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COVID-19 AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE[1]

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Abstract: There are two ways to make sense of a human tragedy: as an injustice, or as a misfortune. A misfortune is usually associated with inescapable external forces of nature, and as such the desolation it leaves in its wake is blameless. An injustice, on the other hand, is caused by fellow humans, it is intentional, controllable, and therefore not blameless. Being hit by lightning is a misfortune, living in poverty is an injustice.

Contrary to what may seem, and what some politicians are telling us, Covid-19 has a lot more in common with poverty than with lightning strike. That is because Covid-19 is a case-study in injustice, not misfortune. No one is responsible for the existence of Covid-19, but collectively we are responsible for the fact that pandemic preparedness plans were grossly insufficient, and the response to the crisis inadequate. All the inequalities, biases, prejudices, and wrongs of modern society have been irrevocably exposed by Covid-19.

This paper will offer recommendations to what social, political and economic changes need to be made, domestically and globally, after this pandemic crisis is over. If everything post Covid-19 goes back to being essentially similar to what it was pre Covid-19, we will have wasted a unique opportunity to eradicate some of the worst underlying conditions of social injustice which inflict misery to billions of people across the globe.

Keywords: Social Justice; Luck; Arbitrariness; Community Wealth Building; Basic Income

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Introduction.

Living in denial has its perks. Sometimes reality is so awful, so disparaging, so unbearable, that we simply refuse to see what is in front of us. There is often dissonance between the beliefs we hold and the truth behind these beliefs, and it is not unusual to hold beliefs without any supporting evidence. William James (1960) had a name for this epistemic attitude: the will to believe. In a lecture first published in 1896 under that name, James allows for the adoption of a belief without prior evidence of its truth. What James had in mind was religious faith, which he argues depends crucially upon first adopting those beliefs without evidence, but the same can be said for our attitude towards Covid-19. Many people will to believe that this pandemic is nothing more than a diabolical global misfortune, and not a case of social injustice. As such, people choose to believe that no one is to blame for the devastation Covid-19 has inflicted since January 2020. And what is more, we find that many politicians, especially those in government, are doing everything in their powers to reinforce this message.

There is no doubt that Covid-19 is a colossal tragedy, but the real question is whether this calamity is a misfortune or an injustice. This chapter argues that Covid-19 should not be considered a misfortune, instead it ought to be analysed, and assessed, with the help of the existing literature on social injustice. After distinguishing between misfortune and injustice, we will explore the idea of social injustice, followed by an account of Covid-19 as a phenomenon of global injustice. Finally we will suggest some remedies to the injustice exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Misfortune Vs. Injustice

A misfortune is usually associated with inescapable external forces of nature, and as such the desolation it leaves in its wake is blameless. The devastating impact of a hurricane, or being struck by lightning, or the trauma of a brain tumour, are wicked, awful realities, but as acts of nature they can be deemed mere misfortunes. An injustice, on the other hand, is caused by fellow humans, not nature. An injustice, unlike a misfortune, is intentional, controllable, and therefore not blameless. Poverty is an injustice, not a misfortune.

At an intuitive level this distinction between an injustice and a misfortune makes sense, and yet actually distinguishing between the two can be problematic.[1] In her still relevant book *The Faces of Injustice*, first published 30 years ago, Judith Shklar (1990) reminds us that what is a misfortune to one is an injustice to another, and the perception of what is an injustice as opposed to a misfortune will often differ if it is described by the victim or the bystander.

Perceptions of injustice are a powerful tool in our effort to make sense of the world we live in. To those not directly affected, an earthquake may seem like a quintessential case of misfortune, but to the family of the victims of a school that collapsed even thought it was allegedly built to withstand an earthquake, this is a case of injustice. Wildfires in California or Australia, flooding in Bangladesh or the rising sea-level in the Maldives may be conveniently dismissed as misfortunes, alternatively the impact of climate change suggests that in fact we are looking at cases of environmental global injustice. Yet perceptions can be deceiving. We must take the victims' views seriously, however that does not mean that victims are always correct when they perceive injustice. When things go wrong, and the unspeakable occurs, our only way to cope is to find someone to blame, or as Shklar (1990, 3-4) says "We often blame ourselves and each other for no good reason. We scapegoat, we accuse wildly,

we feel guilty for acts we never performed, we blame anyone who seems more fortunate than ourselves".

