

# COVID-19 in Historical Perspective: How Disaster Capitalism Fabricates a Fear-Managed World Order?




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## ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) may have led to the most significant public health emergency of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with enormous implications for the global economy and politics. Again this backdrop, the present article aims to bridge the gap between the “disaster capitalism” approach and the study of “cultures of fear”, to provide a systematic explanation of how the capitalist world order undergoes profound transformations. We argue that the cultivation and diffusion of a culture of fear erected on world-historical disastrous events serve as an important medium for the transformation of the world order. In this context, we draw on the ways in which neoliberalism was globally instituted as the organizing principle of the US-led world order in a political-economic and cultural context constructed around disasters. The focus will be on emblematic cases that illustrate the symbiotic relationship between neoliberalism and the culture of fear as a constitutive element of the US-centered world order: the Pinochet coup in Chile and Argentina’s military dictatorship era, “shock therapy” economics in Russia, and the US war on terror following 9/11. Our inferences from these cases will then be used to perform an anticipatory analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic may give way to a world-historical transformation based on a rapidly spreading culture of fear. In the Western world, right-wing populist leaders weaponize COVID-19 in the expectation of mobilizing popular support and marshaling all resources to restore the legitimacy of global capitalism. In doing so, they also resort to Sinophobia and demonize China as a “common enemy” to be geopolitically isolated, in the hope of reversing the multipolarization of world politics. We observe that increasing Sinophobia can also be exploited to radically transform the division of labor in global capitalism with the pretext of “bringing manufacturing jobs back home”. The rise of social isolationism – due to mass fear of pandemics and authoritarian government practices under surveillance capitalism – is likely to disperse attempts at popular mobilization. While the justification of surveillance for public emergency may perpetuate a stronger form of surveillance capitalism, it is also possible that the proliferation of distance-working technologies will lead to a deep transformation in global labor regimes and an unprecedented growth in the “precariat”.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; cultures of fear; disaster capitalism; multipolarization; precariat

THE CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019 (COVID-19) may have led to the most significant public health emergency of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with enormous implications for the global economy and politics. Some recent forecasts suggest that the COVID pandemic is likely to plunge the world economy into a deep-seated crisis whose consequences will be even worse than the Great Depression of the 1930s (Caşın, 2020). These forecasts were recently validated by Gita Gopinath, the chief economist of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), who portrayed the current situation as “the worst recession since the Great

Depression, and far worse than the Global Financial Crisis” (Gopinath, 2020). What is more, Western leaders’ recent statements may well be interpreted as early signs of a rapidly accelerating geopolitical turbulence. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has described the COVID-19 pandemic as the greatest threat since World War II. The European Union (EU), already suffering from heavy blows dealt by the 2009 European debt crisis and Brexit (Britain Exit), has been accused by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez of abandoning his country. For similar reasons, Italian mayors have ripped down EU flags and

politicians participated in popular protests targeting the EU's indifferent attitude. Meanwhile, Italy and Spain welcomed generous medical aid delivered by China and Russia. Italy, as one of the top troop contributors to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), went so far as to host Russian military personnel operating near a US military base (Braw, 2020; Clark, 2020; Smith, 2020).

These cracks within the Atlantic Alliance seem to be accompanied by a rising Sinophobia. French President Emmanuel Macron openly targeted China with his statement, "There are clearly things that have happened that we don't know about" (Financial Times, 2020). In his turn, US President Donald Trump publicly supported claims that the pandemic originated in a lab in Wuhan and went on to proclaim that he had decided to defund the World Health Organization (WHO) for its "insidious relations with China" (Chomsky, 2020). He insisted on branding COVID-19 as the "Chinese disease" (The Conversation, 2020). Similarly, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo directed open threats at China: "There will be a time when the people responsible will be held accountable ... There will be a time for assigning blame" (Bild, 2020). Pompeo went so far as to name China "as the most dangerous adversary for the United States and for all Western governments". He added: "We're going to do the right things by building up our military" (Finnegan & Margolin, 2020). British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab joined the chorus by declaring, "We'll have to ask the hard questions about how it came about and how it couldn't have been stopped earlier ... We can't have business as usual after this crisis" (France 24, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the present article aims to bridge the gap between the "disaster

