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# **The New Normal? Ordinary Deaths and Marginalised Mortalities in Extraordinary Times**

Samantha Fletcher and William McGowan

This Special Issue stems from both discussions held at the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Association for the Study of Death and Society (ASDS) conference at Manchester Metropolitan University in September 2021, and from our teaching, research and discussions with colleagues and activists throughout the Covid pandemic. Its title takes some of the conference themes around diversity and decolonisation as both a point of departure and return, while our reference to “the new normal” and “extraordinary times” casts a wider net than the then still unfolding pandemic, resonating more strongly with the “increasingly fractured and confusing times” alluded to in the conference call for papers. This call understandably included Covid-19, but rightly emphasised widening inequalities more generally, the rise of right-wing populism, successive economic recessions, the Black Lives Matter movement, mass incarceration, gendered violence, hostile environments for migrants and refugees, and worrying disparities around democratic representation in its broadest sense.

Locating the mortalities that exist behind these political issues is our task within this Special Issue. In doing so we articulate *a radical politics of mortality*, providing an analysis of lives and deaths that are, by and large, most commonly found at the peripheries. These peripheries refer not only to *what* and *who* become the subjects of so much research, but also to *how* they become so, each of which is deeply political in nature. Alongside the substantive research topics found within death, dying and bereavement scholarship, what are some of the underlying epistemological, methodological and political assumptions, conventions, and tendencies brought to these fields? How are shifting discourses around death and dying in mainstream disciplines, popular culture, and media platforms in the contemporary pandemic/post-pandemic context informing these current trajectories? Contrary to Ulrich Beck’s (1992) risk society thesis, in which the hierarchic distribution of ‘social goods’ is said to have been replaced by the more democratic distribution of ‘social bads’ (global pandemics being often used as a quintessential example of this), we contend that social divisions and deep inequalities continue to persist along the more traditional fault lines of class, race, gender and (neo)colonialism – all of which also remain important categories of analysis. Indeed, several papers in our collection shine a light on the variegated and uneven consequences that pandemics can, and do, have globally.

While some aspects of social life are said to have metamorphosed into a “new normal”, this discourse betrays an undeniably privileged power: the power to successfully cast the current risk to our mortalities as constituting “newness”. The pandemic may have brought into focus “marginal groups whose lives have become so much more dispensable in the context of emergency” (Knox and Rugg, 2022: 390), yet as Knox and Rugg (2022:

393) fear in their closing remarks to last year's Special Issue for this journal, "it is likely that marginal groups will again fall further from view and the unequal toll of deaths will be largely forgotten". Our focus on marginalised mortalities and our refusal to ignore their existence before, during, and beyond the pandemic, then, stands as an attempt to resist this amnesia. The reality of the "new normal" was not that we all faced death down together, but that the poorest, most vulnerable, and most disposable members of society shielded those behind them, just as they did before. We refuse to normalise this.

### **Beyond Good and Bad Deaths: Towards a Description of the Routine and Ordinary**

To frame the Special Issue, we employ the notion of "ordinary deaths and marginalised mortalities in *extraordinary* times". We use the term "*extraordinary* times" to delineate present political conjunctures which, despite their "fractured and confusing" feel, are not necessarily unprecedented or exceptional in the truest sense. Rather, they acutely express a series of structural continuities. Consequently, when referring to "ordinary deaths" we are drawing attention to their frequent occurrence – to the fact that for many, the possibility and realisation of death under these structural conditions is far more commonplace than it might appear at first (and certainly more commonplace than powerful actors and institutions would have us believe). In short, they are a feature of everyday inequalities. Of course, behind every death is a qualitative experience for friends, families, and communities, and in this sense human loss remains simultaneously an ordinary and extraordinary experience. This collection explores the intersecting and dialectical meanings behind this relationship.

