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The Left's Covid failure

Amplifying the crisis is no way to rebuild trust

BY TOBY GREEN AND THOMAS FAZI

Throughout the various phases of the global pandemic, people's preferences in terms of epidemiological strategies have tended to overlap closely with their political orientation. Ever since Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro expressed doubts as to the wisdom of a lockdown strategy in March 2020, liberals and those on the Left of the Western political spectrum, including most socialists, have fallen over themselves to adhere in public to the lockdown strategy of pandemic mitigation — and lately to the logic of vaccine passports. Now as countries across Europe experiment with tighter restrictions of the unvaccinated, Left-wing commentators — usually so vocal in the defence of minorities suffering from discrimination — are notable for their silence.

As writers who have always positioned ourselves on the Left, we are disturbed at this turn of events. Is there really no progressive criticism to be made about the quarantining of healthy individuals, when the latest research suggests there is a vanishingly small difference in terms of transmission between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated? The Left's response to Covid now appears as part of a broader crisis in Left-wing politics and thought — one which has been going on for three decades at least. So it's important to identify the process through which this has taken shape.

In the first phase of the pandemic — the lockdowns phase — it was those leaning towards the cultural and economic right who were more likely to emphasise the social, economic and psychological damage resulting from lockdowns. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's initial lockdown scepticism made this position untenable for most of those leaning towards the cultural and economic Left. Social media algorithms then further fuelled this polarisation. Very quickly, therefore, Western leftists embraced lockdown, seen as a "pro-life" and "pro-collective" choice — a policy that, in theory, championed public health or the collective right to health. Meanwhile any criticism of the lockdowns was excoriated as a "right-wing", "pro-economy" and

“pro-individual” approach, accused of prioritising “profit” and “business as usual” over people’s lives.

In sum, decades of political polarisation instantly politicised a public health issue, without allowing any discussion as to what a coherent Left response would be. At the same time, the Left’s position distanced it from any kind of working-class base, since low-income workers were the most severely affected by the socio-economic impacts of continued lockdown policies, and were also those most likely to be out working while the laptop class benefitted from Zoom. These same political fault lines emerged during the vaccine roll-out, and now during the Covid passports phase. Resistance associates with the Right, while those on the mainstream Left are generally supportive of both measures. Opposition is demonised as a confused mixture of anti-science irrationalism and individualistic libertarianism.

But why has the mainstream Left ended up supporting practically all Covid measures? How did such a simplistic view of the relationship between health and the economy emerge, one which makes a mockery of decades of (Left-leaning) social science research showing just how closely wealth and health outcomes are connected? Why did the Left ignore the massive increase in inequalities, the attack on the poor, on poor countries, on women and children, the cruel treatment of the elderly, and the huge increase in wealth for the richest individuals and corporations resulting from these policies? How, in relation to the development and roll-out of vaccines, did the Left end up ridiculing the very notion that, given the money at stake, and when BioNTech, Moderna and Pfizer currently make between them over US\$1,000 per second from the Covid vaccines, there might be motivations from the vaccine manufacturers other than “the public good” at play? And how is it possible that the Left, often on the receiving end of state repression, today seems oblivious to the worrying ethical and political implications of Covid passports?

While the Cold War coincided with the era of decolonisation and the rise of a global anti-racist politics, the end of the Cold War – alongside the symbolic triumph of decolonisation politics with the end of apartheid – ushered in an existential crisis for Left-wing politics. The rise of neoliberal economic hegemony, globalisation, and corporate trans-nationalism, have all undermined the Left’s historic view of the state as an engine of redistribution. Combined with this is the realisation that, as the Brazilian theorist Roberto Mangabeira Unger has argued, the Left has always prospered most at times of great crisis — the Russian Revolution benefited from the World War One, and welfare capitalism from the aftermath of the World War Two. This history may partly explain the Left’s positioning today: amplifying the crisis and prolonging it through never-ending restrictions may be seen by some as a way to rebuild Left politics after decades of existential crisis.

The Left's flawed understanding of the nature of neoliberalism may also have affected its response to the crisis. Most people on the Left believe that neoliberalism has involved a "retreat" or "hollowing out" of the state in favour of the market. Thus, they interpreted government activism throughout the pandemic as a welcome "return of the state", one potentially capable, in their view, of eventually reversing neoliberalism's allegedly anti-statist project. The problem with this argument, even accepting its dubious logic, is that neoliberalism hasn't entailed a withering away of the state. On the contrary, the size of the state as a percentage of GDP has continued to rise throughout the neoliberal era.

