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COVID-19: Coronavirus and Civilization

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Lockdowns reveal helplessness rather than power. While in a crisis some will take advantage of disaster, it makes no sense that dominant economic powers sought this crisis for some mysterious benefit to themselves, says Diana Johnstone.

By **Diana Johnstone**
in Paris

Special to Consortium News



As time goes on in close confinement, even people bound by love may start to find each other unbearable. On a larger scale, in this crazy mass confinement, people brought together by a common rejection of the lies of our criminal rulers may find themselves at each other's throats because of conflicting interpretations of why who is doing what.

This is happening on alternative media – especially in Germany. It seems that many anti-conformist political analysts believe that the Coronavirus crisis is a fake, perpetrated by media and governments for sinister reasons. They are actually calling for protest demonstrations against confinement.

I can't help seeing this as an obsession of certain dissidents to prove to themselves that they are good "anti-authoritarian" Germans who would never have bowed to Nazism. But is this assertion of individual freedom appropriate in the midst of a public health crisis?

The Limits of Power

Very clever people naturally want to find motives behind whatever happens. At one time such people might have been theologians, who explained the extremely mysterious ways in which God carries out

His cosmic plan. A flood, a plague, an earthquake? There had to be a reason for it, a motivation in human terms. The All-Powerful was punishing his sinful flock and reminding them of who was boss.

Today, quite a number of alternative media commentators are ready to believe in the absolute power not of God but of Mammon, of the powers of Wall Street and its partners in politics, the media and the military. In this view, nothing major happens that hasn't been planned by earthly powers for their own selfish interest.

Mammon is wrecking the economy so a few oligarchs will own everything. Or else Mammon created the hoax Coronavirus 19 in order to lock us all up and deprive us of what little is left of our freedom. Or finally Mammon is using a virus in order to have a pretext to vaccinate us all with secret substances and turn us all into zombies.



Is this credible? In one sense, it is. We know that Mammon is unscrupulous, morally capable of all crimes. But things *do* happen that Mammon did not plan, such as earthquakes, floods and plagues. Dislike of our ruling class combined with dislike of being locked up leads to the equation: *They* are simply using this (fake) crisis in order to lock us up!

But what for? To whom is there any advantage in locking down the population? For the pleasure of telling themselves, “Aha, we’ve got them where we want them, all stuck at home!” Is this intended to suppress popular revolt? What popular revolt? Why repress people who aren’t doing anything that needs to be repressed?

What is the use of locking up a population – and I think especially of the United States – that is disunited, disorganized, profoundly confused by generations of ideological indoctrination telling them that their country is “the best” in every way, and thus unable to formulate coherent demands on a system that exploits them ruthlessly? Do you need to lock up your faithful Labrador so he won’t bite you?

If anything, the trauma of this situation might actually awaken a somnolent population to the vital need for basic transformation of society. The notion that this lockdown threatens to be permanent is

totally unrealistic, against all evidence from previous lockdowns. On the contrary, prolonged confinement is most likely to lead to explosions. The question is, can these explosions be constructive.



On a wall in Paris: "You will not confine our anger."

Blinded by Hubris

Rather than deploring the all-powerful nature of Mammon, it would be more constructive to look for the flaws in his armor, for his weaknesses, for the ways he can be massively discredited, denounced and defeated.

Mammon is blinded by its own hubris, often stupid, incompetent, dumbed down by getting away with so much so easily. Take a look at Mike Pompeo or Mike Pence – are these all-powerful geniuses? No, they are semi-morons who have been able to crawl up a corrupt system contemptuous of truth, virtue or intelligence – like the rest of the gangsters in power in a system devoid of any ethical or intellectual standards.

The power of creatures like that is merely the reflection of the abdication of social responsibility by whole populations whose disinterest in politics has allowed the scum to rise to the top.

The lockdown decreed by our Western governments reveals helplessness rather than power. They did not rush to lock us down. The lockdown is disastrous for the economy which is their prime concern.

They hesitated and did so only when they had to do something and were ill-equipped to do anything else. They saw that China had done so with good results. But smart Asian governments did even more, deploying masks, tests and treatments Western governments did not possess.

Western governments called for confinement when experts explained the exponential curves to them. They didn't know what else to do. There is at least enough sense of social responsibility left in our societies to oblige governments to take the basic, classic quarantine methods usual during pandemics.