Much research into death and dying asks the normative question of whether this was a "good" or "bad" death. What is typically meant by this is whether the death was natural and unavoidable (elderly people who pass away in their sleep having lived a full life, for example), or unnatural and untimely (such as the deaths of children and young people). This collection explores the alternative and, we argue, more pressing question of which deaths have been routinised over time. Each paper explores, in its own way, the highly contingent set of factors which have produced not a natural event, subject only to the natural laws of physics, biology, and chemistry, but an unnatural one, arising precisely out of very particular social and political contexts. In short, deaths are all "socially constructed", to use that now somewhat tired metaphor (Hacking, 1999: 35). Rather than denoting some vacuous and relativist truism, where things can almost be deliberately willed or talked into being through individual and interactive agency, this should be taken to mean challenging ourselves to meet the rigorous and high standard required in illustrating precisely how things work within these social and political contexts. This task requires, first and foremost, a compelling description of the way that deaths in contemporary societies are structurally curated even before they can be personally experienced. Each paper in this Special Issue takes up this challenge, carefully presenting this descriptive evidence alongside critique of their existence and rendering as normal and natural.

Beyond the contemporary spotlight on Covid-19 and its differential impacts, ordinary yet marginalised deaths are, and always have been, a feature of advanced capitalist societies. Consequently, the existence of a multitude of composite established theoretical and conceptual approaches to studying capital can be brought to bear on our understanding of “ordinary”, routinised deaths occurring under these conditions. The ongoing question of whose death and whose mortality *counts*, morally speaking, including how it is counted, how it is obscured, and which voices are listened to, remains. Asking whose mortalities count, and whose are marginalised, in contemporary capitalist society remains one of the most pressing moral questions of our time and further highlights the imperative to think critically about claims of “newness”. Readers are invited to think for themselves here, the question is not a rhetorical one: if the marginalised mortalities in the pages that follow are ordinary deaths, then just how “extraordinary” are these times we find ourselves living in?

### **Beyond Natural and Unnatural Deaths: Deconstructing the Imaginary Social Order**

What if, instead of proclaiming newness and novelty with each successive crisis, we took a longer view which located all fatalities as contingent, possible ways to die? Capitalism may be an unnatural way to die, but it is also characterised by unnatural ways to live. Even more striking, then, that its manipulation and control over life is almost matched by its indifference to many unnatural deaths. Each country has a structurally stable and observable pattern of preventable deaths, yet many of these will go unrecorded as such. Instead, their occurrence is viewed as a “natural” phenomenon. All papers in this Special Issue argue and evidence that, against the everyday aphorisms about death being society’s great leveller, or death and taxes offering life’s only true certainties, that death is extremely unequally distributed. While it goes without saying that taxes are certainly no leveller, implicit in the claim that death and dying *are* is the irrefutable fact that everyone will, eventually, die. To leave our analysis of mortalities here would clearly be facile.

Modern life is characterised by endless paradox. Some of these are well known and now widely discussed. Our planet is polluted and depleted of its minerals, natural habitat, and species, while we simultaneously obsess over clean slick architecture, buy toy animals for our children, and anxiously consume the latest vitamin regimens. We promote ideals of human health, vitality, and longevity, yet in doing so rely on exposing much of the world to danger, sickness, and shortened lives. We espouse love and peace, while consuming hate and violence. Paradoxes of this kind illustrate, in a Marxian sense, a world of surface and depth, mirage and reality. We can make ourselves clean, healthy, and well, while our natural world around us is poisoned, decaying, and dying. Or so we think. Clearly, we currently inhabit the obverse of a natural world, a capitalist Anthropocene, in which the categories “natural” and “unnatural” make no inevitable or natural sense anymore. Our willingness and ability under *capitalist* conditions to transcend, as opposed merely to challenge, our contradictions and paradoxes is perpetually and terminally fraught. It is the more modest aim of this collection to at least explore some of these contradictions, to

trouble our thinking around death as a great leveller, and to ask some long-standing questions about the truth of our material reality.

Deconstructing the natural/unnatural bifurcation lies at the heart of Marxist theory and a long line of critical theory since. For Marx: “The contradiction between reality and appearance which all this [exchange value] produces is by far the most general and pervasive contradiction that we have to confront in trying to unravel the more specific contradictions of capital.” (Harvey, 2015: 6) We often get to see how things “normally” work when they cease working *in extremis*; when things operating along continuums of violence are tipped past the point of being concealable. As Harvey (2015: 6) goes on to explain in relation to the mirage and reality that is capitalist society:

“We can live perfectly well within a fetish world of surface signals, signs and appearances without needing to know all that much about how it works (in much the same way that we can turn on a switch and have light without knowing anything about electricity generation). It is only when something dramatic happens [...] that we typically ask the bigger and broader questions as to why and how things are happening ‘out there’ [...]”

