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The Virus of Capitalism

Contribution to GTI Forum [After the Pandemic: Which Future?](#)

George Liodakis

The rapid spread of the new coronavirus has exacerbated an already severe social-ecological crisis. Society is at a crucial crossroads, and we urgently need to reflect on the causes of the COVID-19 pandemic and the wider crisis, and then decide how to steer the future.

It is clear that the way we humans have organized society and production—i.e., the capitalist system with its built-in imperatives for profit and growth—is the main cause of the social-ecological crisis that we currently face. Claims that “we are all in this together” ignore the central truths of this system. Different social classes or groups have entirely different and even conflicting interests. For Marxists such as myself, class analysis and struggle is crucial, and it is only by class struggle and a broader social movement that we can face this historically unprecedented crisis.

To effectively confront the crisis, we need to move beyond capitalism and its historically contingent patterns of development and inherent imperative for growth. Global capitalism has brought increasing transnational integration of capital and commodity chains, dense networks of transportation and trade, mass tourism, rapid and anarchic urbanization, and polarization between urban centers and the countryside. Such phenomena have facilitated the swift spread of coronavirus, while neoliberalism has undermined the capacity to respond by weakening the health care systems of most countries.

There is no going back to normal: the [Conventional World](#) scenario is dead. This leaves two options: [Barbarization or Great Transition](#). Allowing neoliberalism to remain dominant, just with minor reforms, will lead to a devastating social crisis, growing authoritarianism, social and national conflict, and ecological collapse. The other option is to struggle against the forces that brought

us to this historical juncture, and towards a reorganization of society on a foundation of ecological sustainability, social justice and solidarity, and common ownership of productive resources.

In other words, more than ever, our choice is between “socialism or barbarism.” Socialism signifies a common participation, ownership, and responsibility towards a shared purpose. It is not a rigid model, but can take various forms as it is configured to emerging historical conditions. If socialism prevails, we will indeed all be in it together.

Marx famously stated that people make their own history, but not as they please, taking into account the conditions and potentials created by all past events. The Great Transition is a path-dependent historical process, with occasional discontinuities and disruptions. Some on the traditional left believe fundamental change can only follow a revolutionary event sometime in the future. But our point of departure must be the historic contradictions, crises, and potential of present-day capitalism.

The immediate struggle is to advance policies, institutions, and technologies capable of significantly addressing the major social and ecological problems of our time. For example, we should fight for adoption of technologies for a post-carbon economy, and against the capitalist interests aligned against such a transition. Similarly, we need to resist the privatization of nature and of health care systems, as well as the commodification of medicine. Yet, even as we struggle for such revolutionary reforms within the capitalist terrain, they remain insufficient for the systemic shift needed, which eventually will take a direct confrontation of capital and the capitalist state.

The next stage in the process of transition must learn from both past socialist endeavors and the COVID-19 experience. The pandemic has highlighted the potential of love, care, and solidarity among people, as well as our social interconnectedness and the fragility of social-ecological systems. Moreover, the reduction of production has significantly improved ecological conditions, highlighted essential human needs, and underscored the need for deep-rooted social changes. All this experience offers valuable lessons as we envision future forms of social organization.

Although the pandemic has highlighted the role of the state and the importance of a public health care system, we must be wary of strengthening state-centric views and institutions. Building decentralized systems of ecological protection and health care may be even more valuable. At

the same time, the need for international and transnational cooperation has never been clearer. Global problems require global solutions. The socialism of the future will emphasize local ecology and production while also recognizing that that an interconnected world demands that such a decentralized mode of organization be coordinated through robustly democratic national and global planning.

The time has come to act urgently and collectively in the direction of this vision. In the words of the Greek poet, freedom requires both virtue and boldness.

About the Author



George Liodakis is Professor Emeritus of Political Economy at the Technical University of Crete, Greece. His research on the intersection of Marxist theory and sustainability has been published in several academic journals. He is the author of such books as *Totalitarian Capitalism and Beyond*.

About the Publication

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