

Interview

Covid-19 pandemic in Latin America: Choosing between life or Capital

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Róbert Nára interviewed Jeffery R. Webber for the summer 2020 issue of *Marxist Left Review* published by Socialist Alternative, Australia?

Róbert Nára (RN): Let's start at an epidemiological level. How has the virus impacted the region so far?

Jeffery R Webber (JW): In terms of the sheer number of cases and fatalities, all existing official numbers provided by states in the region are highly dubious. But you still have some discernible trends. In the future, the most reliable data – as elsewhere – will be the distinction between average death rates over the last several years and death rates during the pandemic period. Such death-rate analysis is particularly revealing both because these figures are more difficult for states to conceal or fudge, and because it captures deaths both from COVID-19 and those excess indirect deaths caused by people with other ailments who were not able to access necessary medical attention due to saturated capacity in the health system.

The full extent of this information will only be known fully some distance into the future, and perhaps never fully in the most under-resourced states. Nonetheless, there are already some initial studies focused on this kind of death rate comparison of select cities in the region, and the results are alarming; the high numbers also stand in stark contrast to the lack of attention paid to the Latin America scenario by the dominant international media compared to the coverage of Europe and North America.

As of May 11, according to data provided by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), there were 1.74 million reported cases of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in excess of 104,000 reported deaths from the virus. The rate of spread is also increasing decisively. Whereas it took three months for Latin America and the Caribbean to reach one million cases, it took fewer than three weeks to roughly double that number. Last week alone there were some 20,000 additional reported deaths in the region, which represented a 23 percent spike over the previous week's numbers.

As of today (May 15), we know that the incidence of the virus in Brazil is escalating the most rapidly of any country in Latin America and the Caribbean, alongside severe scenarios in Peru, Ecuador and Mexico. Brazil has the highest level of COVID-19 cases and deaths across all indicators in the region. There were 203,165 confirmed cases and the official tally of deaths by the virus in the country was 13,999, but this is surely a dramatic underestimate. The healthcare system in Rio de Janeiro, for

example, is completely overrun, as it is in a number of major cities elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean. Big cities throughout the Amazon have been hit punishingly, and the Brazilian Amazon is no exception. A mortality study carried out by the New York Times, for example, showed that the Amazonian city of Manaus, which has a population of 2 million, recorded 2,800 deaths in April alone, which is about three times its historical average of deaths for that month.

Peru has the second highest number of confirmed cases in the region after Brazil at 80,604, with 2,267 deaths, followed by Mexico with 42,595 and 4,477 confirmed cases and deaths, respectively. Chile's official number of reported cases is also high, in excess of 37,000, with almost two-thirds in the capital, Santiago. Reported deaths are still below 400, but these are the official counts of the state – not comparative mortality rates based on the historical average, as in the Manaus example – and as we know from earlier official reporting in Europe and the United States, the real mortality figures lag well behind the day-to-day death notifications in the media, which are invariably revised substantially upwards at a later date. In terms of health infrastructure and the wider socio-economic backdrop of society, of course, it is of significance that Chile is one of the richer countries in the region, even though access to that infrastructure is intensely uneven. So even with high numbers, the death rate as a proportion of cases is likely to be lower.

Ecuador, by contrast, has been severely hit in terms of mortality rate (2,338 confirmed dead), even though the absolute number of reported cases is relatively lower than in Chile, at 30,500. A Financial Times investigation revealed that in the province of Guayas alone (the province contains the major coastal city and coronavirus hotspot of Guayaquil), there were 11,500 excess deaths, or 459 percent higher than historically average mortality rates in the province, between the outset of the pandemic in Ecuador at the close of February and April 28, the last day of data analysed. This is instantaneously revealing of a feature of the present conjuncture that we'll get into more – that is, this is not merely a natural crisis; rather, the uneven scale and depth of the impact has everything to do with the social conditions operative in specific locations. Thus, Ecuador is in no position relative to Chile to deal with what's happening at the infrastructural level of its health system.

Patterns elsewhere are indicative of exceptionality. For example, Argentina, which neighbours both Brazil and Chile, has a distinctively lower rate of transmission (7,134 confirmed cases), death rate (353), and so on. It also has witnessed a notably more extensive response from the state that helps to explain this discrepancy – early, state-enforced social isolation even when there were few cases. Already there is pressure from capital to open up the country's economy at whatever cost to lives. President Alberto Fernández – a figure who emerged from the more conservative wing of Peronism, but who was drawn somewhat to the centre-left given the fact that he owed his presidential candidacy entirely to his vice-presidential co-runner, former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner – is taking a stance quite distinct from the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and, in other ways, from the conservative government of Sebastián Piñera in Chile and the centre-right administration of Martín Vizcarra in Peru. This could have important political repercussions coming out of the first phase of this crisis.

