

Covid-19 changes everything - Focus on the virus itself

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Covid-19 is a huge and many-sided issue. There is the disastrous governmental response leading to thousands of deaths, there is the approaching mass unemployment pandemic, and there is the prospect of the deepest recession for 300 years. These aspects are all hugely important.

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My focus here, however, is the virus itself - Covid 19 - and what it tells us about the future of life on the planet. This is the most fundamental issue of all. It is also the least discussed by the left.

Two crucial ecosocialist starting points

The first crucial point for an ecosocialist understanding of the Covid 19 pandemic is to recognise that it is first and foremost an ecological issue. Ecology is the relationship between living organisms and between such organisms and the planet. The Covid 19 pandemic, therefore, is an integral part of the global ecological crisis - not just occurring at the same time or existing in parallel with it.

The second crucial point is that novel viruses such as Covid 19 represent a direct threat to the future of life on the planet - human life in particular - on a par with the other threats such as global warming, the pollution and acidification of the oceans, the mass extinction of species, and fresh water depletion.

In fact the Covid-19 crisis has taken the ecological crisis to a new and more dangerous level.

I entitled this article 'Covid-19 changes everything'. I could have called it 'Covid-19 a direct threat to life on the planet', or the mother of all wake-up calls.

Inger Andersen, the executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme said recently the coronavirus pandemic is an "SOS signal for the human enterprise".

Spillovers from the wild

Corona viruses (as with many other viruses) exist in the wild in host species - often fruit bats (flying

foxes) or various rodent species - that have immune systems powerful enough to tolerate them. These viruses then spillover 'zoonotically' into other species when their hosts are thrown into close proximity with them under highly stressed conditions.

Daniel Streicker (Glasgow University) explains it this way in Nature (April 2020). "Bats harbour several viruses that cause severe disease in people, including rabies, Ebola, and severe acute respiratory syndrome-related coronavirus (SARS-CoV). It makes sense that they — along with rodents — are the focus of most viral-detection and surveillance efforts. Bats are also a prime suspect as the source of SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the current Covid-19 pandemic."

The prime suspect for the Covid-19 spillover has been a wet market in Wuhan, where fruit bats were kept, both dead and alive, amongst multiple other wild species. Whether this particular market was responsible has not been shown conclusively, but it is clear that that markets treating multiple species in this way represent a major potential source of such spillovers and therefore of pandemics.

Dangers greater today

The danger of such spillovers, however, is greater today than at any previous time in human history. This is because human impact on the rest of nature is itself much greater today. Also because today's model of human society, with its densely packed mega city populations and globalised trade and transport systems create not only the best conditions for such spillovers to take place but the best conditions for such pathogens to spread rapidly amongst the human population afterwards. Fifty-five per cent of the global population now live in big cities.

In fact, today's model of human society with its highly destructive relationship with nature is placing our own continued existence directly at risk.

A recent article in the European Journal of Wildlife Research (No 12 2020) links Ebola directly with human population density. It puts it this way : "Some of the world's deadliest diseases and greatest public health challenges are zoonoses from wildlife, such as Ebola. Due to the increasing number of cases in recent years, it has been widely hypothesized that increasing human population densities and anthropogenic disturbance largely explain outbreaks of Ebola virus disease in humans."

Another article by scientists from the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (ipbes) published on April 27 puts it this way :

"Rampant deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensive farming, mining and infrastructure development, as well as the exploitation of wild species have created a 'perfect storm' for the spillover of diseases from wildlife to people. This often occurs in areas where communities live that are most vulnerable to infectious diseases. Add to this the unregulated trade in wild animals and the explosive growth of global air travel and it becomes clear how a virus that once circulated harmlessly among a species of bats in Southeast Asia has now infected almost 3 million people, brought untold human suffering and halted economies and societies around the world. This is the human hand in pandemic emergence."

In terms of Britain, an article in the Financial Times on May 1st entitled Deprived areas hit hardest in UK by pandemic (based on an ONS study), found that death rates in the major cities are much higher than elsewhere, and that London's death rate is at least double the national average. Three London boroughs — Newham, Brent and Hackney — are the worst-hit in this with death rates of four times the national average. Newham has the highest death rate of all with 144 people per 100,000 killed by C-19.

