

Concept Paper

Learning for the Future beyond COVID-19: A Critical Alternative to the Neoliberal Model of Development

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Abstract: This paper reviews how COVID-19 became a global pandemic, why we now have to live with it, and what needs to be done to stop viruses going global in the future. Specifically, it argues that the still prevailing neoliberal model of development combined with related forms of class structure and ideological struggle all but guaranteed that the priorities of global capital and its agents, along with COVID-19, would win out in the end. Vaccinations have become the only path for resolving the tension between neoliberal capitalism and COVID-19 suppression. However, they take time to develop, are hampered by the capitalist model of vaccine production and distribution, and face a resistant alienated precariat. As a critical alternative, this article explores the neoliberal model of development's democratic socialist transformation with particular reference to the prevention of global pandemics.

Keywords: COVID-19; neoliberal model of development; democratic socialist model of development; class; ideology; anomie; moral regulation



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1. Introduction

The “neoliberal model of development” comprises a global market regulatory form of capitalism that defines the terrain of capital accumulation, which centrally comprises global production and distribution circuits plus tourist-led service sectors [1]. This mode of globalization, that spreads things and people backwards and forwards between and within nation states, initially carried the virus to the countries of the world. In turn, nation states that have become increasingly integrated into this global market economy and thus less and less self-sufficient, cannot quickly decouple and switch to localized regimes of accumulation. In short, they face economic problems when they close their borders, but they must close them if they are to stop the virus spreading into the local community. The longer a country closes its borders, the greater the economic, as well as social and political, fallout. In the end, keeping secure borders has proved unsustainable because countries are dependent on remaining open to the world.

Through under-estimation of the threat and inadequate border closing strategies, the virus has streamed into many countries. Subsequently, many countries have adopted inadequate strategies to stop the local spread. The world's hegemon USA, especially during Trump's presidency, is the classic example of all of these problems. Beyond the success of authoritarian regimes not discussed here, only a few state-led national movements of coordinated solidarity or compliance were able to quickly eliminate COVID-19's first wave community spread and thus avoid serious economic fallout. However, in a world where the virus has spread nearly everywhere, even limited international interaction has meant that the borders in such countries would be breached again, thus forcing another round of community trench warfare with COVID-19. As local economic and social hardships increased and multiplied with each new wave of incoming infections, that to make matters worse has mutated into much more infectious variants, the elimination strategy has been revealed as only a means of buying time before vaccinations came on-line.

Promoted by the failure to eliminate community spread and the coming on-line of vaccines, the “return to normalcy” project is now winning out everywhere including in those countries that had done well in stamping out the initial spread. Specifically, across the advanced capitalist countries governments are negotiating an emerging consensus between business, health professionals, and much of the broader population that combines a hard push to maximize vaccination rates with a staggered return to “business as usual”.

Nonetheless, the vaccination strategy is problematic in this neoliberal world of unequal development. For the Global South, the problem is the lack of vaccine supplies. They are last in the vaccine queue because the pharmaceutical industry is driven by profit and the Global North gets preferential treatment [2]. However, once the virus begins to spread through the population, it can mutate and then spread back to the global North. Furthermore, although there is adequate supply in the advanced capitalist countries, they are confronted with a heterogeneous minority, over-represented by the precarious and alienated who continue to be non-compliant. The problem is that avoiding overwhelming national spread requires high levels of vaccine compliance amongst the population. Finally, these problems will have to be confronted repeatedly because vaccines are not long lasting or completely effective and as the virus mutates may require new vaccine formulations.

In sum, this very infectious virus that has been able to spread and mutate across this neoliberal-led capitalist world of internationally divided and unevenly developed countries has rendered closed borders and lockdowns ultimately ineffective for all countries. Advanced capitalist countries are moving decisively to primary reliance on vaccinations. This reliance legitimates a new kind of neoliberal abnormal normalcy where the return to free movement within and between countries combines with acceptance that COVID-19 is here to stay. For the countries of the Global South, the reality is grimmer. Although in the most need due to economic vulnerability, inadequate health systems, and large poor and slum populations, they are without adequate vaccine access. Especially in terms of the situation of the alienated and vulnerable precariat, the Global South situation resonates with many of the more neoliberalized countries of the Global North. Nonetheless, the return to normalcy with COVID-19 gathers steam as health-first closedowns viciously interact with growing economic instability that even before the virus was threatening to become another global economic crisis.

The existing literature on COVID-19 that is growing every day covers many, including epidemiological, psychological, sociological, geographical, political-economic, disciplines. This article’s conceptual approach is situated within critical political economy perspectives, which it draws on, but it also builds specifically on the author’s existing research agenda that goes beyond much of the existing literature. In particular, this article offers a global overview perspective of COVID-19 that is rooted in the author’s conception of a ‘model of development’ that builds beyond methodologically nationalist and praxis-free standard regulation theory [1,3,4]. It argues, innovatively, that COVID-19 is the latest expression of the catastrophic failure of the “neoliberal model of development” that is driving a planet-wide descent towards collapse. In this respect, this article brings in a “methodological trans-nationalism” beyond the “methodological nationalism” that dominates existing literatures, especially the influential critical geography perspective that flows through into the examination of COVID-19. In this later approach, neoliberalization and COVID-19 are examined as two spreading viruses, evolving “in different ways in different contexts” in “co-pathogenic interaction” that have resulted in global health insecurities [5,6].