At a first bird's eye glance, those are some of the places that are intensifying – Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, Chile – with Argentina as a contrast study. If, and more likely when, the virus hits Central America and the Caribbean in a more concerted way the results are likely to be devastating. Countries such as Honduras, Haiti, Guatemala, and Nicaragua are very poorly positioned in terms of infrastructure to cope with a wide-scale unleashing of the virus, and this is even before we consider the interacting premise of an unsurpassed global depression. If it takes hold in these areas in a significant way the disaster could be monumental.

In Venezuela, where the official indications are that the case (455) and death-rates of COVID-19 are remarkably low (10), we don't yet have an accurate picture of how severe the problem is, but as in

the Central American and Caribbean cases just mentioned, the health system is monumentally ill-equipped to handle any significant outbreak – problems of a dearth of basic medical supplies, ventilators, personal protective equipment, reliable electricity, and so on are self-evident, exacerbated by prolonged economic depression and US sanctions.

There is also the issue of the vulnerability of the over 5 million Venezuelan migrants who have left the country since 2015 – Venezuela is now in the highest position in the world in terms of outward migration, overtaking Syria recently. More than 1.8 million of the total number of Venezuelan migrants are presently in Colombia. They are now in desperate straits because they are not eligible for emergency resources from the Colombian state, and the viability of the sort of petty informal labour and commerce many of them were engaged in until recently has been all but eliminated.

So there's a real trauma there, and some are attempting to return home by foot, although whether what awaits them there is actually superior to their present circumstances is questionable. Even if it's true that the rate of infection is low so far in Venezuela, the infrastructural degradation of the social functions of the Venezuelan state after successive years of extremely intense socio-economic crisis, combined with the morally destitute sanctions imposed by United States, means that Venezuela could easily become one of the worst affected countries in the region if conditions change. In host countries further south, due to border closures and lack of transport, Venezuelan migrants facing similar straits as those in Colombia – in Peru, Chile, and elsewhere – are more or less stuck where they are for the time being.

I think we are in very early days, but that's part of the basic regional pattern visible so far.

RN: So the pattern so far is uneven. Could you elaborate on the underlying dynamics that explain that unevenness? For example, the health of the public infrastructure across states, the condition of the working classes and oppressed, and so on?

JW: It is very clear that even prior to the onset of COVID-19 the social situation in much of Latin America and the Caribbean had deteriorated gravely since at least 2013, and many of the modest but important improvements in poverty rates and income inequality achieved during the era of progressive governments and capitalist dynamism driven by a global commodity boom (2003-2012) had already been significantly reversed.

The pandemic will exacerbate these conditions sharply. This week, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) published a projection of expected poverty increases in 2020, based on their conservative calculation of what constitutes poverty. The report suggests that there will be 28.7 million more poor people, and 15.9 million additional extremely poor people in the region by the end of this year. Added to the existing numbers of impoverished and extremely impoverished people, the total projected figure of poor people by the end of 2020 is 214.7 million, or 34.7 percent of the region's population, while there will be a total of 83.4 million extremely poor people should their conservative projections prove accurate.

Latin America has long been the most unequal region in the world, and it remained so even after the so-called Pink Tide experiments of left- and centre-left governance in the early part of this century. That inequality feeds directly into deeply stratified underlying health conditions and health access among the population.

Poor Latin Americans and Caribbeans are more vulnerable due to the higher prevalence in this layer of the population to existing conditions like lung or heart disease, diabetes, and general lack of access to sufficient medical attention. Likewise, class injustice is interlaced and intensified by the complex and specific oppressions of gender and sexuality, ethnicity and race, disability,

homelessness, incarceration, and migration – all of these will mean disproportionate suffering by specific sectors of the population.

Speaking at a general regional level – and thus necessarily concealing a heterogeneous reality – health systems in Latin America and the Caribbean tend to lack both skilled medical professionals and medical supplies. There has long been an underinvestment in health by central governments, reaching an average aggregate regional level of only 2.2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Most countries of the region have fragile and unintegrated health systems, which have not and will not be able to cope properly with COVID-19 as the crisis expands and endures. In most countries public healthcare is only directed toward low-income sectors of the population, and thus is underfunded and inadequate. Formal sector workers are often able to access the health system through social security services attached to their employment. The rich and powerful rely on private healthcare, whether in their home countries or abroad. Again, with variation, health systems in the region tend to be unequal in terms of access and quality.

