Pandemics: The State As Cure or Cause?

Kevin Carson

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Looking at the news on the COVID-19 (or coronavirus) pandemic, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that this is one of those lifeboat situations in which a crisis cannot be managed without a resort to large-scale social coercion. China and South Korea seem to have turned the tide on the pandemic, with a reduced number of new cases each day. But they've accomplished this through draconian social controls — travel bans, restrictions on public assembly, and lockdowns.

But it's worth stepping back and taking a look at how we got to be in this lifeboat in the first place.

Pandemics, above all, are a direct result of connectivity. The bubonic plague, which devastated most of Europe, the Middle East, and China in the 14th century, was a recurring rat-borne illness limited to the Central Asian steppes until Silk Road caravans carried it to densely populated areas. In our own heavily connected age, pandemics are becoming a recurring phenomenon every few years. The most deadly so far was the Influenza of 1918, but in this century we've had SARS, MERS, Ebola, and the current coronavirus pandemic.

Globalized logistic chains, which connect distributed manufacturing networks and then ship the products of offshored industry to retail shelves in the Global North, are mostly creatures of the state. According to Alfred Chandler (*The Visible Hand*), without U.S. government land grants and other railroad subsidies a high-volume continental system of trunk lines, and hence national wholesale and retail networks, would have been impossible. And it was the creation of this unified national market that enabled the consolidation of industry into large national corporations. Michael Piore and Charles Sabel argued (in *The Second Industrial Revolution*) that without such policies to tip the balance toward centralized mass production, American manufacturing would likely have instead been distributed in local industrial districts.

The large-scale export of Western capital and offshoring of industrial production to the Global South, over the past four decades, was actively facilitated by the state in support of capitalist interests. The primary function of both foreign aid and World Bank loans, for decades, has been to subsidize the transportation and utilities infrastructure without which the profitable offshoring of production would have been impossible. And outsourcing of production to low-wage countries depends heavily on patent and trademark laws — the centerpiece of virtually every "Free Trade Agreement" rubber-stamped by governments around the world — which give transnational corporations a legal monopoly over disposal of goods produced on contract by independent job

shops. And the containerships that transport all those offshored goods have a much better bottom line thanks to the US Navy keeping the sea lanes open at taxpayer expense.

Indeed, the central focus of United States foreign policy — and that of the rest of the industrialized capitalist countries — has been to impose connectivity on the world. The United States entered World War Two in large part because FDR's policy analysts determined that the US economy depended — at an absolute minimum — on the markets and resources of a "Grand Area" encompassing much of the Global South, and that Japan's "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" threatened to withdraw much of that area from the global market. The postwar American order was designed to ensure that the resources and markets of the former colonial world remained integrated with Western corporate economies, and that no major power would ever again threaten to withdraw a significant part of the world into autarky.

The same goes for the airline industry and the current scale of world travel. Every day millions of people around the world fly on commercial airlines — an industry essentially created by the state. In the United States the civil aviation infrastructure — airports, air traffic control, etc. — was originally created at taxpayer expense. And civilian jumbo jets were only economically feasible because of the Cold War heavy bomber program of the late '40s that made the expensive dies profitable.

In short, what we call "globalization" was every bit as much a product of state social engineering as Stalin's Five Year Plans, and would have been impossible otherwise. And from the standpoint of efficiency, most of this connectivity is just a Rube Goldberg contraption. The overwhelming majority of the goods we buy would be more efficiently produced in smaller factories, in the communities or regions where we live. And that would almost certainly be the case if it weren't for the social engineering project I described above.

Note that I didn't limit it to *Western* industrialized capitalist countries. The Chinese Road and Belt Initiative is well on the way to integrating the Eurasian World Island and to some extent Africa on a scale that puts the previous efforts of Western imperialism to shame.

I'm not interested in jumping into the Twitter Left debates between Marxist-Leninists and libertarian socialists over whether China is capitalist or socialist, or whether it's capable of imperialism. Whatever the Chinese state's ideological or class motivations, the operational purpose of its drive to integrate the Eurasian landmass is connectivity through high-volume logistic chains and travel infrastructures that span half the globe. And I'm pretty sure that to a virus, one train, truck, or containership looks the same as another regardless of whether it's capitalist or socialist.

