



# THE BULLET

# The COVID-19 Pandemic Is Exposing the Plague of Neoliberalism

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**T**he current coronavirus pandemic is more than a medical crisis, it is also a political and ideological crisis. It is a crisis deeply rooted in years of neglect by neoliberal governments that denied the importance of public health and the public good while defunding the institutions that made them possible. At the same time, this crisis cannot be separated from the crisis of massive inequalities in wealth, income and power. Nor can it be separated from a crisis of democratic values, education and environmental destruction.

The coronavirus pandemic is deeply interconnected with the politicization of the natural order through its [destructive assaults](#) waged by neoliberal globalization on the ecosystem. In addition, it cannot be disconnected from the spectacle of racism, ultranationalism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and bigotry that has dominated the national zeitgeist as a means of promoting shared fears rather than shared responsibilities.



The plague has as one of its roots a politics of depoliticization, which makes clear that education is a central feature of politics and it always plays a central role – whether in a visible or a veiled way – in any ideological project. For instance, it has been a central pedagogical principle of neoliberalism that individual responsibility is the only way to address social problems, and consequently, there is no need to address broader systemic issues, hold power accountable or embrace matters of collective responsibility. As a politics of containment, neoliberalism privatizes and individualizes social problems, i.e., wash your hands as a way to contain the pandemic. In doing so, cultural critics Bram Ieven and Jan Overwijk [argue](#), “it seeks to contain any real democratic politics; that is to say, a politics based on collective solidarity and equality [because] democratic politics is a threat to the primacy of the market.”

# Neoliberalism: Competition and Irrational Selfishness

Additionally, neoliberalism's emphasis on commercial values rather than democratic values, its virulent ideology of extreme competitiveness and irrational selfishness, and its impatience with matters of ethics, justice and truth has undermined critical thought and the power of informed judgment. As Pankaj Mishra [states](#), "for decades now, de-industrialization, the outsourcing of jobs, and then automation, have deprived many working people of their security and dignity, making the aggrieved ... vulnerable to demagoguery."

Americans live in an age when neoliberalism wages war on the public and inequality is recast as a virtue. This age supports notions of individual responsibility that tear up social solidarities in devastating ways. This is a historical moment that puts a premium on competitive attitudes and unchecked individualism, and allows the market to become a template for structuring all social relations. The social contract has been all but eliminated while notions of the public good, social obligations and democratic forms of solidarity are under attack. This is a form of gangster capitalism that speaks only in the market-based language of profits, privatization and commercial exchange. It also legitimates the language of isolation, deprivation, human suffering and death.

Ravaged for decades by neoliberal policies, US society is plagued by a series of crises whose deeper roots have intensified the stark class and racial divides. Such a divide is evident in the millions of workers who do not have paid sick leave, the millions who lack health insurance, the hundreds of thousands who are homeless, and the fact that as the *Boston Review* points out, "[One in five Americans cannot pay their monthly bills in full](#), and 40 percent do not have the savings needed to cover an unexpected \$400 expense."

Neoliberal capitalism is the underlying pandemic feeding the current global shortage of hospitals, medical supplies, beds and robust social welfare provisions, and increasingly an indifference to human life.

Under such circumstances, the social sphere and its interconnections become an object of either financial exploitation or utter disdain, or both. What is lost in this depoliticizing discourse of neoliberalism and made clear in the current pandemic is that our lives are indeed interconnected for better or worse. There is a certain irony here in that the current White House call for the public to abide by social distancing mirrors not only a medically safe practice to slow down the spread of the virus, it also occupies a long-standing neoliberal ideological space that disdains social connections and democratic values while promoting death-dealing forms of social atomization. Here is where the medical crisis runs head on into a long-standing political crisis. This is also the space where politics has become a tool of neoliberalism as the economy and powers of government relentlessly attack and erode the common good and democracy itself. Irony turns into moral and political irresponsibility as Trump pushes social distancing while also indicating he will relax social distancing guidelines, against the advice of public health experts, in order to reboot the economy.

