

Ecology, Democracy and Development: Capitalist Crises and Covid-19

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For the past four months Covid-19 has revealed the contradictions and unsustainability of global capitalism perhaps in a manner that no other single phenomenon has ever done in history. The virus has become the latest and arguably the bleakest reminder that capitalism's systemic dynamics and imperatives, i.e. its relentless drive for competitiveness and profitability, is bound to sooner or later disrupt the very foundations of human existence as a whole. Furthermore, the biological blitzkrieg activated by the coronavirus has arrived at a time when the global political economy has already been going through two other major crises – crisis of 'development' and crisis of democracy – which will be aggravated by the current pandemic. This short essay provides a synopsis of capitalism's triple crisis, which is critical to develop a balanced assessment of what the post-pandemic world may look like.

Coronavirus: Beyond 'Green Capitalism'

The link between capitalism, ecological crisis and Covid-19 has been amply documented. Very briefly, critical biologists and epidemiologists foreground industrial agriculture and global warming as the root causes of the emergence of new pathogens since the 1990s. Factory farming and extractive industries have now reached the last virgin forests and peasant lands in the world, subjecting them to the logic of capitalist markets. Under the invasive pressure of animal husbandry, monocrop production and resource extraction, huge tracts of forests have lost their ecological diversity. The damage on ecological complexity, combined with the disruptive impact of global warming, has forced or allowed previously boxed-in pathogens to leave their natural habitats and hosts. Hence our increasing interaction with and vulnerability to the pathogens for which we have no medical cure or immunity.

Covid-19 has epitomized the fundamental contradiction between the limitedness of our planet and the endlessness of capital accumulation. The 'endless' and 'contradictory' character of capital accumulation is rooted in the fact that capitalism institutionalizes a mode of life that needs to continuously expand, and while doing so, systematically subordinates the 'natural and human substance of society', i.e., land and labour, to the imperatives of the marketplace. That is, capitalism

conditions people's utilization of nature and enjoyment of life to their ability to increase market competitiveness, profitability and productivity. Therefore, it is characterized by a persistent drive to increasingly commodify land and labor, the living substance of the planet.

The result of capitalism's competitive compulsions has been contradictory, to say the least. For, on the one hand, capitalism has enabled massive technological advancements in all spheres of life. This, in turn, has generated, above all, an unprecedented potential to feed, clothe, and accommodate an ever-increasing world population. Yet, on the other hand, as Ellen Meiksins Wood argues, by subordinating all other considerations to the imperatives of market competition, capitalism has also created environmental destruction and pandemics, alongside poverty and homelessness. Billions of people who could be fed and housed are subjected to immense doses of insecurity, living their lives under the constant threat of joblessness, homelessness, loss of status and starvation. In a similar fashion, the environment that could be protected is systematically destroyed for profit, and killer viruses that could be contained are unleashed.

In short, capitalism has had an inherent tendency to expand in a manner unlike any other socio-economic system. Undoubtedly, capitalism's birth and expansion has been a conflict-ridden and often violent process, underlined by dramatic changes in social relations and a 'metabolic rift' in age-old patterns of human interaction with nature. Yet, capitalism has ultimately managed to turn society and nature (however fictitiously) into an 'adjunct' to the market, i.e. the market is no longer a space wherein surplus labor and surplus product are occasionally sold, as has been the case for millennia, but has turned into an imperative for social reproduction as a whole.

What ensues from this brief exposition is two-fold. First, Covid-19 is not an accidental or temporary phenomenon; the virus has not (and any of its future incarnations will not) emerge like a thunderbolt out of a blue sky but have been a constant possibility built into the very structure of market society. Second, Covid-19 has exposed in the starkest way the imminence of the ecological crisis brought about by capitalism's global march. This, in turn, sheds further doubt on the liberal expectation that markets, if provided with right signals, can themselves fix the ecologically destructive impacts of market competition by means of eco-friendly innovations and technical changes. Put differently, it seems that we have neither the time nor resources to create a 'green capitalism'. Even before Covid-19, there were several scholars confirming that even if we did everything 'right', from investments in more efficient to eco-friendly technologies to implementing a global carbon tax, it would still be impossible to run a successful global market economy without causing some form of ecological collapse. For example, 'to keep global warming to only 2 °C simply by technical means, about 80 percent of all of the energy used in the world...would need to be replaced by CO₂-neutral technologies'. Achieving this, as estimated by the entrepreneur and inventor Saul Griffith,

"would require building the equivalent of all the following: a hundred square metres of new solar cells, fifty square metres of new solar-thermal reflectors, and one Olympic swimming pool's volume of genetically engineered algae (for biofuels) every second for the next twenty-five years; one three-hundred-foot-diameter wind turbine every five minutes; one hundred-megawatt geothermal powered steam turbine every eight hours; and one three-gigawatt nuclear power plant every week" (quoted in Magdoff and Bellamy-Foster 2015).

