

## Colors of Skin and COVID-19: Plateaus of Post-Enlightenment

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### ABSTRACT

The most prescient takeaway in the wake of this Covid 19 catastrophe is: A pandemic is a global catastrophe without simplistic explanations. This article seeks to unravel the anatomy of a persistent problem: Systemic racism and inequality breed oppressive human conditions which manifest institutional meltdown—nationally and internationally—that calls for Enlightenment Two. A post-enlightenment argument is made to re-think *Social Contract* and its consequential dissolution owing to persistently hierarchized inequality and injustice.

**Keywords:** Systemic inequality; racism; Covid 19; institutional meltdown; and post-enlightenment challenges.

### Postulates and Problems

From John Maynard Keynes to Milton Friedman, 1970 to 1990, fiscal regulatory systems federally enjoyed relative independence until the coronavirus changed this paradigm. The clubby rules of macroeconomics have changed. The holy grails of sciences—economics, sociology, and political science included—have faltered. The perils and paradoxes of this new paradigm shift is the focus of this essay. To validate certain assumptions, two analytical units—the United States of America and India—have been discussed in terms of basic issues that relate to racism and inequality in the world’s two most important democracies. Despite many differences, there is uncanny situational similarity between the two. It partakes of special significance in the post-pandemic phase for two main reasons: First, the two great democracies under Trump’s and Modi’s leadership embody the upsurge of nationalist-populist movement which is unprecedented. Second, all democracies are far more transparent than totalitarian countries where censorship muffles civil liberties. Social media and free press unravel events even before they occur as against those which conceal and distort even catastrophic events at the expense of public interest.

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A comparative-formulative narrative underscored by primary and secondary evidence validates a possible theory of *Enlightenment Two* as a precondition to reclaiming civil society.

### From “Black Plague” to “Corona Jihad”

“I began studying the 19th century in a bid to understand the origins of the violent racism that had characterized life (for me) on a housing estate, not for the apolitical aesthetic (as if there were there such a thing) which I’m told from time to time by non-Black scholars should underpin the study of literature. I was drawn, too, to Emily Brontë’s ‘H. and I are going to rebel’ – a rebellion across class, race, and gender allegiances. Until we appeal to the intellect and imagination of children of colour, with histories that speak to their lived realities, we are unlikely to find them as our students or colleagues.”

Angelique Richardson<sup>2</sup>

As a ‘dark-skinned,’ almost “gypsy”, whose parents were non-fictional (real) “Indians”, I can fully identify with

<sup>2</sup>“H. and I are going to rebel”

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=wm&ogbl#inbox/WhctKJVzZ-KtLlDsVdsQlqVHpGCBtzMnmbhVtTRfXgNKgMQcRbHbqMHZqtKRm-kvsPRdpZQgG> (London Review of Books, August 2, 2020)

Bronte's Heathcliff. There is a universal quality in pain and suffering due to banality of evil exclusions. When cataclysmic events occur, their colors change but ethos and essence remain unchanged.

Pandemics are global matters. Covid-19 has morphed the existing paradigms that explained, regulated, and sustained human existence. It has failed science, medicine, governance, and creeds which promoted civility. Theoretically, humanity hangs on a cliff, notwithstanding trillions of dollars invested to keep us alive. Both macroeconomics and micro-dynamics of social intercourse have been proven wrong. While racism and its variants have deeper historical-cultural roots in every society, the prevalence and magnitude of epidemics and pandemics are attributed to epidemiological, virological and related factors which tend to play out independent of human role. However, their hideous interdependence cannot be ignored.

As Coronavirus broke out, violence and social unrest threatened the basic structure, social fabric around our social order. The ugly head of racism was not confined to the US. In Nizamuddin, Delhi, where a multitude of Muslims were hiding, people avenged the *Corona Jihadis* with unmitigated mayhem. The massive violence led to protests signifying Black Lives Matter (BLM). The hideous interface between a pandemic, racism and inequality cannot be overlooked to reconfigure certain principles for enduring civility.

