



A critical analysis of the response to COVID-19

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Fear of the global COVID-19/coronavirus pandemic is compelling local, state and even the US government itself to do what protests, law suits, policy position papers and appeals to human decency could not: treating people as if they were valued members of the human family.

Government agencies that have consistently demonstrated a wanton disregard for the well-being of poor Black and LGBTQ people have taken a series of actions that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, liberals did not necessarily support, progressives were reluctant to demand and radicals thought were impossible to achieve in the political moment.

For example, in the wake of the coronavirus, several municipalities are limiting police contacts and even arrests for non-violent offenses. Multiple prison systems are releasing inmates to ease overcrowding and allow for physical distancing. The city of Detroit has not only stopped shutting off the water service of those who cannot afford the bills, but is reconnecting already shut-off service.[1] The state of California is directly housing its homeless population, including 8,500 hotel rooms in the Bay area alone.[2] And the federal government is sending checks to taxpayers with no requirements.

While many are lauding these and other developments, which under other circumstances would be called radical, it is important to examine this rapid turn of events objectively and with clear political analysis for their impact on working class Black communities, particularly for the women and LGBTQ folks therein.

This is not for us, it is for them

The US Civil Rights Movement mobilized mass protests against the “Jim Crow” segregation laws that prevented Black people from living in certain areas

and accessing basic public accommodations, such as restaurants, public transportation and even bathrooms. Probably the most effective form of protest was the ‘sit-in,’ where Black people would sit in a segregated restaurant and refuse to leave until, in the immediate, they were served and, in the longer term, the Jim Crow laws were repealed. Even though racist restaurant owners did not want to serve Black people inside their establishment, as the act would undermine the tenants of white supremacy, the crisis caused by the sit-ins compelled some of those same owners and managers to lead the charge amongst overtly racist whites to end segregation.

On February 1, 1960, four Black students from North Carolina A&T sat at the FW Woolworth lunch counter in downtown Greensboro, in clear violation of segregation laws. The store manager refused to serve the protesters, but instead of giving up, they returned with more protesters, eventually expanding to other stores in the state and region. Local whites came out to harass and even assault the protesters and the businesses refused to budge on the central demand of treating all customers the same, with the Woolworths corporate headquarters announcing it would continue “to abide by local custom” and refuse to serve Blacks. [3]

As the stalemate dragged on, the businesses continued to pay for rent, electricity, payroll and food, but were losing money because they could not make any sales to the Black customers. Consequently, by the end of July, after losing over \$200,000 of business- approximately \$1.7 million in 2020 dollars- the same manager that refused to serve Blacks a few months earlier, broke state law, local customs and store policy by serving Blacks at the counter, a move soon followed by other stores across the South [4].

Even though the specific actions or measures enacted aligned precisely with what protesters demanded, no astute political thinker concluded that the same corporations that unmercifully enforced segregation had somehow changed their ideology and motivations towards Black people. No one was under the impression that the corporations, or the racists who ran those corporations, suddenly recognized the humanity of Black people or the immorality of Jim Crow segregation.

Racist companies and individuals did not suddenly decide to do Black people a favor. Instead, they engaged in a complex cost-benefit analysis that revealed it is cheaper to change their behavior

towards Black people than to lose everything to Black protests. So, even as they appeared radical in relation to their previous behavior, the changes were superficial and only a means to mitigate an external crisis that threatened to destroy the company.

The corporations and individuals that benefited from racial discrimination changed their behavior for only one reason: the failure to drastically change in response to the crisis- in this instance, the protests- would have 'killed' the corporation by forcing it into bankruptcy.

Without minimizing the tremendous impact the end of Jim Crow segregation had on the daily lives of Black people, the fundamental lesson of time must be brought into focus: Jim Crow laws were not ended to benefit the poor Black masses, they were ended to save wealthy white owned businesses.

In the same way, when corporations agree to increase wages following a labor strike, the company is not discovering some new found respect for the value of labor, it is merely making a financial calculation in regards to its own survival: either decrease profits by paying workers more or lose all profits by going out of business. The companies are not doing workers a favor, they are giving up the spoils of a battle lost to organized labor.

