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ISSUE 203

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING ■ PHOTOS WORTH SEEING

April 2020

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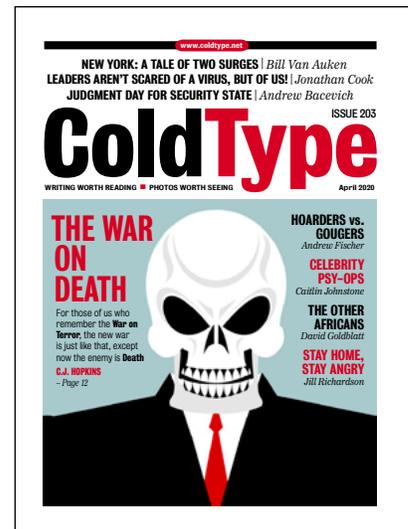
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Our leaders aren't scared of the virus, but of us!

Western governments will decide it is time to shore up capitalism's immune system against their own publics. The risk is that they will begin treating us, not the virus, as the real plague

YOU can almost smell the fear-laden sweat oozing from the pores of television broadcasts and social media posts as it finally dawns on our political and media establishments what the coronavirus actually means. And I am not talking about the threat posed to our health.

A worldview that has crowded out all other thinking for nearly two generations is coming crashing down. It has no answers to our current predicament. There is a kind of tragic karma to the fact that so many major countries – meaning major economies – are today run by the very men least equipped ideologically, emotionally and spiritually to deal with the virus.

That is being starkly exposed everywhere in the west, but the UK is a particularly revealing case study.

It emerged in the middle of March that Dominic Cummings, the ideological powerhouse behind Britain's buffoonish prime minister Boris Johnson, was pivotal in delaying the UK government's response to the coronavirus – effectively driving Britain on to the

Italian (bad) path of contagion rather than the South Korean (good) one.

According to media reports, Cummings initially stalled government action, arguing of the coming plague that “if that means some pensioners die, too bad”. That approach explains the dragging of heels for many days, and then days more of dither that is only now coming to a resolution.

At the time, thousands had already died all around the world, the WHO was already begging government's to enforce distancing and to “test test test”. This gross negligence by the Johnson's gov should never be forgotten nor forgiven.

Cummings, of course, denies ever making the statement, calling the claim “defamatory”. But let's dispense with the formalities. Does anybody really – *really* – believe that that wasn't the first thought of Cummings and half the cabinet when confronted with an imminent contagion they understood was about to unravel a social and economic theory they have dedi-

cated their entire political careers to turning into a mass cult? An economic theory from which – by happy coincidence – they derive their political power and class privilege.

And sure enough, these hardcore monetarists are already quietly becoming pretend socialists to weather the very first weeks of the crisis. And there are many months more to run.

The UK government has now thrown out the austerity policies that have been the benchmark of Conservative party orthodoxy for more than a decade and announced a splurge of spending to save businesses with no business as well as members of the public no longer in a position to earn a living.

Since the 2008 financial crash, the Tories have cut social and welfare spending to the bone, creating a massive underclass in Britain, and have left local authorities penniless and incapable of covering the shortfall. For the past decade, the Conservative government excused its brutalist approach with the mantra that there was no “magic money tree” to help in times of trouble.



The free market, they argued, was the only fiscally responsible path. And in its infinite wisdom, the market had decided that the 1 per cent – the millionaires and billionaires who had tanked the economy in that 2008 crash – would get even filthier rich than they were already.

Meanwhile, the rest of us would see the siphoning off of our wages and prospects so the 1 per cent could horde yet more wealth on offshore islands where we and the government could never get our hands on it.

“Neoliberalism” became a mystifying term used to reimagine un-

sustainable late-stage, corporate capitalism not only as a rational and just system but as the only system that did not involve gulags or bread queues.

Not only did British politicians (including most of the Labour parliamentary party) subscribe to it, but so did the entire corporate media, even if the “liberal” *Guardian* would very occasionally and very ineffectually wring its hands about whether it was time to make this turbo-charged capitalism a little more caring.

Only deluded, dangerous Corbyn “cultists” thought different.

But suddenly, it seems, the To-

ries have found that magic money tree after all. It was there all along and apparently has plenty of low-hanging fruit the rest of us may be allowed to partake from.

One doesn’t need to be a genius like Dominic Cummings to see how politically terrifying this moment is for the establishment. The story they have been telling us for 40 years or more about harsh economic realities is about to be exposed as a self-serving fairytale. We have been lied to – and soon we are going to grasp that very clearly.

That is why the Tory politician Zac Goldsmith, a billionaire’s son who was recently elevated to the House of Lords, described as a “twat” anyone who had the temerity to become a “backseat critic” of Boris Johnson. And it is why the feted “political journalist” Isabel Oakeshott – formerly of the *Sunday Times* and a regular on BBC Question Time – took to twitter to applaud Matt Hancock and Johnson for their self-sacrifice and dedication to public service in dealing with the virus: “Spare a thought this morning for health secretary @MattHancock who has such enormous responsibility right now and is working crazy hours trying to help the nation beat this. The hourly judgements he and @BorisJohnson have to make are so difficult”.

Be ready. Over the coming weeks, more and more journalists are going to sound like North Korea’s press corps, with paeans to “the dear leader” and demands that we trust that he knows best what must be done in our hour of need.

The political and media class's current desperation has a substantive cause – and one that should worry us as much as the virus itself.

Twelve years ago, capitalism teetered on the brink of the abyss, its structural flaws exposed for anyone who cared to look. The 2008 crash almost broke the global financial system. It was saved by us, the public. The government delved deep into our pockets and transferred our money to the banks. Or rather the bankers.

We saved the bankers – and the politicians – from their economic incompetence through bail-outs that were again mystified by being named “quantitative easing”.

But we weren't the ones rewarded. We did not own the banks or get a meaningful stake in them. We did not even get oversight in return for our huge public investment. Once we had saved them, the bankers went right back to enriching themselves and their friends in precisely the same manner that stalled the economy in 2008.

The bail-outs did not fix capitalism, they simply delayed for a while longer its inevitable collapse.

Capitalism is still structurally flawed. Its dependence on ever-expanding consumption cannot answer the environmental crises necessarily entailed by such consumption. And economies that are being artificially “grown”, at the same time as resources deplete, ultimately create inflated bubbles of nothingness – bubbles that will soon burst again.

Indeed, the virus is illustrative of one of those structural flaws – an early warning of the wider

The truth is that in a time of collapse, like this decade-long one, capitalism has only ‘magic money trees’ left

environmental emergency, and a reminder that capitalism, by intertwining economic greed with environmental greed, has ensured the two spheres collapse in tandem.

Pandemics like this one are the outcome of our destruction of natural habitats – to grow cattle for burgers, to plant palm trees for cakes and biscuits, to log forests for flat-pack furniture. Animals are being driven into ever closer proximity, forcing diseases to cross the species barrier. And then in a world of low-cost flights, disease finds an easy and rapid transit to every corner of the planet.

The truth is that in a time of collapse, like this decade-long one, capitalism has only “magic money trees” left. The first one, in the late 2000s, was reserved for the banks and the large corporations – the wealth elite that now run our governments as plutocracies.

The second “magic money tree”, needed to deal with what will become the even more disastrous economic toll wrought by the virus, has had to be widened to include us. But make no mistake. The circle of beneficence has been expanded not because capitalism suddenly cares about the homeless and those reliant on food banks.

Capitalism is an amoral economic system driven by the accumulation of profit for the owners of capital. And that's not you or me.

No, capitalism is now in survival mode. That is why western governments will, for a time, try to “bail out” sections of their publics too, giving back to them some of the communal wealth that has been extracted over many decades. These governments will try to conceal for a little longer the fact that capitalism is entirely incapable of solving the very crises it has created. They will try to buy our continuing deference to a system that has destroyed our planet and our children's future.

It won't work indefinitely, as Dominic Cummings knows only too well. Which is why the Johnson government, as well as the Trump administration and their cut-outs in Brazil, Hungary, Israel, India and elsewhere, are in the process of drafting draconian emergency legislation that will have a longer term goal than the immediate one of preventing contagion.

Western governments will conclude that it is time to shore up capitalism's immune system against their own publics. The risk is that, given the chance, they will begin treating us, not the virus, as the real plague. **CT**

*Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include *Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East* (Pluto Press) and *Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair* (Zed Books). This essay first appeared at www.jonathan-cook.net/blog.*



SURFER'S CORNER, Muizenberg, from Tim Knight's living room window

■ TIM KNIGHT

A letter from the end of the world

If I have to be in solitary, I can't think of a better cell. Compared to the millions of people rotting in the disease-ridden slums of South Africa, I'm the rich man who's gone to heaven

KNOW you haven't asked yet, but I'm in great shape mentally and physically – although approaching my prime with scary speed. I wake to the thrum and thunder of Atlantic surf on the beach outside my window. I check that the various aches and pains mandatory for an 82-year-old man who's lived hard haven't worsened noticeably overnight.

Then I check my state of mind.

And find, somewhat to my surprise, that I'm curiously sanguine. Content. Even happy. Which means, no doubt, that I don't fully understand the seriousness of the situation.

Instead, I choose to be positive. I live alone on my Canadian pension in this glorious apartment up on the seventh floor at Surfers' Corner in Muizenberg near Cape Town. All of False Bay stretches out from my windows on one side.

Awesome Muizenberg Mountain towers on the other.

If I have to be in solitary, I can't think of a better cell. Compared to the millions of people rotting in the teeming, sickening, disease-ridden slums of South Africa, I'm the rich man who's gone to heaven – despite biblical disapproval of such an undeserved reward.

Which inevitably brings me to politics and the precarious state

of political leaders in charge of our futures – indeed the future of Mother Earth herself.

Most important to us all is, of course, Donald Trump. Like so many South Africans I'm terrified of that psychopathic, self-infatuated, bigoted, arrogant, lying, dyeing bully who believes he's God incarnate. I'm terrified that in his supreme, sublime ignorance he's leading the world to a *götterdämmerung* beyond any *götterdämmerung* our world has ever known.

Should Coronavirus take Trump out, I'm nearly as terrified of his successor, vice president Mike Pence. A sanctimonious, sycophantic, sexist, hypocritical, arch-conservative religious fanatic. If Trump doesn't lead us through the gates of hell himself, Pence brandishing the terrible swift sword of his righteous god, is the man to do it

Here in South Africa we have President Cyril Ramaphosa in charge. His cardinal sin is that he obediently served in the disastrous nine-year Jacob Zuma government – best remembered for its dedication to “my turn at the trough” – while capturing and looting the state.

Yet Ramaphosa is also a very smart, persuasive, skilled negotiator and strategist owning so many millions he has no need to loot. Should he, too, succumb to the plague, consider his vice president and heir-apparent, David Mabuza.



FALSE BAY: Sunshine, sharks – and a coronavirus lockdown.

He's the ambitious, powerful, cunning unofficial leader of Ramaphosa's opposition with considerable support in the anti-Ramaphosa faction of the ruling African National Congress.

Mabuza has been accused of a spider's web of political murders, tender corruption and blatant patronage. For years he specialised in state looting yet – miraculously – was never charged. Today he's just a heartbeat or two from becoming President of South Africa.

Whoever runs the former Rainbow Nation now or in the future, we South Africans face existential challenges. Something like half of all of us are unemployed. And more than six out of every ten of our young people – always the most volatile and dangerous group – were unemployed even before the plague hit.

Now what?

If you care at all about South Africa and its future, pray that Ramaphosa washes his hands a

lot, doesn't touch his face, and keeps six feet away from other people.

Total lockdown here started in the third week of March except for supermarkets, pharmacies, police, the army, doctors, hospitals etc. No parties. No restaurants. No pubs. No liquor stores or dagga (marijuana) dealers (I've taken necessary precautions against any protracted shortages.)

Downstairs, my favourite pub, the Striped Horse (74 steps from my back door) closed four nights ago. I was there for last call, supper, and my daily complimentary Pilsener. (Juri, the owner, seems to think I'm a famous writer and generously believes in encouraging the arts).

For the foreseeable future, frozen and canned suppers, considerably aided by large dollops of hot peppers and garlic, followed by some of the stuff that maketh glad the heart. .

Everything is on lockdown. Even the long, curving white sand beach outside my window is off limits. The sun pours down like honey but no lissome lovelies bask in its Autumn warmth. No surfers enjoy the waves or flee the occasional great white shark.

Being stuck inside my apartment for 23-and-a-half hours a day isn't entirely awful. Sitting in front of the TV for far too many hours means I can watch my fellow journalists practice our craft, report how their, my, and your world is falling apart.

I'm back in the journalistic world I knew for 60years. Back in newsrooms at the *Mercury*, *Rand*

Daily Mail, Sunday Express, the Salisbury Herald, Northern Rhodesia TV, United Press International, ABC, NBC and PBS in New York. Back in the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, where I led TV journalism training workshops for ten years. Among my secondments was training TV journalists at the SABC (before and after the 1994 election).

My particular hate at the moment is something that came in with the arrival of the aforementioned Trump – a breakdown of the traditional distance between anchor and reporter.

Over the decades, we broadcast journalists developed a system within which the anchor set the scene and handled the housekeeping – the who, what, where, when of the story. Then the reporter tried to answer the why question, rolled out detail and supplied analysis.

The system protected the station and the anchor from charges of taking sides, particularly in politics. It was about as close to practicing journalistic objectivity as a newsroom could get.

