

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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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 politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout’s* Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.