capitalism" approach and the study of "cultures of fear", to provide a systematic explanation of how the capitalist world order undergoes profound transformations. The "capitalist world order" refers in this context to a system of global governance that institutionalizes a status quo of capitalist-imperialist cooperation and expansion under the leadership of an imperialist power or group of powers. The main argument in this article is that the cultivation and diffusion of a culture of fear erected on world-historical disastrous events serve as an important medium for the transformation of the world order. In this context, we will draw on the ways in which neoliberalism was globally instituted as the organizing principle of the US-led world order in a political-economic and cultural context constructed around disasters. The focus will be on emblematic cases that illustrate the symbiotic relationship between neoliberalism and the culture of fear as a constitutive element of the US-centered world order: the Pinochet coup in Chile and Argentina's military dictatorship era, "shock therapy" economics in Russia, and the US war on terror following 9/11. Our inferences from these cases will then be used to perform an anticipatory analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic may give way to a world-historical transformation based on a rapidly spreading culture of fear. We will rely on the method of process tracing, which uses logical reasoning by reference to major events of historical importance, as well as the preferences, goals, values, and perceptions of global actors involved in these events (Venesson, 2008; Bennett, 2010; Collier, 2011).

Our article is structured as follows. The first section will conceptually explain the symbiotic relationship between disaster capitalism, neoliberalism, and the culture of fear. The second section will be devoted to case studies that show-

case the said relationship. In the final section, we will recontextualize our research within the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Disaster Capitalism and the Culture of Fear

The term “disaster capitalism” was coined by Naomi Klein (2007), who based her conceptual framework on the critique of neoliberalism. In her lexicon, neoliberalism refers to a policy paradigm defined by three landmark demands: privatization, government deregulation and deep cuts to social spending. Her polemic against neoliberalism focuses especially on Milton Friedman, one of its most prominent neoliberal thinkers. Reflecting on Hurricane Katrina – one of the most devastating natural disasters in US history – Milton Friedman recommended the US government to dismantle its public education system by extending the network of charter schools and distributing vouchers to households for food access. Ultimately, Klein shows that the Katrina disaster provided an opportunity for the Bush administration to implement Friedman’s neoliberal recommendations with action (Klein, 2007). Based on similar cases, Klein advances the argument that global capitalism instrumentalizes man-made or natural disasters (e.g. military coups, terrorist incidents, economic crises, wars, earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes) for the sake of advancing its own agenda of renewal and reconstruction. According to her, such disorienting disasters help to suspend public debate and suppress democratic practices. This allows capitalists to exploit the window of opportunity opened by traumatic shocks (Klein, 2007).

Undoubtedly, capitalism cannot succeed in rejuvenating itself merely through top-down policy impositions. It needs to secure popular consent from the ground up. In this

regard, we believe that the study of “cultures of fear” would be helpful for a deeper understanding of the inner mechanism of disaster capitalism. A culture of fear is a system of beliefs, values, and behavioral patterns rooted in negative emotions such as fear and terror, which can be used as “affective tools of government that come into being as a modus of population management deployed by military, political, and administrative actors” (Linke & Smith, 2009: 5). It feeds off a strong sense of existential insecurity that inflates the meaning of harm and fosters a mood of mistrust. This is facilitated by simplistic blaming of the media and the propagation of alarmist reactions meshed with catastrophic rhetoric (Furedi, 2018). In certain cases, the end result is the formation and consolidation of an imagined community united against the threat of the Other, whoever or whatever that might be. In this way, global capitalism can easily deploy a securocratic language around disastrous events to emotionally mobilize popular support and execute its own programmatic agenda conducive to large-scale transformations in the world order (Linke & Smith, 2009). Ultimately, fear becomes “a central figure of global social life” (Linke & Smith, 2009: 4).