Marxist philosophers of violence see this interrogation of natural causation as key in highlighting “that much of the harm that has been thought to be part of the natural hazards of life is not at all natural, and that if we ask why this harm is occurring when it might have been prevented, we will find that it is in fact attributable to the machinations of men [sic]” (Harris, 2009[1980]: 200). Mark Fisher (2009: 16-17) extends this analysis of natural reality to political ideology in a characteristically concise and astute way in *Capitalist Realism*:

“An ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact. Accordingly, neoliberalism has sought to eliminate the very category of value in the ethical sense. [...] As any number of radical theorists from Brecht through to Foucault and Badiou have maintained, emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a ‘natural order’, must reveal what it presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.”

Being able to see things as they are rather than as they appear (the social construction of ‘natural reality’) makes no difference without action of course. Many species throughout the earth’s geological history have evolved and adapted, or else gone extinct, unable to change at a pace in step with, or faster, than change itself. Some living organisms have effectively disappeared others into extinction, a phenomenon known as co-extinction. Host species die, leaving others to die with them. Other species die because their habitat, their environment, dies. If anything truly distinguishes us from non-human animals, it is perhaps that unlike them we do not face down the changes to our environment with clear and direct perception, but rather build walls around our reality, both literally and psychically. One would like to hope it inevitable that human societies eventually find no space for capitalist accumulation in our social and economic evolution away from existential annihilation. Our pessimistic intellects (Gramsci, 1977: 188) should perhaps be less reassuring in their assessments. Currently, we continue to think that we can

somehow exploit, consume and exponentially grow our way out of trouble. This paradoxical and mystifying (Box, 1983) state of affairs requires a cognitive dissonance of the highest order by powerful and wealthy groups of alienated and divided selves (Laing, 2010[1960]) and those labouring for them.

During the pandemic, it seemed as though perhaps COVID-19 death statistics had marked an intriguing shift in aetiological emphasis and diagnosis of mortality. In Britain, for example, deaths registered as COVID-related, particularly among older people, included the use of historical and ostensibly benign illness in some people as inferential markers of mortality and its underlying causes. As controversial as this has been in some cases, it exemplifies the contingencies of diagnosing, conceptualising, and responding to death during a pandemic under the structural inequalities of capitalism. Many scientists advocate for the study of “excess” rather than “COVID” deaths to try to overcome unreliability in the data (Karanikolos and McKee, 2020). While providing more accurate estimates of the impact of COVID, this focus on “excess” deaths does little to aid our understanding of existing, yet routinised, deaths within either the “normal” or “excessive” strata of data.

Where we find routinised deaths we often find structural violence. A recorded cause of death might obscure the context of that death, a context often related to its cause. Asking where deaths occur becomes, for us, a more productive question than simply how much death there is. As Evans and Giroux (2015: 140) argue: “What is distinctive about the performative nature of neoliberal [structural] violence is that it not only absorbs the state as a proxy for violence, but also relegates entire populations to spaces of invisibility and disposability.” What is the relationship between these spaces and the frequent misnomer of a “natural” death? The analyses within this Special Issue encourage us to fundamentally reject the notion that there is any such thing as a natural death in such spaces. Is there anything natural about dying in a refugee camp, a prison, or in police custody? What about a workplace? What if somebody dies while homeless? Or perhaps they die in that quintessentially “good” of all places to die, the home; but what was the quality of life lived in that space over that period we call a lifetime? While life expectancy remains an area of much debate, study, and critical inquiry, capitalist societies nonetheless maintain an implicit, and explicit, illusory and mystifying emphasis on the idea of “natural deaths”. Indeed, it forms an integral part of what Frank Pearce (1976) refers to as the imaginary social order; that is, the carefully crafted illusory depiction of contemporary society that sits in contrast to the material realities of, in this case, death and dying under capitalism. Where this is challenged it is often individual behaviours such as smoking, eating, or drinking which attract scrutiny, while structurally constituted social, political and economic environments do not (Mair, 2011). It has only been through concerted struggle and political organising that generations of workers, bereaved families and communities, trade unions, and activists have publicly thrust a range of unnatural material drivers of premature death into public view.

## **Marginalised Mortalities**

Against this context of enquiry, each paper in the Special Issue describes and critically analyses a case, group, or “type” of marginalised mortalities. While all such mortalities demonstrate the kinds of structural and historic continuities alluded to above, several authors invoke the COVID-19 pandemic as a recent backdrop when such deaths became rendered suddenly visible or, more accurately, worthy of hitherto absent political intervention.

