

Marxism, Science and Covid-19

Helena Sheehan

This was a lecture in the Pandemonium lecture series delivered via zoom on 26 July 2020



Photo: Cuban doctors arriving in Italy in March 2020 during surge of covid-19 in Lombardy

Source: <https://mronline.org/2020/03/23/cuban-doctors-travel-to-italy-to-help-fight-covid-19/>

What is the role of science during the covid-19 pandemic that we are currently experiencing? What questions arise about science as knowledge, about public attitudes to science, about why some anti-science currents have withered while others thrived, about the position of science vis a vis state and market, about the relation of science to capitalism and to socialism? What does Marxism bring to an analysis of these questions?

This pandemic took all of us by surprise to one degree or another. We began 2020 with no idea of what was about to overtake us. At first, it was one of many stories in the news. It was far away in China. I took an interest in it for what it revealed about China, particularly how it could mobilise people and resources in the interests of public health priorities. Meanwhile, I went about my everyday life, going into the university every day and planning trips to Italy and Greece in the spring, having no idea how quickly that life and those plans would unravel – along with the lives and plans of millions of others – because of what was happening in China.

We should not have been so surprised. The science was there. Epidemiologists have been warning that such a pandemic was inevitable. Moreover, writers who put epidemiology in a wider social-political-economic context, such as Laurie Garrett ¹, Mike Davis ² and Rob Wallace ³, have been explaining to a wider public the factors creating the conditions for such a pandemic in the contemporary organisation of agriculture, science, pharmacology, medicine, politics and economics.

Despite reading such authors and despite contracting the H1N1 virus myself during an outbreak of that epidemic in USA in 2009, still nothing quite prepared me for the suddenness and scale of this, so I have been preoccupied with making up for that. In quarantine, as the news became all virus all the time, it was hard to concentrate on anything else. When I settled down to work, it was sometimes as if I was studying for exams in epidemiology and immunology rather than working on the book I was writing. When I reflected, it was about my own mortality, about the fragility of our species and ecosystem, about the devastation that capitalism has wrought on our bodies, our societies, and

our planet. I veered between the specific details of reorganising my everyday life and pondering the world-historical meaning of unfolding events.

In coming to terms with this, I had the considerable advantage of a world view, worked out with great care over many years, while always being open to new facts, events and ideas. Since my twenties, I have engaged in this process within the Marxist intellectual tradition, which merged with my life as a left activist.⁴ In making this tradition my own, I ranged widely, but focused particularly on the convergence of science, philosophy and politics and the debates this generated both within Marxism and between Marxism and other intellectual positions. This formed the basis of my first book.⁵ What I learned from this and from the habits of thought I developed from this has been my strength in comprehending the present conjuncture.

Science has played a prominent role in the unfolding drama of this pandemic. Virtually every report, every discussion every debate references science. Epidemiologists, virologists, immunologists, mathematicians, public health officials and primary care physicians have become our new media stars. In Ireland, Luke O'Neill, Sam McConkey, Cillian de Gascun, Tony Holohan have become household names.

Many people have become amateur epidemiologists and immunologists. Some might sneer at this, but the times have demanded that we all inform ourselves in this area. Such specialist knowledge needed to permeate our collective consciousness. Science is not only for scientists. I have been impressed with how much how many people have learned about the relevant science.

Of course, it is important that we don't overreach ourselves. We have to defer to expertise, but we also have to engage critically with it. Scientists don't all say the same thing, so we need sound epistemological criteria to decide whom and what to believe. Scientists admit uncertainty, so we need to grapple with possibilities and probabilities. Even more seriously, for us, is that science is integrated into a system we oppose, so we need to discern how research agendas and clinical practices are shaped by capitalist ideologies and class struggle.

So science is not a simple matter. Science is always inextricably enmeshed in politics, economics, philosophy, culture.

There is no other intellectual position to rival Marxism in conceptualising this. There is a long Marxist tradition of exploring science in all the complexity of its interactions, standing in sharp contrast to the myopia of positivism and the obfuscation of postmodernism.