By stylistically overviewing key developments within the terms of its innovative conceptual framework, this paper outlines elements of a novel mid-range argument regarding the major global contours of the context and process of COVID-19’s social transmission across the world. Within the context of the unfolding ‘neoliberal model of development’, the paper makes a broad distinction between the Global North, comprising the wealthy industrially advanced capitalist democracies, and the Global South, that most clearly refers to the poor and uncompetitive ‘underdeveloped’ countries. It also offers a broad global class analysis, unavoidably without detailed quantitative description, of the process of

virus transmission and associated ideological struggles around social distancing and vaccinations. This conceptual paper demonstrates the need and agenda for, but does not actually deliver, detailed empirical comparative investigation of the countries of the world. Nonetheless, its critical focus on key problems of the neoliberal model of development central to why we have lost the war on COVID-19, raise fundamental themes regarding the need for, and the general characteristics of, an alternative model of development.

The author's perspective though drawing on, also goes beyond the growing Marxist literature on COVID-19 (e.g., [7]) by focusing much more persistently on a mid-range perspective whose ultimate focus is on the possibility of consciously making another world based in the democratic socialist transformation of the neoliberal model of development. The neoliberal causes of the present global pandemic gripping the whole of human civilization point viscerally towards the urgency of formulating and pursuing an alternative democratic socialist model of development. In short, with specific reference to COVID-19, this article focuses on the alternative that is in the critique of the neoliberal model of capitalist development and its associated ideology. It makes the case that this neoliberal project is responsible for COVID-19 becoming a global pandemic that we will just have "to learn to live with". This general argument is examined through the major pre-vaccination and vaccination stages of the struggle against COVID-19. It is organized in terms of an "alternative is in the critique" approach that moves from regulation theory themes of "accumulation regime" and "mode of regulation" to then bring in themes of class structure, class struggle, and the war of ideological position. The concluding discussion revisits the article's primary argument with particular reference to an alternative model of development that could prevent global pandemics in the future.

2. The General Argument for a Critical Alternative to the Neoliberal Model of Development

In standard regulation theory, a "model of development" refers to a "mode of regulation", or ensemble of laws, policies, and norms, which defines the institutional terrain on which unfolds an "accumulation regime" understood as a dynamically reproducing pattern of production, investment, and consumption [8–10]. The standard approach, however, is constrained by "methodological nationalism" and an over-emphasis on "political contingency" as a process of "accidental discovery". In contrast, in the non-standard approach adopted here, a model of development refers to a consciously designed and calculated trans-national project to get countries to adopt a national regulatory template. Widespread adoption of this prescribed template as a national mode of regulation creates the terrain on which unfolds a national–trans-national regime of accumulation that sets the priorities and constraints of capitalist agency, and in turn, national economic agency. Further, the revised approach offered here distinguishes between the postwar Keynesian-led "Fordist model of development" and rather than a post-Fordist era without a model of development as in the standard view, treats the post-1980s as being dominated by the "neoliberal model of development". In historical practice, national–trans-national connections deliberately constructed as a conscious praxis rather than "accidentally discovered" commonly define both models of development. However, while the former Keynesian model "counteracted", the later neoliberal model has "proactivated", capital logic [1,3].

At Bretton Woods, Keynes pushed for the widespread adoption of his national-centric regulatory template that restrained international capital and facilitated local national accumulation. In contrast, the neoliberal model of development has directly reversed the Keynesian direction. Under the auspices of the "Washington Consensus", UN regulatory agencies of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the World Trade Organization have successfully sought the widespread adoption of its national template that has opened up countries to the unimpeded movement of capital across and within national borders. In aggregate, this project has created the regulatory terrain of global market competition between capitalist firms, and in turn, "locational competition" between countries. This model of development has unleashed the unfolding of a highly unstable and

crisis-ridden planetary regime of accumulation. Consequences include deepening uneven development between and within countries, a growing relative surplus population, recurring economic crises, deepening competition and mistrust between countries and an associated rise of “regressive nationalism”, rapidly deteriorating planet-wide ecological integrity, and now a global pandemic [4,11].

The general argument applied specifically here to COVID-19 is as follows. The neoliberal model of development has created the terrain on which has unfolded global circuits of accumulation that move people backwards and forwards across the planet and thereby rapidly spread the virus. The WHO struggles to lead a coordinated international effort to stop the virus because it is both underfunded and undermined by the competitive imperatives and ethos unleashed globally and locally by the neoliberal model of development. It also confronts a trans-national regime of accumulation that undermines sustainable local accumulation and instead creates global market dependency, thereby making it economically unsustainable for countries to decouple from capital’s global circuits that spread the virus. Fighting the virus within countries is hampered not only by local capital’s dependence on extensive human movement, but also by the contemporary neoliberal-led nature of class structure and ideological struggle within nation states. This general critique, that points directly towards the urgency of constructing and deploying an alternative model of development, is now applied to accumulation, regulation, class structure, and ideological struggle.