**Vickie Cooper and Daniel McCulloch** (2023) powerfully capture this contradictory phenomenon in their opening paper concerning homelessness and mortality, showing that high numbers of preventable deaths among homeless populations have a long history of being downplayed, depoliticised, and omitted from public discourse. They employ the conceptual framework of “organised abandonment” to document this process, which includes both the material and ideological segregation of homeless people to the extent that they become soon exposed to an amplified risk of premature death. Explaining how homelessness has been narrowly defined within a “minimalist” framework, which focuses on individual behavioural problems and mental health issues rather than labour market and housing market conditions, Cooper and McCulloch (2023: 9) show how this incredibly vulnerable group have become subjected to an ideological offensive which frames “their pursuit for survival as a pathological and deviant problem”. Two immediate features of the homelessness crisis leap out from their analysis, evidencing a simultaneous silencing and amplification of this social issue. Firstly, estimates place the global homeless population at 100 million people, with the average age of death for homeless people in England and Wales being almost 20 years younger than deaths in the comparable general population (Cooper and McCulloch, 2023: 4). This makes the “invisibility” of this population and the *relative* dearth of research on the topic all the more concerning. Secondly, the fact that the framing of death among this population suddenly shifted from being an unpreventable and unextraordinary issue to a full-blown state of emergency during the pandemic reveals so much about the contempt routinely reserved for homeless people in life. That which is “normal” often remains unseen until routine social order for so-called “respectable citizens” temporarily breaks down. Under the logic of “locking down” in order to protect people against the spread of COVID infections, an estimated 37,000 people sleeping rough in England were housed in hotels and emergency accommodation, with similar policies put into practice in Wales and Scotland. Taken together with the historical marginalisation of homeless people in the UK, Cooper and McCulloch use this remarkable empirical story to explore what they aptly term the “vicissitudes of extraordinariness” in relation to homelessness and death.

In the second article of our Special Issue, **Kate Fitz-Gibbon and Sandra Walklate** (2023) focus on fatal violence against women and girls, considering what it means to call a death “femicide”. As a death – the killing of women and girls because they are female – to be specifically counted in law, femicide exists in only a small number of jurisdictions but its use among scholars, policy-makers and activists has already proven to be theoretically and (to some important extent) practically useful in demarcating the gendered nature of lethal violence. In a similar vein to Cooper and McCulloch’s paper, here we see an endemic social issue characterised, in the extreme, by radical inequalities in the nature, scope and responses to a marginalised mortality. As with the changing context of “the home” in

relation to COVID and homelessness, domestic abuse also received intensified scrutiny during the pandemic due to the repercussive implications for how vulnerable, high-risk, and victimised women might experience their everyday living spaces under such conditions. It was assumed that domestic abuse, and by extension lethal violence in the home, would rise exponentially. Analysing violence against women during such a massive public health intervention reveals some interesting potential paradoxes, given the long-standing hope among many feminists that domestic abuse be met with more of a public health, rather than criminal justice, response. Of course, being placed in lockdown with perpetrators is nothing like the response such work ever advocated or hoped for. However, Fitz-Gibbon and Walklate show that evidence of a spike in lockdown violence is mixed and complex, arguing that it is still too soon to categorically explain how dynamics of abuse, coercion, and violence within relationships during this enormous social experiment were altered. While such questions remain important, if opaque, one thing remains crystal clear throughout their article, and this is the continued importance of using politicised counting methods in the collection of mortality data. That violence against women and girls “is not borne out of exceptional events or circumstances” (Fitz-Gibbon and Walklate, 2023: 11) should not downgrade the urgency of our responses to it. Indeed, researchers have long referred to the ordinariness of violence used against women. However, worryingly, since the COVID pandemic, “the precarity and risk routinely experienced by women living with violence has become mundane and ordinary for everyone” (Fitz-Gibbon and Walklate, 2023: 10). Much of the way we continue to collect data about lethal violence against women, including how we categorise cause of death, confirms and compounds this observation.