Generations of Marxists, from Marx and Engels on, have embraced the cognitive capacity of science while highlighting the problematic shaping of science under capitalism.⁶

I want to pay particular tribute to those who belonged to the CPGB, because of the centenary being marked this year. John Desmond Bernal⁷ and John Burton Sanderson Haldane⁸ were internationally acclaimed scientists who came to Marxism and wrote brilliant works analysing the philosophy, history and political economy of science from a Marxist point of view. Haldane wrote a science column for the *Daily Worker*, believing that science was for the working class not only for academics. From a very different background came Christopher St John Sprigg, who wrote as Christopher Caudwell⁹, who left school at 15, did not move in elite circles, who came to Marxism through his own reading and thinking, joined the Poplar branch of the party, drove an ambulance to Spain, died in battle during the Spanish civil war and left behind profound works analysing science and indeed everything else within the capitalist system and its all-permeating world view within the Marxist tradition. There were others in the CPGB at that time and through the decades who have brought much insight to bear upon this, but these were the ones who most influenced me.

In our time, Marxists are still those who see most clearly both the crucial role of science as necessary knowledge as well as the complexity of its role within capitalism. In the current crisis, Marxism explains this pandemic in terms of the whole network of interacting forces that have created it. Marxists, such as Mike Davis¹⁰ and Rob Wallace¹¹, have been communicating to a wider public the conditions making such a pandemic inevitable: industrialised intensified agriculture, wildlife trafficking, hyper-globalisation, degradation of public health systems and big-pharma-dominated research.

As the 1918 flu, being studied again now, spread by mobilisation for war, covid-19 has proliferated along the circuitry of capital. Years ago, demobilised soldiers transmitted it across nations and classes. This time it has been the high-flying elite who brought it to the masses.

A dominant characteristic of this period has been the prominence of science, a sense of masses of people learning all they could about the relevant science and depending on scientists to find preventative and therapeutic responses to this threat that would allow us to come out this crisis.

One thing I noticed quickly – which I have yet to see anyone else remark on – is the evaporation of the postmodernist critique of science. Whether this is temporary or long-lasting, we shall see.

The postmodernist approach to science has emphasised the socio-historical construction of science in a way that saw it as discrediting any truth claims made by science, in more extreme forms even denying the possibility for any credible criteria for demarcation of truth from falsity. According to Paul Feyerabend¹², the history of science is a mixture of subterfuge, rhetoric and propaganda. There is no rationality, no progress, no criteria. Anything goes. Astrology or astronomy, take your pick. It is just a matter of personal preference, with no way to prove one more legitimate than the other. However, when he developed a brain tumour, he went to a neurologist not a faith healer.

It was not only in university science studies, which became anti-science studies, but it infected large sections of the left. Up until the 1960s, the left took its stand with science, seeing it as essential to understanding the world as well as to building socialism, even while opposing many dimensions of its function within capitalism. In more recent decades, sections of the left, falling prey to the epistemological crisis of late capitalism and overwhelmed by the role of science within capitalism, have taken an obfuscating and negative position on science, leaning more to postmodernism than to Marxism or sometimes putting forward postmodernised version of Marxism.

Now, unless it is articulating itself somewhere where I can't see or hear it at the moment, this position is dead in the water in the face of this pandemic, because science has become so salient, so immediate, so crucial to our collective fate. I don't think anyone wants to hear that we have no criteria for deciding between contending truth claims or that science is inherently deceptive or oppressive.

However, there have been challenges to the fast-moving science of covid-19. There have been all sorts of conflicting tendencies, ranging from ideas of religious immunity to 5G susceptibility to poorly conceived versions of herd immunity.

I saw a woman on a vox pop in the US insisting that she was immune from infection because she was washed in the blood of her saviour. Greek orthodox clerics told their faithful they could not contract a virus receiving communion sharing the same spoon. In other places too, there were claims that congregating for religious worship was under divine protection. However, these were quashed by public health authorities and met with scepticism even from many believers.

Governments have prided themselves with following the science. There has been massive public pushback when public officials went against the best science or even went with bad science. It happened in Britain when Johnson and Cummings flirted with a garbled herd immunity strategy. It happened in America when Trump, during one of his many chaotic press conferences consisting of a tissue of stupidities, brags and lies, suggested injections of disinfectants or when both Trump and Bolsonaro pushed hydroxychloroquine without adequate clinical basis. It happened in Africa when John Magufuli, president of Tanzania, despite having a PhD in chemistry, looked more to prayer than science and supported spurious theories on origins and remedies. In Ireland, when Simon Harris, our health minister, 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.

