

Stevo Akkerman ~ Wat is dan goed? Prangende vragen over goed en kwaad, en alles daartussenin



Stevo Akkerman. Ills.
Joseph Sassoon Semah

Stevo Akkerman interviewde twaalf schrijvers, filosofen, theologen en psychologen over de vraag wat 'het goede' is. Hoe kunnen we het verschil tussen goed en kwaad herkennen, nu kerken en instituten terrein hebben verloren en we geen maatstaf hebben die buiten onszelf ligt? Het is een persoonlijke zoektocht naar vooruitgang in morele zin en of de mens verlost kan worden van schaamte. Zijn zoektocht eindigt met de vraag aan Rowan Williams, voormalig aartsbisschop van Canterbury (2002-2012): staan we nog steeds zoals Adam en Eva in schaamte staan tegenover God? Kunnen we daarvan verlost worden? Voor Williams ligt verlossing in bevrijding van schaamte. Niet van schuld, maar van schaamte. 'Schaamte heeft veel te maken met gebrek aan vertrouwen dat ik gezien of vergeven zal worden. Maar het goede is hoopvol leven met imperfectie.'

De eerste geïnterviewde in *Wat is dan goed? Prangende vragen over goed en kwaad, en alles daartussenin* is Arnold Grunberg, die geen absolute tegenstelling tussen goed en kwaad ziet: 'Het kwaad zit in het goede, het begint al als jij denkt te weten wat het goede is. Voor mij is een grote bron van het kwaad het

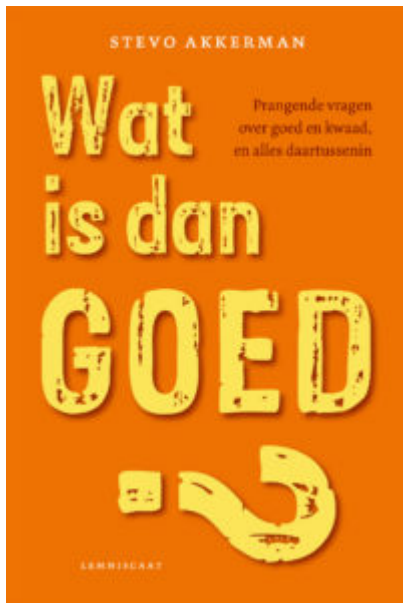
verlangen naar zuiverheid. De zekerheid is het kwaad'. Het is goed een zekere mate van onvolmaaktheid te accepteren en je niet op het standpunt van de goden te stellen. De kunst kan een rol spelen door te laten zien dat onzekerheid niet alleen een bron van lijden is, aldus Grunberg.

De schrijfster Marilynne Robinson constateert dat het kwaad meer intrigeert dan het goede, als je kijkt naar film en literatuur. Het kwaad betekent echter een onderwaardering van de mens. Calvijn en Jonathan Edwards gingen ervanuit dat de mens een prachtig schepsel is, als je deze dimensie negeert, dan open je de weg naar het kwade. Een werkelijke samenleving, en ook de democratie, is gebaseerd op de waarde van elk mens, aldus Robinson. Dat roept het woord 'ziel' op, 'de kostbare kwetsbaarheid van het menselijke zelf'. Het goede is nooit een statische toestand, zodra mensen zeker weten dat ze goed zitten, zitten ze in moeilijkheden.

Voor politiek filosoof Sybe Schaap is de samenleving belangrijker dan het individu. Het ordenen van het bestaan, nodig om het samenleven van mensen überhaupt mogelijk te maken, is de basis van de moraal. Het goede is niet individueel, het heeft een relatie met de ander, het gaat om de mens en zijn medemensen. Het goede is verankerd via cultuur, normen, gewoontes, instituties en wetgeving. Psycholoog Naomi Ellemers vertrouwt erop dat de meeste mensen het goede willen doen.

Voor schrijver Eva Meijer is er niets mis met moralisme: 'Het goede is het cultiveren van een bepaalde houding tegenover anderen, tegenover het leven zelf, je werk, toekomstige generaties, de planeet.' Voor de Tsjechische psycholoog Jindrich Kabát is voor een persoonlijk oordeel over goed en kwaad in een totalitair systeem geen plaats, alles wat moreel is, is verdacht.