This catastrophic situation reflects the thinking behind the 'age of the Anthropocene' - a re-definition, by Earth scientists, of the geological epoch through which the Earth is passing - from the current 'Holocene' or interglacial period, to the Anthropocene, an 'age defined by the impact of modern humans'.

The rush for a vaccine

As governments struggle to exit from lock down, in order to save their economies, they are pinning their hopes on the discovery of a vaccine. When they need good news they exaggerate the progress being made - particularly those governments with the most blood on their hands like Johnson and Trump. (There are always researchers ready to talk up progress since there might be a government grant at the end of it.)

There is a problem, however, and it's a big one. There is absolutely no guarantee that a vaccine will be found. The World Health Organisation (WHO) makes this point from time to time, but no one listens. No vaccine has ever been found for a corona virus, despite extensive research. South East Asia saw SARS in 2002, and the Middle East saw MERS in 2015. They are both corona viruses, but no vaccine was found. No vaccine has ever been found for the common cold - also corona viruses. A break-through is not excluded, given the resources being applied to it - but the consequences of failure are game-changing.

Without a vaccine, Covid-19 would become endemic and would have to be suppressed indefinitely - a task few governments (with the possible exception of China, Taiwan and Singapore) have the capacity to do. Even with a vaccine, Covid-19 might well mutate (which such viruses have a propensity to do and this on already has to some extent) and we would be back to square one. Even if a vaccine worked we would still be living under the shadow of the next spillover - which could come at any time and might involve a virus with a much higher fatality rate than this one.

As the IPBES article points out : "this may be only the beginning. Although animal-to-human diseases already cause an estimated 700,000 deaths each year, the potential for future pandemics is vast. As many as 1.7 million unidentified viruses of the type known to infect people are believed to still exist in mammals and water birds. Any one of these could be the next 'Disease X' - potentially even more disruptive and lethal than Covid-19." (Covid-19 has been classified as a once-in-a-hundred years event because the so-called Spanish flu of 1918-19 comparison. Today it is more likely to be more like a 1 in 10 year event).

Ebola has a fatality rate of 65 per cent. It was also a spill-over from animals - though not a corona. Mercifully a vaccine was found.

Nipah virus has a similar fatality rate. It emerged in 1999 with an outbreak among pig farmers in Malaysia. It also has fruit bats as its natural host in the wild. It is on the WHO list of most dangerous diseases along with Ebola, Zika, and Rift Valley fever. Humans are infected through direct exposure to bats or through contact with infected pigs or other humans. It can cause encephalitis and pneumonia and there are no vaccines or effective treatments.

The message behind the Covid-19 crisis is that we can only continue to trash nature up to a certain point. Until we stop abusing other species (wild and 'domesticated') on a (literally) industrial scale not only will the number of pandemics increase but they will become ever more dangerous.
Defending jobs and living standards

Pandemics of this kind present a challenge to even the best resourced governments. The most

disastrous responses, however, have come from free-market, small-state, neoliberal capitalism which has been exposed for the deadly and reactionary ideology it always was. Under this situation, ultra-right populist ideology kills even more people than even its usual deadly head-count. The UK, under the disastrous Boris Johnson administration, now has the highest number of coronavirus deaths in the world per million of population, higher even than countries with leaderships as dysfunctional as the United States and Brazil.

This means a major trade union led struggle to defend jobs and living standards against the unemployment pandemic that is going to take place as layoffs on 80 per cent pay (for 8.5 million workers) comes to an end in October and mass sackings take place. It means demanding big pay rises for the front-line workers we have been applauding every Thursday evening – who just happen to have been at the bottom of the wages league for a very long time. It means no more care home workers on the minimum wages or less, and no more home care workers traveling between clients without pay. It means ensuring a just transition for workers who are required to change jobs.

