South African and Covid-19

We will not return to normal, because normal was the problem

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But is abnormal possible?

Covid 19, the associated lockdowns, wearing of masks and social distancing have disrupted society. On the one hand, there is the obvious desire for things to return to normal. But there is also much talk of the "new normal", in the knowledge that these conditions are going to be with us for some while. And ironically, the second wave of infections, spreading fear and anxiety in many parts of the world, is the result of the premature return to normality. There are signs, as we go to press, that in the Eastern and Western Cape a second wave has begun - just on the eve of the festive and tourist season.

Lives and livelihoods

As provincial and national governments discuss ways to contain the spread, the debate on where the balance lies between lives and livelihoods will return. Firstly, we must acknowledge that unequal South Africa, under "normal" circumstances, cannot guarantee either lives or livelihoods. Having said that, there is no doubt that the hard lockdown which we endured between March and August flattened the curve and saved lives. But it is equally true that the lockdown's destruction of livelihoods led to an accelerated loss of lives. And that's without taking into account the lives lost from gender-based violence, exacerbated by the lockdown.

Probably the truest picture of lives lost in this time is the measure known as "excess deaths". This is the difference between the total number of people who died, on the one hand, and the number of deaths that would be expected in the period, according to historical patterns. These are not only deaths directly from Covid-19. They are also deaths from collateral damage such as the disruption of normal healthcare, including HIV programmes. The number of excess deaths from natural causes (i.e. not homicide, suicide, or accident) for the period between 6th May and 13th October 2020 stands at just under 47,000.

Inequality kills

Even before the arrival of Covid-19, South Africa faced a national health crisis. Some of the most important features of this crisis are the very high burden of disease, enormous disparities in health and its social determinants, deep inequities between public and private sectors, a crisis in human resources for health, and weak mechanisms for popular participation in health.

The death of the Amadiba Crisis Committee's (ACC) chairperson, Sibusiso Mqadi illustrates death in unequal South Africa. He woke up in the middle of the night with extreme abdominal pains. He was in his rondavel in the isolated village of Mtentu, on the Pondoland coast. No ambulance service is available and he had no cell phone reception. He had to wait for daylight and the Kia van, the only form of taxi that can manage the treacherous water-logged gravel roads.

The 65 km journey to Port Edward took over 2 hours. On arrival in Port Edward, the private doctor (which he only could afford because of the support of the ACC) referred him to the hospital in Port Shepstone. As his situation worsened he was put on a ventilator, which damaged his wind pipe to such an extent he was transferred to Albert
Luthuli public hospital in Durban for an emergency intervention. In the process, attention was diverted from the underlying problem and when that worsened, the emergency operation to drain litres of pus from his abdomen, which was not detected at the Port Shepstone hospital because the CT scanner wasn't working, sent his body into shock. And the militant Chairperson of the Amadiba Crisis Committee died.

Millions of South Africans can recount similar stories, very far from the experience of a medical aid member in the suburbs. Pre-Covid normal The scale of the social and economic crisis that has accompanied the coronavirus pandemic has made us forget how deep the crisis was before Covid-19 came to South Africa. The Cry of the Xcluded, an alliance of social and labour movements, set out the real state of the nation in their launch statement in February, a month before Covid hit:

> South Africa finds itself on a precipice. The economic malaise currently being experienced places the nation at a point of no return. The levels of poverty, unemployment (in particular amongst our youth and women), inequalities, corruption, crime etc. have reached such proportions that the country can be plunged into another civil war and strife if nothing is done. Our schools, hospitals, public transport, in particular rail, the justice system, correctional services centres have become dysfunctional.

> As if this is not enough, our country is being battered by a wave of ecological crises that creates absolute havoc through heavy storms that have left the poor more vulnerable with greater parts of the country engulfed in long spells of drought that further threaten livelihoods and food security and sovereignty.

> We risk losing another generation of youth to drugs and vicious cycles of crime. Women, including the aged, live in fear in their homes and streets. Government is collapsing, overrun by cronism, corruption and neglect. Almost every state owned enterprise is facing a death spiral or financial collapse. Eskom, SAA, Autopax, PRASA are all on their knees with more workers’ jobs and services to the poor on the line.

> There is a strong intention by key officials to sell the family jewels to their friends at the expense of the poor for whom these state assets are vital. Every day that passes these crises get worse and the suffering of our people intensifies. So going back to normal for black working class people, and for women enduring such high levels of violence, is intolerable.

The elite new normal

The ruling class is not slow to exploit this situation. They too don't want to go back to normal. They are looking for ways to advance their interests by defining a new normal in their image. So, they are using the current financial and economic crisis to pile the pressure on the state to impose structural reforms. These structural reforms are about creating conditions for sustained and enhanced profit accumulation. They are demanding the privatisation of most state owned enterprises, greater tax breaks, free movement of capital, deregulation of the labour market and the right to hire and fire at will. And they want even deeper austerity and a harsher assault on public sector wages - no doubt so they can follow suit in their own enterprises. And it is the elites who are winning. Government has promised the liberalisation and privatisation of parts of the electricity and transport sectors. Austerity is deepening. The ANC government is even prepared to alienate Cosatu and its public sector affiliates by reneging on the existing wage agreement and imposing a further three year wage freeze. And if that is not bad enough, they will retrench thousands of public sector workers in order to placate the demand of big business to reduce the public sector wage bill. This is a key aspect of reducing the budget deficit and government debt - which the moneyed classes see as an anathema.
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Our new normal

What about the workers movement and the Left? If the return to pre-Covid normal is intolerable, are we also prepared to acknowledge we cannot continue to think and function in the old way? The labour movement is in decline. Social movements, where they exist, have been reduced to single issue campaigns. And the political left has become largely irrelevant. We too must change.

