

Editorial Introduction

COVID-19, Capitalism and Contagion

“Towards the end of the twentieth century a sickness struck the world. Not everyone died, but all suffered from it.”
(Samir Amin, 2003, 7)

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In times of panic (or pandemic), it is prudent to take stock of one’s path to folly and plan for exit. It has been over forty years since Thatcher and monetarism, thirty years since the Canada-US Free trade agreement came into effect, and twenty years since the launch of the Euro. More recently, 2020 marks twelve years since the Great Recession and bank bailouts began, ten years since the turn to stimulus and sharp return to austerity, and three years since the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. These historical milestones already offered an opportunity for a retrospective with future implications; however, 2020 will undoubtedly be remembered as the year of the virus with all the attendant hardship and hope that might bring.

Circulating since late 2019 through global trade and travel connections from its epicentre in Wuhan, China, by early March 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic. Soon, some eighty countries had implemented lockdown measures to curb the spread, from restrictions on the movement of people, to commerce and border closures.

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Stalwarts of neoliberal governance quickly became bastions of state intervention: from stimulus and neo-mercantilism to seizing the means of production and interfering with circulation and accumulation (ILO, 2020). Proving the Marxian insight that capital is value in motion, lockdown breeds a new ill: grim forecasts for 2020-21 predict economic recession harkening back to the depths of the Great Depression (IMF, 2020).

By the end of April 2020, more than three million were infected worldwide, resulting in over 225 thousand deaths. Global unemployment levels spiked. In Canada, all job growth since the mid-1980s had been effectively wiped out as more than one third of working age Canadians (more than seven million people) sought basic income support through the new Canada Emergency Response Benefit, far surpassing the half million jobs lost in the first year of the 2008-9 recession (Subramaniam, 2020). South of the border, 15 percent of the American workforce (26 million) applied for unemployment benefits, wiping out more than 22 million jobs created since 2010.

While European job losses have been less severe, due largely to more robust government wage subsidy programs equal to 60-90 percent of wages and a broader social welfare net, it is estimated that upwards of 59 million jobs could be lost by mid 2020, on top of cuts in pay and hours worked (Strauss, 2020). Contributors on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum predict that the Eurozone will experience the most significant economic contraction of its history (Schnieder and Syrovatka, 2020; Kraemer, 2020). The UN warns that some 1.5 billion workers in the Global South's informal economy, disproportionately female and often the most vulnerable, are at risk of job losses – a staggering amount equal to nearly half of the global workforce. “[T]hese workers globally have seen a 60 percent drop in income during the first month of the crisis, according to ILO estimates. This translates into a more than 80 percent decline in Africa and the Americas, 70 percent in Europe and Central Asia, and 21.6 percent in Asia and the Pacific” (UN News, 2020). There can be no doubt that the immediate and dire emergency of the current crisis is directly related to COVID-19; its roots, however, can be traced much deeper to the contagion that struck centuries earlier: the ‘liberal virus’.

Samir Amin (2003, 9) summarizes the liberal virus in the following way: “Social effectiveness is equated by liberals with economic efficiency which, in turn, is confounded with the financial profitability of capital. These reductions express the dominance of the economic, a dominance characteristic of capitalism. The atrophied social thought derived from this dominance is ‘economistic’ in the

extreme. Curiously, this reproach, wrongly directed at Marxism, in fact characterizes capitalist liberalism.” The paired opposition of social classes, fractured along crosscutting registers of social identity, provides the basis for this exploitation and propels the capitalist contagion forward (Fanelli and Noonan, 2018; Whiteside, 2020). Clarifying the underlying causes of illness, whether coronavirus or liberal virus, is not only an important diagnostic in its own right, it is also crucial for future well-being.