Of course, in every crisis some are well placed to take advantage of disaster. The vultures didn't cause the cattle to die so they could eat the carrion. But they will gobble it up when it's there. Wall Street financial powers could quickly get Congresspeople to vote laws to bail them out while small businesses sink and working people are plunged into despair.

But in the long run, without the small businesses, without the workers now being deprived of income to spend, without normal economic activity, Wall Street itself will have no one to bleed, nothing to exploit. It makes absolutely no sense to believe that dominant economic powers sought this ruinous crisis for some mysterious benefit to themselves.

In the European Union, creditor countries like Germany and the Netherlands refuse to let the European Central Bank issue "Coronabonds" to finance economic recovery of hard-hit countries like Italy and Spain. That means those countries will have to borrow from the private financial system, at high interest rates leading to bankruptcy.

That sounds like a boon to international finance, which, however, will find itself holding an infinite amount of unpayable debt. And the European Union may split apart as a result – not in the interests of any of these powerful masters of Mammon.

Public Health Is Not an Individual Choice

In the West, "human rights", are conceived in terms of the "rights" of the individual, or of a minority, to go against what we call "the regime" when speaking of countries other than our own. The United States uses the absolute value of "human rights" as a pretext to impose its will through sanctions and bombing on nations that reject its global domination. The defiance of authority is celebrated as resistance, without necessarily examining the details.

However, virtually all key aspects of any civilized society go contrary to the absolutism of individual rights. Every civilized society has some sort of legal system, some basic rules that everyone is expected to follow. Most civilized societies have a public education and (except for the United States) a public health insurance system designed to benefit the whole population. These elements of civilization include constraints on individual freedom.

The benefits to each individual of living in a civilized society make these constraints acceptable to just about everybody. The health of the individual depends on the health of the community, which is why everyone in most Western countries accepts a single payer health insurance system. The only

exception is the United States, where the egocentricities of Ayn Rand are widely read as serious thought.



Mammon and His Slave. (Wikimedia Commons)

The arrival of a plague or an epidemic suddenly calls for totally abnormal, extremely unpleasant constraints, such as quarantines. This is a case where the freedom of the individual is sacrificed for the general good: the individual is confined not merely for his own good but for the good of his community and indeed of all humanity.

The paradox of our highly technological societies is that the greater the impossibility of the general public (all of us) to understand crucial functions and issues, the more we depend on experts and authorities, and the more we distrust those experts and authorities and suspect them of using their position to advance secret agendas. There is thus a sort of built-in paranoia in our societies where the power of invisible forces becomes constantly more inscrutable.

This paradox operates forcefully on issues of medicine and public health, all the more in that the authorities themselves are frequently divided in their opinions. In Germany especially, where the crisis has been relatively mild, one can hear a doctor claiming that fear of Covid-19 is artificially created and that nature should be allowed to take its course, since healthy people will be spared and the few who die would have died anyway.

Stay Home and Take a Pill

This opinion is readily accepted by those who suspect every government measure of being an arbitrary assault on personal liberties. But it is hardly a majority opinion in the world medical profession.

Personally, I've been there. I've seen this virus in action. This is not simply a bad cold, or a seasonal flu. Yes, there are light cases, but there are fatal ones as well. It does not just kill off superfluous elderly people that some commentators seem satisfied to get rid of.

Still, it is quite reasonable to question the usefulness of confinement alone. Here in France, authorities turned to confinement with some delay, only because the illness was spreading and they had nothing else to do about it.

There were no masks; a factory in Brittany that provided the domestic market with masks and other medical equipment had been bought up a while back by Honeywell and closed down. This is an aspect of the deindustrialization of France, based on the assumption that we in the West can live from our brains, our ideas, our startups, while actual *things* are made for low wages in poor countries.

So there were no masks and no immediate capacity to make them. There was also a shortage of ventilators, even of hospital beds – in fact there was no ability to deal with the epidemic other than to tell people to stay at home and prescribe paracetamol.

Surely there are better ways to deal with it, and one inevitable explosion after confinement will be an outpouring of criticism of the way the government has handled the crisis and demands for drastic improvements in the public health system.

The argument that “oh well, even more people die of ordinary flu, or cancer, or something else” is not valid because this illness comes *in addition to* all the others that are anticipated: it pushes already largely saturated health facilities over the top, into collapse.

In Italy, Covid-19 has killed off a hundred medical doctors in just over a month. They would not have “died anyway, of something else” without the epidemic.