De filosoof Jan Keij, geïnspireerd door Emanuel Levinas, beschrijft het goede vooral als de gevoeligheid voor de ander, het appèl dat de ander op een mens doet. Het goede gaat boven de wet: 'als ik nooit regels aan mijn laars lap, lap ik uiteindelijk mensen aan mijn laars.' Het goede is geen opvatting, het is voortdurend zoeken. De filosoof Jan Verplaetse constateert dat mensen niet in staat zijn iets anders te doen, dan dat zij doen 'ook Hitler voerde het programma uit dat ergens voor hem geschreven stond.' Mensen kunnen geen morele schuld hebben, hij gaat uit van een vrijewilsceptische moraal.



Voor psycholoog en boeddhistisch leraar Han F. de Wit, grondlegger van de contemplatieve psychologie in Nederland, gaat het om natuurlijke gevoeligheid. Het idee van goed en kwaad zijn typisch westers, in het boeddhisme gaat het om het heilzame en het heilloze, datgene dat de situatie laat bloeien. De boeddha-natuur is onze helderheid van geest en het is onze natuurlijke zorgzaamheid die we kunnen voelen voor onszelf en andere levende wezens, aldus De Wit. Het geweten als morele rechter, die je oordeelt en schuldig bevindt, kent het boeddhisme niet.

Theoloog en Bonhoeffer aanhanger Christiane Tietz ziet geen morele principes die kant-en-klaar zijn. God aanvaardt mij, maar ik moet nog steeds zelf handelen. Omdat ik leef in deze wereld. Het goede is de relatie tussen de Schepper en de schepping, en daarin huist vanaf het begin harmonie, aldus Tietz. Je geeft altijd antwoord op een specifieke situatie of op de concrete persoon van de ander.

Het boekje eindigt met de theoloog Rowan Williams, die stelt dat de wereld in beginsel goed is maar de mens steeds vlucht van dat besef. De mens heeft de neiging de realiteit van het ware en het goede te ontkennen. We moeten in harmonie zijn met de goede uitgangspositie van de wereld. Alhoewel we betere vragen stellen en beter verbanden kunnen zien, laten we de klimaatcrisis voortduren en onderdrukken en exploiteren anderen langs economische weg. De laatste vraag die Akkerman stelt aan Williams in 'Wat is goed?' is of we nog steeds zoals Adam en Eva in schaamte staan tegenover God? Kunnen we daarvan verlost worden?

'Onze verlossing is in grote mate een bevrijding van schaamte. Niet van schuld, maar van schaamte. We worden uitgenodigd onze zonden voor God te erkennen, en God zal niet geschokt zijn. Wij vertrouwen erop, dat is een belangrijk woord, dat hij zich niet van ons zal afwenden. Schaamte heeft veel te maken met gebrek aan vertrouwen dat ik gezien of vergeven zal worden. Maar het goede is hoopvol leven met imperfectie.'

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

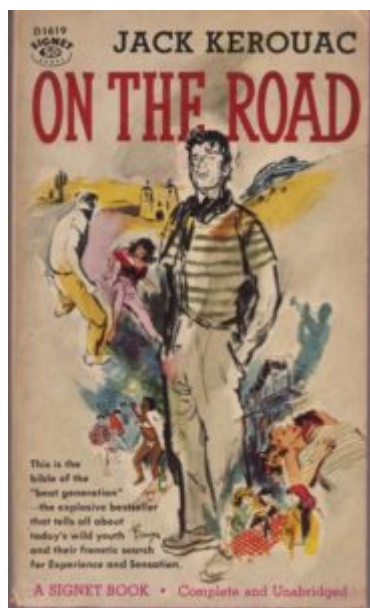
Stevo Akkerman - *Wat is dan goed? Prangende vragen over goed en kwaad, en alles daartussenin*. Lemniscaat, Rotterdam, 2020. ISBN: 9789047712480

Stevo Akkerman is journalist en columnist van dagblad Trouw. Eerder publiceerde hij *Het klopt wel maar het deugt niet* (2016)

Zie: <http://rozenbergquarterly.com/stevo-akkerman-christoph-schmidt-kop-op-europa-hoe-kijkt-de-rest-van-de-wereld-naar-ons/>