The region's medical supplies and inputs are heavily dependent on global health supply chains that are breaking down logistically and politically at the moment, and most states in the region cannot compete with the bulk-buying power of imperial states in the world system, which are able to monopolise purchases of tests and personal protective equipment, among other supplies and equipment. Hospital beds and ventilators per capita are in most countries remotely distant from what is necessary even in normal times.

To make matters still worse, several health systems in the region were already coping – or better, failing to cope – with an outbreak of more than three million cases of Dengue virus in 2019 – over 2.2 million cases in Brazil.

A partial exception to these trends is the Cuban example. As is well known, one of the major enduring successes of the revolution is the island's healthcare system, which has an unusually high number of doctors per capita, and a history of well-coordinated preventative care arrangements. Early regulation on incoming flights from abroad, strict controls of mandatory physical isolation, extensive medical surveys and widespread check-ups on households by medical students, among other measures, have translated into weeks of declining new cases and a low death rate. The respective number of confirmed cases and deaths as of May 15 is 1,830 and 79. Continuing its history of international medical solidarity, Cuba has dispatched more than 2,000 doctors and healthcare workers to more than 20 countries, adding to the existing 37,000 Cuban medical personnel stationed in 67 countries around the globe. I say Cuba remains a partial exception despite these impressive details mainly because the internal economic contradictions in the country are severe, and the socio-economic fallout of declining remittances from the Cuban diaspora and a prolonged slump in tourism will likely have a serious impact on overarching conditions, even if the health system remains highly functional. The US sanctions regime persists, and could escalate in the lead-up to the American November elections.

RN: So on the one hand, the pandemic is lighting up the vast class disparities that exist in terms of public health and livelihoods. On the other hand, the pandemic is entering a region that has been wracked by a series of pre-existing crises – economic, political, social and ecological – as well as one of the largest waves of popular rebellions we've seen for quite some time. How is the pandemic interacting with and exacerbating these pre-existing crises across the region?

JW: I think the most important element to highlight at the outset is that many of Latin America's major economies – Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, in many respects Mexico as well – alongside many of its smaller economies, were already experiencing severe recessionary trends or low growth for

the past several years. So there was a pre-existing economic crisis or recession in much of the region that was itself a kind of delayed reverberation of the 2008 crisis into Latin America.

That delayed reverberation was important in at least two respects. First, it was still mainly centre-left and left governments in office when the crisis started to really take hold in South America around 2012 and into 2013. And, second, to make a long story short, the centre-left and left governments which were in power shifted rightward by and large, implementing overt or disguised measures of austerity in response to the crisis, losing in the process significant swathes of their popular social bases while simultaneously failing in their bid to project “credibility” to capital. As a result they have been significantly weakened in political terms by that crisis, opening up opportunities for both extra-parliamentary and parliamentary forces of the right, including military expressions of the new right – depending on which country we are talking about. The right won elections in country after country, and where it couldn’t win electorally it took power through a revival of hard coups (as in Honduras 2009), soft coups (as in Brazil 2016) or some mixture of the two (Bolivia 2019).

This was all pre-pandemic. So the pandemic is arriving in a situation in which you have three dynamics going on at once: newly formed right-wing governments in many countries; weakened and rightward-moving left governments where they remain; and, the main source of hope, new extra-parliamentary social movements – reaching semi-insurrectionary levels in places like Chile – especially in countries where the right is in power. This new protest wave, including the popular explosions in Ecuador, Colombia and Puerto Rico in 2019 (as part of an international uplift in radical protest that year), but also elsewhere in the region on a less visible scale, was rarely connected or well-integrated into any traditional left formations, especially given the relative delegitimation of centre-left and left parties from their recent time in office in a number of cases. At the centre of the protest wave in many locales has been a resurgent popular feminism, with an intensity and depth perhaps without historical precedence in the region, and ecologically-based struggles.

These, then, were three of the prominent pre-pandemic political dynamics. It should be stressed that the new right governments in office were very far away from enjoying some sort of new hegemony, in the sense of replacing the old centre-left hegemony achieved at the height of the commodity boom. They were generally having difficulties governing, with very low rates of approval. In part, this is because they were unable to generate a kind of renewal of capitalist dynamism, a way out of the economic crisis – dependent as this has been in the region on the restoration of life in the world market. So as the viral pandemic arrives it is interacting with some of these basic political-economic scenarios.

Then you need to relate this to the basic crisis of capitalism on a global scale – insofar as the recent, robust rate of growth in Latin America between 2003 and 2011 was massively dependent on external dynamics – overwhelmingly, China’s rapid industrialisation, high commodity prices, and so on. The latest projections of the International Monetary Fund suggest -3 percent global growth in 2020, which is a six percentage point contraction from the 2.9 percent growth rate of the global economy in 2019. The World Bank is predicting a fall of world trade of between 13 and 32 percent this year. According to the United Nations Conference on Global Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the value of global trade has already fallen by 3 percent in the first quarter of 2020, with an estimated quarter-on-quarter decline of 27 percent in the second quarter. Commodity prices, meanwhile, plunged by a record 20 percent in March, led by the collapse of oil prices.