Fundamental ecological change

It also means demanding fundamental change at the level of the viability of the planet as a sustainable living space for ourselves and the other species that live on it. The pandemic itself has already pointed the way in this. Since Covid-19 struck, air pollution and carbon emissions are falling at an unprecedented rate with aviation, one of the planet's biggest polluters, still at a global standstill. Nature is re-colonising habitats that were dead prior to the lockdown.

It would be a disaster if all this was lost with the return of some kind of 'normality'. We have to insist that there is no return to past levels of pollution and that the investment that will come as an attempt to recover from the economic consequences of C-19 should be used to build for a zero-carbon sustainable future. The 'old normal', it is often said, no longer exists. What is to be determined is whether any 'new normal' will be capable of creating a safe living space on this planet.

Our demands must include :

- Zero carbon emissions by 2030. This means implementing and enhancing the Paris agreements. This means making the polluters pay, with heavy taxes on carbon emissions, as part of a strongly progressive and redistributive taxation system that can win mass popular support for carbon reduction.
- A comprehensive changeover to renewable energy – wind, solar, tidal, and geothermal, with no nuclear component. It means the electrification of the transport system : road, rail, and maritime – including electric cars but with a big reduction in car usage. It means the abolition of the diesel engine forthwith and the internal combustion engine by 2030. It means the upgrading and decarbonisation of the national grid.
- No return to mass air travel. Reduction not expansion of airport capacity.
- A halt to habitat destruction. The extinction of species continues to run a 1,000 times faster than the 'natural' or 'background' rate that has occurred naturally over millennia. This is now recognised as the 'sixth mass extinction' – the biggest extinction event the planet has faced since the demise of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.
- An end to industrialised agriculture. Sixty per cent of global biodiversity loss is directly due to

agriculture. The cattle sector of Brazilian Amazon agriculture, driven by the international beef and leather trades, has been responsible for about 80% of all deforestation in the region, or roughly 14% of the world's total annual deforestation.

- An end to wet markets trading in wild animals and endangered species. (Recognising that not all markets known as 'wet market's fall into this category).
- The conservation of fresh water is critical. The demand for fresh water has long outpaced its replenishment rate by precipitation - rain and snowfall. As a result of this we have been depleting underground reserves, in the form of aquifers, at an ever increasing rate. By 2025, an estimated 1.8 billion people will live in areas facing serious water shortages, with two-thirds of the world's population living in water-stressed regions. Agriculture uses 70 per cent of all available fresh water worldwide. It takes, for example, 24,000 litres to grow the feed to produce a kilo of beef, and between 2,000 and 4,000 litres for a cow to produce a litre of milk.
- There must be a big reduction in meat consumption. Today, 70 billion animals are slaughtered every year for human consumption. This is set to double again by 2050. These animals consume vast quantities of corn, maize, and soy that could otherwise be eaten, far more effectively, by the human population.
- The run-off from intensified meat production is creating dead zones in the oceans. There are now more than 400 dead zones covering some 95,000 square miles. Most are found in temperate waters off the coast of the USA and Europe. There are about 40 dead zones around the coast of the USA. The Gulf of Mexico dead zone stretches from the shores of Louisiana to the upper Texan coast.
- Population density. The drive towards urbanisation needs to go into reverse and cities need to be redesigned to reduce population density.
- An end to globalisation.

These demands are hugely ambitious, and they need to be. Unless there is fundamental change in the relationship between human beings and the planet there is no way out. The old norm of human behaviour of trashing the planet to destruction is no longer an option.

Meat eating and air travel in particular simply cannot continue at the old levels. Not everyone can be a vegan or even a vegetarian, of course, or indeed stop using air travel. But there is a lot the individual person can do short of that. If you can't stop eating meat you can eat less of it - limit it to once a day or once a week or have a meat free day each week. The issue is to be conscious of your own action and take the planet into account. Not everyone can stop using air travel, or even long-haul flights, but everyone can think carefully about it first.

The starting point must be a completely new relationship between human beings and nature. This means both major structural changes in the way human society is organised alongside big changes in the way we all live our individual lives and manage our personal impact on the planet.

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P.-S.

- Socialist Resistance 8 June 2020 & International Viewpoint. Wednesday 17 June 2020 : <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6677>