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GENERAL ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

COVID-19 and the Corpse of Neoliberal Globalization: An Intercultural View

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is as much a process of globalization as it is its outcome. In the wake of the death, socio-economic devastation, and radical uncertainties it has unleashed, this paper re-examines globalization anew. This paper's focus is on the role that neoliberalism has played in precipitating the COVID-19 disaster, especially in the wealthiest nations of the West. Re-visiting history, the paper takes issue with the rhetoric of globalization that had been sold as a project ushering in an interconnected global village exalting culture and community. Against such exuberance, the paper recalls that globalization was a post-Cold War project celebrating liberal-capitalism's 'triumph' over state-socialism. It reveals globalization to be foremost about economic accumulation, not community edification. Moreover, in the realm of ideology and policymaking, the past four decades have seen liberalism devolving into neoliberalism, and many national states becoming financialized corporate states. Especially in the West, the liberal state has been captured and financialized. Austerity—not redistributive growth—has reigned, engendering historically unprecedented social polarization which COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated. Globalization, I argue, has served as rhetorical cover for the social destructiveness of 'neoliberalism'. The approaches and outcomes of pandemic management in much of the West are a further indictment of neoliberalism. Whereas 'herd immunity' had been the early *de facto* pandemic strategy of many neoliberal Western governments, most of East Asia a state-led commitment to 'zero transmission' and minimum casualties, leading to vastly different health outcomes.

Keywords

COVID-19; Pandemic; Globalization; Neoliberalism; Anti-Statism; Herd Immunity

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We live in fundamentally uncertain and confusing times. COVID-19, identified as being caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2, entered the global imagination when it was detected in Wuhan China in December 2019 before it swept across the globe.¹ It was stopped neither by national borders nor differences of ideology, creed, class, age, race, or gender, underlining the pandemic as a profound expression of neoliberal globalization, albeit of an unexpected and undesirable kind. In view of the deaths, border closures, lockdowns, quarantines, economic re-openings, and re-closings that have occurred due to the virus and the ensuing measures to contain it, the pandemic has disrupted our erstwhile practices—political, economic, societal, familial, and personal. In the process, it has laid bare the relations that had previously undergirded and sustained these areas of life.

It is important here to note the distinction between the virus and the pandemic, not least its sociopolitical origins and consequences. The virus implicates biology, the science of life, whereas the pandemic that it has caused draws us into the realm of the social, societal, and cultural, in turn implicating the social sciences, epidemiology, sociology, anthropology, politics, economics, and ideology. My focus in this paper will be on the sociocultural and political realms, namely, the sociopolitical causes and effects of the pandemic and their ensuing cultural responses, specifically highlighting the cultural differences extant between the West and East Asia.

An important caveat about the terms, the ‘West’ and ‘East Asia’, is warranted. These terms are deployed foremost as cultural—and not geographical—signifiers and should be interpreted accordingly. Since the advent of modernity/coloniality ensured ‘East Asia’s’ entanglement with the West ([Quijano 2000](#); [Latouche 1996](#)), neither cultural zone should be thought to be culturally autonomous. To be sure, modernity ensured not only that the logos of coloniality would spread from the West to East Asia upon their historic civilizational encounter, but that it would persist even after the end of formal colonization. Nonetheless, despite the persistence of coloniality in East Asia and the ensuing subjugation of its ways of knowing and being, this paper submits that a comparison of the management of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its mutations in the West (exemplified by the U.S. and U.K.) vis-à-vis East Asia (exemplified by China) discloses important cultural and civilisational differences still extant across these cultural regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the structural fault lines that lie beneath what we may regard as ‘normal’ in our era of neoliberal globalization, perhaps more accurately termed globalized neoliberalism. The adjective ‘neoliberal’ is used here to distinguish capitalism as practised in the West over the past forty years from that which existed between the end of the Second World War until the early 1970s upon the collapse of the US dollar-gold standard. Between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s, the economic regime that existed in the West can be described as a form of Keynesian liberalism, a predominant characteristic of which was state-managed, Fordist-industrial capitalism. It was against such a political and socio-economic context that neoliberal globalization emerged.

I will offer here a critique of popular, celebratory accounts of neoliberal globalization by way of an analysis of the current pandemic. I submit that the predominant discourses celebrate globalization largely as part of the rhetoric of coloniality ([Mignolo 2007](#)), the aim of which, indeed, is to conceal globalization’s colonial logics. The point that I am alluding to, in other words, is that despite its appearance of being ‘normal,’ globalization involves the perpetuation of coloniality on a global scale.

This essay has been prompted by a recognition of the deep structural crisis confronting planetary life and, correspondingly, by my ambivalence about a return to ‘normality.’ Indeed, despite our collective yearnings for a return to some semblance of normalcy after nearly two years of pandemic-related disruptions, it is past

¹ The origin of COVID-19 has become politicized and has been a source of heated contention since the beginning of the pandemic. The virus was known to Chinese authorities in December 2019 but identified in January 2020. Subsequently, there have been reports that patients in Europe and the U.S. had been suffering ailments from a mystery virus as early as in September of 2019 ([Parodi and Aloisi 2020](#); [The Straits Times 2021](#)).

time to reflect on what such normality means. Are our societally and ecologically exploitative and extractive ways of life desirable? And if so, for whom? Who gains and who suffers from them? Is such a way of living socially and ecologically sustainable? The pandemic represents an obvious crisis of and for globalization as we have known it since the 1980s and presents us with an opportunity for contemplation and urgent cultural and societal transformation.