Is Covid-19 an injustice or a misfortune? It is tempting, and perhaps even reassuring, to consider Covid-19 as a misfortune. We know that this virus started in China, in Hubei province, where a cluster of cases of pneumonia of unknown origin had been reported. It is possible, but not certain, that the virus came out of Huanan seafood and live animals market, including illegally captured wild animals slaughtered in front of the customer. We don't know this for sure, and perhaps will never know, since by early January 2020 the market was closed, cleaned and disinfected, destroying all clues to the origin of the virus.[2] But we are fairly certain that the virus was not brought into China by someone from outside the country's borders, as the Chinese state media allegedly announced.

It is necessary to make an important distinction between the *emergence* of Covid-19, and the *impact* of Covid-19. The emergence of this virus, like all viruses (unless artificially fabricated in a lab, which the WHO has ruled out in the case of Covid-19), can possibly be considered a mere misfortune. Knowing whether this virus was transmitted from bats to humans, or propagated in food markets, is vitally important from a scientific point of view, but outside of the realm of science these issues could perhaps be relegated to the folder of misfortunes. Note the 'possibly' and the 'perhaps' in the previous sentences; as Lea Ypi (2020) rightly points out, it is all too easy to blame non-human entities for the consequences of our actions "In January, bats in Wuhan got the blame for Covid-19. But the idea that animals are solely responsible for the spread of the virus obscures the truth. Deforestation, the destruction of habitats and the wildlife trade create the conditions in which zoonotic diseases emerge – and all are consequences of human decisions".

Whether the emergence of Covid-19 is a misfortune or not can be debated, but there is no doubt on the causes of the *impact* of Covid-19. How this virus affects people has very little to do with misfortune, and everything to do with underlying inequalities in the social structure of society. The uneven impact of Covid-19 is a matter of social justice, or to be precise, a reflection of the structural injustice in our society. It is the impact of Covid-19, and not the emergence of covid-19, that will be the subject of this chapter.

What is Social Injustice?

Since the time of Plato political philosophers have asked the question 'what is justice?', working on the assumption that social injustice is nothing more than the lack, absence, or negation of social justice. Bar a few exceptions, political philosophers tend to think that a good theory of social justice tells us everything we need to know about social injustice. Contra Plato and the vast majority of ancient and contemporary political philosophers, in what follows I suggest we explore a different question, namely: what is social injustice?

Let's start by resisting the arbitrary dictates of etymology, theorising injustice as a sheer negation of something else.[3] We need to make an effort by thinking of social injustice independently of our ideal conception of social justice. We need to break away from the theoretical shackles whereby social injustice is derivative from justice, and turn things on its head: social justice is the absence of social injustice, not the other way around.[4] As Bufacchi (2012) I argued in my book *Social Injustice*, the trick is to think of justice and injustice in terms of the relationship between 'solution' and 'problem': social injustice is the problem, and social justice the solution. It is nonsensical to discuss solutions before we know the nature of the problem; similarly, we cannot articulate the demands of social justice unless we have a grasp of the nature

of social injustice. For these reasons, it is imperative not only to take social injustice seriously, but conceptually to prioritize distributive or social injustice over social justice, relegating theories of social justice to a by-product of our theories about injustice rather than vice-versa as widely assumed.

Following Iris M. Young (1990) we can say that there are two ways of thinking about social injustice: either as an act of domination, the externally imposed restrictions on our freedom, in particular our freedom to act on our choices and desires, or as oppression, which curtails our self-expression. Domination, or the arbitrary control or power over someone, tends to be the prevailing way of thinking about social injustice, in part because this is more obvious. People living under dictatorships suffer the social injustice of domination, which makes social injustice a tangible reality. While this is a useful and important way to think about social injustice, it has its limitations, being narrow in its scope. On the other hand the concept of oppression, understood as restrains on our ambitions, dreams, expectations like an invisible straight-jacket, is more slippery but arguably more rewarding for our analysis.

Young explains how the idea of oppression is much more subtle than domination, and therefore a more useful gateway to understanding the nature of social injustice. Oppression refers to structural phenomena that immobilize or diminish a group. Her emphasis on the structural nature of social injustice is critically important, and accurate. According to Young social injustice cannot be reduced to the intentional act of an individual aimed at harming another person; instead it is in-built in the socio-economic system itself, so although some people are chronically disadvantaged and overpowered, there isn't always a specific person or group that can be blamed for this state of affairs. This makes oppression less tangible than domination, more covert than

overt, and therefore also more dangerous and corrosive to the fabric of a just society. Racism is an example of oppression as structural injustice, an implicit bias built into the system, as the Black Lives Matter movement is assiduously trying to point out: police brutality is not a single incident of domination, but the expression of institutionalized oppression against blacks and other minorities. The same goes for sexism, ageism, disabilitism, and all other forms of discrimination.

