groups of young female garment workers, contract farmers, employees in the tourism and hospitality industry, white collar workers in banks and offices, the precariat, and millions of informalised migrant workers. The latter include militaries, high ranking state officials, and business tycoons. To paraphrase Marx, a fractured class already exists in opposition to capital, but is not yet a class-in-itself.¹³⁴ Put simply: most of the working class know full well their interests are very different to those of capitalists. The question is whether they come to see themselves as a collective social formation comprised of a kaleidoscope of different and diverse people and groups with a shared interest in transcending capitalism and building more rational societies in which they have a genuine stake and enjoy the freedom to collectively choose how they spend their time. Through acts of solidarity, empathy, kindness, care, and struggle against processes of exploitation and expropriation, this may be cultivated over time.

Glimmers of Hope

There are numerous examples across the Mekong of subaltern social forces opposing and resisting the concentration of power and wealth and practices of exploitation and oppression before and during the corona crisis. Indigenous groups such as the Karen have established a Peace Park to preserve ethnic identity and biodiversity in the Salween river in Myanmar. Karen in Thailand engaged in mutual aid with coastal communities in the absence of state support during the lockdown, by exchanging rice produced in the north for fish caught in the south.¹³⁵ Young environmental defenders resisted attempts by the Thai state to push through a massive new special economic zone during lockdown, with one brave female activist reproaching the Prime Minister: “real development should be in line with [safeguarding] natural resources ... Your plan might generate huge profits, but it is not for locals”.¹³⁶ Thai students have challenged an authoritarian regime they feel has robbed them of a future with creative, playful, and non-violent resistance to an oppressive, conservative, parochial, and patriarchal military-backed establishment. As one explained: “Our society has destroyed our dreams and hopes. The authoritarian state has given us a sense of hopelessness. It makes dreams only possible for a certain group of people.”¹³⁷ Thai labour unions have expressed support, one stating: “The fundamental right that our labour movements have fought for and hold dear is the democratic right to question those who hold power.”¹³⁸ Myanmar students expressed trans-national solidarity by using the three finger salute used by Thai youth as they were sent to jail for anti-war protests. One explained they had come to see it as “a sign against organised or legal oppression of the people”.¹³⁹ Another declared: “The more they oppress us, the more we will resist and fight for justice, freedom and equality ... We are like ants fighting against elephants, but we will never give up.”¹⁴⁰ The All Burma Federation

Of Student Unions issued the statement: “Whenever they oppress us or arrest our comrades, we won’t step down but instead we step forward to get down the dictators from their thrones”.¹⁴¹ The Thai youth movement has even caused ripples or resistance in neighbouring Laos.¹⁴² Of course, none of these acts alone will leave ruling classes quivering in their boots. What they suggest, however, is people are resilient, hopeful, and thirsty for change.

Democratic State Transformation

Popular resistance to increasingly authoritarian capitalist states is necessary but insufficient. As Riofrancos has noted: “in a world of accelerating climate catastrophe, staggering inequality, and ethno-national violence, it’s hard to imagine a path to transformation that doesn’t pass through the state.”¹⁴³ Collectively we must reject the hastened drift towards increasingly authoritarian forms of capitalism and push for wholesale democratic reorganisation of society and the economy. This requires transcending defining features of capitalist mode of production: the private ownership of means of production, wage-labour relation, alienating dominance of the commodity form, destructive logic of capitalism’s drive to expand, and reorienting social relations toward genuinely sustainable human development and meeting human needs. In all this, the state and its institutions remain a crucial site of struggle, and change must come from below. Potential directions and agents can be found in statements and demands issued by a variety of subaltern social groups on the subregion’s states in response to the corona crisis. These range from urgent and immediate needs for personal protective equipment and food aid, to long term palliatives such as

debt cancellation, sustainable agriculture, and food sovereignty in response to food insecurity and rising prices. Some networks at a higher level of political organisation and consciousness have translated needs and demands into explicitly political claims.

