
Reviewed by Raymond Michalowski

In the opening pages of *Capitalism and Coronavirus*, author T. J. Coles sets out two key goals. The first is to document causal linkages between the search for capital accumulation, in Cole’s terms “enrichment of the few,” and the many and complex ways this search has increased levels of morbidity, mortality, and social disruption due to COVID-19 (SARS-COV-2). The second is to consider why the most extreme capitalist countries in the world, according to Coles the UK and the US, fared worse in dealing with COVID-19 than the capitalist nation-states of Germany, New Zealand, Vietnam, and South Korea, and the semi-autonomous regions of Hong Kong, and the state of Kerala in India.

By placing the COVID-19 pandemic within a comparative framework, Coles lays out a broad canvas for assessing the variable nature of the relationship between capitalism and coronavirus as it manifests itself in different national experiences with the disease.

*Capitalism and Coronavirus* begins this project by listing seven key variables that can shape the impact of COVID-19 on different national populations. These are: (1) The age composition of a population, given that, at the time of the book’s writing, COVID-19 appeared to be far more deadly for elderly as compared to young or middle-aged groups. (2) The strength of a nation’s health care system. (3) The extent and character of poverty within the country. (4) The size of a nation’s ethnic minority population, insofar as ethnic minorities often experience multiple health risks such as poverty, inadequate housing, limited access to health care, and overall poorer health. (5) Population density, because of its positive relationship to rates of disease transmission. (6) Location. Here Cole’s identifies places like New York or London as relevant “locations” for rampant COVID-19. Although he does not explicitly identify these urban incubators of pandemic as examples of the wider phenomenon of what are frequently termed “global cities,” the implication is there. This suggests that another method of addressing the question about why various capitalist countries responded differently to the pandemic might be to compare the COVID-19 experience across global cities, rather than just across nation-states. (7) The overall health of the population, which is to some extent a consequence of the other six factors, along with additional characteristics of a nation’s social structure and cultural practices.

By locating the problem of COVID-19 in a comparative context, Coles points to a way toward analysing the variable relationship between capitalism and public health. As one of the first books to focus explicitly on how global, neo-liberal
capitalism has shaped and been shaped by national experiences under the current pandemic conditions, *Capitalism and Coronavirus* makes a valuable contribution to the emergent literature on the political-economy of COVID-19.

While *Capitalism and Coronavirus* is not explicitly grounded in state crime or state-corporate crime analysis, it offers several elements of use to criminologists. First, by presenting a compendium of over 500 references to news stories and reports about COVID-19 gleaned from a global array of online sources, the book can serve as a reference work of contemporaneous writings about the pandemic. The index and reference section of *Capitalism and Coronavirus* alone constitutes 41 per cent of the book. I would note, however, that few *books* on health, health policy, or state or corporate wrongdoing show up among the referenced work. Whether this is, or is not, a positive step toward relocating social analysis to the meta-verse is something for readers to decide.

Second, in its exploration of the ways capitalism is either responsible for or exacerbated COVID-19, which might have occurred under any circumstances (the author vacillates between these positions), *Capitalism and Coronavirus* foregrounds the importance of analysing the relationship between political-economic arrangements and upstream determinants of health. Although Coles does not specifically address this point, I would suggest that adverse, upstream health conditions created by capitalist social structures are a crucial form of wrongful state and corporate social harm, but one that receives relatively little attention within criminology, with the notable exception of analyses focused on environmental crimes such as pollution, industrial disasters, or global climate change.

Third, *Capitalism and Coronavirus* models the need to recognize social complexity in the analysis of health outcomes. Coles does a good job in considering how cross-connections between multiple social forces such as government policies, inequality, racism, sexism, and political and economic inequalities produce a public health whole larger than the sum of any of its individual parts.

Taken together, these qualities make *Coronavirus and Capitalism* a worthwhile read. From the perspective of criminological analysis, however, the book is underdeveloped in three ways that limit its use in developing new theoretical frames for studying problems of capitalism and public health.

First, the book’s framing of capitalism as the cause of all bad health outcomes has the feel of the proverbial man who has only a hammer, and so sees every problem as a nail. While this may be consistent with a base/superstructure approach to Marxist analysis, it undervalues the important theoretical developments of structuralist, post-modernist, feminist, and critical race theorizing that have demonstrated, or at least offered powerful suggestions, that economy is not the only independent variable shaping societies.

Coles’s instrumental Marxist approach, with its focus on economy as the key motive force, makes *Capitalism and Coronavirus* better suited to inviting political
outrage than suggesting pathways to deeper analyses of the problem. Given the horrific levels of death, disease, and disruption caused by malfeasance, incompetence, corruption, and political manipulation in the face of a grave viral threat over the last three years, outrage is appropriate. However, many times while reading the book I kept hoping for more portals that would take me beneath the narrative of wrongdoing to a deeper analytic understanding.

Second, by laying much of the blame for the coronavirus disaster on the search by capitalists for private enrichment, that is, greed, Capitalism and Coronavirus risks the theoretical error of supplanting social structures with individual behaviour as the key locus of the problem. Left-sympathetic explanations for the problems of capitalist society that rest on the private flaws of capitalists fit well with Margaret Thatcher’s articulation of the neo-liberal ideology that there is no society; there are only “individual men and women.” What is missing when we focus on capitalists and their greed is a theoretical framework that explains why capitalists act the way they do, one that reaches beyond concepts of outrage-inducing moral failing.

Third, Capitalism and Coronavirus provides valuable information about how differently organized capitalisms have resulted in differing levels of death, disease, and disruption over the course of the pandemic. What is absent is a theoretical framework that helps explain how and why different capitalist countries forged different paths to capital accumulation, and in doing so generated different public health outcomes. It is here where the comparative analysis between countries feels thin. This may be a critique too far, since answering that question would require significant historical, political-economic, and cultural analysis of each of the countries being compared. It might have been beneficial, however, if the author had problematized those differences rather than presenting them as givens.

Despite being somewhat theoretically underdeveloped, Capitalism and Coronavirus is worth reading for anyone interested in public health wrongs as state and/or state-corporate crimes.

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Note
1. While Thatcher’s full statement was more nuanced than this, it nevertheless captured the essence of a Hayekian understanding that social structures are the outcome of individual and collective experiences and actions, not the cause of them (Steele, 2009, “There Is No Society,” New Statesmen. Available online at: https://iea.org.uk/blog/there-is-no-such-thing-as-society (accessed 14 April 2022).