

Social Movements and the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic worsens the crises generated by neoliberal capitalism. The “economic resiliency” of the Philippines is not a strength for the struggling masses rather a “financial strength” for the exporter and importer of surplus capital, e.g. the creditors and investors, favoring the few against the many.^[1] The lens and jargon of multilateral development banks bear bourgeois morality and myth describing the Philippine economy and the Filipinos “resilient” amid perennial crises brought by neoliberal ideology. Emphasizing “economic infrastructure” over the “social infrastructure”, e.g. public healthcare, the Philippines attracts the surplus capital of foreign investors but not the confidence of the people as bureaucrat capitalists gain from contracts with the government.^[2] When COVID-19 strikes, the Filipinos remind themselves of the need for “social infrastructure” in public health. The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder since the people already recognize the government’s lack of capacity in dealing with regular maladies like dengue. Though many are organizing themselves in addressing the negligence of “social infrastructure” by the government, a lot more clamor individually through social media for quality public service during the pre-pandemic period, amid the COVID-19, and most likely in the post-pandemic time. It is in this context that this practice note asks: how do Filipinos respond to the government’s response and how should they respond amid and during the post-COVID period? The note benchmarks from the theoretical foundations of social movements as it learns from people providing praxis of mobilizations in different countries for the Filipinos to adopt in their activism and to adapt their strategies when dealing with the “new normal”.

The plight of the people amid the COVID-19 pandemic tests the limits of patience in the inutility of elite politics but the people do not have their own machinery as powerful as the mainstream parties enabling “fair” play in the political arena. Some are asking the whereabouts of party-list representatives while others are conscious of how progressive lawmakers work with the grassroots. With the clamor for mass-oriented politics, Lenin (22 April 2020 marked his 150th birthday), then, lives; he lives among the people who realize the need for genuine people’s party in achieving emancipatory politics free from the dominance of the bureaucrat capitalists. While there are people who do not agree to Lenin’s single-party system, state repression does not discriminate whether one is an anarchist, social democrat, centrist, rightist, leftist, or apolitical. As COVID-19 exposes the crises of neoliberal capitalism, critics are compelled to conceive creative ways of amplifying the material condition in quarantined communities. Myrmidons maligning critics failed to stop netizens criticizing elitist and unscientific responses from the state.

As President Duterte gains additional powers in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, social movements lose the chance of heightening mobilizations at the ultimate place of the political arena, i.e. the public spaces especially the streets. But “social distancing” does not deter social movements. The religious concept of retreat bears resemblance to the isolation provided by the pandemic. Such isolation is nevertheless useful for the sincere activists to think ways of mobilizing

amid the coronavirus and in the coming of the “new normal”. Lenin did this fruitful isolation when he was in exile during the pre-1917 Bolshevik Revolution.^[3] Though the pandemic halted the global protests against the intensification of neoliberal policies, activists are resorting to online meetings, educational discussions, and protests. Since the public gathering is not allowed, online study groups create ways to think collectively concerning the COVID-19, the crises it brought, the material condition, and the material solution. Provided that it is the material condition that shapes the material solution, lots of the intelligentsia from the petty-bourgeois stratum are cut off from the society’s basic sector unable to immerse with the masses. Though this does not mean that there’s no way to get data from the latter by the former, it is still advisable to immerse with the masses as soon as the situation warrants. It is not amid the pandemic that the social movement theory matures vis-à-vis the capitalist crises; rather, in the post-pandemic period when activists and academicians alike can go through the theory-praxis route and vice versa.