2.1. Neoliberal-Led Mode of Global Material Accumulation Regime Spreads the Virus: Glocalization Is the Alternative

The neoliberal-led globalization of capital accumulation has created a world where national survival is dependent on maintaining viable positions in a world of global market standards of global market competitiveness [1,4]. Viability manifests in terms of the form of globalized production and distribution chains and for which countries are its geopolitical links. That is, countries unevenly house different specialized segments of globally networked circuits of production, and secure different shares of the globalized tourist driven service sector chain. National economic viability has become dependent on being able to house sufficient niches of globally competitive production and tourists that will bring in more revenue than the cost of importing everything else. Countries, dependently integrated into this global framework of accumulation, lose any semblance of local self-sufficiency such that economic instability will follow quickly if a country seeks to seal its borders.

Countries thus face a zero-sum trade-off situation. On the one hand, they are inextricably integrated into the economic logic of neoliberal globalization that entails the free movement of people across and within national borders. Accumulation occurs as a complexly integrated global division and distribution of production and services that integrally involves high levels of international movement amongst the population. It includes moving occupations such as in transportation, seafaring, and air travel. It also includes international movement of cosmopolitan middle class tourists, managerial coordinators of globally mobile capital, and competitors in professionalized global sports. As well, because of the globalization of the labor market, it also includes movement of globally scarce skilled workers, tradespeople, professionals, as well as seasonal workers imported from lower waged countries. As a function of this extensive global flow of people unleashed by neoliberal globalization, COVID-19 spreads to the countries of the world. However, on the other hand, in order to prevent the incoming flow of the virus, nation states must stop this inflow of people from beyond its borders on which it is economically dependent.

Global and thus local economic viability is dependent on the smooth functioning of this complexly interdependent system of globally integrated accumulation that looks a lot like the Japanese model of lean production writ large [12]. While more flexible than the single integrated assembly line system of Fordist mass production lean, “Just In Time” inventory systems are much more fragile than the more forgiving “Just In Case”

inventory systems of Fordism that can function as built-in buffers to counteract temporary disruptions in the chain of supply. Moreover, especially when raised to being a global framework for organizing the accumulation of many different products across globally dispersed geographical locations, the “Just In Time” lean production paradigm is revealed to be unwieldy, fragile, and inflexible, and unable to adapt to shocks that disrupt links in the chain. Without the free movement of people, and integrally as people fall sick with COVID-19, then steps in the global supply chain of the neoliberal mode of capital accumulation break down [13].

While the lean production model makes segments of the assembly chain temporarily independent of each other in order to deal with disruptions elsewhere in the process, this simply does not translate into a global supply chain scenario of a global pandemic. That is, when the links in the accumulation chain that are geographically dispersed across the planet are disrupted by border closures, then the whole system breaks down. In addition, countries understood as the geographical expression of these links cannot just decouple from this global network and switch to a locally self-sufficient alternative. There is no Plan B; the world’s population spread across the countries of the planet are all materially dependent on the continuation of this globally integrated capital accumulation framework. Thus, while the only sure way to keep COVID-19 out at the national level is to keep borders closed, this globally integrated accumulation system requires national borders to be open. COVID-19 thereby reveals that this globally integrated system of accumulation, which also has numerous other including ecological problems, is fragile, unwieldy, and inflexible.

However, immaterially, the neoliberal form of economic globalization is inefficiently perpetuating uneven development across countries by constraining the maximal spread of knowledge to the world’s population. That is, the neoliberal mission to privatize almost everything, from space to DNA to knowledge, is a serious restraint on efficient immaterial globalization that perpetuates uneven development. Further, unlike material globalization, immaterial globalization does not spread viruses.

The alternative is in the critique. Rather than globally integrated material accumulation coordinated by privatized knowledge, the way forward is encapsulated in the concept of ‘cosmopolitan glocalization’. More specifically, the alternative accumulation paradigm proposed would be based in a global project underpinned by an ethos of global cooperation and institutions of shared knowledge that would prioritize where practically possible the capacity of countries to flexibly and independently develop sustainable local accumulation regimes. The accumulation paradigm envisaged is one where globally coordinated knowledge and expertise would be made universally available to inform and develop local forms of material production. In a direct reversal of the present neoliberal model of accumulation, the intensified globalization of knowledge would drive locally distributed systems of production. Priority would be given to material viability and human security beginning with the poorest and most dysfunctional countries of the Global South. With input from UN-centered knowledge and expertise, countries could develop on their own terms diverse and ecologically sustainable local food regimes, eco-friendly forms of human-centered shelter, UBI distribution mechanisms, local education systems based in universal access to the world’s diverse knowledge, and vibrant socialized health systems [4,11].