As the crisis caused by the coronavirus/COVID-19 global pandemic accelerates, the response of the US, state and local governments to mitigate the spread and the social/economic impact of the virus has become increasingly drastic- or at least drastic relative to the norms of the capitalist economy.

The series of drastic measures- which in another context might be called steps towards socialist policies, even if not socialism itself- are radically altering the way these governments look and behave, at least for the duration of the crisis. However, because the drastic measures are only in response to what will likely be remembered as the worst pandemic since the 1918 so-called "Spanish Flu," the underlying ideology, motivations, values and priorities of those in power, as well as the system designed to perpetuate that power, remain the same. The drastic actions are only superficial changes in appearance, not fundamental shifts in ideology, motivation or structure of the economy.

This dynamic- actions that resemble radical and socialist style public policies combined with motivations that remain steadfast to the principles of neo-liberal capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy- will cause great political confusion that can only be clarified with solid ideological grounding and clear political analysis which properly

distinguishes the difference between a new paint of coat on a house and the foundation of that same house.

To be clear, many of the drastic measures proposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as a moratorium on rent and mortgages, a halt in debt collections, free coronavirus screenings and treatment, ending utility shut-offs, providing housing for the homeless and a direct check from the government, will have a tremendous impact on the daily lives of working class Blacks, particularly women and queer folk. To be equally as clear, just because an act has a positive impact on us, does not mean the act was intended for our benefit.

For decades, the state of California has catered to major industries and encouraged the increase of housing prices while divesting from the public housing stock and criminalizing homelessness. To no one's surprise, the homeless population there has skyrocketed and governments appear impervious to public opinion and pressure to provide housing. However, in the early stages of the crisis, California, along with several municipalities in the Bay area, secured thousands of hotel rooms- 8,500 in the Bay Area alone- to house the homeless. These extraordinary measures were taken without protests or years of study from a blue ribbon task force.

But the harsh reality is that California is not providing housing to the poor in order to protect them from the coronavirus, it is doing so in order to protect the wealthy from poor people. Due to its highly contagious nature, an infected person entering a coffee shop, resting on the separation rails of outdoor cafes or even touching the gold plated door handles of the building that houses tech sector firms, can potentially transmit the coronavirus from the people the doors are erected to exclude to the people the doors are erected to protect.

Given its long history on the subject, no astute political thinker can conclude that the state of California, or the local governments of the Bay area, suddenly care about the homeless, either in housing or in health. This radical change in behavior is not intended to protect the homeless from COVID-19, though that might be a side effect of the behavior, it is intended to protect the wealthier whiter population from those who lack access to basic healthcare, including water, soap and a home where one can self-isolate.

Providing housing is an expensive, inefficient and politically unpopular way- at least among those whose opinions matter- of solving the homeless crisis. As it turns out, however, housing the homeless is an expensive, inefficient but politically popular way- at least among those whose opinions matter- to protect a valuable

businessman from contracting COVID-19 from poor people who share the same city.

In the same way, providing human beings with life sustaining water, on a planet that is two-thirds water, is an absurd notion to the state of Michigan. The aggressive water shut-off program has demonstrated that the city of Detroit does not care about lives lost due to the lack of potable water. Protecting wealthier whiter people, however, from people for whom the symptoms of poverty are suddenly contagious, apparently strikes the exact balance sought by the stewards of public monies, as evinced by Michigan's plan to not only halt water shut-offs, but to reconnect water service and pay off overdue balances for families that could not afford to pay their water bill.

For all of the extraordinary measures taken, clear political analysis rooted in history demonstrates that even where those measures deliver a net positive benefit for working class Black women and LGBTQ people, those benefits are a side-effect, not the core intent of the action. The core intent is to protect wealthier whiter people from social groups whose vulnerability put them at greater risk of carrying the virus.

In the same way that racist companies and managers changed their behavior in the 1950s and 60s, not as a result of a change of heart or motivation, but in a response of self-preservation to an external crisis, the US government today is not doing you any favors. They are making short term changes to their behavior in response to an external crisis.

Properly understanding this distinction will inoculate us from the avalanche of propaganda sure to come about how much the US cares for its poor and how hard the Democratic party fought for measures to benefit our communities. Neither, of course, is true, and the Republican party even led the way on the stimulus check. This is no defense of the Republican party, however, the Democratic party will attempt to take credit for things they did in agreement with Republicans, but never pursued when in power themselves.