These economic phenomena on a world scale will find particular transmission routes into Latin America – fall in export prices for both primary commodities and manufactured goods (the region’s economy has become increasingly dependent on export earnings since the transition to neoliberalism in the 1980s, a subordinate incorporation into the international division of labour

intensified rather than reversed under Pink Tide rule); declining terms of trade for the region; collapse of remittances from migrant labour; capital flight (both the withdrawal of foreign capital into safer assets as well as the capital flight of domestic Latin American capitalists as they, too, shift their fortunes even more than usual into foreign banks and off-shore tax-havens); breakdown of global value chains for those countries most heavily involved in manufacturing (Brazil and Mexico, especially); and a collapse in tourism (Caribbean small island states to be particularly brutalised by this factor, although its effects will be widely felt throughout Latin America and the Caribbean). ECLAC envisions an extraordinary contraction in 2020, with a -5.2 percent aggregate growth rate, which is well below projected rhythms in Africa, South Asia, or the Middle East.

This is a crisis of unprecedented scale and complexity, a truly global depression – the Eurozone, China, and the United States are all in turmoil. A global recession was already in motion prior to COVID-19, rooted among other things in problems of massive corporate, household and government debt, facilitated by quantitative easing, i.e. cheap money, alongside low rates of profitability, little investment, escalating inequality as cheap money flowed into speculative financial investment schemes, and so on. The viral pandemic has made this underlying economic trajectory monstrously worse.

At the heart of all of this is the monumental question of debt. On the one hand, there is the issue of debt weighing down centres of global accumulation such as the United States and China (a product of their response to the 2008 crisis), which, quite apart from all the unknowns that persist with regard to COVID-19, calls into question the viability of any massive counter-cyclical intervention reanimating these economies and in turn providing an engine source for the world market, as China briefly managed to do following the 2008 meltdown. On the other hand, as Adam Hanieh has demonstrated so effectively, there is the problem of the extraordinary indebtedness of countries in much of the Global South – and not just the poorest ones – which is inhibiting their ability to meet the public spending challenges necessary for any effective response to COVID-19. Even before the latest world conjuncture, two years ago, in 2018, 46 countries devoted more government spending to servicing public debts than they did on their healthcare systems as a proportion of GDP.

In Latin America, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a surge in the influence of the World Bank, IMF, and Inter-American Development Bank. As key institutional vectors of imperialism they made access to lines of credit conditional on neoliberal structural adjustment programs. During the height of the Pink Tide era and the associated commodity boom these institutions receded dramatically from the regional picture. As the global crisis of 2008 made its entry into South America by 2012-2013, however, these institutions followed in its wake.

Before the pandemic, both Argentina and Ecuador had already entered into agreements with the IMF and both were struggling to repay their debts. Ecuador and Venezuela were also massively indebted to China – today, China is the world's biggest public creditor to the Global South through its Belt and Road Initiative, and, along with all the other imperial debt collectors, it is now calling for repayment from the impoverished states of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America to which it loaned hundreds of billions of dollars.

So-called emerging markets as a whole owe \$171 trillion in debt to a multitude of creditors. Debt restructuring will have to occur, but as the Financial Times has pointed out, it is ever trickier to coordinate primary creditors to allow for a haircut on debt repayments given that, unlike in the 1980s and 1990s when creditors were mainly banks and governments, dominant creditors today are an assortment of bond funds, the managers of which are signalling that they are ready to settle into long-term international legal disputes with recalcitrant governments and put a sustained squeeze on even the most hard-hit countries to extract payments for their investors.

All of this means that, already in crisis, Latin American states are now in situations of extreme vulnerability, although the specific channels through which the global crisis is making its way into Latin America varies according to country and sub-region.

To make matters worse, alongside the economic crisis, there are the ongoing ecological contradictions of extractive capitalism. As Robert Wallace and others have pointed out, structural transformations in extractive sectors such as agro-industry worldwide – and associated patterns of planetary hyper-deforestation – are deeply associated with the origins of COVID-19 and potential future viral threats of a similar variety. It is no coincidence that within the dynamics of world capitalism, some of Latin America's most potent social struggles and conflicts between the reproduction of life and ecosystems, on one side, and the interests of capital, on the other, in recent years have been rooted in those sectors that express the particular regional manifestations of the rise of extractive capital globally – agro-industrial mono-cropping, oil and natural gas extraction and mining mineral extraction. Such battlegrounds are in today's altered world assuming novel dimensions, given what we know about the political-economic and ecological origins of COVID-19, and specifically its connection to agro-industrial food production, rural displacement, deforestation, and subsequent flow through global value chains, logistics processes, and so on.