What makes oppression in modern society particularly insidious is the fact that injustice is no longer exercised only via brute force, as in the past. We are past the age of might-makes-right. Instead, social injustice today works in elusive, obscure ways. Those who suffer from poverty, those who are unemployed, or those who have no choice but to take on many different part-time jobs just to keep their heads above water, are now being blamed for their predicament. The fact that poverty tends to have a specific social profile, based on race or gender or ethnicity or religion for example, is simply dismissed as irrelevant. The chronic and institutionalized forms of maldistribution, exclusion, and disempowerment are rarely considered as part of the explanation why some people are disadvantaged.[5] The myth of meritocracy not only succeeds in justifying the achievement of those at the top, but it also shifts the blame on those who fail because of their inadequacies. Modern capitalist societies promote the implausible, unfathomable lie that poverty is the just reward for being lazy, stupid, unmotivated or merely lacking ambition.

Oppression manifests itself in many different ways, including exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. These are what Young refers to as the five categories of oppression, even though as Young herself admits, these five categories of oppression do not constitute a full theory of social

injustice. In order to get a better sense of social injustice as oppression, I want to suggest that we focus on two key concepts: arbitrariness and forced cooperation.

The resurgence of Republicanism in contemporary political theory has put domination and more specifically arbitrariness firmly in the spotlight, although arbitrariness was already a key concept in Rawls's early work on justice as fairness.[6] Arbitrariness can mean two different things. First: arbitrariness as randomness, an event impossible to prevent or foresee. This is the way that Rawls (1972, 72) uses the term in *A Theory of Justice* when he says that luck is 'arbitrary' from a moral point of view: "intuitively, the most obvious injustice of the system of natural liberty is that it permits distributive shares to be improperly influenced by these factors so arbitrary from a moral point of view".

But arbitrariness also has a second meaning: as capriciousness. The idea here is that we have a choice, but the choice we make is unprincipled. An arbitrary decision is not simply wrong, or unjustified, it is also arrogant. It reflects a disrespectful attitude, or as David Schmitz (2006) puts it: 'I will do it because I can'. To be at the receiving end of a capricious, arbitrary decision is an injustice, because the victim of injustice is under the power of another person without the possibility (or hope) of any riposte. Rawls (1972, 96) has this second meaning of arbitrariness in mind when he says that "In particular, it is not possible to have an obligation to autocratic and arbitrary forms of government".

Apart from arbitrariness, there is also another concept that is crucial to make sense of social injustice: 'forced cooperation'. The idea of forced cooperation reminds us that what appears to be a consensual, voluntary choice, is in fact borne of desperate circumstances. Human trafficking is forced cooperation, as is dangerously exploitative

work environments; to suggest that people 'choose' such risks is to have a banal understanding of voluntariness.

This idea plays an important role in Rawls's early work, which suggests that perhaps he took social injustice more seriously than his many followers, or at least that he realized that we cannot discuss social justice independently of social injustice. Rawls points out that utilitarianism is susceptible to charges of injustice, since the hardships of some cannot be offset by a greater good in the aggregate: "It may be expedient but it is not just that some should have less in order that others may prosper".[7] Rawls (1972, 15) explains his reservations for utilitarianism by introducing the idea of voluntary cooperation: "The intuitive idea is that since everyone's well-being depends upon a scheme of cooperation without which no one could have a satisfactory life, the division of advantages should be such as to draw forth the willing cooperation of everyone taking part in it, including those less well situated".

Here we have the essence of social injustice according to Rawls: to be victims of arbitrary rule, and to be forced to contribute to a cooperative system against our will. Which brings us back to the question: is coronavirus a misfortune or an injustice? In terms of the timing and the molecular structure of this particular infectious virus there are elements of a misfortune, but the unequal impact of Covid-19 on society, especially on the most vulnerable members of our society, suggests that Covid-19 must be view through the lenses of a theory of social injustice. Certain underlying aspects of our unjust society have been magnified and fully exposed by Covid-19, starting from the gross inequalities that are a constant feature of every facet of the social order. Many of society's 'essential' workers during this pandemic are also some of the most vulnerable and poorly paid workers: nurses, cleaners, bus drivers, delivery drivers for gig economy companies. Across the globe, some groups have suffered disproportionally

from Covid-19, certain members of our society have been affected much worse than others, and arbitrarily so. We will return to this point later.