Therefore, the goal of keeping markets and economic growth intact while simultaneously decreasing their negative impact on the ecosystem looks unattainable. The immediacy and severity of the ecologically-induced health crisis forces us to think beyond the mere 'greenwashing' of the markets. Unless the very structure of the global political economy changes, unless we alter the political-economic relations and institutions as well as reorient our personal priorities and expectations in life, we should expect more environmental problems, hence more pandemics in the future.

This ecological barrier also provides the necessary background against which to analyze two other, yet interconnected crisis of global capitalism: crisis of 'development' and crisis of 'democracy', both of which have been exacerbated by the present crisis and are critical to develop a balanced assessment of what the post-pandemic world may look like.

Capitalism and the End of 'Development'

The term 'development' has always been contentious, bearing different consequences and implying different legacies for the Global South and the Global North. Yet, regardless of the spatial and temporal differences that mark the North-South divide, it seems that capitalism has been hardly generating any form of 'development' in both milieu for a long time. The vast majority of the Global South, with the exception of a few countries that have managed to establish a manufacturing base, has been doomed to permanent underdevelopment due to, before everything else, the structure of the global political and economic system. In particular, the massive technological and infrastructural gap between the northern and southern countries, combined with continuing neo-imperialist and neo-colonial practices, have left only little space for capitalist 'development' in the Global South.

In the Global North the overwhelming majority of workers have been working longer hours for stagnating or declining real wages since the 1970s. The pressure of increased global economic competition and global capital mobility on the one hand, and decades of supply-side policies on the other have exhausted most of the economic and social rights the working classes previously obtained. The new reality of fiscal austerity, high unemployment, stagnant wages, deteriorating public services, long work hours, precarious jobs and lower social mobility has been concealed for a while by a debt-driven growth, the unsustainability of which has been bitterly testified by millions of people since the 2008 crisis. Unsurprisingly, since the financial crash the underlying problems of the world economy have not been remedied; to the contrary, global economic growth 'has been lower than in any decade since World War II...while aggregate debt (the total debt of governments, corporations and households), already mountainous before the 2008, has more than doubled in size'. All in all, today market imperatives govern human lives almost worldwide, yet with no or little prospect of capitalist 'development' for a large majority of the world population.

Capitalism's Worsening Democratic Deficit

The crisis of capitalist development is firmly connected to the crisis of liberal democracy. This is not only because the imperatives of competitive austerity have increasingly undermined the states' fiscal ability to tackle socio-economic grievances, hence debilitating the legitimacy and usefulness of democratic institutions and actors. Equally important, decades of austerity have forced capitalism to go back to its 'default' settings in terms of its relation to democracy and mass politics. Let me explain.

Capitalism and democracy have always been strange bedfellows. For, capitalism owes its existence to its ability to continuously de-politicize very political issues. In other words, capitalism creates the fiction of 'self-regulating' markets by systematically cutting off essentially political issues (for ex. control of labor, production, property and nature) from the political arena, displacing them to a separate 'economic' sphere. Yet, the paradox is that it is precisely the de-democratization and privatization of the 'economic' sphere that may make thinkable a political arena in which subjects are formally equal despite their socioeconomic inequalities. In other words, as capitalism effectively denies any rights of participation in decisions related to the organization of production and nature, thereby shielding itself from any kind of democratic accountability at the workplace, it may also create and widen a narrowly understood 'political' space consisting of formally equal subjects.

Indeed, during the first three decades following World War II, that's precisely what happened in the

Global North. Massive productivity increases, alongside working-class struggles, allowed for steady increases in wages, job security, institutionalized wage bargaining, expansion of welfare state, improvements in the living conditions of the majority of the labouring masses as well as the expansion of civil and political liberties. Yet, this brief period of generalized prosperity and stability also facilitated the incorporation of the western working classes into capitalist institutions and ideology. The demands for higher wages were effectively separated from the demands for radical equality and political autonomy within the institutionalised mechanisms of wage bargaining. As Charlie Post argues, mere 'reliance on routine collective bargaining, lobbying, and electing pro-labor candidates to office' pacified, bureaucratized and depoliticised most of the radical elements within the western working classes, causing them to gradually give up and forget earlier forms of working class solidarity and protest such as massive and long-lasting strikes, occupations of workplaces and public spaces and street demonstrations. A hypercompetitive, consumerist and politically docile subjectivity, fortified and controlled by new technologies of surveillance and debt, has eventually prevailed among the working classes, rendering increasingly difficult to imagine a world beyond capitalism.

The implication is that when the economic downturn came in the 1970s, working classes were by and large demobilized, devoid of most of their earlier radicalism to resist the looming neoliberal turn in the global political economy. Forms of popular sovereignty and socio-economic rights that prevailed during the so-called 'golden age' of capitalism could now be sent to the neoliberal slaughterhouse without much outcry. Against this background, it is scarcely surprising that since the end of the 1970s capitalism has persistently removed the institutions of 'economic' decision-making from democratic scrutiny either by resorting to explicitly authoritarian measures or by creating technocratic institutions of governance. The remaining 'democratic' institutions have been unable to change anything substantial in the lives of ordinary people amidst growing social inequality, high unemployment and lower social mobility. As a result, especially since the new millennium, the masses, disappointed by 'establishment' political parties, have increasingly turned to right-wing and left-wing 'populist' movements for transformative politics.

