

Capitalism Is the Parasite; Capitalism Is the Virus

By [Prof. Matthew Flisfeder](#)

Global Research, July 27, 2020

[The Bullet](#) 26 July 2020

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

*With hindsight, a few years from now, it may well appear to us that the year 2020, the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, marked the dawn of a new parasitic age. We can tell this much even by looking at one of the year's most popular films. Bong Joon Ho's [Parasite](#) (2019) tells the story of the poor Kim family living in a basement apartment of a decrepit house (a *banjiha*) in a Seoul ghetto. Both parents, Ki-taek and Chung-sook, as well as their young adult children, Ki-woo and Ki-jung, are all precarious gig workers. They scramble together to make ends meet, taking on every and any odd job they can find.*

The apartment sits mostly below ground, but a window pane in the kitchen breaches the surface somewhat, giving them a ground level perspective of the outside world. The space, in this way, is an apt metaphor for the subordination (sub-ordination) of the poor, festering below the surface of ordinary life.

One day, the family is visited by Ki-woo's friend, Min-hyuk, a university student who is about to go abroad for a study trip. Min works as a tutor for the daughter of the wealthy Park family and he invites Ki (who also goes by the name Kevin) to take over in his absence. But in order to work as a tutor, Ki must forge documents proving his credibility. After being accepted as a legitimate tutor and gaining the trust of the Park family, Ki recommends his sister as an art therapy tutor for the young son of the Park family. Jung, however, must also hide her identity and forge her credentials. The Kims further encroach upon the Park family as the children recommend their parents (again, hiding their real identities) to work for the household to replace the current chauffeur and the trusted family housekeeper, whom the children frame in order to have them fired and replaced. Far from a dubious act, their scam is seen more as a necessary strategy of subsistence for precarious workers, an effect of the "entrepreneurialization" of labour and new competitive struggles of workers amongst each other over scarce temporary jobs. Meanwhile, Mr. Park, the patriarch of the family, works in the field of "legitimate"/capitalist scamming, otherwise known as high finance. The contrast between the Kims and Parks in this way evokes the vast cleavages between the precariat class and the wealthy, in whose favour the system is undoubtedly rigged.

Contrasting Living Conditions

The film is stunning in its visual depiction of the class differences between the families, especially through the juxtaposition of the two homes, particularly the kitchen and living spaces of each. Both homes have kitchens and living areas that have a window that looks out upon the world outside. For the Kims living in the *banjiha*, the window only breaches slightly above ground, where they are able to see the largely grungy slums of the inner city. The family witnesses a drunken man urinating in front of their kitchen window, apparently a regular occurrence as they recount to each other. Inside, the claustrophobic space of the

kitchen is grimy and confining, an apt visual portrayal of the constraints of the poor.

This contrasts well with the home of the Parks, whose kitchen and living areas are spacious and pristine, appearing in some ways quite sterile, a perception augmented by the distanced engagement between the members of the Park family, who appear largely separate from each other, the children escaping into their own separate bedrooms, with Mrs. Park spending most of her time alone, while Mr. Park is off at work, in comparison with the very close and tight-knit family relationship of the Kims, a trope not uncommon in the depiction of the individuality and independence of the wealthy. The living area in the Parks' home backs onto a large window expanding the size of one wall of the entire room. Through the window, the family gazes onto the fresh green space of the backyard, a stark departure from infested streets of the inner city. The class distinction between the two families couldn't be more apparent.

One night, while the Parks are on a family camping trip, the Kims (now all employed by the Park family) decide to enjoy the luxuries of the empty house together. In the middle of their festivities, late at night, the doorbell rings. They see on the external security camera that it is the old housekeeper, Moon-gwang, waiting there in the rain. She tells them that in her haste to leave the house after being fired she forgot to take something with her. She is let into the house and quickly runs to the basement where she uncovers a secret bunker below the house. Her husband has been hiding in the bunker from loan sharks and she's come to rescue him. However, amidst the commotion, she discovers the Kims' secret, that they've fooled the Park family, and threatens to turn them in. Ultimately, the two families struggle and fight with each other over who will maintain access to and feed off of the wealthy Park family, hence the title of the film, "parasite."

