

From Fanon to ventilators: fighting for our right to breathe

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To neoliberal states, the pandemic is a racialized security threat and a market opportunity. Our fight is for the right to breathe — in every sense.

Ruling elites are pursuing the convergence of two dreams in their response to COVID-19 : a state dream and a market dream. The state dream entails emptying public space of unruly populations — the poor, migrants, the racialized, protestors. The market dream is a world governed by market-based algorithms abstracted from human relationships. COVID-19 has provided a pretext for both to be realized. As we come under pressure to live privatized, domesticated, separated lives of docility, underpinned by intensified government repression, we will have to defend not only our right to healthcare but our right to be fully human : our right to breathe — in every sense.

The War on Terror offers us lessons on what happens in states of emergency. What were presented as temporary emergency measures after 9/11 quickly became permanent powers of the state. The Authorization for Use of Military Force, passed by the US Congress in the days after 9/11, effectively enabled the US military to treat the entire globe as a battlefield ; it remains in force to this day. There are still prisoners at Guantánamo who have not been convicted of any crime. And the counter-terrorism legislation introduced around the world in the years after 9/11 remains almost entirely on the statute books. Moreover, the anti-Muslim racism that was fueled by the War on Terror is still with us. Indeed, it has spread to China, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka and India, where Muslims have now been scapegoated for the virus.

The unnecessary military violence of the US's War on Terror caused the deaths of over 800,000 people. Its budget of \$6.4 trillion represents a vast redirection of resources that could have been used to build adequate public healthcare or education systems. Indeed, many of us who criticized the War on Terror have long argued that the goal of security policy should be to cultivate healthy social and ecological relationships rather than the elimination of a series of inflated threats, such as international terrorism.

Rather than redefine security in terms of health, we are now likely to see health redefined in terms of security. Neoliberal states have for decades diluted the ability to deliver public services while ramping up their capacities for policing and warfare. Now, the public healthcare responses we need are being subsumed within a broader nexus of national security.

THE CONTROL OF PUBLIC SPACE

The genuine need for lockdowns and quarantines in response to COVID-19 has been exploited by states across the world to intensify patterns of violence that are already normalized in policing. In France, working-class suburbs are seeing punishment of breaches of confinement rules at a rate three times higher than in the rest of the country. In Greece, migrants and asylum seekers are harassed, spat at, and strip-searched by police enforcing COVID-19 rules. In Bulgaria, a number of

Roma settlements have been placed under compulsory quarantine, with separation walls constructed, forcible testing, and the use of drones with thermal sensors to remotely take temperatures of residents.

In Israel, there has been no relaxation of the siege of Gaza to allow for public health assistance ; instead it seems likely Israel will annex much of the West Bank under the cover of the virus. In India, the government is exploiting the pandemic to ramp up repression in Kashmir. Amid the chaos of the pandemic in the US, the states of Kentucky, South Dakota, and West Virginia have passed laws imposing new criminal penalties on protests against oil and gas pipelines.

Migrants and refugees are especially vulnerable. Hundreds of migrant workers in Qatar were told they were being offered testing and then taken away to be detained and deported. In the Mediterranean, Maltese soldiers vandalized a stranded boat, leading to the death of at least five of its refugee passengers. Prime minister Robert Abela said such actions were necessary due to COVID-19. Likewise, Malaysia has turned away boats carrying refugees from Rohingya and has rounded up and detained over 500 migrants.

In a pandemic, restrictions on freedom of movement may be necessary to protect public health. But when the poor arriving by boat are turned away while the rich arriving by private jet are free to enter, it is not about controlling the virus but controlling the dispossessed. In immigration detention centers, which have remained populated throughout the pandemic, there is no protection against the spread of the virus — over 75 percent will likely be infected.

As lockdown measures are imposed on the poor without taking account of the need for food, water and shelter, protests are inevitably springing up, only to be met with extreme police violence. In South Africa, residents in informal settlements are refusing to stay indoors and starve. An estimated 5.5 million informal sector workers have lost their livelihoods, affecting 16.5 million people. Security forces have discharged water cannon and rubber bullets to enforce the lockdown on the urban poor. Similarly in India, police have fired tear gas on jobless, migrant workers who were protesting the coronavirus lockdown.

Elsewhere, critical journalists, bloggers and activists have been arrested. In Sri Lanka, police forces have acted against people publishing posts on social media criticizing government officials. In Pakistan, they have arrested dozens of doctors and medical staff who protested about a lack of personal protective equipment.

DISPROPORTIONATE EFFECTS

The violent ways that states are responding to the pandemic add to broader patterns of inequality within which the virus disproportionately harms the Indigenous, migrants, the low waged and people of color. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore has written, racism can be understood as “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”

In the UK, people of color make up more than a third of patients who are critically ill in hospital with the virus, though they are less than 15 percent of the population. In Chicago, African Americans comprise 64 percent of COVID-19 deaths, though they represent 30 percent of the population. Forty percent of deaths from COVID-19 in Michigan have been among African Americans, who make up 14 percent of Michigan’s population.