In France, in normal times, dial the emergency service SAMU 15 and usually a team is there within minutes. During the Covid-19 crisis, you could dial 15 and wait an hour or more for an answer, whatever your health crisis might be, and help might never come.

The main purpose of the quarantine is to reduce the pressure on overburdened systems. Without the confinement, the overload would have been even worse. This crisis is exposing the inadequacy of existing facilities and the crucial need for major programs to strengthen public health systems.

Irrational Fear of Vaccination

Mass vaccination has always been the surest way to wipe out deadly diseases. It is also an instance where individual freedoms need be sacrificed to the general good. It is deeply disturbing that many intelligent people are more afraid of the vaccine that may be developed to combat this virus than they are of the virus itself.



Jonas Salk's vaccine wiped out polio in the United States, and he didn't patent it. (Wikimedia Commons)

One objection is that profit-oriented Big Pharma takes advantage of every illness to make money. But the answer is not to reject pharmaceuticals. The main problem with Big Pharma is unleashed neoliberal capitalism in the United States, combined with the absence of a government-run single payer health insurance, which allows pharmaceutical companies to charge outrageous prices for their products, as well as to focus on production of the most profitable rather than the most generally useful medication.

The answer to this is not to give up medication but to demand greater public supervision and price control.

Finally, the pharmaceutical industry should be considered a public utility rather than a business and nationalized so that revenue can be used to finance research rather than to pay

dividends to Big Finance.

The prospects are different from one country to another. Achieving social control in the United States looks practically impossible because of the overwhelming belief that “free enterprise” is the only way to do things. In France, which has positive experience of a mixed economy, it could be politically possible to nationalize pharmaceutical companies – if France were not under the domination of the European Union and, less directly, the United States, which is always prepared to do what it can to block socialist measures anywhere in the world.

No Longer the Center

But the West is no longer the center of the world. The Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated the rising capabilities and more human attitudes of East Asia. There will be vaccines developed in China, in Russia, in other countries outside the NATO sphere. Their achievements will break the monopoly of Western “Big Pharma.”

In Europe, and notably in France, Italy and Spain, the total disillusion with the European Union is strengthening the trend toward return of national sovereignty. And sovereign nations, able to respond to their people's demands can be able to break away from the dictates of Big Finance in order to renew democracy in more appropriate forms.

In France, labor unions and progressives are demanding better protection of the population, starting with all those essential service workers, in hospitals and grocery stores, bus drivers, deliverymen, all

those who are increasingly appreciated by their confined compatriots and who need to reap the benefits of their public service.



Yellow Vests protest, March 7, 2020 in Paris before lockdown. (Joe Lauria)

Perhaps because of the long tradition of social struggle in France, including the Yellow Vest movement which is not dead but only on hold, one can be sure that after confinement there will be an explosion of demands to abandon the fantasies of neoliberal globalism and build a system where the welfare of the people comes first.

In contrast, in the context of the corona virus crisis in Germany, someone supposedly “on the left” has initiated a petition calling on persons over 75 to declare that if they are sick, they renounce medical treatment, in order to give preference to younger people. This is a new twist of identity politics, of classifying people by groups, and a step toward revival of the worst eugenics of Nazism.

Which is civilized and which is barbaric: insisting on a system that gives equal care to all, or deciding that the elderly be sacrificed for the others? What is this but a suggestion to resort to human sacrifice to please Mammon?

For Civilization

Sounding the alarm about how horrible our ruling class is gets us nowhere unless we have an idea of a real alternative – not just “resisting” but proposing and fighting for something different and better.

Let’s start with a most concrete practical issue and work from there: vaccination. Like other aspects of public health, this is an issue of collective welfare rather than individual rights. It is an element not of “resistance to oppression” but of the construction of civilization.