On the left, populism has been structurally disadvantaged in carrying out the tasks it set out for itself. As evidenced by the retreat of the leftist 'pink tide' in Latin America and Syriza in Greece, the ability of 21st century reformist left governments to deliver anti-neoliberal policies has been severely constrained by the structural requirements of globalized production and finance. The mobility of global capital and fluctuations in primary commodity prices, combined with capital's ability to withhold investment and employment in the face of unfavorable government policies, renders a left reformist strategy to overcome neoliberalism very hard to implement on a sustainable basis. Right-wing populism too has been unable (if not utterly unwilling) to 'reform' neoliberalism. Despite the rise of a mercantilist discourse among some of its proponents, right-wing populism is equally subjected to the rules of competition in a globalized marketplace; hence compliance with, instead of defiance of neoliberalism has remained to be the norm. Yet, unlike populism on the left, right-wing populists have taken a xenophobic, sexist and nationalist stance. They have usually associated the negative outcomes of neoliberalism (e.g. chronically high unemployment, precarious jobs, decline of public services etc.) with immigrants, Muslims, LGBTQ people, and the intrusion of foreign and domestic 'enemies' (real or imaginary). Right-wing populisms have taken many forms, differing from country to country; yet all right-wing populisms have shared a reactionary, chauvinist and authoritarian way of doing politics.

What's Next?: Socialism or the 'Varieties of Fascism'

All in all, even before Covid-19, capitalism seems to have been leading the vast majority of the world to a future which is ecologically impossible, economically futile and politically catastrophic. The implication is that any meaningful attempt at solving the present, and future crises needs to take the

bull by the horn. There is literally no choice to be made between 'capitalism' and 'capitalism with a human face'. As long as the underlying dynamics of our lives remain the same, as long as we keep treating nature and human beings as commodities, no cosmetic surgery will do. To the contrary, historical experience suggests that such minimal interventions will sooner or later backfire, re-legitimizing capitalism pure and simple. The only way to 're-embed' our economies and save our lives from ecological and social collapse is by intervening in the very heart of the beast: land and human beings need to be taken out of the market. The beast is not tame-able; it needs to be killed.

Obviously, such a decisive way out of this conundrum rests on the organizational ability of socialists to radicalize and internationalize societal demands for change. Imagining and realizing a non-capitalist future, albeit a herculean task, is the only feasible solution to the economic, political and ecological deadlock in which we have found ourselves. Undoubtedly, this requires a working-class strategy that seeks to challenge the limits of legality and transcending the dominant forms of individual subjectivity and national identity. Winning any significant and enduring gains will require massive resistance on a global scale, and the construction of a new mode of life that will nurture egalitarian, ecological, and internationalist modes of being and solidarity.

Should the socialist alternative fail to emerge, it is very likely that the pandemic will exacerbate the present deadlock in the global political economy, ultimately leading to further radicalization of already-existing far-right tendencies. As alluded to earlier, capitalism has always had an in-built tendency to undermine democracy. During the inter-war years, for example, fascism emerged not as a 'political freeze of or simple reaction' to capitalism as often argued, but was underlined by the aim of 'rationalizing' capitalism. Against what they conceived to be a 'wasteful', 'egoistic' and 'rentier' capitalism, devoid of social harmony and subject to cycles of boom and bust, fascist regimes aimed to reorient economic life on the basis of totalitarian 'productivist' ideologies. In the face of inflationary pressures and militant trade unions, fascisms aimed to deepen the commodification of labor, and while doing so, they obliterated or subordinated the potentially radical aspects of modernity (such as radical interpretations of 'equality', 'democracy' and 'rule of law') to capitalism.

In the contemporary context, it does not require great foresight to predict that capitalism will resort to increasingly authoritarian measures to pre-empt and suppress societal reactions (spontaneous or organized) to its unsolvable problems. Furthermore, most states, equipped with mass surveillance technologies and 'extraordinary' measures to rule for indefinite periods of time, are very likely to respond to societal reactions against global warming, economic woes and lack of democracy by sending the last crumbs of political liberalism to the dustbin of history. New security concerns, legitimized through medicalized discourses, are likely to gain prominence within and among polities, leading to the rise of fascist or fascist-like regimes around the world. These new forms of governance will seek to vindicate capitalism by ever more aggressively individualizing, externalizing and medicalizing the responsibility for capitalism's failures. In the face of 'careless' citizens who do not pay enough attention to social-distancing instructions, as well as 'invasive' immigrants who steal domestic jobs and bring in new pathogens, civic universal ideas will be totally discarded to maintain the health of capitalism. Furthermore, one should not forget that this contemporary wave of fascism will 'find itself better placed than historical fascism when trying to court the workers, the unemployed and the fearful lower-middle-class'. For, while in the 1920s and early '30s 'the Nazis found the unemployed, who had turned en masse to the Communists, almost unapproachable, today, the situation has clearly changed'. Therefore, unless a socialist alternative is immediately built, one can expect that the reactions to capitalism's failures will usher in a new era of capitalist barbarism.