Also there has been pushback against scientists coming forward with bad science, making claims for which there was inadequate evidence. A professor in UCD medical school and chair of the Ixexit Irish Freedom Party, Dolores Cahill, claimed that the global lockdown was unnecessary and that anyone who contracted the virus had immunity for life. Medical students organised a petition demanding that the university dissociate itself from her claims, which they eventually did.¹³

In many countries, right populist crowds have gathered to oppose public health measures, refusing to wear masks or socially distance, as a defence of individual liberty, claiming that the virus only killed older people who were going to die anyway, ignoring the considerable numbers of other deaths, particularly among health workers, who were fit enough to be working in intensive care. They have argued that it was a "plandemic", a conspiracy to herd us all into servility, to chip us into constant surveillance and submission. In Ireland, they have gathered to protest outside the

Four Courts and Dail Eireann, but in the US they have turned up in full paramilitary gear with grenades and assault rifles. At one protest, there was a placard saying "Sacrifice the weak. Reopen TN" (Tennessee)

The left, in contrast, has been strong in its defence of scientific knowledge and public health priorities, often calling for stricter measures and stronger enforcement. Even anarchists.

Looking wider than organised left or right, the overriding story has been public trust in science and public health infrastructures. People have demonstrated more social cohesion and compliance than opposition and violation.

However, trust in science and public health infrastructures is problematic, primarily because so integrated into capitalism. We have seen this play out at every level.

At the start of the pandemic, the priorities of capitalist production left even the most advanced countries short of ppe, ventilators, icu beds. When the scramble to make up for this began, there was a ruthless competition for scarce resources. Supplies destined for certain countries were pirated by other countries, the US being the worst offender with private companies dishonouring contracts and selling to higher bidders. The public sector itself, corrupted by market mentalities, saw nation against nation and within the US, state against state.

When it came to therapies, the picture has been equally disturbing. US bought almost whole global stock of remdesivir, which is under patent to Gilead, so no one else can make it. The other drug shown to be effective in treatment is dexamethasone, which (fortunately) is out of patent.

Patents constitute a prime example of how the logic of capitalism runs contrary to the needs of public health. Jonas Salk, who discovered the polio vaccine, refused to patent it, believing that it would be immoral to do so because it belonged to the people. He asked "Could you patent the sun?" Big pharma today are patenting not only drugs but even genes and seeds. They would patent the sun, sea and air if they could.

Many are placing their hopes in a vaccine. There are many vaccines under development. Unfortunately, too much of it is happening in the private sector. Even a lot of public investment, made through governments and universities, is tied to big pharma, with all sorts of initiatives in competition with each other, rather than part of a cooperative global effort, which is an obstruction to optimal research and development.

Another set of problems will arise regarding the dissemination of vaccines once developed. There will be another scramble between nations, and within nations, between classes, for access. The poor in the global south will be way down the line.

The British cybersecurity agency recently accused Russian state-backed hackers of spying on western research facilities developing vaccines, claiming it represented a danger. I ask: danger to whom? To big pharma, of course, not to populations needing protection against this virus. In the same vein, the US has made such accusations against China and closed its Houston consulate.

All such research should be open and cooperative under the coordination of the WHO. The undermining of the World Health Organisation by the US presidency during a global public health emergency runs directly contrary to what the world needs. It is a major scandal among the many scandals of this crisis.

Whatever its flaws, the WHO is a public and progressive force. There has been an ongoing struggle for power within the WHO, between nations and between public and public interests, but the US, UK and big pharma have not prevailed. Their candidate for secretary general, David Nabarro, was defeated several years ago by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the candidate of the African Union. He was also supported by China, which is not the same thing as being bought by China, as accused by the US.

When the US announced it was defunding and withdrawing from the WHO, many governments, even those always wanting to on the right side of the US, denounced this. The Irish foreign minister called it indefensible and the Irish government increased its contribution to the WHO. Britain, unless I have missed something, has sat on the fence. Recently, Pompeo was in London blaming British deaths of coronavirus on the WHO. I heard no refutation from Downing Street. Trump is blaming US deaths on China as well as the WHO.

But what Trump says or does is only the surface of the problem. Trump is a morbid symptom of a system in decline.

