

Your Privileges Are Not Universal: The Eighth Newsletter (2021)



José Balmes (Chile), Lota el Silencio, 2007.

Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

Stencilled in red on the walls of Santiago, Chile is a statement of fact: ‘your privileges are not universal’ (*tus privilegios no son universales*). This is a factual declaration because the privileges of power and property are not shared across the gaping class divide. Consider the fact that before the pandemic struck last year, over 3 billion people – or half the world’s population – had no **access** to health care. This data appears in a 2017 World Health Organisation (WHO) **report** that tracks important matters such as access to basic household sanitation (lacked by 2.3 billion people) and medical care for uncontrolled hypertension (suffered by 1 billion people).

An Oxfam **report** from 25 January 2021 called *The Inequality Virus* points out that ‘the pandemic could cause the biggest increase in inequality since records began, as it precipitates a simultaneous and substantial rise

across many countries'. Before the pandemic, the World Bank **calculated** that about 2 billion people 'remain in poverty, that is, living below the standards their own societies have set for a dignified life'. Because of the pandemic-triggered jobs crisis, it is likely – the United Nations **notes** – that half a billion more people will sink into poverty by the end of the decade; World Bank numbers **concur**.

'And with the pandemic', write the World Bank analysts, 'the newly poor are more likely to live in congested urban settings and to work in the sectors most affected by lockdowns and mobility restrictions; many are engaged in informal services and not reached by existing social safety nets'. These are the billions who will slide deeper into debt and despair, with education and healthcare slipping away from them as hunger rates rise.



Aleksandr Deyneka (USSR), *Unemployed in Berlin*, 1932.

Nothing of what is written above is an exaggeration. All of it comes from researchers and analysts at mainstream organisations such as the World Health Organisation and the World Bank, neither of whom are known to inflate the ill-effects of capitalist policy. If anything, these organisations have a tendency to minimise the perils of privatisation and corporate-based policies, urging on further cuts to public systems. During the tenure of Gro Harlem Brundtland at the helm of the WHO (1998-2003), the organisation

encouraged the creation of Private-Public Partnerships (PPPs) and Product Development Partnerships (PDPs). The WHO's emphasis on the private sector – alongside pressure from the International Monetary Fund to cut public sector funding – accelerated the haemorrhaging of public health systems in many of the poorer countries.

When the WHO should have led the fight to deepen public health systems and to create regional and national pharmaceutical production systems, the agency produced PPP platforms such as the underfunded Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations (GAVI); along with other agencies, GAVI is now **spluttering** forward to provide COVID-19 vaccines to low-income countries. The people who produced global austerity, a desert of possibilities, only now recognise the perils of the inequality virus.



Hugo Gellert (USA), Comrade Gulliver, 1935.

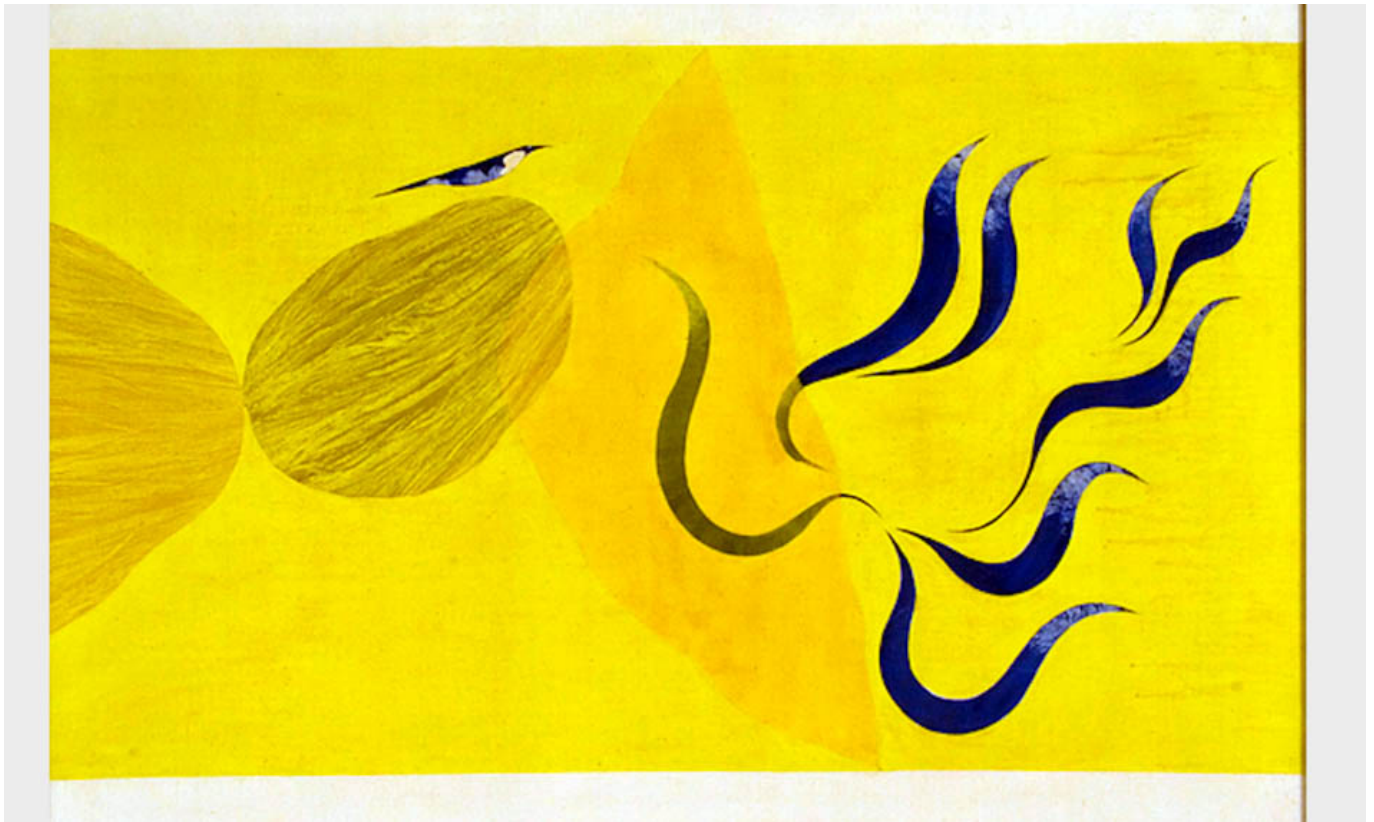
To be anxious about inequality is insufficient. A range of possible, common-sense reforms are being demanded by people's organisations across the world, which include:

