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The pandemic and the Left (Part 1) (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

The pandemic and the Left (Part 1)

This article is based on the author's remarks given on the panel "Πανδημία και Αριστερά (The pandemic and the Left)," hosted by the Platypus Affiliated Society on November 19, 2021, the video of which can be found here. It will be hosted on our website in 2 parts.

The pandemic and its managment around the world have led to unprecedented negative changes in our way of life: we have seldom witnessed such a widespread and lasting restriction of our individual rights due to a pandemic or natural disaster, such as we see today. In my opinion, this restriction was imposed on us without its necessity having been sufficiently substantiated in public debate on the pandemic, and without adequate consideration of other, less authoritarian ways of managing it.

Although we constantly discuss the pandemic and its management, especially the medical and epidemiological features of the virus and the effectiveness and necessity of each individual measure, the public debate so far has not been the best. It is characterized both by state and media attempts to create a climate of panic, as well as by social cannibalism among citizens (especially between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated), with bad arguments and false data on all sides. This toxic climate is also prevalent on the Left, which is trapped in the technocratic and authoritarian logic of the existing management and has limited itself to calling for a more effective paternalistic state.

My goals in this article are twofold: to summarize the management and consequences of the pandemic worldwide, and to summarize the attitude of the existing Left towards the pandemic as opposed to what the attitude of a genuinely revolutionary Left would likely look like. What we know and what we do not know regarding the pandemic

I do not intend to focus on the medical and epidemiological features of the coronavirus pandemic, but I will attempt to provide a brief summary of what we know and what we do not know with certainty regarding the pandemic.

Despite the huge amount of research and constant media reporting on the nature of the pandemic for

almost two years, only two things can be said with certainty about it. One, that vaccines work: they do not prevent infection from the virus or its spread but only mitigate it, but they prevent serious illness from COVID, and hence also the collapse of our health systems. Two, that the infamous “Zero COVID” is an impossible, unrealizable goal. The virus tracking and tracing process was largely useless because it began too late: it is estimated that the virus had already spread to 3–4% of people in major metropolitan areas by March 2020.[1]

Let us now move on to whatever important things we do not know with certainty about the pandemic.

1. We do not yet know the mortality of the virus. This is very important: it makes a big difference whether the mortality rate is 0.2% as some say, or 2% as others say. Leading scientists claim that the mortality rate is extremely inflated and that detected COVID cases are far fewer than the actual number of cases. On the other hand, we had distinguished scientists like Dr. Ioannidis who early on greatly underestimated the possible number of deaths from the virus.
2. We do not know with certainty the effectiveness of natural immunity vis-á-vis vaccine immunity. Some scientists argue that natural immunity following infection is more protective than vaccination, while others argue the opposite.[2] In the U.S. you are not entitled to a safe pass if you have natural immunity, while in many European countries you are. Some scientists even claim that vaccines provide almost no protection against infection. A recent study from the University of Oxford characteristically notes that “the vaccine’s beneficial effect on Delta transmission waned to almost negligible levels over time,” a strong indication that transmissibility from infected vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals is similar.[3]
3. It is uncertain whether herd immunity is possible. At times its possibility has been strongly disputed, but there are many scientists, such as those behind the Great Barrington Declaration, who believe that it is possible. A few months ago, Professor Sir Andrew Pollard, president of the Oxford Vaccine Group, described the achievement of herd immunity as a “myth” due to the high transmissibility of the virus to and from vaccinated individuals.[4]
4. We do not know how the virus originated. For a long time the prevailing theory had been that the virus was transmitted to humans from animals, and this theory is still the most prevalent for many scientists. In recent months, however, the theory that the virus originated from a lab leak during gain-of-function research has gained ground. A senior official at the U.S. National Institute of Health admitted that the agency did indeed fund extremely dangerous research on bat-borne coronaviruses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Significantly, this theory was considered a conspiracy theory for the whole of 2020. It finally turned out that CDC director Anthony Fauci lied to Congress in saying that the U.S. did not fund gain-of-function research in Wuhan.[5]
5. Finally, we do not know with certainty how effective masking is.[6] Some masks offer much more protection than others, with the best providing 50% protection. The way we examine mask effectiveness, however, is not representative of how effective it is to enforce mask use, as participants in mask-effectiveness research wear the masks much more carefully and correctly than most people, changing them every few hours as appropriate, etc. Most people do not seem to wear the mask properly and carefully, thus the protection it provides is minimal.