So there's that crisis, the crisis of ecology. And then there's the crisis of social reproduction, with social reproduction understood in the broadest sense of the best new Marxist feminist analyses, as all activities extending through the realms of paid and unpaid gendered labour involved in the generational reproduction of the working class. This can involve everything from the unpaid toil of raising children and feeding and clothing family members, to the waged work of a teacher providing education, or a healthcare worker providing care to the sick.

In Latin America and the Caribbean women are particularly affected by the aggravated pressure on health systems because they constitute 72.8 percent of the total number of employees in the sector region-wide. In addition to assuming the front-line crisis work in the health system as the pandemic spreads, women are disproportionately burdened with the excess social reproductive labour involved in quarantine, such as the caring and home-schooling of children. Paid domestic workers, accounting for 11.4 percent of women's jobs in the region, tend to be disproportionately migrants, indigenous or Afro-descendant women. They lack access to social security and increasing levels of unemployment as employer families readjust their home budgets in the face of the crisis. As is the case internationally, in Latin America and the Caribbean instances of domestic violence against women and children are intensifying in contexts of quarantine and collapse of household finances.

The social-reproductive elements of the Latin American crises were visible long before the pandemic, and they were raised to the foreground of political life in recent years through what is arguably the biggest wave of popular feminism in Latin American history. The last five years have seen massive movements in Argentina and Chile, and important feminist currents in Mexico, Brazil and elsewhere. The popular feminist movement in Chile, for example, was the most important articulating factor of largest wave of rebellions in that country since the fights against Pinochet at the end of the 1980s. Latin American popular feminism today possesses an extraordinary vibrancy.

Unsurprisingly, alongside this uptick in praxis, there has been an accompanying theoretical effervescence on the Latin American left, pivoting on conceptualizing the dynamics of social reproduction, and the inherent conflicts between the reproduction of life and the reproduction of capital.

Of course, the insights of the ecological and feminist struggles, important as they were in recent years, are still more important in the present scenario facing the region, and indeed the rest of humanity. The fact that these movements were among the stronger popular forces of recent years is

one of the positive factors that will play into the contending balance of forces between life and capital as we emerge from the first phase of the pandemic and disputes over the character of the “new normal” that will emerge to replace it. There are few moments in world history where the competition between the value of production for profit versus the reproduction of life has been so starkly posed.

So to recap a very complicated scenario: you have a viral crisis interacting with a crisis of capitalism at the global level and its specificity in Latin America; you have a crisis of ecology expressed in the intensification of extractive capitalism across all of these dimensions; and you have a crisis of social reproduction. All of this, of course, something we’ll get into, is related to political crises of all sorts. Heuristically, I’ve spoken of many distinct crises, but these are actually better thought of as constitutive parts of a unitary crisis.

RN: That seems like a good point to move onto the immediate political consequences so far. How have capitalist states been responding to this multidimensional crisis? Depending on who is in power and where, are there any early indicators so far as to how they are dealing with this crisis?

JW: Let’s start with Brazil as it is the most important expression of the far-right in office responding to this crisis, and is also the biggest economy in the region and the most powerful Latin American country geopolitically speaking. Brazil is also a kind of exemplary condensation of the kind of crises that predated the pandemic and that have been interacting with the pandemic.

In Brazil – as in the wider international alt-right ideological milieu of post-truth irrationalism – you already had a formal attack by the Bolsonaro regime on the legitimacy of scientific evidence and the pursuit of scientific truths per se. We witnessed this with regard to the question of climate change denialism – the fires in the Amazon last year were, according to Bolsonaro, a conspiracy conjured up by NGOs, and, contradictorily, even if they did exist, it was the NGOs that set them alight in the first place – and myriad other mythologies and alt-right conspiracies of this sort, and even more bizarre ones. This was accompanied by legislative attacks on funding for healthcare infrastructure and scientific institutions alike. All of this meant that a kind of hyper-irrationalism, at the centre of all far-right positions historically, has meant that the most culturally authoritarian section of the Bolsonaro government – which is only about a third of the actual composition of the government, but a very important one, including the president himself – has seized upon the COVID-19 conjuncture and declared the virus a petty cold, a mere sniffle, nothing to see here, continue as usual.