So the state itself has put us in exactly the kind of emergency situation that, seemingly, only state emergency measures are sufficient to mitigate.

Some states, of course, are less competent than others. Way less. Since coronavirus arrived in the United States, Trump's behavior has been fully consistent with the hypothesis that he's really a machine sent back by Skynet to exterminate the human race. He's responded to the pandemic the same way Mayor Vaughn responded to sharks in *Jaws*. Multiple witnesses say he not only downplayed the severity of the crisis, but actively discouraged testing in the early days, because lower infection numbers would be better for both the stock market and his reelection chances.

The Trump administration blocked use of a coronavirus test approved by the World Health Organization. It blocked efforts by Dr. Helen Chu, a flu researcher in Seattle, to repurpose a flu-testing kit for coronavirus. Testing rates per million people in the United States are an order of magnitude or more lower than in China, South Korea, and Italy. Now Trump's banning, by executive order, the use of foreign-made medical supplies.

Aside from the straight-up venality of endangering millions of lives for the sake of his electability, there's also incompetence on a scale sufficient to create its own event horizon. Officially overseeing the national response is young earth creationist Mike Pence, with Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner serving as unofficial go-to guy. And every time Trump opens his mouth, he gives another false assurance or bit of advice that makes the entire epidemiological community cringe.

Even in China, which seems to have had the greatest success in turning the tide, the initial coverup almost certainly made things worse than they otherwise would have been. Still, Chinese state malfeasance pales in comparison to the Trump administration, whose handling of the crisis couldn't be worse if it were deliberately *trying* to maximize casualties.

And even in China, state efforts were piggybacked on self-organized peer-to-peer networks, and heavily integrated with them. This is generally the case in all societies stricken by disaster — the theme of Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell*. Willow Brugh, a scholar on distributed disaster response, also has much to say on this.

So, even stipulating that large-scale social coercion seems to have stabilized the situation in China and South Korea, it was also large-scale social coercion — centuries of it, on a global scale — that created the artificial set of circumstances to which governments are responding.

What's more, large-scale social coercion is operating in many ways to hinder non-state responses to the pandemic, and make us more vulnerable to it.

At *Reason*, Nick Gillespie confidently states that "there's every reason to believe that regular Americans are doing everything they can and should do to minimize the spread of the disease, from being more careful about hygeine [sic] to voluntary 'social distancing' and minimizing contact." But in fact, far more even than in other Western countries governed by the wage system and landlordism, the demands of employers and landlords are an active hindrance to such social distancing.

The great majority of Americans attempting to deal with this pandemic face the near-impossibility of actually complying with common-sense advice. Many people are in precarious jobs who will be fired if they take off work for safety reasons, even if they could afford to. But it's a moot point; the vast majority of low-income workers — the kind in service jobs that involve serving food or selling clothing to the public, taking care of the sick and elderly, etc., and therefore pose the greatest risk of spreading infectious disease — don't have paid sick leave, and would have to choose between going to work sick and being evicted.

In any case, given that the state has backed us into a corner that the state will likely play some role in getting us out of, stateless responses still play a vital role in mitigating the damage resulting from the state's inept response.

One of the most important — possibly the most important — forms of damage control is mutual aid for those who can't afford to self-quarantine. This includes, obviously, organizing financial and material support for those who don't have paid sick leave. But it also includes mass pressure campaigns on employers, landlords, and public utilities, as well as boycotts and demonstrations in solidarity with those who are evicted, expected to work sick, or not given paid leave. You can find a lot of recommendations for mutual aid and solidarity in this great crowdsourced document.

But given the hand we're dealt, our range of immediate responses to the current pandemic is highly limited at best, consisting mostly of damage control. Ultimately our response has to center on long-term courses of action to keep this kind of thing from happening again, or to reduce our future vulnerability to it.

Such actions include relocalizing economies, shifting production from wage labor to the commons and social economy, and building high-capacity mutual aid networks for pooling risks and costs. We need an economy that's less connected, with less of our stuff coming from thousands of miles away and fewer people hopping on jet planes every day, and where people in non-essential work can stay home and distance themselves without permission from a boss and without risking homelessness. The things we need to do, as long-term efforts to build a post-capitalist, post-state society, are pretty much the same things to which we are likely to be increasingly driven to by the ongoing economic necessities of this crisis.

