

## **A virus-created radical moment: Not to be missed?**

### **Tony Taylor**

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I'm sitting in splendid isolation on a lush hillside above a Cretan village, where even the patriarchal *kafeneio* is closed. Outside its shuttered face a group of old men sit, less than socially distant, defying spasmodic police surveillance. A few kilometres away people queue obediently outside the supermarket, clutching in their plastic gloved hands the required Out-of-Home pass and their ID. There are health concerns, even though the island of 650,000 souls has precious few Covid-19 cases and only one death, but such melancholia is hardly new. Crete is awash with chemists, testing one's blood pressure a daily routine. Notwithstanding the benefits of the Mediterranean diet it's tempting to note that Hippocrates hailed from hereabouts and that hypochondria stems from Ancient Greek.

There is real fear, though not so much of the virus per se but of what lies ahead. As I write the island is closed for business. The tourism-oiled life blood of the local economy congeals. With cafes, tavernas, hotels, even beaches, empty of purpose, unemployment and debt soars. The Orhrus-headed threat of poverty and hunger hangs in the air. The questions on everybody's lips are 'when will this end?' and 'will we, do we, want to return to normal?' At this moment, if assuredly we are not all in this together, from capitalist to peasant, humanity faces a fragile future.

For now, it's ironically common-place for commentators to write that the neoliberal obsession with the free market and the self-centred individual has been utterly exposed. In this profound social crisis society turns to the public, not the private, sector. Society turns to the nurse, not the entrepreneur. Capitalism's endless pursuit of profit and growth is shown to be at odds with the common good and at odds with Nature itself,

Against this tumultuous backcloth what are the alternatives as and when the virus loosens its grip? Three perhaps stand out on the grand canvas.

I. Despite the rhetoric that this is impossible, there will be an almost irresistible desire to return to normal. Even though this sordid 'business as usual' has created widening

inequality - the world's richest 1% have more than twice as much as 6.9 billion people - and life-threatening climate change.

2. And if, as is likely, this return to the status quo fails amidst what is speculated to be a second Great Depression of recession and austerity, there is the ever-present danger, as we bow to increased surveillance and policing, that an authoritarian, xenophobic politics with strong men at its helm moves to centre stage.

3. The third possibility depends on us. Are we able to build afresh on the recognition that we are essential; that our labour is the bedrock of society? Are we able to hold onto our renewed community experience of mutual aid and solidarity?

To wonder if the latter is possible brings us inexorably to the matter of consciousness. Do the circumstances thrust upon us herald the fulfilment of the revolutionary dream, the emergence of a people, conscious of themselves as the creators of history? Speaking of which brings me to the part that youth and community workers might play in the renaissance of collective solidarity. At its best, the radical tradition contesting the ideological space to be found therein has been founded on critical conversations and supportive relationships through which we are as much educated as those we aspire to educate. This is a dialogue riven with moments of intimate democracy, listening to one another, as the foundation of an authentic public democracy.

Alas, over the last 40 years we have been on the retreat. The agenda of social conformity has been strengthened immeasurably by the imposition of prescribed and predictable targets and outcomes, aimed at manufacturing the compliant and resilient individual. Pressured practitioners have sought to make the best of a bad job. However, certainly in England, a generation of workers in their acceptance of the planned interventions demanded from above have cooperated with 'formalising the informal'. For my part, the recuperation by neoliberalism of even radical elements in our practice is symbolised by the now ritual abuse on all sides of the notion of empowerment, whereby we accept without demur the absurdity that the powerless can be empowered by the powerful.

In closing, I'll propose that, as we return to work beyond the crisis, there is a fleeting, unmissable chance to revive our commitment to an open-ended, emancipatory dialogue with young people and the community. It will mean challenging, resisting a return to

the managerialist implementation of imposed norms and expectations, the catechism of 'impact'. Such resistance will necessitate the urgent renewal of our collective capacity in the workplace, through workers' self-organisation and the trade unions.

At the risk of being melodramatic, this unexpected rebuke of Capitalism's arrogance and excess marks an opening we cannot afford to let slip by. Surely, we cannot wash our hands of, keep our distance from, deny this once in a lifetime moment to turn the tide of history.