Keeping focus on the framing and interpretation of lethal violence by the state, **Patrick Williams, Lisa White, Scarlet Harris and Remi Joseph-Salisbury** (2023) analyse institutional killings of black men by police. The immense power over life and death held by police as part of the state’s “monopoly of legitimate physical violence” (Weber, 2004[1919]: 33) prompts Williams et al. to draw on Seigel’s (2018) theorising of policing as ‘violence work’ and, by extension, to conceptualise police as ‘violence workers’ with an ever-present capacity to inflict harm and ultimately death. Police who kill occupy an especially powerful position, as the simultaneous perpetrators and definers of violence. As Fitz-Gibbon and Walklate’s (2023) femicide article makes clear, an official “cause of death” – typically thought of as a beacon of certainty for the bereaved at an otherwise traumatic time – can obfuscate the true reality of a marginalised life in death. Certainly, with all of the cases analysed by Williams et al. (2023), state narratives of how and why somebody’s loved ones have died take on a rabid and relentless pursuit for fixity; fixity of institutional meaning and of institutional truth. As with data surrounding deaths in prison that are disaggregated to show disproportionality according to race or gender, to present these deaths as statistics or mere “cases”, even through important, well-meaning work, risks reducing them to “symbols of communal suffering” (Williams et al. 2023: ). The authors present moving personal testimonies from families about their loved ones as a way of rehumanising and complicating these incomplete lives lost to police violence and neglect. Against institutional efforts to frame black bodies as violent, dangerous, risky, deficient, or unhealthy, these descriptions convey a compassionate gravitas which radically contrasts with dismissive and bureaucratic state talk.



Extending this discussion of traumatic grief for the families of marginalised mortalities left behind, **Joe Sim** (2023) directs our critical gaze to the prison, or what Foucault once referred to as the “death machine”. Sim’s abolitionist work on prisons has long supported, and been supported by, the work of INQUEST, a charity who provide expertise and casework to families who have lost loved ones in police and prison custody, immigration detention, or through wider failings in state and corporate accountability (such as the Hillsborough football disaster or Grenfell Tower fire). In his article, he draws directly on INQUEST’s work and research with bereaved and traumatised families to argue that “the prison has always been a lethal site of both premature and preventable death” (Sim, 2023: p). He explains how the pains of pandemic imprisonment meant that prisoners not only lost vital family visits, but they were also exposed to risks of COVID infection that the rest of the country was trying to avoid through extraordinary measures. Once again it is through focusing on preventable deaths, whose true contexts are often shielded from public view, that we see how unexact and unjust the concept of the “new normal” was and is. Sim’s article shows that we should not overstate the uniqueness of COVID. Indeed, there is an obvious risk that the state and “an army of liberal organisations and academics who have been absorbed into the state’s network of power” (Sim, 2023: p) simply respond to criticism of the handling of COVID in prison as they always do, through incremental and post-hoc reform. This misses the mark. Prisons always have and always will inflict preventable death. There is no such thing as a “natural” death in a prison. Crucially for us, as Sim (2023: p) puts it, “prisoners’ lack of safety should be linked to the lack of safety experienced by a range of powerless groups in other state and private institutions of detention, as well as those on the outside, who also suffer thousands of preventable deaths each year caused by, amongst other social phenomena: air pollution, poverty, homelessness, lack of health and safety at work, disablism, systemic violence directed towards women, girls, Black and Minority Ethnic people and LGBTQ plus people and welfare cuts”.

This link is made clear in **Nicolas Montano’s** (2023) article on trans deaths in the US criminal legal system, bringing into sharp focus the way mass incarceration is organised according to strictly binary ideas concerning gender. As Montano argues, what makes this issue so striking is the way in which neoliberal reform efforts have been so ostensibly anxious to “promote” and “protect” trans people who are incarcerated, all while exacerbating a panoply of vulnerabilities precisely through such incarceration. This article analyses the death of Layleen Xtravaganza Cubilette-Polanco, a transgender woman from New York who died at Rikers Island prison in 2019 while in solitary confinement, as a case study to show how the New York Department of Corrections resisted and deflected culpability for the loss of Layleen’s life. Montano highlights this death in custody as an exemplar of the structural violences that Trans people must navigate pre- and post-incarceration and in the aftermath of their death. Indeed, considerable work and energy go into curating such lives after their deaths. Examples of this include the use of dead names in media, misgendering, and transphobic political debate, meaning the physical deaths of Trans prisoners are often followed by multiple discursive deaths. Echoing the previous two papers in the Special Issue, this article makes clear that carceral spaces, or what Montano calls “sites of (in)visibility”, like Rikers Island, can be a death sentence for the people that are sent there. This reality should complicate

analyses of death as punishment, which remain overwhelmingly wedded to the formal passing of death penalties in an age legally conceptualized as “abolitionist” (Garland, 2010). That so many people who are sent to prison each year will die as a result is a social fact that becomes the de facto death penalty mortality rate.

