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On COVID-19, Economic Calamity, Atomization, and the Suffocation of Hope

Brief Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic is – quite obviously – a world-historic event. It has profoundly altered the manner in which billions have conducted their lives and expedited an economic crisis. For a brief moment, it looked like it would shift the globe’s political trajectory, as well. It seemed like COVID had applied some long-awaited oil to the rusty gears of history. As lockdown issues were ordered and millions lost their jobs, it seemed like perhaps *something* would happen to drain the neoliberal mire. Instead, it appears that the same order will remain in place once the crisis has subsided, perhaps with an acceleration of the rise of figures with a hard-right sheen like that of Bolsonaro, Modi, and Netanyahu as opposed to the technocratic center-right epitomized by Obama, Macron, and Trudeau. As such, I would like to use this reflection to describe the “farcical” economic crisis and how it, unlike prior economic crisis, offers very little hope for any semblance of progress in order to contextualize my general outlook of the mundane personal aspects of quarantine. I would like to conclude with a brief historical connection to the plague’s impact on Spanish society.

Economic Crisis

I find the economic crisis that has occurred alongside the COVID-19 epidemic to be farcical not because I believe that mass-unemployment, human misery, poverty, and hunger are

topics to laugh at. Quite the contrary, these are scourges that would structurally never be permitted to exist in a justly organized society. Rather, I refer to it as a farcical economic crisis precisely because this widespread misery, incalculable human anguish, the wretched totality of economic decisions that working people should never have to contemplate – such as accepting a job that will physically harm oneself in the long run, but is necessary for survival in the short run – occurs routinely within this historical epoch characterized by wage-relations. In fact, the failure of capitalism is so embedded within its structural framework that bourgeois economists normalize it, thus every student in high school introductory economics learns of the “Business Cycle” as merely a natural cycle, a beast that central banks can seek to tame, but never conquer. Its existence as “natural” is not questioned in the classroom, on business television programs or within contemporary American politics – that is to say there is little room for something like Marx’s critique of political economy.

But if economic crises occur routinely, what makes this one farcical but not prior ones? In past economic crises in recent memory amid mass suffering those bearing the brunt of the acute economic pain had the ability to organize to extract concessions from capital. One can look to, for instance, the mass-strike wave and formation of unemployed councils that occurred in the United States during the Great Depression, or the Occupy movement that emerged during the 2008 Great Recession for examples of how the masses attempted to discern leverage points in order to shift the balance of power away from capital and toward the popular class. The extent that they were successful or that they were even acting as a conscious class can be debated, but the broader point that they *could* organize and that those levers existed remains. While, from my point of view, I cannot assert that the ability for the laboring class to organize and extract

concessions does not exist during this crisis, the specific nature of the recession accompanying COVID-19 certainly complicates matters in two important ways.

First, COVID-19 obfuscates the true cause of the economic crisis. As discussed, earlier, economic collapse was going to occur at some point in the near future, bourgeois and heterodox economists, alike, acknowledge that economic downturns are an intrinsic feature of the unwieldy nature of capitalism – though they may disagree on their causes, analytically. However, COVID-19, as the proximate cause of the crisis, will be wielded as a get out of jail free card for the derivative gamblers on Wall Street, for the “angel” investors in Silicon Valley, for the corporate board directors throughout the globe as the economy goes belly-up. Instead of COVID-19 being viewed as expediting the inevitable economic downturn, it will be spun as its cause thereby absolving the capitalist class of being forced to accept (even minor) structural adjustments such as financial reform, let alone make concessions to labor. Second, COVID-19 is necessarily atomizing. Whereas the virus of capitalism is theoretically conquered (or, at least, tamed) via collective class organizing at the point of production, the Corona Virus is conquered (or, at least its damage staved) through isolation. As such, there is a massive contradiction in tactics between pacifying the virus and overthrowing the economic mode of production predicated on the mass-misery, pain and suffering while the few lead lives of obscene luxury.

Thus, just as the contradictions of capitalism are laid bare before us, we are powerless to organize a world beyond its bounds. As a continuous stream of news reports during the crisis have demonstrated, we are experiencing a crisis of overproduction – as Marx would term it. Milk is being drained, eggs and vegetables are being destroyed all while hundreds of millions are condemned to hunger. Jobless millions sit within the confines of their residences, fearful for their health and future, becoming increasingly desperate, materially, before being “drafted” as a

member of what Marxists would call a reserve army of labor. As workers earning a pittance in exchange for the extreme exploitation of their labor quit, fearing for their own health and safety, millions will realize that their rent is due, that they need income to put food on the table and thus subject themselves to exploitation, filling the vacuum. This reserve army will also be used – as it has historically- to break up the power of organized labor, depressing wages and benefits. Again, I do not see process that leads to this profound inequality and justice being meaningfully challenged, in the United States, at least. Even in economic crisis without pandemic the exploitative productive relations sustain themselves – an entire superstructure has been organized to ensure they do. With the aforementioned complicating factors to class action fostered by COVID-19, I see the protraction of inequality as opposed to a reduction.