In a time of crisis, capitalism reveals itself as a disimagination machine whose underlying message is that the market provides the only forms of agency left. In this context, political, economic and social forces become the new workstations incessantly pushing the flight from any vestige of social, ethical and political responsibility, parading as the new common sense. Politics becomes a war machine running overtime to habituate people to the abyss of power while undermining any sense of dissent, resistance and social justice. Of course, this is the wider context of neoliberalism in which the coronavirus pandemic operates.

The financial crisis of 2008 made visible the plague of neoliberalism that has for over 40 years ravaged the public good and imposed misery and suffering upon the poor and others considered excess, waste or dangerous. With its merging of brutal austerity policies, financialization of the economy, the concentration of power in few hands, and the language of racial and social cleansing, neoliberalism has morphed into a form of fascist politics. The new political formation is characterized by a distinctive and all-embracing politics of disposability, a massive gutting of the social state, and support for pedagogical apparatuses of spectacularized violence, fearmongering and state terror.

All of this points to a disdain for any notion of the social that expands the meaning and possibilities of the common good, including the crucial sphere of public health, and the broader notion of what political philosopher Michael Sandel calls living together in a community, which requires solidarity and sacrifices to treat people with compassion, humanity and dignity. Central to this notion of the common good, argues scholar Shai Lavi, is a mass movement willing to bring together struggles for emancipation, economic justice and political community established on the basis of human equality.

The brutality of the pandemic of neoliberalism was evident in Trump's call on March 24, 2020, to "reopen the economy," by Easter. At that time, he wanted to move the US quickly toward ending cautious measures such as social distancing and letting the virus run its course. Trump's initial rationale for such an action restated a right-wing argument that "the cure is worse than the disease." After being told that 2.2 million people could die as a result of reopening the economy too early, Trump said the White House would keep in place its social distancing rules at least through April.

Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has stated that social distancing is the most important tool for containing the virus, yet Trump still refuses to issue a national stay-at-home order, especially at a time when seven states do not have one. At a press conference on April 4, Trump had stated that things will get a lot worse with many more deaths. Yet, soon afterward, he reiterated that he would like to see the country open again. Such actions display a shocking level of moral turpitude, making clear that Trump is more concerned about his reelection, commerce and the stock market than the ensuing death toll. As reporters from *The Washington Post* point out, "Trump has long viewed the stock market as a barometer for his own reelection hopes."

The not-so-hidden and terrifying message is that political opportunism, the drive for profits and the embrace of a cruel neoliberal ideology are being embraced by the Trump administration without apology. Trump appears to take pleasure in belittling experts and expertise and only follows the advice of public health officials in the midst of the most dire warnings. He treats the pandemic as a partisan battle, disparages governors desperately calling for supplies, and refuses to implement a coordinated national federal approach to addressing the crisis.

Without hard evidence or scientific proof, Trump endorses specific drugs as treatments, falsely claims the US is “close to a vaccine” and often relies on the advice of right-wing pundits who push conspiracy theories. When it comes to the choice of saving lives or the economy, Trump appears more concerned about the fate of Wall Street. What is more, his often confused and contradictory public remarks are filled with hyperbole and falsehoods and serve to mislead the American public while potentially causing unimaginable misery along with the possibility that “[t]ens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, maybe millions would get sick and die.” In this instance, sheer incompetence coupled with an aversion to experts and scientific evidence rise to the status of being a public danger and a catastrophic crisis.

In light of the ongoing spread of deaths, infections, and hospital shortages and public health catastrophe, experts have called for long-term planning, strategies, increased testing, and coordination between the federal government and the states. Many governors have complained that the government’s lack of a federal plan has created something akin to the “Wild West” – a “system beset by shortages, inefficiencies and disorder.”

The urgency of demands are amplified by the fact that the White House and leadership at multiple levels failed to provide any sense of urgency and immediacy in the early stage of the looming crisis. A report by *The Washington Post* stated that it took Trump 70 days from first being notified about the grave implications of the coronavirus to treat it “not as a distant threat or harmless flu strain well under control, but as a lethal force that had outflanked America’s defenses and was poised to kill tens of thousands of citizens.”

