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Movements for the Moment, the Present and the Everyday: Progressive Politics in Times of Crises

What would be a desirable and viable global organization of progressive movements in the context of the historical conjuncture of crises-ridden capitalism? I propose here a reorientation of progressive politics that are attuned to both the fundamentals of structural change and the basic daily needs of human beings.

Capitalist Crises and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The current global health crisis resulting from the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is just one of the recent multiple crises besetting the world capitalist system. The magnitude of attention given to it is unprecedented. Influential actors have not acted with the same urgency on the other life-threatening problems of climate change, ecological degradation, wars, resource conflicts, inequality and privation.

The digital world has definitely amplified awareness about the pandemic. Yet, such intensity of reaction among power holders and decision makers is largely because of the instantaneous impacts of the deadly disease on the assets, interests and lifestyles of the business and socio-political elites based in the financial, production and industrial centers of capitalism in the US, Europe, Japan, South Korea, and China.

The effects of zoonoses, or diseases transmitted from animals to humans such as COVID-19, are trans-boundary. They adversely affect societal interaction and economic activities from individuals and households to cross-border commerce, trading and tourism. As globalization took off in the early 1990s, ever-increasing production for the export market has ushered in a ramp-up of zoonotic infections. Underpinning this process is the capitalist ethos of neoliberalism, the ideology that puts private interest for profits way above the collective well-being of people, society and planet.

Neoliberal globalization has likewise accelerated the transition to the Anthropocene, the geological epoch characterized by pervasive human interference and conflict with Earth's natural processes. [1] Planetary and ecological crises have become more manifest in new epidemics, massive deforestation, reduced biodiversity and extreme weather conditions.

The virus outbreak can victimize any individual and country. But in times of crisis, structural and relational inequalities that are endemic in capitalist development determine the differences in the respective capacities of groups and nations to bear and overcome hardships.

Philosophically, the unfolding pandemic compels us to rethink virtually everything that exists and to imagine a post-capitalist future. In reality, however, the establishment elites control the prevailing structure, norms and institutions that tremendously constrain the actions of agents for systemic change.

Movements Grounded in the Present

There is a popular desire for the immediate return to business-as-usual and the status quo ante, not least among state leaders across the North Atlantic and the Asia Pacific, financiers and multinational corporations. Capitalists are on wealth preservation mode. Government resources are mobilized to bailout losses of companies and absorb risks of entrepreneurial ventures, often at the expense of social protection programs for ordinary laborers and citizens. The state's executive apparatuses, particularly the police and the military, have re-emerged as the sole governing authority to guarantee order in both spheres of society and economy. Almost by default, the state has exercised its sovereign power in deploying a "regime of exception," which is susceptible to abuse and practically undemocratic. [2]

Lest progressives will be left behind by the reactionary crisis response of the economic and political right, the relevance of a global network of social movements must be asserted. Constructive critique and speaking truth to power should come with concrete policy proposals that can effectively arrest the pandemic. More importantly, actions must be felt by the vulnerable multitude who are among the movement's members and constituencies – including the endangered health workers, the insecure communities and impoverished families. Thus far, the latter is done in the individual capacity of activists and civic organizations.

Modern history of global political economy shows that neoliberal capitalism has evolved from crisis to crisis. Crises are constitutive of—and functional to—neoliberalization processes and the reproduction of capitalist social relations into different configurations. [3]

Periods of crisis simultaneously activate and weaken social movements. The occurrence of a structural crisis and its effects would vindicate progressive analyses and advocacy for change. But the hegemonic pro-capitalist political forces have the critical means to utilize crises to their advantage. Still, even in the battle of rhetoric, progressives must be circumspect in messaging for public relations. This includes discursively reframing usual activist comment of “we told you so” and futuristic slogans like “toward a post-COVID world” by evoking a deep sense of empathy and hope amid general anxiety, sickness and insecurity.

What must be activated is a global coordinating council of local movements that is grounded in the present. Progressive membership at every geographical scale should be responsive to real-time and real-life challenges, not just through manifestos and press releases but also by tangible deeds.

A Dynamic and Democratic Learning Organization

In agreement with Valentine Moghadam’s call to “planetize the movement,” I put forward the case for the formation of a political organization of the global justice movement. [4] Willing participants in this process must learn from the limitations of recent discussion forums of global civil society and new social movements, especially the once-promising World Social Forum, and rectify the organizational errors of past internationals.

A New International, Planetary Movement or World Party of progressive grassroots movements is envisioned to be a dynamic and democratic learning organization. It should coordinate and

keep into perspective various local initiatives and campaigns, observing a continuous dialogue between bottom-up and top-down approaches to decision-making. It should also have an open mind, idealistic yet pragmatic, calculating of the dialectics between reform and revolution whereby particular circumstances may necessitate forging tactical alliances and making strategic negotiations. Though the project is to globalize the radical movement, much focus of the mass action should be on the plight of victims in local communities. Accordingly, state-level mobilizations of activist networks must be sustained because this is where sufferings and oppressive practices are close to home.

Protocols implemented to contain COVID-19 contagion like lockdowns and social distancing are crucial constraints to traditional operations in community organizing and to the connectivity required in coordinating plans for action of inter-national and multi-cultural movements. Technology may hurdle these obstacles. At the same time, mass base and network expansion must include recruitment strategies to partner with scientists, engineers, medical doctors and competent professionals who could actualize visions for alternative systems of production, exchange, and living-together. [5]

Crisis signifies “the turning point of a disease when an important change takes place, indicating either recovery or death.” Thus, there will not be any meaningful human flourishing, social change and global transformation from this significant crisis without paradigm shift about the good life.

At this historic juncture, progressive movements ought to inspire and consolidate the reflexive capability of human beings for concerted action, survival, learning and innovation. Humanity must be convinced to take on the progressive perspective that egoistic individualism is part of the pandemic problem, and that the most potent solution to this tragedy is the care and concern of collective being to live together in compassion, solidarity and mutual aid toward the common good.

Meanwhile, progressive movements must be able to address people's basic day-to-day concerns and connect these with the struggle for fundamental structural changes. We need movements that are not merely daydreaming about the future, but are relevant and effective in crisis and pandemic times. These are movements for the moment, the present and the everyday.

Notes

[1] Ian Angus, "When Did the Anthropocene Begin...and Why Does it Matter?," *Monthly Review* 67, no. 4 (2015): 1–11.

[2] Bonn Juego, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Its Ideological Antecedents and Policy Manifestations from Carl Schmitt's Political Economy of Governance," *Administrative Culture* 19, no. 1 (2018): 105–136.

[3] Bonn Juego, "The Reproduction of Neoliberalism and the Global Capitalist Crisis," *The Interdisciplinary Journal of International Studies* 8, no. 1 (2012): 23–40.

[4] Bonn Juego, "Rethinking Samir Amin's Legacy and the Case for a Political Organization of the Global Justice Movement," *Globalizations* 16, no. 7 (2019): 1109–1115; also in *Journal of World-Systems Research* 25, no. 2 (2019): 336–344.

[5] Bonn Juego, *A Commons Perspective on Human-Nature Relations: Analysis, Visions, and Strategies for Alternative Futures*. (Bangkok: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2016), <https://th.boell.org/en/2016/05/27/commons-perspective-human-nature-relations-analysis-vision-and-strategies-alternative>.

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