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## Collective Action: The Ultimate Vaccine

Forum contribution: [After the Pandemic: Which Future?](#)

Sahan Savas Karatasli

There is probably no better demonstration of the claim that “it is much easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” than the way governments have been responding to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The problem is not simply that the structural and ideological hegemony of capital accumulation prevents us from imagining alternative forms of organizing the economy, society, and politics. The real problem is that, short of a global revolution that replaces the current world order with an alternative form, endless accumulation of capital seems to be speeding up the coming of the end of the world at a much faster pace than its own demise. “Socialism or barbarism” was an appropriate slogan of the global left in the early twentieth century; today, it is more aptly “[Socialism or apocalypse](#)”—a Great Transition or Barbarization, in the language of [GTI’s scenarios](#).

Let us look at the facts. The capitalist world-system in which we are living has proved to be completely incapable of dealing with such a pandemic, which is unfortunately the least of our problems, considering other forms of environmental, social, and geopolitical crises that are waiting at our door. Clearly, the problem at hand is not the lack of scientific knowledge, technology, and socio-political means necessary to stop the spread of a new virus. The real problem is that under capitalism any strategy or form of action that could potentially save thousands and millions of lives is immediately rejected if it has the side effect of temporarily halting or slowing down the pace of capital accumulation.

It is crystal clear that the class character of the capitalist relations deeply contradicts states’ aims of protecting their citizens’ lives. When rulers around the world realize that they need to make a choice between risking either capital accumulation or human lives, they almost always opt for

risking the latter without much hesitation. This choice is self-evident in the hypocritical suggestions many governments have been making. Working-class people, who cannot afford to lose their jobs or their wages, are asked to not to go to work if they are sick, yet they are not granted any paid sick leave. People are advised to immediately seek medical aid when they show symptoms of high fever and dry cough, yet the right to universal health care and social security is still denied in many countries. For many precarious workers around the world who try to survive within the interstices of the informal economy, “social distancing” is not an option because it means hunger, homelessness, and starvation.

What appear at the first sight as “ineffective government responses” to the pandemic, e.g, lack of extensive testing and transparency, turn out to be the most rational actions on capital’s behalf based on simple cost-benefit calculations. Proposed strategies such as “flattening the epidemic curve” by means of social distancing and slowing down our interactions are counterproductive for capital accumulation. As far as capital accumulation is concerned, it is more rational to let the disease spread and wait for it to disappear by its own dynamic than to prolong social distancing. This “herd immunity” strategy is also a predatory accumulation strategy with genocidal repercussions on the elderly. By externalizing the responsibility of “social distancing” to their citizens and by not helping them to prepare for the pandemic in a socially responsible way, many governments are already following capital’s “herd immunity” strategy without naming or intending it.

It is important to note that although the pandemic helped a broad spectrum of the Left refresh their faith in their critique of capitalism, the Global Left has not been a major actor in shaping the response so far. The Global Right has been capitalizing on this pandemic more effectively than the global Left. Many people around the world have already been asking their governments to declare “curfews,” “stay at home orders,” “travel bans,” and further “limitations of rights and liberties” to stop the pandemic. This call for new “Leviathans” is an open invitation to the authoritarian right-wing leaders to grab power, as Viktor Orban did in Hungary. At the global level, the Chinese efforts to market its own strategy to contain the pandemic as a more successful model than the one currently being used by the declining world-hegemonic power also have the potential to reinforce illiberal tendencies. Ideas such as closing the borders, controlling immigration, increasing surveillance, and

using strategic censorship to avoid panic also resonate nicely with authoritarian nationalists seeking power elsewhere in the world, leading us toward a Fortress World future.

The pandemic teaches the Global Left an important lesson: being right on a political issue is not sufficient to win a struggle. At first sight, the pandemic appears to be a huge opportunity for the Global Left because it reveals the hypocritical class character of our world in a very explicit manner even to the most skeptical eyes. In many parts of the world, different organizations have responded by making urgent demands such as “safer work conditions,” “paid sick leave,” “right to stay at home,” “unemployment benefits,” or “rent freeze,” all of which now have a wider purchase.

However, without a mass mobilization from below, such demands will remain mere abstractions. What is key for success is the coordination all of the independent efforts emerging on the ground and the formation of a horizontally linked “movement of movements” that would reflect the spontaneous energies of masses and their diverse demands from below. As we struggle to “flatten the epidemic curve” so that patients do not exceed the capacity of the health care system, we must also find ways to “unflatten the collective action curve.” Governments and businesses can ignore and suppress many particularistic, uncoordinated forms of spontaneous collective action easily if they are not clustered in space and time. However, if movements are clustered, the frequency, spread, and strength of these movements will surpass the capacity of governments and businesses to contain them.

Our obsession with our particularistic experience at the present moment creates the dangerous illusion that the story told is not actually ours; it makes us believe that what we see elsewhere in the world is not linked to us. The extraordinary speed of the spread of the coronavirus makes clear what utter nonsense this egocentric and particularistic worldview is. We are living in a world where the fate of our lives depends on others not only in spatial-temporal terms but also in terms of asymmetric power relations. To emancipate all humans and other natural beings, we need to exterminate systems generating exploitation, oppression, and exclusion not only in our own geographies but everywhere they exist.

That is why in addition to a movement of movements that operates at local and global levels, there must be an internationalist organization that defends and struggles for long-term and global

interests in order to articulate goals and demands and mount action strategies for advancing that vision. We will defeat the coronavirus disease in one way or another, but the exploitative, oppressive, and exclusionary systems that we are living in will survive. We must be ready for the more decisive struggles that await us.

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## About the Author



Sahan Savas Karatasli is a comparative-historical sociologist at University of North Carolina, Greensboro. His research focuses on the relationship between social movements and historical processes of capitalism, state formation, and warfare. He is recipient of the American Sociological Association's Theda Skocpol Dissertation Award and 2018 Distinguished Article Award. He is preparing a book that examines the relationship between major waves of nationalist revolts in the world and periods of intensified economic crises, interstate warfare, and social revolutions from thirteenth century to present.

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