The Global Injustice of COVID-19: Poverty

One of the inevitable consequences of social injustice, defined in terms of domination or oppression, is the devastating (structural) inequality it engenders. As the virus progressed from an epidemic to a pandemic, those of us living in affluent societies were told that one of the most effective lines of defence at our disposal was self-isolation, and washing our hands, repeatedly, with soap. This seems easy, until you realize that globally things are different. According to a report from the World Health Organization from June 2019, some 3 billion people around the world lack basic handwashing facilities.[8] In developing countries, three-quarters of the population live in 'slums', where a slum is defined by overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation, and insecurity of tenure. As Mike Davis (2017, 13) tells us in his detailed account of slums, "there were at least 921 million slum-dwellers in 2001: nearly equal to the population of the world when the young Engels first ventured onto the mean streets of Manchester".[9] The reference here is to Friedrich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, first published in 1845.

Home to just 8 per cent of the global population, by June 2020 Latin America had suffered half the world's new coronavirus deaths. The poverty and inequality in Latin America, which forces most of its population to make a living from the informal economy (a perfect example of forced-cooperation), is a dominant reason for this recent development. In Brazil 13.6 million people live in favelas or shanty-town, roughly 6% of the population, in overcrowded basic accommodations often lacking basic sanitation. People living here cannot isolate, they cannot wash their hands, and

if they don't work they don't eat. Gilson Rodrigues, community leader in Paraisópolis, the largest favela of São Paulo, is expecting the worst: "It is here that we will have more cases [of Covid-19], in the favelas. How can an old person self-isolate in a house with ten people and two rooms? This isolation is a joke; it is for the rich. The poor cannot do it. We are going to lose a lot of people in the favelas, sadly".[10] At the end of April 2021 Brazil has had 15.2 million cases of Covid-19, and 423,000 deaths, the second highest in the world after the United States.

Not as bad as Brazil, but Peru is also in a precarious state. Apart from having one of the highest coronavirus mortality rates per capita in the world, Peru is also facing one of the most severe economic shocks in the region; The World Bank calculated a GDP decline of 17.4% in the first half of 2020, and the IMF estimates that Peru's GDP will have plunged by 14 percent by the end of 2020. 70% of Peruvians work in the informal economy and 60 percent do not have a bank account.[11]

Countries in Africa are also struggling. The devastating impact of Covid-19 on Kenya, and especially women in Kenya, is widely under-reported. When Covid-19 lockdown hit Kenya in March 2020, the resurgence of a different epidemic, this time clearly man-made, followed in its wake. As schools closed across the country, reports surged of young girls being forced to undergo child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), with unusually high number of cases of early pregnancy. Lockdown poverty has taken a severe toll on many already-struggling communities, where some underage girls have been forced into transactional sex just to buy food. Desperate families have resorted to marrying off their young daughters for the sake of valuable dowries, with some of these girls undergoing FGM as part of traditional pre-marriage customs. In addition, with the closure of the safe haven of schools, reports of sexual violence - including child rape - have increased exponentially. One Kenyan county has

reported more than 4,000 cases of teenage pregnancies since March. Although child marriage has been prohibited in Kenya since their ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, incidents many children's rights groups fear that progress made in this regard is being rapidly eroded; one national helpline has reported a more than tenfold increase in calls since lockdown began, increasing from 86 in February to over 1,100 in June.

In the last analysis, the poor are more exposed and susceptible to disease, less capable of accessing healthcare when they catch the virus, and thus more likely to pass it on.[12] As Octávio Luiz Motta Ferraz (2020) points out, the poor bear a disproportionate burden of morbidity and mortality, explained by three main disadvantages caused by poverty. First, differential exposure: unfavourable living and working conditions, and lack of education. Second, differential susceptibility: worse underlying health conditions associated with poverty, such as malnutrition, psychological stress, high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease. Third, differential access to health care. All three disadvantages are the result of arbitrariness and forced-cooperation.

The virus will have a devastating effect on all poorer nations, and the reason for this is the precarious conditions of poverty millions of people find themselves in. David Malpass, the head of the World Bank, has warned that the COVID-19 crisis could push another 60 million people into poverty, worldwide, while according to Oxfam 121 million more people face being pushed to the brink of starvation because of the COVID-19 pandemic.[13] It is not surprising that early indication suggest that this pandemic has exacerbated individual vulnerabilities to trafficking. As Idel Hanley and Jean-Pierre Gauci (2020) suggest, "increasing poverty levels and decreasing

employment opportunities risk pushing workers into illegal economies with a higher risk of exploitation and trafficking".