This model of glocalized accumulation would also be highly effective in dealing with global pandemics. First, it would ensure that countries could maintain economic viability while being able to quickly and sustainably close down their national borders in order to prevent local virus infiltration. If a virus did penetrate national borders, universal local material security, the central goal of this alternative model of glocalization, is the best foundation for being able to sustain lockdowns because it is the basic condition for ensuring all members of society can viably isolate. Finally, in the worst-case scenario, the proposed regime of glocal accumulation would function to ensure even and maximum production of vaccines. Such a model that showcases glocalization is already something that the World Health Organization has considered in the past but has had neither the resources nor the ideological mandate to pursue in practice [14]. Under the auspices of

what elsewhere the author has named the “World Knowledge Bank” [15], the World Health Organization could procure vaccine designs that could be dispersed to local manufacturing plants [14]. Such a glocalized mode of accumulation would both increase and even out global supply of vaccines across the countries of the world. Combined with universally viable local accumulation regimes, such a system of vaccine production would be able to prevent scenarios like the present conjuncture in which a virus that, because never contained in Global South countries, will continue to mutate and spread around the planet.

2.2. The Neoliberal-Led Regulatory Framework Creates a World of Competition: When We Need Coordinated Cooperation

The neoliberal-led regime of global accumulation is underpinned by a global regulatory framework based in the widespread adoption of its national template that opens countries up to the free movement of capital. This national–trans-national mode of regulation generates for capital a world in which competition can come from anywhere, but also a world in which countries must compete with each other to win a viable share of this globally mobile capital. This framework decouples capital from countries that are subordinated to its imperatives. It also pits countries against each other in a form of “locational competition” to house segments of global production. Further, because as the population surplus to capital’s requirements grows capital becomes scarcer, locational competition is zero-sum [1,16]. In short, the neoliberal model of development has created a world of aggressive competition that actually punishes cooperation. This framework and its corresponding worldview also dominate the institutions of the United Nations while its founding principles of democratic cooperation, inclusive solidarity, and universal wellbeing presently function just as obscuring window dressing. Furthermore, this form of locational competition is also a central structural driver behind the current xenophobic and racist Alt. Right form of ‘regressive nationalism’ [11].

While competition can be a strong performance motivator, under the neoliberal model of development it has become a dominating survival imperative that is destructively aggressive and negates cooperative efficiencies that are especially important in times of crisis that require unity of purpose. In these neoliberal times of viciously interacting crises, the current regulatory framework of aggressive competition between countries is deeply counterproductive. Under this neoliberal model of development, countries constantly confront zero-sum trade-offs between what is in the human collective global interest and what is in their narrow short-term national interest. Words of cooperation often hide a cynical mindset that considers trusting each other as naïve and that has become habitually embedded. The neoliberal regulatory framework and its associated mentality undermine both capacity and willingness to cooperate in order to overcome a common threat or enemy such as COVID-19.

Relatedly, the neoliberal regulatory framework also undermines the capacity of the World Health Organization to lead a strategy of coordinated cooperation to meet a common alien threat. The World Health Organization is underfunded, without clear United Nations institutional support, and relatedly, is without a clear mandate from the world’s countries. Furthermore, the world’s failing hegemon, USA, is the key underwriter of the neoliberal model of development, but until recently has even abdicated that responsibility because they were led by an aggressive “regressive nationalist” [11].

The alternative is in the critique. Rather than ruled by a mode of competitive regulation, a globally sustainable human civilization needs an alternative model of national–trans-national cooperative regulation to which competition can be subordinated. Such a mode of regulation would reverse “neoliberal multilateralism” that subordinates countries to the will of capital and replace it with a “social democratic multilateralism” that subordinates capital to the will of countries [11]. Key to “social democratic multilateralism” is trans-national agreements between countries that move them towards establishing shared principles to which each country’s national regulatory framework would adhere. These would include shared ecological and decent employment standards, so that capital could

not push standards down by playing countries off against each other. Having common goals regarding the dimensions of basic universal material security would also imply a shared commitment to promoting local self-sufficiency within a framework of glocalization. This means that countries would each have the local flexibility within shared international agreements to protect and promote the development of local regimes of flexible accumulation. This flexibility would involve selective import controls to protect local autocentric accumulation and the capacity to reject products not produced according to agreed standards, while also giving countries the flexibility to import products that they are unable to produce locally [4,11].

This model of development presupposes the cosmopolitan democratic transformation of the United Nations and its various agencies. Of particular importance would be the transformation of its present economic regulatory agencies. Given the mandate by a genuinely cosmopolitan democratic federation of United Nations, such institutions would seek to promote and facilitate the national regulatory templates of social democratic multilateralism and the cooperative development of local accumulation modes. In addition, a “World Knowledge Bank” would seek to procure knowledge that would become the common property of all humanity, and in addition, such an agency would combine this knowledge with resources and expertise that would help facilitate countries to develop their own efficient and ecological sustainable local accumulation regimes [15,17]. This is not about imposing a model of production on to countries. Rather, it is about helping countries to develop, on their own terms, sustainable ways of living that can prioritize local food regimes, sustainable shelter, local health institutions including the development of local manufacturing plants for vaccines, and education models that could draw freely on the world’s knowledge. In sum, the proposed regulatory framework would systematically transform the anti-local model of neoliberal competition into a framework of cooperative nationalism and cosmopolitan coordination that would also be exactly appropriate for preventing viruses becoming global pandemics.