Profiting from Pandemic

The 2020 public health crisis is exacerbating the socio-economic disparities of liberal capitalism, pushing low waged and food insecure communities into deeper distress (Henderson, 2020). It is estimated that nearly half of the working age US population is employed in low wage jobs, with forty-four percent of workers earning a median annual salary of \$18,000, or roughly \$10.22 per hour (Picchi, 2019). Juxtaposed with the anxiety, stress, concerns, and insecurity of the majority, billionaires profit from the pandemic: the impoverishment of the former and the wealth of the latter are linked economically and institutionalized politically. In less than a month, between March and April 2020, the wealth of American billionaires increased by almost 10 percent or by \$282 billion. These astonishing gains were made possible by decades of regressive tax cuts and billionaire-friendly regulations, which saw wealth surge over 1,100 percent between 1990-2018, all the while tax obligations as a percentage of their wealth decreased by 80 percent since the 1980s (Collins et al., 2020). Indeed, the world’s wealthiest families are estimated to get \$4 million richer by the hour (Bloomberg, 2019). Estimates suggest that global loses from multinational corporations shifting their profits are worth some \$600 billion per year, with cash stashed in tax havens equal to at least 10 percent of the world economy (Shaxon, 2019).

In Canada, it is estimated that more than \$240 billion is hidden in offshore tax havens, depriving the public purse of close to \$15 billion per year (Dubinsky, 2018). What is more, it is estimated that the top 1 percent of individuals, those making in excess of \$200,000 annually, receive 87 percent of the capital gains tax breaks (taxed at half the rate of regular income), resulting in a \$7 billion annual redistribution from the “99%” to the “1%”. Statistics Canada found that in 2017 Canada’s top 0.1 percent saw a 17 percent (\$740,300) increase in their average total income, outdone only by the top 0.01 percent who saw their incomes rise 27 percent (\$2.7 million) but in stark contrast to the measly 2.5 percent

(\$48,400) average increase – and the fourth-largest increase in close to four decades is set amid declining taxes for the ultra-wealthy (Blatchford, 2019). Even the resolutely conservative *Financial Post* (Pelletier, 2019) has declared, ‘Our nation of oligopolies is not good for consumers, but great for investors’ as a handful of companies dominate the Canadian banking, telecommunications, energy, supermarket, airline and other industries.

The OECD ranks Canada 25th out of 37, behind even the US, when it comes to public spending on social services as a share of GDP, a trend connected to the decades-long assault on public services as avenues of profit accumulation through privatization, public-private-partnerships and other forms of marketization (Evans and Fanelli, 2018; Whiteside, 2015). Business subsidies are all the while estimated to be worth some \$29 billion annually; exemplified by the recent federal government write-off of \$3.7 billion from the 2009 auto sector bailouts, the \$5 billion pipeline purchase in 2018, and the \$1.7 billion recently provided to the oil and gas industry as part of the federal government’s COVID-19 economic response to clean up capital’s mess – orphaned wells being worth an estimated \$260 billion in unfunded environmental liabilities (Lukacs, 2017; CBC 2019; Harris, 2020). In Europe, investigations have been launched into the practices of European banks, Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase, Morgan Stanley and others who are accused of siphoning some \$60 billion from public coffers between 2006-11 at the same time as they received hundreds of billions from taxpayer financial supports (Segal, 2020).

COVID-19 responses feature bailouts for big business and billionaires far in excess of relief efforts for vulnerable workers, those un(der)employed, ill, disabled, or elderly. For instance, the American \$2.2 trillion Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) offers households \$500 per child and \$1,200 for individuals earning up to \$75,000, as well as extended unemployment insurance and an additional \$600 per week (transfers declining above that income threshold). If individuals owe outstanding debt, there is nothing preventing banks from garnishing that pandemic support, not to mention the labyrinthine patchwork of eligibility requirements needed to access unemployment insurance (Dickerson, 2020). Small and medium sized businesses are required to make reasonable efforts to maintain their payroll and employees, including restrictions on issuing dividends and executive compensation, but those same rules do not apply to large corporations receiving aid. CARES is, in short, an uncaring act defiant of logic and decency.

