

COVID Revolution

Jodi Dean

Abstract: Revolution only occurs when people are willing to die for it. The last few days of May 2020 showed that thousands of people were willing to risk their lives in the struggle against the racist capitalist system. Rage at four hundred years of oppression, exploitation, and denigration, at the systemic murder of black, brown, and indigenous people, and at wanton, visible, and permissible police violence could no longer be contained. Between the virus and the economy, there was nothing left to lose.

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During the first two months of the US shutdown to prevent the overloading of its weakened and ill-prepared hospital system by coronavirus patients, activists struggled to adapt to the new conditions of organizing. Zoom sessions, webinars, and livestreams mushroomed on the Internet. Car caravans and carefully orchestrated, physically distanced actions attempted to substitute for the missing crowds. The solution to the problem came from the streets the last week of May. Outrage over the ceaseless murder of black people led tens of thousands of people across the country to pour into the streets demanding justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmed Aubrey and an end to police violence.

These uprisings were not the first public demonstrations of the COVID-19 era. Right-wing protesters had already staged multiple gatherings contesting stay-at-home orders. Television news featured middle-aged white people complaining about needing to get haircuts and violations of their rights. On April 17 President Donald Trump egged on protesters in states with Democratic governors, tweeting “Liberate Michigan,” “Liberate Minnesota,” and “Liberate Virginia.” Small crowds of masked and unmasked protesters demanded that businesses be re-opened. Their signs said that fear was the real virus, that COVID-19 was a “test run at socialism.” On April 30 armed white demonstrators were allowed to enter the Michigan state house.

Some on the far right, including the US president, politicized masks. From the outset of the pandemic, the US public health messaging around masks had been incoherent. Because of mask shortages and hoarding, people were told that masks did nothing to stop them from catching



the virus. Once the supply chain failures were somewhat alleviated, the message was that everyone should wear a mask in public. Even as members of the White House staff tested positive for the virus, the president and vice president refused to wear masks. Their most ardent supporters followed suit.

Masks were rejected as indications of weakness, as violations of personal liberty. *Contra* Levinasian ethics, the face expressed not the infinite difference of the Other one is bound to respect but the untrammelled individualism of the Self. Regard for others was expressed in the sameness of the mask, rejected by the right as socialist encroachment.

The right-wing demand for re-opening was also expressed as a demand for liberty. This wasn't persuasive. The billionaire De Vos family funded the group organizing the demonstrations in Michigan. The demand for a return to work was obviously a demand made from the position of bosses. *Workers* were supposed to return to work – as if millions had not lost their jobs, as if a large sector of the working class had not already been risking their lives by working in hospitals, warehouses, plants, supermarkets, and more, as if those working from home and overwhelmed by domestic labor had been on some kind of vacation. The truth underpinning the US vision of freedom wasn't liberty or death; it was liberty and death. The liberty of some depends on the death of others. It's only palpable as freedom, *enjoyed* as freedom – the freedom of enjoyment – when some have to die.

Even before the US crossed the horrific milestones of a million cases and a hundred thousand deaths, evidence showed that black, brown, indigenous, and low-income people were getting infected and dying at rates significantly higher than white people were. The US health system wasn't broken. It functioned as the racist system it was designed to be, guaranteeing “differentiated vulnerability to *premature death*” (to use Ruth Wilson Gilmore's [2007: 28] definition).

The same fundament of racial capitalism held for the economic shut down. It wasn't shut down for over two million prisoners of the US carceral state, who remained in over-crowded confinement as the virus spread among prisoners and guards alike. It wasn't shut down for Amazon warehouse workers, delivery service workers, grocery store workers, and farmworkers. For workers in the meat-packing industry it wasn't shut down until hundreds became infected and died. After that many plants were “cleaned” and re-opened, their owners assisted by governors demanding that workers return to work under threat of losing their unemployment insurance. The economy was shut down for some doctors and nurses as profiting-making elective surgeries were postponed to make space for COVID-19 patients. It was not shut down for frontline medical

personnel forced to work without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). The economy wasn't shut down for many landlords, who continued to expect payment of rent. It wasn't shut down for teachers, expected to work from home even as they cared for their own families and grappled with the material inequalities that made remote education impossible for so many of their students. It wasn't shut down for those engaged in the endless tasks of social reproduction as they cared, cooked, and cleaned for the elderly, the young, the immune-compromised, and everyone who was now at home, all the time.

It wasn't shut down for Jeff Bezos, who raked in billions.

The uprising breaking out in Minnesota and quickly spreading throughout the country ruptured the confining expectations of shut-down life. The hundreds of thousands of people marching, assembling, and rioting, taking highways and bridges, and burning police cars and stations demanded more than life. They demanded justice.

Many were masked, public health advice conveniently turning well-meaning joiners into militants. More striking, though, was how the demand for justice superseded fear of infection. To say Black Lives Matter was not to conclude that everyone should remain isolated. It was to come together to demand an end to police violence and racial oppression and fight for a new society.