Now, though, too many anchors (who weren't at the story scene) feel it right and proper to editorialise and analyse from the very start of the programme. It's dangerous. It makes viewers put news stations into categories. This station is pro-Trump, for instance. That station is anti-Ramaphosa. So you can't believe any of them.

My other bitch is the current manic need on both foreign and local TV to cover interviews with stock footage which almost never matches video to audio. Then they rerun and rerun the very same



TIM KNIGHT: Coronavirus lockdown has enticed him back to his typewriter.

dreary stock footage ad infinitum over the next interviews and the next and the next! Don't they know that showing a reasonably intelligent face thinking aloud is not only the best way to pass on information to the people, it's also the most fascinating TV?

TV stations here are doing their duty. The public broadcaster South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), eTV, the nation's main private all-news network and NewzRoom Africa its newest, try valiantly to cover the nation and its disasters. Their reporters and crews risk their lives in the townships and informal settlements (slums). And they bravely criticise the government and its handling of the twin financial and plague disasters.

All is not doom. The latest Ipsos poll shows that six out of every ten South Africans believe President Ramaphosa is doing a good job during the crisis. Problem is that all the newspapers, TV and radio stations rely on advertising. So face a sudden and potentially lethal drop in revenue.

How the hell can they survive? I remind you that as journalism

goes, so goes democracy.

If there's one personal, positive side to our national lockdown – apart from saving so many thousands, of lives – it's that, having nothing else to do, I'm forced to write again. It's hard work: I much prefer revelling in the joys of Surfers' Corner to slaving over a cold word processor. But there's no revelling at Surfers's Corner today, tomorrow or in the foreseeable future. No lissome lovelies sun on the long lonely beach. No hand-in-hand lovers stroll the shore. So I'm back at work. Whether or not I produce anything of worth doesn't matter. It's writing that matters.

I said at the start of this letter that I'm sanguine, content, even happy. Most of us here in South Africa and around the world will find these words ridiculous. I guess what I mean is that I accept a situation I cannot change. Anyway, I'm 82-years old with only a short time left. It's been a long, twisty road, full of adventure, success, failure, tears, laughter and luck. I have so many regrets, yet so much to be thankful for.

Take care, be happy where you can, and look after each other. And may the God of your choice be with you always. **CT**

Tim

*Tim Knight is an Emmy and Sigma Delta Chi award winner and author of *Storytelling and the Anima Factor*. He was executive producer of the three-hour wildlife series, *Inside Noah's Ark* shot in South Africa for the Discovery Channel and 14 international broadcasters.*

■ CAITLIN JOHNSTONE

Celebrities are psy-ops wrapped in human skin

Hollywood is a giant propaganda mill which, when it isn't cranking out movies that are funded and controlled by the US war machine, is putting on spectacular 90-minute 'The imperialist world order is perfectly sane and capitalism is totally working' infomercial presentations

CENN recently trotted out Hollywood actor Sean Penn to give the nation expert advice on how to deal with a novel virus pandemic. Did they do this because we live in a universe where madness reigns and everything is chaos? Close, but no. They wanted Penn to explain to the public that it would be wonderful if the US military was deployed inside US borders to deal with the pandemic, because the US military is the greatest humanitarian force on Earth.

Sean Penn – Photo: Seher Sikaner / Wikimedia

“There is no greater humanitarian force on the planet than the United States military”, Penn said. “The logistical skills, commitment to service, their care for the people. It’s really time to give the military the full breadth command and control of this operation. I wouldn’t blink, I would have put command and control in their hands a month ago, certainly today”.

The US military is, in fact, one of the least humanitarian forces on this planet, second only to malaria-laden mosquitos (and even that’s debatable). No other force is circling the globe murdering people in countless undeclared military entanglements and bullying the world into complying with the interests of a nationless alliance of plutocrats and opaque government agencies at the expense of ordinary humans everywhere. They are the exact opposite of a humanitarian force on this planet.

Medical staff are a force for humanitarianism on this planet right now. Grocery store clerks

are a force for humanitarianism on this planet. The US military are the armed thugs of a metastatic globe-sprawling empire run by sociopaths.

Don’t say “Thank you for your service” to veterans whose only contribution to humanity has been helping to murder people for imperialist fossil fuel control agendas and Raytheon profit margins. Say “Thank you for your service” to your local cashier. To do the former is to participate in a cruel collective propaganda operation which only encourages more young people to hurl their bodies into the gears of the US war machine in search of the respect and honour you’re displaying, while to do the latter is to thank someone for actually providing a crucial service to human beings.

The malfunction in Penn’s mind is the result of many malignant factors, but among them is the fact that people who rise to fame and fortune naturally experience a gravitational pull toward elitist echo chambers which cultivate narratives that favour the status quo which gave rise to their fame and fortune. You have a hard time



hanging out with normal people because most of them don't treat you normally anymore, so you find yourself spending time with other rich and famous people, and with people who have a vested interest in the rich and famous.

This dynamic naturally fosters an environment where celebrities are eager to believe positive stories about the system which favours them, and where narrative managers are eager to circulate those stories among influential voices. This is why, with few exceptions, the closest you'll ever get to seeing a Hollywood celebrity express an anti-establishment opinion is one of them saying "Fuck Trump" at the Tony Awards. It's also why every few weeks you'll see some celebrity tweet something disgusting and then go into a meltdown when thousands of ordinary people react with revulsion; they don't have ordinary people in their lives giving them feedback on what's normal anymore, all they have is the elitist echo chamber.

This echo chamber is what led a group of self-quarantining celebrities to believe it would be an awesome idea to share a video compilation where they all badly sing lines from John Lennon's *Imagine* from inside their mansions with a world full of people who've been laid off from their jobs and are terrified for their futures. The figuratively and literally tone-deaf video was universally panned and people have been mocking it on social media ever since its release, which probably would have come as a surprise to the celebrities themselves since nothing in their insulated day-to-day lives would have told them

they could all be collectively rejected with such disgust.

The celebrity *Imagine* project was spearheaded by Israeli actress Gal Gadot, who as an IDF veteran would not have required any Hollywood echo chambering to have undergone deep psychological programming in favour of the empire. Gadot, who famously came under fire for publicly cheerleading the 2014 Gaza massacre, first shared the video on Instagram with the caption "We are in this together, we will get through it together. Let's imagine together. Sing with us".

Memesters have of course been having fun with this.

Then you've got celebrities like Rob Reiner, who just tweeted "No more fucking around. We're standing on a precipice. Time to consider a Federal lockdown".

Reiner is one of the more hamfisted of the right-wing Democrats who we first saw promoting Russia hysteria, then working against the Sanders campaign, and are now promoting drastic totalitarian measures from their high-profile platforms. If you still hadn't seen these people for what they are yet, you should definitely be seeing them now.

It is an absolute guarantee that powerful people will use this pandemic to advance authoritarian measures which they have no intention of rolling back once the pandemic is over. This is not a possibility, this is an absolute certainty.

While it does appear necessary to collectively use self-quarantining and social distancing to avoid crashing our healthcare systems



Gal Gadot – Photo: Gage Skidmore / Wikimedia

and needlessly killing millions of people, we need to make sure we slam on the brakes long before we yield any more ground to the authoritarians than they've already shored up over the years. And we need to loudly shout down any celebrities who try to tell us otherwise.

Hollywood is a giant propaganda mill which, when it isn't cranking out movies that are literally funded and controlled by the US war machine, is putting on spectacular 90-minute "The imperialist world order is perfectly sane and capitalism is totally working" infomercial presentations. It is an arm of cultural control which is unrivalled by anything else in this world, so has powerful forces at work within it ensuring status quo loyalism.

Whoever controls the narrative controls the world, and Hollywood celebrities are psyops wrapped in human skin. May our collective disgust with them continue to grow. **CT**

Caitlin Johnstone is an Australian blogger. Her website is www.caitlinjohnstone.com

■ C.J. HOPKINS

The War on Death

For those of us who remember the War on Terror, the new war is just like that, except this time the enemy is Death ...

OK, I've got some good news and I've got some bad news. The good news is mainly for authoritarians who missed all the fun during the War on Terror. The news is ... welcome to the War on Death!

Yes, that's right, global capitalism (aka "the world") is now at war with Death ... which is great news for authoritarians! No more bothersome critical thinking. The time for questioning our leaders is over. It's time to shut up and follow orders. We're in a global state of emergency, folks! We're talking lockdowns, soldiers in the streets, abrogation of our constitutional rights, arbitrary arrests, indefinite detentions, round-the-clock media fear-propaganda ... the whole totalitarian megillah!

What, you're probably asking, is the War on Death? Well ... for those who remember the War on Terror, the War on Death is just like that, except this time the evil enemy is Death ... or, all right, maybe not exactly like that, but there are a number of striking similarities.

For one thing, just like the War on Terror, we didn't start it.

Death attacked us! There we were, peacefully going about our global capitalist business, quelling a worldwide "populist" rebellion orchestrated by Russian-backed Nazis, when Death attacked us with a coronavirus ... more or less exactly the way that the terrorists attacked us in 2001.

And, just like after those terrorist attacks, the world has united and forcefully responded. No, we haven't invaded Iraq again (well, actually, we did bomb them a little), but we have locked down almost the entire planet, virtually shut down the global economy, and are scaring the masses into a state of unprecedented mass hysteria.

Police are patrolling the streets of Europe, checking people's "permission-to-go-outside" papers. In the UK, soldiers are standing by to assist with "protecting possible quarantine zones", or to "cope with the breakdown of civil society". Israel is tapping its formerly secret collection of everyone's mobile phone records to identify people who might be infected, and assorted "others who need to be

quarantined".

Macron (now relieved of his *Gilets Jaunes* problem) is ready to "rule by decree" if necessary. California is "prepared to enact martial law". The US military is "prepared to deploy in support of potential extraordinary missions", including "quelling civil disturbances".

The US Department of Justice is asking Congress for the power to detain people indefinitely. The British Parliament is on the brink of passing an emergency "Coronavirus Bill" that will (among other unsettling provisions) grant authorities the power to arrest and indefinitely quarantine anyone they deem a "potentially infectious person" ... or, in other words, pretty much anyone they want.

As if that wasn't dystopian enough, according to a report in *Politico*:

"Counter-terrorism troops have been redeployed across Italy to beef up police forces throughout Italian cities. Patrol cars are now circulating in every major city in Italy with a monotone male voice warning citizens over a loudspeaker not to leave their residences or



risk a ticket. ‘GO BACK INTO YOUR HOMES’, the voice warns”.

But wait, it gets even better than that. In Missouri, prosecutors have charged an idiot who licked some items at Walmart as a “terrorist”. I kid you not, a Coronavirus Terrorist. I could go on, but I think you get the picture.

The point is, the global capitalist empire (for whatever reasons, real or imagined) has turned on the MINDLESS HYSTERIA machine,

and dialed it up as high as it goes. People are in full-blown headless chicken mode. No one (or hardly anyone) is thinking, or listening to dissenting opinions, or paying attention to official statistics, or common sense, or anything else that contradicts the War on Death narrative.

The British tabloids are publishing horror stories about “doctors” standing by and helplessly watching as patients slowly suffocate to

death. According to such stories, not only are these “doctors” unable to treat roughly 400 patients with any of the UK’s over 8,000 ventilators, but, apparently, patients whose hearts have stopped (and who are therefore unconscious) are also now capable of “dying in agony” with “terror in their eyes”.

According to the *New York Times*, the Coronapocalypse has begun in Elmhurst, where the

authorities have called in the refrigerator trucks to haul away the mountains of corpses, after 13 people who “had tested positive” died (of something) in the course of one day.

The rest of the corporate media are running moment-by-moment deathometer updates, apocalyptic prognostications of the millions or billions who are possibly going to die, and of course the latest on which celebrities have been infected and are clinging to life, or experiencing mild, cold-like symptoms, or absolutely no symptoms whatsoever. Greta suspects she might have been infected! Prince Charles! Colton Underwood (whoever that is), Tom Hanks, and even Idris Elba! Just the other night, celebrated playwright Terrence McNally (who was 81, and had a history of lung cancer and COPD) was struck down in the prime of his life!

In short, the authorities have whipped the masses into an orgy of shrieking, white-eyed FEAR of this new, evil, “invisible enemy” that is coming to kill them and their families. Millions of people (now confined in their homes) have taken to the Internet to pump up the hysteria, share totally unsourced personal accounts of the horrors their therapists’ accountants’ doctors have personally witnessed on the war’s “front lines”, and hunt down any infected persons, or potentially infected persons (or otherwise uncooperative persons) who might have gone outside for some air.

So, that’s the good news for you authoritarians! For the rest of us ... yeah, not so good.

Oh, I almost forgot the bad

People are dying! This is not normal! Death is our enemy! We need to hunt down and neutralise Death! Hang it like we did with Saddam!

news. The bad news is ... well, the bad news is Death. The bad news is, you are going to die. I’m going to die. We are all going to die. All of us. We are going to die. We are going to die of ... well, something. Cancer. A heart attack. A stroke. The flu. Diabetes. Alzheimer’s disease. Possibly a coronavirus. Maybe even this coronavirus.

In fact, a lot of us are dying right now, according to the Internet, around a hundred per minute ... which, it goes without saying, is unacceptable, and a tragedy, and something we need to take drastic action to prevent at all costs. We can’t let these Russian dissension sowers, neo-Nazi accelerationists, and coronavirus-sympathisers confuse us. They want to convince us that Death is, yes, scary, and sad, but inevitable, and natural. How utterly heartless and insane is that?!

