

Lifting the Mask of Capitalist Disaster

The Coronavirus Response

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From official disregard and denial to mismanaged response, each day the COVID-19 crisis brings into ever sharpening clarity the hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of the current ruling class. Claims of American exceptionalism and greatness are revealed to be a crumbling mask for the systemic rot that pervades.

One does not have to be a radical to be appalled by the utter depravity of the conservative establishment's response to the crisis. We watched Republican lawmakers who have tax-funded paid sick leave for themselves vote against a proposal for working-class people to get paid sick leave. Right-wing lawmakers stalled Coronavirus legislation in an attempt to sneak abortion restrictions into the bill. But it is not only conservative leaders that have been exposed as bankrupt, but also establishment liberal centrists. After listening to months of establishment Democrats during primary debates shoot down mild social democratic proposals for universal healthcare and student debt cancellation with the neoliberal mantra "how are you gonna pay for that?," we saw the Federal Reserve pull \$1.5 trillion — enough to wipe out almost all US student loan debt — out of a hat to inject into the stock market just to calm already-wealthy investors. The Coronavirus bill Nancy Pelosi championed as guaranteeing paid sick leave left out 80% of workers, in order to appease business owners. That was only the beginning, as the Trump administration has moved to bail out the wealthy owners of the cruise ship, hotel, airline, oil, and natural gas industries, while not even considering bailing out the many low-income families who are afraid of school closings because schools provide many children with the only meals they get.

This current global pandemic is an opportunity for the capitalists. They are ever poised to take advantage of public confusion and alienation to dig their tentacles even deeper into the fabric of society. They are already pushing all kinds of for-profit online education schemes on K-12 public schools and higher education — all forms of "economic shock therapy." The Trump administration is not missing a beat either by maneuvering to funnel \$700 billion to the wealthy and cut payroll taxes by weakening social security. Moments like this call for a vocal left applying counter-pressure from below.

Neoliberal logic is that we don't need the "big government" (a nonsense concept) addressing social and material needs because the private sector, and the all-wise "invisible hand of the market" will take care of it. The Coronavirus exposed that lie in short order. With few exceptions, the private sector has been at best useless for dealing with the crisis and at worst an active obstruction to a humane response. At the local level it is largely the public sector — such as local public school PTAs working with local school districts and public health departments — that has stepped up to meet people's needs, as ordinary people are organizing mutual aid projects with the resources available to them. Meanwhile the private sector is arguing about why business owners shouldn't have to pay their employees sick leave.

Disaster Capitalism or Capitalism as Disaster?

In Naomi Klein's book *The Shock Doctrine* she explores how capitalists use disasters such as earthquakes, floods, wars, famines, epidemics, and so on to push unpopular neoliberal policy changes on societies during the chaos and shock. Klein focuses mainly on the post-WWII period and the rise of what scholars call neoliberalism, especially as represented by economist Milton Friedman and his Chicago school of economics which pushed capitalist "free market" ideology as the answer to the world's problems even outside the economic sphere.

Black radical political scientist Cedric Robinson, in his earlier classic work *Black Marxism*, showed that what Klein later called “disaster capitalism” was not a new phenomenon emerging in the post-war global order, but that the bourgeoisie, or capitalist class, was born of disaster: “In the beginning, before they could properly be described as bourgeoisie, these merchants traveled from region to region, their survival a matter of their mobility and their ability to capitalize on the frequent ruptures and breakdowns of the reproduction of populations sunk into the manorial soil.” The social and infrastructural rot, stagnation, and political and economic degradation of European life is what created the bourgeoisie:

“Into this depressed land where few were free of the authority of an intellectually backward and commercially unimaginative ruling class, where famine and epidemics were the natural order of things, and where the sciences of the Ancient World had long been displaced as the basis of intellectual development by theological fables and demonology, appeared the figure to which European social theorists, Liberal and Marxist, attribute the generation of Western civilization: the bourgeoisie.”

In the important work *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism*, radical historian Gerald Horne explains that not only was the bourgeoisie born of disaster, but that — contrary to both liberal and orthodox Marxist notions that the bourgeoisie was a force of enlightenment that, in the words of Marx, “rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life” — the story of the rise of the bourgeoisie is the story not of rescue, but of an apocalypse unleashed on the world: the three horsemen of that apocalypse being the intertwined forces of slavery, white supremacy, and capitalism.

All of this is to say that a term like “disaster capitalism” is redundant. Capitalism was born of disaster, survived on disaster, and spread disaster globally. Capitalism is disaster, and during moments of crisis it extends its reach.

Collective Response to the Crisis

Now is a time to reject capitalist economic shock therapy, and to instead make strong demands for universal healthcare, universal childcare, universal housing, and paid sick leave, as the pandemic makes it clear how all of these things are not “free handouts,” but serve the public interest. In the immediate situation we need free covid-19 testing, a ban on evictions, a rent/mortgage freeze, a moratorium on utility bills and parking fees, and rent/fee-free public housing. Water, electricity, gas, internet, and telecommunications must be treated as public services, not market commodities. There must be free food distribution to vulnerable people who do not have the means or ability to acquire food. Workers who are still required to show up and interact with the public during the pandemic — such as grocery store and drug store workers — should receive hazard pay for the greater risk they are taking on to serve our communities.

Also in our list of demands should be increased funding to women’s shelters for women and their children who need a safe place to quarantine/social distance. The reality is, social distancing comes with an increase in domestic violence. Further we must demand the abolition of ICE and the release of all people currently detained by ICE/CBP and other immigration authorities, and the phasing out of the prison industrial complex. Prisons and detention centers are public health

nightmares during a pandemic and it is nothing short of cruelty to keep people caged without access to the things they need to be healthy.

The three-headed hydra of climate crisis, economic crisis, and public health crisis make it clear that capitalism is an enemy of humanity. Socialism from below is the way forward. Socialize the means of production and expand the public sector.

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