### Neoliberalism and Disaster Capitalism in Action

Chile is widely regarded as the first laboratory of neoliberalism: the later structural adjustment programs of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank were modeled on the Chilean experiment. In fact, the case of Chile perfectly reveals how the roots of neoliberalism formed in world-historical disasters are constitutive of the US-centered world order. Chile’s socialist president Salvador Allende was overthrown in 1973 by a military coup led by



Augusto Pinochet and actively supported by the United States. In 1975, Chile transitioned to neoliberal capitalism under the guidance of the Chicago Boys: neoliberal economic advisors, most of whom were trained at prominent American institutions such as at the University of Chicago, Harvard University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Klein, 2007). Chile's neoliberal restructuring owed its power to wide-scale social pacification: the military junta cracked down on opposition forces and inculcated a culture of fear, ensuring compliance with neoliberal shock therapy measures. Estimates suggest that in the Pinochet era, more than 3,000 people disappeared and tens of thousands were jailed, tortured, and/or exiled. This repressive environment strengthened Pinochet's hand in reducing import tariffs and social expenditure, abolishing price controls, carrying out mass privatization, and debilitating unions. Ultimately, Pinochet's shock therapy exposed Chile to deep recessions in 1975 and 1982, and contributed to extreme levels of inequality. Chile's Gini coefficient rose from around 0.45 in the mid-1970s to over 0.6 by the end of the 1980s (Taylor, 2006). Moreover, the replication of the Chilean model in the rest of the region resulted in disaster. The number of people in poverty in Latin America grew from 118 million in 1980 to 196 million in 1990. The region's total foreign debt increased from US\$31.3 billion in 1972 to US\$430 billion in the late 1980s, and US\$750 billion by the 2000s. In the period 1981–2000, average annual economic growth was only 1.6% in Argentina, 2.1% in Brazil, and 2.7% in Mexico (Arestis & Saad Filho 2007; Saad Filho, 2007).

The mobilization of fear through military coups was also instrumental in the case of Argentina's transition to neoliberalism under US influence. Argentina stepped into a long era of

military dictatorship when Isabel Perón's government was overthrown by General Jorge Rafael Videl as part of Operation Condor, a US-backed campaign of state and paramilitary terror in support of right-wing dictatorships in Latin America. This period – also called the Dirty War era (1976–1983) – led to the disappearance of 30,000 people, along with other human rights violations including child kidnappings (Hellinger, 2014).



Salvador Allende at the meeting of the Workers' United Center of Chile. [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central\\_%C3%A9nica\\_de\\_Trabajadores\\_de\\_Chile](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_%C3%A9nica_de_Trabajadores_de_Chile)

This environment of public fear was used by the military junta to impose neoliberal restructuring on the Argentine economy (Klein, 2007). In 1976, thanks to US support for the military dictatorship, Argentina was granted “the largest loan ever to a Latin American country” (Cooney, 2007). In line with the newly adopted neoliberal agenda, the country initiated a radical deindustrialization policy that accentuated agroindustry in favor of the landed oligarchy. This process went hand in hand with financial deregulation and the suppression of unions. Argentina witnessed a record increase in foreign debt, from US\$9.7 billion in 1976 to over US\$45 billion in 1983 (Cooney, 2007).

A world-historical disaster of an even greater magnitude took place in Boris Yeltsin’s Russia in 1991–1999, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin took advantage of the environment of fear and confusion created by the disintegration of the Soviet Union to launch a shock therapy campaign with the aim of liberalizing the Russian economy. The campaign started in 1992, with the IMF’s active support: Yeltsin made a hasty move to liberalize prices and trade, which was followed by mass privatizations. An important side effect of these privatizations was the emergence of a new stratum of Russian oligarchs feeding off rising corruption in the Yeltsin era (Bedirhanoglu, 2004). The shock therapy resulted in average real pay falling by almost 50% in the period 1990–1995. Organized crime grew to such an extent that up to 80% of private banks and businesses in major cities were involved with “mafia” organizations (Kotz & Weir, 2007). In the long run, excessive liberalization and indebtedness exposed Russia to the negative effects of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. This eventually marked the end of the Yeltsin era and

paved the way for Vladimir Putin’s rise to power (Baiman, Boushey, & Dawn, 2000: 210-217).

The post-9/11 conjuncture is an important example of how the world order is shaped by the symbiotic relationship between disaster capitalism and the neoliberal culture of fear (Mendieta, 2011).