For example, civil society groups in Cambodia called for the state to provide free vaccinations and healthcare services for all citizens, impose price caps on essential goods such as water, food, and electricity, direct cash handouts, financial support, and immediate debt relief to rural farmers, and suspend loan repayments to micro-finance institutions.¹⁴⁴ Over 2,000 people mobilised in Karen State Myanmar in August to demand an end to destruction of indigenous land, forests, and livelihoods following decades of oppression, fuelled by the murder of a 40 year old mother of three during the surge in Myanmar army violence during the pandemic.¹⁴⁵ Factory workers in Myanmar and Cambodia have called for income support and social protection, absence of which heightened their vulnerability during the crisis.¹⁴⁶ Worker representatives in Yangon's industrial zones called on the Myanmar government to provide salary advances to help with livelihoods and rent obligations and for strict enforcement of penalties for employers not following rules and regulations: they claimed employers had illegally reduced workforces, shut factories, and withheld salaries, with some shirking all responsibilities by fleeing the country.¹⁴⁷

Platform economy workers fall into a liminal space between formal and informal work, not usually recognised as employees by the large and highly valued multinational companies they work for. Grab has 100,000 drivers on its platform in Thailand alone, with several competitors, and working conditions were poor even before the crisis. Drivers lack protections most formal workers enjoy, such as a

regular wage, social security healthcare protections, and the right to form unions. While profits have returned to pre-pandemic levels and the start-up is now valued at more than \$US 15 billion,¹⁴⁸ workers have been forced to accept a sharp decrease in pay and incentives along with intensification of working conditions as employment surged during the pandemic. These new generation industries often involve "opaque and vexing" relations with employers as the role of boss has been replaced by an algorithm, depersonalising the capital-labour relation and making employment expectations less clear. Yet in the absence of formal representation and extremely atomised working conditions drivers have still found ways of organising and mobilising through messaging apps. One group alone has over 40,000 members, acting as a support network for drivers to plan social events, raise donations for drivers injured or killed on the job, to discuss grievances, and organise labour actions.¹⁴⁹ Drivers have mobilized and called for official recognition as employees and for longstanding grievances to be addressed.

Despite lockdowns and emergency decrees several other groups have also successfully mobilised. Garment factories in Myanmar provided production workers with enhanced personal protective equipment following dialogue between management and trade unions.¹⁵⁰ One hundred and sixty eight garment workers were reinstated after a union intervened following months of struggle following dismissals.¹⁵¹ A case supported by Clean Clothes Campaign and the Solidary Centre maintained public pressure on brands through international solidarity and social media action days leading to reinstatement of three hundred and twenty four workers dismissed in the first week of April 2020.¹⁵² Community activists in Thailand called for a halt to mining operations and the mine licensing process

while maintaining social distancing.¹⁵³ One network enjoyed an inspiring victory in September by reclaiming a mine after twenty six years of struggle against a quarry in which four activists had lost their lives. They denounced corrupt officials and announced:

We would like to declare to the mine capitalist, government officials and anyone that cooperates with this act of violence, know that your guns can only achieve revenge. It will not stop us in occupying the quarry and the stone mill and turning into a community forest area.¹⁵⁴

A network of 250 civil society organisations in Myanmar noted a “majority of the people are already hard pressed under the yoke of bad systems,” expressing concern that unchecked power during the crisis had given “more control to those who control political and economic power,” magnifying pre-existing dynamics and exacerbating existing struggles in a “country whose control was ceded only to a handful of elites”. They called for decisive action by the Myanmar government in accordance with values of dignity, human rights, justice and democracy.¹⁵⁵ Farmers in Cambodia called for protection of fundamental rights to freedom of association, assembly, and expression that were further restricted under lockdown. They petitioned the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Management to provide farmers with land, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries to provide technical support for Good Agriculture Practices, calling on the government to promote sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty in regard to ecological agriculture or Good Agriculture Practices.¹⁵⁶

Thailand’s Assembly of the Poor is a social movement representing the country’s poorest communities with a long history of activism spurred by forced dispossession for development projects decades ago. They joined a coalition of pro-democracy protestors challenging the incumbent military-backed regime in August, leading to the arrest and detention of their general secretary. He was released shortly after the group began mobilising for a prolonged demonstration in the capital.¹⁵⁷ A statement calling for equality and an end to state intimidation of dissidents was later read at a rally by a coalition of activists calling themselves “Free People:”

We want rights and freedom and human dignity because we are not slaves. We want a democracy which belongs to the people. We want equality in education and true justice in the judicial process. We want the decentralisation of power and the right of communities to manage their own resources. We want a new democracy and society¹⁵⁸