One reason why Covid-19 has been so devastating to the global poor is because they are victims of an arbitrary social class system, which condemns them to their subordinate position, unable to escape the poverty trap. As a result, they have no choice but to seek or continue to work, notwithstanding the risks to their health during this pandemic.

The Global Injustice of COVID-19: Vulnerable Groups

In wealthier nations things are better, but only marginally. Gender, class, race and disability are still determining factors in the identity of the worst-affected by Covid-19. Pandemics strike hardest where there is inequality and poverty, and predictably Covid-19 has had a different impact depending on the status and social class of its citizens, and often victims. There is a clear class and race divide in the Covid-19 death rate, with those in low-paid, working-class jobs clearly worse affected than those in middle and upper-class jobs, where people had the luxury to self-isolate and work from home.[14] And of course low-paid working-class jobs are not equally distributed across ethnic and racial minorities. Minority ethnic groups account for 34% of critically ill Covid-19 patients in the UK despite constituting 14% of the population. One possible explanation for this is that patients of black, Asian and minority ethnicity (BAME) live in overcrowded and poor-standard homes in geographical areas where air pollution is highest.[15]

In the UK, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that women with disabilities are 2.4 times more likely to die from Covid-19 than non-disabled women, and men with disabilities 1.9 times more likely to die than non-disabled men.[16] From

domestic violence to bearing the brunt of lay-offs, women have been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Children are also victims of Covid-19 injustice. In the UK, between April and September 2020, there were 285 reported cases of child deaths and incidents of serious harm, including child sexual exploitation. This was a rise of more than a quarter on the same period the year before.[17]

Nurses, historically amongst the worst paid members of the health system, have been expected to go out to work in hospitals and care homes even without adequate protections, as were the cleaners and other manual labourers. In the US, black Americans are dying of Covid-19 at three times the rate of white people.[18] In Poland coal mines have been badly hit by coronavirus, since social distancing is impossible in the tunnels. Of the country's more than 36,000 reported infections, about 6,500 are miners, making miners nearly one-fifth of all confirmed cases. Across Europe food delivery riders are another category of workers who were expected to work during the crisis, since food delivery was considered an essential activity, but without being given face-masks, without having the luxury of any labour rights, and being amongst the lowest-paid workers in our economy.[19] Because of the precarious nature of work in advanced capitalist societies, scores of people had no choice but to go to work, notwithstanding the high risk to their health.

The Global Injustice of COVID-19: Ethnic Minorities.

Across Europe and North America, ethnic minority groups have suffered from disproportionately higher rates of infection, serious illness, and death from Covid-19. While health is partially determined by genetics, it is also affected by structural determinants. In 2010, the World Health Organisation (WHO) published a paper which identified the five main structural determinants of health: education,

occupation, social class, gender, and race/ethnicity (Irwin and Solar 2010). The intersection of these factors is also significant; for example, men in the US are, at an aggregate level, more likely to die of COVID-19. However, Black women are more likely to die of COVID-19 than white men, and Black men are more likely to die than both (Rushovich et al. 2021). When race, occupation, and social class are factored in to such trends, the impact of social-structural determinants becomes discernible.

An individual's experience within these social structures is determined by how resources are distributed in a society; where there is a maldistribution of resources, injustice occurs. More specifically, this can be categorized as an example of Young's structural injustice. For Young, structural injustice and distributive justice are often intertwined and, as with many social injustices, incidences of maldistribution tend to disproportionately affect ethnic minorities.

Studies which have been undertaken across Europe and North America in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic indicate that ethnic minorities are over-represented in terms of infection, serious illness and death from Covid-19. For example, in Scandinavia, which has a large Somali diaspora, Somali-Swedes make up about 0.5% of the population of Sweden, but by June 2020 accounted for 5% of all confirmed cases. Similarly, in Norway, Somalians' infection rates are over 10 times the national average (Yaya et al. 2020).

The Lancet medical journal published a research paper in November 2020 based on a data pool of 18.7 million patients across the UK and US which "found increased risk of infection amongst those of Black and Asian ethnicities compared to White individuals" (Sze et al. 2020). There are a number of reasons why ethnic minorities may experience higher rates of infection, and these can be traced back to

the structural determinants of health. Occupation and social class, in particular, have a significant impact on an individual's likelihood of exposure.

