

What the coronavirus calamity means for intellectual and cultural life

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The present global health and economic calamity is without precedent.

Whatever the outcome in the short term, social life and consciousness will never return to their previous states. A Rubicon has been crossed. The existing order, in the eyes of tens of millions, will be seen from now on as illegitimate and an immediate threat to their continued existence.

There are many political problems and much confusion to work through, but the consciousness of broad layers of the population is shifting rapidly, to the left.

What preoccupied official “radical,” academic and even artistic circles, however, in the months and years preceding the present crisis was the increasingly unhinged and selfish politics of race, gender and sexuality. Countless articles, books and pronouncements of various kinds informed the public that the “defining issue of our time” was, for example, “white privilege,” reparations for slavery, the #MeToo campaign or sexual harassment—or, for that matter, baleful “Russian interference” in the great American democratic project.

The most pressing questions, one might almost say the *only* pressing questions, in recent months for such circles have revolved around libeling the American Revolution as a “slaveholders revolt,” slandering Abraham Lincoln as a “racist,” blacklisting Roman Polanski, Woody Allen and Plácido Domingo (now afflicted with coronavirus) and making certain film producer Harvey Weinstein was jailed for life.

Without “privileged” white males, sexual harassers and Putin’s agents, we were given to understand, America could easily have been mistaken for another Garden of Eden.

The international pseudoleft enthusiastically joined in this rotten “moral” crusade. An article posted on the *International Viewpoint* website by Manon Boltansky, a representative of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) in France, solidarized itself fully and uncritically with the attempted suppression of Polanski’s *J’accuse (An Officer and A Spy)*, a film treating the Dreyfus affair, one of the defining moments in modern French history. Sounding every bit like a high state official or some right-wing, provincial legislator, Boltansky indignantly denounced “the impunity with which Polanski was able to finance, direct, broadcast his latest film, *J’accuse*.” With considerable sophistry, she argued that the attempt to block or disrupt screenings of Polanski’s work, with the encouragement and support of the French government, “is not an attack on freedom of expression.” These are people, in reality, who accept anything, including openly authoritarian measures, as long as it is draped in the banner of opposition to the supposed “rape culture.”

The new conditions created by the pandemic throw such views and the forces that advocated them—and still advocate them—into sharp relief.

What possible relevance do the trivial concerns of these social elements have to the present comprehensive, life-and-death crisis affecting every section of the population, male and female, white, black, Latino and immigrant? Millions now must determine whether it is “preferable” to stay home and run the risk of having no money to pay for rent and food for their families or return to work and face the potential of contracting or

spreading a deadly disease.

None of the petty-bourgeois proponents of the sexual harassment witchhunt, the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project of historical falsification, the nonsense about Russian intervention in the 2016 and every other election, the generally self-obsessed and self-pitying, were the slightest bit prepared for the present crisis.

Neither did this process simply begin in 2017, or 2012. For decades, in fact, increasingly selfish and complacent moods have flourished in the upper echelons of the media and the entertainment industry and the academic universe.

Based on the ever-rising stock market and the superrich spreading a bit of the wealth around to their hirelings, all of that in turn rooted in the increased exploitation and impoverishment of the working class, those newly prosperous layers have come to believe sincerely in the system and pledge their allegiance to it.

Mesmerized by money and status, thrilled to be on the apparently winning side of history, the various shortsighted pundits, third- and fourth-rate artists and well-paid, corrupted professors long ago in many cases “hung up their brains with their hats in the cloakroom” (in Bertolt Brecht’s phrase) and joined the financial orgy.

Out of self-interest, which has appreciably narrowed their outlook, and in their self-deluded state, none of them could remotely imagine a cataclysm of the dimensions of the coronavirus crisis developing in a system they regarded as free of acute contradictions and, for all intents and purposes, everlasting.

It is not a matter, of course, of being able to predict a pandemic, but Marxists are always cognizant of the disasters, what Rosa Luxemburg called the “endless chain of political and social catastrophes and convulsions” into which imperialism inevitably plunges the population, raised to a universal level by the development of a globally integrated economy.

For their efforts to warn the working class and prepare it for great shocks and challenges, Marxists are regularly accused by opportunists and assorted renegades of “catastrophitis” and “crisis-mongering.”

Luxemburg once explained that the point of departure in socialist theory for the transition to socialism had always been “a general and catastrophic crisis.” The central tenet of this outlook, she wrote, consisted “of the affirmation that capitalism, as a result of its own inner contradictions, moves toward a point when it will be unbalanced, when it will simply become impossible. There were good reasons for conceiving that juncture in the form of a catastrophic general commercial crisis. But that is of secondary importance when *the fundamental idea* is considered.”

In a matter of weeks, capitalism has become “unbalanced” and “impossible” for masses of humanity.

In this new situation who can speak with the slightest credibility of “white privilege” or “male privilege”? While age and complicating health conditions are factors, there is no indication whatsoever that the coronavirus punishes one race or ethnicity over another. Chinese, French

and Spanish men and women, along with Italians, Iranians, Americans, Germans, Koreans and Swedes have all succumbed. What the virus might do were it to vigorously invade teeming, healthcare-starved cities in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Senegal, Kenya, Mexico and elsewhere is nearly unimaginable.

