

Noam Chomsky & Robert Pollin: To Heal From COVID-19, We Must Imagine A Different World



Prof.dr. Robert Pollin

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) caught the world unprepared, and the economic, social and political consequences of the pandemic are expected to be dramatic, in spite of recent pledges by leaders of the Group of 20 (G20) major economies to inject \$5 trillion into the global economy in order to spur economic recovery.

But what lessons can we learn from this pandemic? Will the coronavirus crisis lead to a new way of organizing society — one that conceives of a social and political order where profits are not above people?

In this exclusive interview with Truthout, public intellectual Noam Chomsky and economist Robert Pollin tackle these questions.



Noam Chomsky

C. J. Polychroniou: Noam, what are some of the deeper lessons we can draw from

the global health crisis caused by coronavirus?

Noam Chomsky: Pandemics have been predicted by scientists for a long time, particularly since the 2003 SARS pandemic, which was caused by a coronavirus similar to COVID-19. They also predict that there will be further and probably worse pandemics. If we hope to prevent the next ones, we should therefore ask how this happened, and change what went wrong. The lessons arise at many levels, from the roots of the catastrophe to issues specific to particular countries. I'll focus on the U.S., though that's misleading since it is at the bottom of the barrel in competence of response to the crisis.

The basic factors are clear enough. The damage was rooted in a colossal market failure, exacerbated by the capitalism of the neoliberal era. There are particularities in the U.S., ranging from its disastrous health system and weak social justice ranking — [near the bottom of the OECD](#) — to the wrecking ball that has taken over the federal government.

The virus responsible for SARS was quickly identified. Vaccines were developed, but were not carried through the testing phase. Drug companies showed little interest: They respond to market signals, and there's little profit in devoting resources to staving off some anticipated catastrophe. The general failure is illustrated dramatically by the most severe immediate problem: [lack of ventilators](#), a lethal failure, forcing doctors and nurses to make the agonizing decision of who to kill.

The Obama administration had recognized the potential problem. It ordered high-quality low-cost ventilators from a small company that was then bought by a large corporation, Covidien, which shelved the project, apparently because the products might compete with its own high-cost ventilators. It then informed the government that it wanted to cancel the contract because it was not profitable enough.

So far, normal capitalist logic. But at that point the neoliberal pathology delivered another hammer blow. The government could have stepped in, but that's barred by the reigning doctrine pronounced by Ronald Reagan: Government is the problem, not the solution. So nothing could be done.

We should pause for a moment to consider the meaning of the formula. In practice, it means that government is not the solution when the welfare of the

population is at stake, but it very definitely is the solution for the problems of private wealth and corporate power. The record is ample under Reagan and since, and there should be no need to review it. The mantra “Government bad” is similar to the vaunted “free market” — easily skewed to accommodate exorbitant claims of capital.

Neoliberal doctrines entered for the private sector too. The business model requires “efficiency,” meaning maximal profit, consequences be damned. For the privatized health system, it means no spare capacity: just enough to get by in normal circumstances, and even then, bare bones, with severe cost to patients but a good balance sheet (and rich rewards for management). When something unexpected happens, tough luck.

These standard business principles have plenty of effects throughout the economy. The most severe of these concern the climate crisis, which overshadows the current virus crisis in its import. Fossil fuel corporations are in business to maximize profits, not to allow human society to survive, a matter of indifference. They are constantly seeking new oil fields to exploit. They do not waste resources on sustainable energy and dismantle profitable sustainable energy projects because they can make more money by accelerating mass destruction.

The White House, in the hands of an extraordinary collection of gangsters, pours fuel on the fire by its dedication to maximizing fossil fuel use and dismantling regulations that hinder the race to the abyss in which they proudly take the lead.

The reaction of the Davos crowd — the “masters of the universe” as they are called — is instructive. They dislike Trump’s vulgarity, which contaminates the image of civilized humanism they seek to project. But they applaud him vigorously when he rants away as keynote speaker, recognizing that he has a clear understanding of how to fill the right pockets.

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Returning to the pandemic, there was ample evidence that it was coming. Trump responded in his characteristic manner. Throughout his term, budgets for health-related components of government were slashed. With exquisite timing, “Two months before the novel coronavirus is thought to have begun its deadly advance

in Wuhan, China, [the Trump administration ended a \\$200 million pandemic early-warning program](#) aimed at training scientists in China and other countries to detect and respond to such a threat” — a precursor to Trump’s fanning “[Yellow Peril](#)” flames to deflect attention from his catastrophic performance.

The defunding process continued, astonishingly, after the pandemic had struck with full force. On February 10, the White House released its new budget, with further reductions for the beleaguered health care system (indeed anything that might benefit the population) but “[the budget promotes a fossil fuel ‘energy boom’ in the United States](#), including an increase in the production of natural gas and crude oil.”

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The American people are also a target of Trumpian values. Despite repeated pleas from Congress and the medical profession, Trump did not invoke the Defense Production Act to order companies to produce badly needed equipment, claiming that it is a “break the glass” last resort and that to invoke the Defense Production Act for the pandemic would be to turn the country into Venezuela. But in fact, *The New York Times* points out that the Defense Production Act “[has been invoked hundreds of thousands of times in the Trump years](#)” for the military. Somehow the country survived this assault on the “free enterprise system.”

It was not enough to refuse to take measures to procure the required medical equipment. The White House also made sure that stocks would be depleted. A [study of government trade data by Congresswoman Katie Porter](#) found that the value of U.S. ventilator exports rose 22.7 percent from January to February and that in February 2020, “the value of U.S. mask exports to China was 1094 [percent] higher than the 2019 monthly average.”

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As recently as March 2, the Trump Administration was encouraging American businesses to increase exports of medical supplies, especially to China. Yet, during this period, the U.S. government was well aware of the harms of COVID-19, including a likely need for additional respirators and masks.

Writing in [The American Prospect](#), David Dayen comments: “So manufacturers and middlemen made money in the first two months of the year shipping medical

supplies out of the country, and now they're making more money in the next two months shipping them back in. The trade imbalance took precedence over self-sufficiency and resiliency."

There was [no doubt](#) about the [coming dangers](#). In October, a high-level study revealed the nature of the pandemic threats. On December 31, China informed the World Health organization of an outbreak of pneumonia-like symptoms. A week later, it reported that scientists had identified the source as a coronavirus and sequenced the genome, again providing the information to the general public. For several weeks, China did not reveal the scale of the crisis, claiming later that the delay had been caused by failure of local bureaucrats to inform the central authorities, [a claim confirmed by U.S. analysts](#).

What was happening in China was well-known. In particular, to U.S. intelligence, which through January and February was beating on the doors of the White House trying to reach the President. To no avail. He was either playing golf or praising himself on TV for having done more than anyone in the world to stem the threat.

[Intelligence was not alone in trying to get the White House to wake up](#). As *The New York Times* reports, "A top White House adviser [Peter Navarro] starkly warned Trump administration officials in late January that the coronavirus crisis could cost the United States trillions of dollars and put millions of Americans at risk of illness or death ... imperiling the lives of millions of Americans [as shown by] the information coming from China."

To no avail. Months were lost while the Dear Leader flipped up and back from one tale to another — ominously, with the adoring Republican voting base lustily cheering every step.

When the facts finally became undeniable, Trump assured the world that he was the first person to have discovered the pandemic and his firm hand had everything under control. Throughout, the performance was loyally parroted by the sycophants with whom he has surrounded himself, and by his echo chamber at *Fox News* — which also seems to serve as his source for information and ideas, in an interesting dialogue.

None of this was inevitable. It was not only U.S. intelligence that understood the early information that China provided. Countries on China's periphery reacted at

once, very effectively in Taiwan, also in South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore. [New Zealand instituted a lockdown at once](#), and seems to have virtually eliminated the epidemic.

Most of Europe dithered, but better organized societies reacted. Germany has the world's lowest reported death rate, benefiting from spare capacity in reserve. The same seems to be true of Norway and some others. The European Union revealed its level of civilization by the refusal of the better-off countries to help others. But fortunately, they could count on Cuba to come to their rescue, providing doctors, while China provided medical equipment.

Throughout, there are many lessons to learn, crucially, about the suicidal features of unconstrained capitalism and the extra damage caused by the neoliberal plague. The crisis shines a bright light on the perils of transferring decision-making to unaccountable private institutions dedicated solely to greed, their solemn duty, so Milton Friedman and other luminaries have explained, invoking the laws of sound economics.

For the U.S. there are special lessons. As already noted, the U.S. ranks near the bottom of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in social justice measures. Its privatized for-profit health care system, pursuing business models of efficiency, is a disaster, with twice the per-capita costs of comparable countries and some of the worst outcomes. There is no reason to live with that. Surely the time has come to rise to the level of other countries and institute a humane and efficient universal health care system.

There are other simple steps that can be taken at once. Corporations are again rushing to the nanny state for bailouts. If granted, strict conditions should be imposed: no bonuses and pay for workers for the duration of the crisis; permanent ban on stock buybacks and resort to tax havens, modes of robbery of the public that run to tens of trillions of dollars, not small change. Is that feasible? Clearly so. That was the law, and was enforced, until Reagan opened the spigot. They should also be required to have worker representation in management and to adhere to a living wage, among conditions that quickly come to mind

There are many further short-range steps that are quite feasible and could expand. But beyond that, the crisis offers an opportunity to rethink and reshape our world. The masters are dedicating themselves to the task, and if they are not

countered and overwhelmed by engaged popular forces, we will be entering a much uglier world — one that may not long survive.

The masters are uneasy. As the peasants are picking up their pitchforks, the tune in corporate headquarters is changing. High-level executives have joined to show that they are such nice guys that the well-being and security of all is assured if left in their caring hands. It's time for corporate culture and practice to become more caring, they proclaim, concerned not just with returns to shareholders (mostly very wealthy), but with stakeholders — workers and community. It was a leading theme of the last Davos conference in January.

They aren't reminding us that we've heard this song before. In the 1950s the phrase was "the soulful corporation." How soulful, it did not take long to discover.

C. J. Polychroniou: Bob, can you help us understand the economic shock of coronavirus? How severe will the socioeconomic impact be, and who is likely to be most affected?

Robert Pollin: The breakneck speed of the economic collapse resulting from COVID-19 is without historic precedent.

Over the week of April 4, 6.6 million people filed initial claims to receive unemployment insurance. This is after 6.9 million people filed the previous week, and 3.3 filed the week before that. Prior to these three weeks, the highest number of people filing claims was in October 1982, during the severe Ronald Reagan double-dip recession. At that time, the record number of claims added up to 650,000. This disparity between 1982 and today is eye-popping, even after one takes account of the relative size of the U.S. labor force today versus in 1982. Thus, in 1982, the 650,000 unemployment insurance claims amounted to 0.6 percent of the U.S. labor force. The 6.6 million people who filed claims in the first week of April and 6.9 million the week before both equaled fully 4 percent of the U.S. labor force. So as a percentage of the labor force, these weekly filings for unemployment claims were 7 times higher than the previous record from 1982. Adding up the past three weeks of unemployment insurance claims gets us to 16.8 million people newly unemployed people, amounting to over 10 percent of the U.S. labor force. The expectation is that this figure is going to keep rising for many more weeks to come, potentially pushing unemployment in the range of 20 percent, a figure unseen since the depths of the 1930s Great Depression.