In any case, it seems almost certain that the coronavirus is not a natural disaster — as the bourgeoisie wants to present it in order to avoid responsibility for it — but a disaster for which human social activity is responsible. The pandemic has both a social and a physical-biological dimension: we can say that it is a socially-mediated phenomenon with an impact on human biology, but it is also a natural phenomenon with an impact on society, given that the transmission and action of the virus is natural. As for whether the virus is the result of capitalism, I am not sure, as we have always had epidemics and laboratory accidents, and we may have them in socialism too. What we can say with certainty is that capitalism proved to be incapable of managing the pandemic rationally and

effectively, as I will try to show in the next section.

The mishandling of the pandemic

The management of the pandemic was characterized by a climate of panic cultivated by governments and the media. This encouraged paranoia and terror, but also disobedience and resistance. A dose of panic may have been justified at the beginning of the pandemic, as we knew almost nothing about the virus at the time, but it is no longer justified and has had devastating consequences. Public health messages on COVID were often false and misleading, leading to counterproductive, damaging, and authoritarian policies such as lockdowns. For example, Fauci testified in Congress that mandatory mask use is useful more because it discourages socialization than for its inherent protective properties. Members of the Cypriot government's epidemiological team said the same thing concerning mandatory outdoor masking.[7] The idea is that as long as people are required to wear a mask, they will be more "careful" when gathering, and will be less likely to go to bars and restaurants, etc. Therefore, it is an unnecessary demonstration measure that does not protect much from the virus: the spread occurs mainly in workplaces and private homes (at gatherings of family and friends) where we do not wear masks. It is also widespread in schools, but at least for primary-school children mask wearing does not seem very practical for obvious reasons.

Cyprus is an excellent example of irrational and authoritarian pandemic management. Three strict lockdowns were imposed upon us so far, with basic freedoms being violated with unprecedented ease. The Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus stipulates that the suspension of basic freedoms can only take place if a state of emergency is declared, which requires parliamentary approval. This approval was never granted. Instead, the Cypriot government relied on an outdated colonial decontamination law to abolish the freedoms of movement, work, assembly, and demonstration, as well as the right of repatriation of Cypriot citizens who were locked out of the Republic of Cyprus without any repatriation plan — the government required a negative COVID test to allow them to enter the country at a time when no state was providing tests for the general population, rendering repatriation virtually impossible.[8] The militarization of Cypriot society also increased, with soldiers being used to suppress demonstrations and oversee the implementation of the pandemic decrees. In other words, the parliament, including the official opposition, allowed the executive branch to rule by unconstitutional decrees, oppressing and terrorizing the citizens. Decisions are being taken behind closed doors without accountability, without transparency, and without coordination with the wider civil society; they are announced and enforced from top to bottom in an increasingly militarized structure in which the government acts as society's ruler.[9]

What I wrote about Cyprus applies to a greater or lesser degree to several other countries. What has happened with the pandemic globally is that politicians have largely abdicated responsibility to public-health officials who have given priority to one thing, infection control, at the expense of all other social values and principles such as our civil rights. (The only other factor that plays an important role in the management is the economy.) Scientific debate and even research has been suppressed for the sake of having unanimity in public-health messaging. For example, the scientists and doctors who signed the Great Barrington Declaration against lockdowns were demonized and some were fired. The establishment and presence of epidemiological committees in decision-making was mainly employed to provide a veneer of scientific justification to the authoritarian policies of each government, making management technocratic.