The neoliberal model of “development” has kept the public healthcare of “developing” countries inferior in quality and service; it is unfavorable to the people but profitable to the investors. The technological advancement of the Global South is hostage to the subservience of political economy to the Global North who control the International Financing Institutions like multilateral development banks. Hence, there is a failure by the state to provide cheaper but quality health equipment to public hospitals. Neoliberal exploitation of the country’s resources keeps the “social infrastructure” sluggish in responding to the needs of the people. Neoliberal capitalism had been generating crises since the pre-COVID period and the post-pandemic time cannot go back to the “new normal”. In the first place, the pre-COVID “normal” was never normal. Its design fails. Despite the decade-old World Health Organization regulation on responding pandemic, global capitalism failed to coordinate countries in combating against the COVID-19.^[4] If the global interconnection of contemporary capitalism fails in engaging capitalist countries coordinately, Cuba, on the other hand, extends humanitarian work abroad sending its health workers to help other countries fight against the coronavirus amid the US-imposed sanction. Consequently, a re-examination of ideology resurges and the Covid-19 intensifies the class war, especially when news reminds the people of the public healthcare suffering budget-cut anew shortly before the coronavirus strikes. Reducing funding for public healthcare leaves the *have nots* at greater risk than the *haves*. The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health issue but also a political, economic, and ideological crisis.

In the United States, the crises brought by the coronavirus is not isolated from the rise of neo-fascist Right which traces its birth back to the 2008 global financial meltdown.^[5] The same is observable in other countries especially the Philippines. But right-wing populism is relatively effective in a country having no political maturity opiated with patronage politics – a representation of ideology and politics in superhero films. Social Amelioration Program (SAP) and other aids from the local and national governments and the private sector do not warrant economic security amid the quarantine period. They help, and they help a lot, but they need

reformulation as to the roots of the crises perpetuating the ideological representation of the Hollywood heroes in Philippine politics. It may be trite but still very relevant to maintain the Maoist line that the masses can create history if they act consciously and collectively. There is then a greater need to study collectively the material condition along with the COVID-19 pandemic. The quarantined people may have docile bodies but the intellect and will are not. The COVID-19 calls for contemplation on the country's condition. Those who have violated curfew policy were subjected to the militarist method of discipline. Containing COVID-19 meant restricting not only the people's mobility but cracking down dissent. A fascist response cannot cover the capitalist crises. Macho-fascist measure enhances repression along with the Enhanced Community Quarantine. Prior to this year's pandemic, mass mobilizations exposed the socio-political-economic crises in Algeria, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. However, a lot of these social movements across the world may end up hijacked by those who are already powerful who cannot afford to give birth to a "new normal" beyond the horizon of neoliberal capitalism. Though the COVID-19 pandemic halts the mass movements, it does not and cannot stop them from flaring up. They're gaining strength as they pause occupying the ultimate political arena. Online protests and educational discussions are constantly upheld by different people's organizations, academic circles, cause-oriented groups, think tanks, and trade unions exposing the moldy material condition left by neo-liberalized basic social services.

In the Philippines, Filipinos are opiated with the "greener" pastures overseas works offer. Except for the few personal choices, many are compelled by the country's incapacity to provide jobs and if there are any, the wages won't suffice the cost of commodities, housing amortization, education, hospitalization, and other needs which lead to surmounting personal debt reflecting the country's subjugation to the International Financing Institutions like the multilateral development banks. The crises brought by the coronavirus is a reminder of the 2011 Occupy Movement in Wall Street and the 2017 Occupy Bulacan Movement in Pandi, Bulacan. Both are socio-political movements blowing against social inequality in a creative but concrete way of expressing public indignation against neoliberal policies privatizing basic social services. While the former was an awakening from the economic liberalism daydream, the latter was an actual occupation of dilapidated public housing demystifying the bourgeois morality and myth. Lesson learned hence is the need to counter bourgeois morality of mainstream news anchors and columnists. But the intelligentsia can hardly arrive at a materialist and mass-oriented analysis without immersing with the masses. Sadly, the situation does not warrant but they can join with online discussions of different groups from society's basic sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic divulges certain "crass"^[6] character of capitalism.^[7] Community kitchens reflect the state's failure to provide basic needs. Worse, state security forces rounded up volunteers running community kitchens as the latter amplified advocacies along with their humanitarian activity.^[8] It is not only in the Philippines that right-wing responses intensify. Thus,

the COVID-19 crisis calls for a coordinated global response to the crises generated by contemporary capitalism. The global social movements will have wider and deeper issues to advocate, especially in the post-pandemic period. But can the post-COVID capitalism stand up where it falls? “Healing as one” is not even synonymous with the “Community and the Common Good” as posited by the key principles of Catholic Social Teachings. No Corporate Social Responsibility can cover up corporate greed in unbridled capitalism. Continue criticizing the crises brought by the coronavirus to arrive at the “new normal” beyond the horizon of neoliberal capitalism! Though the material condition itself arouses the consciousness of our health workers, they should organize themselves (and/or be organized) so they can mobilize collectively to advocate for reforms (at least, a good start in revolutionizing the public healthcare system) that better public healthcare, better working conditions, higher salary, and more benefits can be realized. As such reiterates their need to have their own party-list.