The title, of course, seems appropriate given that the two families' struggle over who will be able to devour and thrive off of the wealthy living of the Park family. The visual metaphor of the underground bunker, and the basement apartment reflect the parasitic portrayal of the poor feeding off of the rich. But things are surely not so clear cut. While the poor families battle against each other like vermin, beneath the surface of the shiny veneer of the rich, we might do well to turn things around and to ask what in fact is the source of their poverty in the first place?

Capitalism is the Parasite

Popular opinion is sure to read the parasite from the gaze of the elite, in which case it is the poor who are parasitic upon the wealthy. This, after all, is the leading practice of perceiving the abject and the excluded. The poor are typically portrayed as scum; vultures living off of the remainders and shreds of life of the rich. But by asking about the source of the wealth of the elite we are able to understand the reverse. Doing so lets us connect the film to a great number of issues facing us today, which intersect in the capitalist system. As Marx famously put it in *Capital, Volume 1*, "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks." From the perspective of capital, then, Marx notes, the labour-power that it has paid for is its property and it is its right to so consume it during the time in which it has paid for the labour commodity. "If the worker consumes his [own] disposable time for himself, [it appears to capital that] he robs the capitalist."¹ As in a camera obscura, Marx's words describe here the inverted form with which the capitalist parasite is commonly misperceived or kept hidden by the very form of its own crises.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of us have had to limit and self-regulate our everyday lives, going into lockdown and quarantine. While millions of people are laid off of work as businesses have ceased operations and are no longer making any profit, the world's wealthiest few, including big tech giants like Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk, have increased their wealth substantially.² As the old socialist saying goes, during times of prosperity, profits are privatized and rise to the top, whereas during times of crisis, risk, debt, and loss are socialized, and endured by the expanding bottom. The neoliberal myth of trickle down, it would seem, is only true in the case of socializing losses. It is loss that trickles down while the parasitic capitalists appropriate the world's wealth, especially and even during a time of great crisis for many. What we see all too often is that the capitalist system, much like a parasite, exhausts and devours global resources, leaving the majority to scramble and fight amongst ourselves for access to basic needs. In this sense, we should see the Park family, not the Kims, as the real parasites of the movie.

We should think about the coronavirus in these terms, as well. The virus, not unlike a parasite, infects and replicates, and eats away at all forms of life confronting it. The culprit of the pandemic seems to be the virus itself, this nonhuman force of nature; but what we have been seeing is that, as another popular meme has put it, the real virus is *capitalism* – that is, the capitalist system that erects further barriers to our collective treatment of the virus. The true crisis is not simply the virus itself, but the limited capacities in the public health care system to meet the needs for treatment amongst the population.³ This is a system, we should add, that has become relatively starved due to decades of neoliberal austerity measures and cutbacks to social and public services, benefits, and institutions that subsidize the costs of life and living, and that provide access to needs. In this sense, capitalism is very much the real virus, indeed.⁴

Systemic crises are all around us, and not least as we are also currently seeing with the mass Black Lives Matter protests against racism, police violence, and police murders of African Americans, like George Floyd, in the United States.⁵ The police, Donald Trump, and much of the Right Wing media all want to make the protesters look parasitic upon society.⁶ Trump has referred to the protesters as “thugs,” while *Fox News* personality, Tucker Carlson has said that debates about racism are driven by “hysteria” that is spreading like a “disease.”⁷ But we must remember that, while the corporate media creates the illusion that the people are the robber-looters of society – just as it appears to the capitalist that workers’ use of their own disposable time robs the capitalist from consuming the labour commodity – it is in fact the capitalist, neoliberal and very much white supremacist system that continues to be the true vampire-like parasite, sucking the lifeblood out of the people.⁸