Bolsonaro himself is widely believed to have tested positive for the virus, although he denies this, and continues to greet crowds of right-wing evangelical supporters with handshakes and smiles, interspersed with coughing fits. Bolsonaro’s efforts from the executive to prevent people from physically distancing from one another, and the woefully inadequate economic measures the central government has taken in order to respond to the crisis, have meant persistent confrontation between the president and various state governments, including those of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, where governors attempted to institute some measures with the resources available to prevent an even greater catastrophe. Luiz Enrique Mandetta, Bolsonaro’s minister of health, refused to go along with the president’s absurdities and rooted himself in the scientific advice of epidemiologists. He was consequently dismissed from his position and replaced by yes-man Nelson Teich, a private healthcare capitalist with a degree in medicine and an MBA in business management. Bolsonaro’s wilful disregard for human life in the context of COVID-19 is on a par with Trump’s. The historian Forrest Hylton has rightly labelled Bolsonaro “Brazil’s Gravedigger-in-Chief”.

Immediate schisms began to emerge from within the Brazilian regime as a result of Bolsonaro’s cavalier disregard for the scale of what faced the country. To be sure, these schisms were already

apparent in the Bolsonaro government in a more subterranean form prior to the pandemic, with the key fissures cutting through what I have called elsewhere a faction of cultural authoritarians pivoting around the figure of the president and his Rio-based familial dynasty, including his notorious sons; then a faction of militarists, pivoting around the vice-president, but also extending into all echelons of the state, from ministerial to lower technocratic and managerial positions in sub-ministries and public enterprises; and, finally, a faction of neoliberal technocrats, including the minister of the economy, Paulo Guedes, and, until very recently, the minister of justice, Sergio Moro. To repeat, these schisms were already present, with the government seemingly being held together over its first year by some sort of always fragile adhesive substance.

After several months of initial stasis in power, the Bolsonaro government managed to pass the thoroughgoing pension reforms masterminded by Guedes, the key Chicago-Boy finance minister. As a result, the markets began to come back on board with the government, after they had grown sceptical of Bolsonaro's capacities over the initial months of the new government.

Now, however, in the midst of the pandemic scenario, the justice minister, Moro, has resigned, and called into question Bolsonaro's legitimacy as president due to his interference with the federal police, who are investigating his sons for corruption and involvement in other crimes, crimes that extend all the way down to the militias involved in the assassination of Marielle Franco. The new intensity of this neoliberal technocratic-cultural authoritarian schism is very serious, and could eventually spell the end for Bolsonaro's presidency.

Although I don't think it's obvious that he will be ousted from office – people have announced his immediate demise everyday since Moro resigned, a few weeks ago now. I don't think it's necessarily imminent, given that he retains 30 percent support of the population, which has always been about what his core base was, and it really depends massively on what action the military decides to take. The military faction of the regime has always had an enigmatic relationship with the president, not always free of tension, despite the fact that Bolsonaro himself is an former army captain. What is key in the Brazilian situation is that Bolsonaro's flagrant disregard for scientific evidence, and the dispute with his own minister of health and a series of state governors who tried to introduce some minimal measures to contain the spread of the virus, have jeopardised the lives of millions of Brazilians. I think the most important and disturbing thing about the crisis of Bolsonaro's rule at present is that the fissures are not a product of pressure from below, and that therefore will not obviously benefit social movements and the left. The main dispute in Brazil today, which might end up undermining the president's rule, is a schism between the centre-right and the far-right, neither of which have a particular allegiance to even the limited formalities of liberal democracy – which isn't to say that they are the same as one another. An eventual fall of Bolsonaro from office would not give an obvious momentum to the left, even if it would be happily greeted, unless popular movements can somehow play a bigger role than they have in instigating his demise.

In Bolivia, the dictatorship that was set in place following the coup last October, which removed Evo Morales from office, has used the arrival of the pandemic to postpone scheduled elections that were already going to be highly questionable. So a consolidation of power, of sorts, has at least temporarily unfolded in the country under this far-right regime. The spread of the virus in Bolivia has so far been minimal, however, so it's future destabilising effects remain unpredictable.

In Chile, there are political tendencies and counter-tendencies, the precise momentum of which remain difficult to discern with any precision. On the one hand, Piñera's regime has seemingly benefited in the short term, as the virus has provided cover for a suppression of the popular movements of recent months. His approval ratings have gone from a low of 9 percent to 25 percent, and the use of security forces in the streets to enforce mandatory physical distancing has been met with wide-scale approval – the same security forces that were so roundly discredited only weeks

earlier.

