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Covid-19 pandemic

Covid-19, capitalism and the end of normality

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Borrowing the title of James K. Galbraith's work, *The End of Normal*, it now seems indisputable that the normal is finally over and that we are at a turning point that is unprecedented in our contemporary history and, above all, in that of a globalized capitalism that has been imposed as the only possible system. Because now it is this latter that has to be questioned more forcefully.

If there is debate in the scientific field about the origins of the pandemic, there does seem to be sufficient evidence that diffusion is closely related to “the evolutionary pressure cooker of capitalist agriculture and urbanization”. [1]. And with factors such as “the global alteration of ecosystems associated with the eco-social and climatic crisis, deforestation in Southeast Asia, massive changes in land use, fragmentation of habitats, urbanization, massive growth of tourism and air travel, the weakness and commodification of public health systems”, as Joan Benach explains: “The coronavirus is a threat to the poorest neighbourhoods.” A set of factors, in short, that demand a radical challenge to the unjust and unsustainable civilization model that has shaped capitalism throughout its history and that has reached its highest point under neoliberalism.

A capitalism that has not even shown itself compatible with the task of guaranteeing a universal right as fundamental as that of health. Quite the contrary: it has been restricting it through the looting, privatization, cuts and super-exploitation of public health and its workers to gradually put it in private hands, solely motivated by the logic of profit maximising. All this is what has created the conditions for the collapse of the system that is taking place now in the ill-named First World which is supposedly a model, with the consequent human tragedy that we are observing with growing indignation every day.

So if there were doubts before this crisis, there should be no more to convince ourselves that we have entered the era of disaster capitalism (Klein), with the climate crisis as the main threat to life on the planet, but with others interacting, such as the health sector, along with those derived from the aggravation of inequalities of all kinds that make an increasing number of people disposable. And with an outlook for the crisis even worse given the imminent entry into a new Great Recession, likely already before the Covid-19 eruption, which will come with greater force due to the enormous increase in global debt that is being generated and with the consequent pressure from the great transnational economic powers so that the states rescue them again and, in turn, they compete more with each other in the midst of general geopolitical instability.

In the midst of this almost general national-state withdrawal, we could soon find ourselves - even in a European Union that is showing all its impotence when it comes to giving a solidarity-based response, as Manuel Garçon and Fernando Luengo have explained - before a neoliberal austerity offensive tougher than the previous one. Although it is possible that this new twist is accompanied, at best, by some temporary compassionate measures aimed at neutralizing social unrest, as is happening now, but which will not compensate for the brutality of what is to come. A discontent that was already being expressed before the pandemic through popular revolts in many parts of the planet, stimulated by mobilizations driven by environmentalism and feminism, and that we hope will be reactivated in the face of this probable strategy of shock, whether under one or other national-state variant depending on the different relations of social and political forces.

A bankrupt new way of the world

All in all, it will not be easy for a neoliberalism that had become “the new way of the world” (Laval and Dardot) to regain the legitimacy lost in this crisis. We have seen how the response to the pandemic has been incompatible with

the culture of proprietary individualism and entrepreneurship and requires seeking collective solutions in defence of the public - not to be confused with the state - of common goods, of solidarity and mutual support in care. Among these public goods, the demand for universal, free, quality, and socially controlled public health anywhere in the world is now the most urgent. A struggle that is already manifesting itself through an enormous number of initiatives from below that, even in confined conditions and making a virtue of necessity, herald a leap forward in the construction and reinforcement of community self-organization networks in many cities, neighbourhoods and towns.

Also, the forced paralysis of a long list of economic activities, often under pressure from the working class around the slogan "Our lives are worth more than your profits", as has happened in industry or construction, reduces things to their essence, giving credibility to proposals for selective degrowth - including the questioning of the consumption model, distinguishing between needs and false desires - coming from environmentalism; to the revaluation of the care work that feminism has long demanded; in short, the foreshadowing of an alternative moral economy against the fetishism of economic growth and the political economy of capital.