"It is always dangerous to apply selective lessons from biology to politics. And it is just as bad an idea to apply inapt political principles to biology," *Nathan Gardels, Noema Editor-in-Chief*, concludes:

"The anti-maskers of the West also dismiss this quality of interdependence by dogmatically insisting on the political ideal of personal liberty in the face of a contagious pandemic that recognizes no such corporeal boundaries. "Give me liberty or give me COVID" seems to be the misguided rallying cry of society's most irresponsible members"<sup>3</sup>

The crux of post-Enlightenment lies here. The two world wars followed by India's balkanization, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan speak volumes of imperial hubris and violent ideological fissures. Hitler, Stalin, and Mao used those trappings to achieve their utopias which did

not exist. ***Racism, like the caste system, is a systemic inequality institutionalized by hegemonic myths of legitimized ideologies of hierarchized superiority.***

In a special issue on 'The new ideology of race,' *The Economist* alerts everyone especially campus academics: "A set of illiberal ideas about how to tackle American racism will only hinder progress," (July 11–17, 2020: 7). Three aspects of this problem are identified: i) continued blight of African-American even after the end of slavery; ii) the political right's use of race as a divisive political tool; and iii), lastly, academia's rejection of the "liberal notion of progress." Despite elements of truth, *The Economist* views this approach is flawed:

"It is a worldview where everything and everyone is seen through the prism of ideology—who is published, who gets jobs, who can say what to whom; one in which in-groups obsess over orthodoxy in education, culture and heritage; one that enforces absolute equality of outcome, policy by policy, paragraph by paragraph, if society is to count as just" (July 11–17, 2020: 7).

Though academia has a basis for this ideological radicalism, it only serves as a euphemism to perpetuate intra-campus in-groups' hegemonic lust for power and material benefits in a rather capricious and racist fashion. *White Privilege*, and its offspring subsumed under 'white trash' inclusive of phony sense of victimhood of the 'white women', reign the hallowed corridors of empty ideals. Cady Lang succinctly writes:

"The 'Keren' meme is a reminder of the troubling legacy of white women weaponizing their victimhood." (*Time*, July 20–27, 2020: 30)

Fragility of *white women* has been at the center of "Black Plague" portraying African-American males as sexual predators justifying their misfortunes including Jim Crow laws and lynchings. Lang sums up:

"The historical narrative of white women's victimhood goes back to myths constructed during the era of American slavery. Enslaved black men were posited as sexual threats to white women, the wives of the slave owners, when in reality, slave masters were the ones raping enslaved girls and women. The narrative perpetuated the idea that white women, who represented the good and moral in American society, needed to be protected at all costs, thus justifying racial violence toward Black men or anyone who posed a threat to their power. It was the overarching theme of *The Birth of a Nation...* the inspiration for the rebirth of the KKK." (Lang, 2020: 31)

<sup>3</sup><https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=wm&ogbl#inbox/WhctKJVzZ-KlpfbSRKnWRLKGTxpPKJPbzqGPggQMGrXBttjWLBmJpFccpBzSvSBsLWG-ZQwtv> (August 1, 2020)

America is changing but not that well. The white-robed KKK criminals now sport pinstripe suits with red ties. Rewind some two decades ago: In my own school of Social Work, there were three full professors—one Asian Indian, the others two, a native American and a Jew—who were demonized as “the axis of evil” by the second floor occupants, mostly white females who are now on the top of ladder as full professors. Since I had the temerity of voting against the promotion and tenure of at least three of them, I became a target of their vile vindictiveness. I have been retired for almost a decade, yet this bunch remains restless to hurt me. Two years ago, I underscored a column written by George Wills in *The Advocate* by way of a Letter to the editor. A pathetic alliance of avengers manipulated faculty resolution to get my *Dean Emeritus* title revoked, unsuccessfully. This fiendish hatred of the non-white man who is perceived as a threat to the *White Privilege*, is not too uncommon. One cannot fight against this wicked phenomenon. I once tried to get some legal recourse, but my own lawyer sold me out.

### A footnote to history

Workplace toxicity can be lethal. A snapshot from the recent past: the scars have replaced wounds, but the pain persists. I was hospitalized in 2012 for a major abdominal surgery. About 24 hours after a painful procedure, I received a call from my erstwhile acting dean to see her in the office. When I asked her how I could help, she minced no words but to ask me to vacate my office as it was needed for a new professor. A few weeks later, I did oblige without any protest. As Dean Emeritus I am still entitled to certain privileges. I collected my personal effects—pictures, posters, documents, and a few files and left all materials to be left in the students’ lounge. I have never gone back there nor have I been invited—even when called for—to that place. I had worked there for 34 years until I retired (December 25, 2009) under the force of hostile workplace conditions. It will take volumes to flesh out how racism and reverse-sexism work against an individual who is neither black nor white. While teaching a course on diversity, I once quipped: “I haven’t seen a colorless person.” I have lived through this anguished *otherness* in the colorful Dixieland of this fabulous country for about 45 years. The United States, as I often say with pride, is more than a country: It is a new civilization. What I deeply regret is the “ressentiment” —to use a Nietzschean expression—of the anti-Semites and their ilk who shamelessly use their phony “whiteness” and “fragility” to climb up the ladder at the expense of certain marginalized people. These soulless people have marred the essence and ethos of the American Dream which some

people experience as nightmares. I can never forget the horrific episodes of 1986 (See Mohan, 2012: Ch IV: 122–159) when the system used a nefarious set up to pervert the very meaning of “promotion” at the behest of a “privileged” alien. I lost my innocence. It is the dearest price one could pay to remain human.

