

Opinion – COVID-19: Human Dignity Under Siege Amidst Multiple Crises

Written by Salvador Santino Regilme

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SALVADOR SANTINO REGILME, JUN 12 2020

Since the start of the 21st century, humanity has faced at least three global crises. The first crisis pertains to the 9/11 terror attacks in the US that facilitated the US-led war on terror, which in turn, facilitated the expansion of state surveillance systems, widespread extrajudicial killings, and the prevalent use of torture and other abusive state actions. The second crisis, meanwhile, refers to the 2007–2008 global financial crisis that was considered at the time the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression in the 1930s. At present, we fight for survival against the threat posed by the COVID-19 global pandemic. This third crisis forced governments to impose forms of lockdown and quarantine, shutting down schools, universities, restaurants, cultural centers, and other organizations with the aim of slowing down the viral infection rate. Perhaps the third crisis is the most notable yet, particularly if we are to consider the far-reaching, immediate, and lethal effects of a highly contagious disease facilitating multiple crises that concurrently emerged at an unprecedented scale.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis of the global economy, as the International Monetary Fund and economic planning authorities of various countries predict the contraction of global economic output. It is a crisis of public health, with at least four million infected people and 413,000 deaths recorded worldwide as of mid-June 2020. Many national healthcare systems, even those in the Global North, struggle in providing adequate intensive care to all patients with the most severe symptoms.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents also a crisis of democratic regression, as government leaders instrumentalize the pandemic as an excuse for the accumulation of emergency powers, while curbing political dissent and other forms of democratic checks and balances.

The pandemic has also accelerated the emergence of an epistemic crisis, which pertains to the sustained delegitimation of professional expertise and scientific knowledge as bases of public policy and debates in the public sphere, as demonstrated by the proliferation of trolls and ‘fake news’. This epistemic crisis reinforces pervasive doubt about the reliability and legitimacy of established institutions, including public health agencies, while stifling reasoned deliberative debates in favor of conspiratorial and scapegoat politics.

How and under which conditions does the COVID-19 crisis demonstrate the failures of the global capitalist system in protecting the dignity and rights of natural human persons? The dissolution of the welfare state tradition has undermined state capacities for effective public health management. Legitimized by an international regulatory regime that prioritizes unfettered capital accumulation, neoliberal capitalist policy agendas enabled dramatic reductions in state support for accessible and high-quality health care systems, which are now facing under extreme stress due to the pandemic.

Neoliberalization, however, had varying impacts across various political territories. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte demonstrated his willingness to stay in power amidst public criticisms of the state’s inability to provide healthcare, food, and housing to millions of extremely poor Filipinos, who struggle for survival amidst a state-mandated lockdown in Metro Manila and nearby regions. Endowed with weak state institutions and beholden by his oligarchic allies, Duterte quickly deployed Metro Manila’s military and police agents during the early phase of the

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lockdown in order to ensure public order amidst increasing public dissatisfaction against his administration's incompetent handling of the pandemic. Supported by Congress-approved emergency powers and two billion USD-worth of funds intended to fight the pandemic, the Duterte regime appointed three ex-generals to lead the anti-pandemic national task force, thereby illustrating that the key objective is to maintain his regime's political survival rather than the collective survival of Filipinos. As expected, there was no concrete plan to bolster the health care sector; no compelling excuse for the state's inability to provide the basic needs of the working-class; and, no interest at all in hearing political dissent and constructive policy proposals from his critics and the broader civil society.

That militarization strategy to a public health issue led to warrantless arrests of poor people violating curfews and peacefully expressing political opposition, while millions of working-class Filipinos face the existential threat of hunger. Similarly, due to many years of neoliberal defunding of social services and health care systems, weak states in the Global South—especially in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and beyond—are likely to face crises of multiple fronts as facilitated by the lack of systemic and long-term preparedness for a pandemic.

In the neoliberal Global North, decreased state commitment for common goods such as public health and social services have made the pandemic much more unmanageable for the most vulnerable citizens. In the United States, poor African-Americans are more likely to die because of COVID-19 due to the absence of accessible and affordable hospital care, while President Trump undermines the social legitimacy of scientific expertise, denies federal funding to cities and localities heavily affected by the pandemic, and refuses to recognize publicly that poor Americans from minority groups bear the brunt.

The Netherlands, meanwhile, demonstrates a more differentiated yet inadequate response, thus far, to the COVID-19 pandemic. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte initially emphasized herd immunity as the key policy objective, but later on downplayed it after vociferous public outcry. Responsible for the continued decline in state funding on health care, education, social services, in the last decade in power, the Rutte government has failed at so many fronts. His government has indeed struggled in strengthening the country's intensive care capacities, initially dismissed the importance of mass COVID-19 testing, ignored the increasingly racist violent attacks against citizens and residents of Asian background, and failed to commit publicly to increased long-term investment in social services and health care.

In the United Kingdom, the Conservative-led government has rapidly decreased, at least in the last decade, state funding for social services for elderly people and persons with disabilities, public health system, public order institutions including the police, as well as educational institutions. Those so-called austerity measures eventually contributed to the increase in vulnerability of materially poor members of the society, especially those from minority ethnic groups that have been denigrated much more recently in fascist political discourses that have emerged in mainstream public sphere.

While states evade from their core obligations to their constituents, material inequalities have increased in the last three decades or so, and super-rich individuals gain traction in expanding their wealth base and in consolidating their social legitimacy. During this pandemic, tokenistic and superficially altruistic donations from billionaires such as Bill Gates, Jack Ma, and Jeff Bezos represent attempts to reinforce the social legitimacy of unfettered wealth accumulation and the endurance of global capitalism. In so doing, the aim is to protect long-term global economic health, rather than public health for the sake of valuing the dignity of human lives, especially the most vulnerable populations.

This neoliberalization agenda undermined long-term public investments on health-care systems, thereby enlarging the role of private companies in the fate of over-all health and well-being of citizens. Rather than calling for the dramatic restructuring of the global order entrenched in material inequalities and hierarchical stratification, billionaires and multinational conglomerates resorted to philanthropy as a way to avoid public scrutiny from their moral excesses.

This pandemic should lay the burial for the global capitalist order that has commodified and dehumanized individuals into mere objects of production and exchange. As a potential critical juncture for global transformation, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a timely opportunity for states to value actual lives and the dignity of all human persons, invest in

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long-term public and common goods provision, and reinvent political systems in ways that make them effective stewards of the natural environment.

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