No, we need to close our minds to that nonsense. People are dying! This is not normal! Death is our enemy! We have to defeat it! We need to hunt down and neutralise Death! Root it out if its hidey hole and hang it like we did with Saddam!

I’m not kidding. There is a war on, people! GloboCop is taking the gloves off again. (You remember what happens when the

gloves come off, don’t you?) So get your mind right and get with the programme or get ready to face the consequences.

Relax, I’m not referring to all these tanks that appear at (2:34 in this NBC video – <https://www.nbclosangeles.com/on-air/tanks-on-a-train-dodgers-parking-lot-full-social-looks-different-during-pandemic/2335612/>). I’m referring to other consequences. I am not some crazy conspiracy theorist. Plus, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti has assured us there’s no cause for concern:

“If and when National Guard or military units are deployed to the streets of L.A., trust me, I’ll let you know”.

See? Everything is perfectly fine. No one is preparing for martial law. Those tanks just returned from the Middle East and are “being sent back home to Texas”. This kind of thing happens all the time. It has nothing to do with the global lockdown. I don’t know about you, but I’m extremely relieved ... for a moment there I thought we were in trouble. **CT**

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■ ANDREW BACEVICH

Judgment day for the national security state

In their eagerness to hold Trump responsible for the coronavirus pandemic, as if he were the bat that first transmitted the disease to a human being, his critics magnify further a growing sense of events spinning out of control

AMERICANS are facing “A Spring Unlike Any Before”. So warned a front-page headline in the March 13 *New York Times*. That headline, however hyperbolic, was all too apt. The coming of spring has always promised relief from the discomforts of winter. Yet, far too often, it also brings its own calamities and afflictions.

According to the poet T.S. Eliot, “April is the cruelest month”. Yet while April has certainly delivered its share of cataclysms, March and May haven’t lagged far behind. In fact, cruelty has seldom been a respecter of seasons. The infamous influenza epidemic of 1918, frequently cited as a possible analogue to our current crisis, began in the spring of that year, but lasted well into 1919.

That said, something about the coronavirus pandemic does seem to set this particular spring apart. At one level, that something is the collective panic now sweeping virtually the entire country. President Trump’s grotesque ineptitude and tone-deafness have

only fed that panic. And in their eagerness to hold Trump himself responsible for the pandemic, as if he were the bat that first transmitted the disease to a human being, his critics magnify further a growing sense of events spinning out of control.

Yet to heap the blame for this crisis on Trump alone (though he certainly deserves plenty of blame) is to miss its deeper significance. Deferred for far too long, Judgment Day may at long last have arrived for the national security state.

That state within a state’s origins date from the early days of the Cold War. Its ostensible purpose has been to keep Americans safe and so, by extension, to guarantee our freedoms. From the 1950s through the 1980s, keeping us safe provided a seemingly adequate justification for maintaining a sprawling military establishment along with a panoply of “intelligence” agencies – the CIA, the DIA, the NRO, the NSA – all engaged in secret activities hidden from public view. From

time to time, the scope, prerogatives, and actions of that conglomeration of agencies attracted brief critical attention – the Cuban Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, the Vietnam War of the 1960s and early 1970s, and the Iran-Contra affair during the presidency of Ronald Reagan being prime examples. Yet at no time did such failures come anywhere close to jeopardising its existence.

Indeed, even when the implosion of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War removed the original justification for its creation, the entire apparatus persisted. With the Soviet Empire gone, Russia in a state of disarray, and communism having lost its appeal as an alternative to democratic capitalism, the managers of the national security state wasted no time in identifying new threats and new missions.

The new threats included autocrats such as Panama’s Manuel Noriega and Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, once deemed valuable American assets, but now, their usefulness gone, classified as dangers to be





Art: Tony Jenkins / www.jenkinsdraws.com

eliminated. Prominent among the new missions was a sudden urge to repair broken places like the Balkans, Haiti, and Somalia, with American power deployed under the aegis of “humanitarian intervention” and pursuant to a “responsibility to protect”. In this way, in the first decade of the post-Cold War era, the national security state kept itself busy. While the results achieved, to put it politely, were mixed at best, the costs incurred appeared tolerable. In sum, the entire apparatus remained impervious to serious scrutiny.

During that decade, however, both the organs of national security and the American public

began taking increased notice of what was called “anti-American terrorism” – and not without reason. In 1993, Islamic fundamentalists detonated a bomb in a parking garage of New York’s World Trade Center. In 1996, terrorists obliterated an apartment building used to house US military personnel in Saudi Arabia. Two years later, the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were blown up and, in 2000, suicide bombers nearly sank the USS Cole, a Navy destroyer making a port call in Aden at the tip of the Arabian peninsula. To each of these increasingly brazen attacks, all occurring during the administration of President Bill Clinton, the national security state responded ineffectually.

Then, of course, came September 11, 2001. Orchestrated by

Osama bin Laden and carried out by 19 suicidal al-Qaeda operatives, this act of mass murder inflicted incalculable harm on the United States. In its wake, it became common to say that “9/11 changed everything”.

In fact, however, remarkably little changed. Despite its 17 intelligence agencies, the national security state failed utterly to anticipate and thwart that devastating attack on the nation’s political and financial capitals. Yet apart from minor adjustments – primarily expanding surveillance efforts at home and abroad – those outfits mostly kept doing what they had been doing, even as their leaders evaded accountability. After Pearl Harbor, at least, one admiral and one general were fired. After 9/11,

no one lost his or her job. At the upper echelons of the national security state, the wagons were circled and a consensus quickly formed: no one had screwed up.

Once President George W. Bush identified an “Axis of Evil” (Iraq, Iran, and North Korea), three nations that had had nothing whatsoever to do with the 9/11 attacks, as the primary target for his administration’s “Global War on Terrorism”, it became clear that no wholesale reevaluation of national security policy was going to occur. The Pentagon and the Intelligence Community, along with their sprawling support network of profit-minded contractors, could breathe easy. All of them would get ever more money. That went without saying. Meanwhile, the underlying premise of US policy since the immediate aftermath of World War II – that projecting hard power globally would keep Americans safe – remained sacrosanct.

Viewed from this perspective, the sequence of events that followed was probably overdetermined. In late 2001, US forces invaded Afghanistan, overthrew the Taliban regime, and set out to install a political order more agreeable to Washington. In early 2003, with the mission in Afghanistan still anything but complete, US forces set out to do the same in Iraq. Both of those undertakings have dragged on, in one fashion or another, without coming remotely close to success. Today, the military undertaking launched in 2001 continues, even if it no longer has a name or an agreed-upon purpose.

Nonetheless, at the upper eche-

Presidents request and Congress appropriates more than a trillion dollars annually to satisfy the national security state

lons of the national security state, the consensus forged after 9/11 remains firmly in place: no one screws up. In Washington, the conviction that projecting hard power keeps Americans safe likewise remains sacrosanct.

In the nearly two decades since 9/11, willingness to challenge this paradigm has rarely extended beyond non-conforming publications. Until Donald Trump came along, rare was the ambitious politician of either political party who dared say aloud what Trump himself has repeatedly said – that, as he calls them, the “ridiculous endless wars” launched in response to 9/11 represent the height of folly.

Astonishingly enough, within the political establishment that point has still not sunk in. So, in 2020, as in 2016, the likely Democratic nominee for president will be someone who vigorously supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Imagine, if you will, Democrats in 1880 nominating not a former union general (as they did) but a former confederate who, 20 years before, had advocated secession. Back then, some sins were unforgivable. Today, politicians of both parties practice self-absolution and get away with it.

Note, however, the parallel narrative that has unfolded alongside

those post-9/11 wars. Taken seriously, that narrative exposes the utter irrelevance of the national security state as currently constituted. The coronavirus pandemic will doubtless prove to be a significant learning experience. Here is one lesson that Americans cannot afford to overlook.

Presidents now routinely request and Congress routinely appropriates more than a trillion dollars annually to satisfy the national security state’s supposed needs. Even so, Americans today do not feel safe and, to a degree without precedent, they are being denied the exercise of basic everyday freedoms. Judged by this standard, the apparatus created to keep them safe and free has failed. In the face of a pandemic, nature’s version of an act of true terror, that failure, the consequences of which Americans will suffer through for months to come, should be seen as definitive.

But wait, some will object: Don’t we find ourselves in uncharted waters? Is this really the moment to rush to judgment? In fact, judgment is long overdue.

While the menace posed by the coronavirus may differ in scope, it does not differ substantively from the myriad other perils that Americans have endured since the national security state wandered off on its quixotic quest to pacify Afghanistan and Iraq and purge the planet of terrorists. Since 9/11, a partial roster of those perils would include: Hurricane Katrina (2005), Hurricane Sandy (2012), Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria (2017), and massive wildfires that have devastated

vast stretches of the West Coast on virtually an annual basis. The cumulative cost of such events exceeds a half-trillion dollars. Together, they have taken the lives of several thousand more people than were lost in the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Earlier generations might have written all of these off as acts of God. Today, we know better. As with blaming Trump, blaming God won't do.

Human activities, ranging from the hubristic reengineering of rivers like the Mississippi to the effects of climate change stemming from the use of fossil fuels, have substantially exacerbated such "natural" catastrophes.

And unlike faraway autocrats or terrorist organisations, such phenomena, from extreme-weather events to pandemics, directly and immediately threaten the safety and wellbeing of the American people. Don't tell the Central Intelligence Agency or the Joint Chiefs of Staff but the principal threats to

Terror has indeed arrived on our shores and it has nothing to do with al-Qaeda or ISIS or Iranian-backed militias

our collective wellbeing are right here where we live.

Apart from modest belated efforts at mitigation, the existing national security state is about as pertinent to addressing such threats as President Trump's cheery expectations that the coronavirus will simply evaporate once warmer weather appears. Terror has indeed arrived on our shores and it has nothing to do with al-Qaeda or ISIS or Iranian-backed militias. Americans are terrorised because it has now become apparent that our government, whether out of negligence or

stupidity, has left them exposed to dangers that truly put life and liberty at risk. As it happens, all these years in which the national security state has been preoccupied with projecting hard power abroad have left us naked and vulnerable right here at home.

Protecting Americans where they live ought to be the national security priority of our time. The existing national security state is incapable of fulfilling that imperative, while its leaders, fixated on waging distant wars, have yet to even accept that they have a responsibility to do so.

Worst of all, even in this election year, no one on the national political scene appears to recognise the danger now fully at hand. **CT**

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■ MATTHEW ROBERT ANDERSON

Life of Brian: A worthy historical legacy

How Monty Python star Terry Jones gave the world what is one of the best – and most accurate – movies about the life and death of Jesus

FANS of the Monty Python comedy troupe marked the death of founding member Terry Jones on January 21 by posting dozens of scenes on social media featuring the actor, writer and director.

Among the favourites is Jones, playing Mandy, the mother of Brian Cohen. Brian (Graham Chapman) is a hapless young man, born on the same day as Jesus in the stable next door, and forever doomed to be mistaken for a messiah.

In one scene, Jones, as Brian's mother, leans out the window and scolds the crowd: "He's not the messiah. He's a very naughty boy."

Monty Python's Life of Brian was Jones's directorial debut. When the parody came out in 1979, it was met with protests by Christian groups, charges of blasphemy and outright bans in Ireland and Norway. Jones and the other Pythons, however, soon saw the movie outlast its critics.

Jones was a passionate and published amateur historian. Scholars of the Bible have long known that beneath the slapstick, *Life of Brian* made valuable points about the historical Jesus. Brian's story

showed how Jesus – directly referenced only twice – was also a first-century, late Second-Temple Jew who can best be understood within the context of his own time and society.

Woven into *Life of Brian's* cheeky humour were cutting-edge observations on ancient Roman-Judean politics, alongside biting commentary about the danger of mass movements and the inherent weakness of any faith or ideology that refuses to think critically.

King's College London hosted an international conference in 2014 that examined the film as an example of how the Biblical accounts of Jesus have been and continue to be read, heard and valued by different groups. The gathering resulted in the fascinating study *Jesus and Brian*, edited by historical Jesus scholar Joan E. Taylor.

Selections from *Life of Brian* feature regularly in my Theology in Film courses at Concordia University, in Montreal. My students are religiously diverse, and almost all were born a quarter century after the movie's release. Yet it consistently rates among their favourite class films.

Life of Brian is a perfect introduction to how a seemingly irreverent parody of "Jesus biopics" (films about the historical Jesus) can lack the budget, first-century languages and special effects of, for instance, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, yet still be more historically accurate. Here is how Terry Jones bequeathed the world what is still one of the best Jesus movies.

1. Diversity of expressions of Judaism – *Life of Brian* writers knew ancient Jewish authors like Philo and Josephus. When Brian stumbles into a speakers' corner which includes the "really boring prophet", Jones is noting first-century messiah figures but also underlining the diversity of expressions of Judaism in the turbulent decades before the destruction of the Jewish Temple in the year 70.

While mocking British politics of the day, the scene where members of the People's Front of Judea take umbrage at being mistaken for the Judean People's Front simultaneously parodies very real ancient intra-ethnic tensions preceding the disastrous Jewish war against Rome.



"A VERY NAUGHTY BOY": Graham Chapman as Brian in Terry Jones's 'Monty Python's Life Of Brian.'

2. Doesn't project later Christianity onto the first century – *Life of Brian* is a rare Jesus biopic that doesn't look at Jesus the first-century Jew through the lens of later Christian theology. Unlike Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, it doesn't import explicit conceptions of church, positive or negative, into its narrative.