On the other hand, the momentum of street politics and, in particular, the militant feminist wave is unlikely to simply disappear. Rather, it is set to play a decisive role in the battles over the new normal to come, once street politics is once again a reasonably safe pursuit. Karina Nohales, a militant involved in both the Committee for Workers and Unionists and the International Committee of the country's most important umbrella feminist collective, the Coordinadora Feminista 8M, explained recently that, despite being locked down, activists have managed to launch a Feminist Organization of workers. It is envisioned as a space in which women and militant workers come together from the perspective of their labour, whether it be formal, informal, paid or unpaid. Nohales describes the initiative as seeking to unite, in this way, wide layers of Chilean non-unionised workers with existing trade union militants in a space where all can participate and contribute, realising in this way the potential power of Chilean workers which until now has remained fragmented. The uniting strategic horizon is the Feminist General Strike – precisely what will be needed in coming months and years.

In Ecuador, you have a situation in which Lenín Moreno already entered into an agreement with the International Monetary Fund, which involved austerity measures designed to hollow out public infrastructure and the social functions of the state, including healthcare. Austerity measures were at the heart of a popular rebellion in October 2019, which witnessed the rearticulation of a popular indigenous movement at the forefront of class struggle. In the context of the pandemic, the rightward trajectory of the Moreno regime is being further concretised, as he moves to renegotiate debt with creditors and renew agreements with the IMF. As in Chile, it is difficult to imagine the momentum of the rebellions of October 2019 being completely eclipsed by the present interregnum.

In Argentina, where Alberto Fernandez sits at the head of a centre-left administration, the government is thus far enjoying a boost in popularity, despite a catastrophic economic crisis in which debt negotiations are ongoing and a major sovereign debt default is foreseeable in the near future. As I suggested, Fernandez took early, concerted action to enforce physical distancing measures, which won popular approval and also favourable treatment in much of the media. It helps to have Bolsonaro as the standard against which one is measured. The right-wing opposition has been discredited, and basically has subordinated itself to Fernandez's handling of the crisis. Mauricio Macri, leader of the preceding centre-right government, introduced a 23 percent cut to the health budget, further undermining the country's capacity to deal with the present crisis. Public health provision and the role of healthcare workers are being revalorised in the public consciousness in the midst of the crisis, laying the basis for future potential inroads against neoliberalism.

As Claudio Katz has explained, the pandemic managed to push the looming issue of debt repayment to the back burner, as public funding was immediately needed to service the viral crisis. Momentum has been behind a more confrontational stance with international creditors. At the same time, as elsewhere, Argentine social movements are crippled by their inability to assemble in the streets. There is a danger that the use of much-hated security forces to enforce mandatory physical distancing and isolation measures will be normalised post-pandemic, together with the extension of surveillance mechanisms. Illegitimate repressive measures taken by the security forces during the last couple of months have not been met with any reprisal from the Fernandez government. Alongside emergency cash-transfer measures that target informal workers and that seem to run against the logic of neoliberalism, Fernandez is at the same time making austerity moves, such as delinking unionised workers' future salary increases from inflation increases. As is the case elsewhere, one also has to include in this measure of the conjuncture the increasing pressures from capital in Argentina on the government to fully reopen the economy, whatever the cost to lives.

RN: Could you say a bit more about what is taking place in Venezuela at the moment?

JW: Sure. There was another coup attempt against Nicolás Maduro. Until this latest fiasco, it would have been difficult to imagine a set of political events more farcical than that of Juan Guaidó's debacle in April 2019. In that case, likewise an effort to overthrow Maduro, Guaidó was only capable of mobilising a tiny faction of troops in the capital for a couple of hours, despite enjoying the full-throated support of the US and allied right-wing states all over Latin America. That earlier attempt revealed the limits of US imperial power in the region, given that it was obvious that they had played a decisive role in the coup plot. What the events of last April did not show was some kind of widespread popular backing of the Maduro administration or an indication of Maduro's success in the mind of the Venezuelan populace. Maduro's administration has been a disaster and has in my opinion no longer anything to do with the left. But obviously this has nothing to do with the question of opposition to imperialism as a matter of principle – it was a duty of all the international left to oppose the coup attempt by Juan Guaidó and the prospect of any potential US military involvement, or proxy involvement through Colombia.

The recent scenario involves some of these factors, but it is not obvious it enjoyed US backing, and whether or not that ultimately is shown to be the case, the whole endeavour was a complete and utter joke, hardly deserving of analysis. The usual instantaneous commentariat have compared it to the Bay of Pigs, but the events are not remotely comparable.

Effectively, Jordan Goudreau, a former US Green Beret, special forces veteran, who served tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is now CEO of a Florida-based gun-for-hire mercenary enterprise called Silvercorp, coordinated the entire effort. The premise was to launch an attack on Venezuela by sea, seize an airport, kidnap Maduro, and fly him to the United States where he would face prosecution. Goudreau apparently ran training camps in anticipation of the assault on the Colombian Caribbean peninsula of La Guajira, adjacent to the Venezuelan border. The training camps were infiltrated from the start by Venezuelan government double agents, which accounts for the fact that, in the event, two boats were easily seized by Venezuelan troops, eight mercenaries were killed, and a couple of dozen Venezuelan accomplices were detained by the Venezuelan government, together with an American special forces operator from Texas named Luke Denman. It was over before it began.