Healthcare in the Philippines can literally bankrupt the retirees. How much more if hospitalization comes while one is still working? Right now, the government can hardly subsidize public hospitals. Since genuine development creates wealth, national industrialization is vital in achieving quality and accessible healthcare and in controlling national health emergency. National industrialization is an agenda in the GRP-NDFP Peace Talks. Health care issues then require peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines. But many of the majority Catholics do not stand by the key principle of the Catholic Social Teachings on the “Promotion of Peace”.^[9] There is a need to *conscientize* the “apathetic and apolitical” Catholics. If Paulo Freire posits the “see-comprehend-act” method in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines exhorts “Discern! Decide! And act with Mary our Mother!” in its guidelines reflecting on the current socio-politico-economic conditions of the country.^[10]

On 23 May 2020, the Makabayan Bloc held an online forum assessing the COVID-19 pandemic response by the Duterte administration. Kabataan Representative Sarah Elago cites the United Nations in observing the Philippines’ “highly militarized” response. “Emergency powers should not be a weapon governments can wield to quash dissent, control the population, and even perpetuate their time in power... should be used to cope effectively with the pandemic – nothing more, nothing less,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet explains. Elago recognizes the public health emergency reflecting the pre-COVID crises. She elucidates the changing of the term from mass testing to expanded and/or targeted testing calling the former anti-elitist empowering the masses in demanding quality and accessible public healthcare. Alliance of Concerned Teachers Representative France Castro observes the insufficient protection for frontline health workers. Castro cites the World Health Organization’s concern on the percentage of death and/or infection-rate among the *frontliners* in the Philippines. She correlates the incident with the limited Personal Protective Equipment procurement and its late procurement and distribution. COVID-19, Castro claims, divulges the neoliberal character of contemporary

capitalism. She reiterates the need for the filling up of 17,000 unfilled *plantilla* positions in public hospitals operating under their capacities. The disqualified Aksyon Health Workers party-list could have given relief to the underpaid and overworked health workers. Castro cites also the congested quarantine centers halting the accommodation of repatriates. She recommends the enhancement of medical strategy, i.e. testing, tracing, isolation, and treatment. Bayan Muna Representative Ferdinand Gaité says that the target set is unmet after eight weeks. He also cites the pressing concerns of the dismissal of government job orders and *contractuals*, and the stringent qualification, bureaucratic processes, late start payout for Small Business Wage Subsidy (SBWS) and Social Amelioration Program (SAP). Bayan Muna Representative Eufemia Cullamat cites the continuous attacks on Lumads amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Gabriela Representative Arlene Brosas cries foul about the mass arrests silencing critics. She said the people face fascism amid the pandemic and that the lockdown in the Philippines is longer than in Wuhan. Bayan Muna Representative Carlos Zarate criticizes the Duterte administration in its inconsistency in its statements on whether public funds are sufficient or not. After assuring the public of sufficient funds, President Duterte entertains the idea of selling government properties. Zarate disagrees citing the reenacted budget, and calamity and contingency funds. Zarate notes the president belittling the COVID-19 yet the administration loans nearly five billion dollars from multilateral agencies making the country reaching a new high record in its loans. Dr. Joshua San Pedro of Coalition For People's Right To Health reiterates the physical distancing with social solidarity vital to collective struggle towards the new normal.

