

The Pandemic Paroxysm: Meltdown, Hope and Economy

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ABSTRACT

The curse of a virus has transformed the nature and purpose of our main achievements: Global Economy; Digital Revolution; and the Enlightenment. Modernity, civility and hubris are challenged by the mysterious ubiquity of invisibly incandescent and monstrously invincible microbes. The coexistence of two monstrous viruses — communal violence and COVID-19 — is an unmitigated catastrophe which breeds inequality, “resentment”, and injustice. Not many apocalyptic events have brought such a paradigm shift as this staggering impact of a pandemic on the life and death of peoples.

Keywords: Coronavirus pandemic; global economy; inclusive equality; new Leviathan; paradigm paradox, COVID-19.

“The stark choices between life, death and economy” (*The Economist*, April 4-10, 2020) are reminders of limits of ingenuity, science and global economy. Modes of economy are products of politics that govern its culture, its exclusions and inclusions, the hierarchized structure of inequality. This brief essay is written in awe with humility. Aside from angst and despair, fear of a *New Leviathan* is unmistakably recognized with ominous implications for economy and human wellbeing.

Takeaways from history suggest that cataclysmic disasters have been followed by governing elites’ control and manipulations. Wars have usually ended with greater centralized power over the lives and human conditions of the governed. A glaring Enlightenment-paradox is inescapable. Rise of ‘deep state’, domestic violence, ethnic intolerance, communal hatred, and scarcity amid abundance—all on account of lockdown during a monstrous global misfortune.

Adewale Maja-Pearce writes in *London Review of Books*:

“Telling the majority poor to stay indoors may prove impossible. As more than one person in Bwari has told me,

Nigeria is not ‘London or America’. The point about a ‘developing’ country is that the majority poor depend on their daily wages to feed their families. It is hunger that people here fear, not a virus they can’t even see.” (2020)

We are going through a hideously paradoxical time in the wake of Coronavirus pandemic. Social distancing in a globalized economy is a both a paradox and irony. It looks like a curse of nature or a surrealist phenomenal delusion. It may also be viewed as a man-made disaster subconsciously directed toward self-destruction. The reality is: A pandemic is a global challenge, threat against humanity and a staggering failure of both science and politics. It’s a rebuke to hubris manifested by China’s phenomenal material success, European arrogance, Asian ambience, and American imperial delusions.

A Journey from Panopticon to “Coronopticon”

Michel Foucault envisioned modern society as a panopticon guarded by ‘Big Brother’. Digital revolution has morphed into a more hideous reality. During a crisis, centralized control demolishes individual freedoms. In case of a pandemic like COVID-19, economy, science and the human condition will change for ever. *The Economist* raises a pertinent question: “Surveillance through apps and data networks can do much to keep COVID-19 at bay, but at what cost? (March 28-April 3, 2020:15-18). As

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I write this piece 7.6 million people registered for unemployment benefits; more than 10 million Americans lost daily wages. And we are far from flattening the bell curve.

The Economist has summarized the economic consequences of this pandemic:

“This week’s cover reports on the shock ripping through the business world. With countries in lockdown accounting for over 50% of global GDP, the collapse in commercial activity is far more severe than in previous recessions. Numerous indicators suggest extreme stress. Global oil demand has dropped by up to a third; the volume of new cars and parts shipped on America’s railways has dropped by 70%. Many firms have only enough inventories and cash to survive for three to six months. The exit path for those that survive will be precarious, with uneasy consumers, an efficiency-sapping stop-start rhythm, and tricky new health protocols. In the long run companies will have to master a new environment. The crisis and the response to it are accelerating three trends: an energizing adoption of new technologies, an inevitable retreat from freewheeling global supply chains and a worrying rise in well-connected oligopolies².