The Assembly of the Poor’s Women’s Group issued a statement in November explaining peasant women faced not just physical and domestic violence but also other forms of state-linked violence originating from production injustice, economic injustice, social injustice, and political injustice. Production injustice from the promotion of monoculture agriculture, export-oriented agriculture, contract farming, and large plantations, resulting in destruction of sustainable forms of production such as agroecology. Economic injustice from the government’s concentration of power in management of agrarian resources such as land, water, forests, and seeds, enabling poor producers to be dominated

by agribusiness corporates, dumping of cheap imported produce, and depression of crop prices. They linked these struggles to climate crises and atmospheric pollution by factories, attributed to the promotion of industry-oriented economic policies by the government. Political injustices from grabbing of agrarian resources, violations of rights to land, where burdens have disproportionately affected women who also shoulder domestic burdens, and suffer patriarchal discrimination. They reported several have been stalked, harassed, and slandered for participating in political protests. The group recognised the global dimension of their struggles due to membership of global peasant federation La Via Campesina, through which they learnt sisters across every corner of the world have been engaged in similar struggles. They called for an end to state-backed intimidation of dissident workers, activists, students, and grassroots leaders, insisting on a government elected by the people, uniting under the banner: *“Democracy where the People can eat, Politics where the Poor Matter.”*¹⁵⁹

These peasants, workers, youth, women, and the leaders and intellectuals among them are the promising shoots to nourish so that a progressive spring may blossom in the wake of the corona crisis. As Marter Harnecker saw it, politics is:

The art of constructing a social and political force capable of changing the balance of force in favour of the popular movement, in such a way as to make possible in the future what today appears impossible.¹⁶⁰

She recognised the challenge is to convert insurrection into genuine and long-lasting change, conquering power to initiate a process of deep social transformation. This required, she argued:

A political instrument capable of overcoming the dispersion and fragmentation of the exploited and the oppressed ... One that can create spaces to bring together those who, in spite of their differences, have a common enemy; that is able to strengthen existing struggles and promote others by orientating their actions according to a thorough analysis of the political situation; that can act as an instrument for cohering the many expressions of resistance and struggle.¹⁶¹

This is the challenge facing progressives across the Mekong today: to construct a social and political force from diverse subaltern class fractions, based on mutual learning, genuine dialogue, and shared experiences of precarity, vulnerability, distress, hope, cooperation, and strategy. In this way, collective understanding of diverse yet familiar struggles faced by each, solidarity, and power may be built. This could be pursued with a focus on nurturing and empowering young intellectuals and leaders among them, whom will inherit and shape the subregion's future.

Conclusion

Part one provided an introductory overview of the socio-economic impacts of the corona crisis on some of the Mekong's most vulnerable populations: low paid workers in export industries and informal economies, women, migrants, and displaced persons. Their fortunes were contrasted with those of wealthy and powerful class fractions, big firms, salaried workers able to work from home, and investors in financial markets rescued by state interventions. Part two situated the uneven impacts of the crisis in broader global capitalist dynamics, noting those hardest hit by the pandemic were those societies have disempowered in the process of its capitalist transformation. Expansion of capitalist relations of production has generated new social class forces, including ruling class coalitions and diverse state forms that have internalised the interests of capital, often at the expense of struggling subaltern classes. Social relations have been reorganised toward expanded production of commodities for markets, yet local peasants, workers, and states have managed to capture merely a fraction of the monetary value they produce, most appropriated from them by traders, investors, transnational corporations, and financial fractions of capital. This is an essentially extractive process whereby accumulation of monetary wealth, often in faraway lands, depends on socio-economic and environmental consequences at the point of extraction, including environmental despoilation, poverty, labour abuses, and ill-health.

Part two argued the corona crisis is the latest in a long line of capitalist crises driven by capital's structural drive to expand, often at the expense of human and non-human nature. While the pandemic confronts us with a bio-physical health crisis, the emergence of new diseases has been linked to land-use change associated with deforestation, illegal logging, mining, agribusiness, and infrastructure

development. The health crisis merely triggered an economic crisis already on the horizon, its roots in turn found in the expansion of productive forces under capitalism in response to previous crises. This is because pursuit of monetary wealth under capitalism is predicated on twin external and internal dynamics of expropriation and exploitation, generating systemic crisis tendencies as it undermines the ecological, social, and economic conditions of reproduction. As Marx evocatively characterised it, capital is like a vampire: a kind of living death, whereby an alienated form of wealth (money) is maintained by sucking the blood from the world.¹⁶²

Part two claimed the same extractive and imperialist dynamics that led us into the corona crisis are also at work in the Mekong, wherein China and Thailand have also developed exploitative relations with even more underdeveloped and peripheral economies to compensate for the drain of wealth from their own to dominant economies, such as the United States and Japan. Capitalist transformation has been accompanied by labour abuses, slow or stagnant rates of poverty alleviation, consolidation of authoritarian state forms, and environmental despoilation, including the loss of fifty percent of the Mekong's undisturbed forest areas. We did not even begin to discuss the ongoing and future effects of climate change on the Mekong subregion.

