

From Crisis to Capital: Reading the Pandemic through Klein's Shock Doctrine

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Abstract

The experience of living through a pandemic has altered our perceptions of man- nature interactions beyond our imagination. This paper aims to trace the impact of Covid 19 on environment in the light of the regeneration of life in this planet due to the reduction of human interferences on planet earth. The pandemic forced humanity to rethink issues related to sustainability, including food security for the posterity. It locates the historical roots of environmental degradation in disaster capitalism and argues that despite the hollowness of the human centred concept of development, the capitalist dispensations around the world have resisted the communities and governments in realising the dangers of Anthropocene, seeking alternate future. The paper explains how the interest of the capitalist class is advanced through Klein's Shock Doctrine scuttling the pressing demand created by the Covid 19 to reinvent the world by making it calm, greener and prosperous.

Keywords: Disaster capitalism, Double Oppression, Alternate future, Anthropocene, Shock Doctrine, Geopolitics.

The world has witnessed the sporadic outbreak of Corona virus by the late 2019. The Covid 19, a once-in-a-century Pandemic (Gates, 2020) which is both a medical exigency and an economic crisis, is the worst one the world has seen since the Spanish flu of 1919. The new normal has divided history of humanity to pre and post pandemic era. The pandemic created financial instability and altered beyond recognition the idea of normalcy. Tracing the roots of the pandemic will ultimately reach in human drive to conquer the ecosystem, exert control over the ecology, undermining the long-term impact it could create on the biosphere. This has been augmented by the modus operandi of capitalists' administrations and the business-as-usual attitude around the world. The capitalist class look upon every crisis as an opportunity. Though this might sound very optimistic and positive, the future of this biosphere is threatened by this philosophy, which serves only to legitimise the extreme exploitation of resources by capitalist class. The natural calamities like Tsunami, Cyclones and Earthquakes in the last three decades can be looked upon as man-made disasters. This paper examines the immediate and long-term impact of Covid 19 on ecology to look at the tacit ways in which it has impacted human life on earth by reading it through the Shock Doctrine of Naomi Klein. This would lead to an assessment of how ecology has initially benefitted by the pandemic and its immediate aftereffects like lockdowns and how it is going to affect the environmental regulations in future. The paper will explain how the mindless ways of global capitalism in pushing ahead its profiteering agenda even in the troubled times of pandemic, obstructing the alternate future possibilities.

For decades we have been squeezing the environment, and it has commenced to demonstrate signs of impending collapse. Exploitation of all types has finally pulled us to a vast climate change phenomenon going on now. The environment has started changing its form which is absolutely going to be a hit on the face of humanity. Natural resource extraction is looked upon as the key to development. Hence, both the individual actions and the social and economic conditions are responsible for the degradation of Nature. Anthropocentric activities are at the focal point of the destruction of nature. The capitalistic understanding of resources used for development has aggravated the depletion of resources. Capitalism has passed through many faces in its evolution and development, the last of which is its Neo liberal period. In this period, it has resorted to the massive extraction of resources—especially the global commons to make the capitalist mechanism run nonstop in its attempt to make huge profit. This has had devastating effect on human life on this planet. The onslaught of Covid 19 has created spaces for rethinking the catastrophe that has been wrought on this world. But the capitalist dispensation has come up with a new narrative built on the Shock doctrine of Naomi Klein to sustain the unabated exploitation of natural resources.