“Wall Street had its worst month since 2008, with the S&P 500 falling 12.5 percent in March as the coronavirus decimated the global economy” (*NYTimes.com*; March 31, 2020). Inequality, corruption and authoritarianism usually follow a mega-crisis. Benjamin Wallace-Wells, *The New Yorker*, reports that inequality has intensified in Detroit during this *coronacrisis*.³ *The New York Times* reports: “President Trump effectively ousted the head of a watchdog panel overseeing how his administration spends trillions in coronavirus relief funds.”⁴ In light of Trumpian economics, it’s not hard to imagine how corporate welfare and nepotism would benefit at the expense of those who really deserve immediate financial help. Arundhati Roy eloquently narrates a dismal reality:

“The economic crisis is here. The political crisis is ongoing. The mainstream media has incorporated the Covid story into its 24/7 toxic anti-Muslim campaign. An organization called the Tablighi Jamaat, which held a meeting in Delhi before the lockdown was announced, has turned out to be a “super spreader”. That is being used to stigmatize and demonize Muslims. The overall tone suggests that

Muslims invented the virus and have deliberately spread it as a form of jihad.”⁵

“The pandemic is a portal,” Roy maintains:

“As an appalled world watched, India revealed herself in all her shame — her brutal, structural, social and economic inequality, her callous indifference to suffering. The lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things. As shops, restaurants, factories and the construction industry shut down, as the wealthy and the middle classes enclosed themselves in gated colonies, our towns and megacities began to extrude their working-class citizens — their migrant workers — like so much unwanted accrual.”

The horrors of this spectacle cannot be assessed if one does not know the banality of communal violence and intolerance in a populist democracy. Delhi may not be Cabo Delgado, but coexistence of two deadly viruses, communalism and COVID-19, is a frightening reality that imperils life and economy in the world’s largest democracy. Ethnic and racial minorities are more vulnerable during economic stress.

Economies don’t grow up in a social vacuum. There are permanent ‘social distances’ in-built in the engines of GDP and growth. People in power look for belief systems that legitimize their illegitimate expectation. *Hindutva*, for example, in India.

Search for ideology is a primordial attempt to design the society we create. Validation of preconceived notions requires persuasive, aggressive and often violent instruments of reinforcements. From archaic fiefdoms to post-revolutionary movements, ideological predilections have played havoc with humanity in the name of change, the only constant in nature. The search for a utopia continues while dystopian episodes keep on reminding us the futility of illusions of self-glorification. Karl Mannheim would turn in his grave at the present state of both ‘ideology’ and ‘utopia’.

COVID-19 is a threatening challenge to much of hubristic planning. US has 4 percent of world’s population but she has 30% virus victims. Politics of pandemics is a dangerous epoch beyond epidemiological-virologic implications. Limits of science invoke institutional narcissism and godly delusions. The barriers between facts and fiction breakdown. Welcome to a dystopian reality and its surrealism. Patricia Cohen and Tiffney Hsu report that “Jobless claims

²<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/04/08/the-coronavirus-crisis-will-change-the-world-of-commerce> (Accessed April 9, 2020)

³https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-coronavirus-and-inequality-meet-in-detroit?utm_source=nl&utm_brand=tny&utm_mail_ing= (Retrieved April 7, 2020)

⁴<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=wm&ogbl#inbox/FMfcgwxHMLjQmNbkpSVrrPcpvchKkvbg> (Retrieved, April 7, 2020)

⁵https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca?fbclid=IwAR30hP_FH3SOZaC9i9oXfmXxfS4_3B92fnCQofmshLVEfif-VwH4EZ3wGY (Retrieved April 10, 2020)

now exceed 16 million as shutdowns from the coronavirus pandemic widen and problems with getting benefits persist.” (NYT, April 10, 2020). More than 10,000 people have died worldwide. More than 200,000 people died in the US alone. The economic impact of this horrendous tragedy is incalculable.

A temple of reason must be founded on the ruins of a cult and dogma. Ideology serves as a euphemism to sustain *a priori* assumptions about beliefs, percepts and interests that must be maintained and perpetuated. From Marx to Modi, leaders of different hues and stripes have weaponized their beliefs of oppression, on rational and irrational bases, for vested interests in the name of redemption, revolt and revolution. Both *Manusmriti* and Genesis may have to be rewritten if a civil society based on inclusive equality must be established.