Linda Bouws – St. Metropool Internationale Kunstprojecten

EE-DE-LEE-YAH! Jazz en de Beat Generation



Zelfs voor wie niet van jazz houdt, moet het jazzconcert dat Jack Kerouac beschrijft in *On the Road*, op z'n minst aanstekelijk werken. Kerouac schetst op enthousiaste wijze de sfeer en muziek in een kleine jazzclub in San Francisco. Naar binnen gelokt door de klanken van een wilde tenorsax, beleven Sal Paradise (Kerouac), Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady) en hun vriendinnen een gloedvolle avond, zwetend en drinkend, maar vooral genietend van de overrompelende wilde jazz die op het podium wordt gespeeld. Kerouac maakt de hitte en sfeer in de drukke club voelbaar voor de lezer, je hoort de drummer zijn drums ranselen, de saxofonist zijn uithalen

maken en je ziet het zwetende publiek in trance mee swingen.

'The behatted tenorman was blowing at the peak of a wonderfully satisfactory free idea, a rising and falling riff that went from "EE-yah!" to a crazier "EE-de-lee-yah!" and blasted along to the rolling crash of butt-scarred drums hammered by a big brutal Negro with a bullneck who didn't give a damn about anything but punishing his busted tubs, crash, rattle-ti-boom, crash. Uproars of music and the tenorman had it and everybody knew he had it.'

Nieuwe levensstijl

Het concert in *On the Road* moet in 1948 hebben plaatsgevonden. Samen met de

immer zwervende winkeldief en notoire drugs- en drankgebruiker Neal Cassady reisde Kerouac dwars door de Verenigde Staten, in gestolen of geleende auto's, weg van de benauwende omgeving van highschool, familie en werk. Ontsnappen aan de traditionele Amerikaanse levenswijze was de optie, door de weidse vlakten van de Verenigde Staten te doorkruisen, nieuwe steden te verkennen, of door onder te gaan in swingende met alcohol doordrenkte feesten of helemaal op te gaan in muziek, gespeeld in obscure kroegen in de achterbuurten van San Francisco of welke stad dan ook. In gedachten en in dromen, maar ook in werkelijkheid beleven ze een nieuwe levensstijl, sterk beïnvloed door drugs, alcohol en muziek. Op de achtergrond heerst er het verlangen naar een toestand van gelukzaligheid, een vervolmaking van de geest, zo maakt Kerouac duidelijk. Door te reizen, drinken, vrijen en filosoferen, proberen ze die gedroomde werkelijkheid te ontdekken.



Jack Kerouac

Dichters en schrijvers

On the Road (1957) is een verslag van die reis maar ook een dagboekversie van het streven naar dat verlangen. Het is Jack Kerouacs bekendste boek, ooit bestempeld als 'de bijbel van de Beatniks'; en het boek dat leven en werk symboliseert van de dichters en schrijvers die zich de *Beat Generation* noemden.

On the Road was in de jaren vijftig en zestig vooral een inspiratiebron voor hen die zich niet wilden conformeren aan de heersende sociale en culturele normen en waarden in de samenleving, maar die hun eigen weg wilden gaan, los van gewoontes en tradities in de (Amerikaanse) samenleving. Het is een zoektocht

naar een niet-voorgeprogrammeerde toekomst gekoppeld aan de wens zich niet in te willen voegen in de naoorlogse moraal en levensstijl. Die vrijheidsdrang wordt gesymboliseerd door een nogal nonchalante levenswijze, je reist waarheen je wil, je slaapt en vrijt met wie wil en je ziet wel hoe je je kostje bij elkaar scharrelt. Alleen vandaag telt en morgen zien we wel weer verder.

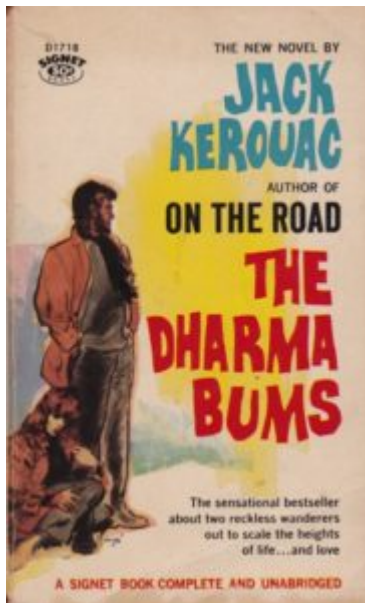
Ontsnappen

Niet alleen *On the Road*, maar meer nog *The Dharma Bums* en *Desolation Angels* van Kerouac geven uitdrukking aan het zoeken naar andere waarden dan de naoorlogse materiële standaard. We zouden dat nu spirituele waarden noemen, maar dan zonder het geloof in een godheid of in diens opgetekende wijsheden, als een poging te onderzoeken of je in je leven iets kunt met die wijsheden. Kun je ze toepassen in de werkelijkheid van alledag en word je er een beter mens van?