The higher risk of infection, the higher risk of hospitalization after infection, and the higher risk of death all correlate with race and class inequalities. The causes are overcrowded housing, shortages of clean water, dangerous working conditions, pre-existing health inequalities, and under-resourced

hospitals. The American Civil Liberties Union estimates the large jail population in the US will itself cause an additional 100,000 deaths.

As the virus spreads through South Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, inequalities in the virus' effects will become all the more visible. Frantz Fanon wrote that anti-colonial revolts occur when it becomes "impossible to breathe." More recently, "I can't breathe" — Eric Garner's infamous last words while he was choked to death by the New York police — was taken up by the Black Lives Matter movement in the US. It now takes on a new layer of meaning for those many thousands of people who will die because they were not white or wealthy enough to have access to a hospital ventilator.

CONSPIRACY THEORY

In the US, Trump had already declared a state of emergency in February 2019, in order to assert his executive power to build a wall separating the US from Mexico. Now, in a situation of real, rather than fabricated, emergency, the US government has been unable to marshal anything like an effective public healthcare response. Instead, Trump has described coronavirus as the "Chinese virus" and "the invisible enemy," apparently coordinating his messaging with the Hungarian prime minister Victor Orbán, who first used these same phrases on the same date as Trump. Like the US, Hungary had already declared a "state of crisis due to mass migration."

Anti-Chinese conspiracy theory has become one of the main ways of publicly discussing the virus in the US. The idea that the virus originated from a Chinese lab has been promoted not only by Fox News but by the Washington Post, where Josh Rogin has written of the possibility that "the pandemic is the result of a lab accident in Wuhan." Secretary of state Mike Pompeo has endorsed this assertion and Trump has insinuated that China used the virus to wreck the US economy. Members of congress are suggesting punishments that include sanctioning Chinese leaders, cutting Chinese drug manufacturers out of supply chains, withholding debt payments, and launching a US-led international investigation into Beijing's propaganda. Democrat presidential candidate Joe Biden has released his own anti-Chinese campaign video.

It is of course true that the virus originated in China and that authorities there initially withheld information about the virus from the public. But there is no reason to conclude that the virus originated in a Chinese lab. In any case, what drives anti-Chinese conspiracy theory is not a desire to discover the truth. Like US anti-communist, anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim conspiratorial thinking of the past, it serves a different purpose. Politicians need to explain why the pandemic occurred, why it spread so voraciously and caused so much havoc, and what has been done to ensure the devastation will not be repeated. As Mike Davis has written, the only truthful response to these demands is to point out that "capitalist globalization now appears to be biologically unsustainable in the absence of a truly international public health infrastructure."

But the China conspiracy theory instead offers us a comforting collective delusion. By displacing the problem onto an abstraction called "China," we can avoid the difficult discussions of capitalist agriculture, public healthcare and racial and global inequality that the pandemic ought to induce. Ironically, the mobilization of anti-Chinese sentiment in the West goes hand in hand with a growing similarity in the forms of authoritarian rule that Western governments and the Chinese state deploy.

ALGORITHMIC RULE

Confined to our internet-connected homes, if we have them, our lives have been ensnared in ever deeper dependencies on digital media corporations. Amazon, Zoom, Netflix and the like have provided the infrastructure of isolation. But the more our relationships are mediated through digital

algorithms, the easier it is to realize the neoliberal dream of a world governed by the logic of markets. Whenever the emergency period of the pandemic ends, we are likely to emerge with social structures that are more deeply digitized, marketized and domesticated — with profound implications for our future ability to come together in human communities unmediated by market relationships.

Healthcare providers and universities, for example, have introduced online services as an emergency response to the virus. But the corporations providing the infrastructure for these services will now try to make those the standard way that the less wealthy receive medical treatment and higher education.

Already, political leaders are competing to establish themselves as purveyors of marketization in the midst of the crisis. In a speech on February 3, UK prime minister Boris Johnson said “there is a risk that new diseases such as coronavirus will trigger a panic and a desire for market segregation,” by which he meant restrictions on neoliberal globalization. Instead, he said, “humanity needs some government somewhere that is willing at least to make the case powerfully for ... the right of the populations of the earth to buy and sell freely among each other.” Thus Britain will defend the free market globally from anyone who sees in the virus a reason to pursue other models.

We should not therefore be dazzled by arguments that the pandemic will automatically strengthen the left. Some even claim neoliberalism is collapsing as states become central to the medical and economic response to the virus. This is a seductive illusion. It rests on the false assumption that neoliberalism can simply be defined as less government. Neoliberalism is better understood as the deployment of market rationalities to disaggregate collective action aimed at social justice. On this definition, the pandemic brings neoliberal opportunities as much as risks. Financial markets indicate investors believe there are more of the former than the latter : April 2020 was Wall Street’s best month in decades. And, between March 18 and April 10, the combined wealth of America’s billionaires increased by nearly 10 per cent, according to the Institute for Policy Studies.

OUR POWER IS IN THE STREETS

We should certainly fight for a new kind of social order to be built on the ruins left by the pandemic — one organized on human needs rather than corporate profit. But we should recognize we are doing so from a position in which progress is not guaranteed by the structure of the situation we find ourselves in. What we do know is that we cannot wait to resist the new measures coming through — because what is put in place today will be harder to undo tomorrow.

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