During my decades’ old post-dean life, there have been sad moments when I had wished for some bad thing that might happen to me. Undeserved humiliation is sometimes unbearable. Big organizations, like a university, usually work impersonally. Universities I served are good universities. It is the feral politics of my own profession, the sociology of social work, which is inherently malignant. Mostly, these soulless “angels” are really parasites who continue to drain on the marrow of what is best in America. It is a sociological obligation “to translate ‘personal troubles of milieu’ into ‘the public issues of social structure,’” as Comte and C. Wright Mills tried in mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries (Becker, 1968: 364). “*Why it’s so hard for white people to talk about racism?*” (Diangelo, 2018).

When George Floyd “couldn’t breathe”, I could fully empathize with the agony and despair of a black man who is still perceived as a threat to civil order aka *White Privilege*<sup>4</sup>. Look at the abuse of this pernicious license:

“According to a reporter for The Hill, Yoho did not cease in his expressive disdain for Ocasio-Cortez even as she walked away. Once he believed her to be out of hearing range, Yoho reportedly described his colleague as a ‘fucking bitch.’<sup>5</sup>”

While the vulnerability of African Americans to ill health, poor housing, poverty, and crime is a national problem, not many white Americans seem concerned about it. “Black America [is] in peril,” Lexington writes about it in *The Economics*:

“Little wonder black have been so stricken by covid-19. In Washington, DC, blacks are less than 47% of the

<sup>4</sup>Singh, Atul P. 2020. ‘Social Work’s Post-Pandemic Challenges,’ *Tryaksh International Journal of Humanities, TJIH*, 1, 1: 1–6. My reflective analysis of Social Work’s role constitutes the main planks of this discourse curated by Dr Atul P. Singh and sponsored by National Association of Professional Social Workers in India.

<sup>5</sup>[https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-ted-yoho-lesson-in-decency-on-the-house-floor?utm\\_source=nl&utm\\_brand=tny&utm\\_mailing=TNY\\_Daily\\_072420&utm\\_campaign=aud-dev&utm\\_medium=email&bxid=5be9cec-c24c17c6adf3b04f6&cndid=40380448&hasha=c0c6f5a7857065a7a89e632b85ba5d88&hashb=27aceb9d4cf959e285c842df842fc2d8208ba672&hashc=b0a6038ddaf1444247bfbd01d3034774292337ac58c220e-9c116182ee36ea8d9&esrc=right\\_rail\\_news&utm\\_term=TNY\\_Daily](https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-ted-yoho-lesson-in-decency-on-the-house-floor?utm_source=nl&utm_brand=tny&utm_mailing=TNY_Daily_072420&utm_campaign=aud-dev&utm_medium=email&bxid=5be9cec-c24c17c6adf3b04f6&cndid=40380448&hasha=c0c6f5a7857065a7a89e632b85ba5d88&hashb=27aceb9d4cf959e285c842df842fc2d8208ba672&hashc=b0a6038ddaf1444247bfbd01d3034774292337ac58c220e-9c116182ee36ea8d9&esrc=right_rail_news&utm_term=TNY_Daily) (*The New Yorker*, reported by David Remnick, July 24, 2020).

population, but account for 80% of its 445 coronavirus deaths” (May 30, 2020:25). A false news is circulated that children are immune to this deadly virus.