I submit, following the scholarship of [Fei \(1992\)](#), [Ames \(2011\)](#), and [Zhao \(2009\)](#), that the West and East Asia have different cultural orientations, marked by an ontology of individualism in the West vis-à-vis that of a certain collectivism in East Asia, which accounts for their contrasting pandemic responses. Cultural orientations are not fixed nor pre-determined in any way. While culture certainly plays a significant role in distinguishing between the West and East Asia, with strong individualism preponderant in the former compared with the more relational and role-bearing modes of being in the latter, it is important to note the respective socioeconomic institutions these cultural orientations engender ([Lee 2021](#)). Hence, I suggest that whereas radical individualism tends to be compatible with profit-driven political economies and wholesale adherence to neoliberalism, cultures weighted towards more relational socialities tend to veer towards state-governed mixed political economies which mitigate against neoliberal excesses ([Hudson 2021a](#)).

I am by no means invoking cultural essentialism here. Indeed, because of the malleability of culture, traditionally more collectivist and relational societies (e.g. China, Vietnam) can choose to implement neoliberal policies as readily as individualistic societies (e.g. U.S., U.K.), allowing private (or market) forces to be preponderant over public (state) regulation. This has certainly been inevitable as a consequence of coloniality. Nonetheless, current pandemic management practices in most of East Asia, not least China, suggest that state control seems still to hold sway over market-determined ones. In what follows, I sketch the outlines of our pre-pandemic neoliberal global economy. I then discuss the pandemic and the various national—and, more importantly, cultural—responses to it. Of pertinence here is the comparison of the pandemic management performances of the industrialized countries of the West on the one hand, with that of many East Asian countries on the other. I conclude the paper with a brief discussion about the prospects of the four-decade old neoliberal world order.

Retrospect: Neo-liberal Globalization—or Globalized Neoliberalism—in the Post-Cold War Era

Up until the SARs-CoV-2 virus emerged and unleashed its deleterious effects around the world, globalization had for much of the past four decades been celebrated by the mainstream media. This trend is well represented in the writings of the *New York Times* columnist [Thomas L. Friedman \(1999\)](#), who held that countries hosting McDonald's franchises seldom went to war with each other. The champions of globalization proposed that as information technologies (IT) proliferated, economic integration and cultural convergence would result, and humanity would be uplifted ([Ohmae 1990](#); [Friedman 1999](#); [VanGrasstek 2013](#)). Moreover, with the Cold War ostensibly over, with capitalism triumphant over socialism, the world had supposedly arrived at the 'end of history' ([Fukuyama 1992](#)). This phase of contemporary globalization had been in the making for some time. As early as the early 1980s, Margaret Thatcher (1984) had in the United Kingdom already declared there to be no alternative (TINA), as she committed to a position of corporate-led, free-market anti-statism, an economic programme of market fundamentalism that simultaneously found common cause with Ronald Reagan's supply-side economics program in the United States. Globalization was thus thought to be the fate of humanity, characterized by an anti-statist and free-market orientation.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall by 1990, followed by the induction of the People's Republic of China into the World Trade Organization in 2001, the expressed optimism in the globalized future was perhaps warranted. With just a handful of Marxist-Leninist/

socialist regimes still standing (the People's Republic of China, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, and Laos), it was anticipated that the new information technologies would help transform the world into a 'global village.' Cosmopolitanism was fashionable and associated with a certain progressive openness while the nation-state was considered parochial, closed, and smacked of a reactionary nationalism ([Friedman 2003](#)). Cosmopolitanism was thus thought consistent and *pari passu* with globalization. The latter was understood as the desirable global spread of market imperatives against nation-state attempts to regulate them. Here, then, we see globalization identified with the ideology that nourishes and propels it: neoliberalism. In other words, globalization was neither a natural nor an inevitable phenomenon; it was the lovechild of a certain political ideology known as 'neoliberalism,' waged by the powerful and wealthy to buttress their interests against the overwhelming majority of the world's population (see [Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005](#); [Harvey 2005](#)). As Saad-Filho and Johnston note, 'Neoliberalism is part of a hegemonic project concentrating power and wealth in elite groups around the world, benefitting especially the financial interests within each country, and U.S. capital internationally. Therefore, globalization and imperialism cannot be analysed separately from neoliberalism' (2005: 1).² Yet because contemporary neoliberal globalization is infused with colonial logics, it would necessarily involve modes of coercion that render it ill-suited to engendering human or societal well-being. This would make globalization appear to be at odds with the sanguine accounts propagated by its adherents, who highlight it as a boon to culture and community. Since these seemingly mythical accounts are also the most popular, they tend to promote wishful thinking about globalization while eliding its most deleterious aspects (coloniality). These mystifying accounts therefore constitute what [Mignolo \(2007: 449\)](#) has identified as the 'rhetoric of modernity.' Such rhetoric is alluring because it inflates the benignity of globalization while concealing its neoliberal perniciousness. It is to the task of unpacking and unmasking this rhetoric that I now turn.

Decoding the Rhetoric of Globalization: Does Globalization Edify Culture and Community?