Revealing the class characteristics of the bailout, the Federal Reserve and the Treasury Department will buy up to \$750 billion in bonds issued by large corporations with no strings attached: no limits on dividends, executive compensation, stock buybacks, or employment levels. As Gibson (2020) reveals, “The richest Americans are also enjoying a tax break that Senate Republicans sneaked in. A recent analysis by the Joint Committee on Taxation found that more than 80% of the benefits of a change in the tax code for ‘pass-through’ businesses will go to Americans who make more than \$1 million per year.” If past practices are the best predictor of future performance, one need look no further than Trump’s 2017 dramatic corporate tax cuts to anticipate the impact of CARES. Advocates of the 2017 tax reforms claimed wages would rise, investments would surge, and the cuts would pay for themselves. In reality, as the Congressional Research Service has shown, wages did not rise, investment did not increase, and the tax cuts did not benefit government coffers; instead they led to a record-breaking upswell in corporate stock buybacks and dividends for shareholders worth over \$1 trillion, which reduced federal revenue by \$170 billion by end of 2018 (Gravelle and Marples, 2019). Again, this recent episode is not only unsurprising, it is also aligned with some forty years of economic evidence (Stanford, 2011; McBride and Whiteside, 2011; Shefner and Blad, 2020).

Corporations are also looking to pick up assets pummeled by the virus, 2020 deflation being the friend of vulture capital just as toxic assets were through 2008 bankruptcies. A reminder of Marx’s diagnosis of capitalist patterns of concentration and centralization, once-liberal states in Europe like Germany, France, Italy, and Spain are now taking up nationalist efforts to “veto investment from outside the EU in recent weeks and the bloc is ushering in the first continent-wide rules for screening takeovers on security grounds. Special safeguards have been offered to biotech firms as the race for a vaccine against COVID-19 takes on critical importance” (Stearns, 2020). The embrace of foreign direct investment and takeovers has been decisively shuttered over a very short period. Whether or not this is a short- or long-term response remains to be seen. States nevertheless continue to bailout large corporations by the billions, with small deviations exemplified by the Danish and Polish exclusion of tax haven-incorporated firms. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has barred companies that have been convicted of tax evasion from government support. However, with zero companies convicted to date, this decree essentially applies to no one, and thus companies registered overseas are set to receive billions in public support. The vultures continue to circle, with BlackRock, the world’s largest asset manager

(responsible for \$27 trillion), now leading the Federal Reserve's corporate debt purchasing program worth some \$4.5 trillion and thoroughly integrated into the Canada Infrastructure Bank (McQuaig, 2019; Nelson, 2020)

Billionaires may not have caused the pandemic but the public policies enabling their wealth accumulation strategies have exacerbated the collateral damage, with foregone tax revenues and public investments, extreme inequality, poverty and precarity of job tenure precipitating the pandemic and shaping the likely outcomes of current support measures. The COVID-19 era is thus a crisis of unprecedented proportions not only for its effects on production and reproduction, but through the coalescing of structural inequalities and cyclical instabilities equally characteristic of capitalism. State responses have been predictably handcuffed by its mode of production and status quo delimitation of future possibilities, making economic overhaul all the more urgent.

Pushing Past the Capitalist Pandemic

"The world is at a critical turning point – economically, politically and environmentally," opens Philip McMichael (this volume) in his (pre-pandemic) assessment of the multi-pronged crisis experienced by the globalization project. He continues, "Economically, the Globalization Project is unraveling as 'market rule' has destabilized economies, generating widespread austerity, precarious employment, and waves of migration. Politically, this conjuncture is expressed in a broad set of countermovement politics of left- and right-wing populism. Environmentally, market deregulation, resource grabbing, and global consumerism have intensified longer-term emissions of greenhouse gases and ecological deterioration, generating widespread rural displacement and public ill-health." COVID-19 began as a health emergency but having emerged in the context of political-economic illness, it soon brought into sharp focus the significance of public services.

Researchers at the *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives* estimated in 2009 that average Canadians received an amount equal to \$17,000 from public services (Shillington and Mackenzie, 2009). For some two-thirds of the Canadian population, the social wage – public services or benefits that supplement market income – made up more than half of household income. For Canadians in median income households, this amounted to \$41,000 worth of public services like healthcare, education, and personal transfer payments. In 2019, Statistics Canada (2019) came to similar conclusions, estimating that average Canadians received over \$6,000 in public services, \$4,000 in education, and close to \$9,000 in direct

cash transfers (e.g., unemployment insurance, Old Age Security, Guaranteed Income Supplement), including another \$2,500 in other public services like housing, recreation, culture and environmental protection. In other words, on average, the social wage was valued at over \$20,000, or about one-fifth of actual household consumption.

