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Protests, lockdowns – and then?

Radical Philosophy Collective

When future historians try to make sense of the epochal transformation that began in 2020, one of the things they will need to consider is the relation between the mass protests that marked the beginning of this year (along with so much of the previous one) and the drastic measures taken in February and March to contain the spread of Covid-19. Like any complex process operating on something approaching a world-wide scale, the nature of both protests and the subsequent containment measures have varied according to place and context. The immediate framework, in each case, has so far remained national or regional, rather than global. All the same, what is perhaps most striking about the protests, the pandemic, and the relation between the two is the degree to which they all demand to be understood as properly 'world historical' phenomena, marked by unprecedented forms of convergence, synchronisation and overlap, if not yet by direct coordination. Routine use of the word 'unprecedented', these days, is itself without precedent.

In one sense, of course, the pandemic has offered embattled national governments all over the world a perfectly timed excuse to stifle all significant forms of dissent. Some of these governments may have been saved from imminent collapse. Although it may sometimes seem that they already belong to another era, it's essential to remember just how widespread, how radical and how determined mass protests had become over the course of 2019. In the final weeks of the year, the press was still full of reports stressing the scope and stamina of popular revolt, in one place after another. Reviewing a 'year of street protest' in the *Financial Times* on 23 December, for instance, Gideon Rachman was struck by its 'sheer geographical spread … Protests large enough to disrupt daily life and cause panic in government have broken out in Hong Kong, India, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Spain, France, the Czech Republic, Russia, Malta, Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Sudan – and that list is not comprehensive.' While Hong Kong's students and the French *gilets jaunes* may have dominated European headlines, governments were overthrown in Sudan and Algeria, and in the autumn the prime ministers of both Lebanon and Iraq were forced to resign. Although it received scant attention in Europe or the US, massive and sustained protest once again brought Haiti to the brink of collapse, if not revolution. Profoundly reactionary and polarising regimes further inflamed tensions, everywhere from Bolsonaro in Brazil and Modi in India to Orbán in Hungary. Yemen, Palestine and Kashmir faced newly profound threats to their political survival. Along frontiers too ramified and too numerous to mention, workers, migrants and people of colour have been treated with a brutality that exposes the real priorities that shape the world for all to see.

The broad context for the 2019 mobilisations is all too familiar, and testifies to the essentially structural quality of these priorities and their immediate corollaries: the increasingly intolerable consequences of neoliberal economic policies; the social costs of austerity, mass unemployment, grotesque inequality and outright destitution; the scapegoating tendencies of authoritarian and fascist regimes; the unrelenting experience of precarity and growing despair about the future – all compounded by climate change, environmental degradation, war-mongering chauvinism, the

legacies of slavery and racism. Even the most forceful measures taken to contain the spread of Covid-19 will do nothing to address these structural problems, of course, and in many ways and in many places they have already intensified them. Whether it's a matter of accessing healthcare or of finding a way to make ends meet, there is obviously nothing 'equal' about the impact of an epidemic in societies shaped by class, race and disparities of wealth and privilege.

On the other hand, it's easy to see that some of the steps taken by governments and corporations, officially in response to Covid-19, may also greatly strengthen their hand in any future confrontations with their own populations. Although grounded in long-running campaigns against migrants and 'extremists', and although framed by our unending wars against drugs and terror, the rapid adoption of newly invasive forms of surveillance and policing may already indicate a point of no return. If for the time being such steps may be most easily taken in places like Israel, China or Singapore, many other governments (including Italy, the UK and the US), with the help of big tech companies, have already seized on opportunities to ramp up their digital surveillance and other security measures, with no clear end in sight.

That's one side of the story. But it's complicated by at least two factors. One is the way in which many governments have now been obliged, by public pressure and often in flagrant contradiction of their most basic principles and ideological reflexes, to reaffirm the need to address public problems by public means. No doubt big pharma, private medicine and the corporate sector in general will do everything possible to profit from the pandemic, and the way that most wealthy countries have so far responded to the economic disruption of 2020 (repeating the pattern set by the banking bailouts of 2008) gives a clear indication of their underlying priorities. Nevertheless, in a place like the UK, explicit veneration of the National Health Service, precisely as a universal public service, has quickly imposed itself across the political spectrum, and even in a country like the US support for a comparable public service may grow significantly in the coming months. Further public pressure may demand the conversion of short-term forms of welfare and income support into something more durable. As feminist movements have long stressed, the politics of care and social reproduction may also play an increasingly central role in future struggles.

The other factor returns us to one of the more striking aspects of the 2019 protests: the fact that so many of them made similar demands in similar terms and at similar times, and proposed similar solutions to similar problems. In Lebanon and Iraq as much as in Chile or Sudan, huge numbers of people mobilised to reject the existing order of things in its entirety. Mass refusal of Lebanon's sectarian political system is exemplary here, as is the rejection of Chile's whole governing class. *¡Que se vayan todos!* remains a pertinent slogan, with an ever wider comprehension of *todos*. It's the world system as a whole, as a system, that has become the chief target of protest in so many places that, in the past, both internally and externally, have been kept in check by reliable means of divide and rule. Recourse to these ancient forms of domination may prove harder to justify in a world that is starting to realise the full extent of its unity and interdependence. We exploit or are exploited in keeping with one and the same set of basic laws. We work, produce and consume according to the rules prescribed by a single economic logic. We share a single planet, and live in the shadow of shared forms of catastrophe.

So many of the perils we face are the same for everyone. The way we address them, in the coming months and years, may well reinforce the differences that already structure our world in dominance and inequality. Or not. Perhaps more than ever before, this stark alternative can now be formulated as an actual political choice.

7 April 2020