This shouldn't come as a surprise. Neoliberalism relies on extensive state intervention just as much as "Keynesianism" did, except that the state now intervenes almost exclusively to further the interests of big capital – to police the working classes, bail out large banks and firms that would otherwise go bankrupt, etc. Indeed, in many ways, capital today is more dependent on the state than ever. As Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan note: "[A]s capitalism develops, governments and large corporations become increasingly intertwined. ... The capitalist mode of power and the dominant-capital coalitions that rule it do not require small governments. In fact, in many respects, they need larger ones". Neoliberalism today is more akin to a form of state-monopoly capitalism – or corporatocracy – than the kind of small-state free-market capitalism that it often claims to be. This helps explain why it has produced increasingly powerful, interventionist, and even authoritarian state apparatuses.

This in itself makes the Left's cheering at a non-existent "return of the state" embarrassingly naïve. And the worst part is that it has made this mistake before. Even in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, many on the Left hailed large government deficits as "the return of Keynes" – when, in fact, those measures had very little to do with Keynes, who counselled the use of government spending to reach full employment, and instead were aimed at bolstering the culprits of the crisis, the big banks. They were also followed by an unprecedented attack on welfare systems and workers' rights across Europe.

Something similar is happening today, as state contracts for Covid tests, PPE, vaccines, and now vaccine passport technologies are parcelled out to transnational corporations (often through shady deals that reek of cronyism). Meanwhile, citizens are having their lives and livelihoods upended by "the new normal". That the Left seems completely oblivious to this is particularly puzzling. After all, the idea that governments tend to exploit crises to further entrench the neoliberal agenda has been a staple of much recent Left-wing literature. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, for example, have argued that under neoliberalism, crisis has become a "method of government". More famously, in her 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein explored the idea of "disaster capitalism". Her central thesis is that in moments of public fear and disorientation it is easier to re-engineer societies: dramatic changes to the existing

economic order, which would normally be politically impossible, are imposed in rapid-fire succession before the public has had time to understand what is happening.

There's a similar dynamic at play today. Take, for example, the high-tech surveillance measures, digital IDs, crackdown on public demonstrations and fast-tracking of laws introduced by governments to combat the coronavirus outbreak. If recent history is anything to go by, governments will surely find a way to make many of the emergency rules permanent – just as they did with much post-9/11 anti-terrorist legislation. As Edward Snowden noted: “When we see emergency measures passed, particularly today, they tend to be sticky. The emergency tends to be expanded”. This confirms, too, the ideas on the “state of exception” posited by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who has nonetheless been vilified by the mainstream Left for his anti-lockdown position.

Ultimately, any form of government action should be judged for what it actually stands for. We support government intervention if it serves to further the rights of workers and minorities, to create full employment, to provide crucial public services, to rein in corporate power, to correct the dysfunctionalities of markets, to take control of crucial industries in the public interest. But in the past 18 months we have witnessed the exact opposite: an unparalleled strengthening of transnational corporate behemoths and their oligarchs at the expense of workers and local businesses. A report last month based on Forbes data showed that America's billionaires alone have seen their wealth increase by US\$2 trillion during the pandemic.

Another Left-wing fantasy that has been shattered by reality is the notion that the pandemic would usher in a new sense of collective spirit, capable of overcoming decades of neoliberal individualism. On the contrary, the pandemic has fractured societies even more – between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated, between those who can reap the benefits of smart working and those who can't. Moreover, a demos made up of traumatised individuals, torn apart from their loved ones, made to fear one another as a potential vectors of disease, terrified of physical contact – is hardly a good breeding ground for collective solidarity.

