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What Does the (In)ability to React to the Covid-19 Coronavirus Reveal About Our Societies?

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Abstract

The many questions raised by the novel coronavirus pandemic go far beyond medical issues. Everything that was self-evident recently became impossible after the global spread of the virus. Despite the declarative EU emphasis of solidarity, the novel coronavirus pandemic clearly demonstrated the limits of solidarity and opened doors to nationalism. This crisis reveals all the anomalies of globalisation and the capitalist system in its currently dominant version of neoliberalism. The present crisis is indeed posing a serious challenge to the existing state system and capitalist economy. Evidence in support of this argument may be found in the surprising generosity of governments in many countries. Former enthusiastic advocates of austerity measures have come to realise that the legitimacy of the system is being tested at this time.

Keywords: novel coronavirus, capitalism, EU, solidarity

Prior to the start of 2020, issues such as pandemics, border closures, quarantines, lockdowns, curfews, cessation of international flights, and so on, were all reserved for science fiction plots and apocalyptic films, or, when associated with reality, historical descriptions of the spread of certain diseases (for example, the best known in Europe is the Black Death pandemic of the fourteenth century). Although some of my teaching in my sociology class touches on global threats and challenges, including pandemics, I did not believe we would experience such a global and multilevel crisis.

The many questions raised by the novel coronavirus pandemic go far beyond medical issues. In fact, the medical perspective is becoming a marginal matter within the overall crisis connected to this novel coronavirus. Of course, we hold

high hopes for medical science, and look forward to news of salvation in the form of a vaccine or at least an effective treatment. Still, as mentioned, this pandemic is revealing so much more and holding up a mirror in front of our globalised world. Everything that was self-evident to us only a few months ago is today impossible. We are witness to global travel restrictions, with the centres of the biggest cities of the world turning into ghost towns. With the fundamental sacral object of today's consumer world – the shopping mall – remaining closed around the towns and cities of the world for months, it has become clear that the engine of global capitalism has run into deep problems. It was only at the last moment that some decision-makers realised this could happen to their countries as well, naively waiting and listening to the music as the Titanic was sinking. Stopping the wheels and cogs of the capitalist economy seemed an impossible notion. The alternative, entailing underestimation of this threat, brought devastating consequences. Medical staff in countries hit hardest by the pandemic most often described the situation as involving war-like conditions. Photos of numerous coffins and mass graves vividly confirmed this observation.

While our country (Slovenia) was fortunately not hit hard by the novel coronavirus, Covid-19, (and hopefully will continue to enjoy good fortune in the coming period), the threat was nevertheless real. Slovenia is an immediate neighbour of Italy. The regions suffering the most in Europe are just 200–300 kilometres away from the national border; of course, the virus knows no borders and thus no comfort could be taken from that. Further, Italy and Slovenia are members of a common political unity – the European Union. The notion of solidarity is strongly supported by EU member states. From the end of March to the end of April, the number of deaths due to Covid-19 in Italy exceeded 500 per day with up to 5,000 new infections being discovered every day (www.worldometers.info). Later other countries in the EU (and wider Europe) followed a similar pattern and saw the disease spread within their communities, although the toll was highest in Italy. In this situation one would naturally expect the solidarity and assistance of all of the alliances in which Italy is included. I personally expected the EU to react to this situation. I expected to see at least a modicum of the commitment, zeal and effort from the member states as we saw when the EU was rescuing the investments of Western banks – or to use Wallersteins (2004) classification, core countries – in Greece (see Askenazy, Coutrot, Orléan, Sterdyniak 2012). Restricting and controlling the spread of the virus in Italy should be in the interest of Europe as a whole, even the world as a

whole, and therefore also in the particular interests of individual countries. Yet, it soon emerged that EU leaders had apparently written off Italy and its many victims. The elderly residents of northern Italy, most of whom were victims of Covid-19, became *homines sacri*. Namely, people who, to paraphrase the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1995), can be left to die without any assistance in the form of medical equipment and medical staff being provided. At the peak of the crisis it became obvious that each member state was reacting in its own way and with its own measures. This prevented successful prevention of the spread of the virus and even led to disputes among EU member states. It is exactly in this vein that Kovac, Elkanawati, Gjikolli and Vandenberghe (2020) claimed that “European public policy must change fast and fundamentally or simply cease to exist.” However, all this is no surprise. This is nothing new for the EU. The austerity measures and public spending cuts imposed on countries, including Slovenia, during the economic recession after 2009 made life extremely difficult for multitudes of Europeans who were then pushed below the poverty line. After decades, we experienced the starvation of children and families, who struggled through the months with the help of NGOs. The value being ascribed to human life in the EU is also evident with the reactions seen to the arrival of refugees and other migrants. The EU’s solution to the incoming unwanted people was to militarise border control and install razor-wired fences along external Schengen borders. The deaths of people seeking shelter and a new life in Europe in the Mediterranean and also in the Kolpa River, which divides Slovenia from Croatia, have not met with any serious objections or led to any change in the EU’s immigration policy. Dead bodies are used as a deterrent to prevent future income of unwanted migrants.

Despite the tremendous potential held by the EU project, the described measures clearly reveal its priorities. It has become obvious that the EU is almost exclusively about safeguarding the capitalist market. All the rest, including the lives of its citizens, may be sacrificed for this higher purpose. The EU is thus losing its legitimacy at a time of extreme political vulnerability, thereby possibly setting the stage for nationalism, populism and extremism. The fact that the EU declares “solidarity” in its documents means nothing if it is not actually displayed when one of its members experiences great distress. As the saying goes, ‘a friend in need is a friend indeed’. The Italians apparently did not find such a friend from among its ‘EU colleagues’ but from China, Cuba, Russia and admittedly, with some delay and to a very limited extent (but better late than never), from Germany.