The situation for unemployed people in the U.S. is worse still because a large share of them had health insurance coverage through their employers. That insurance is now gone. The stimulus bill that Trump signed into law on March 27 provides no funds for treating people who are infected. The Peterson-Kaiser Family Foundation estimated that treatment could cost up to \$20,000, and that even people with health insurance coverage through their employer could end up with \$1,300 in out-of-pocket bills. Thus, fully in the spirit of our corporate-dominated and egregiously unfair U.S. health care system, COVID-19 will hit millions of people with major medical bills at exactly when they are most vulnerable. If Medicare for All were operating in the U.S. today, everyone would be covered in full as a matter of course.

In addition to the situation for people losing their jobs, we also need to recognize conditions for people working in front-line essential occupations. These people are putting themselves at high risk by showing up at work. A report by Hye Jin Rho, Hayley Brown and Shawn Fremstad of the Center for Economic and Policy Research shows that [more than 30 million U.S. workers](#) (nearly 20 percent of the entire U.S. workforce) are employed in six broad industries that are now on the front lines of the response. These workers include grocery store clerks, nurses, cleaners, warehouse workers and bus drivers, among others. Fully 65 percent of these workers are women. A disproportionate share of them are also low-paid and lack health insurance. These essential workers are putting themselves at high risks of infection, and if they do become infected, they will face the prospect of a severe financial crisis on top of their health crisis.

The coronavirus is also hitting low-income African American communities in the U.S. most brutally. Thus, in Illinois, African Americans account for more than half of all deaths from COVID-19, even while they account for only 14 percent of the state's population. In Louisiana, [70 percent of those who have died thus far are African American](#), while the African American share of the population is 32 percent. Comparable patterns are emerging in other states. These figures reflect the simple fact that lower-income African Americans do not have the same means to protect themselves through social distancing and staying home from their jobs.

As severe as conditions are now for people in the U.S. and other advanced economies, they are going to seem mild once the virus begins to spread, as it almost certainly will, with catastrophic impacts, in the low-income countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. To begin with, the strategies of

social distancing and self-isolation that have been relatively effective in high-income countries in slowing down the infection rate will be mostly impossible to implement in the poor neighborhoods of, say, Delhi, Nairobi or Lima, since people in these communities are mostly living in very tight quarters. They also largely have to rely on crowded public transportation to get anyplace, including to their jobs, since they cannot afford to stay home from work. This problem is compounded by the conditions of work in these jobs. In most low-income countries, about 70 percent of all employment is informal, meaning workers do not receive benefits, including paid sick leave, provided by their employers. [As the Indian economists C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh write](#), these workers and their families “are clearly the most vulnerable to any economic downturn. When such a downturn comes in the wake of an unprecedented public health calamity, the concerns are obviously multiplied.”

In addition, most low-income countries have extremely limited public health budgets to begin with. They have also been hard-hit by the collapse of tourism as well as sharp declines in their export revenues and remittances. Thus, in recent weeks, 85 countries have already approached the International Monetary Fund for short-term emergency assistance, roughly double the number that made such requests in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The situation is likely to get worse very quickly.

C. J. Polychroniou: Noam, will coronavirus kill globalization?

Noam Chomsky: Globalization in some form goes back to the earliest recorded history — in fact, beyond. And it will continue. The question is: in what form? Suppose, for example, that a question arises as to whether to transfer some enterprise from Indiana to northern Mexico. Who decides? Bankers in New York or Chicago? Or perhaps the workforce and the community, perhaps even in coordination with Mexican counterparts. There are all sorts of associations among people — and conflicts of interest among them — that do not coincide with colors on maps. The sordid spectacle of states competing when cooperation is needed to combat a global crisis highlights the need to dismantle profit-based globalization and to construct true internationalism, if we hope to avoid extinction. The crisis is offering many opportunities to liberate ourselves from ideological chains, to envision a very different world, and to move on to create it.

The coronavirus is likely to change the highly fragile international economy that

has been constructed in recent years, profit-driven and dismissive of externalized costs such as the huge destruction of the environment caused by transactions within complex supply chains, not to speak of the destruction of lives and communities. It's likely that all of this will be reshaped, but again we should ask, and answer, the question of whose will be the guiding hands.

There are some steps towards internationalism in the service of people, not concentrated power. Yanis Varoufakis and Bernie Sanders [issued a call for a progressive international to counter the international of reactionary states being forged by the Trump White House.](#)

Similar efforts can take many forms. Unions are still called "internationals," reminiscent of dreams that do not have to be idle. And sometimes are not. Longshoremen have refused to unload cargo in acts of international solidarity. There have been many impressive examples of international solidarity at state and popular levels. At the state level, nothing compares with Cuban internationalism — from Cuba's extraordinary role in the liberation of southern Africa, described in depth by Piero Gleijeses, to the work of its doctors in Pakistan after the devastating 2005 earthquake, to overcoming the failures of the European Union today.

At the level of people, I know of nothing to compare with the flow of Americans to Central America in the 1980s to help victims of Reagan's terrorist wars and the state terrorism that he supported, from all walks of life, some of the most dedicated and effective from church groups in rural America. There has been nothing like that in the prior history of imperialism, to my knowledge.

Without proceeding, there are many kinds of global interaction and integration. Some of them are highly meritorious and should be actively pursued.

C. J. Polychroniou: Governments around the world are responding to the coronavirus economic fallout with massive stimulus measures. In the U.S., the Trump administration is prepared to spend \$2 trillion of stimulus money approved by Congress. Bob, is this enough? And will it test the limits of how much more debt the U.S. can bear?

Robert Pollin: The stimulus program that Trump signed into law in March is the largest such measure in U.S. history. At \$2 trillion, it amounts to roughly 10 percent of U.S. gross domestic product (GDP), which the government aims to

distribute quickly in the coming months. By contrast, the 2009 Obama fiscal stimulus was budgeted at \$800 billion over two years, or about 3 percent of GDP per year over the two years.

Despite its unprecedented magnitude, it is easy to see that the current stimulus program is too small, and will therefore deliver too little, in most of the ways that matter. This is while recognizing that, adding everything up, the stimulus provides massive giveaways to big U.S. corporations and Wall Street — i.e. the same people who benefited the most only 11 years ago from the Obama stimulus and corresponding Wall Street bailout. I noted above the fact that the stimulus provides no health care support for people infected by COVID-19. It also offers minimal additional support for both hospitals fighting the virus on the front lines as well as for state and local governments. State and local governments are going to experience sharp falls in their tax revenues — from income taxes, sales taxes and property taxes — as the recession takes hold. During the 2007-09 Great Recession, state and local tax revenues fell by 13 percent. We can expect a drop now of at least equal severity. Absent a large-scale injection of funds from the federal government — i.e. an injection of roughly three times what has been allocated thus far through the stimulus — state and local governments will be forced to undertake large-scale budget cuts and layoffs, including for school teachers, health care workers and police officers who, in combination, represent the bulk of their payroll spending.

Even the Trump administration appears to recognize that the stimulus bill is far too small. That is why both Trump and the congressional Democrats are already talking about another stimulus bill that could amount to another \$2 trillion. The U.S. does have the capacity to maintain borrowing these enormous sums. Among other considerations, as was true during the 2007-09 Great Recession, U.S. government bonds will be recognized as the safest assets available on the global financial market. This will place a premium on U.S. bonds relative to every other credit instrument on the global market. The Federal Reserve also has the capacity, as needed, to buy up and effectively retire U.S. government bonds if the debt burden becomes excessive. No other country, or entity of any sort, enjoys anything like this privileged financial status.

Working from this position of extreme privilege, the Fed has now committed to providing basically unlimited and unconditional support for U.S. corporations and Wall Street firms. Indeed, between March 18 and 31 alone, the Fed purchased

\$1.14 trillion in Treasury and corporate bonds, at a rate of over \$1 million per second. The *Financial Times* reports projections that [the Fed's asset holdings could reach \\$12 trillion by June](#)— i.e. 60 percent of U.S. GDP — with further increases to follow. By comparison, just prior to the 2007 -2009 financial crisis, the Fed's bond holdings were at \$1 trillion. They then spiked to \$2 trillion during the crisis — a figure equal to only about 1/5 where the Fed's interventions are heading over the next couple of months.

The U.S. and global economy do need a gigantic bailout now to prevent suffering by innocent people resulting from both the pandemic and economic collapse. But the bailout needs to be focused, in the immediate, on delivering to everyone the health care provisions that they need and to keeping people financially whole.

Taking a broader structural perspective, we also need to stop squandering the enormous financial privileges enjoyed by the U.S. on propping up the neoliberal edifice that has denominated economic life in the U.S. and the world for the past 40 years. The fact that the U.S. government has the financial wherewithal to bail out giant corporations and Wall Street twice within the past 11 years means that it also has the capacity to take control over some of the most dysfunctional and anti-social private enterprises. We could start by replacing the private health insurance industry with Medicare for All. The federal government could also take a controlling interest in the fossil fuel industry that must be put out of business, in any case, over the next 30 years. Other targets for at least partial nationalizations should include the airlines that face desperate straits now, but that squandered 96 percent of their cash on buybacks over the past decade. The Wall Street operators that helped engineer such financial practices need to face both strong regulations and competition from large-scale public development banks capable of financing, for example, the Green New Deal.

In short, the U.S. economy that will emerge out of the present crisis cannot be permitted to return to the neoliberal status quo. It was clear during the Great Recession that some of the biggest U.S. corporations and Wall Street firms could not survive without government life supports. Now, only 11 years later, we are about to rerun the same movie, only this time on a jumbotron screen. Forty years' worth of neoliberal indoctrination has pampered big business and Wall Street into believing that corporate socialism will always be theirs for the asking — that they can hoard profits for themselves at will while foisting their risks, as needed, onto everybody else. At this moment especially, if businesses want to insist that they

exist only to maximize profits for their owners, then the federal government needs to sever their lifelines. Progressives should keep fighting hard for these principles.

C. J. Polychroniou: Noam, coronavirus seems to be producing an uplift in solidarity among common people in many parts of the world, and perhaps even the realization that we are all global citizens. Obviously, coronavirus itself won't defeat neoliberalism and the resulting atomization of social life that we have been witnessing since its advent, but do you expect a shift in economic and political thinking? Perhaps the return of the social state?

Noam Chomsky: Those possibilities should remind us of the powerful wave of radical democracy that swept over much of the world under the impact of the Great Depression and the anti-fascist war — and of the steps taken by the masters to contain or crush such hopes. A history that yields many lessons for today.

The pandemic should shock people to an appreciation of genuine internationalism, to recognition of the need to cure ailing societies of the neoliberal plague, then on to more radical reconstruction directed to the roots of contemporary disorder.

Americans in particular should awaken to the cruelty of the weak social justice system. Not a simple matter. It is, for example, quite odd to see that even at the left end of mainstream opinion, programs such as those advocated by Bernie Sanders are considered “too radical” for Americans. His two major programs call for universal health care and free higher education, normal in developed societies and poorer ones as well.

The pandemic should awaken us to the realization that in a just world, social fetters should be replaced by social bonds, ideals that trace back to the Enlightenment and classical liberalism. Ideals that we see realized in many ways. The remarkable courage and selflessness of health workers is an inspiring tribute to the resources of the human spirit. In many places, communities of mutual aid are being formed to provide food for the needy and help and support for the elderly and disabled.

There is indeed “an uplift in solidarity among common people in many parts of the world, and perhaps even the realization that we are all global citizens.” The challenges are clear. They can be met. At this grim moment of human history,

they must be met, or history will come to an inglorious end.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

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The defunding process continued, astonishingly, after the pandemic had struck with full force.

There was [no doubt](#) about the [coming dangers](#). In October, a high-level study revealed the nature of the pandemic threats. On December 31, China informed the World Health organization of an outbreak of pneumonia-like symptoms. A week later, it reported that scientists had identified the source as a coronavirus and sequenced the genome, again providing the information to the general public.