1. **Free Universal Healthcare.** This has been achieved in poorer countries like **Costa Rica** and **Thailand** as well as in socialist states and should, therefore, be the objective of every country on the planet.
2. **A People's Vaccine.** Momentum toward the availability of a people's vaccine is growing, which should include not only open access to all patents for the COVID-19 vaccine but also the creation of pharmaceutical production facilities in the low-income states and in the public sector.

These two basic measures could be easily financed by the money now exported to service odious debts. But such logical solutions that would provide immediate relief to people are set aside. Despite the strong words about the problems posed by austerity, more austerity will be demanded, and more social disorder will be produced.

Rather than focus attention on the actual problems that face the planet's people and acknowledge the democratic demands coming from people's organisations and manifestations, government after government has taken refuge in undemocratic behaviour. For example, the farmers and agricultural workers in India continue their months-long **protest** against three anti-farmer laws pushed through by the extreme right Indian government. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi knows that its commitment to big capital – personified in the wealthy Adani and Ambani families – prevents it from any serious negotiation with the farmers and agricultural workers. Instead, the government has **tried** to portray the farmers and agricultural workers as terrorists and as anti-national.

When this did not work, the government went after reporters and media houses that amplified the farmers' struggle. Many who have **reported** on, **participated** in, or shown **solidarity** with protestors have been arrested – such as in the cases of journalist **Mandeep Punia**, worker rights activist **Nodeep Kaur** and activist **Disha Ravi**, who created and shared a toolkit to support the farmers. Finally, in an act of lawfare, the government conducted a 113-hour **raid** against **NewsClick**, one of the key media houses to cover the protests; accusations of money-laundering tried to sully the name of NewsClick, which has earned the trust of millions of readers and viewers with its frontline reporting that lifted up the sentiments and demands of the agriculturalists.



Jagdish Swaminathan (India), *Untitled*, 1974.

Meanwhile, India's Ministry of Education released an order on 15 January that **required** any online conference or webinar that might discuss India's 'internal matters' and those that receive foreign sponsorship to seek prior government approval. Similarly, the French government started a **process** to investigate academic research that promotes 'Islamist-leftist' ideas and thereby, according to the Minister of Higher Education, 'corrupts society'. In the name of Order, freedom of speech is easily set aside and the fragility of the formal nature of democracy is exposed. The attack on NewsClick, alongside the investigation of academics in France, reveals the yawning gap between democratic ideals and the practice of statecraft.

Despite the \$364 billion *prêt garanti par l'État* (PGE) **programme** to provide relief for the French population, there is a serious long-term problem of inequality and joblessness. Rather than focus on this, the French government has whipped around to fight an illusory adversary: Islamists. In the same way, faced with mass dislocation and social suffering deepened by the pandemic, the Indian government is prosecuting a war against farmers and media platforms that are sensitive to the issues raised by the farmers. Both these formal democracies retain their constitutions and their laws, their elections and their public hearings – all part of the panoply of modern democracies. They fail, however, to actually listen to the suffering of the people, let alone the demands made by the people; they remain insensitive to the possibility of a more viable future for our societies.

During the period of the military dictatorship in Pakistan, the communist poet Habib Jalib sang:

*Kahin gas ka dhuan hae kahin golian ki baarish
Shab-e-ehd-e-kum nigahi tujhay kis tarah sarahein*

Teargas smoke is in the air, bullets are raining around.
How can I praise you, the night of the period of myopia?

Your privileges are not universal, since your privileges earn you – the few – the vast bulk of social wealth; when the people put forward our views, you fire teargas and bullets. You believe that your myopia will allow your night-time to last forever. We praise the hopes and struggles of the people, whose desire to advance history will cut through your repression.

Warmly,

Vijay



I am Tricontinental:

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I am in charge of the Research Collective on Communications, Media, and Information Technology. We analyse the evolution of media systems and their relationship to social practices and political processes. I have participated in various collective publications, such as *Private Property, Meritocracy, and Anti-Egalitarianism: The Discourse of the Dominant Sectors in the Argentine Crisis* and *The Internet, Social Media, and Big Data: Culture and Communication under Digital Capitalism*. In 2021, we will continue to explore these issues.