These countries in fact came to Italy's help during the pandemic's peak. What may have been their true underlying motives for this assistance was, of course, completely irrelevant to all the patients and medical staff in need. Of course, this situation together with the measures that encouraged solutions at individual member-state level additionally boosted nationalism and Euroscepticism.

This crisis reveals that the capitalist system, in its currently dominant version of neoliberalism, is essentially just a frightened fragile bully. It creates opportunities and gains power by shrinking and depriving the rights of the majority (labour), thus at the same time privatising former public resources and accumulating capital in the hands of a few and seeing internal inequalities being restored to pre-WWII levels (see Piketty 2014). It uses PR tactics to divert attention, spin arguments and exploit emotions to achieve (internal) divisions (for example the use of anti-immigrant sentiment, racism, labelling and stigmatising the poor). This approach is destroying solidarity and transforming life into a hectic game of all against all; meaning that in this fight for survival we are all left alone and, as shown by Bauman (2016), the most vulnerable individuals are easily convinced that newcomers are endangering their position. It spreads the idea that our future depends on us (for a useful overview of neoliberalism see Harvey 2007). The current crisis further confirms that this variant of capitalism can easily turn completely unresponsive and unproductive. Is there anyone who after this pandemic crisis can still legitimately advocate free-market logic in the healthcare sector or 'only' for the procurement and supply of personal protective equipment, respirators and other necessary medical material? The neoliberal bluff with the notion of a free market and a weak public sector has been called – yet let us not forget that military expenditure and the use of public funds to support big private corporations has never been a problem. Yesterday's 'taxpayer parasites' – public servants (medical staff in public – not private – health institutions, police officers, soldiers, researchers) became heroes overnight. They were joined by other otherwise completely overlooked and marginalised members of the working class, now labelled essential workers (those employed in public transport, retail, pharmacies, etc.). The development and consequences of the pandemic in the United States have plainly demonstrated the capitalist logic in ensuring health. We are witness to the cruellest demonstration of Social Darwinism.

A situation in which the world's richest countries are unable to provide or in fact are unwilling to produce completely basic and technologically primitive means of protection, such as protective masks and even respirators, indicates the complete capitulation of our world to production and the related organising. It also vividly shows the waste of resources in today's globalised mode of production. All excuses are superfluous. This is the price of neoliberal globalisation and measures used to disciplining local labour in the West by exporting production to countries with cheap labour (see Giraud 2006). While for months the EU and the U.S.A. failed to provide enough basic personal protective equipment for their medical staff, China managed to build and equip a hospital in just over one week. Further, most of the personal protective equipment and even respirators were in the end imported from China. In these circumstances, states entered a race for supplies, in many cases marked by extremely untransparent practices with evident signs of corruption. In Slovenia, the discovery of such a scandal through a whistle-blower and public revelations in the media triggered protests which have been going on every Friday for over two months (at the time of writing this text, July 2020). Covid-19 closed national borders and also showed that the basic unit of solidarity remains the state. This may be a cause for concern since it is clearly paving the way for nationalism.

The whole dynamic of preventing the spread of Covid-19 and the way governments addressed the public, at least in Slovenia, have caused extreme psychological pressure for individuals (for example, at a press conference on 21 March 2020, the official Slovenian government spokesperson for novel coronavirus preventive measures ended the conference with the unreassuring words: "Enjoy while you still can!"). The fear of the virus in combination with so-called social distancing – which goes against everything we have been socialised into – has locked people in Weber's iron cage as defined by a pure rational calculation of the (only) efficient way to limit the spread of the virus. This has isolated and alienated people even further. The hectic race has entered a new phase – it is no longer simply about 'career and success', but now about basic survival. The true consequences will be seen in the coming months and years. I assume the numbers of people suffering from psychological illnesses have risen, as have for instances of domestic violence. During the implementation of social-distancing measures, I started to write a (research) diary and there are multiple entries showing how we all avoided any contact with other people and how we perceived any stranger as a possible life threat. I wrote a description of an episode which eloquently describes the social climate of

the time: I was standing at a road crossing in the centre of Ljubljana (the capital city of Slovenia) and a group of people was waiting alongside me (all at least three metres apart). After a few minutes, five to ten people had gathered and we were all standing, waiting for the light to change colour. Yet, this light only turns green after the button has been pressed, and no one dared to push it. We were all watching each other, with nobody taking the initiative. In the end, we crossed the (traffic-free) road while the light remained red. However, there is also the other side of this coin – the pandemic situation has also brought important changes and shown possible improvements. It has demonstrated the value of local production and consumption (e.g. delivery of local food from nearby farms has flourished), understanding the vulnerability of the existing political and economic system, shown the importance and the need for respect of all members of society and all professions for providing the basic (and taken for granted) quality of life.

The described paralysis of the West and inability to take systematic action is a clear symptom of a disease bigger than Covid-19. We are seeing the decline of the global domination of the Western Empire. That era is coming to an end. Some are announcing a new world, the most radical, even the end of capitalism. Still, I believe the reality is still far from that. The current crisis is indeed posing a serious challenge to the existing state system and capitalist economy. Evidence in support of this argument may be found in the surprising generosity of governments in many countries. Former enthusiastic advocates of austerity measures have come to realise that the legitimacy of the system is being tested at this time. They have therefore had to resort to confidence-building measures. The economy was not stopped by a direct concern for lives, but by the realisation that people would be able to recognise that the capitalist system does not care about human lives.

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