

Grave diggers: the grim tale of states, capitalism and COVID-19

Shawn Hattingh

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In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it often seems as if we are stuck in a dystopian movie. In this movie death is stalking us, hospitals overflow with the sick and dying, and the grave diggers are at work. We know more victims will soon die as the folly of millions of workers being forced by circumstances to return into cramped mines, banks, factories and warehouses is so evident. Those that are no longer needed by the billionaires who own the companies are marshalled daily by the police and military dishing out violence and on occasion, humiliation, to underline their power and the power of their bosses. It all feels so unreal, a ghastly movie playing out before our eyes.

The trauma of it all has led many people to seek solace in fiction or conspiracy theories. It can be morbidly comforting to believe in fantasy in times of strife. This is why so many people blame some sinister force for “cooking up” the virus in a biotech lab or why 63% of Americans believe COVID-19 was sent by God to force humanity to repent for its sins. It is soothing to believe something so awful must have a supernatural origin or, at least, a deeper meaning.

We, however, fall into such fantasies at our own peril. When we try and deny reality and escape from it – even if we are traumatised – we are left powerless. If we head down the path of fiction to try to explain why the virus has taken hold, and why some people are far more vulnerable than others, we miss the real causes. If we willingly pretend it is some movie or conspiracy we lose sight of why workers face death to enrich billionaires, why hospitals cannot cope, and why the police and military are being deployed by states in the face of the pandemic. We miss that all of this has to do with the workings and power relations that define our everyday lives – the very workings and power relations of capitalism and state systems.

To understand the reason why capitalism and states – including the workings and the power relations they embody – are at the root of this dire situation we need to examine how such a pandemic came about and how it is being handled or mishandled by those that have power. We have to look at why and how the novel coronavirus took hold, why capitalists and states were so badly prepared, why workers are being forced to return to work in the shadow of it and why states are disproportionately serving the rich to best weather it.

The capitalist trade in wild meat

At the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic is capitalism’s abuse and exploitation of nature, including using various wild animals, as commodities. The destruction of natural barriers between humans and host species of viruses – directly linked to corporate logging, mining, industrial agriculture and property speculation – have dramatically increased the likelihood, and indeed occurrences, of viral pandemics. As a result, some scientists are already warning that COVID-19 could be the first of a number of new viral pandemics arising out of ecological destruction.

In the case of COVID-19, it was the commercialisation of the wild meat trade that allowed the virus to jump from bats to pangolins to humans. The wild meat trade globally is big business and it is controlled by powerful cartels using capitalist management techniques that aim to maximise profit. In China alone, the industry was worth US\$57 billion in 2017.

What makes the wild meat trade, including the pangolin trade, so profitable are the exploitation of nature, the minimal investment that is needed to carry out this exploitation, the low wages paid to impoverished poachers/hunters/farmers and the high prices that the elite who consume these products are willing to pay the cartels and retailers. Indeed, the pangolin market is thoroughly

capitalist with the buyers of pangolin scales being 200 pharmaceutical companies and the buyers of the meat being the Chinese ruling class (eating pangolin meat is a status symbol and forms no part of the diet of the Chinese working class). Without this industry there may never have been COVID-19 – capitalist logic, including the drive to maximise profit, gave rise to the massive pangolin meat trade through which humans likely contracted the novel coronavirus.

They were warned

The ruling classes that hold power and control the resources under the capitalist and state systems had received ample warning of the possible danger of one of the coronavirus family causing a pandemic. From 2003 onwards, in the wake of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), scientists and the World Health Organization repeatedly warned of this probability. The powerful ruling classes (capitalists, politicians and top state officials) chose to ignore these warnings. Consequently, very little was done by pharmaceutical companies to conduct the research on the coronavirus family that was needed. The key reason for ignoring these warnings was it would not immediately bring profits. In other words, it was not lucrative for corporations to undertake research on the coronavirus family when a pandemic had not yet occurred. In fact, it is only profitable for pharmaceutical companies to undertake research on viruses once a pandemic has already arisen. Prevention or mitigation against possible pandemics simply does not pay under capitalism.

