COVID-19: Capitalist and postcapitalist perspectives

Anitra Nelson

Abstract
The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed weaknesses of capitalism as an economy and polity, and revealed the latent potential of postcapitalism. A novel coronavirus is more likely to arise given massive industrial agriculture; the state of health care sectors is a result of neoliberal policies; the pandemic’s impacts were characterised by capitalist inequities; economic repercussions expose a crisis-prone system. Conversely, responses included pandemic solidarity and sharply increasing mutual aid groups. Postcapitalist currents have been arguing for localisation of economies and autonomous governance for decades; the Covid-19 pandemic reveals the rationale for these calls and the urgency to apply such approaches.

Keywords
capitalism, Covid-19, crises (capitalist), human geography, mutual aid, pandemic solidarity, postcapitalism

Like capitalism, Covid-19 has spread globally, isolating and bonding people, and demanding state management. It appeared that the novel coronavirus started infecting people in December 2019 in Wuhan, a city of around 11 million people in Hubei Province, China. Infection was rapid, symptoms fluctuating widely from none to strokes and death mainly via viral pneumonia, a severe and acute respiratory symptom. Elderly proved most prone to both serious symptoms and death. After weeks of monitoring, on 23 January – the first day the first case was reported in the United States – Wuhan was quarantined; construction started on a new hospital planned to be built in 10 days; the city was locked down to contain the contagion, with curfews and very limited movement for a period that would last another 11 weeks. This governmental response became typical the world over as first cases were reported in several European and numerous other countries in the last week of January.

Without widespread testing available, neither a vaccine nor fast-acting and successful medicinal treatment of symptoms, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic on 11 March. A significant minority of cases required hospitalisation, intensive care and ventilators meaning that under-resourced health sectors were easily overwhelmed. Spread via sputum in the air and settling on nearby surfaces, distancing and isolation became key management strategies. The horror of, and measures to contain, Covid-19 quickly became magnified and surpassed by its economic implications and repercussions, triggering a classic capitalist crisis still to play out.

This opinion piece discusses key weaknesses of advanced capitalism exposed in the origin and economic repercussions of Covid-19 and, conversely, aspects of grassroots organising and speculation pointing in a postcapitalist direction: (1) some background, namely the crisis of nature caused by capitalist activities that reverberated in the evolution and spread of the pandemic; (2) a perspective on the nature of the Covid-19 crisis in terms of practical and capitalist developments, and resistance; (3) a discussion of this particular economic crisis in the context of generic crises of capitalism; and (4) identification of ways in which grassroots responses to and reflection on this crisis hint at, even epitomise, postcapitalist ways forward.

Crisis of nature: Capitalocene

If the last century was replete with capitalist class war, in this century another dimension rears its ugly head. Ecologist Joel Kovel characterises capital as The Enemy of Nature in a 2002 book, suggesting the domination of nature in his subtitle The End of Capitalism or the End of the World? Similarly, the
prolific and influential scientist James Lovelock (2007: 77) iterates that while our activities might unsettle Earth, it would be victorious in any showdown with the human species: ‘Gaia is toughest of all.’ In science fiction style, The Revenge of Gaia became a bestseller among a deluge of works in the last few decades on the environmental crises surrounding us, in us and by us.

The insatiable human activities responsible for out-of-control carbon emissions causing global heating are but the tip of the iceberg of environmental crises resulting from humans increasingly breaching Earth’s regenerative limits over the last 50 years. It would only be a matter of time before the increasingly popular ‘Anthropocene’ would be renamed the ‘Capitalocene’, the oneness of nature as Earth mimicked in the victory of global capital. All of these have to do with Covid-19 even as, on 19 May, a successful motion to the World Health Assembly of the WHO to initiate an independent inquiry into the origins and international response to the coronavirus had been called on by capitalist states pointing the finger for the entire fiasco at ‘communist’ China.

Covid-19 is caused by a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2), a nucleic acid molecule surrounded by protein. It multiplies in cells of a living host and, in this case, was most likely transmitted via another animal vector to humans. It is one of a family of viruses causing gastrointestinal and respiratory infections in animals such as pigs and bats, dogs and cats, and poultry. While some propose SARS-COV-2 was created in a lab and escaped accidentally, or even intentionally as an act of bio-warfare, the mostly widely supported theory is that it arose in a live animal (‘wet’) market in Wuhan (Nouri, 2020). Not surprisingly, initial patients with symptoms were misdiagnosed but the strange replication of severe and unique symptoms raised suspicions that a novel coronavirus had broken the human barrier.