For several weeks, China did not reveal the scale of the crisis, claiming later that the delay had been caused by failure of local bureaucrats to inform the central authorities, [a claim confirmed by U.S. analysts](#).

What was happening in China was well-known. In particular, to U.S. intelligence, which through January and February was beating on the doors of the White House trying to reach the President. To no avail. He was either playing golf or praising himself on TV for having done more than anyone in the world to stem the threat.

[Intelligence was not alone in trying to get the White House to wake up](#). As *The New York Times* reports, “A top White House adviser [Peter Navarro] starkly warned Trump administration officials in late January that the coronavirus crisis could cost the United States trillions of dollars and put millions of Americans at risk of illness or death ... imperiling the lives of millions of Americans [as shown by] the information coming from China.”

To no avail. Months were lost while the Dear Leader flipped up and back from one tale to another — ominously, with the adoring Republican voting base lustily cheering every step.

When the facts finally became undeniable, Trump assured the world that he was the first person to have discovered the pandemic and his firm hand had everything under control. Throughout, the performance was loyally parroted by the sycophants with whom he has surrounded himself, and by his echo chamber at *Fox News* — which also seems to serve as his source for information and ideas, in an interesting dialogue.

None of this was inevitable. It was not only U.S. intelligence that understood the early information that China provided. Countries on China’s periphery reacted at once, very effectively in Taiwan, also in South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore. [New Zealand instituted a lockdown at once](#), and seems to have virtually eliminated the epidemic.

Most of Europe dithered, but better organized societies reacted. Germany has the world’s lowest reported death rate, benefiting from spare capacity in reserve. The same seems to be true of Norway and some others. The European Union revealed its level of civilization by the refusal of the better-off countries to help others. But fortunately, they could count on Cuba to come to their rescue, providing doctors,

while China provided medical equipment.

Throughout, there are many lessons to learn, crucially, about the suicidal features of unconstrained capitalism and the extra damage caused by the neoliberal plague. The crisis shines a bright light on the perils of transferring decision-making to unaccountable private institutions dedicated solely to greed, their solemn duty, so Milton Friedman and other luminaries have explained, invoking the laws of sound economics.

For the U.S. there are special lessons. As already noted, the U.S. ranks near the bottom of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in social justice measures. Its privatized for-profit health care system, pursuing business models of efficiency, is a disaster, with twice the per-capita costs of comparable countries and some of the worst outcomes. There is no reason to live with that. Surely the time has come to rise to the level of other countries and institute a humane and efficient universal health care system.

The crisis shines a bright light on the perils of transferring decision-making to unaccountable private institutions dedicated solely to greed

There are other simple steps that can be taken at once. Corporations are again rushing to the nanny state for bailouts. If granted, strict conditions should be imposed: no bonuses and pay for workers for the duration of the crisis; permanent ban on stock buybacks and resort to tax havens, modes of robbery of the public that run to tens of trillions of dollars, not small change. Is that feasible? Clearly so. That was the law, and was enforced, until Reagan opened the spigot. They should also be required to have worker representation in management and to adhere to a living wage, among conditions that quickly come to mind

There are many further short-range steps that are quite feasible and could expand. But beyond that, the crisis offers an opportunity to rethink and reshape our world. The masters are dedicating themselves to the task, and if they are not countered and overwhelmed by engaged popular forces, we will be entering a much uglier world — one that may not long survive.

The masters are uneasy. As the peasants are picking up their pitchforks, the tune in corporate headquarters is changing. High-level executives have joined to show that they are such nice guys that the well-being and security of all is assured if left in their caring hands. It's time for corporate culture and practice to become

more caring, they proclaim, concerned not just with returns to shareholders (mostly very wealthy), but with stakeholders — workers and community. It was a leading theme of the last Davos conference in January.

They aren't reminding us that we've heard this song before. In the 1950s the phrase was "the soulful corporation." How soulful, it did not take long to discover.

C. J. Polychroniou: Bob, can you help us understand the economic shock of coronavirus? How severe will the socioeconomic impact be, and who is likely to be most affected?

Robert Pollin: The breakneck speed of the economic collapse resulting from COVID-19 is without historic precedent.

Over the week of April 4, 6.6 million people filed initial claims to receive unemployment insurance. This is after 6.9 million people filed the previous week, and 3.3 filed the week before that. Prior to these three weeks, the highest number of people filing claims was in October 1982, during the severe Ronald Reagan double-dip recession. At that time, the record number of claims added up to 650,000. This disparity between 1982 and today is eye-popping, even after one takes account of the relative size of the U.S. labor force today versus in 1982. Thus, in 1982, the 650,000 unemployment insurance claims amounted to 0.6 percent of the U.S. labor force. The 6.6 million people who filed claims in the first week of April and 6.9 million the week before both equaled fully 4 percent of the U.S. labor force. So as a percentage of the labor force, these weekly filings for unemployment claims were 7 times higher than the previous record from 1982. Adding up the past three weeks of unemployment insurance claims gets us to 16.8 million people newly unemployed people, amounting to over 10 percent of the U.S. labor force. The expectation is that this figure is going to keep rising for many more weeks to come, potentially pushing unemployment in the range of 20 percent, a figure unseen since the depths of the 1930s Great Depression.

The breakneck speed of the economic collapse resulting from COVID-19 is without historic precedent.

The situation for unemployed people in the U.S. is worse still because a large share of them had health insurance coverage through their employers. That insurance is now gone. The stimulus bill that Trump signed into law on March 27 provides no funds for treating people who are infected. The Peterson-Kaiser

Family Foundation estimated that treatment could cost up to \$20,000, and that even people with health insurance coverage through their employer could end up with \$1,300 in out-of-pocket bills. Thus, fully in the spirit of our corporate-dominated and egregiously unfair U.S. health care system, COVID-19 will hit millions of people with major medical bills at exactly when they are most vulnerable. If Medicare for All were operating in the U.S. today, everyone would be covered in full as a matter of course.

In addition to the situation for people losing their jobs, we also need to recognize conditions for people working in front-line essential occupations. These people are putting themselves at high risk by showing up at work. A report by Hye Jin Rho, Hayley Brown and Shawn Fremstad of the Center for Economic and Policy Research shows that [more than 30 million U.S. workers](#) (nearly 20 percent of the entire U.S. workforce) are employed in six broad industries that are now on the front lines of the response. These workers include grocery store clerks, nurses, cleaners, warehouse workers and bus drivers, among others. Fully 65 percent of these workers are women. A disproportionate share of them are also low-paid and lack health insurance. These essential workers are putting themselves at high risks of infection, and if they do become infected, they will face the prospect of a severe financial crisis on top of their health crisis.

More than 30 million U.S. workers (nearly 20 percent of the entire U.S. workforce) are employed in six broad industries that are now on the front lines of the response.

The coronavirus is also hitting low-income African American communities in the U.S. most brutally. Thus, in Illinois, African Americans account for more than half of all deaths from COVID-19, even while they account for only 14 percent of the state's population. In Louisiana, [70 percent of those who have died thus far are African American](#), while the African American share of the population is 32 percent. Comparable patterns are emerging in other states. These figures reflect the simple fact that lower-income African Americans do not have the same means to protect themselves through social distancing and staying home from their jobs.

As severe as conditions are now for people in the U.S. and other advanced economies, they are going to seem mild once the virus begins to spread, as it almost certainly will, with catastrophic impacts, in the low-income countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. To begin with, the strategies of social distancing and self-isolation that have been relatively effective in high-

income countries in slowing down the infection rate will be mostly impossible to implement in the poor neighborhoods of, say, Delhi, Nairobi or Lima, since people in these communities are mostly living in very tight quarters. They also largely have to rely on crowded public transportation to get anyplace, including to their jobs, since they cannot afford to stay home from work. This problem is compounded by the conditions of work in these jobs. In most low-income countries, about 70 percent of all employment is informal, meaning workers do not receive benefits, including paid sick leave, provided by their employers. [As the Indian economists C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh write](#), these workers and their families “are clearly the most vulnerable to any economic downturn. When such a downturn comes in the wake of an unprecedented public health calamity, the concerns are obviously multiplied.”

In Illinois, African Americans account for more than half of all deaths from COVID-19, even while they account for only 14 percent of the state’s population. In addition, most low-income countries have extremely limited public health budgets to begin with. They have also been hard-hit by the collapse of tourism as well as sharp declines in their export revenues and remittances. Thus, in recent weeks, 85 countries have already approached the International Monetary Fund for short-term emergency assistance, roughly double the number that made such requests in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The situation is likely to get worse very quickly.

C. J. Polychroniou: Noam, will coronavirus kill globalization?

Noam Chomsky: Globalization in some form goes back to the earliest recorded history — in fact, beyond. And it will continue. The question is: in what form? Suppose, for example, that a question arises as to whether to transfer some enterprise from Indiana to northern Mexico. Who decides? Bankers in New York or Chicago? Or perhaps the workforce and the community, perhaps even in coordination with Mexican counterparts. There are all sorts of associations among people — and conflicts of interest among them — that do not coincide with colors on maps. The sordid spectacle of states competing when cooperation is needed to combat a global crisis highlights the need to dismantle profit-based globalization and to construct true internationalism, if we hope to avoid extinction. The crisis is offering many opportunities to liberate ourselves from ideological chains, to envision a very different world, and to move on to create it.

The coronavirus is likely to change the highly fragile international economy that has been constructed in recent years, profit-driven and dismissive of externalized costs such as the huge destruction of the environment caused by transactions within complex supply chains, not to speak of the destruction of lives and communities. It's likely that all of this will be reshaped, but again we should ask, and answer, the question of whose will be the guiding hands.

As severe as conditions are now for people in the U.S. and other advanced economies, they are going to seem mild once the virus begins to spread in the low-income countries.

There are some steps towards internationalism in the service of people, not concentrated power. Yanis Varoufakis and Bernie Sanders [issued a call for a progressive international to counter the international of reactionary states being forged by the Trump White House.](#)

Similar efforts can take many forms. Unions are still called "internationals," reminiscent of dreams that do not have to be idle. And sometimes are not. Longshoremen have refused to unload cargo in acts of international solidarity. There have been many impressive examples of international solidarity at state and popular levels. At the state level, nothing compares with Cuban internationalism — from Cuba's extraordinary role in the liberation of southern Africa, described in depth by Piero Gleijeses, to the work of its doctors in Pakistan after the devastating 2005 earthquake, to overcoming the failures of the European Union today.

At the level of people, I know of nothing to compare with the flow of Americans to Central America in the 1980s to help victims of Reagan's terrorist wars and the state terrorism that he supported, from all walks of life, some of the most dedicated and effective from church groups in rural America. There has been nothing like that in the prior history of imperialism, to my knowledge.

The crisis is offering many opportunities to liberate ourselves from ideological chains, to envision a very different world, and to move on to create it. Without proceeding, there are many kinds of global interaction and integration. Some of them are highly meritorious and should be actively pursued.

C. J. Polychroniou: Governments around the world are responding to the coronavirus economic fallout with massive stimulus measures. In the U.S., the Trump administration is prepared to spend \$2 trillion of stimulus

money approved by Congress. Bob, is this enough? And will it test the limits of how much more debt the U.S. can bear?

Robert Pollin: The stimulus program that Trump signed into law in March is the largest such measure in U.S. history. At \$2 trillion, it amounts to roughly 10 percent of U.S. gross domestic product (GDP), which the government aims to distribute quickly in the coming months. By contrast, the 2009 Obama fiscal stimulus was budgeted at \$800 billion over two years, or about 3 percent of GDP per year over the two years.