But perhaps the Left's response can be better understood in individual rather than collective terms. Classic psychoanalytic theory has posited a clear connection between pleasure and authority: the experience of great pleasure (satiating the pleasure principle) can often be followed by a desire for renewed authority and control manifested by the ego or “reality principle”. This can indeed produce a subverted form of pleasure. The last two decades of globalisation have seen a huge expansion of the “pleasure of experience”, as shared by the increasingly transnational global liberal class – many of whom, somewhat curiously in historical terms, identified themselves as on the Left (and indeed increasingly usurped this position from the traditional working-class constituencies of the Left). This mass increase in pleasure and experience among the liberal class went with a growing secularism and lack of any recognised

moral constraint or authority. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, the support from this class for “Covid measures” is quite readily explained in these terms: as the desired appearance of a coterie of restrictive and authoritarian measures which can be imposed to curtail pleasure, within the strictures of a moral code which steps in where one had previously been lacking.

Another factor explaining the Left’s embrace of “Covid measures” is its blind faith in “science”. This has its roots in the Left’s traditional faith in rationalism. However, one thing is believing in the undeniable virtues of the scientific method – another is being completely oblivious to the way those in power exploit “science” to further their agenda. Being able to appeal to “hard scientific data” to justify one’s policy choices is an incredibly powerful tool in the hands of governments – it is, in fact, the essence of technocracy. However, this means carefully selecting the “science” that is supportive of your agenda – and aggressively marginalising any alternative views, regardless of their scientific value.

This has been happening for years in the realm of economics. Is it really that hard to believe that such a corporate capture is happening today with regard to medical science? Not according to John P. Ioannidis, professor of medicine and epidemiology at Stanford University. Ioannidis made headlines in early 2021 when he published, with some colleagues of his, a paper claiming that there was no practical difference in epidemiological terms between countries that had locked down and those that hadn’t. The backlash against the paper – and against Ioannidis in particular – was fierce, especially among his fellow scientists.

This explains his recent scathing denunciation of his own profession. In an article entitled “How the Pandemic Is Changing the Norms of Science”, Ioannidis notes that most people – especially on the Left — seem to think that science operates based on “the Mertonian norms of communalism, universalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism”. But, alas, that is not how the scientific community actually operates, Ioannidis explains. With the pandemic, conflicts of corporate interest exploded – and yet talking about them became anathema. He continues: “Consultants who made millions of dollars from corporate and government consultation were given prestigious positions, power, and public praise, while unconflicted scientists who worked pro bono but dared to question dominant narratives were smeared as being conflicted. Organized skepticism was seen as a threat to public health. There was a clash between two schools of thought, authoritarian public health versus science – and science lost”.

Ultimately, the Left’s blatant disregard and mockery of people’s legitimate concerns (over lockdowns, vaccines or Covid passports) is shameful. Not only are these concerns rooted in actual hardship but they also stem from an understandable distrust of governments and institutions that have been undeniably captured by corporate interests. Anyone who favours a truly progressive-interventionist state, as we do, needs to address these concerns – not dismiss them.

But where the Left's response has been found most wanting is on the world stage, in terms of the relationship of Covid restrictions to deepening poverty in the Global South. Has it really nothing to say about the enormous increase in child marriage, the collapse in schooling, and the destruction of formal employment in Nigeria, where the State Statistics agency suggests 20% of people lost their jobs during the lockdowns? What about the reality that the country with the highest Covid mortality figures and excess death rate for 2020 was Peru – which had one of the world's strictest lockdowns? On all this, it has been virtually silent. This position must be considered in relation to the pre-eminence of nationalist politics on the world stage: the electoral failure of Left internationalists such as Jeremy Corbyn meant that broader global issues had little traction when considering a broader Western Left response to Covid-19.

It is worth mentioning that there have been outliers on the Left – radical-left and socialist movements that have come out against the prevailing management of the pandemic. These include Black Lives Matter in New York, Left Lockdown Sceptics in the UK, the Chilean urban left, Wu Ming in Italy and not least the Social Democrat-Green alliance which currently governs Sweden. But the full spectrum of Left opinion was ignored, partly due to the small number of Left-wing media outlets, but also due to the marginalisation of dissenting opinions first and foremost by the mainstream Left.

Mainly, though, this has been a historic failure from the Left, which will have disastrous consequences. Any form of popular dissent is likely to be hegemonized once again by the (extreme) Right, poleaxing any chance the Left has of winning round the voters it needs to overturn Right-wing hegemony. Meanwhile, the Left holds on to a technocracy of experts severely undermined by what is proving to be a catastrophic handling of the pandemic in terms of social progressivism. As any kind of viable electable Left fades into the past, the discussion and dissent at the heart of any true democratic process is likely to fade with it.

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