3. Explores ambiguity – The famous scene "What have the Romans ever done for us?" parallels a later rabbinic discussion about the benefits of Roman rule. The writers display the ambiguities experienced by a conquered people. Despite the harsh realities, not all reacted to Rome in the same way.

4. Parallels Jesus's rise
Brian's haphazard, almost accidental rise to messianic status in *Life of Brian* parallels ways in which, even according to New Testament writings such as the Gospel of Mark, Jesus's life and teachings did not

at first seem destined for the influence they subsequently had.

5. Draws attention to differing accounts –

Jones and the Python troupe play with the cognitive gap between how Brian sees himself and how the crowds perceive him. Although the film takes pains to show how Brian is not Jesus, *Life of Brian* illustrates the fact that we have no first-person record of how Jesus saw himself.

Rather, the Christian New Testament contains four gospels, theological narratives by which others, decades later, remembered Jesus as authoritative teacher (Matthew), miracle worker and son of God (Mark), prophet and messiah (Luke) or divine being (John).

These four gospels, and others outside the Christian canon, sometimes remember Jesus's words (and their contexts) quite differently.

6. Crucifixion depiction – Precisely

because it is so absurd, *Life of Brian's* depiction of those alongside Jesus singing *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* while hanging from crosses mocks portrayals in other Jesus biopics: the 1961 *King of Kings*, directed by Nicholas Ray, and *Jesus of Nazareth*, Franco Zeffirelli's 1979 film, show Jesus dying a relatively serene and beatific death. Jones and the Python actors share with their audience the tacit understanding that crucifixion is a most horrific form of state execution.

7. Resists casting Jews as villains – *Life of Brian* doesn't take New Testament polemics against Jews, or against the Jerusalem leadership, at face value. Unlike some Jesus biopics, it resists casting Jews as villains or opponents of a (Jewish) prophet, teacher and, for Christians, Messiah. Instead, it places the responsibility for crucifixions like Jesus's squarely where they historically belonged: with the Roman state.

Terry Jones and the other Pythons have left the world a legacy of laughter. With *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, we remember how Jones also left us biting satire about the dangers of "group-think" along with a considered portrayal of the Roman Mediterranean context of Jesus, the first-century Jew revered by more than two billion people today. **CT**

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DAVID GOLDBLATT

THE *other* AFRICANS



Picnic at Hartebeespoort Dam on New Year's Day. Transvaal (North-West Province), 1965.



DAVID GOLDBLATT began working on the now-classic photobook, *Some Afrikaners Photographed*, originally published in 1975, in 1963, after selling his father’s clothing store in the South African town of Randfontein, and becoming a full-time photographer.

The ruling Afrikaner National Party – many of its leaders and members had supported the Nazis in the World War II – was firming its grip on the country in the face of black resistance. Yet Goldblatt, who died in 2018, was drawn not to the events of the time but to “the quiet and commonplace where nothing ‘happened’ and yet all was contained and immanent”.

Through these photos, he explored his ambivalence towards the Afrikaners he knew from his father’s store. Most, he guessed, were National Party voters, yet he experienced them as “austere, upright,

unaffected people of rare generosity of spirit and earthy humour”. Their potency and contradictions moved and disturbed him; their influence pervaded his life.

Finding a publisher for the book had frustrated Goldblatt since the late 1960s as the world became increasingly hostile to the government’s apartheid policies. Then, after been turned down by a dozen US publishers, Murray Crawford, a South African friend, believing that the book was important and that it ought to be published, put up the cash for *Some Afrikaners Photographed* to be published locally.

The book was not a success: The country’s black population, sickened by the cruelty of apartheid, was on the verge of a massive uprising and hardly likely to buy a book about their oppressors. Nor were English-speaking liberals, who were fiercely opposed to apartheid and wanted

Above: A railwayman and his family in the backyard of their home in the 'Dubbeldekkers'. Both he and his wife were deeply religious; they did not believe that one faith was 'more true' than another, so each Sunday they attended a different church. Bloemfontein, Free State, 1965.

Above: Pensioner with the child of a servant. Wheatlands Plots, Randfontein, Transvaal (Gauteng), September 1962.

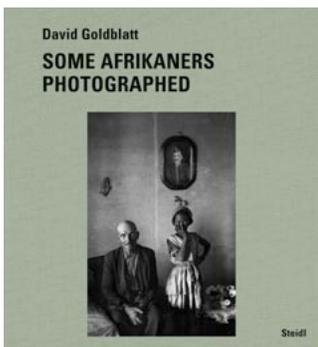
Photographs from *Some Afrikaners Photographed*, by David Goldblatt, published by Steidl / www.steidl.de



Koot Cordier at his front door. Gamkaskloof, Cape Province (Western Cape), 1968.



The farmer's wife. Near Fochville, Transvaal (North-West Province), 1965.



SOME AFRIKANERS PHOTOGRAPHED

David Goldblatt

Steidl

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US \$65

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to see the back of the Afrikaner government. The book flopped and was quickly re-remaindered, selling for just R2,50 (about \$2).

45 years later, 26 years after the end of apartheid, *Some Afrikaners Photographed* has been re-issued by German Publisher Steidl.

The strongest impact of the images is of the poverty of many of the Afrikaners in the photographs who, ironically, were battling against similar hardships to those being endured by the people they oppressed.

It's a theme that art critic Ivor Powell picks up in an essay that charts the outraged reaction of the Afrikaner media towards photos that showed their rural cousins at a time when the Afrikaner elite was trying to establish itself on the international stage, as

well as his own reaction to the original book: "It was all but incandescent with tension and revelation, with a sense of souls being held up to scrutiny, of skins being peeled away".

South African writer Antjie Krog, adds, "Three kinds of Afrikaners look out at us from these photographs, of which the poor Afrikaner is the most haunting – the simple one who, by the sweat of his brow, eats his bread in isolation".

Final words to Powell, who ends his long essay with the observation that "such images have as much to say about now as they did about then. They are encoded with choices and insights of relevance to how we experience the world today, and in revisiting the Afrikaners we revisit ourselves".

Look, read and learn!

TS

■ CHRIS PORTER

Football's class conflicts under the spotlight

Netflix series highlights class inequality during sport's beginnings. Now, more than a century later, the game has changed dramatically, but class conflict is still a key issue

THE new Netflix series *The English Game* tackles the class dynamics of football (soccer if you're a North American) in the late 19th-century, a pivotal period of the sport's development. Football looks very different today, but class conflict remains a key player.

In the 20th-century the sport would come to be called, albeit romantically, "The People's Game", as the world's working class took football to heart. As football grew and diversified, so did its class dynamics, and not always in straightforward ways.

The English Game is written by Julian Fellowes, who had a huge hit with *Downton Abbey*, and has become known for focusing his attention on stories of the privileged elite and the working class with whom they share uneasy social space. Rather than employ antagonistic "hero-villain" plot devices, Fellowes prefers a degree of mutual empathy and political ambivalence between characters as they liaise across class divides.

While viewers might expect such nuances, along with historically faithful period costumes and

evocative settings, it will be interesting to see if *The English Game* affords similarly complex and accurate depictions of wider social and economic reality. Especially since critics of Fellowes's past works have felt he glossed over the stark realities of class relations.

The English Game unfolds amid the growing influence of commerce and capital on football – a context that disrupts and shapes material relations between rich and poor. In this case, between gentlemen "amateurs" and working class "professionals".

The upper classes set down the formal rules and structures of modern football in the mid-19th-century, after it had flourished in various forms in the public school system. Football has older "folk" origins, but it took a particular class-infused unfolding of social, cultural and economic processes to produce the game that would go on to enchant much of the world.

The industrial revolution had created new class relations. The urban lower and middle classes embraced football, in both culture

and commerce. This included secret payments for workers to play for local teams in what was still legally an amateur sport. Talented players were enticed by these rewards to move to English towns and cities, many coming from Scotland, officially to work in local industry.

This brought pools of playing talent to smoky mill towns, and with it new advances in how football was played. Inverting certain class conventions, the workers' technical, passing style contrasted with the more physical, often violent game of the amateur aristocrats. The resentful upper classes tried to stop this encroachment into "their game", clamping down on the economic basis of the working class "professional" sport. The "new money" of the modern world was seen as a threat to their "old money" status.

The sports writer David Goldblatt captures the complexity nicely, "as football completed its mutation from an idiosyncratic aristocratic pastime to the most significant popular cultural practice of working-class life, it came to embody, in its sporting, cultural



US AND THEM: The Blackburn millworkers' team (above) played against the Old Etonians (below) in the dramatised cup final.



and commercial norms, the changing class balance and political compromises of the age”.

Such a compromise would lead the Football Association (FA) – with self preservation trumping principle – to legalise the payment of wages to players in 1885. The superiority of the professional clubs, watched by large paying crowds, soon cast the Corinthians, Old Etonians and other standard-bearers of the amateur ethos into the annals of quirky football obscurity.

The working class, core to football's growth yet passive in terms of power and control, has only occasionally flexed its collective muscles. Players organised into unions

soon after the formation of the Football League in 1898, so brandishing the threat of withdrawing labour. Eventually, this collective clout brought an end to the maximum wage and retain-and-transfer systems, in which players' wages were capped and clubs could retain player registrations against their will. Workers in this case found common ground with free market principles to mobilise against a relic of football tradition.

English football is now a globally successful “product”. Its flagship Premier League provides riches for investors, players and commercial partners. In this era, supporters have often campaigned

against rising ticket prices, games being moved to suit TV audiences, profit hungry club owners, and other features of contemporary football they feel exclude the traditional working class fan. This resistance puts fans in direct conflict with football's ruling class.

In opposing football's sacrifice “at the altar of commercialism”, fans' interests have occasionally chimed in dissonant harmony with the views of the game's governing aristocrats. A sign perhaps of lingering spirits from the FA's once firm commitment to limit market influence in the game.

Such incidental overlaps do not equate to solidarity with working class interests; the game's guardians have long since been at ease with its commercial imperative. Though grating with noble sensibilities, the market has proven open to preserving class privilege and the symbolic and social capital it brings. For the FA, this has no doubt cushioned the blow of compromise. The working class on the other hand have their place, as paid labour or as consumers providing football's marketable cultural backdrop. While football's toffs and suits have their differences, and each may sometimes find common ground with the ruffians on the pitch or in the stands, class hierarchy essentially remains intact.

For now, football's working classes appear to accept that power within *The English Game* resides somewhere above. It is not for “the likes of us”. **CT**

Chris Porter is Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Manchester Metropolitan University. This article first appeared at www.theconversation.com.



BRIGHT LIGHTS. NO PEOPLE: The streets of New York City, like other major tourist areas, are left deserted by a national lockdown.

■ BILL VAN AUKEN

A Tale of Two Surges

Wall Street soars as New York City's coronavirus death toll soars

IT was the best of times, it was the worst of times” was Charles Dickens’ famous opening passage in his fictional treatment of the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities*. These words found stark and fresh expression in New York City on Tuesday, March 24 as billionaires gorged themselves on Wall Street, while the rest of the population confronted a mounting toll in death, sickness and human suffering from the coronavirus pandemic.

Of the two curves pointing upwards, that of the Dow Jones

Industrial Average and the rise in the number of coronavirus cases and deaths in New York, the latter was the steepest.

The number of cases is now doubling every three days, rising on March 24 to 25,665 across New York state, with over 15,000 of them concentrated in New York City. The death toll is also rising steadily, with at least 192 fatalities in the city alone. America’s largest and most densely populated city has become the epicentre of a pandemic that threatens the lives of millions.

While authorities had predicted that the pandemic’s “tsunami” would begin breaking over New York in two to three weeks’ time, it appears to have already arrived. The city is woefully ill-prepared, with its hospitals expected to buckle under the impact of tens, if not hundreds, of thousands seeking care.

None of this, however, stopped the financial feeding frenzy on Wall Street, which saw its steepest one-day rise since 1933, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average soaring 11 percent. The

floor of the New York Stock Exchange was empty, closed down on Monday after a trader tested positive for COVID-19, with the massive buying spree conducted electronically.

Wall Street's 2,000-point rise was in response to the imminent passage of the grotesquely misnamed CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act), a \$2-trillion bonanza for big business, a fresh infusion on top of \$2-trillion more pledged by the US government to prop up the financial assets held by the major banks. Shares of industries to be bailed out – cruise companies, resorts and airlines – jumped by between 30 and 40 percent.

Many of New York's billionaires and multimillionaires who profited off of this record rise have already decamped from the stricken city, emptying out luxury apartment buildings in Manhattan and heading off to mansions in the Hamptons and farms in New England, or taking private jets to bunkers in the West – no doubt taking the virus with them and infecting the army of employees it takes to maintain their lifestyle.

Meanwhile, in the city, the signs that the virus is spreading are everywhere.

At Elmhurst Hospital in Queens, which serves one of the most heavily immigrant populations in the country, a line snaked down the block for the fifth day in a row as sick people waited behind police barricades to get into the emergency room. Nurses at the hospital reported that among those who tested positive were workers who were told that they

New York City's Mayor Bill de Blasio had resisted shutting down schools until threatened with mass sickouts by teachers

could not afford to self-quarantine for even a day without losing their jobs and becoming unable to feed their families.

The majority of the working class in New York, as throughout the United States, is caught in this tragic dilemma. They have no money to sustain themselves over the course of a prolonged shutdown, and the pittance being offered by the US Congress will do nothing to change that. The large population of undocumented immigrant workers that sustains the city's service economy will receive not even the miserable sum on offer.