In cities across the country in images shared in endless feeds, police responded to peaceful protesters with tear gas and rubber bullets. They drove vehicles into crowds. They pulled down protesters' masks to pepper-spray them more directly. They beat people with clubs, grabbed people and threw them to the ground, and kettled them for hours. They used helicopters in intimidation tactics honed during the so-called War on Terror. The police responded to the demand for an end to police violence with more violence. An end to police violence could only come about with an end to the police. An end to the police could only come about through an end to the divisive, oppressive, exploitative system of racial capitalism that the police protect.

The protests quickly took on the feeling of a mass rebellion, even before Trump threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act empowering him to deploy federal troops to quell uprisings on US soil. Many of those willing to come out in the streets to protest in the midst of a global pandemic that had confined them to their homes for months and weeks had nothing else to do and nothing else to lose. Out of work, out of money, and out of patience with a system anchored in inequality, oppression, and degradation, enough was enough.

In *Crowds and Power*, Elias Canetti presents the most fundamental fear as the fear of the "touch of the unknown" (Canetti, 1984: 15). The one

place where a person is free from this fear, he says, is the crowd. Crowds are provisional heterogeneous unities in which people shed their sense of separateness, becoming a larger, stronger, momentarily invincible being. The public health measures enacted in response to COVID-19 materialized and intensified the fear of the touch of the unknown. Contact with others, with anyone outside one's immediate household, brought the risk of the virus. And yet from the initial protests in Minneapolis through the following days crowds formed. People poured out of their private isolation and into collective power. These were not struggles for survival, precarious bodies aiming for self-preservation. The virus had already revealed the smallness, the insufficiency, of such a goal. The protesters were beyond that, willing to put their lives on the line to bring down a system of racist violence, exploitation, and oppression.

Absent the practice of buying and selling, the commercial and public spaces abandoned during the shutdown no longer seemed the province of capital. They were a commons, available to anyone. State command ceased to have a hold.

In "Left-wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder," Lenin sets out the fundamental law of revolution. He writes:

for a revolution to take place it is not enough for the exploited and oppressed masses to realize the impossibility of living in the old way, and demand changes; for a revolution to take place it is essential that the exploiters should not be able to live and rule in the old way. It is only when the "*lower classes*" do not want to live in the old way and the "*upper classes*" cannot carry on in the old way that the revolution can triumph. (Lenin, n.d., emphasis in the original)

Revolution depends more on desire than on consciousness, even class consciousness. People can recognize that they are oppressed and exploited without this recognition leading to revolutionary political upheaval. Even mass demand for change is not enough. Demands lack force when people go on with their everyday lives despite the fact that the demands aren't met. Revolution, Lenin insists, comes about when people "do not want to live in the old way," that is, when they are prepared to die.

During the first ten weeks of the coronavirus outbreak in the US, many people prepared to die, and to die suffocating and alone. Many did. In New York City they were found dead in their apartments. Some died in the street after being released from the hospital. Bodies piled up, unburied, unmourned. The failure of the federal government, the inadequate planning and preparation, the harsh reality of for-profit healthcare, the confusion and disinformation spreading out of the White House, the incapacity of the political establishment, the ever-increasing numbers of

cases and deaths, the collapse of the economy as millions became unemployed, and the relentless systemic racism inundated the country in waves of fear and despair. Required to shelter in place and suspecting that any contact with a person beyond the immediate household could be life-threatening, people thought of basic activities like shopping for groceries as a matter of life and death. As the economic crisis deepened, the availability of food and continuity of shelter for tens of millions of people became uncertain.

And Ahmed Aubrey went jogging in Georgia. Two white men shot and killed him.

And Breonna Taylor was shot in her own home by police in Louisville, Kentucky.

And George Floyd was murdered by Derek Chauvin, who kneeled on his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds.

These assassinations continued the racist violence that black people in the United States have struggled under for four hundred years. They were not unique. Underneath all the claims about the new world ushered in by the novel coronavirus the world of racial capitalism persisted. It was “laid bare” – a phrase constantly repeated. Every aspect of the devastation accompanying the virus was compounded for black, brown, and indigenous people. Everyone knew it. No one could deny it and multinational, multiracial, and multigenerational crowds of people formed to bring down the system that generated, relied on, and reinforced it.

Revolution only occurs when people are willing to die for it. The last few days of May 2020 showed that thousands of people were willing to risk their lives in the struggle against the racist capitalist system. Rage at four hundred years of oppression, exploitation, and denigration, at the systemic murder of black, brown, and indigenous people, and at wanton, visible, and permissible police violence could no longer be contained. Between the virus and the economy, there was nothing left to lose. And there is a world to win.

Jodi Dean is Professor of Political Science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. She is the author or editor of numerous books and articles, including *The Communist Horizon* (2012), *Crowds and Party* (2016), and *Comrade* (2019) all published by Verso. E-mail: jdean@hws.edu

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