

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, the scope of its devastation on communities across the world is gradually becoming clear. At minimum, we are experiencing a “triple crisis” whereby the medical, political-economic, and socio-psychological impacts of COVID-19 combine and intensify the pain felt by populations worldwide (Žižek 2020, 90). Also startlingly apparent is the fact that the harm caused by COVID-19 is distributed unevenly. The pandemic is exacerbating preexisting inequities along familiar lines of race, class, gender, and national origin.

In the United States, Black Americans are disproportionately represented among the essential job sectors, such as cashiers and custodians, and are dying of COVID-19 at an alarmingly higher rate relative to the U.S. population at large (Ray 2020; Ledur 2020). Large sectors of health-care and food-production services are composed of immigrant workers who face health risks during the pandemic (Bloemraad and Sloop 2020). Women face simultaneous risks of exposure to the virus both in women-dominated professions like nursing and home healthcare and also in increased expectations of care work at home

(Jaffe and Bhattacharya 2020). Last, COVID-19 is ravaging Native American communities that have long borne the brunt of structural pain inflicted by the U.S. federal government, which continues to neglect infrastructure and public-health projects in Indigenous nations in an ongoing history of dispossession (Lakhani 2020).

COVID-19 prompts us to acknowledge two possible realities. On one hand, it highlights the absolute urgent need of changes

like guaranteed employment, housing, healthcare, racial justice, environmental restoration, and more. On the other, looming promises of severe austerity and brutalizing mass surveillance across the colonial-capitalist world system make these necessary shifts seem even more difficult to achieve (Grosfoguel 2002; Robinson 2014). Can we achieve a major paradigm shift, or will capitalism maintain itself through continued crisis manage-

ment? To help us contemplate these questions, we use Fredric Jameson’s and his colleagues’ concept of the *vanishing mediator* to make full sense of our current moment and future possibilities. Turning to North Dakota, a state characterized by right-wing politics, fossil-fuel interests, and Indigenous dispossession, we outline the already existing traces of a more hopeful future in a place where radical change appears to be far from likely. We argue that the vanish-

COVID-19, the Vanishing Mediator, and Postcapitalist Possibilities

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ing-mediator concept is useful for helping us identify the foundations of a postcapitalist society in our present moment.

What Is a Vanishing Mediator?

Fredric Jameson (1973) uses the idea of a vanishing mediator to describe ideologies that help transition societies to new eras that appear completely contradictory to the current time. Jameson originally used this concept to describe a contradiction that he observed while analyzing Max Weber's account of the rise of Protestantism and capitalism. At face value, the austere lifestyles promoted by early Protestant sects appear to be incompatible with the extractive and profit-driven practices of early modern capitalism. Jameson resolves this paradox by showing that Protestantism's central values—discipline, entrepreneurialism, and frugality—brought in, or mediated, the rise of capitalism by equating moral worth and heavenly salvation with hard work, participation in the labor market, and monetary success. While Protestantism itself has disappeared as an all-encompassing ideology that organizes everyday life, our current capitalist system still relies upon many of these same beliefs. Our world has not become less religious. Instead, the values of Protestantism have been translated to a capitalist ethic, drained of their original spiritual and religious meaning, and

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Slavoj Žižek (1991) adds to Jameson's account of a vanishing mediator by illustrating the relationship between changes of *form* and content in a sociopolitical system. First, the *initial* change of content takes place within the existing form. Then, once its substantive content within the old form has been altered enough, it sheds the old form entirely. At the level of one's subjective interpretation of historical change, the precise moment when you *retroactively posit the presuppositions*, the mediator vanishes. In other words, in the (future) moment when you look back to reflect on our present moment and see it having the historical logic of *necessity* (i.e., believing something “always had to happen at that moment”) rather than the logic of *contingency*, the mediator vanishes.

Applying this concept to the COVID-19 pandemic offers

both optimism and caution. Vanishing mediators can connect us to political futures beyond neoliberal capitalism. However, such a postcapitalist society is far from guaranteed to be left leaning, and this depends on whether there is widespread agreement that the moment is in fact a crisis of capitalism and also whether it is the time to push a robust leftist political agenda rather than abandoning the political process altogether. Crises are profound moments of subjective indeterminacy, and the “proper reading”

of a crisis impacts how the postcrisis moment will shape up (Jessop 2015).

Covid-19 Crisis Politics as a Vanishing Mediator

In the months prior to COVID-19's emergence, there were key shifts in the U.S. political landscape that are important for understanding our current mode of pandemic crisis management. First, presidential candidate Andrew Yang discussed the implications of technological innovation and automation across sectors of employment, as well as the need to implement a universal basic income (UBI; see Stevens and Paz 2020). In addition, presidential candidate Bernie Sanders (2020a, 2020b) centered universal healthcare and an employment-generating Green New Deal in his platform, demanding all Americans take up the universalist ethic of "fight[ing] for someone you don't know."