The popular account of globalization continues what the salvationist rhetoric of modernity began insofar as it performs the same obfuscatory function. I take issue with two obfuscations that reveal the conceptual confusions—constituting what is a categorical mistake—that the rhetoric of globalization trades on. I then show that owing to such a categorical mistake, it leads to misunderstandings of the phenomenon of globalization and also the perception of the social consequences of globalization through rose-tinted glasses. The reality is that the costs that globalization inflict are more severe and far-reaching in scope than such illusory optics allow.

The early appeal of globalization in the 1980s and 1990s rested on specific myths. They include the following: (i) globalization invigorates community by creating a global-village and village-like solidarities. And, as a corollary, that (ii) globalization will—via its cosmopolitanism—generate a celebration of culture, particularly an appreciation for cultural diversity. Instead of such presuppositions, I contend that globalization is neither about community nor cultural edification but is foremost an economic concern. Additionally, I argue that the conceptual confusions inflicted by the popular globalization discourse have prevented an understanding of the actual and enormous societal costs the project inflicts. It is for this reason that I consider it obfuscatory to deploy the term globalization as a descriptor of international developments over the past few decades without modifying it with the adjective neoliberal, the ideology which informs it. After all, globalization connotes not only a sense of inevitability, but a certain benignity about it as well, especially after the end of the Cold War. In other words, globalization is oftentimes a semantic choice which serves as a euphemism for neoliberalism, in large part as a cynical ideological move to hide the surreptitious

² See ([Quijano 2000](#); [Mignolo 2007](#); [Kho 2017, 2009](#) for discussions on neoliberal globalization's inextricable entanglement with 'imperialism' or, more aptly, 'coloniality.'

but societal assault which it involves (see [Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005](#); [Harvey 2005](#)). Of course, as COVID-19 now propagates unfettered across virtually every contiguous national boundary—ironically as the very expression of globalization itself—these costs have been laid bare. Hence, although the invocation of ‘global village’ as a popular metaphor for globalization seems appealing, it is at best a superficial half-truth that would suggest the metaphor to be misplaced. Global interconnectedness can hardly be analogous to village-like intimacies.

Equally problematic is the uncritical conception of globalization as being virtuous by default, especially in the face of (commodified) universal cultural convergence, a phenomenon highlighted in Tom Friedman’s proselytization of McDonaldization ([Friedman 1999](#)). McDonaldization is a motif that [George Ritzer \(2015\)](#) picks up but takes in a more analytically critical direction. For Ritzer, globalization is exemplified by a process of McDonaldization, referring to socio-political-economic organization around the globe that increasingly adheres to the rationality associated with bureaucracy and capitalism. In other words, Ritzer’s formulation of McDonaldization sees the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control by nonhuman technology, dominate social life worldwide. In equally critical fashion and invoking similar symbols of the popular culture, [Benjamin Barber \(2001\)](#) speaks of globalization as a process bringing into collision the worlds of Jihad and McWorld, the forces of reactionary fundamentalism on the one hand, against those of integrative modernization on the other.

While it is apparent that [Ritzer \(2015\)](#) and [Barber \(2001\)](#) were offering careful critiques of globalization as opposed to [Tom Friedman’s \(1999\)](#) venal apologetics, it was the latter which would prevail in popular discourse. The triumphalism of the ‘end of history’ spared no time for circumspection. Yet it is now abundantly clear that the slogans deployed by the likes of a Tom Friedman to promote globalization have led to serious misunderstandings about its implications and impacts. There has never been any necessity for globalization to cohere with local concerns, for it was foremost about the exaltation of the capitalist economy and the coordination of world markets, not culture as such. Bill Clinton’s U.S. presidential campaign slogan of 1992 aptly captured the zeitgeist: ‘It’s the economy, stupid!’

Tom Friedman’s attempt to sell McDonaldization as a boon for world peace should thus be understood as deliberate ideological mystification, a distraction from what was truly at stake, particularly for those societies confronted by the juggernaut of capitalist—and especially, American capitalist—culture via globalization. To cut through the mystification produced by such discourses one can, following [Ritzer \(2015\)](#), ask: in its rationalising mode is McDonaldization not a form of cultural evisceration and does it not signify cultural convergence? Furthermore, does convergence here not imply cultural commodification? If so, are we not speaking of a fundamental political economic process instigated by powerful capitalist states and transnational corporations? Is globalization not verily a euphemism for economic, cultural, and other forms of neo-imperialism, of coloniality all over again ([Quijano 2000](#); [Mignolo 2007](#); [Kho 2017, 2009](#))? These questions seem to affirm Saad-Filho’s and Johnstone’s observation above that globalization, imperialism, and neoliberalism cannot be analysed separately from each other. Indeed, I submit that they are cut of the same cloth, for it is coloniality—or colonialism’s logic—that undergirds them.

As an extension of coloniality, it is little wonder that neoliberal globalization should proceed with global imperatives taking precedence over local ones, and that its concerns are foremost economic and not cultural. The project of neoliberal globalization is not committed to culture in the sense of acknowledging cultural differences around the world, nor is it attempting to affirm their right to exist. Instead, intimately connected to the project is the subordination of all cultural phenomena under the aegis of capitalist economic logic, a logic that has in the last four decades taken on a radically more extreme hue than that which informed capitalism in the West in the post-Second World War era. But if globalization is primarily about economics and not, as widely claimed, about enhancing community or cultural forms, what level of the social polity does it affect? Who gains, and who is hurt by it? It is these questions that I now address.