Despite its unprecedented magnitude, it is easy to see that the current stimulus program is too small, and will therefore deliver too little, in most of the ways that matter. This is while recognizing that, adding everything up, the stimulus provides massive giveaways to big U.S. corporations and Wall Street — i.e. the same people who benefited the most only 11 years ago from the Obama stimulus and corresponding Wall Street bailout. I noted above the fact that the stimulus provides no health care support for people infected by COVID-19. It also offers minimal additional support for both hospitals fighting the virus on the front lines as well as for state and local governments. State and local governments are going to experience sharp falls in their tax revenues — from income taxes, sales taxes and property taxes — as the recession takes hold. During the 2007-09 Great Recession, state and local tax revenues fell by 13 percent. We can expect a drop now of at least equal severity. Absent a large-scale injection of funds from the federal government — i.e. an injection of roughly three times what has been allocated thus far through the stimulus — state and local governments will be forced to undertake large-scale budget cuts and layoffs, including for school teachers, health care workers and police officers who, in combination, represent the bulk of their payroll spending.

The stimulus provides no health care support for people infected by COVID-19. Even the Trump administration appears to recognize that the stimulus bill is far too small. That is why both Trump and the congressional Democrats are already talking about another stimulus bill that could amount to another \$2 trillion. The U.S. does have the capacity to maintain borrowing these enormous sums. Among other considerations, as was true during the 2007-09 Great Recession, U.S. government bonds will be recognized as the safest assets available on the global financial market. This will place a premium on U.S. bonds relative to every other credit instrument on the global market. The Federal Reserve also has the

capacity, as needed, to buy up and effectively retire U.S. government bonds if the debt burden becomes excessive. No other country, or entity of any sort, enjoys anything like this privileged financial status.

Working from this position of extreme privilege, the Fed has now committed to providing basically unlimited and unconditional support for U.S. corporations and Wall Street firms. Indeed, between March 18 and 31 alone, the Fed purchased \$1.14 trillion in Treasury and corporate bonds, at a rate of over \$1 million per second. The *Financial Times* reports projections that [the Fed's asset holdings could reach \\$12 trillion by June](#)— i.e. 60 percent of U.S. GDP — with further increases to follow. By comparison, just prior to the 2007 -2009 financial crisis, the Fed's bond holdings were at \$1 trillion. They then spiked to \$2 trillion during the crisis — a figure equal to only about 1/5 where the Fed's interventions are heading over the next couple of months.

The U.S. and global economy do need a gigantic bailout now to prevent suffering by innocent people resulting from both the pandemic and economic collapse. But the bailout needs to be focused, in the immediate, on delivering to everyone the health care provisions that they need and to keeping people financially whole.

Taking a broader structural perspective, we also need to stop squandering the enormous financial privileges enjoyed by the U.S. on propping up the neoliberal edifice that has denominated economic life in the U.S. and the world for the past 40 years. The fact that the U.S. government has the financial wherewithal to bail out giant corporations and Wall Street twice within the past 11 years means that it also has the capacity to take control over some of the most dysfunctional and anti-social private enterprises. We could start by replacing the private health insurance industry with Medicare for All. The federal government could also take a controlling interest in the fossil fuel industry that must be put out of business, in any case, over the next 30 years. Other targets for at least partial nationalizations should include the airlines that face desperate straits now, but that squandered 96 percent of their cash on buybacks over the past decade. The Wall Street operators that helped engineer such financial practices need to face both strong regulations and competition from large-scale public development banks capable of financing, for example, the Green New Deal.

Neoliberal indoctrination has pampered big business and Wall Street into believing that corporate socialism will always be theirs for the asking.

In short, the U.S. economy that will emerge out of the present crisis cannot be permitted to return to the neoliberal status quo. It was clear during the Great Recession that some of the biggest U.S. corporations and Wall Street firms could not survive without government life supports. Now, only 11 years later, we are about to rerun the same movie, only this time on a jumbotron screen. Forty years' worth of neoliberal indoctrination has pampered big business and Wall Street into believing that corporate socialism will always be theirs for the asking — that they can hoard profits for themselves at will while foisting their risks, as needed, onto everybody else. At this moment especially, if businesses want to insist that they exist only to maximize profits for their owners, then the federal government needs to sever their lifelines. Progressives should keep fighting hard for these principles.

C. J. Polychroniou: Noam, coronavirus seems to be producing an uplift in solidarity among common people in many parts of the world, and perhaps even the realization that we are all global citizens. Obviously, coronavirus itself won't defeat neoliberalism and the resulting atomization of social life that we have been witnessing since its advent, but do you expect a shift in economic and political thinking? Perhaps the return of the social state?

Noam Chomsky: Those possibilities should remind us of the powerful wave of radical democracy that swept over much of the world under the impact of the Great Depression and the anti-fascist war — and of the steps taken by the masters to contain or crush such hopes. A history that yields many lessons for today.

The pandemic should shock people to an appreciation of genuine internationalism, to recognition of the need to cure ailing societies of the neoliberal plague, then on to more radical reconstruction directed to the roots of contemporary disorder.

Americans in particular should awaken to the cruelty of the weak social justice system. Not a simple matter. It is, for example, quite odd to see that even at the left end of mainstream opinion, programs such as those advocated by Bernie Sanders are considered “too radical” for Americans. His two major programs call for universal health care and free higher education, normal in developed societies and poorer ones as well.

The pandemic should awaken us to the realization that in a just world, social fetters should be replaced by social bonds, ideals that trace back to the Enlightenment and classical liberalism. Ideals that we see realized in many ways. The remarkable courage and selflessness of health workers is an inspiring tribute to the resources of the human spirit. In many places, communities of mutual aid are being formed to provide food for the needy and help and support for the elderly and disabled.

There is indeed “an uplift in solidarity among common people in many parts of the world, and perhaps even the realization that we are all global citizens.” The challenges are clear. They can be met. At this grim moment of human history, they must be met, or history will come to an inglorious end.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

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The University of West Indies (UWI) has a leading role in open access initiatives in the region. UWI is a multi campus University, with major campuses situated in Jamaica (Mona), Trinidad & Tobago (St. Augustine) and Barbados (Cave Hill).

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In the Caribbean, open access initiatives promote regional collaboration and integration of digital collections, with support from foreign and international agencies for digitization and preservation of patrimonial documents and preserving memories, examples:

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Another example of cross-institutional open access initiative is MANIOC, a scientific and cultural open access repository specializing on the Caribbean, the Amazon, the Guyana Plateau and regions or areas of interest related to these territories.

Several digital libraries from the region offer open access to special collections digitized because of their cultural, historical and research significance for countries in the Caribbean, ex.: National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS) Digital Library of Trinidad and Tobago, Digital Collections at University of West Indies St. Augustine in Trinidad and Tobago, National Library of Jamaica Digital Collections, among other.

For subject open access initiatives, several examples can be mentioned:

On legislation:

CARIBLEX, the International Labor Organization's database of national labour legislation for the 13 ILO member States of the English- and *Dutch-speaking* Caribbean is maintained by the ILO's Subregional Office for the Caribbean.

Carilaw (Caribbean Law Online) coordinated by the Faculty of Law Library, Cave Hill Campus of the University of the West Indies.

Go to: <http://www.unesco.org/the-caribbean>

Paul Comenencia ~ Verdeeld Koninkrijk. Pleidooi voor een nieuw elan in Koninkrijksrelaties



‘Deze publicatie is een eigen capita selecta over de totstandkoming van de autonomie van de voormalige Nederlandse Antillen en van de ontwikkelingen die geleid hebben tot de in 2010 van kracht geworden nieuwe rechtsorde. Tegelijkertijd is het een pleidooi voor nieuw elan in de Koninkrijksrelaties, gericht op een voorspoedige toekomst voor de respectievelijke rijksodelen’, schrijft Comenencia in de samenvatting.

In kort bestek weet Comenencia de ontmanteling van de voormalige Nederlandse Antillen helder samen te vatten. De raak gekozen citaten illustreren de tijdgeest ten tijde van de cruciale momenten in die geschiedenis. De auteur, lid van de Raad van State van het Koninkrijk, weet ook de voor de gemiddelde leek lastiger

onderwerpen, zoals de totstandkoming van het Statuut en het voortslepende conflict over de Geschillenregeling, toegankelijk te beschrijven.

Comenencia is niet bang om de schaduwzijde van de verhoudingen binnen het Koninkrijk te benoemen. Het hoofdstuk *Vooruitblik: verschraling tegengaan, Statuut beter benutten*, begint met de vaststelling: 'Al vaker is geconstateerd dat de Koninkrijksrelaties vandaag de dag, voor de meeste betrokkenen, een hoofdpijndossier vormen. Op de eilanden verklaren politici niets tegen Haagse betrokkenheid te hebben (zij willen, naar eigen zeggen, zelfs intensief samenwerken), te veel bemoeienis is waar zij niet op zitten te wachten. En in Den Haag varieert de mening van sceptici tussen, aan de ene kant, de berusting tot elkaar 'veroordeeld' te zijn en, aan het andere uiterste, de eilanden liever kwijt dan rijk te zijn.'

Comenencia noemt zijn boek een *cri de coeur*. Op dezelfde manier doorgaan als tot nu toe, is in ieder geval geen optie, concludeert hij in de *Samenvatting*. Het is tijd om met elkaar duidelijke keuzes te maken voor de toekomst.

De ondertitel, *Pleidooi voor een nieuw elan in Koninkrijksrelaties*, maakt uiteraard nieuwsgierig naar de aanbevelingen die Comenencia tegen het einde van het boek aan de lezer voorlegt. Die aanbevelingen moeten de weg wijzen naar een nieuw elan in Koninkrijksrelaties.

De aanbevelingen op een rijtje:

- Acceptatie door alle Koninkrijkspartners dat bepaalde problemen inherent zijn aan de extreme kleinschaligheid van de eilanden en dus van blijvende aard zijn.
- Meer thema's op Koninkrijksniveau aanpakken en oplossen.
- Differentiatie, maatwerk accepteren in toepassing Statuut
- Meer uitwisseling van expertise
- Permanent in gesprek blijven
- Meer Caribische interventies in Staten-Generaal
- Vertegenwoordigingen versterken

Al zien de aanbevelingen en aanvullende opmerkingen van Comenencia er misschien uit alsof je door een open deur de toekomst binnenwandelt, ze bieden de mogelijkheid om per onderwerp hierover van gedachten te wisselen. Zodat de wens van de auteur uitkomt: dat nieuwe elan.

Paul Comenencia - *Verdeeld Koninkrijk. Pleidooi voor een nieuw elan in*

Koninkrijksrelaties.

Uitgeverij Eburon, Utrecht 2020.

ISBN 978 94 5301 290 4 (paperback) - ISBN 978 94 6301 294 2 (e-book)

Paolo Giordano ~ In tijden van besmetting



Paolo Giordano. Ills.:
Joseph Sassoon Semah

‘Als het om besmetting gaat, is gebrek aan solidariteit bovenal een gebrek aan verbeeldingskracht. De gemeenschap in tijden van besmetting is de totaliteit van alle mensen op aarde.’

CoV-2, die de grootste bedreiging vormt van onze tijd, raast door de geglobaliseerde wereld. De epidemie dwingt ons onszelf te beschouwen als behorend bij een collectief. In tijden van besmetting zijn we één enkel organisme; we worden weer een gemeenschap. Paolo Giordano is niet bang ziek te worden, maar wel bang dat de beschaving een kaartenhuis blijkt te zijn, dat alles wordt uitgewist. Maar hij is vooral bang dat als de epidemie direct over is, alles

uiteindelijk hetzelfde blijft.

