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The Neoliberal Virus

To date, and to the extent that alleged political leaders have even tried to come to terms with the origins of the COVID-19 crisis at all, they have sought to do so in xenophobic terms; though not the only perpetrator on that count, Donald Trump has been most prominent in looking to characterise COVID-19 as a ‘Wuhan virus.’ Describing COVID-19 in these terms suggests that the pandemic has an ethnic origin, that it is the result of some racial deficit on the part of the Chinese that the world is now subject to pandemic.

Suffice to say that these claims are completely unevicenced. They are also consistent with other attempts by Trump and those who slavishly follow his example to demonise groups who, for whatever reason, trigger to their fragile megalomania—the Mexicans Trump, with no sense of shame or irony, slanders as rapists being but one example of many. As yet another incarnation of the politics of scapegoating on this count, the ‘Wuhan Virus’ line is nothing new.

On the contrary, it reflects a continuation of the kind of nativism and xenophobia that has been deployed against various victims of European colonialism for a good 400 years—not to mention more historically recent incarnations of hate propaganda, such as that directed against the Chinese during the 19th century. The particularly notorious example of the Mongolian Octopus reflects the crucial value of virulent racism to the settler colonial project in Australia, a product of scaremongering by those with the power to engineer consent over the so-called ‘Yellow Peril.’

In the Australian case, the Chinese became a convenient punching bag for political frustrations denied more constructive outlets following the suppression of the Eureka

Rebellion by police riot in 1854. Such developments reflected broader social tendencies with an ancient vintage; as one variation on the politics of scapegoating, that kind of nativism and xenophobia served as what historian Frank Van Nuys calls a 'national safety valve'—a means of diverting class tensions onto victims suited to victimisation by virtue of their numerical marginality, and consequent inability to defend themselves.

This was true 100 years ago and it remains true to this day. What the 'Wuhan Virus' xenophobisms perpetrated by Donald Trump and others like him cannot account for, more than anything else, is the role of neoliberal ideology in bringing the COVID-19 crisis about. Neoliberalism can be characterised, amongst another things, by a doctrinaire preoccupation with market deregulation and accompanying mythology, with all the supporting evidence of children's fairy tales, that market mechanisms left to themselves can best guarantee social happiness and prosperity.

In reality, neoliberals fear checks on the absolute power of capital. Not making a distinction between being criticised and being attacked, and habitually conflating their own grotesque class privileges with individual freedoms, the transnational corporate capitalist class who sponsor this ideology and defend its hegemony portray regulation as threats to freedom—even as the deregulation of wet (wild animal) markets in China brings us up to 700,000 people dead globally, and millions more suffering. To this interpretation, only the freedoms of the One Percenters count; the rest belong to unpersons.

The fact of the matter is that it was neoliberal ideology, manifest in the encouragement of deregulated wet markets by the Chinese government as a means of spurring economic growth at any cost, and the deforestation that put infected animals within reach of wet marketeers, that is the root cause of the current pandemic.

The crucial difference between these facts and the 'Wuhan Virus' mythology, the interpretation of choice for those who benefit the most in the globalised neoliberal economy (or better yet, who are the only ones who benefit at all) is the adoption by the Chinese Communist Party of extreme free-market capitalism (which then becomes the particularly thorny question for the left of how state communist movements come to embody all they claim to oppose). Proponents of the 'Wuhan Virus' mythology have no more to say about this than they do the demonstrable origins of COVID-19, and their broader ideological, social and historical context.

If all of the above follows, then, it makes far more sense to characterise COVID-19 as a 'Neoliberal Virus'; it was the conditions wrought by the global dominance of neoliberal

ideology that drove the emergence of wet markets, along with the deforestation that brought infected wildlife within reach of wet marketeers, as noted. While Wuhan might have been the place where the Neoliberal Virus first appeared, it was also the social relations characteristic of neoliberalism that made that possible, and those are by no means limited to Wuhan—much less to say China.

As the ‘Wuhan Virus’ mythology demonstrates, it is no more in the nature of current socio-political arrangements to honestly and diligently address root causes of social problems in the present than in earlier stages of historical development. Then, as now, scapegoating or ‘Othering’ discourses look to manage crises in the interests of defending an ever-more unstable status quo. If the underlying instability associated with class tensions and class struggle of a century ago wrought anti-Chinese nativism at the national level, its use internationally today only serves to demonstrate how much more deeply entrenched the dynamics driving the root causes a century ago have become in the intervening period.

The inevitable result of this systematic and pervasive negligence, militant ignorance, and preferencing of the path of least resistance over the path of responsibility is that the world only becomes ever more chaotic. If the scapegoating of a century ago sought to manage social crisis in the name of, to borrow from James Madison, defending ‘the minority of the opulent from the majority, its continued use is testament to the continued value for transnational corporate imperialists of divide and conquer strategies for vassal states, populations and classes. The only innovation is in constructing environmental racisms to address the ecological crisis the moneyed elites of a century ago bequeathed to the world of today.

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