In *Accumulation Crisis* James O'Connor wrote that, during economic downturns and periods of high unemployment or underemployment, workers of necessity meet as many of their needs in the informal and household economy. And in periods of permanent, structural crisis such as capitalism has been experiencing in recent decades, some of the shift tends to be permanent.

At the same time, recent economic crises have coincided with ongoing technological progress in cheap, small-scale tools suited to direct production for use in the social economy. As far back as the 1970s, anarchist thinkers like Colin Ward and Karl Hess were calling for neighborhood workshops with pooled machinery and tools for putting defunct appliances back into operation. Keith Paton, in a pamphlet addressed to the Claimants' Union in the UK in 1972, suggested the unemployed use such workshops as community factories to produce for their own and each other's consumption.

In the decades since then the price of digitally controlled tools scaled to the small workshop has fallen by an order of magnitude or more, coupled with a similar increase in their capabilities. The Maker revolution since the turn of this century includes, among other things, the Global Village Construction Set — an entire ecosystem of open-source manufacturing tools developed by the Open Source Ecology group at its Factor e Farm demo site. Some of the tabletop machinery (cutting table, router, 3D printer, etc.) is within the range of affordable of a neighborhood workshop; other, more expensive tools (induction furnace, aluminum smelter, etc.) would probably require cost-pooling by several such federated workshops. But all are individually much cheaper than their commercial counterparts, and collectively are capable of the kinds of industrial production that once required a million dollar-plus mass production factory.

Aside from that, most people already possess a wide range of under-utilized household tools and appliances — power tools, sewing machines, etc. — that, pooled with their neighbors, could replace a major share of purchases through the cash nexus. Tool libraries for sharing under-used equipment and saving money on duplicate purchases; home-based production for the neighborhood (micro-bakeries, micro-breweries, plumbing and electrical work, etc.) using the spare capacity of tools people already own anyway; non-capitalist and cooperative car-sharing, baby-sitting, elder care, etc.; community gardens and edible landscaping; all these things together can reduce the need for wage income streams by a significant amount and create that much of a margin of independence.

The history of unemployed people putting their idle skills and tools to work for each other goes back (at least) to striking craft workers in early 19th century Britain who set up independent production and exchanged their wares through a labor notes system. Among other examples of similar practices were the Unemployed Cooperative Relief Organization and the Unemployed Exchange Association in the Depression-era United States.

The same goes for pooling resources against calamity and providing material support for the unemployed in the solidarity economy. During and immediately after the 2007–08 crash, a num-

ber of people proposed counter-institutions to cushion the unemployed and underemployed against the worst effects of the Great Recession. Dougald Hine and Nathan Cravens proposed a collection of community-supported organizations: coworking spaces like Media Labs and Fab Labs, and resources for self-support like community gardens with associated free Open Cafes. At the time I proposed expanding the model to include housing: cheap, open-source, bare-bones co-housing, perhaps on models including YMCA hostels, RV parks with water and power hookups, or the government-owned, migrant-managed camp in *The Grapes of Wrath.*

What all these things have going for them is superior efficiency. Capitalism has grown up over the centuries in an environment of artificially cheap land and resources resulting from enclosure or colonization, socialized costs and risks, and heavily subsidized waste, with an industrial model designed to maximize production inputs and build in obsolescence in order to avoid idle capacity. It's drowning in administrative overhead and riddled with information and incentive problems resulting from absentee ownership and hierarchical control. In the counter-economy, on the other hand, all the benefits are internalized by those who contribute the effort and knowledge rather than those who extract rents. Because it's self-managed and organized on a largely permissionless or peer-to-peer basis, the administrative overhead is nil. And because, like a junkyard dog, it has been forced to maximize the output of the limited material resources available to it, the counter-economy can thrive on the discarded waste of the capitalist economy.

The superior efficiency of the commons-based counter-economy enables people, in Vinay Gupta's phrase, to "buy out at the bottom."