Globalization and the Devolution of Society into Corporate Oligarchy

As an institutional phenomenon, neoliberal globalization has accelerated the interconnection of national economies within the interstate modern capitalist world system, a process which can arguably be said to have begun with the supposed ‘discovery’ of the New World some five centuries ago. It is worth noting that while its present neoliberal incarnation has continued with such past trends, its key animating agents have been transnational corporations and their representatives. In recognizing the nature of this latest variant of globalization, it also becomes clear that the very nature and constitution of states militate against village sensibilities. Yet the mass-media propagated message about globalization appears to have neglected this fundamental anthropological and sociological insight. In the eagerness to celebrate globalization, crucial differences between large- and small-scale social systems have been overlooked. Key among them is the difference between *gessellschaft* (civil society) and *gemeinschaft* (community) as distinct social forms ([Tonnie 2001](#)[1887]: 17). This has resulted not only in their erroneous conflation, but the concomitant failure to recognize the respectively different relationalities they imply.

According to classical sociologists such as [Tonnie \(2001](#)[1887]), society was an abstract—rather than a natural—social form. It was collective existence brought under the rationalization of the nation-state and its laws to cement the impersonal social ties of its members. The latter were, in turn, rendered autonomous, rights-bearing individuals as they bore no prior organic relations with one another. In the absence of the traditional bonds of mutual reciprocity between community members, the conferment of abstract *a priori* individual rights appeared necessary to make mass-society—*qua* the nation-state—possible. Since human existence, particularly in the West, was conceived to be antagonistic, a war of each against all *a la* [Hobbes \(1997](#) [1651]: 78), it was believed that peaceable social relations and the enforcement of private property could be attained only via the state regulation of an individualistic, rights-based regime.

Yet, as such a rationalised notion of rights became the ubiquitous regulatory norm operating in virtually all modern societies, important pre-modern insights about our species have been obscured, if not wholly forgotten. Arguably, modernity was a watershed event that signified a deviation from our self-understandings as relational, interdependent, and co-creative beings. And as the modern system of rights displaced the traditional community scheme of reciprocity, the world’s denizens inadvertently came to understand themselves as free-standing, atomistic, and autonomous social units ([Tonnie 2001](#)[1887]). Such was the civilisational and cultural revolution that constituted modernity, first beginning in the West with the late-sixteenth century Reformation ([Toynbee 1946](#)), then spreading to the rest of the world, giving rise to what is understood in Tonnie’s formulation to be the displacement of ‘community’ by ‘society’ ([Tonnie 2001](#)[1887]).

Late twentieth-century neoliberal globalization has thus represented the latest extension of these developments. It witnessed the reinforcement of nation-state processes on the world system on the one hand, alongside the consolidation of capital accumulation within and across it, on the other. And it is exactly because of such a demonstrable alliance between nation-states and capital that the primary motives and forces of globalization have irrefragably been both political and economic, prioritizing societal over community interests, the large-scale over the small-scale, *gessellschaft* (civil society) over *gemeinschaft* (community) relationalities ([Tonnie 2001](#) [1887]). But if the emergence of the modern, liberal state constituted an historically undesirable and unnatural social deviation from our communal pasts, globalization since the late twentieth century has been informed by practices even more removed from that past. I now turn to examining these practices and their logic to disclose how the liberal state has devolved into the neoliberal corporate oligarchy it is today.

Globalization and its Libertarian Underpinnings: Liberalism vs. Neoliberalism

Fredrich von Hayek criticised socialist central planning as a threat to freedom, arguing that the government takeover of economic decision-making and the economy was a sure way to totalitarianism (2001: 91-104). This doctrine would find a keen following in the lead nations of the West beginning in the 1980s, with Thatcher and Reagan becoming its most ardent proponents. In keeping with this libertarian doctrine, policymaking in the US and UK, and, increasingly, also around the world, would see the state's traditional political and economic functions being ceded to the market, specifically private and corporate interest groups. Set into motion, therefore, was not so much a government takeover of the economy as warned by Hayek, but the converse: a corporate takeover of government.

It is exactly because of such market and, specifically, corporate dominated trends in the global polity since the late-1980s that the past four decades can be described as neoliberal, involving the seizure and control of state power to bring about market-friendly economic ends (Mirowski 2018: 122). The neoliberal project specifically aimed to turn society into a market economy and, as such, to depoliticize it. This was a posture Thatcher had already alluded to, admitting 'economics are the method, the goal is to change the soul' (1981).

Against this backdrop, the conclusion of the Cold War and collapse of state socialism were not just viewed in the West as portending socialism's defeat; it also meant the defeat of the traditional liberal conception of the state. Consequently, globalization since the early 1990s can be seen to involve a re-ordering of the world according to the interests of corporations, with the latter increasingly usurping the functions of nation-states. Kapferer has noted that whereas the activities of corporations had in the past been constrained by state power, the neoliberal phase has been marked by the growing independence of corporations from state control (2005: 290). Consequently, the power of corporations has exceeded that of states. Not only are the world's largest corporations wealthier than many states, as Kapferer has noted: 'They are assuming increasingly state-like potencies but without the obligations of the state' (Kapferer 2005: 290). Their only obligation is to their shareholders—the global elite—to the singular goal of wealth accumulation. Meanwhile, states have themselves been corporatized, re-made in the image of, and run as if, they were corporations. Within the nation-state, public administration has been displaced by corporate management. In keeping with these neoliberal trends, national governments are expected to demonstrate fiscal responsibility and not spend more than they earn (Kelton 2020: 9). Ideally, they would deliver budget surpluses that are now regarded as unqualified virtues by governments worldwide.