For anyone but the most hardened ideologues, the fact that most people receive far more value from universal public services than that they pay in taxes is well known and appreciated. Public services also reduce broader inequalities, particularly in times of economic difficulty or labour market uncertainty, and ensure that ordinary people can have a say in the quality and cost of those services. Even so, this has not stopped a cacophony of ‘pedantic, leather-tongued oracles of the ordinary bourgeoisie’ (Marx, 1867) from coming out of the woodwork in the midst of the 2020 pandemic to fan the flames of deficit hysteria; without a hint of shame, calling for reductions, or the outright elimination, of the very public services and jobs that have buttressed the most severe effects of the COVID-19 crisis (Cross, 2020; Ivison, 2020). Vampire-like ideology is, however, hard to kill, even if it means that “an entire generation has been thrown on the scrap heap in the name of ‘balancing the books’” (Coppola, 2018; cf. Cohen 1997).

As others have noted, the deficit per se is less important than the debt servicing costs associated with it, and what that debt is incurred for matters, particularly when making much-needed investments in public services to restore economic growth or address protracted periods of unemployment. The affordability of public debt is an issue for the denominator: the debt-to-GDP ratio. In the context of rock bottom interest rates (2009+), debt-servicing burdens drop relative to the overall size of the economy when growth occurs. Far from radical, these are the findings of neoliberalism’s longtime architect-in-chief, the IMF (Barrett, 2018), and are the plain implications of the widely debunked fiscal consolidation thesis (Herndon et al., 2013). Exposed as the vulgar charlatans that they are, proponents of neoliberalism and austerity are out of ideas; indeed, if they were really serious about the deficit, they need not look any further than the tens of trillions doled for corporate welfare and tax cuts for the wealthy.

China, as coronavirus epicenter, hampered global supply to/from the ‘workshop of the world,’ with shortages of ventilators, medical supplies, and personal protective equipment, a painful reminder that domestic manufacturing capacity matters. The post-Confederation Canadian economy, embedded in settler-colonial dispossession, was created by National Policy protective domestic tariffs for infant industry and state support (through ownership and investment)

for transportation, energy, manufacturing, and services. Not just an antique feature of Canada's origins, the period preceding the 1980s saw restrictions on unfettered foreign direct investment for fear that this would undermine national sovereignty, self-sufficiency and the democratic capacity to enact policies in the public interest. Foreign ownership of key industries declined, high value-added production increased, along with real wages and unionization. "Far from being a tool employed exclusively by Canada's economic and political elites," High (2003, 169) contends "the new nationalism became a powerful rhetorical weapon in the hands of working people to be used against companies that closed plants." However, the situation changed profoundly over the next twenty years.

As Jim Stanford has shown (2019), Canada was reoriented toward the export of raw materials – agriculture, forestry, minerals, and energy. A good many trade sensitive industries were also damaged through sharp currency appreciation, contributing to stagnant productivity and innovation gains, and undermining the development of a sustainable and diversified economy able to weather volatile global commodities markets. Canada was not alone, many other countries too having undergone a period of protracted 'deindustrialization' as governments facilitated the offshoring of manufacturing capacity to low-wage jurisdictions, often those with lax environmental protections and authoritarian regimes (Ness, 2017). COVID-19 prompted emergency legislation (Bill C-13) granting the Canadian government the power to authorize any manufacturer to make patented medicines during a public health emergency. However, as Nathaniel Lipkis (2020) has written, it may be too little, too late:

"Today, there appears to be no Canadian biomanufacturing facility capable of producing a vaccine at regulatory standard to provide national coverage. Even if the necessary treatment does not require biomanufacturing, lack of public knowledge about production and formulation of any new chemical drug may practically prevent domestic manufacture of a generic version within the time needed. As a result, at our time of truly greatest need, we may be beholden to a foreign manufacturer facing unprecedented demand from around the world. If so, our ability to access the medicine will be slower, far more costly, and far less controlled than if we have adequate domestic supply capability."