Another major disadvantage of the pandemic's management is the phenomenon of conflicting announcements and measures implemented in different countries. For example, some countries use the AstraZeneca vaccine while others, such as Denmark, have discontinued both AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson's.[10] We were repeatedly promised that mass vaccination will save us from the

pandemic, but as it turned out, this is not the case. In Cyprus, the government introduced a series of contradictory measures last November that likely promoted the spread of COVID instead of restricting it. The measures included what essentially amounted to a ban on access to open public spaces through limiting outdoor interaction to two people under the condition of using a mask, while keeping shopping malls, shops, cafes, churches, bars, and restaurants open. At the same time, the government imposed a curfew between 9:00pm and 05:00am, with most stores having to close at 7:00pm.[11] The result was crowded cafes, malls, and shops, an expected development given the curfew that reduces a person's free time to a few hours. As expected, the contradictory measures and information reduced the public's confidence in science and public-health management and encouraged conspiracy theories.

Public confidence in the management of the pandemic is further affected by the overt political exploitation of the pandemic. In Cyprus, the first measure taken was the partial closure of roadblocks to the Turkish-occupied areas at the end of February 2020, without similar measures at airports and ports, although there were COVID cases abroad and no cases in the occupied areas.[12] The measure, absurd from a health point of view, was clearly taken for political nationalist reasons.[13] Similarly, the Republic of Cyprus began violating international law under the guise of the pandemic, preventing boats carrying refugees from reaching the southern part of the island, leaving them to drown in the Mediterranean.[14] We had more of the same on the Mexico-U.S. border, with the Biden administration using the pandemic as a pretext to continue Trump's tough immigration policy.[15] As for the authoritarian measures of social control that have been adopted worldwide, I expect that some of them will stay with us forever unless we react.

It is also important to recognize that the pandemic is being managed in the context of austerity. The bourgeois class seeks to tackle the pandemic as economically as possible, shifting the burden of management to ordinary citizens through its rhetoric of "individual responsibility." There is a lack of development of treatment options for the virus as well as negligence in strengthening the health systems of several countries, resulting in the almost complete dependence of the management on mass vaccination. In Cyprus we did not have any substantial improvement in our health system, with the government forcing senior nursing students to staff hospitals without pay, and not even paying for the establishment of a functional vaccination-appointment system.[16] Although vaccination is helpful, the Delta mutation has spread all over Europe despite high vaccination rates, indicating that vaccines will not end the pandemic. If vaccination is not enough to get us out of the pandemic, why make it mandatory? After all, its authoritarian imposition rather discourages people from being vaccinated as many people react to authoritarianism.

The demonization of the unvaccinated

The media and the proponents of the measures tend to portray any citizens skeptical of the measures as paranoid conspiracy theorists who deny the scientific rationality of pandemic experts. This presentation is incorrect. Citizen skepticism has varying degrees: from skepticism towards specific pandemic management measures to skepticism towards the existence of the virus, or even to the adoption of theories of deliberate construction of the virus for nefarious purposes. Therefore, the skeptics and conspiracy theorists are not a homogeneous group. Or better, not all skeptics are conspiracy theorists.

Many people think that the virus exists and is dangerous, but they do not agree with the way the pandemic is being managed. They agree that some measures are needed in response to the pandemic, but they disagree or have disagreed with lockdowns, curfews, bans on demonstrations, mandatory vaccination, etc. These people criticize the management of the pandemic as authoritarian, racist, and irrational, speaking from the point of view of human rights and freedoms.[17] It does not make sense to consider exponents of this point of view as paranoid conspiracy theorists.

Unfortunately, there is also a significant portion of people who deny the existence of a pandemic and embrace more or less improbable conspiracy theories. In my opinion, although the attitude of these citizens has irrational characteristics, it also contains an important rational kernel. I think it makes perfect sense for a citizen not to trust what her government and the mainstream media are telling her about the pandemic. This is true all over the world, but especially for citizens of countries such as Cyprus, Greece, and the U.S., as they know that their state is highly corrupt, incompetent, and unreliable. If a state, after having clearly shown that it does not serve the good of its citizens, asks those citizens to radically change their way of life for the worse and sacrifice their basic freedoms, it makes sense for them to react with suspicion. This suspicion seems even more rational when we consider the contradictory measures that have been imposed in various countries, the constant changes in these measures, and the many times that governments rushed to tell us that the pandemic is ending.

