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The Pandemic is a battlefield. Social movements in the COVID-19 lockdown

Geoffrey Pleyers

FNRS, UCLouvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

ABSTRACT

This article examines ways in which social movements have been impacted and responded in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Between March and May 2020, lockdown measures put a halt to mass protests for democracy, and the virus spread became the only political focus and news headline. Far from disappearing, social movements have adapted to unexpected circumstances and been particularly active during this challenging period. The first section of the article provides an overview of grassroots movements initiatives to complete five roles. The second section focuses on the struggle over the meaning of the crisis. While progressive intellectuals and movements consider the COVID-19 pandemic opened opportunities to build a fairer world, they compete with reactionary, capitalist and state actors to shape the meaning of the crisis and the world that may come out of it. The intensity of social justice movements' initiatives during the lockdown may show the outlines of a global wave of movements, embodied in countless decentralized reactions to a global event that affected has shaken billions of human lives.

KEYWORDS

Social movements;
coronavirus; COVID-19;
solidarity; democracy

Introduction

2019 will remain as one of the most active years in terms of social movements and citizens' protests around the world. Eight years after the Arab revolutions and square occupations all over the world, the 2019 protests took the form of regular mass demonstrations that lasted for months. Citizens from very diverse backgrounds took the streets along with activists from different generations, from those claiming the right to live their retirement in dignity to young people on the front line. Everywhere, they demanded more democracy, dignity, less unequal society, and denounced corrupt elites, repression, and mainstream media control.

The COVID-19 pandemic broke this global wave of protests. Not only did the coronavirus outbreak bring the weekly demonstrations to an abrupt halt; it has also been seized by governments to call for national unity and regain legitimacy.¹ Amidst an unprecedented sanitary crisis, citizens look for protection and guidance by their state leaders and accept exceptional measures of social control. An increasing number of citizens even consider authoritarian governments as the most efficient ones to deal with the

crisis.² Some governments took advantage of the media focus on the virus spread to silence activists (Lahbib, 2020), censor criticisms (Zhang, 2020) or take control of the press³ under cover of lockdown measures. The claims raised by the 2019 global wave of protests are more relevant than ever. However, one single issue has monopolized all the media coverage, social media, and daily life conversations: the pandemic and the urgent tasks to bring it under control. All of a sudden, there seems to be no place left for social movements.

This article shows that movements for social justice⁴ have actually been particularly active during this period. Around the world, activists focused their energy in implementing five roles: *protests* (that re-emerged in some countries despite sanitary risks); *defending workers' rights*; *mutual aid and solidarity*; *monitoring policymakers* and *popular education*. These five roles performed by movements during the pandemic combine concrete practices and arguments with a cognitive dimension by which they interpret the crisis and provide particular meanings to it. As the second section of the article will show, progressive movements confront reactionary, capitalist and governmental actors that seek to impose different meanings of the crisis in order to shape the world that will come out of it.

The period covered in this article spans from March 11th, when the World Health Organization declared the new coronavirus a pandemic to May 26th, when the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer sparked a new wave of protests. Any dates are questionable to delineate an epoch. Most governments started to ease the lockdown by mid-May, even if many countries did not reach the peak of the pandemic by then, notably in Latin America. Rather than specific dates, three features define the period under scrutiny. (1) The period of high virus spread led to lockdown measures unprecedented in most countries. It constitutes both an experience shared by billions of people worldwide and a very different challenge faced under deeply unequal conditions in terms of work, housing and access to health (Purkayastha, 2020). (2) The spread of the new coronavirus and its mitigation overshadowed any other political or social issue. It became the only focus of political debates, mainstream and alternative media and most conversations in daily life. (3) Social movements faced an additional challenge as demonstrations ceased to be an option in many countries, for health concerns or because they were outlawed.

The pandemic and the lockdown occurred in a specific historical context that deeply affected social movements. The rise of populist leaders and a tense geopolitical context (Bringel, 2020) have shaken alliances and the relations between governments and their citizens. Liberal democracy is far from being the only regime or a shared horizon.

Social movements below the tip of the Iceberg

This article draws an overview of the roles social movements played during this unique period. It does so in a theoretical and epistemological perspective that engages three sets of debates.

First, it challenges social movement studies' focus on protests and suggests paying more attention to less visible aspects of social movements (Melucci, 1985). While focusing on demonstrations leads to consider the lockdown period as a time of latency, shedding more light on less visible forms of actions, show that movements have been particularly active during this period. In the past decade, significant contributions coming from

outside of the field of social movement studies (e.g., Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019) have pointed out the importance of activism in daily life and of building solidarity in communities beyond activists circles.

Second, while most research on mobilisations focuses on the national scale, this article attempts to grasp some roles and challenges shared by movements for social justice in different continents. It contributes to a global perspective on civil society (Anheier et al., 2001–2012) that opposes methodological nationalism and builds on transnational analytical categories. Identifying global dimensions of a movement should not be mistaken as homogenizing actors and contexts or ignoring local and national dynamics. This contribution complements first analyses of movements and civil society published during the lockdown and that focused on local or national initiatives (e.g., Kavada, 2020; Woods, 2020).

Finally, this article addresses the current debate on movement outcomes (e.g., Bosi et al., 2017), and in particular on their agency in times of crisis. Progressive intellectuals and movements consider the COVID-19 pandemic to have opened opportunities to build a fairer world. The second section of the article suggests that far more caution is required when assessing the impacts of progressive movements in the crisis. Drawing on the aftermath of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, it invites taking into account the struggle over the meaning of the crisis. It builds on two theoretical perspectives. Following ‘cognitive’ or ‘cultural’ approaches, it considers the production of meanings (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), knowledge (Sousa Santos, 2019) or narratives (Polletta, 1998) as a crucial function of social movements. While research in this perspective has mostly focused on progressive movements, the article pleads for a relational perspective, taking into account ‘counter-movements’ (Polanyi, 1944). Progressive, capitalist and reactionary actors compete to impose different narratives of the crisis and of the world that should come out of it. As Jasper (2012) maintains, state governments also act as influent players in this arena.

The article brings together data and analyses collected in different continents in English, Spanish, Portuguese and French. It draws on three kinds of sources. (1) The article draws on local, national and international media consulted during the lockdown period (March to May 2020). Information was crosschecked by consulting at least two media on the reported cases. (2) Movement organizations’ and activist networks websites, online publications, webinars, and social media have been essential sources as the sanitary crisis fostered a further digitalization of their actions and ways of organizing. (3) Social scientists have also been particularly productive during the first months of the outbreak. They have revealed the social and political dimensions of the crisis. Public health policies and social inequalities matter at least as much as the way our bodies react to it when it comes to the virus’s deadly consequences (Purkayastha, 2020).

Social movements under lockdown

One may have expected that this challenging time would be at best a period of latency, a time between two active phases when activists would go back to their private life and wait for the lockdown to ease to come back to the streets and movements activities. An overview of movements initiatives in different countries shows they have been particularly active in assuming five main roles during the lockdown period.

Protests

The pandemic has intensified social problems denounced by popular movements over the last decade. Inequalities have become more salient as poor people and minorities are more affected by the virus (Purkayastha, 2020). Governments' corruption and inefficiency in dealing with the crisis resulted in thousands of additional deaths. Austerity politics and the deconstruction of the welfare state and public hospital as well as the end of healthcare for all have dramatic consequences.

In countries that experienced a massive wave of protests before the lockdown, activists insist that demonstrations have only been 'suspended' and that they would be back in the street as soon as the spread of the virus is under control. Lebanese citizens flooded social media with a 'we will be back' hashtag (Kassir, 2020). Calls for 'deconfining the struggles' have multiplied all over France, arguing that 'Nothing will make them change if we don't force them to do so'.⁵

Repression of protests and activists has not stopped during the lockdown. Hong Kong police kept the pressure on the movement activists, and the Chinese government limited civil liberty in the Special Administrative Region. In Turkey, political prisoners were maintained in jail during the COVID-19 outbreak when thousands of other prisoners were released to avoid the spread of the virus.

Most activists waited for the end of the lockdown to join gatherings and protests. In some countries, they restarted protests under the lockdown, despite the sanitary risks and the prohibition of gatherings. On May 1st, activists protested on a square in several cities including Jerusalem, Athens and Santiago, respecting social distancing. In Hong Kong, protesters were back on the streets in May, mobilized by the Chinese central government threat to extend its repressive law to the island.⁶ In Lebanon, the citizen revolt against the political elite also restarted during the lockdown, this time spreading from the Northern city of Tripoli. It gathered activists with slogans such as 'The COVID will not kill the revolution' and families affected by the lockdown claimed that 'hunger is deadlier than COVID-19' (Kassir, 2020). In Ecuador, students went back to the street to contest budget cuts in higher education on May 11th. By the end of the month, thousands joined them in demonstrations against the government mismanagement of the pandemic and neo-liberal policies it planned to implement.⁷ In Chile, the prohibition of gatherings during the lockdown did not impede protesters to meet on Fridays on the 'Place of Dignity', the revolt movement epicentre. On May 18th, the 7-month anniversary of the citizens' outbreak, 'hunger protests' confronted the police in popular neighbourhoods of Santiago, as many households had no revenue and lacked support by the state to feed their families.

Workfare actions and strikes

To lockdown and work from home is a privilege that was not accessible to everyone. Many could not afford to stop working because of their precarious economic situation or because they were part of the 'essential workers' in sectors that did not stop during the pandemic. From the health sector to transport drivers and supermarket workers, most carried out their tasks with a high sense of duty, encouraged by the sudden recognition of their role in society. However, the daily demonstration of support by the population did not

compensate for the lack of protection material at work or the low salaries for demanding jobs. A range of strikes and actions thus took place during the lockdown.

In the US, work stoppages took place on a daily basis during the lockdown. Most of these actions were organized by employees in non-union companies, and are thus not considered 'strikes' by unions and in official national statistics.⁸ Delivery workers' strikes took place all over the world.⁹ In France and in New York City, strikes broke out in Amazon warehouses.¹⁰ Supermarket workers organized short strike actions¹¹ to demand a bonus for the risks of infection and the heavy workload while the distribution sector registered record sales during the lockdown.

In Hong Kong, seven thousand medical workers led a successful and historical 5-day strike to ask the government to take measures against the virus spread. Sociologists Chan and Tsui (2020) qualify this as an 'epoch-making strike' as it laid the foundations for a new wave of union movements that may take a leading role in the future struggle for freedom and democracy. The new medical workers union has inherited the public support and mobilization capacity of the 2019 democratic movement.

In other countries, nurses and workers in the health sector choose other ways to express their claims. In France, banners hung in hospitals windows, asking for more social justice and denounce the damage of austerity politics in public hospitals. In Brussels, hospital workers turned their backs ostentatious at the arrival of the Prime Minister, featuring a 'hedge of dishonour'. The action had some eco in the media and public debate. Their unions' claims benefited from a high rate of legitimacy among the population and successfully led negotiations for some pay rise and better working conditions.

Strikes and contentious actions also developed in sectors facing increasing precarity or impoverishment. A 'global rent strike' started in April, supported by housing rights organizations in all continents. In New York City, housing right associations obtained a moratorium on evictions (Krinsky & Caldwell, 2020).

Solidarity

In this period of crisis, popular movements, grassroots organizations, and citizens have taken a leading role in engaging in mutual support, providing basic needs and solidarity in their community and beyond. In this period of social distancing and isolation, social movements build ties (Della Porta, 2020).

Solidarity efforts have taken place at workplaces. Among the largest ones is the decision by Chicago truck drivers union 'Teamster 705' to allocate up to 2 million dollars from their strike fund to extend health benefits to members laid off during the pandemic crisis.¹²

Volunteers and local civil society organizations have been on the first line dealing with the coronavirus outbreak. When most citizens only leave their home to buy food, volunteers showed up to re-open autonomous social centres for homeless people (Cassilde, 2020) and organize food distributions for migrants or in popular neighbourhoods (Woods, 2020) where the state was failing. Feminist organizations have been particularly active in shedding light on the rise of domestic violence during the lockdown, mobilizing the state on this tragedy and providing solidarity housing for the victims.

On all continents, grassroots movements set up thousands of local groups for mutual aid to help neighbours to cope with the pandemic and avoid self-isolation. Confronted with the lack of public services and attention to the favelas during the pandemic, slum

dwellers associations of Paraisópolis, Sao Paulo's second-largest favela, elected 420 'presidents of the street' in charge of some 50 houses each. They have the mission to monitor the residents who have COVID-19 symptoms or need medical attention and to identify families with low or no income and who suffer from hunger.¹³ They also play a crucial role in diffusing information about the virus and the community to the neighbours. Paraisópolis mutual aid group also set up an ambulance system, hired medical doctors and organized the production and distribution of over 10,000 meals a day.¹⁴ In 'Alemão', the largest favelas complex in Rio de Janeiro, civil society and social movement organizations including 'Ocupa Alemão'¹⁵, the 'popular media activists' 'Voz das Comunidades' and housing rights organizations have created a citizens council to deal with the pandemic.¹⁶ Their mutual aid network assigns itself three missions: raising awareness in the community to prevent the spread of the virus; produce, collect, and distribute food baskets, soaps and sanitary protections; and reclaim public programs targeted to the favelas. In another of Rio's favela, the 'Morador Monitor' neighbours group organizes daily visits from house to house, to identify the needs in food, hygiene and protection items and organize their distribution. They also aim at raising awareness and gathering statistics on COVID-19 contamination, as national statistics and public policies do not take into account most favelas.

While it is a less common practice in Europe, thousands of mutual aid groups have surged in European neighbourhoods during the pandemic. Neighbours take care of each other by shopping or medical prescriptions lists, friendly phone calls to isolated people or dog walking. Over 4,000 'COVID-19 mutual aid groups' are operating in the UK alone.¹⁷ The networks are almost entirely organized from the bottom-up and focused at the neighbourhood level (Kavada, 2020). They have extensively relied on social media to organize under the lockdown and social distancing conditions. Posters, leaflets and conversations are indispensable to reach neighbours of a generation that is less connected online. Taking part in a neighbourhood solidarity group is also an individual and collective learning process. Active participants learn to organize from the bottom-up, often in horizontal ways and become familiar with new usages of social media.

In an emergency like the coronavirus outbreak, activists and movements focus on immediate needs and concrete solidarity. Does this divert energy from demands for a structural change and contentious actions? Do teamsters divert money that could have been used to strike for social justice to expand healthcare for some of their members? Do mutual aid groups contribute to the 'taming' of social movements (Glasius et al., 2004; Kaldor, 2003) and their progressive integration in the social system as 'service providers' (Kriesi, 1996)? Do they contribute to a depoliticization of movements?

Over the last three decades, small farmers and indigenous movements in the Global South have shown that communities, local solidarity and popular pedagogies may be the pillars of collective emancipation and of resistance to global capitalism (Escobar, 2018). It challenges the separation between activism and daily life and the focus on protests and contentious actions in social movement studies. Actions in daily life have indeed always been an essential part of social movements, including for the workers' movement (Thompson, 2016) and the feminist movements.

Most neighbours do not join mutual aid groups with a political or activist purpose, and most of the groups avoid connection with partisan politics. It does not mean that they have no political dimension. From middle-class neighbourhoods to slums, a similar leitmotif

resonates in participants discourses and the mutual aid groups self-presentation: 'It is not charity but solidarity' (Gravante & Poma, 2020). 'It is not about richer people donating to save poor people, but about being together to confront the virus and the crisis'.¹⁸ The COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK coordination explains it clearly on its website:

Mutual aid isn't about 'saving' anyone. It's about people coming together, in a spirit of solidarity, to support and look out for one another. (...) Mutual aid is where a group of people organise to meet their own needs, outside of the formal frameworks of charities, NGOs and government. It is, by definition, a horizontal mode of organising, in which all individuals are equally powerful. There are no 'leaders' or unelected 'steering committees' in mutual aid projects; there is only a group of people who work together as equals.¹⁹

Mutual help is indeed far more than delivering food packages to neighbours. These groups (re-)generate a sense of community or 'communality' where citizens self-organize, rebuild social fabric and experience their neighbourhood differently. They create other ways of living and relating to each other. Knitting social relations among neighbours across ethnicity divide play a fundamental role in a time of strong resurgence of racism. Indeed, 'solidarity is first of all the construction of different social relations' (Laville, 2016). In a world dominated by selfish interests and hyper-individualism, caring for others and establishing active solidarity and inter-personal convivial relationships have a prefigurative dimension. They have become a fundamental part of activism and a crucial contribution of contemporary popular movements.

Recent history has shown that citizens' solidarity networks and initiatives may be the seeds of future democratic revolutions and processes. In Mexico, sociologists considered citizens solidarity after the devastating 1985 earthquake as the beginning of the democratization process (Zermeno et al., 2002). Thousands of citizens self-organized to make up for the inability of the corrupted state. More recently, Bayat (2010) showed the importance of local solidarity and resistance in daily life in neighbourhoods all over the Arab world. They became the foundation on which the 2011 revolutions rose. While most social movement scholars focus on protest and contentious actions, Johansson and Vintagen (2019) suggest long-term social or political change happen more frequently by setting up and maintaining alternative practices than by protest and armed revolutions. Will it be the case this time? Will the infrastructures created by mutual aid groups be mobilized by future movements? Whatever their impact on political regimes and institutional politics, these mutual aid groups have already changed the way of live in their neighbourhood and for of thousands of citizens.

Monitoring policymakers

Civil society and social movements also act as *watchdogs* of public policies and governments. Since the very beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, social movement experts and committed intellectuals have produced counter-expertise, reports and analyses that have scrutinized the way governments have tackled the sanitary and social crisis. In an emergency period with a concentration of power in governments and state leaders, monitoring the state and its policies is a crucial feature of democratic societies (Keane, 2009). They have shown how the virus spread is deeply connected with social inequalities and have written reports analyzing the impact of austerity policies in public hospitals or housing. The Association for Neighbourhood and Housing Development in New York

City has revealed how closely the incidence of COVID-19 tracks the geography of neighbourhoods with majorities of people of colour and with renters paying more than 30% of their incomes on housing (Afridi & Walters, 2020; Krinsky & Caldwell, 2020).

As Beck (2005, p. 442) outlines, power 'is founded on how facts are systematically passed over in silence and denied by leaders of states as well as big groups'. Counter-powers seek to shed light on these realities (Sousa Santos, 2019). Progressive movement experts have carefully scrutinized the allocation of public budgets to cope with the crisis. They pointed out that, in the United States, of the 2 trillion dollars stimulus package of the 'coronavirus aid, relief and security act', only 9% have gone to public services, namely 5% to hospitals and only 450 million dollars to food banks while half a trillion went to large corporations, including 58 billion to the airline industry. In Europe, activist experts denounced the priority given to saving airline companies while we face an ecological crisis. European citizens associations also successfully lobbied to prevent corporations who receive help from COVID-19 bailout programs to pay dividends to their shareholders. Expert activists and civil society organizations propose 'alternative help packages' whose measures focus on social justice and ecological transition rather than on corporations' interests.²⁰

Civil society experts also play a crucial role in monitoring lobbies and their influence on policymakers. During the pandemic, the NGO 'Corporate Europe Observatory' (McArdle & Tansey, 2020) published a report showing that 'pharmaceutical industry controls billions in EU research funding and deprioritises the public interest' in EU initiatives. They gather evidence that the main lobby of the European pharmaceutical industry successfully opposed funding for the development of medical technologies to address coronaviruses by the EU Innovative Medicines Initiative.

Human rights and popular movement organizations have also collected evidence of police violence during the lockdown. In the Philippines, NGOs and progressive priests gather information on extrajudicial killings, which became less visible under the lockdown. In France, 34 unions and civil society organizations denounced 'police force impunity and the multiplication of violence and humiliation in popular neighbourhoods'.²¹

Popular education and politicisation

Finally, popular education and awareness-raising is perhaps the most potent role of movements as the pandemic is combined with an 'infodemic' (Zarocostas, 2020), a spread of false information, fake news and conspiracy theories.

Popular media activists, anarchist movements,²² unions and mutual aid groups produce and diffuse information about the virus, sanitary precautions, where to get help and how to organize at the neighbourhood level. Mutual aid networks are efficient alternative information networks. In Brazilian favelas, the coronavirus mutual aid groups struggle to counter the campaign led by the president Bolsonaro that minimizes the impact of the pandemic. They diffuse the World Health Organization's recommendations through banners at the entrance of the favelas,²³ street art, videos, articles, images and even funk music.²⁴ In addition to social media, the 'Maré online' media activists have set up a campaign with loudspeakers broadcasting from vehicles, and flyers posted in churches, associations and businesses.²⁵

National and international movement networks are actively engaging in sharing experience and analyses via online platforms and social media. Online spaces and forums have been set up for grassroots movements from different continents to share experiences and analyses. One example is the 'Viral Open Space', an 'online social forum to connect positive responses to our current global crisis' including workshops, sharing experiences and arts'.²⁶

The battle over the meaning of the crisis

Interpreting the crisis

The five roles performed by movements during the pandemic combine concrete practices and arguments with a cognitive dimension by which they interpret the crisis and frame it in a way that opens spaces for alternative futures. With each of these roles, social actors raise public awareness, propose worldviews, or enact alternative practices to the dominant model. *Protests* maintain the claims of the movements on the agenda and disrupt the consensual perspective framed by the government. *Contentious actions* to defend the collective rights of workers in sectors that revealed essential to society during this crisis but whose contribution is usually poorly recognized remind us the virus lands in deeply unequal societies and amplifies these inequalities (Sousa Santos, 2020, pp. 46–58). Neighbour groups for *mutual aid* provide a perspective of the crisis 'from below' and offer concrete examples of rebuilding the social fabric based on concrete solidarity. By *monitoring* the government policies and sharing analyses in its *popular education* activities, civil society and movements show a very different perspective as the centrality of states and government in dealing with the crisis that dominates mainstream media.

Interpreting the crisis is neither a function reserved to movement intellectuals nor a task apart of the roles performed by movements. Popular movements produce knowledge rooted in lived experience and alternative practices (Sousa Santos, 2019) at least as much as expert knowledge. Each of these five roles introduce debates and reflexivity, challenge the hegemony of a world order that is taken for granted. By doing so, movements contribute to the ability of a society to transform itself, 'to produce itself' more conscientiously, as Alain Touraine (1973) put it.

Each sector of movements embeds the pandemic in its meta-narrative or 'master frame' (Snow & Benford, 2002). Some show the pandemic from the standpoint of urban inequalities, other from an intersectional outlook, revealing that women and minorities particularly suffer from the lockdown and cope with most of the crucial task of caring in families, communities and public hospitals.²⁷ All over the world, progressive intellectuals link the pandemic to the ravages of capitalism ('Capitalism is the true virus' has become a trending slogan on social media) and with the ecological crisis. Latin American popular movements frame the crisis in their metanarrative that has surged from the confluence of indigenous, feminist, ecological and social justice movements over the last decade: 'the crisis reveals the deep social, political and ecological crises we face. Behind the sanitary crisis, it is a crisis of civilisation'.²⁸ International networks of popular movements aspire to overpass these divisions by opening spaces for 'global dialogue for systemic change'²⁹ and building international analyses.

Interpreting the momentum is a crucial stake for social movements in a time of crisis. The coronavirus pandemic is both a series of facts that no one can deny and a social reality

that is reinterpreted differently by social actors (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). These interpretations draw on and strengthen pre-existing worldviews and convictions. It is thus misleading that the crisis in itself calls to some particular social change or specific economic policy. As the sociologist of science Boudon (1989: chapter 9) demonstrated, the ‘truth’ of economic theories has more to do with a group of actors capacity to forge a provisional consensus than with their always highly debatable scientific validity. Shaping a ‘provisional consensus’ on the narrative of the COVID-19 crisis is a major stake for social movements. The ability of social actors to highlight the questions spawned by the historical situation, and impose their interpretation of the crisis and its underlying vision of society and economic rationality may set the ground for new policies in economic, social and democratic matters. Hence, as Latin American scholar-activist Arturo Escobar put it, for popular movements at the times of the pandemic, ‘it is crucial at this stage to have narratives about other ways of lives, and to have them ready’.³⁰

Opening horizons for alternative futures

When social movements claim that ‘another world is possible’, to take the slogan of the World Social Forum, dominant actors impose the idea that ‘there is no alternative’ to their world order. In the coronavirus crisis too, status quo defenders have framed the ‘return to normal’ as the reason to unite behind their leadership and vision. State leaders call to a ‘national unity’³¹ bringing together policymakers, corporations, workers and the population in times of emergency. Activists insist on the opposite, that the reality they present as ‘normal’ is part of the problem and is not the only possible exit (Bizberg, 2020). ‘Your normality is our problem,’ said a graffiti in Santiago de Chile. ‘Nothing could be worse than a return to normality’, claims Indian global activist Arundhati Roy.³²

Movements for social justice and progressive intellectuals claim the crisis should be treated as a moment of rupture that will bring significant changes into our lives, our societies, and our world. Scholar-activists and movements have drawn countless scenarios for ‘alternative futures’. Most see in the pandemic crisis the confirmation and the deepening of crises they have denounced in earlier work, framing it as the crisis of corporate globalization, capitalism (Amadeo, 2020), the Anthropocene (Kothari et al., 2020) or a civilization crisis (Escobar, 2020). Activists and committed intellectuals have stressed the need for a another model of society after the pandemic that provides people better livelihoods and working conditions, addresses social inequalities and strengthens public healthcare systems.

Early successes?

In the heat of the pandemic, social justice movements have succeeded in spreading some of these arguments beyond activist circles. The pandemic has shaken the economic dogmas that have ruled the world for decades (Teivainen & Huotari, 2020). After years of austerity in public services, governments spend lavishly to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and the economic crisis. State interventionism in the economic sector is rising, and several governments argue for a re-localisation of the production of ‘essential goods’. Those who promoted budget cuts in public hospitals now take part in the daily handclapping to support

nurses and medical doctors. Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron and Boris Johnson all stated they considered welfare state and public hospitals as crucial features of their country's national identity.

Until February 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron implemented austerity plans in public hospitals and did not attend to the claims by nurses and medical doctors that conducted the longest strike in the sector in France's history. His ambitious 'reforms plan' aims at decreasing state intervention in the economy and saving money in the public service sectors. By mid-March 2020, he considered nurses and medical doctors of public hospitals as national heroes. The state massively founded hospitals during the crisis and the president swore there would be significant changes in public policies after the crisis.³³ Macron swore it: 'The day after ... will not be a return to the day before'³⁴ [the pandemic], 'We will have to question the model of development in which our world has been engaged for decades'.³⁵ A fervent defender of free trade, he now talks about 'economic sovereignty', provides massive loans to key 'national corporations' and considers nationalization. The pandemic may even succeed where one of the most prolonged general strikes in French history has failed: getting rid of the pension reform that was about to be finalised.

The discourses by Emanuel Macron's eco declarations by another French president twelve years ago, in the early aftermath of the global financial crisis. On 23 October 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy declared that 'the ideology of the dictatorship of the market and public powerlessness has died with the financial crisis'.³⁶ Alter-globalization activists could not say it better. At the 2008 European Social Forum, they shared the conviction that 'the [financial] crisis has proven us right. Now governments will have to take into account our arguments and stop neoliberal policies'. The aftermath of the global financial crisis took a very different path. A few years after the crisis, the dominant narrative put the burden of the economic crisis on European welfare states, paving the way to austerity policies across the continent. It led to social crisis and increased inequalities that set the ground for right-wing populists.

Movements and counter-movements

The decade of austerity policies implemented in most Western countries after the global financial crisis invites to pay more attention to the alternative interpretations of the crisis by social actors from different orientations. In the battle to shape the meaning of the COVID-19 crisis, progressive movements confront two kinds of 'counter-movements' (Polanyi, 1944): a capitalist elite that defends corporate globalization (that Leslie Sklair (2002) has called 'a social movement for global capitalism') and reactionary movements.

The years that followed the global financial crisis showed the ability of the global elite (Occupy Wall Street's '1%') to impose a narrative of the crisis favourable to corporate globalization and capitalism. In just a few years, they managed to shift the meaning of the crisis and the focus of policymakers from the excesses of global finance to over-indebted Welfare states, paving the way for a decade of austerity policies. Today, the actors that seem better able to seize the opportunities opened by the crisis and the rupture of the economic dogmas may be on the same side. In many countries, the coronavirus crisis bailout has channelled historic amounts of public money (over 500 billion dollars in the first bailout budget in the US) to large corporations. While activists claimed the crisis

should be an opportunity to build an economic model that would reduce global warming, oil companies received their share of public money and governments adopted massive bailouts and loans for the airlines.³⁷ Besides, Klein (2009) has shown how capitalist elites have taken a sudden crisis as an opportunity for imposing neoliberal policies. The COVID-19 crisis may be no exception. While most governments extended their budget to cope with the sanitary crisis, the economic and debt crises that will follow may be seized as an opportunity to shrink social policies.

Reactionary movements have also been very active during the lockdown. In many ways, the pandemic strengthened the polarization of society, as each pole interpreted it following its worldview and conducted tense campaigns against the other stances. Habermas' faith in a deliberative public space fades out at a time of a very fragmented public space, social media, fake news and populist leaders. Facts and sciences are not shared references but subject to reinterpretations by ideologies and populist leaders who mistrust science. Conspiracy theories spread all over social media, giving rise to an unprecedented 'infodemic'. Such discourses embedded the crisis in a broader 'war of cultures' narrative that blames migrants, the 'multi-cultural society' and 'cultural Marxism'³⁸ for the pandemic. Far-right activists protested against the lockdown even when the pandemic was at its peak. In the United States,³⁹ rallies against the stay-at-home and business closure started in Michigan on April 15th and have taken place in most state capitals, with the support of Donald Trump. In Brazil, the president himself participates in protests against the sanitary measures imposed by the state governors.⁴⁰ In Germany, protesters include anti-vaccine, anti-Semites, ultra-liberals and conspiracy activists who frame the lockdown as the first step of a coup imposed by Angela Merkel.⁴¹ Meanwhile, conservative neo-Pentecostal churches claimed 'Faith, not science will save us'⁴² and brought their support to state leaders who pleaded to re-open the temples during the lockdown.

Racism has surged in all regions of the world since the beginning of the pandemic. It targets migrant workers in India or China, Asian-American in the US, and all over the world refugees, minorities and poor people accused of spreading the pandemic. United Nations general secretary alerted on a 'tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering' unleashed by the coronavirus pandemic.

As speculation swirled about where the virus originated, Guterres said migrants and refugees have been vilified as a source of the virus and then denied access to medical treatment. And journalists, whistle-blowers, health professionals, aid workers and human rights defenders are being targeted simply for doing their jobs.⁴³

As poor people suffer higher risks of infection due to precarious work and housing, they became the target of a 'racism of class' that often combined with ethnic racism against minorities and people of colour. State leaders passed the blame of the virus spread over to foreigners and closed their borders to other countries. The Malaysian government invoked narratives linking the spread of the virus to Rohingya refugees to conduct raids against this community and deport migrants.⁴⁴

Social movements are not the only actors striving to shape the meaning of the current crisis. Governments have portrayed themselves as the key players in the pandemic. They have massively invested media and public communication seeking to impose their narrative and defending their management of the crisis. China's Communist Party carefully monitors its image as an efficient government to control the pandemic and arrests

anyone who dares to challenge this narrative or criticize the crisis management by Xi Jinping.⁴⁵ In Hungary, freedom of speech has come under further threat by coronavirus ‘emergency measures’ that allow Prime Minister Orbán to rule by decrees and threatens authors of ‘false information’ with up to five years in prison (Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2020). In Brasília as in Washington, populist leaders defend a world vision that seems able to reinterpret any social fact, even after they failed to act swiftly to tackle the pandemic.

This power game to shape the narrative is not exclusive to authoritarian states and populist leaders. The French government is particularly vigilant about public discourses on its crisis management. Mediapart reports a series of police force interventions across the country to intimidate citizens who hung banners to criticize the president crisis management.⁴⁶ On April 26th, a woman spent four hours under police custody for hanging a banner ‘*Macronavirus, when will it stop?*’.⁴⁷ In terms of biopolitics and social control, the border between democracy and authoritarian regimes sometimes appears blurred. Biopolitics implemented to tackle the pandemic may pave the way for a new authoritarian era, grounded in new technologies, artificial intelligence and increasing police control over citizens. In this perspective, the consensus that has emerged on the need to increase the role of the state may take very different orientations. Citizens rising demand for being protected by the state may lead to better welfare states, but also to increasing social control and authoritarianism or to state policies focused on helping out national corporations in a world competition.

Conclusion

The period under scrutiny in this article constitutes a peculiar ‘global moment’, unprecedented in modern history. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken all realms of life and society in all the regions of the world. Social movements were deeply impacted by the lockdown measures that urged millions of citizens to stay at home and put a halt to the 2019 wave of mass citizens’ protests for democracy and social justice. However, a closer look at less visible activities developed by social movements shows that movements for social justice adapted to unexpected circumstances and were actually very active in this challenging period.

Most activists focused on local initiatives to enact solidarity in their community or on monitoring their national government’s policies to tackle the pandemic. However, social justice movements’ initiatives during the lockdown draw the outlines of a global wave of movements, embodied in decentralized reactions to a multi-dimensional crisis. In countries of the global south and of the global north, movements for social justice have faced the pandemic by implementing similar roles. They have denounced the weight of inequalities in facing the pandemic, set up groups of mutual aid, monitored national policies and informed their fellow citizens in campaigns of popular education.

Bringing together cases and initiatives from different continents should not hide the specificities of local and national contexts, the different shape of the debates on the crisis or the fact that efforts to build ties and shared perspectives among movements from different continents remained limited. However, previous ‘global waves of movements’ were not different in these matters. The 1968 protests or the post-2010 ‘square movements’ were not coordinated by an organized global network of activists. They gathered mobilisations in different national contexts and political regimes that resonate with other protests happening worldwide (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013). On the other hand, the global wave of movements during the lockdown has its specificities. This time, the

spark did not come from a revolt or movements themselves. It was a decentralized reaction to a global event that affected (almost) simultaneously all the regions of the world. More significantly, its primary expression was not demonstrations or square occupations, but less visible forms of activism.

The murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis on 26 May 2020 opened a new period for movements. The event drastically altered the public debate, diverting it from the quasi-monopolistic attention to the pandemic, and changed both the main topics and the forms of actions of social movements. It sparked an international wave of protests against racism and police violence as well as counter-mobilisations from reactionary actors. It was also concomitant with a progressive end of the lockdown measures in European and North America, as well as in most Latin America and Asian countries. However, these two periods of mobilisations are far disconnected. The roles played by movements during the lockdown period set some of the ground on which the new movement would grow. They pointed to the dramatic impact of the social and racial inequalities revealed by the pandemic, strengthened solidarity in the communities that were particularly affected by the sanitary and economic crisis, and denounced police violence against minorities during the lockdown.

Progressive movements consider the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for humanity to take its future in its hand, at a time of rising inequalities and when the economic system endangers life and the planet itself. However, there is no easy path leading from the pandemic to a better and less unequal world. The urgent need for a fairer world is not a sufficient argument to make it happen. The COVID-19 outbreak is a battlefield for alternative futures. A better understanding of the crisis and its aftermath requires analyses of social actors who struggle to shape the meaning of the crisis and hope to have an impact on the world that will come out of it. This debate did not end with the peak of the pandemic or with the ease of lockdown measures in most Western countries. It has only started and may shape the global economy and political regimes for decades to come.

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