These shifts were partially reflected in the federal government's response to the pandemic. Shortly after COVID-19 began ravaging the United States, the government passed bills to send \$1,200 stimulus checks to nearly all Americans and promised free COVID-19 testing for all (Erb 2020). The Trump administration even proposed making direct federal payments to hospitals to pay for COVID-19 treatment for the uninsured, echoing the basic framework for a national health insurance program in the United States (Abelson and Sanger-Katz 2020). While these policies are woefully inadequate, their enactment by a right-wing government is an implicit acknowledgement of how urgent these types of protections are. New political imaginaries are

being awoken, with many coming to the realization that "everything that sustains life—housing, food, clean water, and healthcare for all—[must] be protected and decommodified" (Brown and Zheng 2020).

If enough people view these crises as unacceptable, then this moment has the potential to be *evental*, introducing a possibility for radical change (see Badiou 2013). These moments can potentially activate human subjectivity as we become dedicated to a cause beyond our immediate needs, working tirelessly to cultivate a world beyond capitalism. However, there is a wide gap between the current stage of decaying neoliberal capitalism and that of the future post-capitalist utopia to which many aspire. Moreover, despite the government-sponsored programs outlined above, the present strategies of crisis management in the United States still favor capital over labor (Wolff 2020). Thus, for this moment to serve as a vanishing mediator, we must strive to radically alter the *content* of the existing system, which can lead to an altogether different *form* that it will take in the future.

The potentiality of a vanishing mediator in this moment is what Žižek (2020) calls war communism and what we call COVID-19-induced wartime socialism, or simply CV19 socialism. We conceptualize this particular mediator as CV19 *socialism* rather than *communism* as the concept of socialism encourages us to consider difficult questions about the nationalization of industries and about transitional moments "which the loftier regions of communism allow us to avoid" (Jameson 2016, 317). The concept of war socialism applies to the acts of numerous cap-

italist states who are flirting with nationalizing industries, with enacting nearly universal programs that provide financial assistance to the masses, and with partially coordinating a global response to a public-health and economic crisis that transcends national boundaries.

The present moment is grim, and we conceptualize CV19 socialism in a more hyperbolic than “actual” way. The implementation of quasi-universal emergency welfare actions was a choice made by political-economic elites to *stabilize* an unstable capitalist state. The immediate task is to use and push this temporary stability (i.e., the temporary shift in *content* of the U.S. capitalist state) further, facilitating a full shift in the *form* of the U.S. political-economic system. Accordingly, CV19 socialism from above and mass mobilization from below will both be necessary to make this moment a vanishing mediator.

The potential for eventual politics and a vanishing mediator is present in the overlapping areas of environmental restoration and political economy. In the next section, we illustrate the potential for CV19 socialism to act as a vanishing mediator in relation to these issues. As an example, we offer a case study of the U.S. state of North Dakota, with its currently unsustain-

able and extractive political economy and how this can be radically reconfigured to usher in an era of environmental justice and jobs guarantees in a post-COVID-19 world. We also show how this dovetails with longstanding Indigenous resistance movements that have articulated how alternatives to capitalism must be accompanied by ecological sustainability and Native sovereignty (Estes 2019a).

Ecological Restoration and Postcapitalist Aspirations: North Dakota and Beyond

An important case of how transformative postcapitalist ideas might come into play in our current crisis moment is the U.S. state of North Dakota. The state’s extractive economy will likely be devastated by COVID-19, with a recent study predicting that the “labor force will decline by 7.5% to 15% ... the unemployment rate could

increase by as much as 20% ... total tax collections may decrease by more than 50%” (Associated Press 2020). North Dakota is also the site of the ongoing dispossession of the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota communities. Nonetheless, there is an opportunity for implementing radical new social policies to address these issues and more. Despite facing serious political challenges while embodying major contradictions between capital, labor, and ecological degradation/resto-

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ration, a Green New Deal is one such platform from which we can build a more equitable future (see McCollum 2019).

North Dakota's latest chapter in a long history of extractive settler-colonialism is its dependence on oil extraction in its western region, the site of the Bakken oil shale formation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, oil prices plummeted between March and April 2020, causing the state's tax revenues to fall by an estimated 12 percent (Boesen 2020). Although North Dakota's dependency on oil revenue makes it an unlikely candidate for a state-supported decarbonization program, in many ways it already provides an *informal* jobs guarantee through its oil sector. In fact, the state offers an estimated \$100 million a year in tax rebates and other forms of subsidization, including the elimination of sales taxes on extraction-related equipment that purchasers are not required to report to state regulators (Redman 2017). Given the present state of low oil demand, North Dakota's dependence on oil revenues is not a sufficient source of funding.