The state's response to citizens' suspicion is to demonize them as paranoid conspiracy theorists. The state uses its influence in the media to present any criticism of the measures and any mobilization against them as irrational and socially dangerous, overemphasizing the presence of a minority of anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theorists. This was its stance with both Right-wing and Left-wing mobilizations in Cyprus and Greece. It betrays that the state's goal is to divide the citizens into two rival camps — responsible law-abiding citizens on the one hand, and irresponsible conspiracy theorists on the other — within the framework of the classic "divide and rule" tactic. By demonizing skeptics the state succeeds in directing the dissatisfaction of the public with the virus to them, thus avoiding being itself the recipient of the dissatisfaction.

On the other hand, the vast majority of supporters of the measures are content with state propaganda on the issue without examining it further. Most people who shrilly tell us to get vaccinated are not more knowledgeable about the pandemic than those skeptical of the measures — far from it. Most people who trust and follow the management do it blindly. They lack the knowledge and critical thinking to judge whether what the "experts" and the scientists are telling us is true. So the distinction between rational law-abiding citizens and irrational conspiracy theorists is meaningless. At least the people who are critical of the handling of the pandemic have shown some reflexes against the violation of their civil rights and way of life. The more irrational are those who follow the measures indiscriminately, not those who face them with suspicion.

End of the first part. Read part two here.

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[3] Smriti Mallapaty, "COVID vaccines cut the risk of transmitting Delta — but not for long," Nature, October 5, 2021, available online at <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02689-y>.

[4] Natalie Grover, "Delta variant renders herd immunity from Covid 'mythical,'" The Guardian, August 10, 2021, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/10/delta-variant-renders-herd-immunity-from-covid-m

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[6] Cf. David Zweig, “The CDC’s flawed case for wearing masks at school,” The Atlantic, December 16, 2021, available online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2021/12/mask-guidelines-cdc-walensky/621035/>.

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[9] “Delirium, The Exploitation of the Pandemic by the Republic of Cyprus: An Update,” Κυπριακες Υποσημειωσεις, February 4, 2021, available online at <https://cyfootnotes.blogspot.com/2021/02/the-exploitation-of-pandemic-by.html>. This text provides an excellent synopsis of the authoritarian mishandling of the pandemic in Cyprus.

[10] Nikolaj Skydsgaard, “Denmark continues exclusion of J&J, AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines”, Reuters, June 5, 2021, available online at <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/denmark-continues-exclude-jj-covid-19-vaccine-national-roll-out-tv-2-2021-06-25/>.

[11] “Από σήμερα τα νέα μέτρα - Όλη η Κύπρος κέρφιου από τις 9,” Offsite, November 30, 2020, available online at <https://www.offsite.com.cy/eidiseis/topika/apo-simera-ta-nea-metra-oli-i-kypros-kerfioy-apo-tis-9>; “Οι επιχειρήσεις που πρέπει να κλείνουν στις 7 μ.μ. από τη Δευτέρα,” Brief, November 29, 2020, available online at <https://www.brief.com.cy/oikonomia/kypros/oi-epiheiriseis-poy-prepei-na-kleinoyn-stis-7-mm-apo-ti-deytera>.

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[17] For examples of such critical responses to the handling of the pandemic, see “Delirium, The Exploitation of the Pandemic,” op. cit.; “Για το Δικαίωμα Άρνησης Εμβολιασμού,” 1917, September 4, 2021, available online at <https://1917.com.cy/2021/09/04/gia-to-dikeoma-arnisis-emvoliasmou/>; “On a Society Increasingly Turning Fascistic: The Exploitation of the Pandemic by the Republic of Cyprus,” Κυπριακες Υποσημειωσεις, November 24, 2021, available online at <https://cyfootnotes.blogspot.com/2020/11/on-society-increasingly-turning.html>.

The views expressed are the personal opinions of the authors.

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