**The collective trauma created by these attacks served as a historic opportunity for the United States to launch the “war on terror”: a strategic campaign for restructuring the world order in pursuit of its imperialist agenda.**

On September 11, 2001, four passenger planes were hijacked by terrorists affiliated with al-Qaeda. Two of the planes crashed into the World Trade Center complex and the third into the Pentagon, while the fourth plane crashed in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The attacks claimed nearly 3,000 lives and resulted in more than 25,000 injuries. The collective trauma created by these attacks served as a historic opportunity for the United States to launch the “war on terror”: a strategic campaign for restructuring the world order in pursuit of its imperialist agenda. As such, “the Bush administration outsourced, with no public debate, many of the most sensitive and core functions of government – from providing health care to soldiers, to interrogating prisoners, to gathering and ‘data mining’ information on all of us” (Klein, 2007: 12). The enacting of the USA Patriot Act enabled the government to suppress civil liberties and enhance the influence of the US military- and prison-industrial complexes. Mass surveillance and incarceration thus became the norm (Klein, 2007; Mendieta, 2011). The driving agen-

da was not limited to reasserting the waning importance of US interventionism in the absence of the Soviet Union and reordering the Greater Middle East with the aim of inhibiting the rise of potential US rivals in Eurasia. The United States was also interested in refuelling its stagnating neoliberal economy based on a military stimulus. This was particularly seen in the US occupation of Afghanistan since 2001, the War on Iraq, and other interventions, for example in Libya and Syria as part of the so-called Arab “Spring”.

In summary, these cases demonstrate how disastrous events such as terrorist attacks, state failures, and military coups lead to large-scale transformations that open up new possibilities for neoliberal restructuring on a global scale. Disaster-led crises sweep away the conditions for healthy public deliberation; this process is facilitated by an authoritarian environment of fear and confusion. Such an environment is easily exploited by capitalist interests in favor of an agenda of renewal and reconstruction. In particular, the post-9/11 conjuncture strongly exemplifies the ways in which disaster capitalism reproduces itself by deploying an Islamophobic culture of fear, where highly inflated and alarmist reactions help to reorganize the world order in line with the catastrophic rhetoric of the war on terror.

### COVID-19 and the Collective Mobilization of Fear

The above cases can give us valuable insights into the possible ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic may pave the way for a paradigm shift in the world order. Worthy of mention in this regard is Giorgio Agamben’s thesis of a “state of exception”. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Italian philosopher Agamben assert-

ed that the danger of the disease was highly exaggerated. According to him, the pandemic is a socially constructed phenomenon, which helps governments to create a state of exception in deploying extraordinary measures that might have been difficult to implement under normal circumstances. In other words, Agamben claimed that governments purposefully exaggerated the risks of the pandemic in order to implement new social control devices and methods (Agamben, 2020). Though he may have underestimated the lethal potential of the pandemic, there seems to be some value in taking his “state of exception” thesis seriously. The pandemic of COVID-19 has great potential to be used by capitalist forces to reinvent the capitalist system or postpone the collapse of global capitalism by exploiting widespread anxiety and panic. By creating a culture of fear that feeds off the COVID-19 disaster, global capitalism can potentially incapacitate anti-systemic forces through increased use of new surveillance technologies and enhanced social-distancing strategies.



Photo by Cottonbro from "Pexels"  
"Fear of Coronavirus"



It is known that infectious diseases can trigger negative psychological effects such as hypochondriasis and anxiety (Duncan et al., 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception to this psychological peril. A case in point is a survey by Wang and his team, which reveals the psychological damage that the pandemic caused in China during its early phases. In this study, 16.5% of respondents showed moderate to severe depression symptoms while 28.8% of them experienced anxiety problems and 8.1% had high stress levels (Wang et al., 2020). Similarly, in a survey conducted during the lockdown period in Italy, 17.3% of respondents said they had depression while 20.8% admitted having anxiety problems (Rossi et al., 2020). In a similar vein, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the people of Italy to intense stress, closely associated with high levels of uncertainty as to how long it will take for Italy to return to normal and whether the pandemic will affect loved ones (Montemurro, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic may really have engendered a collective trauma and mass anxiety that can be easily taken advantage of by global capitalism.

Another important observer who anticipates the potentially dangerous outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic is Slavoj Žižek. He claims that there is no turning back to normal and that this pandemic will irreversibly change our lives. Žižek implies that the pandemic will have paradigm-shifting effects for the world. In his opinion, the pandemic can only have two possible outcomes: either a new normal will be constructed “on the ruins of our old lives” or a new form of barbarism will emerge (Žižek, 2020: 3). Žižek goes on to suggest that the pandemic has the potential to engender the worst socio-economic catastrophe since the Great Depression. In this new period, markets will not be able to

prevent the forthcoming waves of poverty and chaos. Moreover, Žižek does not believe that developing medical treatments or a vaccine will suffice to reverse the crisis of global capitalism (Žižek, 2020). Indeed, even when the pandemic is brought under control, the markets may not function as they used to, because the risk of a new wave of COVID-19 could discourage investments and lead to monopolistic prices at the expense of lower income groups.