Like most viruses, Covid-19 spreads more quickly in shared or crowded spaces. In Europe and North America, urbanised areas with high population density tend to have larger ethnic minority populations than rural areas. In the US for example, racial and ethnic minorities make up about 22% of the population in rural areas but 43% in urban areas - almost double the proportion (US Department of Agriculture 2018).

These highly populated areas are often associated with lower socio-economic status or poverty. Ethnic minorities are also more likely to live in overcrowded households, or in accommodation with shared facilities and communal areas (Sze et al. 2020). Such living conditions are sometimes directly linked to an occupation where employers provide shared accommodation for employees, such as the meat-packing industry in Ireland which became notorious in 2020 for its high rates of Covid-19. In Ireland, the meat-packing industry employs a workforce which is made up of 58% migrant workers, 41% of which are from non-EU states (Special Committee on Covid-19 Response debate 2020). The residency status of migrant workers is often dependant on their employment status; thus, they are more susceptible to exploitation in the form of low wages, extreme working hours, subcontracting, and lack of unionization (Covid-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses and meat processing plants 2020). Significantly, 80-90% of workers in the Irish meat-packing industry have no entitlement to sick pay, which disincentivises employees to report symptoms of Covid-19. In Denmark by contrast, only a handful of Covid-19 cases have been reported in the meat industry. The meat industry sector in Denmark is characterized by health and safety precautions, strong union membership and no subcontracting. Austria and Sweden have employed similar measures to Denmark and witnessed similar results.

More broadly, ethnic minority individuals are more likely to be employed as essential workers during the pandemic, in sectors such as healthcare, retail, security, or transport (Sze et al. 2020). Road transport drivers, such as chauffeurs or taxi drivers, have had one of the highest rates of Covid-19 deaths in the UK; 1 in 3 workers in this area are Bangladeshi or Pakistani (Office for National Statistics 2020). As they are less likely to be in a position to work from home, ethnic minorities face additional risks of increased social exposure and public transport.

The higher rates of serious illness and death from Covid-19 can be linked to the higher rates of infection, but even accounting for this, disparities remain. In the US, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that several states show extreme disparities in deaths. In Illinois, for example, African-Americans make up 16% of the state population but account for 37% of all confirmed cases within the state and 45% of Covid-19 deaths. In Michigan, a state with a 15% African-American population, African-Americans made up 33% of Covid-19 cases and 50% Covid-19 related deaths (Yaya et al. 2020).

Another study by the CDC, published in November 2020, indicates a correlation between being a member of a minority group and higher likelihood of serious illness or death from Covid-19 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). For example, Native Americans and Hispanic persons are four times more likely to be hospitalised due to Covid-19, as opposed to a white or non-Hispanic person. Also, Native Americans are 2.6 times more likely to die from Covid-19, and Black, African-American or Hispanic persons are 2.8 times more likely to die from Covid-19. All minority groups mentioned are also more likely to contract Covid-19 in the first place (1.4-1.8%) but this is significantly lower than the mortality rate for these groups, which indicates that even if you factor-in the increased cases, Black, African American,

Native American, and Hispanic persons are all more likely to die of Covid-19 than a white, non-Hispanic American. The conditions which cause Covid-19 to spread, such as overcrowded spaces, are more likely to be experienced by Black, African-American and Hispanic Americans who are more likely to live in urban areas and under poorer conditions than a white American.

Aside from the health effects of Covid-19, lockdown regulations have had a disproportionate effect on ethnic minorities. An Amnesty International report found that in London, Metropolitan Police recorded a 22% rise in stop-and-searches in the first two months of the pandemic lockdown. Within this group, the proportion of Black people who were searched rose by almost one third. Similarly, in Belgium NGO reports in March 2020 indicated a much stronger police presence and enforcement of lockdown measures in working class areas. During this period, 40% of abusive police practices between March 18th and May 29th 2020 were against ethnic minority individuals (Policing the Pandemic- Human rights violations in the enforcement of COVID-19 measures in Europe 2020).

Lockdown regulations have also led to racial disparities in more subtle ways. People living in urban areas or in overcrowded spaces are unlikely to be able to take exercise or avail of fresh air within the parameters of their home. These factors tend to correlate with race and ethnicity- for example, Black people in Britain are four times more likely to have no outdoor space in their home than White people (Office for National Statistics 2020). Thus, individuals face greater exposure to both Covid-19 and law enforcement inspections.

The Way Forward

A vaccine will, one hopes, immunize us from the virus, but it takes more to immunize society from social injustice. Next time a pandemic unfolds – and there will be other pandemics – we may find ourselves hopelessly unprepared unless we get out house in order, globally, in terms of social justice.