Initiatives such as these have led some to conclude that, “the era of peak globalisation is over. An economic system that relied on worldwide production and long supply chains is morphing into one that will be less interconnected” (Gray, 2020). Indeed, principal responses to the pandemic have been primarily national and sub-national, with attention now turning to national recovery strategies. Others remain less convinced:

“[T]he world following the pandemic is unlikely to be radically different from the one that preceded it. COVID-19 will not so much change the basic direction of world history as accelerate it. The pandemic and the response to it have revealed and reinforced the fundamental characteristics of geopolitics today. As a result, this crisis promises to be less of a turning point than a way station along the road that the world has been traveling for the past few decades” (Haass, 2020).

What the world economy will look like a year from now, let alone ten or twenty, may be uncertain, but there is little denying that governments will have the difficult tasks of both ramping up spending to rebuild the economy and generating revenue needed to cover the emergency outlays. Time and again, the private sector (whether competitive or monopolistic) has shown itself to be not only disinterested in wholesale systemic coordination, but also incapable of it. The private sector has equally hindered government intervention or funnelled it into meeting narrow interests (Mazzucato, 2013)

A pious fidelity to upholding the same policies that got us into this mess will not be able to reverse its course. Any substantive reform agenda will need to begin with the recognition that recovery begins at home, in the spheres of production and social reproduction, centred on the waged, unwaged, and those denied the chance to earn a wage when their skills are deemed unproductive or inferior. A companion to this is the recognition that the climate crisis is the ‘greatest challenge of our time’ (Fanelli, 2013). Almost daily, we are reminded that the wellbeing of the natural world is also stricken with disease – capitalist-fostered human impacts worsening more quickly than the models predicted, from global temperature increases to melting ice sheets, retreat of glaciers, rising and acidifying oceans, deforestation, displacement, shifts in weather patterns, food chains, plant and animal life, water shortages and massive species extinctions (Monbiot, 2018; Milman, 2019; Carrington, 2019; Plumer, 2019; Ahmed, 2019).

It is the ‘unrealistic’ proposals that are increasingly the only ones standing a chance of making a realistic difference. Ending climate change requires the end of capitalism as we know it: “Any meaningful policy has to upset the established power base and the political donor class. Any policy that doesn’t upset these people will be useless. To pretend that we can compromise our way through this while we wait for a magical, technological bullet that will keep temperatures down without costing us anything is beyond wilful ignorance now” (McDuff, 2019). This is a contradiction Keynesianism and social democracy are powerless to overcome (Evans and Schmidt, 2012; Fanelli, 2015; Schmidt, 2018). If historians of the future are to look back upon the COVID-19 pandemic as a truly transformative political and economic turning point, alternate routes are necessary.

Even the *Financial Times* (2020) felt compelled to reason that, “Radical reforms – reversing the prevailing policy direction of the last four decades – will need to be put on the table. They must see public services as investments rather than liabilities, and look for ways to make labour markets less secure. Redistribution will again be on the agenda; the privileges of the elderly and wealthy in question. Policies until recently considered eccentric, such as basic income and wealth taxes, will have to be in the mix.” That the *Financial Times* lists as ‘radical’ the protection of public services, creation of less insecure labour markets, provision of a basic income, and implementation of wealth taxes indicates not only the limit of its vision but also how ripe the moment is for change.

Real change begins with challenging the structural power of capital shaping production and social reproduction; not limiting ourselves to timid redistribution but taking on hard questions like what happens pre-distribution through state power and how distribution is determined through property rights. As Jeff Noonan (this volume) shows, “No society that allows a minority class to control everything that others need (including their ability to find paid employment to earn the wages that they need to exchange for the goods they need to live) can be fully democratic.” Going beyond liberal democratic ‘representative’ democracy is imperative because even our existing examples of robust state institutions are compromised and co-opted. Jon Carless, for example, finds (this volume) that Canadian housing assistance policies initiated in the postwar welfare state era have long since been bent in service of neoliberal financialization, particularly through the activities of the state-owned Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, given “that the Canadian state has persistently shaped the

direction of housing policy in accordance with the imperatives of the prevailing structure of accumulation.”