Both President Donald Trump and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo have made cynical political appeals to the fears of working class families that they will go hungry or homeless and small businesses will go under by suggesting that people can soon return to work, despite the spread of the virus.

On March 24, the New York City Transit Authority announced that it had been compelled to slash subway service, cutting more than 1,000 trips over the past week because of a sharp rise in the number of train operators and conductors calling in sick. At least 23 transit workers had confirmed COVID-19 cases, while many more had been

forced to self-quarantine because of contact with infected co-workers.

The cascading effect of these cuts is felt in passengers packed shoulder to shoulder on trains, facilitating the spread of the virus to ever wider layers of the population.

Similarly, the city announced on March 24 that it is negotiating with private trash-hauling companies because of fear that the spiking number of sanitation workers stricken with the virus – 61 already tested positive and 26 more quarantined – will end up leaving garbage piling up on the streets.

In another tragic expression of the virus's spread, it was reported that a 36-year-old principal at a Brooklyn school, Dezann Romain, died as a result of complications of the coronavirus. New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio had resisted shutting down the city's schools until threatened with mass sickouts by teachers, who had denounced him for having "blood on his hands".

This impact on essential service workers is an indicator of how wide the virus has already spread throughout the city's population. There is growing anger among these workers and New York's working class as a whole over the failure of the city and the employers to provide them with even minimal protection from the disease.

According to official estimates, the city will need 140,000 hospital beds to deal with New Yorkers stricken by the disease, with only 53,000 available. To save patients' lives, 30,000 ventilators will be required, when there are no more

than 5,000 in the city. Hospitals are being told that they must expand their capacity by 100 percent, but there is no indication of how a staff already stretched beyond endurance is to deal with such a doubling of their load. The inevitable outcome is that medical staff will be forced to choose between who will live and who will die.

Late in the day, soldiers in camouflage uniforms together with New York police erected tents and positioned refrigerator trucks outside Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan as a makeshift morgue for the anticipated overflow of bodies. Similar arrangements are being made at all of the city's major hospitals.

Doctors, nurses and health care workers are woefully short of personal protective equipment, with supplies of masks and face shields running low at every hospital and expected to run out within weeks. The inevitable result will be that these workers will themselves become a significant portion of those who become sick and die.

The Republican Trump and the Democrat Cuomo traded barbs, with the New York governor protesting the pitiful amount of aid being offered by Washington and the US president claiming that Cuomo should have bought more ventilators for his state years earlier.

The reality is that both parties have decimated public health services over the course of decades. The existing US two-party political system, based upon defending the interests of America's financial and corporate oligarchy, is organically incapable or responding to the present crisis outside of the

The inevitable result will be that hospital workers will themselves become a significant portion of those who become sick and die

pursuit of policies that impose its full burden upon the working class and condemn millions to die.

The glaring contradiction between the orgy of financial parasitism on Wall Street and the suffering inflicted upon millions in the city of New York poses the inescapable answer to the present crisis. The trillions of dollars being put into the pockets of the financial oligarchy must be seized and utilised in a globally coordinated response

to the coronavirus pandemic.

The giant banks and corporations must be placed under public ownership and democratic control in order to mobilise all of society's resources to combat the pandemic and provide for universal access to health care and a guaranteed livable income, housing and other necessities for every worker, regardless of citizenship or immigration status, who is unable to work because of it.

The global coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated that the very preservation of human life is incompatible with the capitalist system and requires society's reorganisation upon socialist foundations.

CT

Bill Van Auken is a staff writer for the World Socialist Web Site at – www.wsws.org – where this article was first published.

Hurwitt's Eye

MARK HURWITT



■ ANDREW FISCHER

Hoarders vs. Gougers

Toilet paper hoarding's driving the world crazy. So, what's the best way of combatting it. Our writer comes up with an answer that won't satisfy everyone

ONE consequence (there will be others) of the current coronavirus craziness is that petrified consumers are hoarding everything from frozen vegetables to oatmeal to toilet paper. I find it a curious reaction that defies logical explanation, but some are trying:

Stores usually stock two or three days worth of inventory. Customers usually shop for toilet paper every two weeks or so, buying enough to keep them supplied until their next run to the big box store. But the COVID-19 outbreak and the calls for social distancing that followed upended that steady flow of buying and restocking. People started buying more toilet paper, a "buffer stock"... after they were told to prepare for more time at home...." [1]

Psychologists suggest that stockpiling gives people a sense of control when they otherwise feel powerless. We would add that a lack of public leadership at the highest levels only feeds public panic. When it looks like those in charge don't have a handle on the problem, more than a few people will do the only thing within their

power – stockpile for the uncertain times ahead.[2]

[A] perceived scarcity of Charmin is not proof of a global health crisis. It's only proof that some people are taking an abundance of caution. If someone fears not being able to buy toilet paper, that apprehension can be remedied by buying a lot of it. It's one of the few things about the current health climate that consumers can control.[3]

On the other side of the coin is the self-righteous MSM braying over alleged "price gouging" when sellers increase their prices during times of scarcity. Somewhere between the two extremes lies a reality that needs to be explored. Let's take a look ...

I see three possibilities for a seller during a crisis-induced purchasing panic: Do nothing, ration inventory or raise prices. Let's see what happens in each case.

A seller will soon notice that his/her ("his" from now on – I'm pulling a Jordan Peterson and refuse to use grammatically incorrect "their" and "they" forms)

inventory is turbo-jetting off his shelves. He may quickly restock from inventory, but after another wave of super-quick sales he will have to make a choice – reorder now or later. It's likely that he'll immediately call his supplier and order more. Let's stick with toilet paper (if you'll pardon the mental image), so I can abbreviate it as "TP". If he's smart and lucky, our seller will increase his normal order by some multiple and they'll soon be delivered.

His TP supply restored, our hypothetical entrepreneur goes about his daily business, probably noticing very brisk sales of other items. Soon he notices that his TP inventory again needs to be reordered. This time, however, his supplier informs him that other retailers have been ordering increased quantities of TP and to keep them happy he can only give him half a case.

A light bulb pops up over our seller's head. He realises he will soon be out of TP. Knowing that he has to keep his customers happy, our seller considers the three possibilities noted above:

1. He can do nothing, let his stock run out and put up a sign



that says “temporarily out of TP”, which will likely send his customers to competitors.

2. He can ration his remaining TP, posting a sign that says “one roll per customer”, which will slow the sales of the sought after mega-rolls but may also lose customers, perhaps permanently. Additionally, he will have to monitor everyone at checkout and remove any extra TP from customers’ baskets, which could create embarrassment and ill will.

3. He can raise the price of toilet paper, perhaps quintupling it. This will drastically slow sales of his remaining TP and alienate his customers. Additionally, he will be reported to the authorities for the “crime” of price gouging. But would all the hue and cry be

justified?

Clearly, doing nothing is the worst possible choice for a seller. Customers will search elsewhere for TP (or any product), and if they find it will probably make this new location a replacement for their original favourite store.

Rationing is the best choice, but if many products are being hoarded then enforcement becomes a nightmare. Perhaps UPC codes and associated programming could make it more manageable, but removing excess items from customers’ carts at checkout will result in ugly scenes. Government-mandated rationing, as in wartime, would likely not sit well with consumers and broadcasts a massive failure of the economic system. Black markets would spring up.

Somewhere between these two choices lies raising prices. Due to a crisis, demand increases because, in my opinion, people are afraid that everyone else will “get there” before they do and buy up everything in sight. (We have a winner, folks: italicized explanation #3.) Viewed through the lens of supply and demand, consumers perceive that disruptions in supply are about to occur and they feel they cannot live without certain products. They project the time period of the crisis and its associated elevated demand, calculate how much they can afford to spend, and then rush out to buy those products before everyone else does.

In most cases, if everyone continued their purchases normally there would be no shortages. Consider an impending snowstorm, for example. People flood grocery stores for bread and milk, and shelves are soon empty of these items. But how much bread and milk does, say, a family of four need? A week’s worth? Great, because that’s about how long they’ll stay fresh at home. Why, then, should people buy double or even triple quantities since a snowstorm and its impact usually last only a few days? But people do, and late arrivals to the stores will leave with zero bread and milk thanks to the hoarders (who get a mere slap on the wrist from the MSM).

The current CV-19 situation is somewhat different, since if half the population is forced to stay home there could very well be long term supply disruptions. However, this was not apparent in North America at the onset of the problem, yet panic buying began

almost immediately.

Back to raising prices as a solution to hoarding. What would happen if all sellers doubled or tripled their prices? It's easy – people would buy less. They would buy only what they really need. Products would be allocated based on supply and demand and most people would get at least some of what they need. Yes, the wealthy would be able to buy more than others lower down on the income/asset pyramid – but would they? Perhaps, but depending upon your definition of “wealthy” that percentage of the population ranges from the top 1 percent to the top 20 percent. It's very unlikely that wealthy folks will drag ten shopping carts along and fill them up with cases of TP. Nope, they'll buy one case per family, enough to last for weeks or months.

Therefore, assuming everyone on the pyramid rushes to stores ASAP, the entire bottom 80 percent has an excellent chance to buy what they actually need and, due to the increased cost, *can afford*. They will not be able to buy cases of products and hoard them. Thus, raising prices in a crisis is not gouging, but a means of sensibly allocating resources. The additional profit to sellers compensates them for the reduced quantities they have for sale. It's called supply and demand, people.

Look at the guys who bought tons of hand sanitiser during the current CV-19 emergency, intending to resell them at \$70 a bottle. (I can't imagine paying that much for a non-essential \$2 item, but perhaps some rich people might.) Of course they were ruined by Amazon and Ebay as “price gougers”. But who is Amazon – or government, for

that matter – to interfere? They simply took an entrepreneur's chance, which might have worked if at a more realistic selling price – maybe four or five dollars a bottle. The sellers would have soon found an equilibrium point maximising sales and income. Supply and demand. (Note: while hand sanitiser is hardly an essential item, food in general and water are, which is why I won't consider them here. (I know: cop-out!))

Remember Hurricane Katrina? At least one sharp out-of-state entrepreneur loaded his pickup truck with electric generators and drove down to Mississippi, with the intention of selling them to desperate flood victims at a fair profit. (*Look up John Shepperson.*) It's similar to the hand sanitiser situation – an entrepreneur rushed to fulfil a correctly perceived demand. Set the price too high, however, and no generators would be sold. Too low and they'd all sell but it wouldn't be worth the effort. Bargaining with prospective customers would quickly find the best price for both the seller and his customers. Naturally government authorities refused to let the “price gouger” sell his generators – and actually jailed him for four days. Mississippi authorities thus believed it was better to let willing consumers suffer than let them freely purchase scarce generators at a higher-than-Home Depot price.

(It's the same with so-called ticket scalpers. The fact that they exist simply proves that event prices are set too low. As show-time gets closer scalpers must lower their prices or get stuck with worthless tickets. Meanwhile, their

prospective customers may not get into the stadium if they wait too long. Again, supply and demand. Scalpers are really just entrepreneurs, taking risks and trying to maximise profits. By the way, the original ticket sellers could easily limit purchases to, say, four per customer to prevent anyone from buying hundreds of tickets.)

Hey, what about Jeff Bezos? It's a fact that Amazon.com uses “surge pricing”, raising its prices when demand for an item runs hot or supplies of an item run low. Also, absurdly high prices for “only one left in stock” items can readily be found on its website. Amazon also uses “dynamic pricing” to present a higher price to the customer if its algorithms decide he can pay more. Now *that's* price gouging!

So, in the battle of hoarders vs. gougers, which group is more worthy of our scorn? I vote for the hoarders. **CT**

Footnotes

[1] <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/03/toilet-paper-hoarding-why-one-economist-says-not-to-worry.html>

[2] <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/2020/03/17/as-coronavirus-spreads-hoarding-wont-save-you-but-it-will-endanger-others>

[3] <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/620067/coronavirus-hoarding-toilet-paper>

Andrew Fischer is an accountant and author of two books. *Purgastories, a collection of short stories, is available at amazon.com. He enjoys his fiancée and designing board games; the latter can be downloaded at no charge from boardgamegeek.com.*

ONE MAGAZINE'S 10-YEAR QUEST FOR JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

Before I wound up in Toronto and ColdType, I designed **Frontline** magazine, South Africa's top liberal-left magazine, for 10 years during the 1980s as it battled for justice and equality during the final years of Apartheid. Now, we're digitising Frontline, as a case study of prophecy and history. The first digital issues are now on line; more will follow each month.

– **Tony Sutton, Editor**



Read the digital editions of Frontline, exactly as they were published, free of charge, at

www.issuu.com/frontline.south



STILL ALIVE: Walking the streets of Busan, the only fear on his mind is of a wayward virus.

■ LINH DINH

Zombieology

It should be stressed that the coronavirus is not the ultimate cause of our economic, political and societal unravelling, for we've been a dead man walking for a while

AS a chicken chomping, coke snorting species, we have three main foes:

1. Beasts more ferocious than us, such as tigers, lions and, well, just about all other animals, since we're such wimps;

2. Living organisms we can't even see, such as viruses;

3. Other men, of course, since man is clearly man's most lethal and sadistic enemy.

The first category is nearly extinct, with even the most frightful animals turned into lovable cartoons, for our kids' amusement.

In the zombie, however, all three threats are combined, since he's a man, sort of, that acts like a fierce, bonkers beast, and if he bites you, then you're a gonner, for sure, thanks to his virus laden spit.