If the disease strikes down, as it appears to, more men than women, this is hardly an argument for “female privilege.” It is undoubtedly so, as it is always the case in class society, that the poor, the overworked, the oppressed of every ethnicity and gender will undergo the worst.

Of course, the voices promoting racialism and gender politics have not been silenced.

A March 24 *USA Today* article, “Coronavirus layoffs disproportionately hurt black and Latino workers: ‘It’s almost like doomsday is coming,’” is aimed at creating divisions in the working class and encouraging communal selfishness. The piece points to the case of a black single mother laid off from a small printing company in Maryland and argues she “is among thousands of employees at small businesses, restaurants, hotels, bars and manufacturing companies who lost their jobs in recent days because of the pandemic. Civil rights groups worry those workers, many of whom are people of color, will be sent in a downward spiral, scraping to pay bills and feed their families.”

And what about the rest of the population? Should they all go to hell? *USA Today* cites the comment of a National Urban League official, “We know that when the economy goes into decline, people of color always bear the brunt.” Every section of the working class will suffer, and every section will be propelled into struggle.

In recent years, in fact, the portion of the population that has suffered the sharpest decline on a number of fronts has been the white male working class. A recent *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) study, detailing the unprecedented fall in life expectancy in the United States from 2015 to 2017, found that the rise in mortality had impacted workers across every racial and ethnic group, with the largest number of excess deaths occurring among white workers. The incidence of opioid overdose and suicide among white males is especially horrendous.

A stupid, backward column by Solomon Jones in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* asserted in its headline, “The rush to close businesses amid coronavirus reeks of white privilege.” Speaking for both successful and aspiring African-American entrepreneurs, Jones argues that “every business owned by a person of color is essential.” He goes on, “While white business owners and workers will also be hit by economic losses, our leaders acting like everyone can simply weather the storm and come out whole reflects the very white assumption of a safety net—something black communities don’t have.”

Not to be outdone, the *Atlantic*’s Helen Lewis informs her readers, “The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism” and that “women’s independence will be a silent victim of the pandemic.” Some 25,000 people are dead and more than half a million infected, but Lewis seems primarily worried her middle class lifestyle might be adversely affected. Rejecting a “gender-neutral approach” to such disasters and accepting fully the inability of society to prevent the deaths of vast numbers of people, Lewis goes on, “Grim as it is to imagine now, further epidemics are inevitable, and the temptation to argue that gender is a side issue, a distraction from the real crisis, must be resisted.”

Madeleine Simon on *The Hill* website (“Women and the hidden burden of the coronavirus”) claims that “women shoulder the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic.” Simon writes that evidence suggests “more men than women are dying of the coronavirus, but COVID-19 is also having specific ramifications on women.” After pointing to the burdens of looking after children, some 850 million of whom are out of school around the world, and providing healthcare, which unquestionably fall disproportionately on the female population, the journalist cannot help but

let the cat out of the bag.

Women, she writes, “are also largely left out of global health conversations” and “underrepresented in decision-making spheres. ... Seema Verma and Deborah Brix have prominent roles in the U.S. Coronavirus Task Force, but only 10 percent of the representatives in the group are women.” The fine words about working women weighed down by domestic and other responsibilities give way to the actual concerns, more positions, more income, more power for already affluent female professionals.

The reaction of certain groupings may be more self-centered than ever, but that will not be the only reaction.

The coronavirus crisis will unleash other forces, including intellectual and artistic ones.

The disease is having a physical impact on the artistic world, as it is in other fields. The sad deaths of playwright Terrence McNally, actor Mark Blum, musicians Manu Dibango, Mike Longo, Freddy Rodriguez Sr. and Marcelo Peralta, and the contracting of the virus by performers and musicians such as Plácido Domingo himself, Jackson Browne, Idris Elba, Rita Wilson and Tom Hanks, David Bryan, Ed O’Brien, Debi Mazar, Rachel Matthews, Olga Kurylenko, Kristofer Hivju, Daniel Dae Kim and others indicate its broad reach and potentially fatal power.

The economic effect of the current shutdown will also be devastating for many artists, the vast majority of whom lead precarious lives at the best of times—but the most enduring result will be ideological and intellectual rather than monetary.

The ongoing and irreversible discrediting of capitalism will profoundly influence the further development of contemporary film, music, painting, literature and theater. Once again the naked drive for profit at any cost will provoke disgust and horror among artists, its underlying barbarism exposed for all those with eyes to see.

It seems safe to predict that the attention of the best artists will swing in the direction of more critically examining the social and economic contradictions of the system in which they live, and which now endangers them and everyone else. The artists, along with the rest of the population, will want to know: How was this possible? Who is responsible? What can be done?

A renewed interest in realism as an aesthetic approach, a more serious, committed engagement with life and with the life and fate of masses of people in particular, linked to more and more open political opposition to the status quo, must be an outcome.

There is a vast, pent-up pressure mounting in society, including pent-up creative pressure. Many have been confused, isolated, unable to find their voice or their footing or not allowed—or not confident enough—to make themselves and their deepest thoughts and feelings known. Everything will not change overnight, but the destruction of existing prejudices, including anticommunism and illusions in the Democratic Party, will take place nonetheless. Artists and others will find their way through orienting themselves to the complete and radical reconstruction of society.



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