Editorial

COVID-19 and the counter-collective collective organizing of the cosmic right

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Shortly before the deadline for sending the selected content of this issue of the *Community Development Journal* to the publishers, the editorial team received a message from Oxford University Press alerting us to the possibility of delays in the publication process due to the dramatic upsurge in COVID-19 infections and deaths in India. Like many other publishers, Oxford University Press outsources much of the journal production process, such as typesetting and copyediting, to India. The notification served as a reminder of the globalization of academic capitalism. More starkly, it signalled the catastrophic contribution of COVID-19 to intensifying what Achille Mbembe (2021) refers to as the ‘vicious partitioning of the globe’. In some parts of the world, mass vaccination has been accompanied by talk of post-COVID-19. Elsewhere there is talk of mass trauma, chaos and indignity as poverty and lack of access to healthcare are revealed to be the most significant pre-existing conditions that increase people’s risk of dying from the virus. Describing the privatization of healthcare in India as a crime against humanity, Arundhati Roy (2021) reported recently that because of the pandemic, oxygen has become ‘the new currency on India’s morbid new stock exchange’. Despite hellish reports and images from India of makeshift crematoria in which many of those who die from the virus are being cremated, protests organized by those who argue the risks of the virus have been grossly exaggerated continue. According to many of these protesters, instead of living through a pandemic we are being deceived by a ‘plandemic’ orchestrated by the global elite of Big Pharma, Bill Gates.

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and the World Health Organization, and a ‘casedemenic’ of repeated public announcements of the numbers infected by what they claim is a highly treatable minor illness. We need to pay more attention to this kind of organizing.

On May Day of this year, traditionally the annual day of celebration of the Left, a Rally for Health Truth took place in the city where I live in Ireland. Chanting slogans such as ‘end the lockdown’ and ‘no more lies’, protesters carried placards with messages such as ‘dare to disagree’ and ‘no vaccine passports’, along with the repurposed slogan from abortion politics ‘my body, my choice’. Several people in the crowd carried Irish flags and others carried placards with traditional Catholic iconography. The large gathering was addressed by members of the organization World Freedom Alliance, including the former chairperson of the anti-immigrant far-right Irish Freedom Party. Based on a highly individualized understanding of freedom and rights, the World Freedom Alliance opposes pandemic public health measures on the grounds that they violate people’s inalienable rights to bodily integrity and freedom of movement. The counter-collective understanding of freedom promoted by the Alliance denies the porosity of our bodily and social interdependencies. Furthermore, the contradiction between the protesters’ championing of the right to freedom of movement and their association with anti-immigrant rhetoric and organizing is striking. The Irish Freedom Party campaigns for ‘regaining control of our borders’, asserting that ‘immigration should be controlled effectively to suit the interests of ordinary Irish people’.

Objecting to requirements to wear masks in public places, some opponents of this public health measure argue it violates individuals’ ‘right to breathe’. For Mbembe (2021: S61), this right has a radically different and communal meaning:

Before this virus, humanity was already threatened with suffocation. If war there must be, it cannot so much be against a specific virus as against everything that condemns the majority of humankind to a premature cessation of breathing, everything that fundamentally attacks the respiratory tract, everything that, in the long reign of capitalism, has constrained entire segments of the world population, entire races, to a difficult, panting breath and life of oppression. To come through this constriction would mean that we conceive of breathing beyond its purely biological aspect, and instead as that which we hold in common, that which, by definition, eludes all calculation. By which I mean the universal right to breathe.

The CDJ tends to focus on community organizing and development initiatives deemed to be progressive and mobilized around worthy causes.

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1 See https://www.irishfreedom.ie/principles/.
For example, Ana Margarida Esteves’ article in the current issue, which is freely available as the Editor’s Choice, addresses the concept and praxis of a solidarity economy. Her case study of solidarity economy markets in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul frames these markets as ‘mobilizational commons’ and considers their potential as social movement ‘sites of socialization into economic practices based on trust, reciprocity and cooperation’.

Also based on a communal understanding of rights, the article in this issue by Francisco Vergara-Perucich discusses the process of developing a plan for an informal settlement in the city of Antofagasta in Chile that drew on Henri Lefebvre’s concept of ‘the right to the city’ as a political framework. This is not to say that the journal tends towards an uncritical celebration of practices undertaken in the name of community, or indeed, of the very notions of ‘community’ or ‘community development’. Peter Westoby’s article in this issue of the *CDJ* encourages community development scholars and practitioners to consider the works of the philosopher Jacques Derrida, including his ambivalence about the idea of ‘community’. Derrida’s biographical experiences of antisemitism made him wary of its connotations of unity and uniformity leading him to declare ‘I don’t much like the word community. I am not sure I even like the thing’. As discussed in Peter’s article, his preference was for the ideal of unconditional hospitality to the other. My point is that in this journal we need to take seriously and pay more attention to grassroots counter-movements asserting liberal hyper-individualistic conceptions of rights and freedom, as evident in the Rally for Health Truth. Paradoxically, this might be described as counter-community community organizing, or counter-collective collective action.

The recently popularized concept of the ‘cosmic right’ offers a helpful way of thinking about one strand of the counter-collective collective action that has grown during the COVID-19 pandemic. As explained in an instructive discussion of this new term in a podcast on ACFM by Nadia Idle, Jeremy Gilbert and Keir Milburn, it refers to a blending of New Age and psychedelic cultures with far-right patterns of thought. This blending is evident and has a long history in many supposedly alternative scenes, including among some environmentalists and hippie communities. Many who are into mushrooms are also into Jordan Peterson, dubbed by the *New York Times* as a custodian of the patriarchy. In the podcast, they take QAnon as an extreme example. Largely mobilized through social media, members of QAnon featured prominently in the storming of the US Capital building by Trump supporters in January 2021. For them, Trump is a defender of democracy and opponent of the ‘deep state’ and pseudoscience, both of

2 Available at https://novaramedia.com/2020/08/16/trip-12-the-cosmic-right/.
which are controlled by a global elite of paedophiles. Widely dismissed as conspiracy theorists, the podcast conversation highlights the inadequacies of both that dismissal and term ‘conspiracy theory’. In place of dismissal are the urgent political tasks of trying to understand and change the conditions in which these ways of thinking proliferate and take hold. Underlining the need for a new term to describe the distinctive discourses of the cosmic right, the longstanding disparagement by those on the right of anyone with a systematic understanding of power as a conspiracy theorist is acknowledged. A further urgent challenge is to disentangle the sense from the nonsense in these ideas. The stakes of medical capitalism far exceed those of academic capitalism. Unquestionably, global elites and Big Pharma have corrupted and profited from science and have resisted threatening essential medicines as global public goods or a commons, making the recent announcement by the US administration of support for a waiver on patents on vaccines all the more significant. But that does not mean all science is pseudoscience and we have entered a new ‘post-truth’ era. With all its problems of arrogant assumptions of superior insight, that many people are cultural dupes, and that there is a universal true consciousness rather than a pluriverse of consciousnesses and possible better worlds, we need to revisit the out of vogue idea of ‘false consciousness’ and expose and oppose its part in counter-community community organizing. Contributions to the CDJ on this theme are most welcome.

References

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