Zombies also resonate because they're contemporary and urbane

cannibals. In torn jeans, hoodies or suits, they'll eat your flabby ass.

Though literal man eaters have become extremely rare, we know in our bones their taste and tactics have merely been transferred into more elegant and expensive looking gentlemen. Most of us also know we're being devoured, chunk by gristly chunk, daily.

These cheerful thoughts occur to me because last week, I took a



Two women on the train platform at Daegu, epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak in South Korea.

bullet train from Seoul to Busan, and there's a pretty damn good zombie movie called *Train to Busan*. We're also staggering through a virulent miasma right now, in case you're Rip Van Winkle, and no, this ain't no media hoax. Shit's real. When paradigm shifts, we must readjust our thinking and habits with much clarity, effort and discipline, not that we have a choice. True to its title, nearly all of *Train to Busan* takes place on a train, and this is obviously symbolic. Before there were planes or trains, ships were common allegorical vehicles, as in Plato's *Ship of Fools*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Conrad's *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus,'* and so on. Floating on a vast unknown, we're all in this together.

Trains can also be stand ins for the community. Encased, we're

We're staggering through a virulent miasma right now, in case you're Rip Van Winkle, and this ain't no media hoax. Shit's real

being hurled towards a common destiny, though some are reclining in first class or feasting in the bright dining car, while the rest, stiffly upright, are munching on corn chips in the semi dark.

The film's protagonist is an emotionally dead investment banker. Focusing only on his work, her is already separated from his wife, and barely talks to his small daughter.

On the train, he shows no reaction as the first zombie victim screams by, and his face barely registers shock or pain as he hears his mom's anguished last words over the phone, as she moans, retches and gasps while apparently turning into a zombie. He's cooler than cool. Redeeming himself, the banker finally learns how to team up with a blue-collar guy to fight off zombies, and they both die while saving others.

Though far less corrupted, his daughter also says nothing as she witnesses her first zombie, just outside the train window, pouncing on a man. It's the film's director Yeon Sang-ho's little joke to have his characters stay placid at the sickiest spectacles, but that's surely the story of our time. We all do this a thousand times each day. Barely responsive, we're deader than zom-

bies, with our passivity punctuated only by impotent anger.

Ah, but there's one arena where our passions run free, and that's spectator sports, though most of the time, we stare at the screen as if we're comatose, with barely a facial twitch to register another whatever.

I'm not going to lie to you. My main objective in coming to South Korea three weeks ago was to catch as many games as possible of the Women's Korean Basketball League, for how can any objective and sane man not be enthralled by the nightly exploits of the KB Stars, S-Birds, Blue Minx and OK Shoot?

I couldn't wait to sit forever at half court to constantly shudder and duck as gigantic Korean ladies fly, seemingly right over me, to smirkingly execute triple pumping, 720 degree and blind folded slam dunks that the great Shawn Kemp himself never dared attempt.

Alas, I found to my infinite sorrows, regrets and even recriminations that all WKBL games would now be played only in empty arenas. Yes, even more cemetery-like than before, thanks to the corona fuckin' virus.

Spectator sports prove to us that not everything in life is rigged and, moreover, that we still belong to a community, just because we all root for the same colours.

Along with pornography, spectator sports are the ruling class's greatest pacifier of the masses, so if they're suddenly taken away, does it mean our rulers have lost control of the narrative?

When I landed in Seoul, the

The mostly empty platforms at midday had single, figures at disease-free intervals, among the endless columns

coronavirus crisis appeared to be primarily an East Asian problem, with hardly anyone but Orientals dying. There was no outbreak in Iran or Italy, much less the rest of Europe or North America. Now, horrible news swarms from the West, where death counts rise relentlessly, and entire countries are crippled and shuttered.

If this coronavirus was unleashed by the US, as has been charged by many, including Chinese officials, then why didn't Washington take precautions to protect its own population? And why was it so paralysed as the crisis unfolded? More importantly, how does Wall Street benefit from the poleaxing of the American economy? The 1 percent have just lost trillions.

If the Chinese government was responsible for the outbreak, albeit only accidentally, then why didn't it rush to contain it immediately, instead of just spinning the news? Perhaps Beijing was unaware of what had occurred in Wuhan?

On the train to Busan, we passed Daegu, the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak in South Korea. The mostly empty platforms at midday had but single, desolate figures at disease-free intervals, among the endless columns. It was a de Chirico vision come to

life, but only barely. At least they weren't zombies.

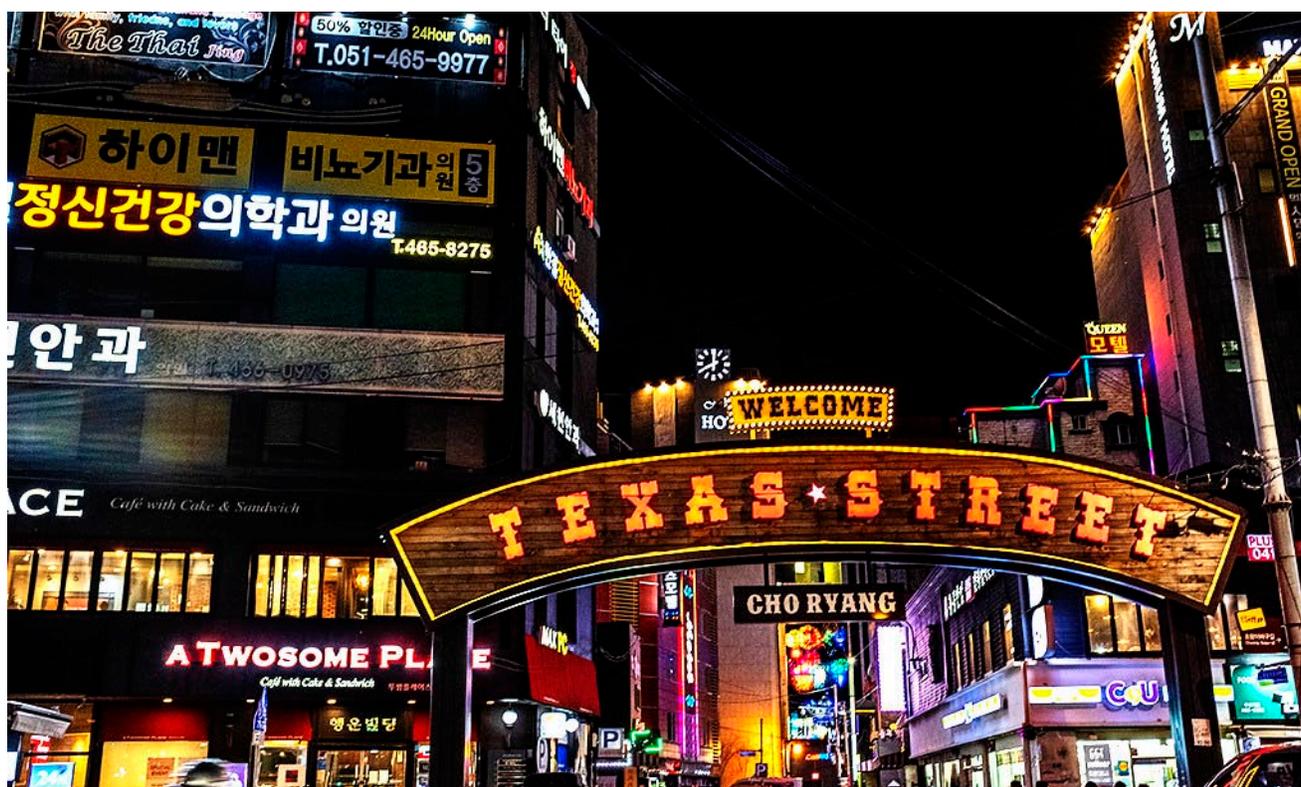
Unlike China, and now Italy, Spain, France and others, South Korea never locked down even a single neighbourhood, much less a city. To combat this pandemic, it immediately launched a comprehensive testing campaign, which has yielded alarming daily tallies of infections, though tailing off significantly as of late, auguring a recovery.

For this deliberateness and transparency, South Korea has paid a huge price in international isolation and lost commerce, but it has managed to maintain, nationwide, an impressive semblance of normalcy. People go to work. All stores are open and well stocked.

Though most restaurants and bars have suffered, you'll still find, in just about any neighbourhood, those that can still pack them in, for there are obviously versions of black bean noodles, ox bone soup, spicy fried chicken or bibimbap that are good enough, or at least cheap enough, to risk a small chance of death to eat.

Here in Busan, I've been frequenting the niggardly named Food Café, where for just \$5 or so, I can stuff my face with a wholesome meal. Last night, I had some fine fried rice with garlic and bacon, which made me ponder, if only for a moment, Why wasn't I born Korean?

One type of Korean business that can't be flourishing right now is the "kiss bang". Don't get too excited. Let me explain. "Bang" merely means "room", so you're not going to bang anyone at such an establishment. You'll certainly



"Russian whores still lurk on Texas Street, and inside talking bars named Las Vegas, Miami, Seattle and London".

kiss and fondle a bit, at around \$50 for half an hour. It's perfectly legal, as long as you don't go downstairs, not that there's anyone bent over a peephole to spy on your sneaky infractions. The girls tend to be college students, so it's cute and sad. Moreover, there's a reason why many whores or even go-go dancers don't want you to touch their face. The head is really sacred. In any case, swapping spit with multiple strangers during a pandemic is, well, not the brightest idea. It's almost as dumb as making out with zombies.

After checking into the appropriately named One Way Guest House in Busan, I returned to Daegu the next morning to see what life was like beyond its rail depot. Getting off the train, I saw an immobile monk, in a black knit cap, white mask and slate gray

robe, sitting by himself as a white pigeon fluttered. Inside the station, a dozen passengers waited to depart. Cafes were open. Having never seen its usual volume, everything seemed normal.

That day, I inspected a vast luxury shopping mall, had lunch at a greasy spoon, drank a cappuccino at a chain café, wandered many streets and walked briskly on a river hugging trail along with dozens of others. Compared to my experience of Seoul, Suwon, Incheon, Busan and Gimhae, Daegu did come off as more subdued, but it was still functioning, with traffic everywhere, and people out shopping.

As for my Busan neighbourhood, Choryang-dong, it's still jumping, if only on one leg. Russian whores still lurk on Texas Street, and inside talking bars named Las

Vegas, Miami, Seattle and London, etc., Filipina hostesses still wait for you to entertain them. The area's many homeless still sleep outside in the frightful cold. Teenagers still flock to McDonald's.

Maybe you can tell me what comes next. It should be stressed that the coronavirus is not the ultimate cause of our economic, political and societal unravelling, for we've been a dead man walking for a while.

Since we're all linked, even a productive, efficient and disciplined society like South Korea must pay this belated penalty. Zombie surges await. **CT**

Linh Dinh's latest book is Postcards from the End of America. He maintains a regularly updated photo blog at <https://linhdinhphotos.blogspot.com>

How anti-immigration left Italy exposed

It's not the only country in chaos. More than a decade of misguided austerity policies have weakened the health care systems right across over Europe

AS the viral blitzkrieg rolls across one European border after another, it seems to have a particular enmity for Italy. The country's death toll has passed China's, and scenes from its hospitals look like something out of Dante's imagination.

Why?

Italy has the fourth largest economy in the European Union, and in terms of health care, it is certainly in a better place than the US. Per capita, Italy has more hospital beds – so-called “surge capacity” – more doctors and more ventilators. Italians have a longer life expectancy than Americans, not to mention British, French, Germans, Swedes and Finns. The virus has had an especially fatal impact on northern Italy, the country's richest region.

There are a number of reasons why Italy has been so hard-hit, but a major one can be placed at the feet of former Interior Minister Matteo Salvini of the xenophobic, rightwing League Party and his allies on the Italian right, including former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Italy has the oldest population

in Europe, and one of the oldest in the world. It did not get that way by accident. Right-wing parties have long targeted immigrants, even though the immigrant population – a little over 600,000 – is not large by international standards. Immigrants as a “threat to European values” has been the rallying cry for the right in France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Greece, Spain, the Netherlands and Britain as well.

In the last Italian election, the League and its then ally, The Five Star Movement, built their campaigns around resisting immigration. Anti-immigrant parties also did well in Spain and certainly played a major role in pulling the United Kingdom out of the EU.

Resistance to immigration plays a major role in “greying” the population. Italy has one of the lowest birthrates in the world, topped only by Japan. The demographic effects of this are “an apocalypse” according to former Italian Health Minister Beatrice Lorenzin. “In five years, we have lost more than 66,000 births [per year]” equal to the population of the city of Siena.

“If we link this to this increasingly old and chronically ill people, we have a picture of a moribund country”.

According to the World Health Organization, the ideal birth-death replacement ratio in advanced countries is 2.1. Italy's is 1.32., which means not only an older population, but also fewer working age people to pay the taxes that fund the social infrastructure, including health care.

As long as there is no a major health crisis, countries muddle though, but when something like the Corona virus arrives, it exposes the underlying weaknesses of the system.

Some 60 percent of Italians are over 40, and 23 percent are over 65. It is demographics like these that make Covid-19 so lethal. From age 10 to 39, the virus has a death rate of 0.2 percent, more deadly than influenza, but not overly so. But starting at age 40, the death rate starts to rise, reaching 8 percent for adults age 70 to 79, and then jumping to 14.8 percent over 80. The average age of Corona virus deaths in Italy is 81.