‘Shock Doctrine’ denotes the brutal tactic of using the public’s disorientation following a collective shock – wars, coups, terrorist attacks, market crashes or natural disasters – to push through radical pro-corporate measures described as “shock therapy”. This strategy has been a silent partner to the imposition of neoliberalism for more than 40 years. Shock tactics follow a clear pattern like waiting for a crisis or formant one, declare a moment of what is sometimes called “extraordinary politics”, suspend some or all democratic norms – and then ram the corporate wish list through as quickly as possible. Any tumultuous situation, if framed with sufficient hysteria by political leaders, could serve this softening-up function. It could be an event as radical as a military coup, but the economic shock of a market or budget crisis would also do the trick. Amid hyperinflation or a banking collapse, for instance, the country’s governing elites were frequently able to sell a panicked population on the necessity for attacks on social protections, or enormous bailouts to prop up the finance private sector – because the alternative, they claimed, was outright economic apocalypse. Shock and Awe are actions that create fears, dangers, and destruction that are incomprehensible to the people at large, specific elements/sectors of the threat society, or the leadership. Nature in the form of tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, uncontrolled fires, famine, and disease can engender Shock and Awe (Klein, 2007). The outbreak and the spread of corona virus were used by many to further their ideas and to calibrate movements of the Integrated World Capitalism (I.W.C) as Felix Guattari (2000) described it. The devious means adopted by Neoliberalism is revealed in Milton Friedman proclaiming that the function of the State is "to protect our freedom both from the enemies outside our gates and from our fellow citizens: to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts, to foster competitive markets"(Friedman, 1993). This could be summarised as to supply the police and the soldiers, anything else, including providing free education, was an unfair interference in the market. The shock of the pandemic though forced people to rethink this prevalent mode, Neoliberalism as I.W.C is torpedoing the shift in favour of the ideology of the capitalists. In the age of neoliberal globalization, it is no longer surprising that even the most distressing

situations can be a source of profit. The term "disaster capitalism" has been used to describe the global pattern of big businesses profiting from disasters.

The sudden outbreak of the novel corona virus has necessitated the States to move away from indifference to structured mechanisms to counter the threat posed by it. They tried to find a solution and to take precautionary measures to stop the spread of it. The states were forced to provide subsidised food to hapless people. Medical facilities were made affordable to all citizens and vaccines were given free of cost to all sections of people. The pandemic taught us how the states must take care of its citizens. There was concerted effort from governments all over the world to make internet accessible to all the people. There was a renewed understanding among governments and people that reorientation of their policies in connection with environmental regulation is necessary for the survival of the planet. The capitalist eco system found this transition posing challenges for their very existence. They attempted to torpedo this paradigm shift in attitude, prohibiting the emergence of the alternate future explaining a new formulation in line with the shock doctrine of Naomi Klein. Covid 19 raised many questions about the connection between global health and the health of the ecosystem. Bill Gates have noted that,

“There are two reasons that Covid-19 is such a threat. First, it can kill healthy adults in addition to elderly people with existing health problems. The data so far suggest that the virus has a case fatality risk around 1%; this rate would make it many times more severe than typical seasonal influenza, putting it somewhere between the 1957 influenza pandemic and the 1918 influenza pandemic. Second, Covid-19 is transmitted quite efficiently. The average infected person spreads the disease to two or three others — an exponential rate of increase. There is also strong evidence that it can be transmitted by people who are just mildly ill or even presymptomatic. (Gates, 2020)”

As in any health exigency, the conditions of the poor people are unimaginable due to the lack of access to life sustaining mechanisms. The rapid response of the individuals and governments in countering the menace is a shining event in the episode. Similarly, the shift in thinking in favour of environment for a bright biosphere is also a positive note. The direct impact of the lockdown on environment had shown the evil effects of Anthropocene. But the responses of governments through policy prescriptions in protecting the environment need a critical attention. Though it is high time to question the capitalist development paradigm, the inability of capitalism for a drastic shift in its orientation offers little chance for the future of the planet.

This pandemic has forced us to rethink our actions at multiple fronts. Though most of the changes were temporary, the rethinking it caused is expected to have long term structural and behavioural changes. Due to the unexpected lockdown of various nation states to counter the spread of infection, the emission of carbon dioxide was reduced substantially. As a primary mover of climate change, this rapid decline has a lot of messages to communicate; including the search for sustainable models of industrialisation. There was a steady decline in the levels of air pollution during this period. The pandemic highlighted the important link between air pollution and mortality from Covid 19, with higher levels of indoor and outdoor air pollution exacerbating the health impacts of the pandemic. The renewed understanding of