A project oriented toward environmental restoration and Indigenous sovereignty and justice would enable the region to reconstruct their social ecology and political economy around radically different principles. The state *already* uses a complex web of regulations, tax incentives, permits, and zoning laws to direct oil extraction, transportation, and refinement. Similarly, the state reacted to the original oil boom with a sovereign wealth fund and rapidly appropriated funds for new schools in the booming regions as well as transportation infrastructure, law enforcement, and other social necessities.

Granted, these appropriations served the needs of extractive firms, but they demonstrate the state's *capacity to act*.

A program built on postcapitalist aspirations could mobilize state resources in a similar manner for the creation of public wealth and the protection/restoration of the region's ecology. The state is already deeply involved in the permitting and operation of wind-energy farms throughout North Dakota and has established a comprehensive wind-energy technician program at Lake State Regional College, all while proving that the state can attract and train a suitable labor force (Huttner 2019). How then might COVID-19 crisis politics help usher in a program in North Dakota that taps into existing state arrangements to substantively change its content in a postcapitalist, anticolonial direction?

There is popular support across Native American nations in the United States not only for a Green New Deal but a Red Deal that centers Indigenous voices in struggles *against* colonialism and capitalism but also in struggles *for* environmental justice and self-determination (Estes 2019b; Hill 2018). This movement also identifies how North Dakota's extractive oil economy, staffed predominantly by large camps of male oil workers, reinforces a violent heteropatriarchy that harms Indigenous communities (Estes 2019a). Although national attention to these issues intensified after the 2016 Standing Rock antipipeline movement, Indigenous nations have long challenged capitalist and settler-colonial valuations of land and labor.

It is also worth noting that Native American

communities across North Dakota were some of the first in the state to take serious steps to stem the spread of COVID-19 in their territories (Sisk 2020). Any postcapitalist initiative emerging from this pandemic must forge substantive links between movements for Indigenous, racial, socioeconomic, and climate justice (Estes 2019b; Sunrise Movement 2020). The earlier Standing Rock/Dakota Access Pipeline protests were indicative of this potential, and expansive coalition building is going on as we speak (Elbein 2017; Martin 2020; Sunrise Movement 2020; Whyte 2017). Importantly, this movement explicitly ties climate justice to an anticolonial beyond-capitalist project that also emphasizes Indigenous sovereignty (Ellis 2019).

The case of North Dakota asks us to consider how a vanishing mediator may usher in anticapitalist and anticolonial relationships that are not new but rather have long been endorsed by Indigenous nations. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights how the ecological and health-care crises experienced by Indigenous nations are intimately linked to their continued subjugation by the U.S. government. Any emancipatory post-COVID political movement in North Dakota must also center Native American sovereignty. Since a widespread fidelity to left-leaning programs will be required well beyond North Dakota if CVI9 socialism is to become a vanishing mediator, let us briefly move the scale of analysis to the fed-

eral level.

Beyond a Green New Deal: An Initiative for Health, Environment, and Technological Investment

Here, we offer a dose of experimental utopian thinking, sketching what widespread fidelity to an eventual COVID-19 politics might look like in

terms of a nationwide initiative. Simply put, something more comprehensive than a Green New Deal is required. We shall call this the Health, Environment, and Technology initiative, or HEAT. In the wake of COVID-19's devastation of a country already possessing a subpar healthcare system, decrepit infrastructure, and widespread unemployment, an initiative

that generates jobs on a mass scale is needed. The HEAT initiative would be a federally backed plan that would, at minimum, offer guaranteed green tech training and employment for any that seek it; coordinate the building of health clinics and facilities across the country (as a part of a universal health-care plan), with local input by working-class, disenfranchised, and other affected communities; and invest in technology that will lead to automation of labor that no longer requires humans to carry out its tasks, in tandem with the provision of a UBI (onto which the newly unemployed may fall back as a safety net or that the gainfully employed may use at their

own discretion).

This ambitious program should be *demand*ed by a population scarred by COVID-19 and that lacks universal healthcare, is facing the highest unemployment rate since the Great Depression, and faces a climate catastrophe that makes COVID-19 appear as “a dress rehearsal for the next crisis, the one in which the reorientation of living conditions is going to be posed as a challenge to all of us” (Latour 2020; Soergel 2020). Following Bernie Sanders (2020a), many Americans may decide to *fight for someone they don’t know* if for no other reason than it being a rational necessity for survival in a post-COVID-19 world. The struggle to radically alter the form of the U.S. political-economic system could build off the heretofore unheard of shifts in content of the U.S. political economy, ushered in through political imaginaries fomented immediately before the pandemic and emboldened by the implementation of CVI9 socialism.