Likewise, the elite that directly control states also elected to largely ignore the forewarnings. Despite knowing the real dangers of new pandemics – given at least three dozen new viruses having developed among the human species since the 1970s – states spend very little on research to prevent and control diseases. In 2019 the US' federal government's budget was US\$4.4 trillion, yet the entire budget allocated to disease control and prevention – including funds directed to global disease control and prevention – was only US\$12.1 billion. For the three years prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus, the US had cut staff working on research in China on viruses that could be transferred from bats to humans, including coronaviruses, from 50 to 14. The powerful in the US had other priorities like spending US\$686 billion on the military. Lest anyone think that this has been a unique problem to the US, the South African state spent more money in 2017 (R2.19 billion) on VIP protection for politicians than it did on health related research (R1.45 billion).

Capitalism has made the pandemic worse for the poorest

Over the past 45 years, states have actively intervened to assist the wealthiest capitalists in society. Trillions of dollars have been showered upon the rich in the form of tax breaks since the late 1970s as well as corporate bailouts that followed the 2008 crisis. In contrast, the right to housing and healthcare won by the working class through hundreds of years of struggle has been gutted. This has made the working class in many countries – especially the Black section of the working class in the US, Brazil and South Africa – highly vulnerable to the virus. In some of the poorest communities in the US, the death rates from COVID-19 are up to 9 times higher than in wealthy areas. Indeed, under capitalism, essentials for the working class, such as housing and healthcare, are generally under-produced, and under-invested in, as these are not profitable

sectors. This is precisely why the poor are vulnerable, as in overcrowded housing the virus can spread quickly, social distancing is difficult and when people need medical care the only options are under-resourced healthcare facilities or even no facilities at all. The workings of capitalism, and the manner in which states prop up the wealthy while attacking the poor, have made some people far more vulnerable than others to the pandemic.

In a sane society everyone would have access to basic needs, but not under capitalism and the state systems. When COVID-19 -linked lockdowns began in different countries, it was low-paid workers and the unemployed that were the worst hit. Without being able to sell their labour power, it was hard for this class to survive. Hundreds of millions of people experienced hunger under lockdown conditions worldwide. Yet, ironically, there was a global surplus of food produced at the very same time – some corporations dumped food to ensure prices remained high. Likewise, under the logic of capitalism thousands of nurses in the US have been retrenched during the pandemic because the private healthcare sector was trying to ensure profits via cost-cutting during COVID-19. This example illustrates how even highly socially useful labor was shed for profits rather than using it to address the pandemic.

It has become evident to all during the pandemic that it is the working class that produce all goods and services under capitalism. Likewise, without the working class no profits could be made in the productive sectors of the economy. This is why corporations across the world have been clamoring for production to restart in every sector as soon as possible, even though it is still unsafe to do so. They need labor to extract surplus value and they are willing to endanger the lives of workers to do so. This is why millions of workers have been forced back to work, even in non-essential sectors, before the peak of the pandemic has been reached. To make matters worse many companies have skimmed on protective measures and clothing for workers to increase profits. Workplaces, therefore, are one of the main nodes through which the virus has been spreading. To maintain profits, capitalism is literally creating killing fields. This was not god given, it has been a choice made by the wealthy and powerful in their own class interests.

Even when states have attempted to do some social good during the pandemic – albeit limited – it has often turned out to be a disaster because of the inefficiency of centralised and hierarchical systems. In South Africa, for example, the state further centralised its limited feeding programs, targeted at children in the poorest schools, under the auspices of the so-called Command Centre (comprised of the president, a handful of cabinet ministers and selected state officials) during COVID-19. The goal was to expand and roll out food parcels not only to poor children, but also their parents who were temporarily or permanently unemployed. This turned out to be a disaster and the amount of food being distributed under the Command Centre to the poor declined compared to levels prior to COVID-19. Worse still, some politicians used their power to steal and sell food parcels that should have been distributed to the hungry.

In this context it is important to realise that states are not democratic structures. Even in a parliamentary system, the vast majority of top state officials, including generals, are not voted for. Representative democracy means people hand their power to politicians to govern and have, at best, a minor say every four or five years during elections. The fact that states are hierarchical and undemocratic means that in times of crisis their first reaction is to police people. Instead of involving communities to address COVID-19, including ensuring social distance, most states deployed the police and military to enforce commands from above to impose social distancing and curfews during COVID-19 – even in informal settlements where social distancing cannot happen. In the US, this has seen a spike in police killings – almost exclusively of working class

people. Likewise, in South Africa the police and military arrested 230,000 people during the lockdown. Worse, at least 11 people were killed. States arose historically to carry out and defend elite minority rule, often through brutal violence, and when social crises occur – as with COVID-19 – it is these authoritarian impulses that come to the surface.

