

# Science in a Time of Pandemic

Helena Sheehan

Of the many dimensions of the present pandemic, swamping our lives and suspending our normal reality, one of the most central has been the role of science. Every report on our all-virus-all-the-time news references science. The new media stars are epidemiologists, virologists, mathematicians, physicians and public health officials. My facebook newsfeed has been dominated by amateur epidemiologists. I do not mean this disparagingly. The times demanded that we all inform ourselves in this area to allow such specialist knowledge to permeate our collective consciousness to find our way through this crisis.

There have been all sorts of challenges to the fast-developing science of covid-19, ranging from religious immunity to 5G susceptibility, but the overriding story has been trust in science. There was massive public pushback against the Johnson-Cummings flagging of a poorly conceived herd immunity strategy and the Trump suggestion of disinfectant injections. There was disappointment in Africa when the Tanzanian president, who had a PhD in chemistry, looked more to prayer than science and supported spurious theories on origins and remedies. When our health minister here in Ireland, grandstanding with constant interviews and photo-ops, got in over his head pronouncing on the 18 previous coronaviruses where no vaccine had been found, he was quickly forced to backtrack and apologise. The Irish government has prided itself on following the science

Science, of course, is not a simple matter. Science is always inextricably enmeshed in politics, economics, philosophy, culture. There is a long Marxist tradition of exploring science in all the complexity of its interactions, standing in contrast to the myopia of positivism and the obfuscation of postmodernism. Generations of Marxists, from Marx and Engels, through Bernal, Haldane and Caudwell, to Gould, Levins and Lewontin, have embraced the cognitive capacity of science while highlighting the problematic shaping of science under capitalism.

Marxism explains this pandemic in terms of the whole network of interacting forces that have created it. Epidemiologists have been warning that such a pandemic was inevitable. Writers who put epidemiology in a wider social-political-economic context, Marxists such as Mike Davis and Rob Wallace, have been communicating to a wider public that industrialised agriculture, wildlife trafficking, hyper-globalisation, degradation of public health systems and big-pharma-dominated research were creating the conditions for such a pandemic. As the 1918 flu, being studied again now, spread by mobilisation for war, covid-19 has proliferated along the circuitry of capital.

Now that we are in it, Marxism also clarifies what is to be done. The situation demanding that the priorities of public health override all other considerations, not only individual liberty, but proprietary science and medicine, runs counter to the whole trajectory of capitalism and points to the necessity for socialism. This pandemic highlights the need for global, public and open science focused on the urgency of finding preventative, diagnostic and therapeutic responses to this virus, particularly a vaccine. It should transcend all considerations of prizes, patents and profits. It requires transparent and international sharing of all relevant experimental and clinical information.

The World Health Organisation, despite any flaws, is the obvious body to co-ordinate this effort. The biggest obstacle to its optimal fulfilment of its mission is the US government. The Trump administration negotiating with a German pharmaceutical firm to develop a vaccine for US-only use, pirating personal protection equipment *en route* to other nations, undermining and then defunding the WHO run against everything the world needs now. In response, Ireland quadrupled its contribution to WHO. Now the US is accusing China of trying to steal its research on vaccines and treatments for covid-19 when all such research should be in the public domain.

There is much media speculation on life after lockdown, some of it very shallow, but some of it more penetrating. In querying what has changed in us, in our society, as a result of this experience, many have said they do not want to return to our former normality. They have become increasingly aware of the devastation that capitalism has wrought on our bodies, our societies, our planet.

Things we were told were impossible suddenly became possible in Ireland and elsewhere in this crisis: an end to a two-tier health service, increased funding for biomedical research and clinical resources, a ban on evictions, a rent freeze, a reduction in carbon emissions. We have lived, however partially and temporarily, in a scenario where public

health and welfare overrode the imperatives of the market. The government implementing these measures in Ireland were also responsible for running down our public health capacity and being on the other side of the class struggle. They will want to row back, so it is the responsibility of the left, with considerable public support, to resist this.

Of the many memorable sights and sounds that have flowed through my social media during this period, I could not refrain from sharing an image from a demonstration of health workers where the main banner read CAPITALISM: DO NOT RESUSCITATE.



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