Americans are taking an explosive interest in socialism during the pandemic as they realize that capitalism cannot be “fixed” and insist on systemic change to build a more just society (Godfrey 2020). Cross-national networks of solidarity already exist, from the communities of mutual aid forged through the Dakota Access Pipeline protests to formalized groups like the Sunrise Movement (Whyte 2017; Witt 2018). This in tandem with demands from insurgent left-leaning political candidates at local, state, and federal levels of governing can initiate major change within the structures of U.S. power in the years ahead.

If short-term measures prove inadequate, a federal review of goal attainment could be implemented in which a federally mandated draft would come into effect, subsequently creating a “universal army” working toward these goals (see Jameson 2016). Building a robust, publicly owned, ecofriendly, public-health-oriented and technologically sophisticated infrastructure requires mass mobilization of all those capable of participating. We envision widespread election of socialists into office across the United States and federal-to-local coordination among working-class and disenfranchised communities nationwide as a prerequisite for this task. Fidelity to this task can create citizens who don’t wince at the prospect of deployment in a nationally necessary workforce. Instead, the desire to build a livable society free of poverty, exploitation, and scarcity will be motivation enough. To explore how this may start at the state level, let us conclude by returning to North Dakota.

North Dakota’s political economy of unchecked fossil-fuel extraction and its corresponding externalities cannot continue under the present juncture of a global pandemic and rapidly declining demand for fossil fuels. Thus, some postcapitalist dreaming is required to turn CVI9 socialism into a vanishing mediator. The North Dakota Sovereign Wealth Fund offers an example of how a post-COVID-19 HEAT initiative might work. This fund was established by voters in a 2010 state constitutional amendment with the goal of providing the state with funds to weather price downturns in agricultural commodities and oil revenue. Thirty percent of revenues from oil- and gas-extraction taxes are designated to flow into the fund (Gross 2014). Today,

¹ See “Legacy Financial Statements,” North Dakota Retirement and Investment Office, accessed 29 July 2020, <https://www.rio.nd.gov/legacy-fund>.

the fund’s value sits at around US\$6.5 billion,¹ and it could support ambitious socioeconomic and ecological projects across the state.

In preparation for the 2021 legislative session, North Dakota lawmakers sought public input in fall of 2019 on how the legacy fund might be used. Participants in a November 2019 meeting of the Legacy Fund Earnings Committee identified such disparate needs as free school lunches for children, tourism development, affordable housing, infrastructure development, and health care as suitable for spending legacy-fund dollars (Springer 2019). This type of democratic input could facilitate the transition to a wider HEAT initiative throughout the state and could act as a model for other political entities. The job guarantees offered by new social arrangements could ensure that this path is equitable, and they could be crafted with input from the state’s Native American nations and other exploited communities. This model could be used with modification across the United States.

Concluding Remarks

Considering the above, the following is abundantly clear: rather than imagining this as a time to “put aside politics” and address the crisis in an allegedly “neutral” way, our moment demands

the opposite. As May turned to June 2020, political uprisings emerged across the United States in response to the ongoing brutalization and devaluation of Black lives in America—still unrelenting, even during a deadly pandemic (Taylor 2020). As Angela Davis (2020) presciently observed, “the conjuncture created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the recognition of the systemic racism that has been rendered visible under these conditions” have generated the

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“extraordinary moment” in which we are immersed. These ongoing, overlapping crises have created space to forge new solidarities with communities worldwide while facilitating utopian thinking on what a new world system might look like—a system that moves beyond the profit motive and exploitation of labor and is instead based on mutual cooperation, coordination, and care. In the era of capitalist realism, this thinking is more necessary than ever,

as it assists in displacing the false belief that there is no alternative to capitalism (Fisher 2009; see also Frase 2016). Striving toward a new form of socialism/communism should be conceived as a struggle to achieve a difficult-to-impossible utopia. Far from depressing our expectations, this radical act dispatches the idea of simple blueprints to achieve utopia. Instead, we must constantly strive toward an uncertain emancipatory

endpoint (Badiou 2013; Jameson 2016; Özselçuk and Madra 2005).

An obvious but often neglected issue must now be stated: *nothing is guaranteed*. Whether COVID-19 crisis management ushers in ecosocialism or a new form of barbarism is not predetermined. We are active participants in crafting the future we wish to see. In the United States, CV-19 wartime socialism has the potential to serve as a vanishing mediator that brings about social change—if we become active subjects with a fidelity toward building a postcapitalist society. Millions have already shown such a fidelity. There is also an urgent need for the U.S. government to craft an internationalist foreign policy that offers solidarity with and diplomacy toward the workers of the world (Bessner 2019).

More people around the globe are demanding environmental justice, racial justice, and economic justice while striving to create a world system not based on colonial-capitalist exploitation. With the possibility of unimaginable mass immiseration on the horizon, it is our responsibility to turn this moment into a vanishing mediator, creating a better world for ourselves and future generations. There is much work to be done. Onward!

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