Analyzing the emergence of a ‘new democratic economy’, Luke Martel (this volume) argues that a transformation is indeed already underway, characterized as not only opposed to neoliberal globalization but also as involving the active creation of local embeddedness to bridge existing political divisions and unite civil society with formalized politics. Examples include proposals for social ownership and local wealth schemes pursued by think tanks like The Democracy Collaborative in the USA and the UK Centre for Local Economic Strategy (CLES), and through political platforms like Corbyn’s Labour. Election defeat does not extinguish ideas and ideals which include stronger labour market protections, social and environmental supports, such as universal childcare, fare-free public transit, affordable housing, as well as a recommitment to progressive taxation, financial and wealth taxes. Even the IMF (2019; 2020) recently proposed ramping up income, property and wealth taxes, modeled as a “solidarity surcharge,” noting that profit shifting by multinational corporations in tax havens undermines both public revenue and faith in the fairness of the tax system. And the Parliamentary Budget Officer of Canada recently estimated that a 1 percent tax on those with a net worth of \$20 million or more could generate upwards of \$70 billion over the next decade (PBO, 2019).

Of course, public policies matter, including the form of state interventions to support value-added activity, such as requirements for domestic processing, limits on exports of unrefined resources, the use of fiscal subsidies to encourage downstream investments and the direct allocation of public equity capital in large-scale resource projects. Canadian economic history, not to mention the recent experiences of many Latin American and Asian economies, has relied on state planning, subsidized capital, strong domestic supply networks and innovation clusters, effective export promotion and effective limits on imports to nurture high value-added export industries. Going further, this could also include, contrary to the contemporary emphasis on *laissez-faire*, proactive policies mandating domestic reinvestment and domestic content quotas in strategic sectors, active trade interventions, and public ownership. The role of the labour movement will be key, including demands for living wages as outlined by David Goutor (this volume) like more ‘inclusive’ labour markets and regulatory mechanisms, like international framework agreements (Gibb, this volume) that can extend gains won by unionized workers to non-unionized workers. Good minimum wages, employment-protection legislation, the enforcement of national

labour laws, and benefit systems for the jobless and low-income households also help ensure that workers find better jobs with better wages and benefits (see Marshall, this volume). So too do strong public services and social programs that provide security for workers and their families (see Cameron et al., this volume).

With governments increasingly detached from the demands of ordinary people and hostile toward tripartite compromises with labour, public involvement in formal politics has declined significantly (see McBride and Whiteside, 2011 on ‘democratic malaise’ in Canada). For Pilon (2018), this has led to both an increased public disdain for and seeming indifference to politics, which is indicative of a broader crisis with deeper roots – namely, that western electoral democracies are not, and never have been, wholly democratic to begin with. In the absence of substantive alternatives, mounting inequality and social polarization have led to a resurgence of populist, anti-establishment parties. While Bryn Jones (this volume) evaluates both left and right populist movements in the UK (Corbyn, UKIP) and Italy (La Lega, Movimento Cinque Stelle), more generally the populist upsurge has been dominated by the politics of the authoritarian right.

The ‘fanatical centre’ (Krugman, 2019), a politics devoid of adversaries, is an increasingly spent force neither able to provide a convincing intellectual explanation nor connect with the various layers of the working class negatively affected by the consequences of neoliberal de-democratization (Albo and Fanelli, 2014; Crouch, 2011). Jones (this volume) finds that “Populist movements could have the potential to shift both national political economies and that of the EU away from neoliberalism; and its underpinning pillar of representative-based liberal parliamentary democracy;” however, economic constraints suggest the opposite: “Italian populism remains within the EU fiscal straitjacket, lacking plans to limit corporate and financial power...In the UK, both the ethos of free market globalism adopted by the anti-EU parties, and their influential financial backers would, most likely, intensify neoliberal forces.” For Joe Galbo (this volume), the rise of two Italian populist movements, the cyber-populism of the Five Star Movement under Beppe Grillo, and the nativist populism of the Lega under Matteo Salvini, both aim to counter democratic deficits (the former through digital and direct participation in political power, the latter offers ethnic belonging and a relationship between the leader and ‘the people’).