Capitalism Exacerbates the Crisis, Socialism Addresses It

What those in power do- not what they say, but what they do- during a time of crisis, particularly when that crisis has potentially fatal implications for them, speaks volumes about what they actually think, as distinguished from what they say they are thinking.

The Trump administration, of course, reacted with the bumbling incompetency and irrationality that is the trademark of Trump himself. While it remains unclear if this is a positive or a negative trait, it appears that the entire administration deeply believed the narrative that the coronavirus was a hoax solely manufactured to embarrass Trump himself. While the negative aspects of the position are obvious, it seems the narrative was not just some disingenuous talking point created by political operatives that everyone repeated but no one believed. Instead, the conviction so deeply held that the administration did not even bother organizing a 'Plan B' in the unlikely event that the coronavirus was, indeed, real.

The importance of the above mentioned observation is that given the level of reluctance to grapple with a global pandemic, followed by the sheer incompetence in the grappling itself, the biggest and boldest responses to the crisis were conceptualized, shaped and executed with remarkable speed.

The lack of a functioning federal government forced states to take initiative, including California's effort to house the homeless, Michigan's plan to reconnect water to houses, statewide moratoriums on evictions and municipal plans to release incarcerated people from confinement and limit police interactions with the public, including those accused of breaking the law.

While the bailout of banks and other industries that regularly ~~bribe~~ contribute large amounts of cash to the re-election campaigns of elected officials is extraordinary in terms of scale, the practice is so common that template legislation can be produced from memory. On the other side of the equation, however, the feds have instituted a moratorium on student loans and are attempting to provide universal coronavirus testing and potentially even treatment as well as cash payments to most taxpayers.

To summarize, in response to this crisis, state and local municipalities have either implemented or are seriously considering lite-versions of universal housing, full access to utilities regardless of ability to pay, decarceration and a radical rollback of the police state. At the same time, the feds are considering lite-versions of debt cancellation, universal healthcare and a guaranteed universal income.

To put it another way, all of the human made elements that make this global pandemic so dangerous- the lack of housing and sanitation, forced confinement in small spaces with large numbers of people, the bills that force people to go to work instead of observing the quarantine, the lack of healthcare and the inability to secure basic needs without money- are all functions of capitalism. Conversely, all of the elements that ease the impact of the pandemic- universal housing, sanitation and personal

protective equipment, freedom from the stress of debt, universal healthcare and a predictable income, also known as a guaranteed universal income- are all functions of socialist policies, even if not socialism itself.

When things are 'normal,' the ruling class will have everyone believe that the solution to every problem can only be found in the private sector. But in times of crisis, all of the solutions are social, including the bailing out of the private sector itself. Want to make a profit? Force people to pay for housing and water. Need a safe society? Provide those necessities to every human being, without exception.

Shifting from a capitalist economy to a socialist leaning one while in the midst of a pandemic is an inefficient use of time and energy. Finding housing for people, setting policies and rules for rent or mortgage moratoriums and establishing a system for one time checks to millions of people is a poor mobilization of human and financial resources. But the fact that a society that prides itself on efficiencies is jumping head first into such an inefficient use of resources speaks volumes about the way that society actually feels about socialist policies.

While the notion that centering the lives of human beings, instead of the production of wealth, makes for a better society is no major revelation for anyone vested in the concept of people power, or even social justice, the biggest revelation of this moment, as it relates to capitalist versus socialist policies, is a bit more nuanced, but no less dramatic.

Even with a blundering and incompetent executive branch and a bitterly divided legislative branch with separate parties in charge of each bicameral chamber, the policies intended to address the coronavirus have been drawn up, passed and implemented with remarkable speed. The rapid response occurred without the benefit of a call for public input or in response to mass mobilizations or following a precipitous turn in public opinion. Government officials moved with break-neck speed to prevent the pandemic from collapsing the country.

This is not to suggest that the ideas utilized were entirely new, imagined by some genius on staff at a random congressperson's office. For years social justice organizations forcefully argued that cutting water service to the poor was not only a violation of their human rights, but represented an immense public health risk resulting from unclean cooking water and the inability to properly sanitize. Those groups delivered well considered position papers, met with elected officials, protested, held news conferences, illegally turned water service back on themselves and more, but ultimately were unable to convince the powers-that-be to halt water shut-offs. Yet,

with a looming crisis, it only took a few days for the city of Detroit and the state of Michigan to hammer out an unprecedented deal to resume water service for all.

