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USA

“Normal” No More – “The root of the interlocking crises is systemic”

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A nationwide uprising against murderous racialized police brutality has broken out in the streets of U.S. cities even amidst the considerable risks of mass protests during the coronavirus pandemic, let alone threats from rampant militarized police violence. An enormously positive development is the fact that it is both Black-led and multiracial in its actions and demands, relative to historic urban rebellions from the 1960s onward. The central demands to "Defund the Police" and "De-militarize the Police" stand out for their clarity and radical character and their necessity.

The broad-daylight police lynching of George Floyd, on top of other police and vigilante murders (Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and so many more) brought much of American society face to face with our real condition. The eruption of open white-supremacist politics in the Donald Trump era is real and dangerous, but we are now assured that it does not go unchallenged, particularly among courageous young white people as well as communities of color. It's also clear that while there are a beautiful panoply of Black, Latinx and allied anti-racist formations, these actions are on a far larger scale than any organization or combination could mount on their own.

Beyond that, a perspective on this insurgent movement requires a whole discussion of its own, beyond the scope of the present statement. We would suggest that people are marching not only for, and in solidarity with, Black lives as critically urgent as that is but also from a certain consciousness that survival is on the line for us all.

Well before the most recent string of high-profile police and vigilante murders of Black civilians, there's been a spreading sense of all-encompassing crisis, and no wonder. It's important always to remember that the root of the interlocking crises is systemic, not subjective: in other words, not even Donald Trump on his own could have screwed this whole thing up so completely. We must emphasize this point, precisely because Trump's buffoonish and sinister daily spectacles make it all too easy to forget.

We are living in the worst global public health disaster since the 1918-19 flu pandemic; a potential economic slump on a scale still unknown, possibly rivalling the 1930s Depression; and the unfolding climate and environmental catastrophe that threatens mass species extinction and the survival of human civilization by (or before) the end of this century. What was "normal" is no more, and may never be again.

The United States in particular is governed by a U.S. administration that's the most overtly racist since Woodrow Wilson, the most incompetent since Herbert Hoover, headed up by the most personally corrupt president ever. The country faces a November election with the least inspiring available Democratic presidential candidate, and the real possibility of systematic rightwing electoral theft organized from the top levels of the federal executive and voter-suppressing state legislatures.

We will focus first on the coronavirus pandemic, which (like America's racial and policing crises) was entirely foretold many years ago. "(I)n one vital area," Laurie Garrett wrote in the 1995 edition of her pioneering report *The Coming Plague. Newly Emerging Diseases in a World out of Balance*, "the emergence and spread of new infectious diseases, we can already predict the future and it is threatening and dangerous to us all. The history of our time will be marked by recurrent examples of newly discovered diseases...[including] diseases which spring from insects and animals to humans, through man-made disruptions in local habitats."

Referring to the specific circumstance that terrified the world at the time, Garrett continued: "The global epidemic of human immunodeficiency virus is the most powerful and recent example. Yet AIDS does not stand alone; it may well

be just the first of the modern, large-scale epidemics of infectious disease." The crusading anti-AIDS hero Larry Kramer could hardly have put it better.

The subsequent quarter century has seen plentiful outbreaks to validate this warning. Scientifically, with regard to virology in particular the advances in basic research and technical understanding have been breathtaking. Socially and politically, not so much to put it mildly. Why such poor preparation for the COVID-19 mess?

The answers are well known. Partly it's because a public health emergency doesn't heal or reduce social inequalities and injustice it magnifies them. The slogan "we're all in this together" is exposed as a well-meaning platitude when frontline health care providers, essential service and meatpacking workers protest lethal workplace conditions, as Black and Latinx and Native American communities suffer two and three times the national U.S. infection and death rates while overwhelmingly white demonstrators encouraged by the White House and the right wing demand "open everything."

The workplace actions and demands of Amazon, meatpacking, nursing care and designated essential workers for protection represent today's face of class struggle in the half-locked-down United States, where by late May close to 40 million workers had filed for unemployment and terror swept through prisons, immigrant detention centers and longterm care facilities.

With official unemployment at 20% (and the labor participation rate somewhere around an incredibly low 60%), "reopening the economy" became the rage. What's deemed "essential," whose lives and which communities are expendable, which industries get the bailouts and which go under, are shaped by corporate lobbies and political interest not by deep considerations of human need, and certainly not by democratic discussion.

The same will apply, even more diabolically, to the development and deployment of therapeutic treatments and eventually vaccines. Trump's promotion of hydroxychloroquine and bleach is the stuff of the continuing White House craziness, but the bigger problem isn't that POTUS is a doofus. It's that the capitalist market dictates how vaccines must be created and distributed for profit, complicated by national rivalries and inevitable quarrels over patent rights ("intellectual property").