Yet there is something misplaced about nation-states saving and accumulating money as an end-in-itself. The state, after all, is a unique institution bestowed with seigniorage, money-creating powers. Seigniorage is therefore a characteristic of sovereign statehood, allowing sovereign states the capacity of money-creation to facilitate economic provisioning for their respective societies (Mitchell, Wray & Watts 2016: 122). It would follow, then, that there is no necessity for the state to pursue a budget surplus in and of itself, for the state is in fact a public institution not politically analogous or comparable to a household or individual eking out an existence. Rather, the sovereign state has the power to configure the terms under which a national economic system operates, including the issue of its own currency.

Seen from a macro-systemic perspective, money—or credit-creation—is the institutional mechanism by which the state initiates economic activity within its territorial boundaries (Mitchell, Wray & Watts 2016: 130). When the state generates economic activity in this way, financing it with an infusion of money (credit) into the economy, a fiscal deficit necessarily results, for fiat money is, by definition, an IOU: it is the state's promise to pay. It follows that although predominant economic wisdom automatically casts government debt (fiscal deficits) as 'bad' it needs to be recognised that government debt in fact has an expansionary effect on the economic system. Conversely, fiscal surpluses brought about by cuts in public spending (i.e. austerity) exert an opposite, contractionary, effect. In other words, balanced-budgets—much less, budget

surpluses—are not in themselves good. Nor are budget deficits in themselves bad. These positions appear to be little more than the pervasive myths of libertarian thought, existing in its anti-statist, neo-classical, and neoliberal variants.

In contrast, if the understanding of money was not distorted through such libertarian lenses but was taken for what it is—as a public institution by which sovereign governments deploy to grease the wheels of the economy—then a country’s fiscal position would not simply be judged as good or bad on the grounds of it being in surplus or deficit. Determining a nation-state’s health solely on its negative or positive fiscal positions seems to miss the point about sovereignty and the fiat money that characterizes it: it is to succumb to a crude quantitative fetishism. Just like a healthy library *should not* be judged by how full its shelves are but how many of its books are in circulation, the health of a national economy should be evaluated by whether the state’s fiscal behaviour meets the needs of its national economy and its participants. In short, money as a public institution is—and ought to be—a means to social, public provisioning. It is only via a libertarian distortion and the neoliberal capture of the state and its institutions that money has widely come to be fetishized, understood as an end-in-itself.

i. The Financialized Corporate State

Fiscal austerity represents the corporate takeover of the state, amounting to the latter’s financialization, involving the financial-sector takeover of the state polity. Indeed, this trend may be observed to have occurred throughout the globe, with the result being an application of *rentier*— and rent-seeking—logics to what were the traditional state functions of public-provisioning: healthcare, food, education, public utilities, and infrastructure.³ Such financialization took root and expanded across the globe soon after the collapse of the Bretton Woods monetary system in 1971, when the U.S. dollar—as the world’s reserve currency—went off the gold-standard and became a fiat currency. This engendered the gradual, surreptitious takeover of Wall Street interests over those of Main Street, finance over industry, rents over profits,⁴ and the fictitious over the real economy ([Hudson 2021b](#)). Perhaps the financialization of the state and its policy-making apparatus should not surprise, for economists have long argued that the ability of financial markets to reflect real-time price changes attest to the supremacy of the market as the ultimate bearer of truth ([Mirowski 2019: 7-10](#)). Abetted by information technology, finance is thus the very embodiment of the exalted virtues of the market.

ii. Anti-Statism, Neo-liberalism, and Neo-conservatism: Western Imperium Redux?

It is in this context that anti-statism has risen alongside the discourse of neoliberal globalization, especially in the West. Such anti-statism is a historically longstanding feature of capitalism and is constituted by considering government social provisioning to be undesirable. Kalecki identified the reasons for such anti-statism when writing about full-employment through government spending eight decades ago: ‘Full employment would cause social and political changes which would give a new impetus to the opposition of the business leaders. The “sack” would cease to play its role as a disciplinary measure. The social position of

3 The noun ‘rentier’ and its associated behaviour of ‘rent-seeking’ is derived from ‘rent,’ a concept which exists alongside ‘profits’ and ‘wages’ in nineteenth century classical political economy. Just like ‘profits’ and ‘wages,’ ‘rent’ is a class designation, signalling one’s social role in economic production and, concomitantly, one’s distributive share in accordance with it. In the socio-economic context of nineteenth century England, ‘rent’ was that which accrued to the landed aristocracy; it was that portion of national income that was paid out to the landlord class. Yet it was often associated with unearned or unproductive income. A more generalised definition conceives of ‘rent’ as the difference between an economic activity’s market-price and its value (based on the necessary labour costs of its production). Here, the notion that it is unearned or unproductive is again underscored. Indeed, it is in this sense of being unproductive that financialization is invariably connected with rentier and rent-seeking behaviour. I am indebted to Michael Hudson for clarifying these concepts in conversation. See also: [Hudson 2021b](#).