Van eind februari tot begin maart schrijft de Italiaanse auteur Paolo Giordano *In tijden van besmetting* om vooral niet te missen wat deze epidemie over onszelf vertelt. De corona-epidemie, die identiteit en cultuur overstijgt, maakt niet alleen duidelijk op hoeveel niveaus we met elkaar zijn verbonden, maar ook de complexiteit van de wereld waarin we leven. 'Aan deze besmetting kunnen we afmeten hoezeer onze wereld is geglobaliseerd, verweven is geraakt, een ontwarbare kluwen is geworden.'

Voor de auteur van de bestseller *De eenzaamheid van de priemgetallen* (2009) en cum laude afgestudeerd in natuurkunde, is wiskunde een onmisbaar instrument om te begrijpen wat er aan de hand is, want wiskunde is de wetenschap van relaties. De besmetting is een infectie van het netwerk van onze onderlinge betrekkingen, aldus Paolo Giordano. De besmetting als kille, wiskundige abstractie is ook een groot spel, een spel van het quarantainedilemma. Paolo Giordano legt uit wat het SIR-model is, het alles onthullende geraamte van elke epidemie. SARS-COV-2 is het virus, COVID-19 de ziekte. Hij onderscheidt drie groepen: de vatbaren (Susceptibles), de besmettelijken (Infectious) en de mensen die niet meer ziek zijn (Recovered), waarbij de vatbaren de belangrijkste is: zevenenhalf miljard personen maken onderdeel uit van deze groep.

De groei van het virus is niet-lineair, niet constant, maar neemt voortdurend sneller toe. Een besmetting begint als kettingreactie, steeds meer personen worden steeds sneller besmet. Hoe snel hangt af van een getal, de verborgen kern van de epidemie, dat wordt aangeduid met het symbool r_0 , elke epidemie heeft haar eigen r_0 , aldus Paolo Giordano.

Om de epidemie te bestrijden, moeten we de waarde naar beneden zien te krijgen, onder de kritische waarde, totdat alle voorafgaande besmettingen bekend zijn en zijn ingedamd, en totdat van het merendeel de incubatietijd is verstreken, dan kunnen we een vertraging tegemoetzien. De besmetting is dan vertraagd, ondanks dat ze nog toeneemt. Het kan alleen maar goed aflopen als we ons opsluiten, dan zakt de besmettingsgraad uiteindelijk onder de kritische waarde van één en zal de epidemie tot stilstand komen. Verlagen is de wiskundige betekenis van onze offers.

Paolo Giordano definieert de besmetting als kille, wiskundige abstractie, als een

groot spel. Een spel dat we 'het quarantainedilemma' zouden kunnen noemen. De epidemie dwingt ons onszelf als collectief te zien, als één enkel organisme. In tijden van besmetting worden we weer een gemeenschap, waarin we om twee redenen geen enkele risico mogen nemen. Het percentage noodzakelijke ziekenhuisopnames wegens COVID-19 is ongeveer 10 % van de besmette mensen, waardoor een tekort aan bedden en verplegers ontstaat en het zorgsysteem plat komt te liggen. De tweede reden is niet getalsmatig maar van menselijke aard: de ouderen die net wat vatbaarder zijn moeten we beschermen evenals de miljoenen en miljoenen die super vatbaar zijn om sociale en economische redenen. 'Als het om besmetting gaat, is gebrek aan solidariteit bovenal een gebrek aan verbeeldingskracht.' De gemeenschap in tijden van besmetting is de totaliteit van alle mensen op aarde.



We weten dat de mens is besmet met CoV-2 via een diersoort.

Door onze agressie jegens het milieu wordt contact met deze nieuwe ziektekiemen steeds waarschijnlijker: de steeds sneller verlopende uitsterving van veel diersoorten dwingt de bacteriën die in hun ingewanden leven naar elders te verhuizen. Ook de intense veehouderij is een voedingsbodem voor allerlei bacteriën. COVID-19 is slechts het begin van wat steeds vaker zal gebeuren. De infectie is te vinden in de ecologie.

We moeten deze 'lege tijd' benutten om zo snel mogelijk ons gedrag te veranderen, zoals geen overbodige vliegvlagen maken, geen vreemde dieren eten, geen verspilling van energie. Dat vereist alle offerbereidheid en verantwoordelijkheid waartoe we in staat zijn. De patstelling waarin we ons bevinden zal enorme consequenties hebben, gemiste opdrachten, dichte rolluiken, stagnatie in alle sectoren, aldus Paolo Giordano.

Hij citeert een paar regels uit Psalm 90:

'Leer ons zo onze dagen te tellen
Dat wijsheid ons hart vervult.'

We kunnen nu zin geven en nadenken over een andere toekomst en niet alleen

het aantal besmettingen en doden tellen, de miljarden die op de beurs zijn verdampt.

En vooral 'Niet toestaan dat al dit lijden voor niets is geweest.'

Paolo Giordano - *In tijden van besmetting*. De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 2020. ISBN 9789403198309

Paolo Giordano is auteur van *De eenzaamheid van de priemgetallen*, *Het menselijk lichaam*, *Het zwart en het zilver* en *De hemel verslinden*.

Linda Bouws - *St. Metropool Internationale Kunstprojecten*

Alle poëzie is balanceren op het scherp van de snede. Jean Pierre Rawie over het ambacht dichten



*Jean Pierre Rawie Foto:
Uitgeverij Prometheus*

Oude gedichten (1987) van Jean Pierre Rawie bevat de gedichten uit zijn eerste

bundels, *Het meisje en de dood* (1979), *Intensive care* (1982) en *Kwade trouw* (1986), alsmede een aantal 'Liederen in opdracht' en vertalingen. De bundels *Woelig stof* (1989) en *Onmogelijk geluk* (1992) bereikten een, voor oorspronkelijke Nederlandse poëzie ongebruikelijk, groot publiek. Najaar 1993 verzorgde de dichter een aantal werk- en hoorcolleges aan de Letterenfaculteit van de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

Bij romans en verhalen kun je er gewoonlijk vanuit gaan dat ze voor een belangrijk deel autobiografisch zijn. Bij toneelstukken is dat precies omgekeerd: niet veel mensen zullen zich afvragen of het werk van Pinter of Beckett autobiografisch geïnspireerd is. De eerste vraag van een biografisch interview met een dichter dient dan ook te zijn: hoe zit dat bij poëzie?

Je leest wel eens dat er vroeger op *de Kring* een heel verlopen type kwam, van wie de mensen zeiden: daar heeft Roland Holst zijn *Winter aan zee* voor geschreven. Dat soort dingen moet je helemaal niet weten. Het is heel goed dat we onzeker zijn over Beatrice en Laura. Het heeft ontzettend weinig zin om bijvoorbeeld over mijn verschillende amoures te spreken. Die spelen natuurlijk wel een grote rol in mijn leven en duiken ook in mijn poëzie op, maar daar heb je zo weinig aan. Ik heb vaak meegemaakt dat de verkeerde vrouwen dachten dat een bepaald gedicht over hun ging; terwijl ik zelf natuurlijk altijd wel de aanleiding weet, maar daar heeft niemand wat aan, want dan bemoeilijk je de identificatie. Dat is niet goed.

Dus de biografische kennis over een dichter is niet relevant?

Volstrekt niet, volgens mij. De belangstelling voor schrijvers als persoon heeft een veel te hoge vlucht genomen in de afgelopen decennia. Het vervelende is, dat het ook weer omdraait. Het succes van mijn laatste bundels, bijvoorbeeld, wordt door bepaalde kunstbroeders gaarne op het conto van de media in plaats van op dat van de kwaliteit van mijn werk geschreven, terwijl die media zich er pas mee zijn gaan bemoeien toen het al een tijd in de top-tien stond.

De televisie heeft de functie van de krant voor een groot gedeelte overgenomen. Dus als je de gelegenheid krijgt op de televisie iets te zeggen – de enkele keer dat een dichter daar iets mag zeggen – en je leest daarbij een gedicht voor, en daarna gaan er allemaal mensen naar de boekhandel die zeggen: ja, er was een man met een baardje op de televisie die een mooi gedicht voorlas, dan ligt het toch aan dat gedicht en niet aan het feit dat je kop op de buis was.

En het wil er bij mij ook niet in dat iemand door een televisieprogramma of een

interview in de krant naar een boekhandel gaat en dertig gulden neertelt voor een bundel die hij eigenlijk niet wil hebben. Dat geloof ik niet.

Dat beantwoordt niet mijn vraag. Leest men een gedichtenbundel anders met biografische kennis over de dichter?

Het ligt andersom. Als je getroffen bent door een bepaalde dichter, dan wil je er meer over weten. Dat is begrijpelijk. Poëzie is in het algemeen maar een kleine hoeveelheid tekst. En sommige biografieën van dichters zijn geweldig leuk, zoals die van Byron. Maar het voegt inderdaad niet verschrikkelijk veel toe. Natuurlijk is alle poëzie wel geschreven vanuit ervaringen die je zelf opgedaan hebt. Ik kan tenminste niet schrijven over iets wat ik niet zelf heb meegemaakt. Rilke zei dat ooit heel mooi: *Gedichte sind keine Gefühle, die hat man früh genug; sondern es sind Erfahrungen.*

Alleen: het is gestileerd en tot een kunstwerk gemaakt. Dat is ook altijd het probleem als je ergens voorleest. Dan lees je in een uur tijd een aantal gedichten voor en aangezien het in die poëzie, bij mij althans, wat ernstig van toon is, om het voorzichtig uit te drukken, en het allemaal over 'ik' gaat - dat is nu eenmaal zo bij lyriek, dat is een heel onbeleefde kunstvorm wat dat betreft -, heb je mensen die denken: nou, die man heeft het niet makkelijk.

Ze realiseren zich dan niet dat het allemaal gestileerd is, en dat dus weliswaar de oorsprong autobiografisch is, maar dat de bedoeling van het gedicht is dat de lezer die 'ik' wordt. Dat moet je nog vaak uitleggen. Het gaat om het effect dat poëzie sorteert bij de lezer en niet om de gevoelsuitstorting van de dichter.

Het is bij uitstek bij lyriek dat de identificatie met de auteur dreigt. Ik heb als voorbeeld wel eens genoemd: als men 'De Vrolijke Drinker' van Frans Hals ziet, denkt niemand dat Frans Hals een geweldige zuiplap was. Misschien was hij dat wel, dat weet ik niet, maar dat verband wordt niet gelegd. Of als bij Beethoven over bepaalde stukken door de duiders wordt gezegd dat dit eigenlijk gaat over Orfeus in de onderwereld en de gestorven geliefde, dan gaat niemand op zoek naar die gestorven geliefde van Beethoven. Maar bij poëzie gebeurt dat wel.

Bij het luisteren naar muziek werkt het dus veel eerder zo dat men zich aan zijn eigen gemoedsbeweging overgeeft.

Het lijkt me heel vervelend als je bij een stuk muziek duidelijk te horen krijgt wat de componist bedoeld heeft en waar het allemaal over gaat en welke emoties hij

erin verwerkt heeft, want, zoals Karel van het Reve ooit terecht zei: wat gaan mij de emoties van die ander aan? En dat is ook de bedoeling van poëzie: dat de emotie waar je over leest je aangaat. En zodra je gaat denken: dat is de emotie van die Rawie, dan is het al een stuk minder interessant geworden, behalve voor die paar mensen die het direct betreft. Het moet iets worden waar men zijn eigen gevoelens in terugvindt.



Laat ik een voorbeeld geven. Ik heb de indruk dat je gedichten in Onmogelijk geluk over het sterven van je vader en het gedicht over je moeder...