Bij Kerouac vinden we elementen uit het anarchisme, uit het boeddhisme en hindoeïsme terug. Hij hangt geen bepaalde religie of maatschappijopvatting aan. Uit diverse richtingen probeert hij datgene te halen waar hij in zijn leven mee uit de voeten kan, waar hij als individu beter van wordt. Het is een poging te ontsnappen aan een samenleving die het gezinsleven als hoogste goed stelt, waarin iedereen volgens gestandaardiseerde regels leeft en het individu ondergeschikt lijkt te zijn aan een algemeen geaccepteerde levenswijze. Het is het streven je te onttrekken aan het Amerikaanse leefpatroon van de

jaren veertig en vijftig.



Het werk van Kerouac is doordrenkt met de wens alles op te schrijven, te vertellen hoe hij het leven 'on the road' ervaart, en erover te publiceren. Kerouac en de andere schrijvers en dichters van de Beat Generation zetten zich af tegen de gangbare gezapigheid, de preutsheid en het ontbreken van cultuurvernieuwing. Niet jezelf conformeren aan heersende waarden en normen, maar daar aan ontsnappen en jezelf ontplooien en uitdrukking geven aan persoonlijke gevoelens, belevenissen, gedachten en ideeën. De jazz was één van die mogelijkheden tot ontsnappen. Met name de jazzstijl die dan sinds enkele jaren in opkomst is: de bebop.

Mainstream jazz

Waar en wanneer de bebop is ontstaan, is bekend. In het begin van de jaren veertig speelde in *Minton's Playhouse*, een jazzclub in West 118th Street in Upper Manhattan, geregeld een combo met Thelonius Monk en Kenny Clarke. Zij, maar later ook Charlie Parker en Dizzy Gillespie in dezelfde club, begonnen zich af te zetten tegen de mainstream jazz die tot aan de Tweede Wereldoorlog de toon had gezet. In plaats van grote swingbands koos men voor combo's, waarin juist de individuele muzikant de kans kreeg te soleren. Zo ontstond een vorm waarin ruimte bleek voor improvisatie. Dat werd de basis voor de muziek, in plaats van te voren vastgestelde arrangementen en composities.

'Bebop was characterized by fast tempos, complex harmonies, intricate melodies, and rhythm sections that laid down a steady beat only on the bass and the drummer's ride cymbal. Bebop tunes were often labyrinthine, full of surprising twists and turns', schrijft David Rosenthal in zijn standaardwerk *Hard Bop*. Jack Kerouac woonde in die jaren in dezelfde straat en was met vriend Allen Ginsberg een frequent bezoeker van *Minton's Playhouse*. Hij raakte onder de indruk van hoe Dizzy Gillespie nieuwe melodieën maakte van de akkoordenschema's van oude standards en van hoe Charlie Parker improviseerde op basis van oude jazz- en bluesklassiekers en door middel van tempovariaties zo geheel nieuwe nummers wist te creëren. Dit was pas 'real jazz', aldus Kerouac: *'Music which has not been pre-arranged – free-for-all ad lib. It is the outburst of passionate musicians, who pour all their energy into their instruments in the quest for soulful expression and super-improvisation.'*



Neal Cassady & Jack Kerouac

Improvisatie

Daarnaast raakte Kerouac gefascineerd door de zwarte cultuur, waar de jazz uit voortkwam. Volgens Kerouac stonden zwarten vrijer en spontaner in de Amerikaanse cultuur dan witte Amerikanen. De spontaniteit en het improviseren in de bebop inspireerden hem tot het voordragen en opnemen van poëzie en proza terwijl hij er aan werkte. Met woorden deed hij wat hij de muzikanten met hun instrumenten hoorde doen. Al improviserend voegde hij woorden aan elkaar, maakte hij associaties tussen woorden, beelden en ideeën en sprong hij heen en weer tussen zinnen die spontaan bij hem opkwamen en eerder door hem geschreven teksten. Hij gebruikte de improvisatietechnieken van Dizzy Gillespie en Charlie Parker: poëzie en proza ontsproten aan het onderbewustzijn, spontaan geuit en niet gehinderd door vooropgestelde regels. Allen Ginsberg beschreef deze techniek later '*spontaneous bop prosedy*' en '*an undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words.*'