Beyond Posthumanism

Viewed from this angle, we can see how truly topsy-turvy is the parasite metaphor when it originates in the ruling ideology that deflects attention from the parasitic system of capital and projects its own contradictions onto false enemies. This practice is even deployed in much of the critical literature on climate change and the environment. For instance, we should even be hesitant deploying concepts like the Anthropocene and subscribing the fashionable idea that there is an Anthropocentrism at the core of our environmental troubles, for this merely abstracts from the historical relations of empire, capital, and class,

as Jason W. Moore describes, displacing environmental and ecological crises onto an ill-conceived notion of humanity as a collective actor, and ignoring the class disparities so well represented in films like *Parasite*.⁹ Also unhelpful are the Object-Oriented Ontology and New Materialist thinkers, like Timothy Morton, who are on the brink of declaring that humans are the real parasite of the Earth.¹⁰ As Morton himself puts it, “In symbiosis, it’s unclear which is the top symbiont... Am I simply a vehicle for the numerous bacteria that inhabit my microbiome? Or are they hosting me? Who is the host and who is the parasite?”¹¹

The danger in Morton’s contrasting of innocent and alive but nonhuman nature with the guilty and parasitical human species, is that it has the potential to devolve into nihilistic activism, such as “death politics.” For example, Patricia MacCormack’s *The Ahuman Manifesto* advocates for the cessation of human reproduction and the death of humans with calls for “an end to the human both conceptually as exceptionalized and actually as a species.”¹² The risk in seeing humans (as a whole) as the uniform culprit of the global environmental catastrophe is that it misses the systemic forest for the individual trees. While right-wing governments compel and guilt the working class back to work to revivify the coronavirus-slumping economy, and while the anti-racist protesters are labelled “thugs” when demonstrating against a system that degrades and even murders their comrades, the theory of the Anthropocene ends up portraying the victims of the vampiristic system as themselves virus-like and parasitic. In this way, the theory of the Anthropocene ends up supporting the ruling capitalist ideology by portraying humanity, not the capitalist system, just as so much of the historical portrayals of racialized and colonized peoples, as well as the working class, as viruses and parasites leeching off of the system.

With so much attention being paid to the problems of the Anthropocene, and less to those of the social relations of capitalism, it is no wonder that post-humanism is becoming the dominant ideology of twenty-first century capitalism. Post-humanism, that is, both as a critique of the hubris of previous historical humanisms, and as an ideology of transhumanist technological transcendence of the limitations of corporeal humanity. On both ends, the critique of humanism displaces the cause of our collective inter-species problems from the capitalist system onto humanity as such. Instead, we should focus our critical attention on the capitalist system, and demonstrate how capitalism is incompatible with all life. We need to move from the prism of the Anthropocene to that of the [Capitalocene](#).

Capitalism, rather than the people, is the real virus, the true parasite upon our thriving in the world today. What we need to learn is, not how to be post-human, but how to build and rethink a neo-humanism, in which, as Kate Soper puts it, human beings acknowledge our collective responsibility to each other, to the planet, and to other species – a humanism, that is, in which emancipation is both universal and equitably post-capitalist, and in which *human* agency drives action rather than the “objective” laws of the market.¹³ In other words, if capitalism is the parasite, then perhaps the project of Democratic Socialism, or something like it, is the cure.

Fantasies of Emancipated Futures

Parasite concludes, first with a bloody and violent climax where Ki-taek stabs Mr. Park to death in the middle of the family’s backyard party in a burst of violent outrage. Ki-taek then flees the scene and disappears from sight, confusing the police and the media about his whereabouts. Rather than read the film’s conclusion as an expression of the inevitable

violence of the degraded and humiliated working class in the absence of a Socialist alternative, we might instead reflect upon the final moments of the film in which Ki-woo fantasizes about his father's survival. It is unclear whether or not the final moments of the film are a fantasy scenario that he dreams up about his father. He seems to imagine that his father was able to go back into the bunker, hiding and evading the authorities after killing Mr. Park. Ki-woo imagines that one day he will be able to then earn enough money to buy the house and in that way set his father free.

For some Posthumanist thinkers, such as Donna Haraway, the problem of the Anthropocene is in perceiving a time called the future that prohibits us from being fully present.¹⁴ Futurisms, according to her are what inevitably lead us toward our demise in a kind of dystopian chaos. We need to, as the title of her book claims, "stay with the trouble." But can we really imagine telling those suffering from the exploitative and degrading conditions of capitalism, or those suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic, or those affected by rampant racism from an integrated system of white supremacy – can we really imagine saying to the object: "don't worry, just stay with the trouble"? Far from offering this un-sagely advice we should instead reflect upon the strategy of the film. It is not by staying with the trouble, but by imagining emancipated futures that we will be driven to set ourselves free from the capitalist parasite.