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the boss would be undermined, and the self-assurance and class-consciousness of the working class would grow' (1943: 324). For these reasons, Kalecki writes that 'budget deficits necessary to carry out government intervention must be regarded as perilous; (1943: 323). The political economic reasons for anti-statism, in other words, are simple: (government) social provisioning not only crowds out private commercial opportunities; it blunts the disciplinary power that the captains of industry wield over the working population. However, the state-market, public-private conflict is seldom understood in such realist political economic terms but almost exclusively through an individualistic, rights-based libertarian framing.

This libertarian orientation, encompassing both liberal and neo-liberal offshoots that spawn from it, tends invariably to frame the state-market conflict in terms of the state's encumbrance of the individual and his or her attendant rights. The present neoliberal milieu thus witnesses a sustained critique of the state, which is thought to unduly interfere with individual choice. This anti-statist critique is sustained axiomatically: since government action disrupts market mechanisms it is inefficient and ultimately detrimental to society. A more strident anti-statism maintains the state (government) as an irredeemably oppressive institution that threatens individual liberties. In international relations, this anti-statist posture can be observed in Western leaders' expressions of disapproval against the governments of China, Russia, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea, whose claims of sovereignty against Western neoliberal domination (i.e. the Washington Consensus) typically result in their demonization. Accordingly, the governments of these countries are routinely regarded in the West as authoritarian and dictatorial, in accordance with the prevailing liberal (and neoliberal) common sense. While these countries have strong state-regimes led by strong personalities—perhaps a necessity in the face of the tremendous political challenges they face—it is careless to equate neoliberal markets with individual freedoms on one hand, and strong states with authoritarianism on the other. Certainly, such associations trivialise both the notions of freedom and authoritarianism. If strong and authoritarian national leadership should be considered problematic, it is equally pertinent to ask if neoliberalism's global presence has not itself been the result of its own forms of coercion. Indeed, it is worthwhile asking: to what extent has such nationalistic authoritarianism been a response to the global-scale neoliberal assault on nation-state and parastatal structures over the past four decades? Additionally, does neoliberalism necessarily rule out coercion and authoritarianism simply because declarations about individual rights and freedoms have been built into its rhetoric? Lottholz *et. al.*, after all, note that, "authoritarian" and "illiberal" framings are part of an Orientalist and Western-centric worldview that distracts attention from the discontents and violence inherent in capitalist modernity' (2020: 421). Are we complicit in conflating rhetoric with reality?

It bears remembering that since the end of the Second World War, Western domination of the global polity has occurred through various seemingly multilateral institutions: the Bretton Woods Institutions, the corporate-led World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the direct military interventions of the U.S. and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation). In the latter instance, we observe a case of neoliberalism devolving into neoconservatism, with overt or covert military operations undertaken to engender desired Western geopolitical outcomes.⁵ Additionally, one must not forget the geopolitics of knowledge featuring dominant Western knowledge institutions (e.g. media, universities, think tanks, and NGOs) imposing Eurocentric civilization on the world, whether in its Judeo-Christian, liberal, neoliberal, or neoconservative, incarnations. Indeed, coloniality in the realm of knowledge has been necessary for maintaining the colonial

5 The relationship between neoliberal financialization and U.S. militarization, which U.S. neoconservatives advance unapologetically, can be explained by the hegemonic status of the US dollar as the world's de facto reserve currency. The US dollar's hegemony allows the U.S. state to issue Treasury bonds or IOUs without constraint, permitting the U.S. government to finance its military budget [Hudson 2021c] without the need to ever consider having to repay its debt obligations. US dollar hegemony—or the absence of an alternative global currency—ensures that the balance-of-payments (BOP) surpluses of foreign countries (such as China) are re-invested in US Treasury bonds, reinforcing the US dollar's standing, in turn, perpetuating the said militarization. There is, of course, an inescapable irony residing in the fact that insofar as China has been the U.S.' largest creditor, channelling its BOP surpluses into the purchase of U.S. Treasury bonds, the Chinese state has inadvertently been paying for its own military encirclement.

matrix of power (Quijano 2000). As the history of western empire attests, this has been a trend since the sixteenth century, with neoliberalism and neoconservatism being but its latest incarnations.

Do these ongoing attempts by the West to make and re-make the world in its image not verily entail its own brand of authoritarianism, one that is imbued with universalist pretensions? Despite the West’s much-touted opposition to any kind of authoritarian governance in its professed commitment to individual liberties, it is evident that its historic attempts to shunt the world towards an increasingly unilateral and unipolar (i.e. Eurocentric) global world-order since the sixteenth century (which has persisted until recently), could neither have emerged nor been sustained without an authoritarian governing regime. Instead, the contrary has been evident: world system domination has required that a veritable kind of authoritarianism be enacted on a world scale, to the extent that by 1941, 84% of the world had been colonized by the West (Hoffman 2015). Indeed, is the West’s (U.S. and NATO member states and their allies) current opposition to the governments of China, Russia, Iran, Cuba et. al. not verily an example of ongoing efforts to re-Westernize the world? And do such attempts at re-Westernization not arise from an apparent fundamental intolerance of anything but a Judeo-Christian, liberal-secular, neoliberal, or neo-conservative world order? Is this not the democratic West’s attempt at totalitarianism, contradictions notwithstanding? Or is such a variant of authoritarianism acceptable and beyond reproach for being derived from the exceptionalism of the U.S., its leading nation?

