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

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Humanity has developed many practices to think and communicate about the future: prophecy, visioning, foresight, scenarios, forecasting, scientific prediction, song, and poetry, among others. Yet we can never know what the future holds.

As we grapple with COVID-19 and its long-term implications, it is clear that standard approaches to business risk management are not up to the task. At the macro level, ecological Marxism, with its ontological starting point of crisis-ridden capitalism, offers a much more useful way to explore possible trajectories for global capitalism. Epidemiologists and virologists have been warning of the “next pandemic” for decades. Informed by scientific and ecological evidence, these scientists have warned of zoonotic diseases spreading from animals to humans. Outbreaks such as MERS (from camels) and Ebola (from monkeys and bats) have been severe, but fortunately have not mushroomed into global pandemics.

COVID-19, worsening economic crisis, and climate shocks are all expressions of the systemic crisis tendencies within capitalism. The global economy, which did not fully recover from financialized overaccumulation (2007–2009), was slowing down before COVID-19 hit, and is now in recession. Meanwhile, climate shocks have continued unabated over the past few months, devastating millions of lives.

The more carbon capitalism destroys biodiversity and continues the illegal poaching and consumption of “exotic animals,” the more it blurs the boundaries between society and habitats that contain dangerous pathogens. The more the world economy is organized around the interests of global finance with its attendant risks and carbon extraction and use continues, the

more systemic crisis tendencies will accentuate, interconnect, and ramify. These crisis tendencies threaten everything including the future of capitalism itself.

Where Are We?

The systemic crises of capitalism express the logic of the system. The fault lines of racialized and gendered inequalities, precarious work, privatization of health care, and widespread hunger are now in full frame.

Despite COVID-19 revelations, neoliberalism still stalks ruling class imaginations. Trump has unleashed the corporate pharma-medical complex to provide medical products and search for a vaccine, offered big bailouts to major industries (and only a one-off cash payments to the public), and given license to libertarian white nationalists to demand economic freedom at all costs. In South Africa, a draconian lockdown sealed off one of the most unequal countries in the world, still reeling from a serious drought. Miserly COVID-19 top-up grants for old age recipients, child care givers, and the unemployed only exist through October. An estimated thirty million people are food-stressed. Many believe the hunger pandemic will take more lives than COVID-19 in the coming months. Calls for a substantive and universal basic income (UBI) grant are growing louder, and this is challenging a black government that has placed financialized and carbon-based capitalist accumulation before the needs of black lives and society in general.

Two Possible Futures, Not Three

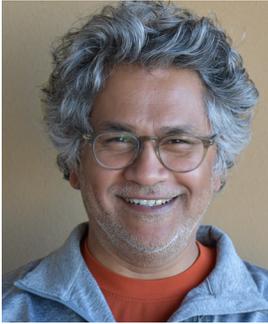
[Barbarization](#) has arrived. All forms of neoliberalization are implicated in this. Prior to COVID-19, neoliberalism was already mutating into a more authoritarian form of right wing nationalist and neo-fascist rule to defend carbon capitalism and its inequalities. Trump and plutocratic US market democracy have intensified this shift. Authoritarian Chinese capitalism, based on cheap labor, is also contracting with the collapse of exports. It will certainly need to rethink its carbon driven export-led development model as it directs fiscal surpluses to COVID-19 economic adjustments and mitigation.

In any case, the depth of social suffering in the world cannot be addressed through a return to a [Conventional World](#) of globalized capitalism, even if that were plausible. Instead, the pretense of thin market democracy might be dropped as full-blown neo-fascist rule and suppression prevails.

In the context of intensifying climate and other crisis tendencies, this shift would likely defend carbon capital and advance further destruction of the planetary commons, driving capitalist civilization into global chaos and collapse. The new normal of a world in permanent systemic crisis has arrived, and more of the same globalized finance or authoritarian financialized nationalism is a direct route to human and non-human extinction. We are living the end game of capitalism and possibly all of us.

At the same time, COVID-19 has engendered an awakening of the importance of scientific warnings and science-based policy. This gives momentum to the mainstreaming of climate science and the need for social-ecological restructuring. Currently, campaigns for universal basic income are active in 95 countries. The Pope has called for a UBI, and the UN General Secretary supports considering a UBI. Moreover, more localized and agroecological food systems are coming to the fore in many communities. The value of effective public health care institutions, including primary health care, is gaining salience in public consciousness. If these four developments are buttressed by greater popular understanding and support during the COVID-19 pandemic, a Great Transition to an emancipatory future is very possible.

About the Author



Vishwas Satgar is an Associate Professor of International Relations at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. He edits the book series Democratic Marxism and serves as principal investigator for the Emancipatory Futures Studies in the Anthropocene project. He is the co-founder of the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign and is currently participating in the development of a Climate Justice Charter for South Africa.

About the Publication

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