The rich are glowing in the light of bailouts

When it was evident that the novel coronavirus could not be contained, most states reacted either with secrecy or denial. The Chinese state initially tried to cover up the danger of the coronavirus, including sanctioning eight doctors in Wuhan who alerted contacts on social media in December 2019 about the new virus. The Chinese state did this for two reasons: to avoid any social unrest that may turn into a threat to it given the protests around its authoritarianism in Hong Kong, and to avoid the stock markets plunging. Likewise, the Trump regime's immediate reaction to COVID-19 cases surfacing in the US was to deny any possible danger. The motive for doing so was again to protect the powerful who are heavily invested in the stock markets.

When denial was no longer possible, to try and prevent healthcare systems being swamped by COVID-19 – and having the possible politically devastating spectacle of people having to place their dead in the streets because morgues could not cope – states began embarking on lockdowns. The problem was the lockdowns severely dented capitalist economies around the globe. The first reaction of states under these conditions was to protect the wealthy and the powerful.

Within a matter of days of the start of lockdowns most states passed emergency measures expressly aimed at protecting capitalists. The foremost beneficiaries of these measures were financial corporations and banks. In one week in March – with the threat of credit markets seizing due to lockdowns – the US state approved a US\$2.3 trillion stimulus package, most of which were bailouts primarily for financial corporations. Accompanying this, the Federal Reserve ramped up Quantitative Easing (QE) starting in March 2020 – in other words electronically printing money and pumping it into the finance sector – to the tune of US\$50 billion a day. By some estimates the assistance received by financial corporations during COVID-19 from the US state alone has surpassed US\$6 trillion. This dwarfs the relatively tiny amounts spent to assist the working class and provide some semblance of decent healthcare under COVID-19.

Even smaller states, such as South Africa, have been following the lead of the US. The South African state passed its own limited “stimulus” package during lockdown. Although in reality small, at R500 billion (not all of which represented an increase in spending but involved reshuffling the 2020/21 national budget) the largest item was a R300 billion guarantee for banks on the loans they had provided for businesses. In addition, in March 2020 the South African state embarked on its own version of QE. The priority of the South African state, like the US state, was to assist capitalists – who in reality are less than 1% of the population.

Various states have attempted to sell QE and the bailouts for the financial sector during COVID-19 on the basis that the trillions of dollars made available to massive corporations will trickle down to everyone. This, as in 2008/09, has turned out to be bullshit. Corporations, as they did with the bailouts after 2008, have used them to speculate on stock markets and undertake a spree of share-buybacks. This can be seen in the movements of the stock markets in 2020. For example, in early 2020 the Dow Jones hit a record high, before slumping 30% in the first days of lockdown and then climbing dramatically again after the expansion of QE and the bailouts. This

in a global economy that has experienced a contraction and accompanying unemployment levels last seen during the Great Depression. This helps to explain how the wealth of the US' tiny group of billionaires could leap by US\$500 billion during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Another path is still possible

The organising by the working class through protests and strikes that have taken place during COVID-19 does, however, offer hope in the face of the fiasco states and corporations have made of dealing with the pandemic. In reality, the best projects that have been established to handle social and health issues arising out of COVID-19 were those set up and undertaken by communities themselves. From the US to South Africa, these have been at the forefront of addressing hunger and providing mutual aid. This offers hope and the first steps towards a possible path to a better world.

At times in history – from the Paris Commune, to the Korean People's Association in Manchuria, to the Spanish Revolution, to Rojava – there have been glimpses on a larger scale of a system that could have dealt better with the crisis of COVID-19. In such societies it was mutual aid, direct democracy, anti-racism, anti-sexism and production for need and not profit that were valued. The task in the face of states and capitalism failing to effectively deal with the pandemic, is to build on the organising that has taken place under COVID-19 to plant the seeds of a saner, more compassionate and democratic society, drawing inspiration in the process from larger attempts to create a better world such as those above. Without that, a grim future awaits humanity post COVID-19. Karl Marx once wrote capitalism would be its own grave digger. He never could have known that 150 odd years after he said those words, capitalism and the states that prop it up are still alive (not well, but alive) and are leading hundreds of thousands of people to premature deaths. Grave diggers they certainly are.

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