**One possible explanation for this situation is that leading politicians in Western societies are seeking to capitalize on a historical opportunity to reorganize global capitalism by justifying extraordinary measures through manufactured mass panic and Sinophobia.**

Žižek maintains that the pandemic can only be controlled by using a different paradigm to neoliberalism; that is, through large-scale measures including government-imposed quarantines. Furthermore, he points to the fact that the spontaneous functioning of markets would eventually deepen the inequalities and hamper access to basic necessities and services. As such, the risk of economic disaster can only be averted through globally coordinated efforts; not only in the battle against the disease, but also in production and distribution. In the meantime, Žižek expresses optimism that this crisis presents a universal threat and therefore may give birth to global solidarity inasmuch as it invites us to reconsider “the very basic features of the society”. In this sense, the WHO’s global coordination efforts at leading this process based on precise and scientific recommendations without causing



panic can be seen as a key catalyst for an emergent solidarity on a global scale (Žižek, 2020: 41). This is in contrast to US efforts to delegitimize the WHO by reference to its alleged “China-centric” approach (Deutsche Welle, 2020).

In contrast to the WHO’s responsible approach, certain world leaders are not interested in following scientific guidance, preventing mass panic, or promoting global solidarity. Agamben (2020) underlines the fact that public authorities – and the mass media – contribute to the diffusion of panic at first hand. For instance, Donald Trump has not restrained himself from amplifying popular anxiety with his statements highlighting the number of potential fatalities from COVID-19; at the very beginning of the pandemic, these were estimated at somewhere between 100,000 and 240,000 (Mangan, 2020). Similarly, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has not hesitated to stir mass panic by warning his people to be prepared “to lose loved ones to coronavirus” (Hughes & Payne, 2020). Yet political restraint could have played a key role in reducing pandemic-related social risks. One possible explanation for this situation is that leading politicians in Western societies are seeking to capitalize on a historical opportunity to reorganize global capitalism by justifying extraordinary measures through manufactured mass panic and Sinophobia. Therefore, they are mobilizing a culture of fear predicated on the COVID-19 disaster. As such, China’s geopolitical isolation can be used to re-industrialize capitalism in core countries, reverse the increasing Chinese influence on global governance, and postpone the multipolitatization of the world order.

Yuval Noah Harari’s warnings buttress this possibility of exploiting the disaster for a fear-driven political agenda. A state of horror triggered by economic and social turbulence

can encourage society as a whole to search for a strong leader who will restore public order. This is similar to how the incessant economic disasters in post-World War I Germany resulted in the rise of the Nazis to power. Harari thus underlines how a crisis can be a turning point for a society, or a decisive moment to determine the direction of history. The COVID-19 pandemic is exemplary of such a milestone. It marks one of the deepest crises in recent history, which will surely have serious ramifications, not only for public health but also for the global economy, world politics, and culture (Harari, 2020). According to Harari, the human species will certainly survive the pandemic, but the world will be subjected to a deep-seated structural crisis. He goes on to argue that today’s political choices will greatly affect how the post-coronavirus world takes shape.

Similar to how Agamben cautions about a disease-induced “state of exception”, Harari refers to the “nature of emergencies”, underlining how these are “fast-forward historical processes”, and there are some “short-term emergency measures” that can be implemented to overcome the crisis (Harari, 2020). We are already seeing the rapid proliferation of immature technologies such as distance-education platforms and teleworking environments. The diffusion of such technologies in the post-coronavirus era may result in the permanentizing of precarious labor practices (e.g. temporary employment, lower wages, de-unionization, job insecurity) and the intensification of labor exploitation (e.g. unpaid overtime and further disturbance of work-life balance). Meanwhile, governments across the world have already declared states of emergency and started to take extraordinary measures to counter the pandemic. One of these measures is the implementation of new surveillance technologies on the pretext of controlling the contagion.