When the economic meltdown



ITALIAN JOB: Armed policeman looks for curfew breakers.

hit Europe in 2008, the European Union responded by instituting painful austerity measures that targeted things like health care. Over the past 10 years Italy has cut some 37-billion euros from its health system. The infrastructure that could have dealt with a health crisis like Covid-19 was hollowed out, so that when the disease hit, there simply weren't enough troops or resources to resist it.

Add to that the age of Italians, and the outcome was almost foreordained.

The US is in a very similar position, but for somewhat different reasons. As Pulitzer Prize-winning medical writer Laurie Garrett points out, it was managed care that has derailed the ability of the American health system to respond to a crisis. "What happened with managed care is that hospitals eliminated surplus beds and surplus personnel. So, far from being ready to deal with surge capacity, we're actually understaffed and we have massive nurse short-

ages across the nation".

Much of that shortage can also be attributed to managed care. Nurses are overloaded with too many patients, work 10- and 12-hour shifts on a regular basis, and, while initially well paid, their compensation tends to flatten out over the long run. Burn out is a major professional risk for nursing.

Yet in a pandemic, nursing is the most important element in health care according to John Barry, author of the *The Great Influenza* about the 1918-19 virus that killed up to 100 million people, including 675,000 Americans. A post mortem of the pandemic found "What could help, more than doctors, were nurses. Nursing could ease the strain of a patient, keep a patient hydrated, calm, provide the best nutrition, and cool the intense fevers". Nurses, the study showed, gave victims "the best possible chance to survive".

The issues in Italy's 2018 election were pretty straightforward: slow growth, high youth unemployment, a starving education system and a deteriorating infrastructure

– Rome was literally drowning in garbage. But, instead of the failed austerity strategy of the EU, the main election theme became immigration, a subject that had nothing to do with Italy's economic crisis, troubled banking sector or burdensome national debt.

Berlusconi, leader of the right-wing Forza Italia Party, said, "All these immigrants live off of trickery and crime". Forza made common cause with the fascist Brothers of Italy, whose leader, Giorgia Meloni, called for halting immigrants with a "naval blockade".

The main voice of the xenophobic campaign, however, was Salvini and the League. Immigrants, he said, bring "chaos, anger, drug dealing, thefts, rape and violence", and pose a threat to the "white race".

The Five Star Movement leader Luigi Di Mario joined the immigrant bashing, if not with quite the vitriol of Berlusconi, Salvini and Meloni. The centre-left Democratic Party ducked the issue, leaving the field to the right.

The outcome was predictable:

the Democratic Party was routed and the Five Star Movement and League swept into power. Salvini took the post of Interior Minister and actually instituted a naval blockade, a violation of International Law and the 1982 Law of the Sea.

Eventually the League and Five Star had a falling out, and Salvini was ousted from his post, but the damage was done. The desperately needed repairs to infrastructure and investments in health care were shelved. When Covid-19 struck, Italy was unprepared.

Much the same can be said for the rest of Europe, where more than a decade of austerity policies have weakened health care systems all over the continent.

Nor is Italy facing a demographic catastrophe alone. The EU-wide replacement ratio is a tepid 1.58, with only France and Ireland approaching – but not reaching – 2.1.

If Germany does not increase the number of migrants it takes, the population will decline from 81-million to 67-million by 2060, reducing the workforce to 54 percent of the population, not enough to keep up with current levels of social spending. The Berlin Institute

Maintaining adequate surge capacity in hospital beds, ventilators and staff reduces stockholders' dividends

for Population and Development estimates that Germany will need 500,000 immigrants a year for the next 35 years to keep pensions and social services at current levels.

Spain – which saw the right-wing anti-immigration party do well in the last election – is bleeding population, particularly in small towns, 1,500 of which have been abandoned. Spain has weathered a decade and a half of austerity, which damaged the country's health care infrastructure. After Italy, Spain is the European country hardest hit by Covid-19.

As populations age, immigrants become a necessity. Not only is new blood needed to fill in the work needs of economies, broadening the tax base that pays for

infrastructure, but, too, old people need caretaking, as the Japanese have found out. After centuries of xenophobic policies that made immigration to Japan almost impossible, the Japanese have been forced to accept large numbers of migrants to staff senior facilities.

The United States will face a similar crisis if the Trump administration is successful in chocking off immigration. While the US replacement ratio is higher than the EU's, it still falls under 2.1, and that will have serious demographic consequences in the long run.

It may be that for-profit health care simply can't cope with a pandemic because it finds maintaining adequate surge capacity in hospital beds, ventilators and staff reduces stockholders' dividends. And public health care systems in Europe – which have better outcomes than the American system's – only work if they are well funded.

To the biblical four horsemen – war, famine, wild beasts and plague – we can add two more: profits and austerity. **CT**

Conn Hallinan can be read at dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com and middleempire-series.wordpress.com

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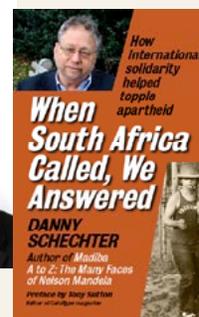
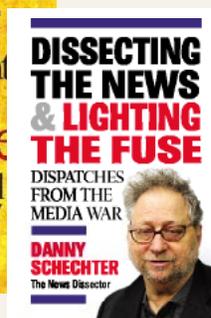
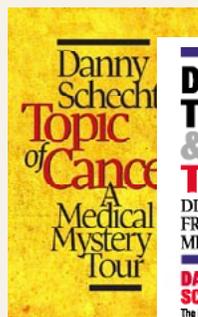
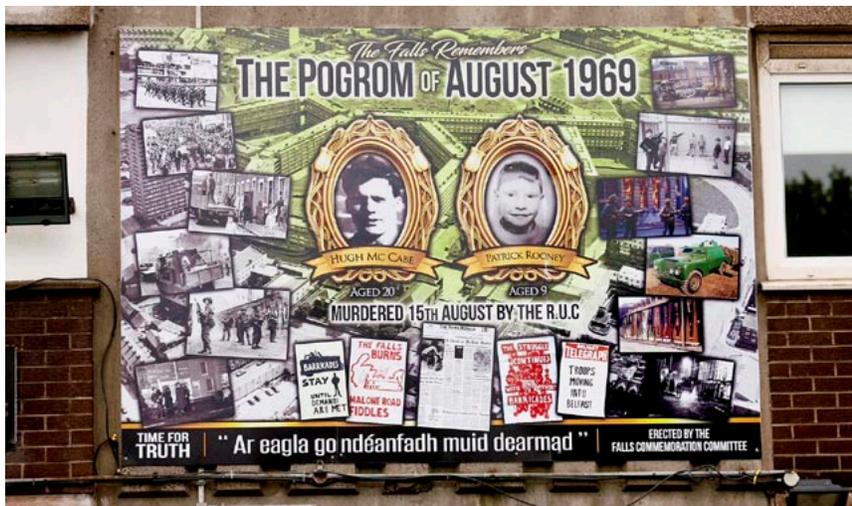


Photo: Belfast Media Group



A Belfast wall mural commemorates schoolboy Patrick Rooney and on-leave soldier Hugh McCabe, both shot dead in the August '69 pogrom. The homes of nationalist Bombay Street were rebuilt by local people in 1970, but to this day a 'peace wall' divides the Catholic Falls from the Protestant Shankill areas of Belfast.

■ MAIRTIN O MUILLEOIR

In a city oft-divided, unity against a common enemy

WE'VE been here before. Or at least, I have. Dread and despair. A fear of imminent and overwhelming attack. Panic and hysteria. A feeling of abandonment. Questions in a torrent but answers in a trickle.

It took a while before it hit me but my first ride on this roller-coaster was as a nine-year-old when I watched on, wide-eyed and tremulous, as my elders were swept away by the tumult of August 1969.

In that burning summer of '69, hate rather than love was

in the air in Belfast as gangs of pro-British loyalists rampaged through defenceless Catholic streets while the forces of law and order looked on. The doors of Catholic families were marked with 'X's as the local MP egged on the mob to "work to rule, boys, work to rule", by targeting their venom on the marked homes.

When dawn broke on August 15, the two-up-two-down terraced homes of the Falls were but rubble and among the dead were a British soldier home on leave and defending his neighbours and a nine-year-old boy killed as

he slept. Both were cut down by automatic fire from B-Specials, the state's paramilitary force, using armoured cars mounted with Sterling machine guns.

The resultant exodus from the Catholic Falls area represented the greatest movement of refugees since the Second World War.

Things would never be the same again.

Bombay Street had been burned to the ground by the mob and refugees were flooding into the half-finished homes in Upper Andersonstown, West Belfast.

It was frightening but exciting too as, with my primary school buddies, I roamed the estate, observing the unfolding drama.

We saw the lorries bring in the belongings of the refugees as workmen knocked together mobile homes on the Glen Road above Rosnareen. We watched as petrol bombs were made on a makeshift production line and stored behind the barricade at the top of Ramoan Gardens. Young as we were, we knew that this was an epoch-making time.

My most vivid memory from those frantic few days in August is of Patcheye Doyle standing on the roof of a Morris 1100 which was caving in under his weight. His one eye dancing, he was roaring at a gathering of local men, urging them to get organised before the next onslaught. A fearsome and fearless scrapper of some reknown, Patcheye took the lead while others dithered. He

was a hard man, in a time when that epithet was more than a throwaway schoolyard taunt.

And of course, there was real fear abroad. There were no weapons to hold off an invasion, no police force to turn to for protection. Yet the people did pull together defences, after a fashion. Barricades went up, British Army 'ex-servies' patrolled the streets and the people turned to each other for support and comfort.

Mistakes were made, too, in the maelstrom. Some concerned matters of life and death, others were less consequential but remain with me: I remember the proud pine trees on the Glen Road being cut down to block the road. You can still see the gaps where they once stood – and where their more fortunate cousins continue to watch over us.

Yet, we survived. Not in one piece, admittedly. But we emerged on the other side. Changed for sure, stronger undoubtedly but also scarred. So

what can I retrieve from those all-but forgotten memories of the heady days of August '69 to help us as we march headlong into this coming Coronavirus hurricane? Put up the barricades. Protect your neighbour. Gear up for the fight. But most of all, listen to the key men and women – those selfless heroes who we will find today not on car roofs but in hospital emergency rooms and Intensive Care Units. They have given us fair warning: keep your distance, isolate and defend the elderly, wash your hands and, above all else, stay at home.

I can put it no better than in the words of a 16-year-old paper

boy who arrived, complete with surgical gloves, to the *Andersonstown News* offices insisting that he be allowed to do his door-to-door paper round – which we had cancelled in light of the crisis. Pointing a gloved finger at me, he said, "I will knock the f*** out of this Coronavirus". Patcheye must be smiling down.

Today, it's not Shankill against Falls or unionist versus national-

ist. It's all of us, one people, one city, and one battle which we cannot and which we most certainly WILL NOT lose. **CT**

Mairtin O Muilleoir is managing director of the Belfast Media Group and publisher of the Irish Echo newspaper. He was Lord Mayor of Belfast from 2013 to 2014 and Northern Ireland's Finance Minister in 2016.

■ JILL RICHARDSON

Stay in your home – and stay angry

SOcial distancing is hard, and it's not fun.

I don't question that we are doing what is necessary. Until better testing, treatment, and prevention are available, it is. But quarantining us in our homes separates us at a time when we need connection.

And you know what? It's okay to feel angry about that. It's important to remember we're doing this in part because the people at the top screwed up.

Trump fired the pandemic response team two years ago, even though Obama's people warned them that we needed to work on preparedness for exactly this in 2016. Unsurprisingly, a government simulation exercise just last year found we were not prepared for a pandemic.

Later on, even after the disease had come to the US, infectious

disease experts in Washington State had to fight the federal government for the right to test for the coronavirus.

It gets worse.

Now we know that Senator Richard Burr was taking the warnings seriously weeks before any real action was taken – and all he did was sell off a bunch of stock, while telling the public everything was fine. Meanwhile, Trump didn't want a lot of testing, because he wanted to keep the number of confirmed cases low to aid his re-election.

The people we trusted to keep us safe didn't do that. Now the entire economy's turned upside down, people are dying, and we're all cooped up at home.

It sucks. We should be angry.

I'm young enough that I don't have to worry much about the likelihood of a serious case if I

get sick. But I'm staying home, because I don't want to get it and accidentally spread it to someone more vulnerable than myself.

I'm also aware of the sacrifice many of us are making for the sake of others. Some lost their jobs, while others put themselves at risk working outside the home because they can't afford not to – or, in the case of health care workers, because they're badly needed.

Entire families are cooped up together and I've heard jokes that divorce lawyers will get plenty of business after this. Parents are posting memes about how much

they appreciate teachers now they are stuck with their kids all day. I'm entirely alone besides a cat.

I worry about the college seniors graduating this year and trying to find a job. What about people prone to anxiety and depression? How much will this exacerbate domestic abuse? What about people in jails, prisons, and detention centres?

Our society is deeply unequal. So while the virus itself doesn't discriminate, this bigger crisis will hit people unequally. Some don't have health insurance. Some are undocumented. Some are more susceptible to dying from the disease.

The people in power who screwed up are wealthy enough that they can work from home, maintain their income, and access affordable health care. Others will feel the full brunt of this, not them. It's not fair.

I'm supportive of doing all we can to prevent the virus's spread and to protect vulnerable people, but anger at the people whose incompetence put us in this position is justified. We deserve better. **CT**

Jill Richardson is pursuing a PhD in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Distributed by www.OtherWords.org.