In order to remedy the inequalities generated by the current system of social injustice, radical changes are necessary. A comprehensive redistribution of wealth is imperative. Oxfam's *The Inequality Virus* report, published on January 25 2021, highlights how the world's 1,000 richest people had recouped their Covid-19 losses within just nine months, while it could take more than a decade for the world's poorest to recover economically from the pandemic. According to Oxfam (2021), Covid-19 has the potential to increase economic inequality in almost every country at once, the first time this has happened since records began over a century ago.

In the United States billionaires saw their wealth increase by $1.1 trillion, or almost 40%, during the first 10 months of the coronavirus pandemic, the solution to global social injustice is obvious for anyone to see. The Americans for Tax Fairness (ATF) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) reported that there have been 46 new billionaires in the US since the beginning of the pandemic. The top five billionaires include Tesla CEO and SpaceX founder Elon Musk, Amazon CEO and founder Jeff Bezos, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and investor guru Warren Buffett. The wealth of America's 660 billionaires is also 70% higher than the $2.4 trillion in wealth held by the bottom half of the US population, which is 165 million Americans, ATF And IPS said. In the UK, the 'Wealth Tax Commission', launched by researchers from the London School of Economics and Warwick University, concluded that a 5% tax on assets over £500,000 would raise £260bn, just

20bn short of the £280bn deficit built up during the coronavirus pandemic, according to a report published today.[20]

Increasing the rate of taxation, especially for the mega-rich, will be necessary to pay for radical policies, for example an unconditional (but not necessarily universal) basic income. One of the advantages of basic income is that it is not means-tested, therefore avoiding the stigma of receiving charity from the state. But basic income need not only be an extreme measure to be wheeled-in during desperate times; we need to rethink the basic axioms of our economy, starting from the premise that there are simply not enough jobs to go around, and those who are lucky enough to have a job will have to contribute through higher taxes so that everyone has a chance to live with dignity, and have real opportunities.

Three experts on basic income, Jamie Cooke, Jurgen De Wispelaere and Ian Orton offer a convincing argument why there is a unique window of opportunity for introducing basic income, due to the co-existence of three conditions that have never occurred simultaneously in recent social history. First, Covid-19 impacts the whole population (albeit in decidedly unequal ways) and not merely an easily identifiable segment or group. Second, the frequent practice of blaming the victim (the poor, the unemployed, the sick and the disabled, and of course the immigrant) for their dire circumstances is rendered moot when the root cause is a major external shock, in this case a pandemic. Third, Covid-19 has caused an almost global u-turn on the dominant imperative of budget balancing and appears to have sent the austerity paradigm governing social spending in the past decade into oblivion. They are right: basic income could be one of the best things to come out of this global tragedy.

To those who reject basic income because it is too radical, and expensive, it is possible to introduce basic income gradually, by making it unconditional but not

universal. To be precise, in the first stage basic income could be introduced not to all citizens or residents, but only those in a certain age group. This idea finds validation in recent comments made by Olivier De Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. At a press conference in Brussels on 29 January 2021, on the occasion of preliminary findings presented in this end-of-mission statement as Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights to the institutions of the European Union, De Schutter said that while he holds some reservations, on gender grounds, over a universal basic income, he would endorse a basic income for the age group 18-25.[21]

Another policy that must be considered in the post Covid-19 world is what is known as Community Wealth Building. The basic idea of this theory is to shift the emphasis from redistribution to predistribution: with redistribution great inequalities are allowed to be generated in the capitalist economy, and then the state intervenes to claw back some of these inequalities through taxes, while the idea of predestribution is to engineer markets to create fairer outcomes from the beginning. Similarly, the idea of Community Wealth Building is to redesign core institutional relationships of the economy, especially at the local level, in order to produce more egalitarian outcomes as part of the economy's routine operations. The key to Community Wealth Building is to introduce democratic collective ownership of the local economy, including worker cooperatives, community land trusts, and public and community banking.

Unlike multinationals, who blackmail countries with the persistent threat of moving to the next tax-haven to take advantage of more advantageous offers, until a better offer comes along, Community Wealth Building is centred around large non-profit and quasi- public institutions, like hospitals and universities. These are known

as *anchor institutions* because they are rooted in place and aren't likely to up and leave. Community Wealth Building is a crucial framework for engendering economic democracy, where ownership is vested in community stakeholders, profits are reinvested locally, and local publics can exert democratic control over local government. The aspirations of Community Wealth Building are perfectly captured by Joe Guinan and Martin O'Neill (2020, 115-6): "At a time of renewed crisis and uncertainty on both sides of the Atlantic, the outlines of a new economic paradigm are beginning to take shape. Community Wealth Building is where this next system begins….we can aim to generate the fundamental transformation of our political economy that we so urgently need. A the long dark night of neoliberalism comes to a close, radical economic change appears once again to be within our grasp".