...veel persoonlijker zijn? Dat vind ik niet. Ik heb zelfs grote problemen gehad met het feit dat ik de kleur van de ogen van mijn moeder in een van die gedichten vermeld. Want daarmee sluit ik mensen die moeders hebben met anders gekleurde ogen al weer uit. Maar ik heb niet de indruk dat er in die gedichten meer van mij in zit dan in andere gedichten. En herkenbaarheid ligt bij de lezer, daar gaat het om.

Er bestaat toch de theorie dat men emoties van zaken waarbij men persoonlijk heel nauw betrokken is geweest, pas kan beschrijven als er voldoende afstand ontstaan is?

Ja, dat geloofde ik ook altijd. Maar zeker in mijn laatste bundel staan liefdesgedichten en die gedichten over mijn vader die helemaal niet vanaf een afstand geschreven zijn. Sterker nog, er is geen woord gelogen in, behalve dat het zo gestileerd is geworden door de vorm. En dat is ook wat me in eerste instantie enige schroom bezorgde: kun je dat wel publiceren? Het gekke is: bij liefdesgedichten vindt iedereen dat gewoon. Waarbij je trouwens als schrijver altijd heel streng moet kijken dat er geen belachelijkheden in kruipen. Dat is een heel riskant genre, hoor. Hoewel, alle poëzie is balanceren op het scherp van de snede. Het gaat erom: het gedicht moet wel ontroeren maar net niet naar de sentimentaliteit doorslaan. Maar dan ook nèt niet, wil het echt ontroeren. Maar dat geldt voor alle kunst.

Niettemin lijken sommige gedichten mij, laat ik zeggen 'concreter autobiografisch' dan andere. Bij die over je vader denk ik niet: dit gaat over zomaar iemand wiens vader overlijdt, maar dit gaat jou en jouw vader.

Dat is de aanleiding. Maar juist die gedichten blijken, gezien het feit dat ze opduiken in de rouwverwerking van andere mensen, een algemene geldigheid te hebben. En daar gaat het om. Dat is ook waarom ik ze gepubliceerd heb. Het zijn gedichten waarbij ik zelf in eerste instantie enige schroom voelde. Kan dit wel? Want het is toch raar dat je, in een situatie waarin je geacht wordt je over te geven aan je gevoel zonder meer, een sonnet schrijft. En aangezien een sonnet dat voor je eigen gevoel goed en af is, altijd een geluksgevoel meebrengt, is dat wat paradoxaal. En dat was in dit geval ook zo. Maar je hoeft niet mij of mijn vader gekend te hebben om die gedichten te waarderen. Daar gaat het om. En zo gauw je te veel details vermeldt - en er zijn dichters die echt man en paard noemen in hun poëzie -, verhindert of bemoeilijkt dat de identificatiemogelijkheid.

Dit gezegd zijnde, gaan we naar je jeugd.

Daar denk ik nou bijna nooit aan, aan mijn jeugd. Ik vond het buitengewoon vervelend om kind te zijn.

Waarom?

Ik wilde altijd iemand zijn die zijn eigen lot in handen had, en dat heb je niet als kind.

Wat herinner je je van je jeugd?

Daar was niks fout mee, verder. Ik had heel veel zorg en liefde om mij heen, maar ik herinner het me als een echt vervelende periode die zo snel mogelijk voorbij moest. De simpelste voorbeelden. Ik had er als kind een geweldige hekel aan om naar bed te gaan, maar dat moest natuurlijk toch. Dus het mooiste van volwassen zijn leek mij - en zo zie je maar hoe bitter het is als je jeugdromen uitkomen -, dat je dat zelf kon bepalen. Later zijn er veel perioden geweest waarin het heel goed geweest was als er iemand had gezegd: nou Jean Pierre, nog één verhaaltje en dan naar bed. Jeugd, het is één aaneenschakeling van beschamende incidenten.

Laten we beginnen bij het begin.

Ik ben geboren in Den Haag. In 1951, op 20 april. Zelfde datum als Adolf Hitler, maar dan in een ander jaar. En de dichter Nijhoff.

Mijn vader was lutherpredikant en die werd, toen ik ongeveer een half jaar was, overgeplaatst naar Soesterberg; toen zijn we in Zeist gaan wonen. En toen ik vier of vijf was, zijn we naar Winschoten gegaan. Dat hadden ze natuurlijk beter

niet kunnen doen, maar aan de andere kant: we leefden daar nog midden in de vorige eeuw, dus voor iemand die later gedichten wil gaan schrijven, is het misschien wel heel goed in Winschoten op te groeien.



Wat betekende dat voor je opvoeding, dat je vader predikant was?

Hij was predikant van de Doopsgezinde Gemeente, wat op zich heel curieus is, want dat zijn principiële dienstweigeraars, dus zijn luchtmachtpredikantschap werd hem ook wel een beetje nagedragen. Maar op zich is dat een heel sympathiek geloof, hoor, je merkt er bijna niks van.

Dat is heel prettig. En ik ben wel blij dat ik het heb meegemaakt. Als je kinderen in Sinterklaas laat geloven, laat ze in hun jeugd dan in vredesnaam ook letterlijk geloven wat er in de Schrift staat. Dat kun je daarna dan

weer kwijtraken, dat is ook heel gezond, maar het is voor het genieten van onze cultuur vrijwel onontbeerlijk.

Er is een emotionele kant aan het esthetisch genieten van de *Matthäus-Passion* of van Dantes *Divina Commedia*, die je niet hebt als je het hele Christendom alleen maar als een cultureel verschijnsel ziet waar je op latere leeftijd kennis van neemt, zoals de Griekse mythologie of zo. Dat is onzin. Onze cultuur is er zo van doordrongen, dat als je de essentie van dat soort werken - en er zijn er talloze in onze cultuur - echt wil voelen, het zeer goed is als je een echte ouderwetse religieuze opvoeding hebt genoten.

Ik kan me voorstellen dat lezen, en in het verlengde daarvan schrijven, al snel een grote rol in jouw leven is gaan spelen.

Ik was buitengewoon blij toen ik leerde lezen. In ons gezin was nog geen televisie, dus iedereen las altijd. Ik was daar geweldig jaloers op, want ik verveelde me verschrikkelijk als kind. Het was heel fijn, ook voor mijn ouders trouwens, vooral voor mijn moeder, dat ik op gegeven moment de passie voor het boek opdeed. Het werd een stuk rustiger.

Wat las je dan?

Ik was altijd geweldig geïnteresseerd in dingen die met geschiedenis te maken hadden. Dus dat begon met prachtige riddersverhalen en *De drie musketiers* en dergelijke. Maar nog steeds, zij het dan nu op een ander niveau, lees ik in mijn

vrije tijd ter ontspanning het liefste historische werken.

Over geschiedschrijving gesproken, je bent opgegroeid met de bijbel op tafel, neem ik aan.

Nou, dat viel mee. Zoals gezegd, dat is een heel rekkelijk en verdraagzaam clubje, die Doopsgezinden. Er werd wel gelezen uit de Schrift en het speelde wel een rol, maar ik heb niet zo'n Maarten 't Hart-jeugd gehad, helaas. Maar je merkt toch duidelijk in mijn taalgebruik in de gedichten een invloed van de Schrift. En in bepaalde stukken is het ook grootse literatuur. De inspiratie is niet altijd even sterk aanwezig geweest bij de Heilige Geest, maar in grote trekken is het een schitterend boek, vooral in de Statenvertaling, die overigens door de Doopsgezinden niet werd gebruikt.

En toen brak de tijd aan dat je naar het gymnasium ging.

Dat was ook lang erg verschrikkelijk. Want ik vond de lagere school erg, 'maar', zei mijn vader, 'jongen, als je straks op het gymnasium zit, dan wordt het allemaal heel anders.' Dat was helemaal niet waar, dus toen ik op het gymnasium zat, werd mij wijsgemaakt dat het op de universiteit beter zou wezen. Nou, toen begon het ook wel een beetje, maar ik heb eigenlijk pas de laatste tien jaar het gevoel dat ik ben wie ik altijd al was. Geworden ben, wie ik altijd al was, eigenlijk.

Hoe kwam dat, dat die gymnasiumtijd minder aangenaam was dan je je voorgesteld had?

Ik was een onhandelbaar jongetje op die leeftijd. Dat is iedereen dan, denk ik. Dus ik ben van het gymnasium in Winschoten afgeschopt. Omdat mijn haar te lang was, en ik zat ook in de schoolkrant en schreef daar dingen in die niet mochten, geloof ik. Toen ben ik in Groningen beland, waar ik onmiddellijk voornamelijk ging spijbelen, want dat werd niet gecontroleerd. Dat was een wat rommelige periode.

Op schoolreünies zullen ze jou niet tegenkomen.

Neen. Ze hadden me in Winschoten gevraagd het nieuwe schoolcomplex te openen, maar dat heb ik toch maar geweigerd. Ik heb ze geschreven dat het weliswaar alweer een kwart eeuw geleden was en dat het merendeel van de leerkrachten uit die tijd inmiddels, naar ik vurig hoopte, het tijdelijke wel met het eeuwige zou hebben verwisseld, maar dat ik toch gezien mijn ervaringen uit die tijd geen enkele aanleiding zag om mijn naam op welke wijze dan ook aan dat instituut verbonden te doen zijn. Nou, dat vonden ze weer een prachtige

brief, natuurlijk.

Ik kwam hem laatst weer eens tegen. Ik moest daar in de buurt, in Pekela, voorlezen en toen werd ter inleiding die brief voorgelezen. Dat was heel curieus. Meestal weet je, als je uit je werk voordraagt, eigenlijk wel zo'n beetje wat men gaat vragen. Maar hier was iets waar ik heel verrast door was. Er was een mevrouw van onbestemde leeftijd - ze kan zo oud geweest zijn als ikzelf maar ook misschien wel zo oud als mijn moeder, dat kun je daar in Oost-Groningen vaak niet zien -, die stelde de vraag 'Die vertalingen, heb je die zelf gemaakt?' 'Hoe bedoelt u?' 'Nou, die vertalingen achter in die bundel, maak je die zelf?' 'Nou, dat spreekt nogal voor zich, nietwaar. Waarom vraagt u dat?' 'Nou, 't ging toch niet zo goed op school hier?' Toen heb ik haar uitgelegd dat het een teveel, méér dan een tekort aan hersens was wat mijn conflict daar veroorzaakt had. Oost-Groningen is bij uitstek een streek van gewoon doen en je niets aanmatigen. En het probleem is dat gewoon doen een van de dingen is die ik altijd het allermoeilijkst heb gevonden.

Waarin voldeed het gymnasium dan niet aan je verwachtingen? Waren die te hoog gestemd?

Ach, welnee. Het is de puberteit, en je moet dan dingen doen waar je hoofd helemaal niet naar staat. Als iemand mij in de tweede klas van het gymnasium had verteld dat ik nog eens voor mijn plezier een aantal talen zou gaan leren, had ik dat nooit geloofd. Bovendien was ik zo'n vervelend soort leerlingetje dat een volstrekt onvoldoende proefwerk Duits na tien minuten inleverde en dan met een blasé gezicht een deeltje Schiller of Goethe in het Gotisch uit de tas haalde en daar opzichtig in ging zitten lezen. Je zou zo'n jongen doodslaan.

Maar ik had toevallig voor Duits een docent die begreep dat daar meer achter zou kunnen zitten, dus die gaf mij altijd braaf een zes op mijn rapport. Dat was heel netjes van hem, want dat had ik niet verdiend. Maar ik geef toe, je zal ze maar voor je hebben. Het probleem is: op die leeftijd zijn de kinderen die later wel interessant worden de supervervelende jongetjes zoals ik was, en de rest interesseert het al helemaal niet. Verschrikkelijk, wat een erge tijd.