Capitalism has been immensely successful at expanding forces of production and transforming the world for the better. In many ways it can be credited for a great deal of human progress and innovation, providing many with longer lives and better opportunities than otherwise would have been available to them. Yet this has been achieved by sacrifices forced on groups our societies have disempowered, falling unevenly along geographical and class-based lines. Workers, women, migrants,

indigenous communities, persons of colour, especially in the Global South, are the ones that have sacrificed the most; often blood, sweat, and soil. As we close in on the present, capitalism's systemic crisis tendencies and transgressions of social and ecological boundaries have seen it transform into an increasingly disruptive and dangerous mode of production, heightening peril to our collective health, the natural world, and ultimately human life on the planet. It has failed to deliver on promises of substantive and sustainable development. The United Nations Special Rapporteur noted that poverty has barely declined worldwide since 1990, and the United Nations has warned we are on course for a 3.2 Celsius rise in global temperatures, threatening to turn our home into an "uninhabitable hell" for millions of people.¹⁶³ Rosa Luxemburg famously declared during World War One that bourgeois society faced a choice: either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism. Over a hundred years later we - the global we, but especially those of us in the Global South in regions such as the Mekong - face a similar choice: ruin or revolution.¹⁶⁴

Alternatives

Our collective response to the corona crisis presents us with an opportunity to begin the necessary transition to a path that may help avoid such a ruinous fate. There are alternatives to extractive imperialism. To wit: The private sector should not be relied on as the engine of recovery and the state could take on a greater role, guided by democratic and accountable social planning. This requires reversing corporate capture and making states responsive and accountable. Reliance on private investment has failed to deliver the material and technological progress humanity urgently needs. A greater role for a democratic and socially-oriented states could unleash humanity's productive forces and return dynamism

to societies gripped by decay and decline. Production could be reoriented away from a fixation on the market and toward the creation of goods that society actually needs, rather than hypertrophy of fictitious capital stashed away on treasure islands.

The crisis has reminded us what and who possess real value: the natural world, those who feed us, those who care for us, and those who nurture us. Farmers, healthcare professionals, teachers, our families and communities. We could rebalance our economies so they are no longer geared toward the maximisation of leisure, luxury, and consumption for the few, and direct our collective energies instead to mending the yawning rift that has been opened between humanity and nature and recognising the contribution these essential workers make to our societies.

We could begin by reducing material footprints, particularly those of wealthy and developed countries, and protecting those acting as stewards over wild areas not yet destroyed: by recognising and defending indigenous rights, for instance. We could empower producers: of food, and necessary goods and services, by defending and expanding the wage share of productive labour at a bare minimum, and redistributing assets such as land, upon which so many across the Mekong depend, as we work toward a system of production based upon democratic associations of producers. We could address the plight of those our societies have made especially vulnerable, such as informal workers, migrants, refugees, and IDPs. These are feasible goals that should not be easily dismissed. A paper by the Transnational Institute outlines just ten proposals that could raise \$US 9.4 trillion per year, enough to pay for the pandemic, Sustainable Development Goals, a climate transition, and reparations for slavery. This includes taxes on wealth, capital income, offshore corporate profits, eliminating subsidies for the fossil fuel industry, and a 10 percent cut to military spending.¹⁶⁵

It is imperative the costs of the crisis are not once again imposed on the planet and subaltern class fractions. It is high time fractions of capital paid for a crisis they have created. Yet capitalism is remarkably resilient and adaptive. It will not be surpassed unless disparate subaltern class fractions with an objective interest in transcending its contradictions and oppressions recognise this fact and overcome their fragmentation through mutual learning, dialogue, solidarity building, and cooperation. The aim should be to build power and transform state forms so that our societies can be more rationally ordered, democratic, and better serve the interests of people and planet rather than dictates of capital. Such long lasting social transformation must come from struggle from below by subaltern class fractions as they currently exist. This is the task of political education and movement building. It was argued potential agents of this transformation can be found among the youth, peasants, workers, and their progressive allies across the subregion who have been resisting and making political demands on their states, both before and during the corona crisis. This is where progressives should focus their energies. A better world is possible, it requires we work together to build it.

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