However, the left increasingly finds itself at an impasse too, having not only yielded the language of social change to the right but also seemingly unable to seize the appetite for transformative change. Indeed, the politics of political discourse have been historically tied to changing dynamics between governing

elites and the masses around the world (Ives, this volume). Marx famously noted that history repeats itself first as tragedy and second as farce. For the left, the recurring ability of neoliberalism to reinvent itself has been clearly and consistently tragic. The decade of austerity that has followed in the wake of the Great Recession reveals how constituted state powers remain political obstacles requiring strategic address, not theoretical abstractions. This is why, in our view, it is mistaken to juxtapose national struggles with transnational activism. If an emancipatory politics of resistance is to emerge, it will do so from multiple scales through a national politics of transformation that is internationalist in its commitments. Indeed Della Porta (this volume) argues that, “social movements will follow multi-level strategies, using leverage at local, national and international level,” with Martell (this volume) adding, “There may be limits in the localism of democratic economy proposals.” In other words, local bases of power need to be integrated into revolutionary projects to transform national state power and to internationalize political struggles and alliances against the world capitalist market (Albo and Fanelli, 2019; Whiteside, 2020).

In this regard, Della Porta (this volume) reminds us how, for some significant social movements like many focused on post-2008 anti-austerity campaigns, it is not automatic that the transnational level is where the action is: “While progressive social movements have always linked at the transnational level, the forms these transnational linkages take changes in time, and so do the channels of diffusion of ideas across countries. Additionally, economic globalization and the proliferation of international organizations are not automatically followed by transnationalization of contentious politics. Rather, resources and opportunities for multilevel campaigns vary, influenced by transformation in global capitalism and its political consequences.” The implications this holds for the role of subaltern voices remain to be seen; that is, how to match the large funding needs for services and generate productive efficiencies for labour while remaining manageable enough to integrate popular input and control.

Back to the Future: The Return of the National Question

“Now this liberal virus, which pollutes contemporary social thought and eliminates the capacity to understand the world, let alone to transform it, has profoundly penetrated the whole of

the ‘historical left’ formed in the aftermath of the Second World War.” (Samir Amin, 2003, 41)

With the growing regularization of once-rare crises, there is no shortage of blame to go around. Journalist Wolfgang Munchau (2019) writes that liberal democracy is in decline because liberal regimes have proven incapable of solving problems that arose directly from liberal policies like tax cuts, fiscal consolidation, deregulation, financial instability, job precarity and policy coordination failures, like global tax avoidance. Following on the heels of the Great Recession, he derides governments for not taking control of their banking systems, cracking down on bonuses for the wealthy, raising income and corporate taxes to counter-balance cuts in public spending or imposing a financial transaction tax. But where Munchau sees failure in these policies we see ‘success’, insofar as these policies are working precisely as they were designed to do by maintaining the neoliberal social structure of accumulation; not to mention that progressive taxes and tighter banking sector controls fit comfortably within Keynesian-liberalism as well.

Alex Ballingall (2019) traces the arc of left populism in Canada from William Lyon Mackenzie’s rebellion against Upper Canada’s “family compact,” to early-twentieth century farmers’ organizations that helped to form the socialist Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, precursor to the modern ‘social democratic’ New Democratic Party. Left nationalists in countries like Canada opposed the early neoliberal free trade initiatives of the 1980s/90s because they anticipated some of the economic problems that we see right populists moving in to ‘address’ today like sectoral decline and dependency. When presented with the opportunity to ‘rip NAFTA up’ twenty years later, the Canadian left was largely silent (if not troubled by the prospect), perhaps owing to the deep structural transformations that have indeed occurred within the economy or perhaps owing to even deeper ideological transformations over the years. Thomas Walkom (2018) notes how, “In both Canada and the US, the left is finding itself trapped in the dead end of identity politics where the key aim is to divide the world into as many subsets as possible, each with its own particular grievance. That has left it to the right to exploit the bigger, common grievances – of work and wages and social class. We have not only surrendered the field to the Trumpians, we have willingly allowed them to monopolize its language.” Even the language of social change has been seized by (and ceded to) the right.