Traditionally, the Left has assumed a hierarchy of struggles - at the top are workers at the point of production. We will even have to abandon such sacred cows as that. This is even more necessary in a country where almost 50% of workers have no work. They are not at any point of production.

Covid-19 has brought home the centrality of care work and particularly the role of women in the so-called care economy. Much of this work is made invisible. And of course it is unpaid - especially, but not only, the work performed in the home. The struggle around social reproduction (creating the conditions for life) cannot be considered secondary. We must acknowledge the "vanguard" role of women - working class women. This may just go some way towards recognising the centrality of the fight against patriarchy and all forms of oppression of women, not least gender-based violence, in renewing left and anti-capitalist struggle.

Intersectionality

Then the Left needs to adopt a more intersectional approach towards the continuity of various forms of oppression, such as class, colour, gender and sexuality. We must recognise how these oppressions each exist individually in their own right, but also how they intersect, reinforce and reproduce existing power relations. Similarly, struggles such as that against racism and for the building of a non-racial society, need to go beyond the social and the cultural. They must incorporate the radical redistribution of wealth. Learning each other's languages, attending the same crèches and schools, living in integrated communities are all important in breaking down division. But without reconfiguring the economy to root out inequality, such interventions will be unsustainable and meaningless.

As much as race might be a social construct, racism and racialised inequality are deadly realities and have to be fought against tooth and nail. That is what has given the Economic Freedom Fighters both their potency and their shortcomings. In this respect they are similar to the SACP. The SACP rides the bandwagon of African nationalism for its relevance, and loses its class politics. The EFF rides the bandwagon of radical nationalism, and so fails to locate racial oppression and inequality within the working of the capitalist system, not to mention the capitalist patriarchy.

A new Left for South Africa has to walk a fine line between class and race essentialism. We need to construct the kind of intersectional programme outlined by John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clarke in "The Expropriation of Nature". [1]
Twenty-first-century monopoly finance capitalism constitutes what Karl Marx once called an "age of dissolution." All that is solid in the current mode of production is melting into air. Hence, it is no longer realistic to treat - even by way of abstraction - the crucial political-economic struggles of our day as if they were confined primarily to the exploitation of labor within production. Instead, social conflicts are increasingly being fought over capitalism's expropriation and spoliation of its wider social and natural environment. This historical shift and the deepening fissures that it has produced can be seen in the growth of what David Harvey has termed "anti-value politics," directed at the boundaries of the system and visible in such forms as the ecological movement, growing conflicts over social reproduction in the household/family and gender/sexuality, and global resistance to the expansion of imperialism/racism. To understand these rapidly changing conditions, it is necessary to dig much deeper than before into capital's external logic of expropriation, as it was first delineated in Marx's writings during the Industrial Revolution. Most important, because at the root of the problem, is the extreme expropriation of the earth itself and the consequent transformation in social relations.
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A Left that is in denial when it comes to the climate crisis and the broader ecological crisis will be irrelevant. It will have ignored a principal element of the crisis of capitalism and a central aspect of any freedom charter of the 21st century. Climate change, it should be remembered, is only one of the major planetary boundaries now being crossed. Others include loss of biological diversity (the Sixth Extinction), ocean acidification, deforestation, disruption of the nitrogen and phosphorous cycles, growing shortages of freshwater, and the toxic contamination of the environment. All of this, of course, has a common denominator in what Michael Roberts calls the "rapacious drive for profits by capitalist companies in fossil fuel exploration, timber logging, mining and urban expansion without regard for nature."

And, as Daniel Bensaid put it in *An Impatient Life*, it must not be a subordinate left:

In the last 10 years, there has still not been the political left that is needed for us to stand upright. In order for the other world that is necessary to become possible another left is equally necessary. Not a left 'light', like the fat-free butter, alcohol-free wine or decaffeinated coffee, but a left of struggle, to match the right of struggle. We can no longer be satisfied with the left resigned to the subaltern role of opposition to the Republican or liberal/bourgeoisie. It is high time to break the vicious cycle of subordination.

And there may be another benefit of an intersectional approach to the multiple crises we face. Perhaps the very nature of the crisis which intersectionality responds to can contribute to overcoming the sectarianism and intolerance amongst different sections of the Left. An intersectional approach might allow material analysis to replace dogma, as we break out of the straightjacket of exhausted and outdated formulations. It would require an openness to, and engagement with, popular movements and struggles, without attempting to force them into preconceived schemas. It would recognise that it is no longer appropriate (if it ever was) for the Left to see itself as bringing socialist salvation to popular movements. It would have greater respect for the integrity of those movements. Perhaps in the end that is more likely to win recruits to an anti-capitalist perspective than endlessly quoting the truths of socialism.

Another left is possible, but we will have to become less "normal".

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