2.3. From Class Structure to Class Struggle in the War against COVID-19

Contra the *Communist Manifesto* scenario but following Marx’s implicit analysis in *Capital Vol. 1*, capitalism’s mature class structure comprises the distribution of the laboring population into three major groups: knowledge workers, the industrial working class (“Active Army”), and the “relative surplus population”. This later group refers to those made redundant relative to capital’s needs because of the introduction of “self-acting machinery” [18]. It is segmented and includes the “Reserve Army” of labor that intersects with the Active Army, as well as the “lumpen proletariat” and the destitute [16,18,19].

Under the neoliberal mode of uneven development, the relative surplus population has grown as the coercive whip of technological competition making labor redundant has extended to apply across the whole planet. This development has generated a zero-sum competition between countries that arises from a viciously interacting causality between labor in oversupply, and capital that is thus made scarce [1,19]. The relative surplus population bears the brunt of resulting wage declines and the related facilitating of “labor market flexibility” policies and welfare policy retrenchment. Workers in the Global North are subject to the redundancy effects of both automation and de-industrialization as capital moves to newly industrializing low wage countries. In the Global South, the peasantry, still the largest social grouping in the world, is violently brought into this redundancy process due to the neoliberal-led global unleashing of technological competition in agriculture. This redundant population trudges into the growing slumlands of the cities. The capitalist class has also become highly segmented. It includes those at the apex of the power and wealth structure of multi-national corporations. However, it also includes the “contradictory class positions” of knowledge workers who perform capitalist functions but are also being precariorised, and small businesses and the self-employed or “own account workers” that grow, and whose experience overlap, with the relative surplus population.

This global class structure is unevenly overlaid and intersected by culturally, politically, and ideologically inflected social divisions between and within nations. Within countries, subordinated cultures are overrepresented in the relative surplus population. Raced and gendered class structures are also overlaid by the divisions within a prevailing hegemonic project between the “securiat”, the “social bloc” of secure and advantaged groups who are integrated into and supported by the prevailing project, and the “precariat” whose core is in the relative surplus population and who are outside of the prevailing hegemony [20–22]. This insecure and disadvantaged precariat is vulnerable, marginalized, and alienated from the dominant structures and systems of the prevailing hegemony.

Common features, though unevenly variegated across and within the strata of relative surplus populations of unevenly developed countries, are poverty, employment and income precarity, insecure and unhealthy shelter, and living in competition with each other for scarce work. This complexly class structured and competitively divided distribution of the world’s population also presents as a highly unequal distribution of wealth, welfare, and security. At its bottom is a stratified relative surplus population whose circumstances are characterized by deep poverty and everyday uncertainty. For the most desperate strata living in the streets of the large city slums of the Global South without steady employment or housing and for whom food needs to be procured daily, social distancing and self-isolation are unrealistic. In addition, the countries in the Global South with less developed health and social security systems cannot provide short-term welfare, or offer adequate hospital service, and for whom the vaccine is still unavailable. The tragic irony of the present situation in the Global North is that the relative surplus population, defined here as the most precariously located and therefore the most vulnerable, are also the most alienated, implying lower trust in government. Vulnerability to COVID-19, that follows this stratified social division of vulnerability that resonates with the division of the population into the vaccinated and the unvaccinated, is increasingly central to why the epidemic continues to rage in both the Global South and the Global North.

Especially in the Global South, this social division resonates most strongly with the internationally uneven division of wealth leading to vaccine undersupply that most strongly affects the relative surplus population. However, especially in the Global North, the most vulnerable within the relative surplus population are likely to be suspicious of the vaccine. That is, this core precariat, at the very bottom of which are the destitute and homeless, has reason to be suspicious because it is alienated from the mainstream middle class inflected habituses that pervade prevailing education and health systems.

Marx’s early work [23] emphasizes how capitalist production relations are the source of alienation that is both self-estrangement and estrangement towards others. Following on, Durkheim’s classic work on alienation, or what he names as “anomie”, refers more specifically to atomized, lonely socially disconnected people that results when there is not, or they are not part of, widely shared integrating values or “moral regulation”. In short, alienation or anomie arises for those without the unifying solidarity of “moral regulation”. The term “system anomie” is introduced here as referring to people’s disconnection from the “moral regulation” of prevailing hegemonic institutions and discourses.

The key problem in this present context is that to eliminate COVID-19 from the community, by means of social distancing and vaccinations, requires a movement of unified solidarity across the whole population that in turn is premised on universal awareness and trusting acceptance of hegemonic socially integrative system discourses and institutions. However, the population, divided between those with permanent secure employment and income, and those in the relative surplus population located outside or on the margins of organized capitalism, manifests as differing levels of precarity/security that unevenly overlaps with differing levels of system integration/alienation.