It will not be easy, therefore, for the neoliberal think tanks to repeat the history of 2008 seeking to demagogically blame those below for having "lived above our means" and converting the state in its neoliberal version as saviour of the large corporations. The hegemonic framework is in dispute and with it emerges the collective feeling that this crisis changes everything or, at least, should change it. Starting with the socialization of the strategic sectors of the economy, of the production and reproduction of life and, therefore, pointing towards a response to the crisis that, in the face of the perverse Keynesianism that the states adopt for the benefit of 1%, faces the need for a radical redistribution of wealth from top to bottom and social shock plans similar to those that are being proposed by more than 200 social groups in the Spanish case.

Every effort will have to be put into preventing the return to normality prior to this crisis, demanding a radical break with the old common sense and forcing the dismantling of all the policies that have prevailed during the long neoliberal wave. It is not, for example, about temporarily suspending the Budget Stability Law or article 135 of the Spanish Constitution be temporarily suspended, but repealing them, as some left-wing forces have already proposed in the recent debate in the Spanish parliament.

Because now it does seem evident that the time of reformism without reforms that social-liberalism has represented is over. Speeches like Pablo Casado's are already showing the fear of the right wing that after this crisis all the cuts and privileges made in the name of the preservation of sacred private property will be questioned; and we should not be scared of this, quite the opposite. Because we are going to witness a greater polarization of conflicting interests, values, and reasons, and they will no longer be worth half measures. It will be necessary to propose measures that, once and for all, lead to a radical transition towards a civilizational rupture, reforms that question the logic of this increasingly destructive capitalism in which we are immersed and do not simply serve to wash the system's face.

Human security vs. emergency neoliberalism

On the other hand, there is another more complex and difficult field of struggle to face pedagogically as a result of the measures adopted by governments in the fight against the pandemic. It has to do with the suspension of fundamental rights, derived from the application of the state of emergency according to country. Because, although the adoption of confinement measures and others aimed at curbing contagion is justified (although some of them are the consequence of the absence of a preventive policy that should have taken into account alerts from at least part of the scientific community), the recourse to a warmongering discourse is not, with the leading role of high-ranking military commanders at press conferences and their appeal to the citizenry to become soldiers, and nor is the role of the army in assistance tasks that could have been assumed for civil protection services if they had been prepared for it in advance.

Behind this authoritarian option is the false conception of the fight against the pandemic as a war and, with it, the intention of gradually restricting our freedoms and rights in the name of a “patriotic unity” (with the corrupt Felipe VI at the forefront) that pretends the pandemic does not recognise social class, gender, skin colour, age, functional diversity, territorial and other inequalities. A discourse that is serving as an alibi to demand a complete closure of ranks and, in particular, the exhibition and abuse of force by members of the police and military forces in the streets and even, worse, the promotion of a punitive populism against vulnerable people and social groups, as has already been denounced by legal groups. That is why it is very necessary to promote from now on what Jordi Muñoz has defined as a “democratic emergency culture” that contests the idea of a culture of obedient subjects to an authoritarian and recentralizing state that aspires to emerge more strengthened after this crisis.

In summary, in this state of alarm we must watch those who watch us if we want to prevent the exception from becoming the norm and here, too, the trend towards the digital panopticon continues. A danger that is not unreal but closer and closer, as we are seeing in its extreme forms in countries like China, the great power that, by the way, may emerge as short-term winner of this crisis within the global geopolitical game. A new paradigm of social control of dissent emerges, as denounced by the Chuang collective, since “as the secular crisis of capitalism takes on a seemingly non-economic character, new epidemics, famines, floods and other “natural” disasters will be used as a justification for the extension of state control, and the response to these crises will increasingly function as an opportunity to exercise new and untested tools for counterinsurgency.”

All this in the name of a narrow concept of security, assimilated to the preservation of public order in an Orwellian world and in the new capitalist war economy they want to sell us. Faced with this, a complex and multidimensional concept of human security (which would have to be extended to other sentient and suffering beings) will have to be advocated, as already claimed by, among other premonitory voices, Elmar Altvater, a defender of an ever more necessary horizon of solar communism.

27 March 2020

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[1] Chuang collective, “[Social contagion: microbiological class warfare in China](#)”.