Het werd niet alleen typerend voor Kerouacs schrijfstijl, maar ook voor die van andere dichters en schrijvers, die zich met elkaar verbonden voelden in ideeën en levenswijze, zoals Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lucien Carr en William Burroughs. Ze noemden zich de *Beat Generation*, naar het New Yorkse slangwoord *beat*, wat oorspronkelijk bedrogen, beroofd en emotioneel en fysiek uitgeput, betekent. Kerouac verbreedde de betekenis door er *beatific* van te maken, waarmee hij niet alleen uitdrukking probeerde te geven aan hun ideeën tegen materialisme en tegen persoonlijk gewin, maar het ook naar een hoger plan wilde trekken, naar het bereiken van een vorm van spirituele gelukzaligheid.

Beatcultuur

'We are somewhat of a beatgeneration...', zei Kerouac in een interview, een weliswaar 'verslagen'; generatie die eerst ellende en rottigheid moet doormaken, voordat de weg naar het doel duidelijk wordt en open komt te liggen. Dat het woord beat ook een muziekterm is die vooral in de jazz gebruikt wordt, is natuurlijk niet toevallig.



De Beats vonden dat hun teksten niet alleen gelezen, maar ook gehoord moesten worden. Literaire avonden waarop spontane proza en poëzie ten gehore werd gebracht waren het gevolg, eerst in New York, later in San Francisco. Eind jaren vijftig werd deze stad de hoofdstad van de Beatcultuur, met de *City Lights Bookshop* als middelpunt en met dichters Michael McClure en Lawrence Ferlinghetti als belangrijkste exponenten. *In The Cellar*, de belangrijkste jazzclub van San

Francisco, lazen Ferlinghetti en Kenneth Rexroth hun werk voor met free-jazz begeleiding. Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* was er speciaal voor geschreven en net als met jazz, zo stelde hij, blijft de inhoud voortdurend aan verandering onderhevig. Bij iedere volgende voordracht, had het gedicht dan ook een vernieuwde inhoud.

Jazzritme

Kerouac nam in de jaren vijftig een aantal langspeelplaten op waarop hij veelal met jazzbegeleiding zijn werk voordroeg: *Jack Kerouac on the Beat Generation*, *Blues and Haikus* en *Poetry for the Beat Generation*. Zo nu en dan trad hij in clubs op als scat-zanger en op enkele obscure opnames uit die tijd is hij te horen als een niet onverdienstelijk zanger bij een jazzorkestje.

In bijna al het werk van Kerouac speelt de jazz een nadrukkelijke rol. Voortdurend refereert hij aan jazzmusici of zet hij gebeurtenissen in een muzikaal kader. Zijn poëzie is vaak opgebouwd volgens een jazzritme. Soms zijn maakt hij in gedichten een eerbetoon aan bepaalde jazzmuzikanten. In het lange *Mexico City Blues* zijn enkele passages gewijd aan Charlie Parker. Op de langspeelplaat *Jack Kerouac on the Beat Generation* staat het tien minuten lange *Fantasy: The Early History of Bop*, waarin hij fictie en werkelijkheid over het ontstaan van de bop mengt met

eigen belevenissen en sfeerschetsen van jazzconcerten.



*San Francisco 1965,
v.l.n.r. Robbie Robertson
van The Hawks (later
The Band), Michael
McLure, Bob Dylan,
Allan Ginsberg*

Allen Ginsberg

Het beste voorbeeld van hoe stijl en ritme van de bebop door de Beats werden gebruikt, is het gedicht *Howl* van Allen Ginsberg. In dit lange poëziestuk over de worsteling van zijn (beat)generatie in de samenleving, zijn de regels zo lang als Ginsbergs adem ze kan voordragen. Na iedere paar regels volgt een adempauze, daarna gaat het gedicht verder, voortbordurend op hetzelfde thema, net als in een nummer van Charlie Parker. De herhaling van het woord *who* vormt in wezen de beat van het gedicht. Voor de Beats was de bebop een inspiratiebron en voorbeeld voor hun werk. Beat auteur John Clellon Holmes schreef in zijn roman *Go*: *'In this modern jazz, they heard something rebel and nameless that spoke for them, and their lives knew a gospel for the first time. It was more than a music; it became an attitude toward life, a way of walking, a language and a costume; and these introverted kids....now felt somewhere at last.'* De musici van de bebopstroming wilden de gangbare jazz verlaten omdat die volgens hen in artistiek stilstand water terecht gekomen was. Voor de Beats gold hetzelfde met betrekking tot de literatuur.