atmospheric pollution aggravating Covid 19 mortality rate has alarmed all the sections of people. As evidence indicates that socially disadvantaged groups are already more exposed and vulnerable to air pollution, this makes them potentially more vulnerable to adverse cardiovascular and respiratory impacts. Another challenge posed by the pandemic to the environment is the absence of proper mechanism to dispose the plastic waste, including medical waste. The absences of proper mechanism reveal the hollowness of the development paradigm followed by the present generation. With many governments now mandating masks for large segments of the general population, the use of disposable medical masks has skyrocketed, creating significant waste management and environmental challenges. Deforestation, habitat degradation and fragmentation, agriculture intensification, wildlife trade and climate change have all played a role in zoonotic diseases. In addition, there have been reports of increased poaching and illegal resource extraction in some countries, which links to the loss of rural livelihoods and the reduced capacity for monitoring and enforcement.

Pandemic necessitated better air quality, improved water quality, effective waste management, and enhanced biodiversity protection to reduce the vulnerability of communities to pandemics but will also improve overall societal well-being and resilience. Biodiversity conservation and sustainable use is also key as biodiversity and an ecosystem service is unavoidable. Effective biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, including the need to address deforestation, will limit the risk of zoonotic transfer while also helping to maintain the existing ecosystem services. Considering the gravity of the problem, the pandemic should be an eye opener for various administrations in chasing out programmes aimed at ameliorating the evils of the present mode of development. Against this background, addressing global issues such as climate change, air and water pollution, biodiversity loss, ocean degradation, and inefficient resource use has become even more important as countries seek to rebuild their economies and enhance resilience against future shocks. When well designed and implemented, green stimulus measures can generate income, create jobs, improve well-being for all and build resilience. This was one of the key lessons emerging from a review of the measures implemented in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. Integrating environmental sustainability and socioeconomic equity together in policy packages is also important to mitigate regressive impacts of environmental policies and ensuring equal opportunities for all to contribute to and benefit from economic growth. A lot of green recovery measures were suggested by experts for serious consideration.

But the profit drive of capitalism is likely to force us return to the previous condition as early as possible. The initial analysis suggests that governments have so far concentrated their green measures in the energy and surface transport sectors. Other sectors important for a green and resilient recovery, such as industry, agriculture, forestry and waste management, have so far been less targeted. In terms of types of support measure used, tax reduction and grants/loans are the most used, followed by subsidies to Research and Development. Few measures are so far dedicated to skills training. In the case of urban transport some countries are scaling up efforts and funding to re-allocate car space to more sustainable modes like walking and cycling. Some countries have also stipulated environmental conditionality for

recovery support offered to firms in key sectors, for example in aviation, and through linking automotive industry support to the promotion of cleaner vehicle technologies. Covid19 is spreading to areas that are environmentally fragile and vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. These areas are also often affected by conflict, poverty, high rate of forced displacement and fragile health systems. The consequences of Covid 19 add a new layer of vulnerability on already fragile populations. The world while trying to cope up with Covid 19 and tide over the crisis, all the possibilities on alternate future is on the anvil. But any change which affects the prospects of profiteering are scuttled by governments and agencies favouring the capitalist interests. Historically, global crises offer the opportunity for positive societal and economic changes as we learn to think and act differently when faced with immense disruptions. In that respect, whilst fully acknowledging the negative impacts of the current crisis, we can strive to propose innovative migration programmes so that an equitable demographic distribution too could be possible in future. But, the post Covid policies followed in Europe, North America, South Asia showed that fossil fuel will be the engine of development in all regions. All the efforts to switch over to natural energy sources are met with stiff resistance from the Corporations, as it dwindle their profit.

The force exerted by disaster capitalism prevented the world turning its policies in favour of humanity and biosphere in the post pandemic era. It is sad to note that the pro market, consumption-oriented capitalist system is gaining momentum again even after the revival of the ecology and change in the lifestyle effected by the pandemic. A greener planet would have provided quality water, food security and sufficient nutrient cycle to the people. As all these are commodified, the capitalist class successfully created a panic situation about the economy and the governments all over the world were made to pump money into the market to sustain the capitalist machine. The only solution for this could be in people's movements in resistance questioning the dubious ways of disaster capitalism.

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