Alienation, bankruptcy, dehumanization, and exploitation are characteristics of neoliberal capitalism. In congested communities, there are individualists expressing liberalism whereas they could have survived strategically with communal way. Economic inequality is the common denominator among the recent social movements. They should work together redefining the least upheld principle and/or method of reaching the new horizon beyond the shadow of neoliberal capitalism. The “new normal” would not be new if it can't step forward away from neoliberal capitalism. Frantz Fanon's “new humanism” and/or Marx's “positive humanism” cannot realize its being in neoliberal capitalism. “Positive change in the conditions of life and labor will occur only with the development of a radical class politics independent of the current civilian leadership”, Kevin Anderson, Peter Hudis, Jens Johansson, Karel Ludenhoff, and Lilia Monzo, the steering committee of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization, maintain.^[11]

As people are becoming more conscious of the crises brought by the coronavirus, will they be conscious of capitalist contradictions?

The capitalist crisis conditions the consciousness. If the problem is capitalism, the solution cannot be capitalism but surely it comes through the crises generated by capitalism. Hence, understand and challenge the right-wing populism amid the pandemic. The post-COVID period will require new pedagogical practices for social movements to solidify subjective sentiments despite social

distancing. Benchmarking across the globe, activism in the Philippines can create a creative type of social movement considerate to the threat of coronavirus while maintaining vigilance to the fangs of the state. One good thing to note was the car caravan in Portland's May Day 2020 protests and during the indignation rally over the killing of Jory Poquia, coordinator of Bayan Muna party-list in Iloilo City, by suspected state security agents.

COVID-19 pandemic changes the landscape of social movements. How to organize and where to mobilize amid and after the pandemic is a critical question needing collective contemplation. The pandemic is crucial not only to the capitalists but also to the social movements. It invites a re-examination of ideologies and strategies calling for cooperation and coordination among the powerless to "cut the balls" (as worded by Slavoj Zizek) of the powerful.^[12]

Notes

[1] Sonny Africa, "Financial strength, development weakness," *Ibon*, May 14, 2020

(<https://www.ibon.org/financial-strength-development-weakness/>).

See also Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

[2] Jose Lorenzo Lim, "The fate of BBB in the time of COVID-19," *Ibon*, May 7, 2020

(<https://www.ibon.org/the-fate-of-bbb-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>).

[3] Kevin Anderson, "Notes on Lenin at 150: Theoretical Preparation for Revolution in the Time of COVID-19," *The International Marxist Humanist Organization Journal*, May 4, 2020

(<https://imhojournal.org/articles/notes-on-lenin-at-150-theoretical-preparation-for-revolution-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>).

[4] Kevin B. Anderson, Peter Hudis, Jens Johansson, Karel Ludenhoff, Lilia D. Monzo, "Where to Begin? Growing Seeds of Liberation in a World Torn Asunder", *The International Marxist Humanist Organization Journal*, April 10, 2020 (<https://imhojournal.org/articles/where-to-begin-growing-seeds-of-liberation-in-a-world-torn-asunder/>).

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Heather Brown uses the term "crassness" of capitalism in her paper *COVID-19 Lays Bare Capitalism's Deference to Profits over Lives* published by The International Humanist-Marxist Organization at <https://imhojournal.org/articles/covid-19-lays-bare-capitalisms-deference-to-profits-over-lives/>

[7] Kevin B. Anderson, Peter Hudis, Jens Johansson, Karel Ludenhoff, Lilia D. Monzo, "Where to Begin? Growing Seeds of Liberation in a World Torn Asunder".

[8] See the story of Sitio San Roque in Quezon City at

<https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/1/quezon-city-protesters-arrested-.html> and at <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/04/06/2005868/conducting-dialogue-cops-raid-san-roque-community-kitchens-tear-protest-materials>

[9] See https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Key-10-Principles-of-CST_1-pager.pdf

^[10] See <https://cbcnews.net/cbcnews/cbc-pastoral-guidelines-for-discerning-the-moral-dimension-of-the-present-day-moves-for-charter-change/>

^[11] Kevin B. Anderson, Peter Hudis, Jens Johansson, Karel Ludenhoff, Lilia D. Monzo, “Where to Begin? Growing Seeds of Liberation in a World Torn Asunder”.

^[12] Laurence Cox, “Learning in movements: how do we think about what we are doing?,” *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, Volume 11(2):91-105 (December 2019) (<https://www.interfacejournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Interface-11-2-full-PDF.pdf>).