So, how were the slow moving and deliberate governmental bodies that must always consult the needs of big business, whims of campaign contributors and winds of public opinion polling able to advance such a radical agenda- one that had no chance of passing just at any point in 2019- so quickly?

Because even officials of a capitalist government know that socialist principles are the only ones that can address these problems.

As it turns out, they have always known how to end homelessness and the importance of access to potable water. Even the most ardent capitalist knows that public health is only as good as the health of the lowest member of the public and the most fascist of administrations understand the importance of a guaranteed income on the health of the overall economy. And when certain supplies are critical to the survival of the population- whether that is masks and ventilators or water and housing- both bitterly partisan parties agree that critical industries must be nationalized in order to protect the public from the free market forces of capitalism.

There is a saying that you don't know who your friends are until you hit hard times. Well, hard times are here and all of the government officials are at socialism's house.

When those hard times hit, they did not have to search, study or impanel a blue ribbon commission in order to discover the most effective measures to save their society from collapse. They already knew what to do. They turned on the water and housed the homeless. They stopped arresting people and released others. Some stopped charging for housing and cancelled debt. They made medical care available and sent you some money while you stayed at home. They knew what to do.

What are now called 'drastic measures' in response to a global pandemic were previously called 'our list of demands.' The very same proposals that were demonized yesterday as radical socialism are enthusiastically embraced today as a means of saving this society from collapse, with little outcry from either major political party or mainstream media outlet.

To be clear, these drastic measures are not proper socialism, as they do not permanently wrest control of the essential means of production from the hands of the capitalists and into the collective control of the working class. But make no mistake, universal healthcare, universal housing, guaranteed income, government

provided personal protective equipment and the nationalization of core industries are all hallmarks of socialist societies.

Instead, those in power want to implement stop-gap socialist-lite measures to confront the crisis in the short term while maintaining access to obscene profits- at the expense of humans and the planet- in the long term.

When their survival is threatened, those in positions of power expect everyone to unify and even give money to 'save' banks and major industries. But after the crisis has passed and our emotional feelings of unity linger, those same industries quickly return to the cut-throat practices of capitalism, and they will use the bailout money you gave them to evict you, send bill collectors to hound you or to pay for the postage on the letter rejecting your medical claim.

For anyone who is still, in good faith, wrestling with questions regarding the viability of socialism, understand this: it is not just the street corner radical who believes socialism will solve your problems, because conservative and liberal capitalists alike are banking on socialist policies to save every sector of the society they have built.

Those in power are fully aware that socialist policies will save lives and, indeed, the planet. We know they know not because of what they say, but because of how they behave when faced with an existential crisis that threatens their very existence.

But unlike the crisis caused by social movements in the 1950s and 60s, no movements have (yet) mobilized to demand the government provide socialist solutions to the coronavirus crisis. The captains of capitalism are running towards socialism all on their own, because they know that socialist policies represent their best chance of survival.

Sometimes it takes a crisis to see clearly, but universal healthcare, housing, food, utilities, education and a clean and livable planet are all human rights and absolute necessities, even absent a global pandemic. We must fight for a system that will provide those human rights to us all.

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Notes

- (1) *Detroit unveils water restart plan because of coronavirus threat*, Michigan Public Radio, March 9, 2020. <https://www.michiganradio.org/post/detroit-unveils-water-restart-plan-because-coronavirus-threat>.
- (2) *Coronavirus: SF has 8,500 potential hotel rooms for the homeless, front-line workers*. Mercury News, March 23, 2020. <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/03/23/coronavirus-sf-has-8500-potential-hotel-rooms-for-the-homeless-front-line-workers/>
- (3) *Four men, a counter and soon, revolution*. New York Times, February 1, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/01/arts/design/01museum.html>
- (4) *Congressional resolution recognizes Woolworth lunch counter civil rights protests*. WCTI tv, January 29, 2020. <https://wcti12.com/news/state-news/nc-general-assembly-resolution-recognizes-woolworth-lunch-counter-civil-rights-protests>