Large-scale industrial agriculture is the main source of such pathogens emerging in the ecotones of capitalism and, as it were, ‘wilderness’. Rather than unseemly habits in Chinese markets, the practices of capitalist agriculture incubate them. Drawing on other studies, Wallace and Chaves (2020) eloquently spell out this case, demonstrating that via the territorialisation of global companies ‘straddling national borders, these “commodity countries,”’ flexibly embedded across ecologies and political borders, are producing new epidemiologies along the way’. From standard breeds in crowded conditions to global production and supply chains, ‘the entirety of the production line is organized around practices that accelerate the evolution of pathogen virulence and subsequent transmission’.

Nature of crisis: Exposing the weaknesses of capitalism

According to official figures tallied by the John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Centre, Covid-19 had claimed around 380,000 lives and infected around 6.4 million people in more than 185 countries worldwide by 3 June 2020. Real numbers of cases and deaths are rising and are undoubtedly higher, under-reported due to insufficient data collection and testing, misdiagnosis and incorrect causes in death records. More cases and deaths have been hidden due to infections within illegal and informal settlements particularly at risk to the contagion due to crowded and poor housing, and homelessness. Not surprisingly, inequity, the dynamic of capitalism, has characterised the progress and outcomes of the coronavirus.

Many human geography analyses are still to unfold around healthcare capacity and state-cum-health responses by country and region, but already a few generalisations can be made. Neoliberal policies have exaggerated capitalism’s tendency to minimise capacity and capability related to health care and, in particular, pandemics. Most countries were not prepared. As Zaretsky (2020) points out, approaches to workers’ health has mimicked ‘the management of animals’ following plantation slaves. Yet the health of the slave was of direct concern to their master. Once ‘free’ within burgeoning capitalism, workers’ health became an extraneous matter, all at once private and a cost to state welfare. Writing mid-May, Zaretsky concluded that ‘these simple facts of modern political economy may help explain how the United States, the self-proclaimed “greatest country in the world”, ended up with one-third of all Covid-19 cases’ and that given ‘a choice between letting people die and closing down “the economy”, there was no question which the masters would choose’.

In poorly resourced health sectors, care workers have borne the brunt of neoliberal budget cuts, just as they would labour – and perish – under appalling conditions once the pandemic hit. Lack of preparedness included the sector’s strict adjustment to contemporary capitalism’s long-chain and just-in-time delivery system and reduced storage space, making access to personal protective equipment especially dire. The globalisation of a buy-from-the-cheapest-source mentality – which led to diminished manufacturing in the Global North during the latter half of the twentieth century – meant sole dependence on a few suppliers, most on the other side of the world where, as it transpired, the pandemic started, paralysing production for trade and proving, literally, fatal.

Initially, international plane and cruise ship tourists spread Covid-19 after they landed, often inadvertently, because the incubation period was a few weeks from infection and not always followed by symptoms. As community transmission kicked in state responses were various and numerous. Most governments restricted movement into and within their territories. Practices around personal hygiene and individual (im)mobility were enforced by law and police, raising suspicions of authoritarian and secret crackdowns from media and human rights activists. Later right-wing groups, flouting rules privately, publicly broke isolation and physically distancing measures in street protests against the quarantine (Goßner, 2020; Vogel et al., 2020). This agitation for the relaxation of restrictions proved convenient for
politicians who saw their rule as based in facilitating economic growth. Indeed, while the refrain from podiums was “we’re all in this together”, mounting debts quickly seemed more important than mounting deaths.

Meanwhile, in many countries, local solidarity resistance groups emerged in rapid response to those marginalised by safety nets, such as the homeless, those at risk of eviction, unemployed, detainees, refugees, certain migrants, people with disabilities and illnesses who relied on care and treatments, indeed anyone disadvantaged and with a low, or no, income (Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, 2020). Stay-at-home conditions heightened the incidence of domestic violence and ill-health due to inappropriate housing. Meanwhile the well-off with safe and secure housing, space and resources to support working and schooling from home could also comfortably pay for home deliveries for goods and services ordered online.

As restrictions eased and state attention turned to stimulating economies, organised mutual aid groups, many emerging from pre-existing structures of resistance, have set their sights on formalising the foment into a fully politicised transitional process to postcapitalism. In the words of Solnit (2020): ‘The pandemic marks the end of an era and the beginning of another – one whose harshness must be mitigated by a spirit of generosity.’ Movements such as Occupy, degrowth, ecosexualist and Extinction Rebellion already disenchanted with inadequate and inappropriate mainstream responses to global heating and attendant environmental crises see the failures of capitalism spelled out so clearly in the last few months as testimony to their case to move beyond capitalism (Ligeay and Nelson, 2020).

