

Covid-19 (United States): An Organic Crisis Is Upon Us - When Gramsci Goes Viral

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It would be an understatement to call what we're going through an epidemiological crisis, but that's precisely what this is: a pandemic of proportions unparalleled for a century, catching governments completely unprepared. A dismissive hand-waive no longer suffices. We were lucky here in the States with SARS, Ebola, and influenzas both avian and swine, but now plugging our ears is no longer an option. This isn't just a public health crisis after all, but what Gramsci called an organic crisis: the confluence of crises in nearly every sphere.

He termed this sort of concatenation of crises "organic" insofar as they threaten the very foundations of capitalist stability. As Peter Thomas puts it in *The Gramscian Moment* [[1](#)], an organic crisis isn't "merely conjunctural disequilibrium," akin to the periodic recessions that shake out overcapacity. Instead, a crisis can be called "organic" when cracks begin to appear in the very edifice of bourgeois rule.

For Gramsci, capitalist rule is secured by what he called "hegemony." Capitalists as a class have successfully convinced the rest of us that their own particular class interest – maximizing profit – is in the interest of the rest of us. Think of the way we talk about the economy: business confidence is invoked as a measure of economic health, even though it doesn't alter the fact that wages have remained stagnant for decades despite productivity gains. We conceive of abstract measures like "economic growth" or "GDP" as somehow corresponding to the common good – even though these figures tell us nothing about inequality or the well-being of the working class.

An organic crisis occurs when this bourgeois claim to universality begins to crumble, and previously hegemonic assertions are revealed for what they truly are: means of securing capitalist stability. The social consensus, in other words, deteriorates, and capitalist claims no longer appear to correspond to the general well-being. This is when those famous "morbid symptoms" begin to appear. Lloyd Blankfein of Goldman Sachs, Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, and other assorted class enemies openly call for elderly Americans to sacrifice themselves on the altar of Mammon: profitability should trump life, they openly proclaim, and we should reopen the economy now. Meanwhile, the Dow Jones sees an incredible rally the same day as an unprecedented number of Americans file for unemployment. Mike Pence unabashedly calls for testing an unproven coronavirus vaccine on Detroit residents, as if we don't all know what he's signaling by invoking the name of that city.

That's the first telltale sign: the jig is up, and politics appears a bit less mediated than usual. It's no coincidence when strikes begin to proliferate just as the economy crashes and unemployment spikes, and all of this occurs just as traditional party systems begin to collapse across the globe. This is precisely the type of conjuncture Gramsci had in mind. The key thing to understand is that an organic crisis is not some chance happening in which all of the various cosmic crises align; it's rather what happens to hegemony when capitalists as a class fail to maintain it.

Stuart Hall points out [2] that organic crises don't straightforwardly erupt "in the political domain and the traditional areas of industrial and economic life, [nor] simply in the class struggle in the old sense." To be sure, they do emerge on these terrains sometimes. But oftentimes they appear elsewhere. They are articulated, Hall tells us, "in a wide series of polemics, debates about fundamental sexual, moral and intellectual questions, in a crisis in the relations of political representation and the parties — on a whole range of issues which do not necessarily, in the first instance, appear to be articulated with politics, in the narrow sense, at all."

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Think about all of the unexpected ways in which the current crisis is beginning to take shape. Just this week, protesters in cities across the South and Midwest drove around in a socially distanced automotive mobilization, demanding that state governments reopen local economies by ending shelter in place orders. Of course, this was a directly political mode of engagement, with these protesters channeling Trump's insistence the day before that he had sole authority to force these economies open. Meanwhile, as Democratic governors publicly sided with science, science itself became something to oppose, a populist instinct articulated to partisan identity.

In the process, all sorts of positions assume political form – Hall's "whole range of issues which do not necessarily, in the first instance, appear to be articulated with politics, in the narrow sense, at all." Science, freedom of the press, public health, sexuality, education: all of these and more, through an extended chain of mediations, are articulated to a fundamental struggle between parties. Meanwhile, this partisan competition becomes increasingly disarticulated from the struggle between classes. Workers disaffected by decades of Democratic dithering looked to Trump, only to be met with additional waves of upward redistribution.