■ NANCY MANCIAS

BlackRock profits in a time of crisis

WITH little government support and corporate accountability, humanitarian aid workers are scrambling to address the refugee crisis in the wake of the global pandemic, COVID-19 (coronavirus).

The outbreak of the coronavirus comes at a time when there is a great influx of war and economic refugees migrating to Europe. Despite Turkey's efforts to host millions of refugees, the country has reached its tipping point. President Erdogan signalled to refugees that his government would no longer hold

them back from reaching Europe. After getting word of this, thousands of refugees took flight over land and sea. Disappointingly, they were greeted with hostility, tear gas, and xenophobia from Greek law enforcement and European partners. The new Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis charged that he will protect the country's borders against illegal migrants. Meanwhile, refugees are situated on the Greek-Turkey border in Edirne, living in cold muddy makeshift camps without the basic necessities to combat the coronavirus.

After nine years of war in

Syria, the country of Turkey has hosted millions of Syrian refugees – more than any other country. Additionally, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq have felt the brunt of the Middle East migrant crisis because of the US-backed wars. Even though there are no coronavirus cases in the camps, humanitarian aid workers believe that it is only a matter of time. Are the governments prepared to protect the most vulnerable in the camps?

On the Greek island of Lesbos, refugees from conflict regions, mostly Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, are packed into Moria, a squalid camp meant to house 3,000 people. Over 19,000 refugees reside in the overcrowded camp, which offers limited access to good hygiene and sanitation. Because of the inability to control

the spread of the coronavirus within the camp, Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) is urgently requesting that the Greek government evacuate the camps on Lesbos and the other Aegean islands. As of now, MSF is coordinating with the country's National Public Health Organisation.

In the United States, medical professionals and lawyers have stated that it is only a matter of time that the coronavirus will spread in US private prisons operated by GEO Group and CoreCivic. Similarly to the camps in Europe and the Middle East, it is reported that there is a lack of good hygiene and sanitation in the overcrowded prisons that house migrants from Latin America. However, US humanitarian aid workers and doctors are not allowed access into the prisons, making it difficult to truly know the level of urgent care that is needed. There are attempts by Congress to hold the private prisons accountable. Members of the Senate wrote to the federal Bureau of Prisons and private prison companies, requesting an outline of how they will address the coronavirus. In Washington, immigrant rights groups are demanding swift results by asking for the release of the most vulnerable immigrants from the state prisons.

It is US-led wars and policies that have driven refugees and migrants across the globe to overcrowded and unsanitary camps and prisons. As we just passed the anniversary of the disastrous Iraq



KILLING MACHINE: Lockheed Martin F35.

war, the US remains in conflict with seven countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and Niger.

The United Nations reports that there are 70.8-million forcibly displaced people across the globe with 6.7-million from Syria and 2.7-million from Afghanistan. Even though the US brokered a peace deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan, after 13 years, the number of displaced Afghan refugees remains the second-highest in the world. After five years of conflict in Yemen, 3.6-million people have been forced to flee. In Iraq, millions of Iraqis remain internally displaced. The country is host to thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing their home country. In Libya, Somalia, and Niger, millions are in desperate need of protection and humanitarian assistance. It is safe to say that US-led wars are one of the root causes of the global humanitarian crisis across the Middle East and Northern Africa. Additionally, the US has meddled in Latin American politics for decades by supporting oligarchies, passing neoliberal trade deals, training death squads, waging a fictitious war on drugs, and supporting the coup d'état on democrati-

cally elected officials. The US destabilisation of Latin America has resulted in mass migration to the country.

It is the weapons companies, private prisons, and asset management firms like BlackRock that stand to gain a profit from war and migration. Not only is BlackRock the largest investor in the private prison companies, GEO Group and CoreCivic, but they promote a roughly \$3-million defence fund loaded and full of weapons made by Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, and Boeing. All these companies are publicly traded on the market. All these companies profit off the backs of the most vulnerable: refugees. It is shameful how BlackRock can continue to brazenly turn a profit while migrants and refugees lack basic necessities to combat the coronavirus.

Across the globe, humanitarian workers are working tirelessly to support migrants and refugees against the coronavirus. In the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, camps and private prisons are ill-equipped to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The United States has played a significant role in the global migrant crisis. Weapon manufacturers, private prison companies, and asset management firm BlackRock will continue to profit from the most vulnerable. **CT**

Nancy Mancias is a campaign organizer for CODEPINK. This article was produced by Local Peace Economy, a project of the Independent Media Institute.

Photo: Wikimedia

■ GEORGE MONBIOT

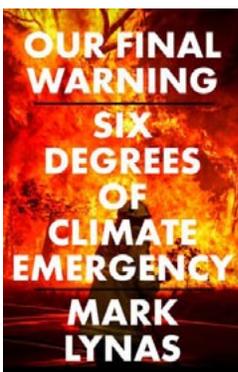
Wake-up call for a complacent civilisation

WE have been living in a bubble: a bubble of false comfort and denial. In the rich nations, we have begun to believe we have transcended the material world. The wealth we've accumulated – often at the expense of others – has shielded us from reality. Living behind screens, passing between capsules – our houses, cars, offices and shopping malls – we persuaded ourselves that contingency had retreated, that we had reached the point all civilisations seek: insulation from natural hazard.

Now the membrane has ruptured, and we find ourselves naked and outraged, as the biology we appeared to have banished storms through our lives. The temptation, when this pandemic has passed, will be to find another bubble. We cannot afford to succumb to it. From now on, we should expose our minds to the painful realities we have denied for too long.

The planet has multiple morbidities, some of which will make this coronavirus look, by comparison, easy to treat. One above all others has come to obsess me in recent years: how will we feed ourselves? Fights over toilet paper are ugly enough: I hope we never have to witness fights over food. But it's becoming difficult to see how we will avoid them.

A large body of evidence is beginning to accumulate, showing how climate breakdown is likely to affect our food supply. Already, farming in some parts of the world is being hammered by drought, floods, fire and locusts (whose resurgence in the past few weeks appears to be the result of anomalous tropical cyclones). When we call such hazards “biblical”, we mean



CRISIS TIME: Mark Lynas's new book, gives us the global warming-details

that they are the kind of things that happened long ago, to people whose lives we can scarcely imagine. Now, with increasing frequency, they are happening to us.

In his forthcoming book, *Our Final Warning*, Mark Lynas explains what is likely to happen to our food supply with every extra degree of global heating. He finds that extreme danger kicks in somewhere between 3 and 4° above pre-industrial levels. At this point, a series of interlock-

ing impacts threaten to send food production into a death spiral. Outdoor temperatures become too high for humans to tolerate, making subsistence farming impossible across Africa and South Asia. Livestock die from heat stress. Temperatures start to exceed the lethal thresholds for crop plants across much of the world, and major food producing regions turn into dust bowls. Simultaneous global harvest failure – something that has never happened in the modern world – becomes highly likely.

In combination with a rising human population, the loss of irrigation water, soil and pollinators, this could push the world into structural famine. Even today, when the world has a total food surplus, hundreds of millions are malnourished as a result of the unequal distribution of wealth and power. Under food deficit, billions could starve. Hoarding will happen, as it always has, at the global level, as powerful people snatch food from the mouths of the poor. Yet, even if every nation keeps its promises under the Paris Agreement, which currently seems unlikely, global heating will amount to between 3 and 4°.

Thanks to our illusion of security, we are doing almost nothing to anticipate this catastrophe, let alone prevent it. This existential issue scarcely seems to impinge on our consciousness. Every food producing sector claims that its own current practices are sustainable, and don't need to change. When I challenge them, I'm met with a barrage of anger,

abuse and threats of the kind I haven't experienced since I opposed the Iraq War. Sacred cows and holy lambs are everywhere, and the thinking required to develop the new food systems we need is scarcely anywhere.

But this is just one of our impending crises. Antibiotic resistance is, potentially, as deadly as any new disease. One of the causes is the astonishingly profligate way in which these precious medicines are used on some livestock farms. Where vast numbers of farm animals are packed together, antibiotics are deployed prophylactically, to prevent otherwise-inevitable outbreaks of disease. In some parts of the world, they are used not only to prevent disease, but also as growth promoters. Low doses are routinely added to feed: a strategy which could scarcely be better designed to deliver bacterial resistance.

In the US, where 27 million people have no medical cover, some people are now treating themselves with veterinary antibiotics, including those sold, without prescription, to medicate pet fish. Pharmaceutical companies are failing to invest sufficiently in the search for new drugs. If antibiotics cease to be effective, surgery becomes almost impossible. Childbirth becomes a mortal hazard once more. Chemotherapy can no longer be safely practised. Infectious diseases we have comfortably forgotten become deadly threats. We should discuss this issue as often as we talk about football. But again, it scarcely

registers.

Our multiple crises, of which these are just two, have a common root. The problem is exemplified by the response of the organisers of the Bath Half Marathon, a massive event that took place on March 15, to the many people begging them to cancel. "It is now too late for us to cancel or postpone the event. The venue is built, the infrastructure is in place, the site and our contractors are ready." In other words, the sunk costs of the event were judged to outweigh any future impacts – the potential transmission of disease, and possible deaths – it might cause. The amount of time it took the International Olympic Committee to postpone the Games could reflect similar judgements – but at least they got there in the end. Sunk costs within the fossil fuel industry, farming, banking, private healthcare and other sectors prevent the rapid transformations we need. Money becomes more important than life.

There are two ways this could go. We could, as some people have

done, double down on denial. Some of those who have dismissed other threats, such as climate breakdown, also seek to downplay the threat of Covid-19. Witness the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, who claims that the coronavirus is nothing more than "a little flu". The media and opposition politicians who have called for lockdown are, apparently, part of a conspiracy against him.

Or this could be the moment when we begin to see ourselves, once more, as governed by biology and physics, and dependent on a habitable planet. Never again should we listen to the liars and the deniers. Never again should we allow a comforting falsehood to trounce a painful truth. No longer can we afford to be dominated by those who put money ahead of life. This coronavirus reminds us that we belong to the material world. **CT**

George Monbiot is a columnist for the Guardian, where this article first appeared. His website is www.monbiot.com

■ CHUCK COLLINS

Planet CEO vs. Planet Worker

REMEMBER the Great Recession? For most Americans, it's an unforgettable nightmare that lives on. But for the CEO's of some of our nation's biggest companies,

it's a distant memory.

These CEO's live on Planet Platinum, where profits and paychecks are in a parallel universe. In 2009, the paychecks of CEO's at the biggest US corporations

averaged 263 times the compensation of US workers.

Here on Main Street, Planet Earth, many Americans are living with the reality of increased economic insecurity, eroding savings, and anxiety about their jobs. In the last two years, as a result of the economic meltdown, over 8-million jobs were eliminated.

Many social observers believe the “long shadow” of this recession will be felt for a generation, with persistent high unemployment changing the life course of today’s young adults.

On Planet Platinum, corporate profits and CEO pay have bounced back. Unfortunately, this isn’t translating into new jobs. In fact, many companies are pursuing a business strategy of boosting profits while shedding workers at a shocking pace. While the benefits of this strategy in terms of productivity gains appears to be petering out, it has created a record stash of cash for big corporations.

According to a new report by the Institute for Policy Studies that I co-authored, a bunch of that cash is going to a handful of CEOs. And the CEOs who have slashed the most jobs have actually got bigger paychecks than CEOs who have retained their work forces.

CEOs at the 50 firms that have fired the most workers since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008 paid themselves nearly \$12-million on average in 2009. This is 42 percent higher than the average CEO pay at the 500 larg-



Art: Pixabay.com

est companies.

For example, Fred Hassan CEO of drug company Schering-Plough took home \$49.6-million in 2009, even as the company laid off 16,000 employees in a merger with Merck.

Hassan’s one-year compensation is equal to the benefits that a total of 3,131 average unemployed Americans would receive over the course of an entire year.

On Planet Platinum, companies enjoy all the benefits of doing business in the United States without having to pay for them. Thanks to tax dodges and overseas tax havens, several companies pay their CEOs more than they pay in total federal corporate income taxes. For example, Occidental Petroleum paid its CEO Ray Irani \$31.4-million in compensation in 2009. This was double the \$18-million it paid in corporate income taxes that same year.

Companies like Occidental benefit from our remarkable infrastructure of roads, bridges, and technology. They’re protected by our military, policing, and

judicial systems. But they pay only a fraction of the taxes that people on Main Street, Planet Earth pay because of tax loopholes and subsidies.

Efforts to reform runaway executive compensation have been slow in coming. Thanks to the recently passed financial reform legislation, shareholders will now have a “say on pay.”

But we still have a long way to go to close the distance between the two planets where CEOs and ordinary workers live. Congress should enact several proposals that have tremendous public support. One would cap CEO pay at companies that receive government bailouts at the level of the US president’s salary of \$400,000 per year. Another would limit a corporation’s ability to deduct excessive CEO pay as a business expense when it exceeds 25 times the average worker at a company.

Realigning the interests of CEOs with their employees and the rest of our country would be good for the economy and national morale. At a time when we should be pulling together to strengthen our shared economic futures, no one should live on another planet. **CT**

Chuck Collins directs the Program on Inequality at the Institute for Policy Studies. He is co-editor of Inequality.org and the author of Born on Third Base: A One Percenter Makes the Case for Tackling Inequality, Bringing Wealth Home, and Committing to the Common Good.

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