Mid-range capitalist projects differ in the extent to which they unify or divide the population. The pre-neoliberal project of the Keynesian welfare state, driven by an inclusive vision of social democracy that spreads free health and education and radically reduced the size of the precariat while also reducing the wealth and power of the capitalist class,

generated a form of society characterized by security, integration, and solidarity. As well, the dominant perspective of the “expertocracy” located within the legitimized systems of the state–capital–science complex was largely unchallenged and trusted by the population. In short, there was unified “moral regulation” and low “system anomie”.

In contrast, the neoliberal model of development has moved the world in exactly the opposite direction, towards an increasing proportion of the population susceptible to “system anomie” combined with declining “moral regulation”. Growing social fragmentation and deepening inequality follows the form of the class structure under the neoliberal model of development that grounds system anomie. Ideologically, neoliberal values of individualism and competition have undermined solidarity and trust. Further, especially since the birth of the internet, the exponential rise in the number and availability of competing narratives has filled the emptying space of shared values due to declining hegemonic socially integrative discourse or “moral regulation”. For those already disconnected from the prevailing hegemonic discourse, this fracturing of a singular common sense view of the truth, or what can be called the “postmodern malaise”, presents as a smorgasbord of anti-hegemonic discourses that replaces the unifying discourse of solidarity or “moral regulation”. The war against COVID-19 is being waged on this highly fractured and divided social terrain. Rather than solidarity and a unity of purpose, central preconditions for winning a war, this competitive, unequal, disconnected, alienating, and divisive terrain is a recipe for social conflict and the unsustainability of a unified solidarity.

Competition and division within and between the national societies in this neoliberal era strongly indicate that COVID-19 will remain in global circulation indefinitely. Moreover, without the neoliberal model of development’s democratic socialist transformation, humanity will remain susceptible to the global spread and embedding of more viruses. In the immediate present, the ideological war of position overlaying this complex class structure is being won by the neoliberal project as the moderate Left concedes with the neoliberals to an acceptance of a vaccine-mitigated, living-with-COVID-19, return-to-neoliberal-normalcy strategy. On-going battles, complicated by the Alt. Right’s articulation with popular frustration, anger, and COVID-19 denial, focus on how best to manage a vaccine-led transition back to neoliberal normalcy.

2.4. Sketching the Contours of the Ideological War of Position on COVID-19

Three major perspectives, though in varying proportions and forms across the advanced capitalist democracies, are central to the current war of ideological position. There is a moderate Left perspective implicit in solidarity-led health-first responses to COVID-19, a neoliberal business-first perspective that always prioritizes the path back to neoliberal normalcy, and contradictory Alt. Right views that feed the anger and denial of the alienated and vulnerable. Intersecting this Left–Right reading are other dimensions of ideological struggle related to what are called “culture wars” around race, gender, religion, and science. The moderate Left’s solidarity project against COVID-19 has been hamstrung by the hostile neoliberal-led economic, political, and ideological environment, but integrally, without an alternative post-neoliberal Left imaginary, it has also become subordinated to the neoliberal project. In the end, neoliberal right and left positions have coalesced towards a practical Third Way win–win strategy—summed up as “vaccinate, vaccinate, vaccinate!”—that seeks to make neoliberal normalcy compatible with containing, but not eliminating, the virus. However, this Third Way movement of the majority has also brought to the surface an oppositional minority, primarily located amongst the alienated precariat, who resist vaccination. However, alienation also articulates with other system-alienated views such as often contained in alternative health-based movements that mistrust dismissive mainstream medical science and post-colonial movements that do not trust the state that continues to be infected by colonial residues. This heterogeneous social bloc in-the-making are brought together by Alt. Right discourses that connect with the anxiety, anomie, and mistrustful disposition of all groups associated with this alienated and under-vaccinated minority.

More generally, the Alt. Right's ascendancy has been facilitated by the catastrophically failing neoliberal project that pits nations against nations and by the absence of a progressive alternative that could win the hearts and minds of the population, especially the alienated precariat that is growing, to an alternative counter-hegemonic project [4]. In addition, the divisively anti-democratic nature of the neoliberal project itself has also opened up space for the Alt. Right. The neoliberal-led underfunding of educational institutions undermining an informed citizenship sustains immature neoliberal views of citizenship rights. Especially pronounced in the USA, me-first market individuals see only their possessive rights and freedoms, and do not grasp that the individual rights of the "one" integrally entail obligations to the "other" in the form of collective commitments to the wellbeing of the whole of society. Ideally, a democratic socialist world is one in which solidarity is the basis of an inclusive individual freedom where everyone can meet their needs and pursue their own destiny. However, especially in times of war, as with COVID-19, where a consensual solidarity needs to be fully inclusive, the dissenting minority becomes deeply problematic. That is, solidarity, across a population bifurcated between those within and those outside of the prevailing hegemony, is the only path to universally meet citizens' rights for a sustainable collective environment free of the virus, but this right directly clashes with the democratic right of the minority to dissent.