When workers no longer trust their political representatives, they begin to turn elsewhere. And given the timidity of most union leaderships, wildcats increasingly become the norm as workers slough off these chains of mediation and confront their employers directly. We began to see this with the teachers' strikes that swept the country, and as David McNally shows in the first issue of *Spectre*, these mass strikes are on the rise across the globe. While politics often assume unorthodox forms in organic crises, these are also periods that tend to be marked by an upsurge in working class militancy as elected leaderships of all stripes turn out to be emperors with no clothes.

While all of the various crises that comprise the larger organic crisis are inextricable, I've tried to map out in schematic form a number of the crises I see cascading across our conjuncture. As you will see, it's nearly impossible to talk about one without talking about all, but that's what I've tried to do here: provide a roadmap to the organic crisis that's only just begun.

Economic: Don't believe them when they tell you that the emergent recession is a fluke, that we couldn't have predicted the novel coronavirus, or that the crash is merely a consequence of the pandemic. It was many months before the first death on US soil that the Fed began pumping repo loans into Wall Street trading houses, fearful of an impending liquidity drought. And in January, we learned that industrial production was down nearly a percentage point from a year prior. This is to say nothing of longstanding concerns over an inverted yield curve and an enormous stock market bubble. The failure of profitability to recover after the last recession lies at the root of the current downturn.

Political: Never have the signs of a crisis of representation been so apparent. Around the globe, center-left and center-right parties have been hemorrhaging support as voter turnout continues its long slide. With left-wing parties only occasionally able to compete in earnest – in Greece, Spain,

France, and Brazil, for example – right-wing authoritarians have tended to fill the void. After decades in which nominal working-class parties clearly represented capital more effectively than labor, workers around the globe have turned to nationalist populists. For all their proto-fascist tendencies, at least these leaders are able to successfully appeal to working-class interests, even if only in rhetoric. At least they make proletarian voters feel recognized. The rare left-wing populist who attempts to do the same – Sanders, Corbyn – is predictably marginalized by a party apparatus with its head in the sand. People may be wary of Trump, but when the alternative is Biden’s tragedy-and-farce act, his approval rating continues to climb.

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Social reproductive: Millions of workers deemed “essential” in this country aren’t getting hazard pay or even basic personal protective equipment. In the sphere of social reproduction, teachers, transit workers, nurses, and janitors are testing positive for Covid-19 at alarming rates, but all of these workers remain outrageously underpaid and in sectors that have been systematically hollowed out over the past four decades. The very infrastructures of care required for us to survive this crisis have been first on the chopping block, with the American health care system reduced to its core profit-making function. ICU beds have disappeared systematically since the HMO revolution of the 1990s (“managed care” indeed!), and reports of EMTs who cannot themselves afford health care continue to proliferate. Just two months ago we were told that Medicare for All was unaffordable, but now it’s suddenly on the table – but only for now, only for this affliction. Cancer and heart disease are not putting the brakes on profit-making, but the coronavirus is. The patient turns out not to be one of us, but the economy itself. As soon as it’s nursed back to health, the rest of us should feel free to die.

Racial: In Louisiana, 70 percent of Covid-19 deaths have been Black residents – more than double their percentage of the population in that state. Roughly comparable figures are available in Chicago, and in Michigan, Black deaths are nearly triple their percentage of the population. In St. Louis, every single death recorded at the time of writing is of a Black resident. The notion that the coronavirus is a “great equalizer” is ludicrous in a society in which Black people are systematically excluded from access to health care and stuck in precarious employment. Of course, this is also the predicament of much of the working class, but in the US, Black, Latinx, Native American, and Southeast Asian residents are at substantially higher risks than their white counterparts. In other words, these disparities didn’t originate with the virus but were exacerbated by them. (Though this would be news to the US Surgeon General, who blamed the racial disparity on behavior [3]: “Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and drugs,” he instructed Black Americans from the White House podium.) The coronavirus is refracted through an already racist system in which residents of color are more likely to live in overcrowded housing and less likely to be able to work from home. The same is true globally. As the virus makes its way through cities of the global South, racialized populations living in precarious housing situations and lacking the ability to isolate are sure to be the most susceptible to infection and yes, death. This certainly gives Ruthie Gilmore’s widely cited definition of racism a new gloss: “Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. [4]”

Ecological: If this is how they react in the face of a novel virus scare, imagine what climate change is going to look like. As Sanders proposed a Green New Deal, Joe Biden sported a D- on environment from Greenpeace. He’s now up to a B, thanks to a revamped climate program, but carbon trading will no longer do the trick. As Antarctica experiences rare summer days and hurricanes continue to decimate Caribbean islands, fires rip through the Amazon and the Outback. We may bemoan a snowless winter or a frigid fall here in the US, but “climate refugee” is now in the standard

vocabulary of most of the world, and it's coming to a city near you soon.