Our next article, by **Evgenia Iliadou** (2023), explores the human consequences of the necropolitical border regime on border crossers’ lives on the Greek island of Lesbos. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interview data with border crossers, activists, NGO staff, the Greek authorities, and FRONTEX (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency) at three refugee camp areas, or so-called “hotspots”, Iliadou’s research paints another stark picture of how some of the most vulnerable lives are degraded, dehumanised, and ultimately destroyed through state-sanctioned violence. As Iliadou explains, Greek islands have a long history of functioning as zones of physical and temporal confinement, with myriad human rights violations against those deemed “undesirable” by the authorities occurring on their comparatively remote shores. The refugee camps and detention centres of Lesbos are different spatial and architectural vehicles to the prisons discussed earlier, but many of Sim and Montano’s observations concerning prison confinement resonate here, as do Williams et al.’s regarding police violence. Iliadou eclectically draws on social anthropologies of violence, critical migration and border studies, social harm literatures, and Achille Mbembe’s (2003) concept of “necropolitics” in her analysis, coining the term “necroharm” to capture the myriad forms of lethal abandonment facing border crossers. Multiple traumas from war, torture, and violence lead refugees to Lesbos, where many then experience violence at the hands of police, sexual violence in the camps, racism, verbal abuse, or have to engage in survival sex and acquisitive crimes as a means to support themselves in lieu of any rights to work from the Greek state. The detrimental impacts of this environment on all aspects of physical, psychological, and social health exemplifies, for Iliadou, the complete and utter disposability of human life, characterised by endemic suffering, social death, and heinously marginalised mortalities.

From the relatively private, invisible, and hidden spaces of homes, prisons, and refugee camps to the everyday workplace, our penultimate article focuses on the juxtaposition of deaths at work and coronavirus deaths. In doing so, **Steve Tombs** (2023) reveals more about the context of regulatory strategies which are there, ostensibly, to prevent such deaths from occurring. This builds on an established and compelling *oeuvre* in which Tombs and colleagues have long argued that “regulation”, as both a conceptual and empirical reference point, serves to permit and routinise deaths relating to work and working. Snell and Tombs’ (2011: 208) argument concerning workplace deaths and their bereavements, penned over a decade ago, captures the ordinary and routine occurrence of such mortalities and their relatively marginalised status: “Here, then, is a key initial observation upon the class of deaths with which we are concerned – that is, they generally fall entirely below the popular and political radar, if media coverage is any yardstick. In this sense, then, these are routine deaths – a term used not in any dismissive nor pejorative sense, but one which reminds us that these are a tiny fraction of the tens of thousands of occupational deaths that occur in the UK each year.” (Snell and Tombs, 2011: 208) For perspective, the estimated 50,000 COVID deaths in the UK between

February 2021 and January 2022 “equates with the numbers of deaths caused by work in the UK *each year*” (Tombs, 2023: 2, emphasis in original). While headline data concerning fatal injuries at work (142 deaths in 2020-21) typically glosses over the true scale of work-related illness and deaths, daily press briefings provided a rising count of COVID mortalities, ensuring that the nation conceived of 50,000 deaths as serious business. Numbers cannot speak for themselves any more than the dead can but this tale of two fifty thousands speaks volumes. To unravel this juxtaposition, Tombs historicises it. Workplace deaths had to be routinised as a matter of course for capitalism to grow as it did, and Tombs cites the 1844 Factory Act as key in decriminalising health and safety breaches in the workplace which killed and injured so many lower-class workers, including children. Almost 200 years later and the UK’s approach to regulating COVID exposure was, and is, similarly uneven, classed and racialised. “Lockdown” applied to all, except those employed within the social and healthcare sectors, the gig economy, the security and construction industries, cleaners, delivery drivers, refuse collectors, non-essential retail workers, teachers, and scores of other workers too. “Thus, we see here – as Marx, too, documented in quite a different context – how regulation is revealed as a means of keeping work going in as profitable a fashion as possible, rather than merely or even mainly a regime for protecting workers, a form of regulation *for capital*.” (Tombs, 2023: 5, emphasis in original)