Of course, the many people who are and will die as a result of this reckless policy will be those traditionally viewed as disposable under the reign of neoliberalism. These include the elderly, the destitute, poor people of color, undocumented immigrants and people with disabilities – not to mention the front-line medical workers who lack the equipment they need to be safe as they treat the elderly, sick and dangerously ill.

There is more at work here than a hardened depravity of an ill-informed, petty celebrity politician who is causing havoc and needless human suffering in a time of crisis. Trump has always had a penchant for thoughtlessness and self-absorption, and takes delight in humiliating others. Citing Stephen Greenblatt in a different context, his words perfectly fit Trump for whom “There is no deep secret about his cynicism, cruelty and treacherousness, no glimpse of anything redeemable in him, and no reason to believe that he could ever govern the country effectively.”

Trump's crudeness, mendacity, disregard for science, and arbitrary rule had led him to disregard previous warnings from experts about the possibility of a looming pandemic. This willful form of ignorance and sheer effrontery was on display in his earlier refusal and colossal failure to mobilize the power of the federal government to provide widespread testing and masks while simultaneously ensuring that hospitals and medical staff had enough beds, masks, ventilators and other personal protective equipment for treating people infected with the virus.

Ed Pilkington and Tom McCarthy report in *The Guardian* that Trump not only downplayed the threat the virus posed after the World Health Organization confirmed that there were 282 confirmed cases in several countries on January 20, his actions were "[mired in chaos and confusion](#)." Rather than act quickly to avert a national health disaster, Trump let six weeks go by before his administration took seriously the severity of the threat and the need for mass testing. Pilkington quotes Jeremy Konyndyk, who led the US government's response in 2013-2017 to a number of international disasters. He stated: "We are witnessing in the United States one of the greatest failures of basic governance and basic leadership in modern times."

Trump has a penchant for turning politics into a form of theater and entertainment into a form of cruelty. In a shocking display of pettiness, he publicly told Vice President Mike Pence [not to answer the calls](#) of those governors who are not "appreciative" of his efforts to deal with the pandemic. This includes Washington Gov. Jay Inslee and Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, both of whom have made desperate pleas for critically needed supplies.

Moreover, as part of an ongoing effort to shift blame away from himself, Trump has attacked and attempted to humiliate reporters who asked him critical questions, and went so far as to claim that "hospitals had squandered or done worse with masks and were 'hoarding' ventilators, and that states were requesting equipment despite not needing them." He went so far as to suggest that [much-needed masks were "going out the back door."](#) It is hard to overlook this type of weaponized cruelty, especially given the moving pleas by medical professionals appearing on social media begging for masks, gowns, ventilators and other crucial protective and lifesaving equipment. There is more at work here than the politics of denial and solipsism on the part of Trump; there is also what Robert Jay Lifton calls "[malignant normality](#)," which I interpret as behavior that revels in violence and is fueled by what appears to be an immense pleasure in engaging in acts of cruelty. We have seen echoes of such cruelty in other eras with consequences that resulted in the death of millions, such as in the lynching of Blacks in the United States and acts of genocide in Nazi Germany.

Trump's obsession with wealth and ratings, and his limitless self-regard define him not only as an inept leader but also as a dangerous fraud. For instance, in the midst of the rapidly rising death toll in the United States, Trump [boasted at one of his press media appearances](#) "about the [high] ratings for the White House's coronavirus task force briefings." This is a form of political theater and pandemic pedagogy that weaponizes a rising death toll in the service of entertainment. Trump's incompetence bears tragic results in that hospitals are overcrowded, medical personnel lacking adequate protective equipment are dying, and the governors of



hardest-hit states such as New York appear to be in a running feud with Trump, who is more at ease in insulting governors who have criticized him for his lack of leadership than in supplying them with much-needed medical equipment.

## **Trump and his administration are not alone in pushing a necropolitics that celebrates capital over human needs, greed over compassion, exploitation over justice and fear over shared responsibilities.**

Trump and his administration are not alone in pushing a necropolitics that celebrates death over life, capital over human needs, greed over compassion, exploitation over justice and fear over shared responsibilities. How else to explain the chorus of Trump supporters in the media, corporate board rooms and the White House arguing for rationing life-saving care on the basis of age and disability in order to prevent imposing drastic strains on the nation's hospitals and the US economy? How else to explain that long before this pandemic crisis, as [Naomi Klein points out](#), the apostles of neoliberalism have attempted to underfund services, such as "state-funded health care, clean water, good public schools, safe workplaces, pensions, and other programs to care for the elderly and disadvantaged."