Finally, social media has undermined, rather than promoted, a vibrant virtual global civil society that could generate genuine unity. Profit-driven companies are soft on disinformation and use algorithms that reinforce and radicalize existing views rather than providing a genuine democratic forum for facilitating honest and open debate between different perspectives. Within the context of the postmodern malaise, declining moral regulation, and increasing alienation, a space has opened up for the Alt. Right to give expression and identity to the growing proportion of the population in precarious, alienated, and vulnerable circumstances that have been neglected by both the neoliberal Right and the neoliberal Left. In sum, through manipulative tropes of mistrust and blame, the Alt. Right gives voice and expression to the alienated minority that releases its anger and anxiety on to the "other" thus feeding social division and conflict [11,21].

Within the immediate terms of the prevailing model of development, the evolving ideological struggle over COVID-19 grows out of the deep tension confronted by all countries. Especially in the pre-vaccine phase, this tension is between opening up the neoliberal-led global capitalist economy on which depend livelihoods and eventually lives, and directly prioritizing the health response by closing national borders and locking down the population in order to eliminate COVID-19 and save lives. The lockdown response provoked by initial cases sneaking through borders into the community also necessitated solidaristic movements of the whole population to socially distance and abide by drastic restrictions on the freedom of movement if local spread was to be stamped out. Both at and within borders, success in the war against COVID-19 has depended on the unified consent and solidarity of the population that in turn is dependent on high "moral regulation" and low "system anomie". In other words, unless nearly everyone accepted state-led discourses of social distancing, restricted freedom of movement, and vaccination, then especially with the highly infectious Delta and Omicron variants, the virus was guaranteed to spread rapidly amongst the population, though most seriously amongst the unvaccinated.

While the coming on-line of the vaccine has added a crucial line of defense, the recent more infectious strains demonstrate that anything less than complete elimination is losing the struggle. That is, the eventual universal spread of COVID-19 only needs a dissenting minority that does not get vaccinated or follow the rules of social distancing to ignite the rapid spread of the virus. Further, the Alt. Right movement that, ironically, asserts democratic rights as absolute freedom of choice and movement has articulated and validated this dissent. The problem is that even if the forces on the side of reopening the country to movement and business are only a minority, this will still de-rail the project to stamp out the virus locally. Compounding this logic is the tragedy that the portion of the population most alienated from the system and its legitimating discourses, and where

vaccination is low, is also in the end most vulnerable to COVID-19. These tensions break out into a complex ideological and political struggle between different agents to win the hearts and minds of complexly overlapping social groupings. This struggle is nonetheless based in the bifurcation of the population into, on the one hand, the socially integrated and trusting securiat that is vaccinated who are increasingly intolerant and dismissive towards, on the other hand, the system-alienated mistrusting unvaccinated precariat.

Institutional and ideological neoliberalization that has been central in creating alienated, uninformed, impoverished, and precarious segments of the population has ensured the failure of the moderate Left's health-first project of solidarity. The deeply precarious core of these overlapping groupings have been less able to abide by the rules of social distancing and staying at home, and along with other less precarious but also alienated groups, have been ideologically open to conspiracy, freedom, and denial narratives that have been coordinated by the Alt. Right. Not only does this all lead to a resistant non-vaccinated social bloc, it also generates an opposition movement to the solidarity movement against COVID-19, and indeed supports a return to neoliberal normalcy.

The consequences of the neoliberal model of development, including threatened democracy, undermined solidarity, and a world of divisive competition, are central to why COVID-19 will likely become a permanent feature of the human condition. In turn, only the neoliberal model of development's democratic socialist transformation can prevent future pandemics. Such an alternative requires the construction of a cooperative global regulatory framework whose political precondition is the genuine democratization of the United Nations. Such a transformation would provide the political preconditions leading to support for an alternative cooperative regulatory framework dedicated to helping all the nations of the world achieve local material security and self-sufficiency in food, shelter, health, and education that are the basic material prerequisites for the establishment of a genuine solidaristic social democracy. Relatedly, such a reformed United Nations could develop globally socialized forums of virtual democratic communication and a "World Knowledge Bank" dedicated to the procurement and then free distribution of cosmopolitan knowledge to the countries of the world that together would facilitate international cooperation and local self-sufficiency [15].

3. Concluding Discussion

This article has provided a "methodologically trans-national" stylized global overview of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has demonstrated how the neoliberal model of capitalist development and its associated worldview are central to why the virus is becoming a permanent feature of the human world, and how an alternative democratic socialist model of development is needed in order to prevent global pandemics in the future. This paper's overview conceptual perspective deployed the fundamental Global North/Global South geopolitical distinction, but further research needs to examine in much more detail the varying national forms of the struggles and timing of the stages of the war against COVID-19. It also should examine ideological variations in the struggle across nation states, especially regarding the nature and danger of the virus that link with specifically varying practical responses that can potentially have global outcomes. However, under the still-prevailing terms of the global capitalist neoliberal project, all paths are leading towards the same end-point. In simple terms, COVID-19 is becoming a permanent parasitic feature of the human condition that we must "learn to live with" as the world returns towards a recalibrated neoliberal normalcy.