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Matthew Flisfeder is an associate professor of Rhetoric and Communications at The University of Winnipeg. He is the author of [Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media](#) (Northwestern University Press, Forthcoming 2021), [Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner](#) (Bloomsbury, 2017), [The Symbolic, The Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film](#) (Palgrave Macmillan 2012), and co-editor of [Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader](#) (2014). He is currently working on project called "The Hysterical Sublime," a critical study of the aesthetics, rhetorics, and ethics of new materialist and posthumanist critical theory, funded by a SSHRC Insight Development Grant.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, [Capital, Volume 1](#), translated by Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), p. 342.
2. Robert Frank, "[American billionaires got \\$434 billion richer during the pandemic.](#)" *CNBC*. May 21st, 2020. Viewed June 2nd, 2020.
3. Elizabeth Chuck, "[What is a ventilator? The 'critical resource' that is in short supply.](#)" *NBC News*. March 25th, 2020. Viewed June 2nd, 2020.
4. Manisha Sahoo, "[The Effects of Neoliberal Practices on Public Health.](#)" *Public Health Advocate*. December 6th, 2018. Viewed June 2nd, 2020.
5. Evan Hill, Ainara Tiefenthäler, Christiaan Triebert, [Drew Jordan](#), Haley Willis and Robin Stein, "[8 minutes and 46 seconds: How George Floyd was Killed in Police Custody.](#)" *The New York Times*. May 31st, 2020. Viewed June 2nd, 2020.
6. Michael M. Grynbaum, "[Tucker Carlson of Fox News Accuses Trump of Being Too Lenient on Protests.](#)" *The New York Times*. June 1st, 2020. Viewed. June 2nd, 2020.
7. Brendan Cole, "[Tucker Carlson says Black Lives Matter Protests a 'Hysteria' Pandemic.](#)" *Newsweek*. July 2nd, 2020. Viewed July 20th, 2020.

8. Mary Frances O'Dowd, "[Explainer: What is systemic racism and institutional racism?](#)" *The Conversation Australia*. February 4th, 2020. Viewed June 2nd, 2020.
9. Jason W. Moore, [Capitalism in the Web of Life](#) (New York: Verso, 2015), p. 171.
10. Both Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and New Materialism are schools of thought that make it their mission to trouble an apparent Anthropocentrism, focusing respectively on the reduction all things equally, human and non-human, real and unreal alike, to objects of different sorts, or to the vibrancy of all matter. See for instance Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (New York: Pelican Books, 2018); Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2011); and, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Elsewhere, I have argued that the turn to OOO and New Materialism is the product of the neoliberal period and the reification of all human life as "human capital." Both approaches and their critique of Anthropocentrism have been popularized, in other words, at the moment when capitalism has finally reified all of life and living. Despite the long history of colonialism and sexism, where non-European, non-masculine people were not even regarded as human, OOO and New Materialism emerge at the moment when the White middle classes are now, too, being dehumanized as a result of global neoliberal capitalist governance. But this is equally the product of a misguided attempt to grapple with the twin crises of climate change and the rise of digital automation and artificial intelligence. See Matthew Flisfeder, [Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media](#) (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021).
11. Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity With Nonhuman People* (New York: Verso, 2019), p. 1. Morton, here, echoes the work of the post-humanist philosopher, Michael Serres in *The Parasite*, translated by Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 14.
12. Patricia MacCormack, *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the end of the Anthropocene* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 5. Like Morton, MacCormack's book is also influenced by Serres' scholarship.
13. Kate Soper, "The Humanism in Posthumanism." *Comparative Critical Studies* 9 (2012): 377. I draw here, too, upon Andreas Malm's critique of posthumanism in *The Progress of This Storm* (New York: Verso, 2018).
14. Donna J. Haraway, [Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene](#) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

All images in this article are from The Bullet

The original source of this article is [The Bullet](#)
Copyright © [Prof. Matthew Flisfeder](#), [The Bullet](#), 2020

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Prof. Matthew Flisfeder](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca