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Notes on the political economy of planetary health – with reflections on prospects for the 'symbiocene' and the 'post-modern princess'

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This short reflection draws upon political economy and historical and social perspectives to help make sense of the crises, forces and influences that have shaped global and planetary health and may do so in the foreseeable future. Our contribution reflects on the existing world order and its structures of political economy, with their 'morbid symptoms', or on 'what is'. We then consider not only what planetary health 'might be', but also what it 'ought to be' for progressive, socially just and ecologically sustainable change to promote improvement in the health of people and our planet. To address the question of what might promote such transformations we introduce two concepts: the 'symbiocene' and the 'post-modern princess'. These concepts may help us to theorise new forms of political agency orientated to ethically advancing that future scenario.

Keywords: planetary health, inequalities, morbid symptoms, planetary organic crisis, market civilisation, political agency

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This short conceptual reflection draws upon political economy and historical and social perspectives to help make sense of the various crises, forces and influences shaping global and planetary health, and that might shape its limits and possibilities in the foreseeable future.

Our contribution is also critical: it does not take the existing world order and its nature and structures of political economy simply as a given. It seeks to look beyond 'what is' and to consider what not only 'might be', but to advance what we consider 'ought to be', and consider alternative and potentially progressive forces in the shaping of the future. We do so by combining what Antonio Gramsci suggests as a prudent maxim of political and social analysis, combining the 'pessimism of the intelligence' with the 'optimism of the will' as a means to address what he called the 'morbid symptoms' of a world in deep crisis during the 1930s leading to World War II.

Pursuing this maxim of political and social analysis involves analysing the contradictions, subordinations and other key problems of the world *as it is*, while invoking an 'optimism of the will', identifying latencies, potentials and creative acts to help inform progressive change and offer alternative modes of development and being: in sum, socially just, progressive and ecologically beneficial futures for people and our planet.

A note on global health and inequalities

So how does global and planetary health fit into this picture? Our starting point is that good health depends upon nutritious food and clean water supplies, reasonable shelter, freedom from oppressive conditions, education, a sense of social equity and justice, and not least a reasonable ecosystem with mitigation of the extreme effects of climate change. In short, good health needs a sense of human security so people may look to the future and be able to flourish. It also depends on a healthy environment in which to live (and love). We might add that recent studies have shown how the climate crisis is fundamentally a symptom of global inequality and injustice, which is worsened in patriarchal societies, and that inequality is perhaps the major variable explaining health outcomes.[1,2]

Here then we also follow the perspective of Solomon Benatar, who in his later work has emphasised that the problems (and indeed the solutions) of health questions are rooted in the major social and political forces governing our life-worlds.[3] Health problems are massively shaped by the unequal distribution of resources and living conditions, including the unequal ways ecological destruction and the effects of climate change tend to place greater burdens on weaker peoples and subordinated societies. Benatar pointed out that many problems can be ameliorated by new policies and values devoted to improving collective conditions of existence. He emphasised the need for a renewed focus on improving the basic health of populations, calling for an approach not premised solely on innovations governed by scientific, principally biomedical, perspectives on health and medicine. Indeed, while advances in modern medical care and public health initiatives have allowed about 20% of the world's population to achieve their human potential, there has simultaneously been a widening of local and global disparities in access to conditions essential for better health and longevity. So there is a need to move beyond prevailing perspectives on global health to illustrate how the health of the world is linked with global capitalism, world order and the biosphere, while also noting the disparities within countries and localities stratified by race, class and gender.

Market civilisation, political economy and private property rights

So what are some of the key political economy, socioeconomic and cultural forces driving many of the health issues and constituting the new 'common sense' for its beneficiaries and aspirants? We earlier characterised the dominant political economy model of world capitalism as neoliberal 'market civilisation', to help explain some of the world's health inequalities.[4] These inequalities include morbid symptoms connected to food in/security and its contradictions

that are reflected in the obese majorities of populations in societies at the epicentre of market civilisation, while elsewhere hundreds of millions of people are either starving or go to bed hungry. The market civilisation model has its epicentre in the USA but it spans the capitalist world, including consumers in communist-led China.

Indeed, market civilisation – a model that is restricted to roughly one-fifth of the world's population – is part of a capitalist hierarchical system of power dominated by large corporations, encompassing energy-intensive consumerist accumulation and associated cultural forces that operate increasingly on a planetary scale. One of its principal features is the rapid growth of private appropriation or enclosure over social reproduction and previously non-commodified or inalienable elements of culture and life-worlds. This is reflected in privatisation of collective goods such as education, public health, and social and cultural identities and, as such, involves the dispossession of shared 'commons' and public spaces by wealthy individuals and privately owned companies.

Indeed, the commodity form of law that prevails in capitalism legally locks in ownership of these aspects of our life-worlds so they become assets, to be controlled by privately owned property rights.[5] Such issues of expropriation and dispossession have been a focus of global political struggles now for several hundred years, with the efforts to socialise (democratise) control over education and healthcare, etc. The large transnational corporations and financial firms (oligopolies) ultimately driving these processes rely on legal and constitutional protections of private property rights. Such rights enable legal control over the social and knowledge commons and other elements of life (such as DNA, human tissue, plant forms) so that they are treated as commodities (i.e. things that can be bought and sold), thus conferring private authority and control over the behaviour of people relative to things.[6]

A particularly important element of this process in the field of health and medicine relates to intellectual property rights (IPRs) – ownership via patents over knowledge, techniques, treatments, therapies and other copyright protections – which confer private corporations with legal rights to supply or deny access to medicine and treatments based on the ability to pay. This pattern was clearly indicated in the struggles over profits and vaccine provisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar contentious issues relate to private IPRs not only over medications but also basic foodstuffs, including seeds and other agricultural inputs and processes. In sum, together, the legal, economic and cultural forces just noted are serving to intensify an unprecedented planetary organic crisis in our world today and they are shaping developments both now and in the future.

Morbid symptoms

We emphasise, first, that the developments and struggles just noted relative to IPRs are deeply contested. Indeed, in addition to conflicts more generally over the rights of property, the political struggles to sustain public goods and the common ownership and rights of people to land, education and healthcare, we can see some of the contours of contemporary politics. They involve struggles over the conditions of livelihood and human security, and they are linked to questions of dignity, justice, representation and legitimacy, although these take different forms and levels of intensity in different locations throughout the world.

We propose, then, that these issues now form part of a global situation that has elements akin to those once expressed by Antonio Gramsci, from his incarceration by Mussolini's fascists in the mid-1930s. As he sought to characterise the nature of the crisis of European civilisation, Gramsci depicted that historical situation as one of 'organic crisis' involving a long unresolved process (not simply an economic crisis or one similar to that of a medical turning point or moment where a patient may survive or die). This longer process was structural and unstable, and involved a stalemate of increasingly opposed political forces. The organic crisis was characterised by a decline of political authority and legitimacy, challenges to forms of representation, growing violence and conflict, and, not least, the growth of the violent and reactionary forces of Nazism and fascism.

The European organic crisis became global and subsequently propelled the major powers of the world towards World War II, the most lethal and destructive conflict in history, culminating in the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Almost poetically, Gramsci wrote that the key characteristic of the era was that the old was dying and the new could not be born, and in that interregnum 'many morbid symptoms arise'.[7]

Of course, after World War II there was an attempt to resolve the global organic crisis in the form of an unprecedented global historical settlement and innovations intended to peacefully improve the condition of the planet, with justice and equality for its citizens. This was reflected in the creation of the United Nations and proclamations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Nevertheless, that universal promise retreated into a struggle between two of the victors of the war in the form of opposed superpowers each embracing entirely different models of development and politics.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, that struggle has subsequently given way to two opposed projects to dominate the governance of global capitalism – one associated with the so-called rules-based order of globalisation and market forces, with some restraints on the despoilation of the planet, the other wedded to conservative nationalism allowing more ecologically reckless deregulated forms of capital accumulation and use of fossil fuels.

Nonetheless, both projects are variants of what we call *disciplinary neoliberal capitalism*, a system dominated by giant oligopolies that benefit most from the supremacy and discipline of capitalist market forces to shape political, social and economic outcomes. Indeed, even China can be considered an authoritarian neoliberal capitalist economy, albeit one governed by the disciplined, highly efficient and scientifically trained cadres of the Chinese Communist Party with some redistributive aspects to shape its social model.

We see such issues as forming a contemporary interregnum involving a struggle between the old and the radically new. Its 'morbid symptoms' involve crises of economy/development, society, ecology, politics, culture and ethics. Its systems of production and consumption generate massive pollution and other deleterious and toxic side-effects that worsen health conditions, particular among the poor. For example, despite progress in India and China, much of the world suffers from harmful levels of air pollution with the negative effects of respiratory diseases including lung cancers.[8]

So what, then, are some of its other 'morbid symptoms' today? Firstly, the political context includes a significant decline of traditional left forces and the rise of the reactionary and authoritarian right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, allowing neoliberal capitalist policies to govern responses to the massive 2007/8 global financial crisis and, as noted, aspects of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. These crises and the austerity policies adopted tended to hit the poorest hardest. Despite many impressive scientific innovations in the field of health, the health of a majority of poorer people on the planet has suffered.[9]

This weakening of the left has permitted a wealthy plutocracy, with highly organised and well-funded networks, to push for far-right reactionary policies, engaging in culture wars against 'woke' forces that offer collective or socialised solutions to problems and efforts to redress inequalities and injustice. This cultural counterrevolution

includes attacks against science and evidence and deploys efforts to obscure the class-based nature of a strategy to accelerate capitalist exploitation and profits and to deepen authoritarian/private controls over education, health, culture and society.

A second morbid symptom is the enormous growth in public and private debts that have particularly hit the global South; this has been linked to austerity measures coupled with privatisation/defunding of social provisioning and public healthcare worldwide, prompting a general privatisation of public goods (along with cuts to foreign aid). All of this has affected funding for health in poorer nations. Indebtedness of the poorer countries to the international organisations and richer nations and their investors is a growing problem, often accounting for 20%+ of their fiscal outlays. What is new is the growth of massive debts to China. The Australian Lowy Institute has calculated that in 2025, the poorest 75 countries owed record debt repayments of US$22 billion to China, of the total owed of US$35 billion. This huge sum includes costs that should be measured as what economists call an 'opportunity cost', that is, costs measured in terms of the development *opportunities forgone* associated with these debts. Debts to China were mainly related to its Belt and Road Initiative.[10]

Austerity and indebtedness are thus also linked to the ongoing dispossession of communities of their public goods, including the knowledge commons, much of the cultural heritage of societies and the common use of the fruits of nature. Seeds and species are now expropriated and subjected to private ownership, and common spaces for leisure and the ability to enjoy nature in parks and other green spaces are restricted, despite immersion in nature being known to have beneficial health effects. As the new field of environmental neuroscience has shown, time spent in nature is not simply a luxury but a necessity for good health.[11]

Thirdly, such new concentrations of wealth and power have gone with inflation/greedflation by companies; incumbent governments have suffered because of cost of living issues with unequal effects across populations and workers, while profits soar. This has allowed far-right forces to press for regressive, racist solutions to economic and social problems, using social media controlled by plutocrats. This also permits climate change denialism and the discounting of evidence of ecological degradation and species extinction. Indeed, an issue for future health questions is the salient fact that 'we are all guinea pigs now'.[11] Whether we like it or not, we consume genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and toxic chemicals with unpredictable effects on our health; poorer people tend to eat cheaper 'Frankenfoods'; and obesity becomes a key health problem.[12] This is especially true in countries following the US-style 24/7 market civilisation model of individualist competitive consumerism, in societies that are often heavily palliated by drug therapies within a somatic culture. In sum, these morbid symptoms amid a planetary organic crisis today form a unique, existential and ecological moment: they endanger the biosphere and the (social) reproduction of life-forms on our planet.

Fourthly, much of this above relates to how the global power of capital has intensified, with giant corporate oligopolies gaining increasing control over life-worlds and key aspects of social reproduction and consciousness, e.g. big data, social media, big pharma and energy, along with growing use of fossil fuels and chemical-based agribusiness. Forces in the USA are driving many of these changes, and, as noted, not least of which are the key problems of climate change and, especially, global warming. One study claims that global warming will likely make capitalism collapse because, on current trends, so many activities will become uninsurable; banks and mortgage companies will not issue loans on ventures: the premiums required will exceed what people or companies can pay.[13]

'Optimism of the will': The 'symbiocene' and the 'post-modern princess'

So what can be done to change things for the better? Our response to this question includes a brief reflection on what Solomon Benatar once raised as a hopeful prospect of a global paradigm shift towards the 'symbiocene', namely an ethically just and desirable future based upon decentralised governance, democracy, mutual recognition and co-operation offering human dignity, caring and shared resources to benefit generations now and into the future. We see this as desirable. However, for it to be realised requires the creation and emergence of effective political agency, as it is unlikely the powerful and wealthy who benefit from the ownership of fossil fuel producers will give up many – if any – of their gains. This is, of course, unless they are forced to do by stronger political forces – even if capitalism as we know it may collapse because it will prove to be uninsurable due to the ravages of climate change and the follies of war as plunder.

Our metaphor for the political form such agency might take, what we call a 'post-modern princess', is inspired by the ideas concerning political agency of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci was influenced by Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), which sketched an imaginary prince. This prince was a heroic leader embodying leadership that could transcend the corruption and dynastic conflicts of the Renaissance by combining virtue and strength to transcend the limits of the possible, and help organise and emancipate the people from their oppression, creating a new type of politics and form of the state. Machiavelli's imaginary inspired Gramsci's *The Modern Prince*, written in the 1930s in his *Prison Notebooks*, which imagined a new 'myth-prince' as a truly democratic communist party that would defeat fascist capitalism by educating and combining the interests of peasants and industrial workers to create a new type of state and social order. That party (at least in the democratic sense imagined by Gramsci) was never formed, and its leader was imprisoned by the Italian fascists.

Our concept of political agency builds on these ideas and tries to take account of the realities, contradictions and potentialities of our post-modern era in ways that go beyond the concept of a single political party, to encompass a constellation of progressive forces drawn from North and South. This is why we call such forces and potentials of political agency a 'post-modern princess', in acknowledgement that such new forms of agency are to be broadly understood and that their numbers are not exclusive to a particular political party, but are potentially unlimited. They necessarily must involve not just men but also women, and not simply people in the most powerful and affluent nations in both global North and South.

Indeed, in the case of workers in health, caring and wellbeing, women constitute perhaps the most compassionate, significant and dynamic flank of such progressive political forces worldwide. These include millions, almost unlimited, numbers of thoughtful and committed people at all levels of society, particularly scientists, not only in health (doctors, nurses, carers) but also educators, writers, philosophers, farmers and fishers, and many other thinkers with practical and other forms of knowledge. These forces are growing, despite the massive concentration of power and wealth among the billionaires that fund and shape reactionary right-wing forces. Indeed, this is particularly the case in the USA, where a majority of young, educated people, especially women, are supportive of democratic socialism, recognising and sharing the desire for all people to flourish, to include all workers and to show tolerance for and inclusion of all people in society, irrespective of creed and colour.

There is growing sensibility, action and organisation based on a clear recognition of the limits and contradictions of the planetary organic crisis. It is based on widely shared concerns about the future,

stressing the importance of incorporating an ecological and feminist perspective of Mother Nature, our life-worlds and biological and social reproduction of people and species. Moreover, like Solomon Benatar, we recognise the importance of a growing proportion of junior and increasingly senior women doctors who now understand that the most crucial elements shaping global health are social and political, and this will help shape the future of health.[2] Indeed, as far as health policy and systems are concerned, a shift in the emphasis of health systems much more towards the basics of health in a healthier planet and away from overreliance on biomedical models of health systems and treatments would be a welcome step forward for the vast majority of people on the planet.

On whether this is possible, it is important to note that such a collective and global political will of this type has been formed before, arising from the ashes of war, initially consummated with the United Nations and the UDHR. This was later embodied in the post-1945 'Health for All' initiatives and movement involving, for example, advocacy of universal literacy, primary healthcare, sustainable agriculture and equitable food systems. This could and should happen again, harnessing similar principles of universality and social justice to shape contemporary post-modern conditions of the possible, with the new forces we have noted generating an imaginary that is, like the UDHR, truly radical for its time and its future.

Thus, although the term 'post-modern princess' is not yet a term of art, its ideas and social forces are certainly widely understood and practised. They harness various forms of knowledge to offer a way to think constructively about ways out of the planetary organic crisis and to create a more peaceful and just world order, with a lucid but optimistic realism grounded in a deep historical perspective on the planetary limits and the vast life-giving potentials of the necessity of local and global transformations. Quite simply, the healing of our planet and social and health systems will take collective political action and organisation, and that task is and will be the work of both men and women, young and old.

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