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Compounded disasters: Puerto Rico confronts COVID-19 under US colonialism

Puerto Rico is suffering the compounded effects of multiple disasters over the last few years, including a crushing debt crisis that led to a congressionally imposed and undemocratic austerity regime in 2016; the devastating force of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in September 2017; and an ongoing seismic sequence in the southwest corner of the main island, which began in December 2019, and has led to displacement and the depopulation of certain areas. During these trying times, island-side and diasporic Puerto Rican communities have organised for our people's survival with minimal help from the government. Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory (plainly, a colony) of the USA and has been so since 1898.

One of the problems Puerto Ricans face during this pandemic of COVID-19 is that the federal US government does not see Puerto Rico as a priority, in large part because residents of Puerto Rico cannot vote for US presidential candidates in national elections. Federal disdain towards Puerto Ricans was amply demonstrated by the unequal and discriminatory application of disaster recovery assistance after the 2017 hurricane season, famously epitomised by the image of President Trump tossing paper towels at hurricane refugees at a shelter in Guaynabo. As a result, testing and prevention supplies to address the developing epidemic of the novel coronavirus on the islands are extremely limited, even as the US acts to commandeer and embargo medical supplies around the Caribbean and around the world.

Puerto Ricans know that little to no aid in general is forthcoming, in part because shipping restrictions mean that Puerto Rico is effectively embargoed – the islands are unable to trade with or receive aid from any country other than the USA. At the same time, local government officials, hospital administrators and community organisers have not been able to purchase enough supplies from China or other international markets. The US government recently moved to stop payment for one million diagnostic tests the local government had ordered from Australia to the tune of US\$38 million. While legitimate concerns exist about the overblown price tag for these tests, which were ordered through a shady company with ties to the ruling party, without widespread testing it is impossible to have a clear picture of how the disease is progressing through the population. Puerto Rico has the lowest testing rate in the USA.

Despite early and severe action from Governor Vásquez, who imposed a curfew and stay-at-home order earlier than most US states, the prognosis is grim. About 20% of the population in Puerto Rico is over 60 years of age and most live in poverty. At least 16% of the population is diabetic. Cardiovascular disease and cancer are the leading causes of death. Recently, private hospitals have laid off hundreds of staff,

closing their doors due to loss of revenue. Some public hospitals have reportedly turned away patients considered likely COVID-19 cases due to fears sparked by the lack of personal protective equipment. What steps can poor communities take to protect lives?

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[Correction added on 26 June 2020, after first online publication: Adriana Maria Garriga-Lopez's middle name has been amended in this current version.]

DAVID N. GELLNER

The nation-state, class, digital divides and social anthropology

The events of 2020 are a powerful demonstration that the decline of the nation-state in the age of hyper-globalisation or 'overheating' has, like Mark Twain's death, been greatly exaggerated. Throughout the world (with interesting local contrasts in North America, East Asia, Scandinavia and South Asia) a massive cross-national social-science experiment is being carried out in real time as different strategies are adopted by neighbouring countries. It feels as if, for better or worse, we are living through a radical turning point. In the face of an existential threat, the old gods of neoliberalism are being thrown on a bonfire.

It is an ethnographic truism that, in moments of crisis, underlying power structures and unspoken truths are revealed. The current unprecedented challenge to globalisation and capitalism is no exception. Political journalists, adept at 'deep hanging out' with the holders of power, are stunned at the way advocates of shrinking the state are now pumping previously unimaginable quantities of money into the economy: contrary to what Theresa May once declared, there is a magic money tree after all. In the UK £18 billion of accumulated NHS (National Health Service) debt has been written off at a stroke following years of cuts and forced marketisation that played a huge role in producing the chaos visible in the British response to COVID-19.

The class divide in lockdown living is evident in the UK, but nowhere is it more extreme than in South Asia. The mis-named 'social distancing' is a cruel joke