**Crises of capitalism: Key dynamics revealed**

As Karl Marx famously maintained, capital is not a thing but, rather, a relationship. After all, the monetary worth of any capital asset essentially relies on its actively earning an income meaning that the source of exchange value is labour. We can put aside a ball, knitting or reading and pick it up some time later without a hitch. Not so a lover, not so with relationships. If capitalism halts, it wilts and dies. Capitalism is a set of social practices that constitute a living system. If capitalist practices are not played out by, and around, us then the ideological narrative that ‘there is no alternative’ fails – a potent moment for all agents in the game.

Serious constraints on production and movement of goods and people due to the pandemic promoted a classic capitalist crisis. Every capitalist crisis is, at heart, simply a generic interruption to its smooth monetary processes involving contracts of debt and credit. The increasingly complex and integrated nature of capitalism means that crises occur procedurally not only as an exaggeration of its cyclical swings and roundabouts but also as an effect of any expansive, extensive or prolonged hitch in investment, production, distribution or consumption, thus the strategy of the strike whether by capital or workers. Capitalism is a tenuous and precarious form of social reproduction.

On the one hand, schools were closed, workers locked out and aged care facilities locked down. On the other hand, massive emergency economic assistance was handed out to paralysed workplaces, workers and overburdened health sectors. This feat of simply fabricating capitalist relations quickly prompted policy makers’ and politicians’ concerns to the ‘unprecedented’ economic costs of the global pandemic and, in particular, efforts to contain it. Certain economists entertained cost–benefit analyses of containment strategies based on lives lost versus the life of national economies (Porter and Tankersley, 2020). Many major and minor decisions contained an element of such evaluations based on clashes between exchange value and use value. Today such clashes reflect less on the struggle between capital and labour than a clash between capitalist ideology and postcapitalist imaginaries.

There is no space here to unpack the ways in which relationships within capitalism rotate on an axis of specifically monetary debts whereby capitalist growth on one side of the coin creates an equivalent shadow of debt on the other. Suffice it to say that many recent crises have taken the form, and often the content, of financial crises, such as speculative fevers and creation of irresponsible debt, the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 being the prime example. The majority of such crises end up with finger-pointing at the high end of town and bankers.

In contrast, Covid-19 presents as a different order of crisis. While Western media and politicians distract the wrath of citizenries with finger-pointing at China, this calamity is actually exposing fatal weaknesses of capitalism. That a chain is as strong as its weakest link in such a system of production for trade became clear with interruptions to extensive and intricate supply chains in production and distribution of essential commodities. As globally entwined just-in-time provisioning seized up, scared consumers rushed to purchase and hoard goods, making the situation worse. Still, in a sign of hope, after a rush on toilet paper they rushed to flour and seeds and nurseries, to bake their own bread and grow their own food. While politicians acted in authoritarian nationwide ways, the experiences of individuals and communities were situated. They call now for local economies that will not fail them as the fragile capitalist market has. This is a crack in the wall of capitalism that postcapitalist currents are cleaving open in practical ways.

Means of production lose exchange value to the extent that they either currently fail to contribute to production for trade or seem likely to lie idle in the future. But they do not disappear. Their use value, even if unclear with respect to capitalists, remains. If deemed latent capital from one view, both unemployed people and other means of production are blatant use values that postcapitalist imaginaries

Nelson
entertain. Crises give agents time to think again, to strengthen and generate postcapitalist imaginaries, activities and practices. Pandemic solidarity, collaborative relationships, respect, care and sharing have all become more organised – stoking imaginaries of postcapitalist ways of being (Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, 2020).

**Postcapitalist imaginaries**

Organised pandemic solidarity and mutual aid groups involve local production and local distribution oriented around needs, calculated in terms of use values. Such activities prefigure postcapitalist relations, replacing global relations of trade and exchange value with direct democracy and local autonomy in ‘glocal’ formations. One strategy for defying the ‘capitalist law of value’ is to go beyond money, that is, monetary relations and private property (Nelson, 2016). Such formations centre on commonging, local autonomy and collective sufficiency, sharing universal social and environmental principles. They co-govern with one another across landscapes, regions and, ultimately, the globe via horizontal, networked governance, ‘open relocalisation’ in degrowth parlance versus insular protectionism (Lieuxy and Nelson, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has proved a unifying and dividing experience. States have taken a lead after years of humble restraint within market-driven neo-liberalism. Yet they have regulated in authoritarian, even if seemingly benign, ways both citizens and workers, not only owners and managers of capital. Moreover, if their initial and main aim was to protect lives, they are now more strongly driven to support a resurgence of capitalism that threatens to erode workers’ wages and conditions as well as environmental reforms and progress. While most movements call for transformation with the refrain ‘we can’t return to business as usual’, there is no reason to believe that a real showdown between hard-nosed neo-liberalism and postcapitalist currents can be avoided.