For instance, the UK government has adapted its facial recognition systems to identify COVID-19 victims (Tovey, 2020). Another case in point is how Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has authorized the use of surveillance technology, normally designed for anti-terrorist activities (Harari, 2020). Coupled with the proliferation of mass anxiety, “social” isolation and new surveillance technologies, the perpetuation of authoritarian government practices may seriously undermine the mobilizing potential of popular movements against neoliberal capitalism and imperialism. These possibilities parallel Harari’s observations: he suggests that the implementation of biological and emotional surveillance is another possible outcome. What is more, once these measures are normalized, they may become permanent, in the same way as the extraordinary antiterrorist measures adopted in the post-9/11 era (Harari, 2020).

According to Harari, our political choices are the important things. Like Žižek, he believes that we need a global plan that avoids isolationism and encourages the free flow of information and equipment all over the globe, since the pandemic cannot be regionally contained. Moreover, global cooperation requires stronger trust in science and close care for personal hygiene, regular handwashing, and physical distancing. Just as Žižek advocates a stronger state to deal with the crisis, Harari maintains that the state’s role is crucial in this period and surveillance is necessary to overcome the pandemic. However, he also cautions that data collected for this purpose should not be exploited to invent “an all-powerful government” (Harari, 2020). According to Harari, more dangerous than the disease itself is “our own hatred, greed and ignorance”, which may even set the stage for a new dictatorship under mass panic (Deutsche Welle, 2020, April 22).

**Such tendencies – which are perhaps most strongly reflected in a Sinophobic culture of fear in Western nations – evoke the pre-World War II period during which protectionism increasingly gained currency and minorities such as Jews and Roma were persecuted.**

In this sense, mass surveillance on social media platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook – as well as banning and removing content associated with “false” news and “conspiracy” – risk generating new forms of censorship to sustain the relations of domination and oppression. While Harari shares Žižek’s optimism about the prospects for global cooperation, he also cautions that these prospects are threatened by a growing tendency towards scapegoating or targeting minorities and rival nations. Such tendencies – which are perhaps most strongly reflected in a Sinophobic culture of fear in Western nations – evoke the pre-World War II period during which protectionism increasingly gained currency and minorities such as Jews and Roma were persecuted. At this point, Žižek calls for caution about a possible return to the premodern state of reason after COVID-19 (Žižek, 2020: 14). Even though developed countries benefit from higher educational standards, their citizens can be prone to anthropomorphizing the COVID-19 pandemic. The origins of this regression of reason may be found in mass anxiety and panic, which are further provoked by political authorities and corporate media (Žižek, 2020).

According to Žižek, rational thinking dictates the necessity for collective struggle against the pandemic and stronger social policies geared towards protecting society as a whole. On any account, Žižek reasons that our health and wel-

fare are inextricably linked to those of others, which brings forth the principle of altruism at the expense of absolute individualism. However, in the case of COVID-19, Žižek's reasoning does not seem to fit the facts. Individualism may well be taking on increasing importance to the extent that people have started to see others, not only as potential rivals in the marketplace, but as "biological threats". Enhanced individualism also has the potential to atomize society by fostering anxiety, especially when individuals withdraw themselves into their own private domains and see the public domain as inherently threatening. Such perceptions can be easily manipulated by political authorities such as Trump and Johnson, who are interested in taking advantage of disastrous situations. Put differently, a panic environment facilitated by public authorities may result in increased mass anxiety as a coping mechanism in the face of disastrous or threatening situations.



(Portugal News, 2018)

On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic may further exacerbate the global economic crisis, with the total disappearance of growth,

a ubiquitous rise in unemployment and debts, and a cascade of bankruptcies across the world. On the other, it may have already started to create material conditions for the reproduction of neoliberal individualism. Perhaps most importantly, the meaning of self-quarantine against COVID-19 may be extended from mere home isolation to the normalization of self-interested behavior. When society allows itself to be taken over by fear, individuals become more prone to pursuing nothing else but their own well-being and daily survival. In this environment, those in power positions could easily seize the moment to reshape the public domain in line with their agenda. This means that the COVID-19 pandemic may not be the absolute end of neoliberalism per se, even though it has exposed the deepening of the crisis of global capitalism. Under the influence of self-interested politicians, mass anxiety – as a popular self-defence mechanism against dangerous situations – risks the retreating of individuals, not only into their apartments but also into their narrow individual interests.