### Global Dysfunctionality

Thomas J. Bollyky and Chad P. Brown contend: “When a COVID-19 vaccine becomes available leaders around the world are all too likely to resort to “shortsighted ‘my country first’ approaches” to manage its production and distribution—with disastrous results. “Absent an international, enforceable commitment to distribute vaccines globally in an equitable and rational way, leaders will instead prioritize taking care of their own populations over slowing the spread of COVID-19 elsewhere... . It is not too late for global cooperation to prevail over global dysfunction, but it will require states and their political leaders to change course.”<sup>6</sup>

*The Indian Drama*, if I may, unravels the quintessential roots of rituals of *Caste* and primordial *class* which have universally institutionalized the structures of inequality and injustice. The authors of *Rig Veda* prevailed, as did Marx. Isabel Wilkerson “reframes systemic inequality in the U.S.” and “argues for understanding the U.S hierarchy as a caste system: a deeply entrenched yet artificial method of categorizing people by birth” (Worland, 2020: 91-93). Racism has been compared with and likened to Indian caste system before. Indic scholars, an emerging force in revisionist academia, would disagree with Worland’s characterization of its origin as “artificial.” To Wilkerson, *racism* does not fully capture the infrastructure of inequality; she builds on caste which represents “the man-made nature of systemic injustice” (Worland, 2020: 92): Isabel Wilkerson narrates race as a socio-political equivalent construct like caste in India (2020).

Arundhati Roy makes a powerful statement: “The relentless and ongoing incarceration of activists, academics and lawyers in this case is a manifestation of this Government’s understanding that this nascent, emerging secular, anti-caste and anti-capitalist politics that these people represent, provides an alternative narrative to Hindu fascism and poses the clearest threat—culturally, economically as well as politically—to its own disastrous Hindu Nationalist politics that has led this country into a crisis that has blighted the lives of

hundreds of millions of people which ironically includes its own supporters.”<sup>7</sup>

When I discussed Candy Lang’s narrative about the white women’s “victimhood” and their men’s wanton sexual predation of the enslaved women, I should mention how pervasive is this abominable behavior in India’s caste pyramid. About six decades ago, I remember the so-called ‘untouchables’ (Dalits) were generally dark skinned. Now, at least physically, the color barrier that starkly identified major caste hierarchy, has disappeared. A *Dalit* boy may be lynched for going out with a higher caste girl, but his perpetrators do not mind—in fact, they lust—for sleeping with *Dalit* women.

### Capital, Marvel Covid-19, and Piketty

“Against a backdrop of mile-long lines for food handouts Congress and the Federal Reserve have put \$7 trillion in the hands of investors through the CARE Act’s corporate bailout and follow up interventions. Since March 2020, the wealth of US billionaires has risen by \$565 billion. ...The leaders and chief funders were behind it, and overwhelming majorities in Congress went along. This consensus has been at the heart of politico-economic evolution in the US, where a seemingly inexorable process of economic deterioration has been met by intensifying predation.”

Robert Brenner (2020)

When you go through a thousand plus pages of Thomas Piketty’ new book (2020), you understand the exterior (Marxist) and inner (Nietzsche) structure of human proclivities. At no other time in post-war history this banality has been so vividly demonstrated as now. Becoming rich and richer while people are dying in thousands is the nadir of depravity which builds capital and its owners. But Marx was right: they are also their own gravediggers.

The politics of pandemics, *The Economist* contends, will be a challenge to most western governments: “In the West covid-19 is a challenge to the generations of politicians who have taken power since the financial crisis. Many of them decry globalization and experts. They thrive on division and conflict. In some ways the pandemic will play to their agenda. Countries may follow

<sup>6</sup>The New Yorker, Only Cooperation Can End the Pandemic by Thomas Bollyky and Chad Bown, <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=wm&ogbl#inbox/WhctKJVzZJvrDdBzWqbQWqV LZHkjpVmcJGWkzFCqkccD-KfNwKVCsDdRwGTrStWgnsJsNSq> (July 27, 2020).

<sup>7</sup>On the arrest of an anti-caste activist Professor Hanu, Arundhati Roy gave a statement: [https://maktoobmedia.com/2020/07/29/arundhati-roy-protests-arrest-of-hany-babu/?fbclid=IwAR0rHr8XhMX2IQNkkzR-JwWYECyQ5WYifzIY9ZpYJOERiAr28\\_5Yw9XZ-ZF0](https://maktoobmedia.com/2020/07/29/arundhati-roy-protests-arrest-of-hany-babu/?fbclid=IwAR0rHr8XhMX2IQNkkzR-JwWYECyQ5WYifzIY9ZpYJOERiAr28_5Yw9XZ-ZF0), Maktoob, July 29, 2020 (retrieved, August 3, 2020).

America and turn inward and close their borders” (2020, March 14:7). “America is called a nation in decline: a rich country too divided, selfish, and racist to keep its citizens safe” (*The Economist*: June 13, 2020:34). One wonders if America is one of the failed states. When a world power falters, we must pause and rethink some of the forgotten lessons of history.