Certainly citizens have had experiences that make radical critiques and claims for postcapitalist futures more persuasive and attractive (Mason, 2020). They are seeing benefits of local economies and slower, self-organised work. People have been challenged to be more creative and self-reliant. The slow food to slow everything, permaculture and agroecology, food sovereignty and commons movements, incorporated in localising practices and visions, all seem more reasonable and feasible. They and mutual aid groups are set on prolonging and formalising their influence, entrencing as postcapitalist advocates and practitioners.

Yet the flip-side to the pandemic and forced isolation might well be a mainstream yearning for a romanticised capitalist past; a strong desire for the security of work to pay the rent or mortgage even as terms and conditions of work deteriorate; and submerging concerns to address climate change as the pandemic and a return to normal is pursued by capitalist interests and states. Mutual aid and postcapitalist advocates of various hues must address such tendencies.

Writing from Australia, where unprecedented bushfires ravaging ecosystems over the 2019–2020 Summer were followed by a global health emergency – closing international and interstate borders, restricting households, locking families out from loved ones in aged care facilities and dying in hospital – the cracks in the wall of capitalist ‘civilisation’ and its rapacious ecological impacts seem all too clear. Re-appropriating the economy seems necessary to decide what we produce, how we produce it, who produces it and for whom – for a safer, more secure, healthier and enjoyable way of life. Postcapitalism has a new platform. But if movements aligned with postcapitalism are global and networked, its realisation will be local and material. If the human geography of the Capitalocene has been standardisation, genocide, species extinction and globalisation, the human geographies of postcapitalism will be diverse, localised, multiple and dynamic.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**References**

Goßner C (2020) Anti-lockdown protests in Germany infiltrated by far-right extremists. EURACTIV.de, 14 May. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/anti-lockdown-protests-in-germany-infiltrated-by-far-right-extremists/

Lieuxy V and Nelson A (2020) Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide. London: Pluto Press.

Lovelock J (2007) The Revenge of Gaia. London: Penguin.

Mason P (2020) Will coronavirus signal the end of capitalism? Al Jazeera, 3 April. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/coronavirus-signal-capitalism-200330092216678.html

Nelson A (2016) “Your money or your life”: Money and socialist transformation. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27(4): 40–60. DOI: 10.1080/10455752.2016.1204619

Nouri A (2020) Let evidence, not talk radio, determine whether the outbreak started in a lab. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 15 May. Available at: https://thebulletin.org/2020/05/let-evidence-not-talk-radio-determine-whether-the-outbreak-started-in-a-lab/

Porter E and Tankersley J (2020) Shutdown spotlights economic cost of saving lives. *New York Times*, 24 March (updated 13
April). Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/business/economy/coronavirus-economy.html

Sitrin M and Colectiva Sembrar (2020) *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid During the Covid-19 Crisis*. London: Pluto Press.

Solnit R (2020) “The way we get through this is together”: The rise of mutual aid under coronavirus. 14 May. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/14/mutual-aid-coronavirus-pandemic-rebecca-solnit

Vogel KP, Rutenberg J and Lerer L (2020) The Quiet Hand of Conservative Groups in the Anti-Lockdown Protests. 21 April, *New York Times*. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/us/politics/coronavirus-protests-trump

Wallace R and Chaves LF (2020) COVID-19 and circuits of capital. *Monthly Review*, 1 May. Available at: monthlyreview.org/2020/05/01/covid-19-and-circuits-of-capital

Zaretsky E (2020) Culling the herd: A modest proposal. *London Review of Books*, 14 May. Available at: https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2020/may/culling-the-herd-a-modest-proposal

**Author Biography**

*Anitra Nelson* is honorary principal fellow at Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute at University of Melbourne, Australia. An activist scholar with particular interests in environmental sustainability and non-monetary economies, her books include *Small Is Necessary: Shared Living on a Shared Planet* (2018), *Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide* (co-author, 2020), *Marx’s Concept of Money* (1999), *Life Without Money: Building Sustainable and Fair Economies* (co-editor, 2011), *Housing for Degrowth* (co-editor 2018) and *Food for Degrowth* (co-editor, 2020). Website: https://anitranelson.info/