> Fuller's "do more with less" was a method we could use to attain self-sufficiency with a much lower capital cost than "buy out at the top." An integrated, whole-systems-thinking approach to a sustainable lifestyle – the houses, the gardening tools, the monitoring systems – all of that stuff was designed using inspiration from Fuller and later thinkers inspired by efficiency. The slack – the waste – in our old ways of life were consuming 90 percent of our productive labor to maintain.

> A thousand dollar a month combined fuel bill is your life energy going down the drain because the place you live sucks your life way in waste heat, which is waste money, which is waste time. Your car, your house, the portion of your taxes which the Government spends on fuel, on electricity, on waste heat… all of the time you spent to earn that money is wasted to the degree those systems are inefficient systems, behind best practices!

On a larger scale, the new municipalist movements in Barcelona, Madrid, Bologna, Utrecht and Preston in Europe, in Cleveland and Jackson in the U.S., and related movements like the Zapatista movement in Chiapas and the neighborhood and communalist offshoots of Bolivarianism in Venezuela, are actively engaged in constructing integrated, commons-based local economies.

Such an economy, fully developed at the community level, might include micro-factories and hackerspaces, land trusts with cheap cohousing constructed either with local and vernacular materials or with new ultra-cheap techniques like 3D printing, ride-sharing services organized on a cooperative basis, free municipal wireless, free coworking spaces and community spaces for food carts, community currencies, etc.

Meanwhile, the vulnerability of globalized just-in-time capitalism is confronting capital itself with a radically changed set of incentives. If globalized logistic chains are one of the chief causes

of pandemics, they are also extremely vulnerable to it. To take a couple of examples, minor in themselves, John Feffer at *Foreign Policy in Focus* reports a conversation with an architect who said he's been cut off from his Chinese supplier of carpets. And at a local garden and seed store which also sells other self-sufficiency products, I was told that they were out of wood stoves until further notice for the same reason.

The disruption and intermittent breakdown of fragile global supply and distribution chains will likely lead to a considerable amount of economic relocalization. As Andrew Nikiforuk writes at *The Tyee*:

> Viewed through the lens of climate crisis survival, the pandemic has produced some good news. Reduced economic activity in China, the world's largest oil user, has already resulted in a 25 per cent drop in greenhouse gas emissions and blue skies. Container ship traffic across the Pacific has dropped by half to 100 sailings a month. Auto sales are down 80 per cent and exports have fallen off by nearly 20 per cent.
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> In this regard, the virus is readying us for what could be the new reality. To really address the climate emergency, we must slow down economic activity, reduce trade, re-localize economies and severely restrict travel.

By any legitimate standard of efficiency, global logistic chains extending from factories in Shenzhen to Walmart shelves in California are entirely irrational. Much of the actual machinery used in Chinese job shops — general-purpose CNC tools — is ideally suited to production on the industrial district model for a local market. The only "efficiency" served by the transoceanic supply chains is access to cheap labor. Otherwise the most efficient thing would be for those job shops to ignore the patents and trademarks of the Western corporations they're producing on contract for, keep right on producing the same goods without the Swoosh or Apple, and sell them — at a price reflecting actual production cost, without the several hundred percent intellectual property markup — to the local population. Similar shops, in relocalized manufacturing economies, could produce directly for communities in the United States.

As I recall, there were rumors that the Chinese leadership seriously considered taking such action in 2008. Maybe this time will be the charm. As logistic chains become disrupted and unpredictable, it's certainly time for those of us on this end of the chain to consider rebuilding industry on a local level.

And all sorts of things that have been continually dismissed as impossible or unfeasible for years, countless rules that have been considered unbreakable, have been radically reconsidered and revised in just the past few weeks. All our lives we've been told that this artificial scarcity, that irrationality, is just part of the nature of things and can't be changed. And now, at the stroke of a pen, it's being done away with.

For example, after twenty years of false promises about remote working and teleconferencing, the potential is finally being rapidly embraced as a public health measure. All the jobs that could have been done over the fiber optic lines all these years instead of face-to-face, but weren't, are now either being done that way or well on their way to it. Local communities are imposing rent moratoria.

It would be nice if people got used to such "extraordinary" and "emergency" measures, which were feasible all along, and they became the new normal. Don't accept a return to the status quo.

The coronavirus pandemic, and the overdue economic slowdown it triggered, are black swan events whose ultimate outcome is anyone's guess. A large number of extremely complex, extremely interconnected systems are being disrupted and things are ripe to recrystallize into an entirely different structure.