*Athenaeum Boekhandel Amsterdam
1973. Links vooraan winkelchef Jan
Meng, zittend achter de tafel
Gregory Corso en Allen Ginsberg,
staand Cees Aarts (Coll. Jan Meng)*

Hippies

De *Beat Generation* was de eerste naoorlogse protestgeneratie, je zou ze als de pioniers van de tegencultuur kunnen beschouwen. De ideeën, het werk en de personen die er deel van uitmaakten, wierpen hun schaduw vooruit naar de protestbewegingen van de jaren zestig en zeventig. Naar de anti-Vietnamdemonstraties, naar het verzet tegen autoriteiten, tegen ingesleten sociale patronen en opvattingen. Duidelijk ook naar de teksten van Bob Dylan – die op zijn beurt weer een generatie beïnvloedde -, naar de New Left, naar de poëzie van Jim Morrison en naar de psychedelica van de jaren zeventig. Zeker naar de punk, de new wave en het werk van Lou Reed, Patti Smith en Tom Waits. En is de straatpoëzie van nu, de rap en de hiphop, in wezen niet een eigentijdse versie van de beatvoordracht?

Als Jack Kerouac nu nog zou leven, zou hij waarschijnlijk die visie niet delen. In een interview niet lang voor zijn dood (1969), maar ook in een van zijn laatste artikelen, nam hij stelling tegen de hippies (on-Amerikaans), en verbaasde hij zich erover hoe de Yippie-protestbeweging van Jerry Rubin en Abbie Hoffman in 1967 in hemelsnaam hem als inspiratiebron kon noemen. Hij sleet zijn laatste jaren in ledigheid en dronkenschap in het huis van zijn moeder. Met de *Merry Pranksters*, een groep hippies die in die jaren op initiatief van Ken Kesey – auteur van *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* – in een psychedelisch beschilderde schoolbus (met

Neal Cassady als chauffeur) door Amerika trok, geheel in de stijl van *On the Road*, wilde hij niets te maken hebben.

Bronnen en literatuur

- Hoestekst van Douglas Brinkley bij de cd *Jack Kerouac reads On the Road*
- Mike Janssen, Jazz op www.litkicks.com
- *The Beat Generation* (3 cdbox Rhino Records 1992)
- Holly George-Warren (ed.), *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats*, London 1999
- Steve Turner, *Jack Kerouac Angelheaded Hipster*, London 1996
- Ann Charters, *Kerouac*, San Francisco 1973
- Ann Charters (ed.), *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, London 1992.

Zie:

Jack Kerouac reads from On The Road

Jack Kerouac - McDougal Street Blues

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.

These are the times we live in, and unless there is a radical change of direction, what we are seeing now is a bare foretaste of what is to come.

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.”

Perhaps there are words that can capture the systematic malevolence. I can’t find them.

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.”

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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.

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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

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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

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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.

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.

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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.

These are the times we live in, and unless there is a radical change of direction, what we are seeing now is a bare foretaste of what is to come.

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.

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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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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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C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism’s

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Unesco ~ Global Open Access Portal ~ Caribbean Countries ~ English & French Speaking



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).

UWI at Mona offers online open access to full-text scholarly output from UWI within its MORD-Mona Online Research Database and institutional repository registered in OpenDOAR. UWI Libraries and UWI Digital Library Services Centre (DLSC) at the St. Augustine Campus, manage an institutional repository of UWI. UWI is also a member of the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD).

In ROAR and in OpenDOAR, are registered the repositories of the University of West Indies, the Public Digital Library e-Jamaica, and MANIOC. No mandates registered in ROARMAP.

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:

The Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC), established in 2004, is an open access cooperative, multilingual and multi-institutional digitization project of

partners within the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean that provides users with open access to Caribbean cultural, historical and research materials held in archives, libraries, and private collections.

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>

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 quarantinedilemma. 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 quarantinedilemma' 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 vlieggreizen 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

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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