Conclusion

Covid-19 has fully exposed the true character of our society: its remorseless injustice. No one is responsible for the fact that viruses exist, nor for the fact that some viruses are more harmful than others, but collectively we are responsible for the fact that pandemic preparedness plans were grossly insufficient, and the response to the crisis almost totally inadequate. Not to mention the fact that across the globe, bar a few exceptions, decades of many years of privatisations and austerity have left many countries ill-prepared to deal with this major crisis. This is where injustice creeps in.

The structural injustice of modern society, where a tiny minority benefits disproportionately at the expense of the rest of humanity, and the political class puts the interests of the top 1% wealthiest people before the other 99% of the population, has been magnified during this pandemic for all to see. All the inequalities, biases, prejudices, and wrongs of modern society have been irrevocably exposed by Covid-19. Unconditional Basic Income and Community Wealth Building are only two radical

suggestions for rebuilding society on a more equal footing. Covid-19 has laid bare the injustice of our current society, and the deadly reality of gross inequalities. In the last analysis, the best vaccine against inevitable future pandemics is less inequality and more social justice.

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NOTES:

[1] Amartya Sen (1981) argues that famines are not caused by scarcity of food supply, but by political factors. Democracies do not always solve all the problems hunger and malnutrition, nevertheless famines are less likely to occur in democracies.

[2] In January 2021 a World Health Organization (WHO) team of 10 scientists arrived in Wuhan to start its investigation into the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic. This trip occurred only after many months of negotiation with the Chinese authorities, who initially had refused the WHO access to Wuhan. Apparently, China wanted to avoid more foreign blame for the outbreak of this pandemic.

[3] Heinz (2013, 6): "We overlook the reach and the complexity of injustice, we impoverish our understanding of it, when we instinctively obey the arbitrary dictates of etymology, theorising injustice as a sheer negation of something else".

[4] This reversal of roles has the approval of another influential political philosopher Nancy Fraser (2012, 43): "we do experience injustice, and it is only through this that we form an idea of justice . . . Only when we contemplate what it would take to overcome injustice does our otherwise abstract concept of justice acquire any content".

[5] For an account of social injustice in terms of maldistribution, exclusion and disempowerment, see Bufacchi (2012), Ch.1. On poverty and injustice see Schweiger (2020).

[6] On the republican conception of arbitrariness, see Lovett (2020, 96): "let us define social power as arbitrary to the extent that its potential exercise is not externally constrained by

effective rules, procedures, or goals that are common knowledge of all persons or groups concerned. Arbitrariness, so defined, is not merely an excessive form of discretion".

[7] Ibid., p.15.

[8] On the lack of access to clean water, see: https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/18-06-2019-1-in-3-people-globally-do-not-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-unicef-who

[9] Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso 2017, p.13.

[10] Quoted in Ferez (2020).

[11] The World Bank in Peru: https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/peru/overview

[12] On Kenya and COVID-19, see Bhalle (2020 & 2020a); Wadekar (2020).

[13] The World Bank has so far loaned money to about 100 countries, accounting for 70% of the world's population, but that may not be enough.

[14] On the class divide in the COVID-19 death rate, see: https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-class-divide-the-jobs-most-at-risk-of-contracting-and-dying-from-COVID-19-138857?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1589893703

[15] On the possible link between ethnic minorities, air pollution, and COVID-19 in the UK, see: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/19/COVID-19-impact-on-ethnic-minorities-linked-to-housing-and-air-pollution

[16] On COVID-19 and disability, see: https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/coronavirus-academics-call-for-urgent-inquiry-into-deaths/

[17] Covid: The devastating toll of the pandemic on children: https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55863841

[18] On the divide in the COVID-19 death rate in the US between black Americans and the rest of the nation, see: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/20/black-americans-death-rate-COVID-19-coronavirus

[19] On how COVID-19 is putting food delivery riders at serious health risk, see Caterina Morbiato (2020).

[20] https://www.ft.com/content/36c35939-c06e-4758-8dcd-711d083f4192?shareType=nongift.

[21] Statement by Olivier De Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, on his visit to the European Union (25 November 2020 to 29 January 2021): https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26693&LangID=E