It is social democracy rather than liberalism *per se* that has most greatly suffered from the failures of neoliberalism (Schmidt, 2018; cf. McMichael this

volume on ‘neo-illiberalism and the changing of the guard’). Costas Lapavistas (2019) writes that the European Union has hollowed out democracy in Europe, removed popular sovereignty, and alienated poor and working-class communities across countries, a sentiment echoed by Galbo (this volume) when he writes that “Populism in Italy arose, in part, in response to a feeling of non-representation, of being excluded from a political world perceived as dichotomized between the few who have power and the many who do not.” With the left seemingly unable to present an alternative political vision, much of the resulting political reaction has gone to the right.

The long shadow of racism and racialized accumulation will also have to be addressed in going ‘back to the future’. The past was not always a pleasant place, and nations are constructions dripping with blood (Drapeau, 2019). Nour Afara (this volume) finds that, “colonial ideas ‘stick’ to bodies, such that particular discursive and affective regimes endure (and mutate) across time.” The recent surge of right-wing extremism merges late modern fatigue from endless liberal economic failures with the enduring racist ideologies of older white supremacist, anti-immigrant xenophobia, and the ‘fresh-faced fascism of the alt-right’ (Cai and Landon, 2019). The lure of populism, nativism, and racism is further complicated by inherited political philosophies, religions, and ethnic identities, which have curiously also been taken up by racialized and immigrant communities themselves (Mosleh and Green, 2019; Kazin and Abrahamian, 2019). “When we think of social transformation and the economic policies we need, the first port of call is domestic strength – commanding the levers of power where we live, where we are employed, where we’re active. That is where it starts, not by seeking strength in Paris, Lisbon, Rome or wherever else. First, we find it in London, in Glasgow, in Newcastle and so on. That’s where our true strength comes from, always with an international perspective however...” In this sense, it is difficult to imagine change coming from above, within the architecture of the European Union, or some indeterminate space beyond the nation state. As Jones (this volume) concludes, “the EU’s neoliberal and skeletal democracy has not accommodated popular discontents.”

Capital may have always been global, but control is usually wrested through on-the-ground conditions. Writing about the US context, Michael Kazin and Atossa Araxia Abrahamian (2019) argue, “the only way out of our current mess is to engage in a political struggle within our nation-state – and to win it.” An ethical internationalism has always been a cardinal virtue of the left, they argue, but it is possible to uphold that ideal without calling for scrapping borders

and nations – a political trap that plays right into the hands of right populists. Gidron (2018) likewise contends that in giving up on appeals to national solidarity, the left has forgotten the basic political argument that served it so well in the past: “that out of the ties that bind together our national communities emerges a deep commitment to the well-being, welfare and social esteem of our fellow citizens.” In other words, being a part of a social, cultural, and political community.

Inoculating against the scourge of both well meaning (liberal) centrists and the rabid (racist) right will not be easy, but it is clear that the neoliberal market-led order offers nothing helpful. Crises of global proportions are forcing government intervention on an unprecedented scale – first to rescue finance in 2008, now production and reproduction in 2020. Unlike the problems experienced with social democracy and earlier variants of left nationalism, numerous polls conducted over the last decade indicate a growing interest in socialism, particularly younger adults with less to lose and much to gain. Openly socialist candidates in the US like Bernie Sanders, Ksharma Sawant, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, Jeremy Corbyn in the UK (see Martell this volume), and Pablo Iglesias in Spain are starting to win elections, challenge the right, and shift centrist policy discourse. More broadly, calls to deeply transform, if not end, capitalism now make frequent mention in mainstream media. Just a decade ago socialism was a dirty word, today it not only offers an anti-capitalist future, it is also breathing new life into the political-economic arena by offering solutions to a dire pandemic and looming ecological collapse – and healthy lives and livelihoods are just what we need right now the most. As we deal with the immediacy of the coronavirus crisis, developing a treatment for the liberal virus will be part and parcel of any long-lasting and substantive changes.

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