The last crisis on this scale was the Great Recession of 2008, and things came out of it beyond anyone's imagining at the time. A lot of idealistic young people in their late teens and 20s voted for Obama based on his progressive-sounding rhetoric, only to be betrayed. Instead of bailing out debtors, workers, and consumers, and restructuring the economy, he bailed out banks and auto companies and restored the status quo. The generation that experienced this betrayal went on to form the backbone of Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and NoDAPL, and to fuel the Sanders insurgencies of 2016 and this year. They've lived through a decade of precarious work, unpaid internships, no health insurance, and moving back in with their parents. They've been mocked and dismissed by a neoliberal establishment, and seen two attempts at working through the system in the Democratic primaries sabotaged.

By every indication, we're on our way to another Great Recession or worse. Pretty much everyone under 40 has shared the same formative experience of repeated betrayal by the establishment. If the last crisis gave us Occupy and the Sanders insurgency, I suspect those movements will pale in comparison to the response this time. People won't be nearly as patient this time, or settle for the same halfway measures. We're tired of being fucked with.

So we've got all these complex systems being disrupted, and we've got a huge portion of the public who are fed up and ready to force through something new. What new configuration will emerge when some form of order reestablishes itself? Who can say, although I think the themes I discussed above of economic relocalization and direct production for use in the commons are as good a guess as any of the general direction of change. In any case we're at a tipping point, and it's time to push as hard as we can to affect the outcome in a positive direction.

What might this push look like?

I recently read a fictional account of a tipping point brought on by an economic crisis, in Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140.* By way of background, the millions of precarious people living in flooded Lower Manhattan were devastated by a hurricane, with countless thousands moving into emergency refugee camps set up in Central Park. Increasingly out of patience with the lack of food or sanitation, the angry crowds migrated into Upper Manhattan, where luxury residential high-rises hundreds of stories tall sat mostly empty, held as real estate investments by absentee owners. Mercenary security firms working for these absentee owners fired on climate refugees seeking shelter in the empty buildings.

Amelia Black, a popular media figure whose program was followed by hundreds of millions of viewers in the cloud, shared aerial video footage of the hurricane devastation, the empty luxury high-rises, and the mercenaries firing on destitute crowds. Then she said this:

> So you know what? I'm sick of the rich. I just am. I'm sick of them running this whole planet for themselves. They're wrecking it! So I think we should take it back, and take care of it. And take care of each other as part of that. No more table scraps. You know that Householders' Union that I was telling you about? I think it's time for everyone to join that union, and for that union to go on strike. An everybody strike. I think there should be an everybody strike. Now. Today....

What I mean by a householders' strike is you just stop paying your rents and mortgages … maybe also your student loans and insurance payments. Any private debt you've taken on just to make you and your family safe. The daily necessities of existence. The union is declaring all those to be odious debts, like some kind of blackmail on us, and we're demanding they be renegotiated … So, we stop paying and call that the Jubilee? … That's an old name for this kind of thing. After we start this Jubilee, until there's a restructuring that forgives a lot of our debt, we aren't paying anything.

You might think that not paying your mortgage would get you in trouble, and it's true that if it was just you, that might happen. But when everyone does it, that makes it a strike. Civil disobedience. A revolution. So everyone needs to join in. Won't be that hard. Just don't pay your bills!

We're being hit by a global pandemic that's the direct result of a hyper-connected global capitalist system imposed on us by states. Besides killing millions of people, it forces millions of the most vulnerable to choose between contagion and unemployment or homelessness. And it's triggering an economic crisis that will most likely result in unemployment and homelessness on an even larger scale. The management of this crisis, the outgrowth of a set of artificial circumstances created by state violence, may well entail some unavoidable level of state action.

So do what you need to get through it. Take advantage of whatever aid the state offers. Comply with state measures that seem like common sense, like quarantines and restrictions on large gatherings. If pressure from the state causes your employer to offer paid medical leave, or the local government imposes a moratorium on your rent, take whatever you can get.

But let all the other expedients we adopt to survive through this crisis, to help each other survive it, be the seeds of a society where we can live without fear of it happening again.

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