



Prensa Participativa

COVID-19 + CAPITALISM = A DEADLY MIX

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These days we are living two of the most horrifying events humanity has ever suffered. The first one, and most directly impacting oneself due to its immediacy, is the one going by the name of COVID-19. Panic is on-going and ever-present because its victims fall silently at a rapid rate, worldwide surpassing 100,000 victims daily for a grand total of 5.45 million as of this date. The second one, more harmful long term, is capitalism, floating on life's waves while corroding our human existence. For Covid, it's a matter of time until we have a cure and an antidote; for capitalism, now last-named "Savage", we won't.

Within our framework in Puerto Rico, being a U.S. colony, the situation turns even more complicated by savage capitalism's brother: racial capitalism.

In his scientific paper titled Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Inequities in the United States, Dr. Whitney N. Laster Pirtle asserts that racial capitalism is a fundamental cause of the racial and socioeconomic inequities within the present coronavirus pandemic in the United States.

"The overrepresentation of Blacks deaths reported in Detroit, Michigan, is a case study for this argument. Racism and capitalism mutually construct harmful social conditions that fundamentally shape COVID-19 disease inequities", he says, adding that such conditions:

1. Shape multiple diseases that interact with COVID-19 to influence poor health outcomes.
2. Affect disease outcomes through increasing multiple risk factors for poor, people of color, including racial residential segregation, homelessness, and medical bias.
3. Shape access to flexible resources, such as medical knowledge and freedom, which can be used to minimize both risks and the consequences of disease.
4. Replicate historical patterns of inequities within pandemics, despite newer intervening mechanisms thought to ameliorate health consequences.

He closes stating that interventions "should address social inequality to achieve health equity across pandemics".

Supporting Dr. Laster Pirtle's opinion, the U.S. National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health holds an investigative essay that seems to be warning us since 2012 about capitalism's detrimental influence on our health system. Produced by Dr. Martin McKee, a London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine professor, its abstract reads in part:

"The current economic crisis in Europe has challenged the basis of the economic model that currently prevails in much of the industrialized world. It has revealed a system that is managed not for the benefit of the people but rather for the corporations and the small elite who lead them, and which is clearly unsustainable in its present form."

Further back, in 2006 Drs. Richard Lofgren, Michael Karpf, and Jay Perman had already sounded an alarm regarding capitalism's detrimental effect on the U.S. medical establishment: "The medical care system in the United States is in crisis. Health care costs are escalating and threatening coverage for millions of people. Concerns about the quality of care and patient safety are heightening; patients and payers now publicly share these concerns and want to make providers more accountable".

Nevertheless, there's a hidden in this system: a crisis developing in health care which earnings-seeking model is also failing. Proponents of converting health services into merchandise items simultaneously argue that the cost of providing medical services to aging populations is not cost effective while they try to create a demand for their health products among those who are basically healthy.

Of course, when capitalism's failures are mentioned in any conversation among Hispanics there is a quick tendency to interpret it as extolling capitalism's enemy, socialism... and by extension unconsciously jumping to Cuba's example. On that thread should come up the unavoidable question: ¿How is Cuba doing with this pandemia?

According to Google's Covid-19 World Statistics Table, on May 25 Cuba ranked 90th among the world's 114 countries. There were 82 people dead out of its 11.3 million citizens, placing it 24th among the least-affected countries.

Cuban health care is guaranteed by the national constitution, which was revised in 2019. It's Article 72 states: "Public health is a right of all persons and it is the state's responsibility to guarantee access to free, quality medical care, health protection and rehabilitation. The State, to make this right effective, institutes a health system accessible to the population at all levels and develops preventive and educational programs, to which society and families contribute".

In comparison, according to the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, U.S. healthcare costs are one-third higher or more relative to the size of the economy. Its 2015 annual report revealed that health expenditures per person were nearly \$10,000 on average, with total expenditures of \$3.2 trillion.

"Proximate reasons for the differences with other countries", said the OECD, "include higher prices for the same services (i.e., higher price per unit) and greater use of healthcare (i.e., more units consumed). Higher administrative costs, higher per-capita income, and less government intervention to drive down prices are deeper causes.

While the annual inflation rate in healthcare costs has declined in recent decade, it still remains above the rate of economic growth, resulting in a steady increase in healthcare expenditures from 6 percent in 1970 to nearly 18 percent in 2015”.

According to the World Health Organization, in the U.S. “healthcare coverage is provided through a combination of private health insurance and public health coverage (e.g., Medicare, Medicaid). The United States does not have a universal healthcare program, unlike most other developed countries”.

Last May 4, the independent, non-profit global news network The Conversation headlined its daily contents with “Coronavirus medical costs could soar into hundreds of billions as more Americans become infected”. The note says, in part:

“The costs of a hospital bed, health care personnel, medications and potentially the use of medical equipment such as ventilators quickly add up, pushing up the median cost for a person hospitalized to \$14,366. Someone has to pay those costs. If you own a business, pay for health insurance or pay taxes, that someone is you”.