This brings us to our final article of the Special Issue by **Robert Knox and David Whyte** (2023), “Vaccinating Capitalism: Racialised Value in the COVID-19 Economy”. While Tombs makes clear that regulation has more to do with ensuring a steady rate of commerce than delivering safer working conditions (a capitalist truism which transcends the pandemic, though one persistently overlooked), Knox and Whyte reveal how both corporate autonomy and profitability were actually augmented through the necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) of COVID-19. In other words, not only did the greatest global public health emergency of our time not lead to lost revenues for big business, it absolutely boosted them in the most globally unequal ways imaginable. That the state stepped in with wage subsidy and furlough schemes paid directly to corporate payroll departments is one dimension of this. Another is the now well-documented way in which enormous contracts for personal protective equipment were issued to pharmaceutical and logistics firms with little to no transparency or accountability. The massive bailout of corporations, many of which announced simultaneous job losses, had more than a ring of 2008 about it, while Conservative Party donors and friends of government ministers being able to capitalise on public procurement through COVID emergency contracts will furnish students with exemplars of state-corporate fraud for years to come. Knox and Whyte point to both the racialised division of labour domestically, with inherently higher risks of exposure to COVID for black and minority ethnic workers, and an imperial model of value extraction which saw massive investment for vaccine rollouts rapidly deliver vaccinations for almost 80% of people in upper-middle and high-income nations compared to 11% in low-income countries by 2022 (Knox and Whyte, 2023: 13). Coronaviruses such as SARS and MERS, which were largely spread within Asia, and diseases such as Ebola or Zika virus, which mainly affected Africa, all share a chronic lack of investment by comparison. Neither SARS nor MERS have a vaccine yet, and the Ebola vaccine was only approved in 2019 – 16 years after it was patented and 6 years after the

Ebola epidemic hit West Africa. No vaccine has been developed for Zika virus which was first identified in Uganda over 70 years ago (Knox and Whyte, 2023: 11). Knox and Whyte's article reveals that if there is any truth to notions of a "new normal", then it is to be found in the unprecedented generation of vaccine profits previously unimagined even by Big Pharma, who in the past have overwhelmingly capitalised on chronic treatments rather than preventative medications. The racialised divisions of labour, economic exploitation, and radically unequal risks of death upon which this process rests are as old as capitalism itself. In this they are unequivocal. In the absence of revolution, nothing short of seriously constraining, rather than endlessly sustaining, corporate autonomy offers a viable interim solution to rampant value extraction within our capitalist society; the true possibilities for lasting hope lie in overturning the very system of value extraction itself.

### **For A Radical Politics of Mortality**

Taken together, these articles provide a diverse and compelling point of departure and return for thinking through our earlier claims. That ordinary deaths and marginalised mortalities are an enduring feature of capitalist society requires, we argue, *a radical politics of mortality*. This means challenging the uncritical cliché that, despite the inherent complexity and chaos wrought by capitalism, death provides us with at least one true certainty, the leveller of all levellers. It does not. What is required is nothing short of social autopsy (Klinenberg, 1999; Timmermans and Prickett, 2021); what can deaths which are both quantitatively routine and qualitatively fraught reveal about the way that society has lived and functioned? Through the social post-mortems presented here we find sickness and maladies of the most endemic kind.

In *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018: xi) asks: "At the heart of this mystery is the question 'why'? Why such dehumanisation, but only of some? Why such carnage? Why such devaluing of some lives? And alongside this over-arching instrumentalisation of human life, how are some deemed (even) less?" Some lives are seemingly given greater attention, greater value, in death than they are in life through the frenetic energies of those trying to deny them, while others remain as devalued as ever. However, again, the descriptive task leads us to conclude that there persists a material, observable pattern to many of our worst social ills, irrespective of how new, normal, or unique we are told the social milieu that we now find ourselves in truly is. It is the persistent, patterned, and indeed familiar, existence of ordinary, yet marginalised, mortalities with which the papers in this collection ultimately identify. The times we find ourselves in continue to produce extraordinary carnage, we just hope ideological attempts at moral resurrection are not allowed salvation through the illusory image of a "new normal".

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