Agents and defenders of capital and the neoliberal project that have pushed for and celebrate a return to normalcy will crow that they were right all along. The global market will once again be equated with freedom, openness, democracy, and the only path to progress, while the tentative war socialism of local solidarity in the face of a common threat that pointed embryonically towards the need for the (g)localizing transformation of the neoliberal model of development will be demonized as authoritarian and regressive. One already hears neoliberal slogans that localization is like living in a cave or seeking

a North-Korean-like hermit fortress. The term “fortress”, in particular, articulates back with the neoliberal critique of the postwar nation-centric Keynesian model of development and more generally expresses opposition to all developments that move in a socialist or nation-centric direction.

In sum, even though the neoliberal model of capitalist development is the root cause of this global pandemic, the failure of solidarity to win out will be made to appear as a victory for the resilience of the neoliberal capitalist world. Expressed as an intellectually pessimistic hindsight, it is obvious that the solidarity project was up against insurmountable odds, and the return to a neoliberal normalcy albeit with COVID-19 can now be seen as the almost guaranteed final outcome inscribed in the very logic of the neoliberal model of development itself. Rather than gaining insight into the neoliberal-led capitalist causes of this outcome that underpins the construction of a progressive alternative, neoliberal global capitalism will, without significant critical exposure, continue to lead human civilization into the darkness. Paralleling the experience of the global financial crisis, capital will be given bonuses, humanity will bear the brunt, and little will change.

Capital will continue on its path of systematic destruction that treats Nature, including humanity, as expendable resources. Under the neoliberal model of capitalist development in particular, profitability has become the overriding global imperative that also drives locational competition, which feeds “regressive nationalism” and undermines the capacity of countries to prioritize humanity’s and, integrally, Nature’s health and wellbeing. If indeed this is to be the future, then one can assume there will be more viruses that will become global pandemics that we will not be able to stamp out. In sum, the world organized within the framework of the neoliberal model of development has ensured COVID-19’s planet-wide embeddedness and that future viruses will also become global pandemics. This future is not guaranteed, but if there is to be an alternative future, it is imperative that the critical lessons coming out of this global pandemic are translated into the democratic socialist transformation of the neoliberal model of development.

Multiple dysfunctions in global supply chains into which countries are unevenly inserted and dependent upon spread the virus and prevented local de-coupling. The inflexibly unstable nature of this global monolith thus revealed by this global pandemic points urgently towards the need for a “glocalization” alternative. Such an alternative is based in global socialization of cosmopolitan knowledge deployed to facilitate locally controlled material accumulation. Such an alternative is particularly relevant for vaccine production and distribution.

Relatedly, global market competition generated by the neoliberal model that pits countries against each other that has rendered international cooperation impossible has been demonstrated to be particularly dangerous in global emergency situations where international coordination and organized cooperation is crucial. In particular, this dangerous situation is reflected in problems with the World Health Organization. It lacks power and resources that have their root causes in the overall neoliberal infected organizational framework of the United Nations linked with its domination by the neoliberalized countries of the Global North. As a result, the World Health Organization has been unable to coordinate an international response that could have stopped COVID-19’s spread and that could have been central in the management of its elimination once getting a foothold in countries.

The present COVID-19-led conjuncture underpinned by the interacting crises of the neoliberal model of development has also revealed a deeply conflictual and unstable dynamic of political and ideological struggle. While there are complex reasons for people being anti-vaccination, a central factor is the neoliberal model of development itself that has generated a vulnerable and alienated precariat. System alienation corresponding with me-first neoliberal individualism and the absence of the unifying cement of shared discourses of social integration (or “moral regulation”) has generated a dissenting and resisting minority. This minority is particularly significant in this context because the project of solidarity in order to stamp the virus out is fragile because only the resistance of the few is needed to put it in jeopardy.

Only briefly in a few countries did the war against COVID-19 take the form of a unified struggle against a common threat. In the end, the on-going struggle boils down to that between the project to save a catastrophically failing model of capitalism that has led to COVID-19 becoming a global pandemic in the first place, and the counter-movement which, ultimately, pushes towards the neoliberal model of development's democratic socialist transformation. The present return to neoliberal normalcy represents another missed opportunity to progressively reverse the devastating consequences of the catastrophically failing neoliberal model of development, at least partly because of the absence of an ideological imaginary and blueprint for a counter-hegemonic democratic socialist model of development. The neoliberal model of development's viciously interacting economic, ecological, and political crisis tendencies, that now include viral pandemics, all point towards the urgent need for a democratic socialist model of development.

Under the cosmopolitan democratic leadership of a reformed United Nations, a socialized form of knowledge globalization and a new national–trans-national regulatory framework would facilitate universally material self-sufficiency for the countries of the world. Under this model of “glocalization” that defines the democratic socialist model of development, countries would be able close borders quickly without significant economic fallout and reformed United Nations institutions would have the mandated support and capacity to effectively coordinate this process within a framework of cooperative nationalism.

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