Op zeker moment heb je de poëzie ontdekt, dat wil zeggen actief.

Ik ben blij dat het stof der eeuwen over de gedichten komt die ik in die tijd schreef. Maar ik herinner me wel vanaf het eerste gedicht dat ik schreef het gevoel dat daarbij hoort, dat volstrekt extatische gevoel als je een gedicht af hebt. Dat is een constante in mijn leven gebleven. En ook iets om naar te streven.

Anders zou je het natuurlijk ook niet doen, want nu ligt het langzamerhand wat anders. Als ik nu een dichtbundel publiceer, is er een belangstellend gehoor voor. Maar als je begint te dichten en als je debuteert, dan doe je iets waar niemand om vraagt. Dat is een tamelijk malle bezigheid, eigenlijk. De meeste mensen houden dan ook op met gedichten schrijven na hun puberteit.

Ben je begonnen met experimentele poëzie?

Ja, ook. Ik dacht toen dat poëzie vooral heel raadselachtig moest wezen. Dat valt best mee. Het is ook wel raadselachtig, in diepste zin. Nog steeds. Maar ja, poëzie, dat was toen toch de Vijftigers, toen ik op school zat. We lazen Rodenko's bloemlezing, *Nieuwe griffels, schone leien*, en ik dacht: zo moet het kennelijk. Nou, dat was een vergissing.



Hoe ontdek je dat je wil dichten?

Ik herinner mij dat het eerste wat ik echt ervoer als 'ik heb nu een gedicht geschreven' - dat gedicht was natuurlijk te verschrikkelijk voor woorden, maar daar gaat het niet om -, samenviel met misschien wel de eerste bewust doorwaakte nacht. En dat is eigenlijk altijd zo gebleven. Als het gedicht begint, zoals ik het haast passief zou willen noemen, dan verlies je het besef van tijd. En nog steeds gebeurt het regelmatig dat het opeens klaarlichte dag is terwijl je om twee uur 's nachts merkte dat er een gedicht aankwam. De manier van doen is wel hetzelfde gebleven.

Zat je in de schoolkrantredactie om, zoals zovelen van ons, je verzen te kunnen publiceren, of nam je ook deel aan het kritisch beoordelen van de ingezonden bijdragen?

Schoolkranten, daar komen bijna geen ingezonden bijdragen in. Dat wordt altijd door zo'n redactie volgeschreven. In mijn studentenjaren heb ik nog meegewerkt aan een soort Gronings *Propria Cures*, en ook daar was het zo dat het minstens voor de helft door de redactie werd gevuld. Dat is nu eenmaal zo.

De behoefte om iets te publiceren, dat is nog wel essentieel voor mij. Een gedicht is pas af als het gepubliceerd wordt en onder ogen komt van mensen die je niet kent, en dat gevoel had ik toen ook. Zelfs al stencilde je het zelf, maar een gedicht moet gedrukt en verspreid worden. Ik heb nu wel eens de indruk dat er een heleboel dichters zijn die daar helemaal niet zo voor zijn.

Tijdens een forum op een symposium over media en literatuur vroeg Anton Korteweg mij bezorgd of ik niet bang was dat mijn gedichten nu door de verkeerde mensen gelezen werden. Daar ben ik uiterst verwonderd over, want dat kan toch helemaal niet? Maar kennelijk bestaat er tegenwoordig een idee over poëzie, dat de enige lezers van poëzie die twee- à vijfhonderd mensen zijn die zelf ook gedichten publiceren en dat die onderling allemaal poëtische ideeën uitwisselen.

Ik las dat Guus Middag beweerd had: als iemand zegt 'ik vind dit een mooi gedicht', dan heeft hij het niet goed gelezen. Dat vind ik buitengewoon quasi-diepzinnige onzin-uitspraken.

Je schrijft iets, en dat is in principe niet om door de vakbroeders maar om door gewone mensen gelezen te worden. Stel je toch voor dat muziek alleen maar beluisterd werd door de musicologen. En de reactie van een gewone lezer kan zijn dat hij ontroerd is, of dat hij het mooi vindt. Ik zou heel verontrust zijn als de gewone lezer zei: het meest fascinerend vind ik de functie van het wit op de pagina. Daar bedoel ik helemaal niets volks mee en ik wil ook helemaal niet zeggen dat ik concessies doe aan de smaak van een groot publiek, daar gaat het niet om. Maar ik vind het een wanverhouding dat poëzie alleen maar te begrijpen zou zijn door afgestudeerde neerlandici, waar het dan toch wel een beetje op neerkomt. En dan ook nog in een bepaalde school. Ik heb zelfs scripties onder ogen gehad over mijn eigen werk waarin beweerd wordt dat de *jij* uit mijn gedichten het gedicht zelf is. Dat leren ze aan de universiteit. Het houdt ze van de straat, maar het is natuurlijk niet waar.

Vervolgens ben je Slavische talen gaan studeren.

Ik heb een jaar of drie Russisch gedaan. En een beetje Pools, maar dat schoot niet erg op. Maar genoeg Russisch om mij in die literatuur thuis te voelen. Daarna heb ik Italiaans en Roemeens gedaan. Een beetje, hoor, een paar jaar steeds. En ook niet met grote inzet. Ik vond het leuk om daarin te kunnen lezen, maar het probleem is dat ik een talenstudie als een vakopleiding zie en niet als een wetenschap.

De wetenschappelijke pretentie die men aan de universiteit daaraan geeft, wijs ik van de hand. Dus dat botst al snel.

Bovendien waren er andere factoren. Iedereen die een taal gestudeerd heeft, weet dat het grammaticaal geslacht ondergeschikt is aan het natuurlijk geslacht en ik heb dat, geloof ik, verkeerd begrepen in die tijd. Dus ik werd al snel afgeleid

van mijn studie door andere dingen.

Maar je poëtische productie voer wel bij dat inzicht.

Ja, dat was inderdaad de tijd dat de gedichten voor de eerste bundel, *Het meisje en de dood*, ontstonden. Ik schrijf nu betere poëzie, maar dat was geen onaardige bundel.

Wanneer ontstaat de behoefte, of wellicht noodzaak, om van je gedichten te kunnen leven? Of is het omgekeerd: dat je denkt 'dit is wat ik wil doen, maar dat moet dan wel mogelijk zijn'?

Het idee van *the world owes me a living*, ja. Als je mijn werk in de loop van de jaren gevolgd hebt, zie je dat het één duidelijke lijn vertoont. Er zit een cesuur in, maar het is niet zo dat ik in deze laatste bundels ineens heel andere poëzie ben gaan schrijven; hoogstens betere, voor mijn gevoel. Dat dat uiteindelijk succes heeft en dat ik inderdaad, althans op dit moment, materieel wat minder zorgen heb, dat is alleen maar heel erg prettig. Iedereen vergeet - en dat bepaalt ook de wat bitse toon waarin men daar soms over spreekt, merk ik - de twintig jaar waarin je je het een en ander ontzegd hebt om deze poëzie te kunnen schrijven.

De critici zijn in het algemeen zelf ook dichters, zoals gezegd, en vinden het kennelijk onzin dat je je zo absoluut alleen maar daaraan wijdt, want zij kunnen het immers ook combineren met kritieken schrijven en een docentschap of iets dergelijks. Alleen al de manier waarop ik de poëzie benader, is een doorn in het oog van menigeen. Maar goed, het gaat heel aangenaam en het zou krankzinnig zijn als ik er ontevreden over was dat het ook een materiële kant heeft.

En het zal je toch ook goed doen, dat je voor een gastdocentschap aan de Universiteit van Groningen bent uitgenodigd.

Toen ik ging studeren, wilde ik natuurlijk gewoon hoogleraar worden. Zoals iedereen. Als ik een andere instelling tegenover die studie had gehad, had dat ook best gekund. Het gaf dan ook een grote satisfactie om hier aan dezelfde universiteit waar ik min of meer gesjeesd ben - want dat gevoel heb je natuurlijk wel -, uiteindelijk als gastgeleerde het woord te voeren. Dat heeft wel wat.

Ik begon dan ook mijn eerste college met een opmerking hierover en voegde daar aan toe: 'want, dames en heren, ik kan u wel zeggen, wie niet gestudeerd heeft vóór de invoering van de tweefasenstructuur, die kent, om met Talleyrand te spreken, de zoetheid des levens niet.' Ik hoorde dat een van de studentes tegen haar moeder had gezegd dat ze de helft niet snapte van wat ik allemaal zei, maar

dat ze wel vond dat ik heel mooi sprak. Nou, dat is ook iets.

P.S. Het succes hield geen stand. Na Verzamelde verzen (2004) zou het tot 2012 duren eer Rawie weer een poëziebundel publiceerde, *De tijd vliegt, maar de dagen gaan te traag*, gevolgd door twee prozabundels: *Vroeger was alles beter, behalve de tandarts* (2013) bevat luchtige columns die hij schreef voor het *Dagblad van het Noorden* en *Mijn ouders hadden één kind en een dochter* (2015) met tamelijk autobiografische vertellingen.

In 2017 verscheen bij Uitgeverij Prometheus de dichtbundel *Handschrift*, met oorspronkelijk werk en vertalingen.

Het interview met Jean Pierre Rawie verscheen eerder in *BZZLLETIN* december 1993/januari 1994.

Robert-Henk Zuidinga (1949) studeerde Nederlandse en Engelse Moderne Letterkunde aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam. Hij schrijft over literatuur, taal- en bij uitzondering - over film.

Alle poëzie is balanceren op het scherp van de snede. Jean Pierre Rawie over het ambacht dichten is gepubliceerd in *Dit staat er II, Artikelen en interviews over literatuur*. Haarlem 2017. ISBN 9789492563248.

Ook verschenen: *Dit staat er 1. Columns over taal en literatuur*. Haarlem 2016. ISBN 9789492563040 en *Dit staat er III. Bijnamen en Nederlied. Buitenlied en film*, Haarlem 2019. ISBN 97894925636637.

De drie delen *Dit staat er* bevatten de, volgens zijn eigen omschrijving, journalistieke nalatenschap van Zuidinga. De boeken zijn in eigen beheer uitgegeven. Belangstelling? Stuur een berichtje naar info@rozenbergquarterly.com - wij sturen uw bericht door naar de auteur.

Noam Chomsky: Ventilator

Shortage Exposes The Cruelty Of Neoliberal Capitalism



COVID-19 has taken the world by storm. Hundreds of thousands are infected (possibly many times more than the confirmed cases), the list of dead is growing exponentially longer, and capitalist economies have come to a standstill, with a global recession now virtually inevitable.

The pandemic had been predicted long before its appearance, but actions to prepare for such a crisis were barred by the cruel imperatives of an economic order in which “there’s no profit in preventing a future catastrophe,” Noam Chomsky points out in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*. Chomsky is emeritus professor of linguistics at MIT and laureate professor at the University of Arizona, author of more than 120 books and thousands of articles and essays. In the interview that follows, he discusses how neoliberal capitalism itself is behind the U.S.’s failed response to the pandemic.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, the outbreak of the new coronavirus disease has spread to most parts of the world, with the United States now having more infected cases than any other country, including China, where the virus originated. Are these surprising developments?

Noam Chomsky: The scale of the plague is surprising, indeed shocking, but not its appearance. Nor the fact that the U.S. has the worst record in responding to the crisis.

