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The Bananalisation of Consumption.

My mother, born 1937, never saw a banana until she was 12 years old. A Merchant Seaman uncle brought one home from overseas, and all the extended family – aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents – crammed into the two-roomed flat in the Glasgow southside tenement neighbourhood to see this wonder. It was a horrible wee black thing lain on the table, said my mother: they all laughed and none of them even wanted to touch it, never mind taste it.

That period around World War 2 with its curfew, blackout and rationing was often invoked as a comparator for the experience of the Covid 19 lockdowns of 2020 and 21. Yet beyond the terrible and unfortunate suffering and deaths from the virus, for most people the pandemic was experienced as a period of feast not famine. Where, in WW2, work was universalised, production was ramped up with women joining the factory and farm work forces, and everyday foods for consumption became scarce, were rationed and sometimes simply unavailable, in the pandemic lockdown an inverse type of situation arose. Folk didn't have to work, you'd stay home, produce nothing, but the supermarkets were full of food and drink from all over the world, and you could consume your purchases from there at home, any time, at your leisure.

Some of the effects of this glut of private consumption and ceasing of public work seem entirely predictable.[Footnote⁸](#) Yet the logic of its operation is difficult to account for and seems bizarrely counter-intuitive: How can an almost complete cessation of production apparently have no depressive effect on levels of consumption? Who was paying for all this consumption, and how? Why did the economy not simply collapse? The whole world seemed to have gone bananas ...

Those bizarre and unhinged relations of life under Covid lockdown revealed some truths about our social organisation and the global order that now have almost the quality of a taboo. Subjectively, that is to say, one could not help but become aware of a huge epistemic shift in how we can know and understand the workings of this globalised world. Objectively that shift still can't be openly acknowledged or discussed

though: there is a public pretence that since Covid is 'over' we can just continue in the same erstwhile unwitting paths of the status quo ante.

Nonetheless, some individual voices have been raised, have cried out, as it were, in the wilderness. Writing during the 2020 lockdown, Paul Preciado asserted that societies get the pandemics they deserve.[Footnote⁹](#) Drawing on Emily Martin's statement that 'The body's immunity is not a biological fact independent of cultural and political variables', Preciado brings our attention to the etymological heart of the cognate words 'community' and 'immunity' in *munus* meaning duty or tax. Hence, originally, community consists in those who come together to enjoy the benefits of the public taxation system, while the immune are those who were exempt from payment or performance of duty. During Covid, as Preciado points out, the privileged of the Global North carried on consuming in isolation, while those who are excluded as not immunised or isolated – that is, the producers in the Global South where the expensive vaccines are not available, and the deprivileged lower classes of the North, workers in supermarkets, refuse collectors etc – are left vulnerable to the disease.

What has been exposed by the experience of pandemic then, and now can't be unseen, is the privileged Global North's role as an Elect community. Like Calvin's Christian theological Elect, they are the chosen people, predestined to a privileged existence which is not the result of works, merit, faith nor some form of reasoning. They are simply members of the chosen community because they were born in a certain place, to a certain people, in a certain class at a certain time. All others on the planet, both the privileged North's underclasses and the Global South are condemned (or damned in the Christian conception) to suffer extraction, exploitation, oppression and exclusion in order that the chosen community continue to enjoy their privileges. The most extreme and naked form of this appropriation of the world's goods and resources for the chosen community is, of course, currently seen in the ongoing land-grab and genocide in Gaza.

It is in Gaza that we can see clearly the failure of the public institutions of the Global North to openly address this epistemic shift, far less to act on it. Yet subjectively, for all those individuals who underwent the privileged lockdown, the questions they know that they face in order to understand and come to terms with this world are of this order: If our work does not produce the goods for our consumption, what is our work for? How does

our work compare with the work of the excluded and the deprived? Is it of the same order, significance and purpose? By what mechanisms does the product of the Global South/deprived become our consumables? What, if anything, can or should be done about this imbalance and expropriation of production/consumption?

While in the Global North the public world ignores these questions and seeks to continue as in the pre-covid era, the international art world might claim to be the wee black banana on the table and the joker at the court of privilege, and thus, to be speaking truths to power, but is it not, with its billionaire-organised and owned market and system of galleries, its super-rich global art stars and glamorous cosmopolitan jet-setting and network of openings and residencies and showings, corporate sponsored biennales and festivals, just another symptom of the same Elect Community problem?