The Worst of the Worst

We now know that the novel coronavirus had begun travelling from China by early winter. Since then, three governments stand out for the most complacent, arrogant and incompetent response: the United States, Russia and Brazil, under the ruinous rule of Trump, Putin and Bolsonaro. Those countries happen to be, of course, the giants of North America, Eurasia and South America, helping ensure that the spread would be global and maximally destructive.

A second tier of regime malpractice would have to include mullah-ruled Iran, Boris Johnson's Britain, and Mexico where president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador caved in to Trump's demand, forcing the reopening of maquiladora plants for the sake of the U.S. auto supply chain. One should also add Narendra Modi's India, where the no-notice lockdown sent millions of workers walking from the cities to their rural villages, inevitably circulating the virus to the most vulnerable regions.

The rapid full decoding of the genome of the present deadly new coronavirus is an amazing tribute to what science has achieved. Meanwhile the spectacle of the U.S. and Chinese governments spewing garbage at each other about

which side "created" or "unleashed" the virus speaks volumes about the condition of global civilization.

Put to proper use, scientific knowledge of the virus combined with early full disclosure, flawless coordination among governments, plentiful global supplies of protective equipment for medical workers, testing and quarantining capacity in case of need, and a strategic national plan in each country about which sectors of the economy were "essential" to maintain and which would need to be shut down in an emergency could have contained COVID-19 with relatively minimal damage.

That's not the world we live in. It's not the world that Donald Trump inherited when he won the U.S. presidency, and international cooperation and massive investment in global public health certainly were no part of his agenda to "Make America Great Again."

Notoriously, Trump blew off a detailed blueprint prepared by the Obama administration for dealing with a pandemic, and dismantled the inter-agency office that was actually in place to handle such an emergency. That's criminal negligence, on steroids. Yet it can be seen as a perfectly rational political calculation at the time.

Think of a parallel with the threat a certainty, without dramatic immediate action of catastrophic climate change. A given politician may or may not care about the impending disaster, but the truly horrific environmental consequences will not hit (at least in the rich developed countries) during their present term of office and next reelection campaign.

Similarly, even assuming (against the weight of evidence) that Donald Trump understood that the threat of a deadly global pandemic was real, it made sense to calculate that the risk of it happening on his watch was small. Why then spend money on replacing the surgical masks and equipment used up during a previous flu emergency that you'd probably not need, compared to the urgent priorities of wiping out Obamacare and shoveling tax-break money to cronies, corporations and billionaires?

Short-term political rationality translates to ultimate insanity. Almost certainly, thousands in the United States alone would have died in the best-case scenario, but what could have been a costly but probably contained epidemic in 2020 has become an open-ended calamity for the U.S. population and economy, and the entire world. Epidemiology experts like the fired Dr. Rick Bright fear that the coming winter in this country "may be the darkest in modern history."

In a country with no national health service or universal insurance, tens of millions of laid-off workers have lost health care and many who get called back will find their employers no longer providing it. The insurance industry's increases in premiums getting ready to hit next year can only be imagined.

What is the future of public education, already facing a federal administration committed to destroying it? When filling classrooms with 30+ students is out of the question? When reliance on "online learning" is an educational and social disaster for kids and their families? When the race and class gap between those with and those without reliable internet access and technology is enormous, and when so many students depend on school-provided breakfast and lunch meals?

Whole economic sectors stand on the brink. While some like major airlines with political clout and claims to be "essential," will probably be bailed out, others such as hundreds of thousands of non-chain restaurants and myriad small retail outlets will disappear. Musicians and cultural workers relying on live performances and art fairs, seasonal workers in tourist and travel sectors, all kinds of small businesses and their work forces, face ruin.

With state and local government budgets in catastrophic shape, the jobs and crucial services they provide along with public workers' pension plan and union contracts will face the chopping block. On top of so much human misery and insecurity entailed in all this, the cascading collapse of purchasing power and consumption feeds on itself, creating exactly the conditions for a possible prolonged Depression. The absurd claim that May's slight decline in unemployment signals a "V-shaped recovery" is not taken seriously by any economist.

Coronapolitics Inflames Everything

For a long time now, the racialized inequalities of America's neoliberal regime have been leading toward some kind of social explosion. Its timing and the form it might take were not predictable whether it might be mass strikes and community mobilizations, or uncontrolled rioting, or something in between.

We now have a somewhat better idea the hybrid combination of workplace actions at "essential" work places and hospitals, and the anti-police rebellions all mark elements of a mobilization responding to the crisis of a devastated capitalist society. The coronavirus crisis, which will not go away quickly if ever, further inflames everything.

We can barely imagine what might occur if the 2020 election culminates in a shambles and a full-scale crisis of political legitimacy, but that too requires a subsequent discussion. Immediately, can sustained organization and a new mass socialist movement crystalize from the current crisis and struggle? That may be the central question in a situation where we can no longer speak of nor can we survive a return to the death spiral that used to be called "normal."

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