At the same time, a war has been waged by predatory capitalism on "the very idea of the public sphere and the public good." One consequence is that "the publicly owned bones of society – roads, bridges, levees and water systems – are going to slip into a state of such disrepair that it takes little to push them beyond the breaking point. When you massively cut taxes so that you don't have money to spend on much of anything besides the police and the military, this is what happens."

What is being revealed in the current pandemic crisis is the underlying plague of neoliberalism that has dominated the global economy for the last 40 years, though increasingly brandished as a badge of honor by fascist politicians, such as Trump, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and others. Ruling-class corruption is also readily visible in a bailout package which, as Rob Urie observes, amounts to "[Bailouts for the Rich, the Virus for the Rest of Us](#)." He writes:

“In an economy where the richest 1% takes all the gains while the poor and working class haven’t seen a raise in four decades, it is the rich who will reap the benefits while workers get sick and die. It is finance capitalism that is being bailed out when it should have suffocated under its own weight in 2009.”

What is being revealed in this looming pandemic is an unabashed resurgence of fascist politics with its history of grotesque inequalities, disposability, unadulterated cruelty and regressive policies. The latter neoliberal rudiments have a long legacy in the United States and have returned with revenge under the Trump administration. Neoliberal fascism signals a resurgence of a terror that bears an eerie echo to the racial cleansing and embrace of eugenics that marked the purification policies of the Hitler regime and made the concentration camp the endpoint of fascism. This was also policy designed to reboot the economy in a time of crisis.

We live at a time of multiple plagues that fuel the current coronavirus epidemic that is engulfing the globe inflicting economic misery, suffering and death as they move through societies with the speed of a deadly tornado. These include the plague of ecological destruction, the degradation of civic culture, the possibility of a nuclear war, and the normalization of a brutal culture of cruelty. Moreover, the plague of neoliberalism has waged a full-scale attack on the welfare state. In doing so, it has underfunded and weakened those institutions such as education and the public health sector. In addition, it has removed the vast majority of Americans from the power relations and modes of governance that would enable them to deal critically and intelligently with natural disasters, pandemics, and a slew of planetary crises which cannot be addressed by the market. In the midst of this pandemic, the poison of ruling-class power is at the center of the current political, ideological, and medical crisis. Frank Rich gets it right in [arguing](#):

“... the pandemic has revealed in particularly stark terms that the extreme economic inequalities unmasked by the 2008 economic collapse remain unaddressed. There’s a titanic dynamic playing out now in real time. Celebrities and the wealthy are first in line for the lifeboats of coronavirus tests. Rupert Murdoch and his family protect their own health while profiting from a news empire that downplayed and outright disputed the threat of coronavirus... As the virus spreads from its current epicenters through the country the grotesque discrepancy between the elites and the have-nots is going to make *Parasite* look as benign as an episode of *Modern Family*.”

The other plague, among many, is the rise of right-wing cultural apparatuses, such as *Fox News* and *Breitbart Media* in which truth is treated with scorn, science viewed as a hindrance and critical thought is maligned as “fake news.” This is a plague of willful ignorance and state-sanctioned civic illiteracy.

Under such circumstances, language at the highest levels of power and among powerful conservative cultural apparatuses operate in the service of denial, lies and violence. These media relentlessly push conspiracy theories such as the claim that the pandemic is a product of the “deep state” designed to prevent Trump from being reelected; a hoax created by the Democratic Party; or a virus that is no less dangerous than the common flu. They have also relentlessly insisted that all social problems are a matter of individual responsibility so as to depoliticize the public while making them indifferent to the neofascist claim that the government has no responsibility to care for its citizens or that society should not be organized around mutual respect, care, social rights and economic equality.