### Review and Discussion

The history of neoliberalism since the 1970s shows how global capitalism can shape the world order by instrumentalizing disastrous events. Inculcating a culture of fear serves as a strategic means to legitimize paradigmatic policy shifts so as to radically alter the structure of the world order. A characteristic of such cultural practices is the deployment of a securocratic language around disaster, similar to the anticommunism of putschists in Latin America and the case of post 9/11 Islamophobia. Military, political, and administrative actors capitalize on heightening feelings of existential insecurity, panic, and anxiety, resulting from disasters such as the collapse of the Soviet Union. As such, they can encourage alarmist reactions and exploit the people's affec-

tive situation so as to impose drastic measures without democratic deliberation.

In a similar direction, there are early signs that COVID-19 is being fed into a culture of fear to rejuvenate the US-centered world order. In the Western world, right-wing populist leaders weaponize COVID-19 in the expectation of mobilizing popular support and marshaling all resources to restore the legitimacy of global capitalism. In doing so, they resort to Sinophobia and demonize China as a “common enemy”, in the hope of reversing the multipolarization of world politics. Clearly, the US and its Western allies are concerned about the fact that their monopoly over global governance institutions such as the WHO is being challenged by China and other developing countries. To reverse this situation, they invest in geopolitically isolating China from international trade and global governance by blaming China for COVID-19. For Trump, increasing Sinophobia can also be exploited to radically transform the division of labor global capitalism with the pretext of “bringing manufacturing jobs back home”.

Overall, one cannot easily foresee in what direction COVID-19 will affect the world order. In the meantime, this pandemic as a disaster reveals the crisis of neoliberal globalization and the ineffectiveness of US-led global governance. It creates a perfect opportunity for capitalism to launch a process of creative destruction, which has been much needed since the 2007–2008 financial crisis. Interestingly, *The Economist* predicted in an article published in 1999 that the world economy would see the prospect of a new paradigm change in 2020 (*The Economist*, 1999). From a similar perspective, one could argue that the COVID-19 pandemic offers a suitable moment for the reorganization of markets in a way reminiscent of how the 9/11 terrorist attacks brought about the opportunity to reform the

world political structure and overcome the 2001 recession. The rise of social isolationism – due to mass fear of pandemics and authoritarian government practices under surveillance capitalism – is likely to disperse attempts at popular mobilization. While the justification of surveillance for public emergency may perpetuate a stronger form of surveillance capitalism, it is also possible that the proliferation of distance-working technologies will lead to a deep transformation in global labor regimes and an unprecedented growth in the “precariat”. The precariat can be understood here as a working-class stratum that “consists of people living through insecure jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment or labour-force withdrawal (misnamed as ‘economic inactivity’) and living insecurely, with uncertain access to housing and public resources” (Standing, 2014a: 16). Coupled with economic crisis and heightened competition in the labor market, distance-working technologies have great potential to endanger representation, employment, and income security by facilitating de-unionization, employment flexibility, arbitrary dismissals, wage cuts, and a lack of social security (Standing, 2014b). One could thus anticipate substantial increases in household debts and work-from-home monitoring that violates workers’ private life.

As is often the case, capitalism’s real agenda may be hidden behind positivist and empiricist discourses, which pretend to pursue the public interest in the name of science. Yet the danger cannot be overcome by merely subjugating politics to science and rational thinking. In modernity, knowledge itself is the source of power and technocratic discourses can be used to veil the true nature of authority (Habermas, 2015). The battle against COVID-19 is thus to be merged with the battle against neoliberal capitalism and the relations of domination and oppression



in the world order. This being said, the battle against COVID-19 cannot be reduced to a mere choice between the empowerment of the individual and that of the state, or public versus private measures. One should consider the fact that these distinctions are of an illusory character inasmuch as the individual's perception of threat is shaped through public channels of information. All of this raises another crucial question: How will global institutions be transformed in this period of disaster? Rather than merely framing today's dilemma in terms of the individual versus the state, one could focus on whether our institutions will be reorganized according to the needs of markets or the working classes. As Žižek cautions, this is not a moment to confront "the ultimate abyss of our being" (Žižek, 2020: 112). Even though we are "socially" isolated and withdrawn into our private enclaves, our collective future largely depends on major transformations in the public sphere. 🌱

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