RN: Let's end with the question of popular movements. Apart from some very limited strikes among sections of workers, and some protests by medical professionals, there appear to be no discernible and sustained patterns of popular struggle, at least just yet. This is not to say that the basis isn't being laid for such struggles in the very near future. What do you think are the parameters of these struggles that are currently being laid by this crisis?

JW: I agree with your assessment that this precise moment is a weak one for popular movements, who are unable to engage in their usual above-ground assembly and repertoires of contention. We can't know what's coming next, but we can speculate in a reasoned and relatively informed way, basing our analysis on the observable if contradictory tensions in the region's politics that are becoming visible.

In one direction, there is the potentially negative consequence of normalising a certain subservience to state authority in the wake of necessary cooperation around public health measures. The gravest dangers here are associated with the extension and normalisation of military and police power into everyday governance of public life in parts of the region, and the danger this poses to the revival of popular protest once the lockdown phase of the pandemic draws to a close. Likewise, in Latin America and the Caribbean, as elsewhere, there has been an extension of corporate surveillance facilitated by state measures responding to COVID-19. Capitalist states, while engaging temporarily in public health measures, are ultimately orientated toward restoring conditions for profitability, and

insofar as an extension and consolidation of the role of the coercive apparatus of capitalist states is necessary for establishing post-pandemic conditions favourable to capital, states are likely to pursue this kind of normalisation if it is not resisted.

Another issue is the basic one that, for the moment, because social movements are demobilised and are capable only of virtual coordination through social media and the like, political momentum and initiative is very much in the hands of state managers and capitalist interests. This advantage in the immediate field of contention could position them well in determining the subsequent terrain to follow.

Critically, capitalist states are accruing significant debts, and the ensuing economic depression will demand sharper decisions from state managers as to who pays for the accumulated debts, and who is to benefit from the conditions of the new post-pandemic normal. The battle to come in Latin America and the Caribbean in the immediate above-ground, post-pandemic period will likely be structured in the first instance by capital-led austerity drives.

At the same time, working in the other direction is the ideological factor of this multidimensional crisis, making more visible than normal all of the interlaced threads of contradiction, from ecology to social reproduction, as well as their connections to capitalism as a system. Critiques of the system of capitalism are likely to meet with a wider audience in the midst of this crisis. More visible to many is the basic irrationality of the pursuit of profit over life, the basic irrationality of ecological degradation attached to the system, the basic irrationality of attaching no value to socially reproductive work in normal times in terms of wages and conditions, and then celebrating it as “essential” in times of emergency; cheering healthcare workers on, calling them heroes, but not actually paying them decently, or providing them with effective equipment. There is no automatic process of politicisation attached to this, but in times of immense crisis people are more open to universal change of worldview than at other times.

So what is being valorised at this moment in popular consciousness in many Latin American and Caribbean countries in crisis is the notion of public health as a priority over profits, essential workers as necessarily having value attached to them, public services as a necessity, free access to the means of life, and so on. When the theatre of politics shifts from the present subterranean underworld of living rooms to above-ground workplaces, streets and communities, so will surface the tendencies and counter-tendencies I’ve cursorily noted above. The balance of forces aligned behind each side, drawing on reservoirs of strength extant in the pre-pandemic period but necessarily altered by the social, economic, and ideological conditions of the pandemic itself, will help to determine the content and form of the new normal.

That contestation, in the midst of an unprecedented global depression, will define the parameters of class struggle in the immediate future in the region. The outcome is not preordained, as it never is, but especially because crises are unusually contingent periods, in which various competing exit routes are opening and closing over the course of each battle.

This crisis shares some features with global crises of the past, even as it has other, unprecedented characteristics specific only to this moment. Insofar as we can learn from past crises, it is certainly the case that they don’t automatically produce gains for the left. Such success will be contingent on strategies of intervention that mobilise and amplify the infrastructures of rebellion that exist where they do exist, flexibly respond to the genuinely novel reconfigurations of politics, economics and society coming out of the pandemic, and audaciously refuse to shrink for the scale of the change that is necessary simply to pull the emergency break and avoid disaster – after which and out of which a new world organised around our terms of life might be possible.

P.S.

- Marxist Left Review. A journal published by Socialist Alternative. Issue 19 — Summer 2020:
<https://marxistleftreview.org/articles/choosing-between-life-or-capital-in-latin-america-interview-with-jeffery-r-webber/>