Living with Covid vs Zero-transmission: Neoliberal Epidemiology and its Cultural Alternative

Two years after the pandemic began scientists are still grappling with newer mutations of the virus. The latest Omicron variant has underlined the immense damage inflicted by the pandemic on public health and economies. The levels of mortality, morbidity, and economic devastation that have ensued from COVID-19 are obvious, even if their distribution has been uneven. In the U.K. and the U.S, two nation-states that constitute the vanguard of the neoliberal experiment, they have disproportionately claimed the lives of the indigent, elderly, infirmed, and essential workers. As the virus mutated, we observed similarly devastating trends in India in May 2021 (Prashad 2021; Roy 2021).

While the pandemic has claimed the lives of over five and a half million around the world (as of 10 January 2022), the billionaire class in the U.S. saw a manifold expansion of its wealth within the first few months of it (Collins, Ocampo & Paslaski 2020). In the meantime, government responses to the pandemic have been myriad. National strategies have included herd immunity at one pole and zero-transmission (or elimination) at the other, with various permutations in between. There is now considerable cross-sectional data allowing us to draw contrasts between the outcomes and relative efficacies of these different strategies

Table 1. COVID-19, Deaths per million of country’s population

	12-Sep-20	3-Feb-21	13-Sep-21	10-Jan-22
USA	596	1378	2034	2573
UK	600	1586	1965	2194
Sweden	N.A.	1166	1441	1504
Taiwan	0.3	0.3	35	36
Japan	11	46	133	146
S. Korea	7	28	46	118

Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

(see, for example, [Oliu-Barton et.al. 2021](#)). Although the available data is subject to interpretations and could easily be politicized, I contend that there is sufficient data to allow useful working hypotheses to be made.

Unlike most infectious diseases in the past, COVID-19 has hit the rich countries of the West particularly hard. Especially prominent is the U.S.A, topping the world in recording the highest number of infections to date. With just four percent of the global population, it has as of 10 January 2022 accounted for nearly 20 percent of the world's total infections while also registering an extremely high number of deaths. [Table 1](#) documents the COVID-19 mortality rates of some of the leading neoliberal nations such as the U.S.A and U.K. and compares them with those of the East Asian nations of Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. The U.S. effort seems to have had many parallels with the *laissez faire* approach adopted by the U.K. and Swedish governments at the start of the pandemic. Indeed, the U.K. government was an early proponent of herd immunity, some variant of which the U.S. and some others in the West—including Sweden (see [Dewan 2021](#))—have deployed as their de facto pandemic strategy. Herd immunity is said to occur when the virus can no longer spread because it is constantly running into people who have developed immunity to it ([World Health Organization 2020](#)).

In contrast to the U.S. and U.K., China, the world's most populous country with 18 percent of the world population and the initial ground-zero of COVID-19, had on 13 September 2021 accounted for only about 0.042 percent of the world's total infections since the pandemic began. By 10 January 2022, China's cumulative number of infections made up 0.0034 percent of the world's cumulative total. This was a reduction from 0.085 percent on 3 February 2021, which was in turn a decrease from 0.30 percent on 12 September 2020. Arguably, the Chinese state has demonstrated its commitment, determination, as well as its capacity to control the spread of the virus by persisting with a zero-tolerance elimination strategy even as other countries have abandoned such a course in favour of the economy over the short-run. It follows that China's COVID-19 mortality rate on 10 January 2022 stood at around 3 deaths per one million, a striking contrast with all countries in [Table 1](#), including the East Asian ones.

If China's apparent success at managing the pandemic somehow lacks credibility because of its authoritarian governing regime ([Green & Medeiros 2020](#)), one may consider the performance of other East Asian nations such as Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, all liberal democracies firmly entrenched within the U.S. geopolitical orbit. Although these East Asian nations are liberal democracies in the mould of the U.S. and U.K., associating them on the grounds of their outwardly shared political forms can be misleading. It is more important to note that notwithstanding their apparently similar political systems, these East Asian nations, including authoritarian China, appear to share a common, implicit statist-commitment to ensuring public safety. These statist commitments militate against the excesses of Anglo-American neoliberalism and seem to explain the general adoption of zero-transmission or elimination strategies in East Asia against the de facto herd immunity or mitigation approaches more commonly found in the West ([Freeman 2020](#), [Oliu-Barton et. al. 2021](#)). Again, no cultural essentialism is being suggested here: East Asian countries are as free to choose mitigation as countries in the West zero-transmission. For instance, New Zealand and Australia, two Western nations with a considerable history of neoliberalism adopted cautious zero-transmission policies throughout 2020 and 2021 and were successful keeping infections and deaths down to a minimum. Even then, despite its earlier successes, Australia—led especially by its commercial centre of New South Wales—has since late 2021 abandoned its zero-transmission policy in favour of a more *laissez faire* approach, with predictable devastating consequences ([West 2022](#)). As the pandemic persists and herd immunity has proven elusive due to the virus continuing to mutate into ever more infectious strains (Delta, Omicron), the discourse has shifted towards the virus being endemic. This has given rise to the policy of living with Covid becoming the concomitant pandemic strategy ([Pearlman, Cheong & Huang 2021](#)), which I discuss below.