The current crisis is part of an age defined by a pedagogical catastrophe of indifference and a flight from any viable sense of moral responsibility. This is an age marked by a contempt for weakness, as well as rampant racism, the elevation of emotion over reason, the collapse of civic culture, and an obsession with wealth and self-interest. Under such circumstances, we are in the midst of not simply a political crisis, but also an educational crisis in which matters of power, governance, knowledge and a disdain for truth and evidence have wreaked havoc on the truth and endangered both millions of people and the planet itself. This is a politics fueled by a disimagination machine whose political and cultural workstations make the truth, justice, ethics, and most of all, bodies, disappear into the abyss of authoritarianism.

For the plague to end, it is crucial to address the ideologies of neoliberal fascism that prevent people from translating private troubles into broader systemic issues and to fight pedagogically in order to convince the public to move beyond the culture of privatization and atomization that propels a consumer society and reinforces a politics of single issues detached from broader considerations. This political crisis can only be grasped as a crisis of the social totality, one in which a range of “democratic ills form the specifically political strand of a general crisis that is engulfing our social order in its entirety.” We live in a moment in which it is becoming more credible to acknowledge that capitalism and democracy are not the same thing, and that the endpoint of capitalism is not only massive inequality and human suffering but a brutal machinery of death in which humanity is one step closer to the edge of extinction. This suggests that crises can have multiple outcomes resulting in a surge of authoritarianism and repression, on the one hand; or on the other, a resurgence of resistance movements at numerous levels willing to fight for a more just and equitable society, one that rejects what Brad Evans has called an age of multiple exclusions, mass terror, increasing expulsions and the hollowing out of the social state.

## Pulling Back the Curtain

The coronavirus pandemic has pulled back the curtain to reveal the power of a brutal neoliberalism – and its global financial markets – in all of its cruelty. This is a system that has not only eroded the democratic ideals of equality and popular sovereignty, but has also created a political and economic context in which the looming pandemic puts a severe strain on medical workers and hospitals that lack ventilators and other essential equipment to treat patients and



limit the number of deaths caused by the virus. This points to a moment in the current historical conjuncture in which the space between the passing of one period and the beginning of a new age offers the possibility for the social and political imagination to set in motion a global movement for radical democracy.

The current viral pandemic cannot be discussed outside of the crisis of politics and education. What is needed is a new vocabulary to comprehend the current pandemic crisis. Such a language must provide a sustained critique of neoliberal fascism with its discourses of exclusion, exploitation and racial purity. Such a discourse should also address the underlying causes of poverty, class domination, environmental destruction and a resurgent racism not as a call for reform, but as a project of radical reconstruction aimed at the creation of a new political and economic social order. In the words of Amartya Sen, we need “to think big about society.” In spite of the overwhelming nature of the current crisis, there is a need to think beyond being isolated, overwhelmed and powerless.

As we have seen in a number of countries, such as Hungary, Egypt, the Philippines, Thailand and Israel, the pandemic crisis creates extraordinary circumstances for restricting civil liberties, free speech and human rights while intensifying the possibilities of an emerging authoritarianism. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 crisis will test the limits of democracy worldwide.

At the same time, the magnitude of the crisis offers new possibilities in which people can begin to rethink what kind of society, world and future they want to inhabit. What we do not want to do is to go back to a system that equates democracy and capitalism. We must move beyond modifying the system, because the current crisis has deeper political and economic roots and demands a complete restructuring of society. David Harvey is right in [arguing that](#) “[t]he fundamental problems are actually so deep right now that there is no way that we are going to go anywhere without a very strong anti-capitalist movement.”

As the pandemic crisis recedes, we will have to choose between a society that addresses human needs or one in which a survival-of-the-fittest ethos becomes the only organizing principle of society. It is time for new visions, public transcripts and pedagogical narratives to emerge about the meaning of politics, solidarity, mass resistance and democracy itself.

We still have the opportunity to reimagine a world in which the future does not mimic the predatory neoliberal present. This should be a world that brings together the struggles for justice, emancipation and social equality. More urgent than ever is the need to struggle for a world that imagines and acts on the utopian promises of a just and democratic socialist society. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, matters of criticism, understanding and resistance are elevated into a matter of life or death. Resistance is a dire necessity. •

This article first published on the [Truthout.org](https://truthout.org) website.

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