Pankaj Mishra explains how *Anglo-America loses its grip* (2020: 9–14). Pundits of western hegemonies (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Diamond, 2020; Ferguson, 2011) have laid down algorithms of success underrating China, India, Brazil, Egypt, and other non-western nations. President Donald Trump tastelessly labeled these developing nations as “shithole countries.” Covid-19 has shown how smaller countries sidelined by regional powers have shown courage and insight to solve their own problems. Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam on the one hand Germany and Japan on the other merit credit. Mishra writes:

“Covid-19 has exposed the world’s great democracies as victims of prolonged self-harm; it has also demonstrated that countries with strong state capacity have been far more successful at stemming the virus’s spread and look better equipped to cope with the social and economic fallout. .... Anglo-America’s dingy realities – deindustrialization, low-wage work, underemployment, hyper-incarnation and enfeebled or exclusionary health systems– have long been evident. Nevertheless, the moral, political and material squalor of two of the wealthiest and most powerful societies in history still comes as a shock to some.” (2020: 9)

Jared Diamond’s view of “how and why some nations recover from crises and others don’t,” posits both nations and individuals on a par while confronted with crises. While his “turning points for nations in crisis’ have some merit, it is simplistic to overstate their universal prevalence. Many ‘developing’ nations, India and Egypt, were great civilizations before colonial exploitation. The British Empire could not have become an Imperial power without India’s economy, natural and human resources. If Indians failed to see the evilness of a trading East India Company, it’s more of a tragedy than “turning point.” The same could be said about the Aborigine who according to one Australian senator did not recognize them as human beings at all (Diamond, 2019:260). My point is: Jared Diamond *selected 7 modern nations and analyzed their turning points in light of 12 factors without foreseeing the invincibility of Covid 19*. His main assertion needs to be reevaluated:

“It required the shock of the Cocoanut Grove fire to transform short-terms psychotherapy: can nations decide to transform themselves without the shock of a Cocoanut Grove?” (2019: 23)

Shock therapy cannot transform many nations. Nothing could be more shocking than India’s balkanization in 1947 (Mohan, 2020). India and Pakistan are nuclear powers only to destroy each other. *What the British Did to India*, is succinctly summarized by Shashi Tharoor in his *Inglorious Empire*:

“British imperialism justified itself as enlightened despotism for the benefit of the governed, but Shashi Tharoor takes on and demolishes this position, demonstrating how every supposed imperial “gift”—from the railways to the rule of law—was designed in Britain’s interests alone. He goes on to show how Britain’s Industrial Revolution was founded on India’s deindustrialization and the destruction of its textile industry. In this bold and incisive reassessment of colonialism, Tharoor exposes to devastating effect the inglorious reality of Britain’s stained Indian legacy.” (Tharoor, 2017)

The so-called First World has flourished on the imperial mayhem and rapacious colonization of nations which the western scholars have labelled as *Third World*. The abuse of power, perversion of reason and prostitution of ideologies are wolf- children of the western *Enlightenment Paradox*. In his *A brief history of humankind*, (Harari, 2014; 2018) suggests that *Sapiens* are indeed capable of big changes. Colum McCann, the founder of *Narrative 4*, comments:

“Covid 19 is, like most things, so much more than one thing: it is an annihilator of time, for sure, but it is also—bizarrely, in our exponential age—a creator of time as well... . The voices that matter really matter will be the ones that come from underneath, not above.” (*Time*, May 20: 19)

“Every historian writes in—and is impacted by—a precise historical moment,” Ibram Kendi writes while analyzing “The Definite History of Racist Ideas in America” (2016: ix). Both human conditions and ideological streams have evolved overtime. Reason and objectivity are social constructs defined by those who write history.

Man is an incomplete social animal. So is the study of *Sapiens*. Science is amoral; politics is not. Reason and objectivity are social constructs defined by those who write history. Unless ‘social contract’ is rewritten by authors—unlike the John Lockes of *Enlightenment*—slavery, poverty, deprivation, disease and all other social covids will continue to bedevil humanity<sup>8</sup> (Mohan, 2021). Knowledge is an incomplete process. “No science is fully developed.” (Becker, 1968: 361)

<sup>8</sup>The concluding statement is a subject of my forthcoming book *Rediscover of Society: The Post-Pandemic Ordeal* to be published by Nova Scientific Publications, New York (due out 2021).

## 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.

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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.



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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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 LifeTime Achievement Award from National Association of Professional Social Workers in India.

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