Scientists have been warning of a pandemic for years, insistently so since the SARS epidemic of 2003, also caused by a coronavirus, for which vaccines were developed but did not proceed beyond the pre-clinical level. That was the time to begin to put in place rapid-response systems in preparation for an outbreak and to set aside spare capacity that would be needed. Initiatives could also have been undertaken to develop defenses and modes of treatment for a likely recurrence with a related virus.

But scientific understanding is not enough. There has to be someone to pick up the ball and run with it. That option was barred by the pathology of the contemporary socioeconomic order. Market signals were clear: There's no profit in preventing a future catastrophe. The government could have stepped in, but that's barred by reigning doctrine: "Government is the problem," Reagan told us with his sunny smile, meaning that decision-making has to be handed over even more fully to the business world, which is devoted to private profit and is free from influence by those who might be concerned with the common good. The years that followed injected a dose of neoliberal brutality to the unconstrained capitalist order and the twisted form of markets it constructs.

The depth of the pathology is revealed clearly by one of the most dramatic — and murderous — failures: the lack of ventilators that is one the major bottlenecks in confronting the pandemic. The Department of Health and Human Services foresaw the problem, and contracted with a small firm to produce inexpensive, easy-to-use ventilators. But then capitalist logic intervened. The firm was bought by a major corporation, Covidien, which sidelined the project, and, "In 2014, with no ventilators having been delivered to the government, Covidien executives told officials at the [federal] biomedical research agency that they wanted to get out of the contract, according to three former federal officials. [The executives complained that it was not sufficiently profitable for the company.](#)"

Doubtless true.

Neoliberal logic then intervened, dictating that the government could not act to overcome the gross market failure, which is now causing havoc. As *The New York Times* gently put the matter, "The stalled efforts to create a new class of cheap, easy-to-use ventilators highlight the perils of outsourcing projects with critical public-health implications to private companies; their focus on maximizing profits is not always consistent with the government's goal of preparing for a future crisis."

Putting aside the ritual obeisance to the benign government and its laudatory goals, the comment is true enough. We may add that focus on maximizing profits is also "not always consistent" with the hope for "the survival of humanity," to borrow the phrase of a [leaked memo from JPMorgan Chase](#), [the U.S.'s] largest bank, warning that "the survival of humanity" is at risk on our current course,

including the bank's own investments in fossil fuels. Thus, Chevron canceled a profitable sustainable energy project because there's more profit to be made in destroying life on Earth. ExxonMobil refrained from doing so, because [it] had never opened such a project in the first place, having made more rational calculations of profitability.

And rightly so, according to neoliberal doctrine. As Milton Friedman and other neoliberal luminaries have instructed us, the task of corporate managers is to maximize profits. Any deviation from this moral obligation would shatter the foundations of "civilized life."

There will be recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, at severe and possibly horrendous cost, particularly for the poor and more vulnerable. But there will be no recovery from the melting of the polar ice sheets and the other devastating consequences of global warming. Here, too, the catastrophe results from a market failure — in this case, of truly earth-shaking proportions.

The current administration had ample warning about a likely pandemic. In fact, a high-level simulation was run as recently as last October. Trump has reacted during his years in office in the manner to which we have become accustomed: by defunding and dismantling every relevant part of government and assiduously implementing the instructions of his corporate masters to eliminate the regulations that impede profits while saving lives — and leading the race to the abyss of environmental catastrophe, by far his greatest crime — in fact, the greatest crime in history when we consider the consequences.

By early January, there was little doubt of what was happening. On December 31, China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) of the spread of pneumonia-like symptoms with unknown etiology. On January 7, China informed the WHO that scientists had identified the source as a coronavirus and had sequenced the genome, which they [made available to the scientific world](#). Through January and February, [U.S. intelligence was trying hard to reach Trump's ear](#), but failed. Officials informed the press that "[they just couldn't get him to do anything about it](#)." The system was blinking red."

Trump was not silent, however. He issued a stream of confident pronouncements informing the public that it was just a cough; he has everything under control; he gets a 10 out of 10 for his handling of the crisis; it's very serious but he knew it

was a pandemic before anyone else; and the rest of the sorry performance. The technique is well-designed, much like the practice of reeling out lies so fast that the very concept of truth vanishes. Whatever happens, Trump is sure to be vindicated among his loyal followers. When you shoot arrows at random, some are likely to hit the target.

To crown this impressive record, on February 10, when the virus was sweeping the country, the White House released its annual budget proposal, which extends further the sharp cuts in all the main health-related parts of the government (in fact just about anything that might help people) while increasing funding for what's really important: the military and the wall.

One effect is the shockingly belated and limited testing, well below others, making it impossible to implement the successful test-and-trace strategies that have prevented the epidemic from breaking out of control in functioning societies. Even the best hospitals lack basic equipment. The U.S. is now the global epicenter of the crisis.

This only skims the surface of Trumpian malevolence, but there's no space for more here.

It is tempting to cast the blame on Trump for the disastrous response to the crisis. But if we hope to avert future catastrophes, we must look beyond him. Trump came to office in a sick society, afflicted by 40 years of neoliberalism, with still deeper roots.

The neoliberal version of capitalism has been in force since Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, beginning shortly before. There should be no need to detail its grim consequences. Reagan's generosity to the super-rich is of direct relevance today as another bailout is in progress. Reagan quickly lifted the ban on tax havens and other devices to shift the tax burden to the public, and also authorized [stock buybacks](#) — a device to inflate stock values and enrich corporate management and the very wealthy (who own most of the stock) while undermining the productive capacity of the enterprise.

Such policy changes have huge consequences, in the tens of trillions of dollars. Quite generally, policy has been designed to benefit a tiny minority while the rest flounder. That's how we come to have a society in which 0.1 percent of the population hold 20 percent of the wealth and the bottom half have [negative net](#)

[worth](#) and live from paycheck to paycheck. While profits boomed and CEO salaries skyrocketed, real wages have stagnated. As economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman show in their book, *The Triumph of Injustice*, taxes are basically flat across all income groups, except at the top, where they decline.

The U.S.'s privatized for-profit health care system had long been an international scandal, with twice the per capita expenses of other developed societies and some of the worst outcomes. Neoliberal doctrine struck another blow, introducing business measures of efficiency: just-on-time service with no fat in the system. Any disruption and the system collapses. Much the same is true of the fragile global economic order forged on neoliberal principles.

This is the world that Trump inherited, the target of his battering ram. For those concerned with reconstructing a viable society out of the wreckage that will be left from the ongoing crisis, it is well to heed the call of Vijay Prashad: "We won't go back to normal, because normal was the problem."

Yet, even now, with the country in the midst of a public health emergency unlike anything we have seen in a very long time, the American public continues to be told that the universal health care is not realistic. Is neoliberalism alone responsible for this peculiarly unique American perspective on health care?

It's a complicated story. To begin with, for a long time, polls have shown favorable attitudes toward universal health care, sometimes very strong support. In the late Reagan years, about 70 percent of the population thought that guaranteed health care should be in the Constitution, and 40 percent [thought it already was](#) — the Constitution taken to be the repository of all that is obviously right. There have been referenda showing high support for universal health care — until the business propaganda offensive begins, warning of the heavy if not astronomical tax burden, much as what we have seen recently. Then popular support fades.

As usual, there is an element of truth to the propaganda. Taxes will go up, but total expenses should sharply decline, as the record of comparable countries shows. How much? There are some suggestive estimates. One of the world's leading medical journals, *The Lancet* (U.K.), recently published a [study](#) estimating that universal health care in the U.S. "is likely to lead to a 13% savings in national health-care expenditure, equivalent to more than US\$450 billion annually (based

on the value of the US\$ in 2017).” The study continues:

The entire system could be funded with less financial outlay than is incurred by employers and households paying for health-care premiums combined with existing government allocations. This shift to single payer health care would provide the greatest relief to lower-income households. Furthermore, we estimate that ensuring health-care access for all Americans would save more than 68,000 lives and 1.73 million life-years every year compared with the status quo.

But it would raise taxes. And it seems that many Americans would prefer to spend more money as long as it doesn't go to taxes (incidentally killing tens of thousands of people annually). That's a telling indication of the state of American democracy, as people experience it; and from another perspective, of the force of the doctrinal system crafted by business power and its intellectual servants. The neoliberal assault has intensified this pathological element of the national culture, but the roots go much deeper and are illustrated in many ways, a topic very much worth pursuing.

While some European countries are doing better than others in managing the spread of COVID-19, the countries that appear to have had greater success with this task lie primarily outside the Western (neo)liberal universe. They are Singapore, South Korea, Russia and China itself. Does this fact tell us something about Western capitalist regimes?

There have been various reactions to the spread of the virus. China itself seems to have controlled it, at least for now. The same is true of the countries in China's periphery where the early warnings were heeded, including democracies no less vibrant than those of the West. Europe mostly temporized, but some European countries acted. Germany appears to hold the global record in low death rates, thanks to spare health facilities and diagnostic capacity, and rapid response. The same seems to be true in Norway. Boris Johnson's reaction in the U.K. was shameful. Trump's U.S. brought up the rear.

Germany's solicitude for the population did not, however, extend beyond its borders. The European Union proved to be anything but. However, ailing European societies could reach across the Atlantic for succor. The Cuban superpower was once again ready to help with doctors and equipment. Meanwhile, its U.S. neighbor was [cutting back health aid to Yemen](#), where it had helped create the world's worst humanitarian crisis, and was using the

opportunity of the devastating health crisis to tighten its cruel sanctions to ensure maximal suffering among its chosen enemies. Cuba is the most longstanding victim, back to the days of Kennedy's terrorist wars and economic strangulation, but miraculously has survived.

It should, incidentally, be profoundly disturbing to Americans to compare the circus in Washington with Angela Merkel's sober, measured, factual report to Germans on how the outbreak should be handled.

The distinguishing feature in responses seems not to be democracies vs. autocracies, but functioning vs. dysfunctional societies — what in Trumpian rhetoric are termed "shithole" countries, like what he is working hard to craft under his rule.

What do you think of the \$2 trillion coronavirus economic rescue plan? Is it enough to stave off another possible great recession and to help the most vulnerable groups in American society?

The rescue plan is better than nothing. It offers limited relief to some of those who desperately need it, and contains an ample fund to help the truly vulnerable: the piteous corporations flocking to the nanny state, hat in hand, hiding their copies of Ayn Rand and pleading once again for rescue by the public after having spent the glory years amassing vast profits and magnifying them with an orgy of stock buybacks. But no need to worry. The slush fund will be monitored by Trump and his Treasury Secretary, who can be trusted to be fair and just. And if they decide to disregard the demands of the new inspector-general and Congress, who is going to do anything about it? Barr's Justice Department? Impeachment?

There would have been ways to direct aid to those who need it, to households, beyond the pittance included for some. That includes those working people who had authentic jobs and the huge precariat who were getting by somehow with temporary and irregular employment, but also others: those who had given up, the hundreds of thousands of victims of "deaths of despair" — a unique American tragedy — the homeless, prisoners, the great many with such inadequate housing that isolation and storing food is not an option, and plenty of others that are not hard to identify.

Political economists Thomas Ferguson and Rob Johnson put the matter plainly: While the universal medical care that is standard elsewhere may be too much to

expect in the U.S., “[there is no reason why it should have one sided single payer insurance for corporations.](#)” They go on to review simple ways to overcome this form of corporate robbery.

At the very least, the regular practice of public bailout out of the corporate sector should require stiff enforcement of a ban on stock buybacks, meaningful worker participation in management, an end to the scandalous protectionist measures of the mislabeled “free trade agreements” that guarantee huge profits for Big Pharma while raising drug prices far beyond what they would be under rational arrangements.

At least.

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