Ideological: If 2008 was supposed to be the final nail in the coffin of neoliberalism, we needed a better hammer. Cost-cutting is still the mantra of the day, with Biden pushing to privatize social security as recently as last year, and Andrew Cuomo slashing \$400 million of state funding from hospitals amidst the corona scare. Trump celebrates every "regulation" he removes, as if he's reading from some Hayekian instruction manual, and free marketeers continue to dominate the op/ed pages. Even the token Keynesian dissenters like Paul Krugman advocate blind faith in the Fed and rabidly oppose social spending plans. We all have some intuitive sense that neoliberalism is on the wane, but what will replace it?

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We've all heard about the surveys: millennials love socialism, as do Texans apparently. The Cold War is in a museum somewhere, and socialism is back on the agenda. Workers threaten strikes in Amazon warehouses in multiple countries and public schools in multiple states. Wildcats rock workplaces from the University of California to Fiat-Chrysler, and that's just here in the US. In Italy, unions are building for a general strike, shutting down workplaces where the government and capital refuse to do so. Similar developments are emerging in France and Hong Kong, and we should hope they encircle the globe in the virus' wake. Workers have taken the lead in their response to the abject failure of capitalist states to protect their populations. Here socialist politics aren't some abstract program or logical set of ideas; they're the real movement of the working class in the face of capitalist abandonment.

A politics adequate to this moment of organic crisis is desperately needed, lest we anxiously thumb our revolutionary rosaries, or else project all of our hopes onto a leader instead of a class. We urgently need a venue for discussing, debating, and reconstructing a way forward in this uncannily contradictory moment - a moment in which darkness is a constant, but in which glimpses of light seem to be more recurrent than we're used to. We don't want to fall back into failed models, and certainly we must let the dead bury their own dead. But we also need to remain skeptical of the resurgence of old-school reformism, repackaged as a novelty but typically redolent of experiments past.

We're living through a bizarre political moment. Racist attacks are on the rise, as are fortified borders, assaults on reproductive autonomy, and countless other forms of oppression. Here at Spectre we refuse to dismiss these as so-called "fringe issues." These are precisely the problems afflicting the global working class. As fans of Marx, we know all too well that abstract modes of domination can only ever be experienced concretely, and this means that not every worker is going to experience the organic crisis in the same way. But rather than attempting to paper over these divisions with a one-size-fits-all solution we call "socialism," we take these differences as its point of departure. If capital differentiates the working class, as we well know, what does this mean in practice? How can we capture this in all its complexity without falling into the trap of simply re-describing what exists? And most importantly, what sorts of political interventions might help us think about particular and general struggles as two sides of the same coin? If challenging racism, heteropatriarchy, and so forth is impossible without challenging capitalism, doesn't this mean that anti-capitalism shouldn't be posited as an alternative to anti-racism, but instead as its sine qua non?

That's the thing about an organic crisis: it's hard to figure out where to even begin to make an intervention. With so many interwoven crises, all of them politicized, it's an overwhelming scene, a game of communist mole-whacking in which for every advance made, two more crises rear their heads. But we mustn't recoil in frustration, insisting that the universal is the only terrain upon which

progress can be made. Capitalism may be “out there,” but it only exists insofar as we experience it. This is why we need to strategize in the realm of everyday life. If we truly aim to build a mass movement, we can only do this insofar as people feel invested in this struggle. And to do this, we need to understand the dynamics of the organic crisis, tracing the ways in which people’s chief concerns become politicized and ultimately, linked together.

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P.S.

- Spectre, April 20, 2020:
<https://spectrejournal.com/an-organic-crisis-is-upon-us/>
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/363-the-gramscian-moment>
- [2] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/1679-the-hard-road-to-renewal>
- [3] <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/11/21217428/surgeon-general-jerome-adams-big-mama-coronavirus>
- [4] <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520242012/golden-gulag>