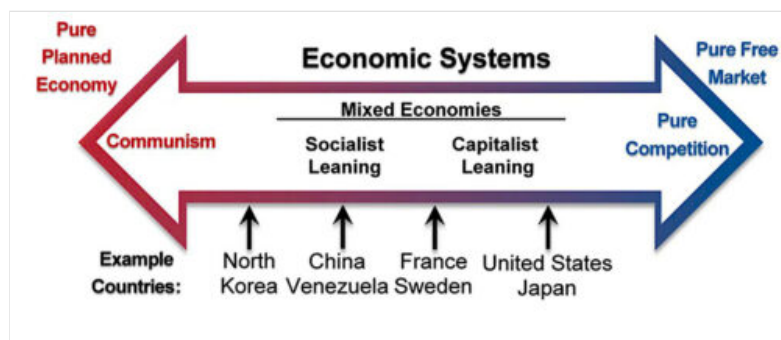
The coronavirus has not illustrated the need to get rid of vaccines – on grounds that “they” want to use them against us – but on the contrary, of the need to make sure that vaccines are developed under proper supervision for the public welfare and not as a means for Big Pharma to make bigger dividends for BlackRock.

So the problem with vaccines is not vaccination but American capitalism that has gotten completely out of hand. Once upon time, the Food and Drug Administration was a reliable monitor of pharmaceutical innovations. In recent decades, such control agencies have increasingly been taken over by the companies they are supposed to control and transformed into rubber stamps.

Alarms are also raised about the alleged role of billionaires like Bill Gates whose philanthropic institutions are suspected of manipulating vaccines for hidden nefarious purposes.

The remedy is not to flee medication and vaccination, but to dismantle these overgrown dictatorial powers and build a society that can properly be called civilized because it is balanced between collective and individual welfare. Of course, to say what should be done is very far from knowing how to do it. But without an idea of what should be done, there will not even be any effort to figure out how.

A Mixed Economy



In the United States, it would be necessary to accept the fact that certain essential activities must be considered *public services*. This requires a wave of reforms equivalent to a revolution, not as prescribed by Marxist revolutionaries to situations that no longer exist. Pharmaceuticals and hospitals are public

services and must be socially controlled. Internet has become a public service.

How should that be treated? Innovators who used free market mechanisms to gain virtual monopoly control of their sector should be invited to choose which of their mansions to retain as residence as they are retired to the role of advisor, while their disproportionate accumulated earnings should become part of the public treasury.

What I am advocating is not a “communist revolution,” certainly not for the United States. I am advocating a mixed economy, which can take various forms, from France in the 1960s to China today. The commanding heights of the economy should be under social control, to ensure that major investment has social purpose.

The forms of this control can vary. In the United States, the first task of the commanding heights should be to shift investment away from insanely wasteful military production to domestic infrastructure and measures to integrate all citizens into a genuinely civilized society. Such a mixed

economy creates a favorable environment for the proliferation of small independent enterprises free to innovate.

Free from fear of illness and homelessness allows more real freedom than the polarized lottery that passes for capitalism in the United States today. Such a project of civilization should win support from decent and lucid people in all classes of society.

I am perfectly aware that the United States today is ideologically light years away from such a sensible project. But developments are underway in other countries to meet the threat of Big Pharma and meddling American billionaires. The word that sums up these developments is “multipolarization.”

This is the slogan launched by Vladimir Putin in 2007. It drove Western champions of unipolar globalization into a frenzy from which they are far from having recovered – witness the insanely provocative “Defender Europe 20” military games practicing nuclear war right up to the Russian border, stalled temporarily by Covid-19.

The United States and its European satellites are in effect waging war against the Free World – that is, countries free of U.S. domination, in order to perpetuate an imaginary global regime along the lines of neoliberalism: rule of finance approved by manipulated elections.

Nevertheless, unipolar globalization is in the process of disintegration. All the slander against China cannot change the facts. While U.S. propagandists blast their rising rival, most of the world sees that China handled the epidemic with more professional know-how than the West. The United States control of international agencies is being threatened by growing Chinese influence – in particular, the World Health Organization.

This is the greatest threat to Big Pharma: a multipolar world. Bill Gates and U.S. pharmaceutical companies will have no monopoly of vaccine development to combat Covid-19. A dramatic shift from neoliberal globalization to multipolar national sovereignty will restore genuine competition – not only in production of vaccines but in social organization.

Let Western countries look to their own problems and find solutions. Let other countries develop according to models that suit their history, philosophy and popular demands. It is obvious that the vaunted U.S. “free market democracy” is not a model that should be imposed on every country on earth, nor even on the United States itself.

Mixed economies can take various forms. Some could evolve toward something that could be called socialism, others not. Let every small country be as independent as Iceland. Let the world explore different paths. Let a hundred flowers bloom!

Diana Johnstone’s latest book is *Circle in the Darkness; Memoirs of a World Watcher*, Clarity Press, 2020.

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