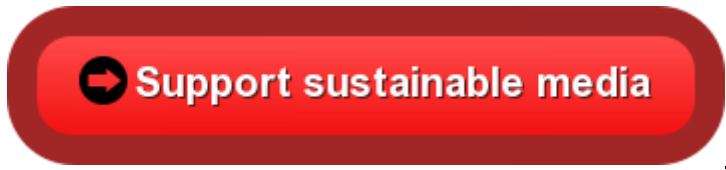


# Rob Wallace's book highlights COVID-19 as a disease of capitalism

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### ***Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of COVID-19***

by Rob Wallace

(Monthly Review Press, 2020, 17.00)

Rob Wallace has been a darling of the left since 2009 with the publication of ***Big Farms Make Big Flu***

([https://monthlyreview.org/product/big\\_farms](https://monthlyreview.org/product/big_farms)

[make\\_big\\_flu/](https://monthlyreview.org/product/big_farms)). His most recent book, ***Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of COVID-19***

(<https://monthlyreview.org/product/dead-epidemiologists-on-the-origins-of-covid-19/>), published in

September 2020 by Monthly Review Press, has been touted as the must-read "leftist" text on the current pandemic.

The book is short. It contains a series of essays and interviews that were previously published. The essays appear in various formats: some seem to be transcribed presentations; others merely have a date, indicating this is the first time they have been published. Some could be taken as manifestos, others appear to follow academic style.

*Dead Epidemiologists* argues that we need to be less concerned with whether Wuhan's wet market was the origin of COVID-19 and instead focus our attention on the structural causes of disease. The answer does not lie in biomedical approaches but in what Wallace calls relational geographies. He's interested not in Orientalizing the wild-food sector but in the processes and mechanisms that regulate it:

"The animals [in Wuhan] were not being sold off the back of a truck or in an alleyway. Think of the permits and payments (and deregulation thereof) involved. Well beyond fisheries, worldwide wild food is an increasingly formalized sector, evermore capitalized by the same sources backing industrial production."



LIVESTOCK AND HUMAN COMMUNITIES. Ebola, Zika and the other coronaviruses have all made their way from hinterlands into the metropolises: "Capital centers, places such as London, New York, and Hong Kong, should be considered our primary disease hotspots."

Industrial food production, where "local circuits [...] operate within the same web of global expropriations," just as the "Wuhan wild-food circuit" did, accelerates the virulence of pathogens: genetic monocultures remove immune responses, and crowded conditions, large animal farm populations, and livestock being fed other livestock all quicken transmission. The entire industry thrives on the lack of governmental control: "Capitalized landscapes turn living organisms into commodities and entire production chains -- animal, producer, processor, and retailer into disease vectors."

It is hardly surprising then that domestic meat-processing facilities in the U.S. have twice the national average rates of COVID-19 infections: "A shipment of corn might start at a farm in Illinois, travel to a grain elevator in Iowa, before heading to a feedlot in Kansas, and then in animal products sent to groceries stores in Chicago." Through all the stages of this process, the workers, almost all of whom are Black, Latino, or immigrants, are often "treated as much as sides of beef as the animals they're tasked to process." Yet the agri-food industry treats potential viruses as an acceptable risk of doing business, downloading these costs onto everyone else. National public health bodies are the ones left to clean up the mess created by this neoliberal trade.

Wallace is critical of institutional approaches in managing the pandemic and critical of governments that are more concerned with securing power than controlling infections. While China applied its full resources to containing the outbreak, he argues, the U.K. and the U.S. did not, a reflection of the neoliberal world's decaying public health systems. The failure of the U.S. to respond to the pandemic did not occur just in 2020, when public health officials ignored the warning signs of COVID-19. It was also visible earlier on, when Donald Trump dismantled the domestic pandemic preparation team, and even earlier, with public health commodified and monetized for profit. As an illustration of the failing public health system, Wallace mentions his own personal experience: he contracted COVID-19 in the spring of 2020. He was diagnosed online, without a test, and received no follow-up care, which he attributes to the failure of the American state.

Nationalize the hospitals; socialize the pharmaceutical industry; ramp up domestic medical production; and force companies to produce hospital ventilators and protective equipment -- these are the types of interventions that Wallace suggests are needed in America. This is not to say that the pandemic should be controlled through the exercise of autocratic power, but through trust,



The book's main point, which is constantly reiterated yet not fully demonstrated, is that the novel coronavirus is linked to the industrial model of agriculture and livestock production, which are propped up to increase the profitability of multinational corporations. But while Wallace affirms several times that coronaviruses are neoliberal diseases that emerge from the global circuits of capital, through travel networks and livestock trading, he does little to explain the underlying mechanisms. He writes, for example, about cities as sources of global capital and hotspots of disease, yet he fails to describe these entangled travel circuits. What are some of the connections between hinterland and metropole? How is agribusiness connected with the global travel network? And how exactly do pathogens spread from wild areas into cities? What exactly do these chains of transmission look like?

Similarly, in relation to Wallace's suggestions of setting up neighborhood brigades, for example, it is unclear how these would work logistically and who would be in charge of such planning -- individuals or the state. Such questions warrant answers, especially since solidarity efforts might not be so easy in societies that are hyper-individualized, ideologically speaking.

In arguing that capitalist food production needs to be socialized to respond to the needs of rural communities, Wallace again leaves out any account of how this can be achieved in contemporary societies that have already accepted the capitalist model as the right way of structuring economic relations.

It is only the last essay of the book that thoroughly engages with the topic in a systematic way. Here Wallace differentiates between beta-coronaviruses and alpha-coronaviruses, and focuses on the bat species that have housed coronaviruses. He also explains how SARS viruses attach themselves to certain enzymes in the human body and that it is these enzyme levels that influence the severity of COVID-19.

By moving away from absolute geographies (i.e., a market in Wuhan) to relational ones and underlining capitalist global metropolises as the source of the virus, Wallace's text conceptualizes COVID-19 as a disease of capitalism. While this is insightful, the book, overall, exemplifies why the left's arguments so often fail. *Dead Epidemiologists* proposes some viable ideas, but they are neither fully contextualized nor rigorously theorized. It thus lacks analysis and reads like propaganda. Ultimately, it accomplishes little beyond superficially addressing themes that have been similarly discussed in the media. Yet Wallace is not a journalist, but an academic, and the left would benefit much more from a rigorous discussion of the structural origins of the COVID-19 pandemic than from a "fast-thinking" text (as **Pierre Bourdieu** (<https://thenewpress.com/books/on-television>) would call it) that regurgitates already published material in order to capitalize on the pandemic.