The problem is systemic. The problem is capitalism.

The same system that has created the conditions for this epidemic, that same system that is responsible for the inadequate medical resources in combatting it, is still the same system obstructing the research, production and dissemination processes needed to get us all through this.

It is no coincidence that epicentre of global capitalism is now the epicentre of global infection as well as the epicentre of global obstruction of the whole range of measures necessary for a world that provides for public health now and in the future.

Marxism comes into play not only in highlighting the nature of the system but pointing beyond it. The priorities of public health go against the very logic of capitalism, which sets up obstacles at every step of the way with class-based access to healthcare, profit-based research priorities dominating even public institutions, a whole range of legalistic proprietary blocks with complex contracts and patents, while also allowing violation of its own laws, even ruthless pirating, when it suits powerful national and class interests, as we have seen so dramatically in this pandemic when medical supplies destined for one place were blatantly seized on airfields and diverted elsewhere.

Pandemics demand public science and public healthcare. They create a scenario necessitating that the priorities of public health override all other considerations, not only individual liberty, but proprietary science and medicine, running counter to the whole trajectory of capitalism and pushing in the direction of 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. Beyond that, it requires open, public and global coordination of energies and mobilisation of resources. It demands an ethos of socialism and public control of relevant knowledge and resources.

This was not on offer during this pandemic, except in places such as China, Cuba, Vietnam and Kerala.

Yet governments ruled by parties ideologically committed to capitalism were forced to adopt measures more characteristic of socialism.

In Ireland, things we were told were impossible suddenly became possible: an end to a two-tier health service (all medical care for all conditions was public and free), increased funding for biomedical research and clinical resources, a ban on evictions, a rent freeze, a reduction in carbon emissions. We lived for a time, however partially and temporarily, in a scenario where public health and welfare overrode the imperatives of the market and enacted the priorities of socialism

Globally, the relation of the state to the market shifted in the direction of domination of the state over the market, but as we exit lockdown the balance is shifting back to the market. We need to resist this.

Of the many memorable sights and sounds of this crisis, I chose a photo to illustrate my *Morning Star* article from a demonstration of health workers where the main banner read CAPITALISM: DO NOT RESUCITATE.¹⁴

This is what many of us want to see, but it is not what we will get. Capitalism faltered, but it did not die. It is being resuscitated. We won't be getting socialism any time soon. Nevertheless, we have to keep that vision and make the case, highlighting how this pandemic has demonstrated the fatal flaws of capitalism and demonstrated the need for socialism.

We often hear discussions of what will change as a result of what we have experienced during this pandemic. What I hope is that we can not only hold on to some modest gains made during this period, but push further for enhanced public health infrastructures at a national and international level.

We cannot relax too much as we see the curve flatten, because the conditions are still there for future and even fiercer pandemics.

I have long seen the road to socialism as a long march. This pandemic has been a massive push to make that march.

-
- ¹ Laurie Garrett *The Coming Plague* 1994
- ² Mike Davis *The Monster at Our Door* 2005
- ³ Rob Wallace *Big Farms Make Big Flu* 2016
- ⁴ Helena Sheehan *Navigating the Zeitgeist* 2019
- ⁵ Helena Sheehan *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science* 1985, 2017
- ⁶ Helena Sheehan "Marxism and Science Studies" *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 2007
- ⁷ JD Bernal *The Social Function of Science* 1939, *Science in History* 1954
- ⁸ JBS Haldane *The Marxist Philosophy and the Sciences* 1938
- ⁹ Christopher Caudwell *The Crisis in Physics* 1939, 2017, *Heredity and Development (in Scenes and Actions)* 1986
- ¹⁰ Mike Davis *The Monster Enters: Covid 19, Avian Flu and the Plagues of Capitalism* 2020
- ¹¹ Rob Wallace *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of Covid-19* 2020
- ¹² Paul Feyerabend *Against Method* 1975
- ¹³ "Ireland's Plandemic: How a YouTube video about coronavirus racked up almost one million views before it was taken down" <https://www.thejournal.ie/dolores-cahill-coronavirus-video-facebook-twitter-5148488-Aug2020/>
- ¹⁴ Helena Sheehan "Crucial science lesson in a time of pandemic" <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/c/crucial-science-lesson-time-pandemic>