In his latest book *Capital and Ideology* (2020), renowned French economist Thomas Piketty, the famed author of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), explains how a dominant class of people invented conceptual tools of governance — aka ideology — to exploit powerless people. The Hindu ‘caste system’ is a perfect framework of institutionalized oppression beyond redemption. Both capitalism and totalitarian socialism are fraught with the evils of caste that predetermines the economic structure. Inclusive equality is the cornerstone of social justice. But there is something universally unjust and man-made about inequality. Modern capitalism is a product of such a perverse relationship between haves and have-nots. Rich get richer and the poor become poorer. This is a pernicious “neo-proprietarian” (Piketty, 2020) ideology which incubates inequality and perpetuates injustice. Globalization didn’t fail us; humans failed humanity. “The West’s obsession with home ownership undermines growth, fairness, and public faith in capitalism” (*The Economist*, January 18-24: 2020:9).

“[E]conomics developed an account of human behavior as far from Utilitarian morality as it is possible to get. Economic man is utterly selfish and infinitely greedy, caring about nobody but himself. He becomes the bedrock of the theory of human behavior,” writes Paul Collier, a noted development economist (2018: 10; emphasis mine).

Surveillance Capitalism heralds a new age of power that shall manipulate and constrain human freedom. Put simply, “rigged economy” is more than a game of profit-making. Shoshana Zubof (2020) shows:

“We still have the power to decide what kind of world we want to live in, and what we decide now will shape

the rest of the century. Our choices: allow technology to enrich the few and impoverish the many or harness it and distribute its benefits. The Age of Surveillance Capitalism is a deeply reasoned examination of the threat of unprecedented power free from democratic oversight. As it explores this new capitalism’s impact on society, politics, business, and technology, it exposes the struggles that will decide the next chapter of capitalism and the meaning of information civilization. Most critically, it shows how we can protect ourselves and our communities and ensure we are the masters of the digital rather than its slaves.”

Freedom and liberty are not analogous as generally thought. I explored ‘freedom’ and ‘unfreedom’ in a dialectical framework nearly 35 years ago (Mohan 1985; 1986). In *Development and Freedom*, Amartya Sen follows the same logic: “The removal of substantial unfreedom,” he argues, “is constitutive of development” (1999:xii). Development is “seen as a process of expanding substantive freedoms that people have” (1999: 297). Individual freedom as a “social commitment” (1999: xii) looks benign but annihilation of the forces of oppression entails heavy burden on “individual agency”.

The idea of “Social Choice” may earn a Nobel to economist Sen⁶ but it does not help the poor *Everyman* to achieve justice in an unjust, unequal world. Bernard Sanders’ egalitarian campaign may not have succeeded. His democratic socialism, however, has become a theme of mainstream discourse. That’s not a mean achievement for a quiet revolutionary.

Absence of counterprojects opens vistas of historical alternatives which might define the future of capitalism and socialism. A \$2-trillion-dollar disaster relief may not mitigate the American problem, but it redeems human endeavors for collective good. Even Leviathan, the ‘big government’, does not look that evil now.⁷

Competing Interest Statement

The author has read and approved the manuscript and takes full responsibility for its contents. The author declares that no competing interest exists.

⁶See Emmanuelle Bénicourt’s critique, “Against Amartya Sen”. https://www.cairn-int.info/abstract-E_LECO_023_0072--against-amartya-sen.htm (Retrieved, March 30, 2020)

⁷A detailed narrative of the issues involved in this article is contained in my forthcoming book *Social Policy on the Cusp* with Guy Bäckman (NY: Nova, 2020; due out shortly). This article is a work in progress.

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Biographical Statement of Author

Brij Mohan, Professor and Dean Emeritus, is an internationally renowned intellectual with expertise in social philosophy, social welfare, public policy and international social development. Dr. Brij Mohan is a protégé of the late Professor Saiyid Zafar Hasan who in his own right may be called a legendary pioneer.



Dr. Mohan is a prolific intellectual whose volumes of writings have nearly launched an international movement to “think critically and act globally.” In a digitally revolutionized world, neither “social” nor “work” will remain the same.

He has earned numerous honors and awards including a D. Litt. from M.K. Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith and the Life-Time Achievement Award from National Association of Professional Social Workers in India.

Since 1975, Dr. Brij has been teaching, speaking, and publishing in the United States where modern social work evolved as profession.

He is author of 23 books and over 400 articles, papers, and reviews. His most recent books include: *Development, Poverty of Culture and Social Policy* (Palgrave, 2011), *Climate, Economy and Justice* (Palgrave, 2015), *The Future of Social Work* (Sage, 2018) and *Social Policy on the Cusp* (Nova, 2020).

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