I anticipate at least two further economic developments as a result of the COVID pandemic. First, I expect rapid corporate consolidation as massive, transnational firms like Amazon, Walmart, and assorted private equity vampires who are well-positioned to weather the economic storm, purchase smaller businesses that will fail, *en masse* due to the virus. This is actually not necessarily a negative, from my viewpoint, as consolidated firms are easier to nationalize and organize to meet human needs, if that ever becomes a political possibility. Further – though this is more of a political-economic example – I expect there to be another wave of brutal austerity, throughout the west. In the United States, where austerity went politically unchallenged in wake of the 2008 crisis to the extent that it's not even a term in its political lexicon, I expect tuition increases, cuts to Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and ever other aspect of its already thin welfare state. Privatization of the few remaining public services, such as USPS, will certainly be on the table, as well, mirroring the United Kingdom's selling off of its Royal Mail after 2008. Working people were told that it was their patriotic duty to tighten

their belts, to expect less and accept suffering after the Great Recession. Now that they have proven they can do it, the belt will never be loosened, but rather tightened further as conditions deteriorate. All while the Bezos' and Gates' of the world reach higher heights and are never asked to sacrifice, and instead portrayed as heroes who can chart the path of the post-virus world.

Concisely put, my reflection of the economic facet of the epidemic is quite grim, with very little of the hope of an organized challenge to fetid economic order that at least exists during normal economic collapses.

Personal Reflection

As can probably be surmised from my economic analysis, I am not an optimistic or hopeful person, generally. However, I would like to begin by acknowledging that I'm fortunate to be home with my family during the lockdown which provides in-person social interaction and support which are essential in a social species. One of the most prominent aspects of the pandemic for me has been an underlying sense of anxiety. My dad and I have Type-1 Diabetes which is one of the underlying conditions that potentially make COVID-19 more deadly. As such, I am incredibly concerned for my dad, in particular – especially when he goes on walks or grocery shopping. Yet walks are essential for mental well-being and obtaining groceries at the market are necessary for survival, thus they must be done. I'd describe this as the magnitude and consciousness of risk dramatically increasing during this period. Risk is unavoidable, in life, and oftentimes fine, but the pandemic has escalated the consequences of risk and mandated it for almost the entirety of the population, with certain groups – such as wage workers in factories, fields, warehouse, markets, and hospitals, to endure more than others.

Beyond anxiety relating to the health of family, friends, and the vulnerable I have found the inhuman isolation required to stave off the virus to be a difficult adjustment. While much of the West has already embraced an ideology of atomization – in which individuals told by the ruling class that they are responsible for their own lot in life, along the lines of Margaret Thatcher’s infamous remarks about the nature, or lack thereof, of society. This ideology has applied to how individuals think (or don’t think) about class and structural processes but is now manifesting itself physically. I have partially alleviated this physical atomization through video calls with friends and family, but it – much like the virtual college term – has felt artificial. It is better than nothing, but there is certainly something missing. I, like many, have attempted to fill this void – and my time – by using the internet, watching films, and listening to podcasts. I’ve been surprised – actually – about how boring life is during a horrifying, conscience shocking crisis. The mundanities of life have not dissipated. This is the point I want to conclude on. Early in this course, we learned about the period of crises on the Iberian peninsula. One of the many crises that we read about was the depopulation caused by the outbreak of plague. Historians looking to examine the impact of plague on Castilian society between 1350 and 1360 were hard-pressed to find many primary sources in the usual records – as Professor Ruiz wrote “[i]t seems, as one looks into the archives or in published collections, as if life had stopped”.¹ Obviously, life did not stop. Those that lived – between the terror they most have felt about the prospect of their loved ones being infected with plague – must have also had mundane moments and were likely bored at points. This crisis has – if anything – has provided me with a new perspective for understanding historical crises. I have been able to attempt to imagine the terror and fear felt by classes of people in the past, now I’ll have to consider the moments beyond that.

¹ Teofilo Ruiz, *Spain’s Centuries of Crisis: 1300-1474*, (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 45.

Work Cited

Ruiz Teófilo F. *Spains Centuries of Crisis: 1300-1474*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2011.