The Neoliberal Corpse

I have highlighted the chasm between the pandemic outcomes of East Asia vis-à-vis U.S. and the U.K., the leading nations of the West, specifically to throw more light on the foregoing discussion of neoliberalism. I submit that the abysmal pandemic management outcomes in the West viz. East Asia is an indictment of neoliberalism and its *laissez faire*, 'personal responsibility' approach to public safety and welfare. As discussed, the neoliberal fetishization of markets converts public goods such as healthcare into commodities, rendering them accessible only to those with the means to pay. Furthermore, following [Ritzer \(2015\)](#), a globalized neoliberal society is one which is subject to the rationalizing process of McDonaldization; whatever is needed for its commoditized healthcare system is produced and distributed 'just-in-time' so as to ensure the minimization of costs while maximizing profits. But it is also because such a rationalized and privatized healthcare system creates rent-seeking monopolies that the U.S. has been judged by the World Health Organization to have the world's costliest healthcare system while ranking 37th in terms of performance ([WHO 2000](#); see also [Parramore 2021](#)). It is also in adhering to these same neoliberal forces that the U.K. has taken a wrecking ball to its national health system ([Zapata 2020](#); [Pilger 2019](#); [Gill and McFadyen 2019](#)).

Yet the experiences of the U.S. and U.K. during the current pandemic have demonstrated the limitations of a privatized and rationalized healthcare system. A pandemic demands a robust state-public response that is not forthcoming from a just-in-time healthcare system that seeks the constant lowering of costs and efficiency gains. The aims of such a system are to lower costs and maximise profits, not save lives. Hence, when deaths occur, they are thought to be inevitable. It is no surprise, then, that when measured in deaths per population, the U.S. and U.K. count among the worst-hit in the developed world. It is useful to recall that the U.S. and U.K. are the historic birth-sites of neoliberalism and remain its vanguard today. Of course, such outcomes do not have to be, save for an uncompromising commitment to neoliberal ideology and practice. How many more need to die in the service of an ideology that exalts the sanctity of individuals while materially denying them the very right to life?⁶

In faithful service to neoliberal ideology, governments eager to re-open their economies typically do so by reiterating that people need to work to live. Indeed, this government position speaks to the desperation of the precarious who are characteristically confined to a hand-to-mouth existence. The claim of 'having to work to live' is as trivial as it is cynical, especially when coming from neoliberal governments, for it conveniently elides the fact that it is entirely within the political purview of governments to intervene in the interest of public welfare and well-being, be it in economic provisioning or health. The question of why people should be (rendered) so desperate as to risk their lives to make a living is seldom asked, much less addressed. Perhaps this is understandable, for such a line of inquiry probes deep into the system's structure and exposes it for what it is—a system of iniquitous expropriation that preys on the insecurities wrought by individualism.

Indeed, the justification for government safeguards in the public interest becomes all the greater in times of crises. Yet such a social orientation generally seems to be lacking. Because of our globalized neoliberal milieu and its resulting consciousness, today's common sense determines that matters of personal welfare, whether livelihood or health, are one's private affairs. Furthermore, it is also a widespread belief that the individual is always free to choose. In a curious distortion, the neoliberal ideological doctrine of individual choice is augmented when states prioritise the economy over public safety and renege on their traditional governmental duties to safeguard public health. For example, individuals can be said to be exercising their

⁶ In March 2020, then Democratic presidential candidate and now newly elected U.S. president, Joe Biden, announced his intention to veto 'Medicare for All' legislation, maintaining the status quo. The standard pretext about 'costs' was offered for not doing the socially necessary and responsible, which this author has hopefully shown in the foregoing discussion to be hogwash. See [Higgins \(2020\)](#).

choices effectively—to the point of being prepared to die for their decisions—when they return to the workplaces and schools that governments have re-opened despite the virus still spreading. Yet what this appearance of individual choice-making has done is to essentially transfer the pandemic's structural risks from governments onto individuals. Such risk-transfer is in lock-step adherence with neoliberal ideas in that it absolves governments of the responsibility to underwrite public safety while it passes the pandemic's dangers on to individuals. Moreover, it is useful to note that these risks are not distributed equally but are unduly borne by society's most vulnerable. Such uneven exposure to the pandemic in the U.S. along the divides of social class and race have been highlighted in a Brookings Institute report, which note:

There are numerous ways in which the burdens of this COVID-19 have fallen disproportionately on less advantaged demographic groups. This essay highlights just one: the burden of continuing to work outside the home while the virus continues to spread through the populations is disproportionately born (sic) by lower wage, less educated, and non-white workers. ([Kearney & Pardue 2020](#)).

Similarly, a U.K. Office for National Statistics report highlights a similar correlation between social class and COVID-19 mortalities in the country between March and May of 2020. It states:

People living in the most deprived local areas, and those living in urban areas such as London, have been found to have the highest rates of death involving COVID-19... Today's analysis shows that jobs involving close proximity with others, and those where there is regular exposure to disease, have some of the highest rates of death from COVID-19. ([Windsor-Shellard & Butt 2020](#): 3).

These findings about the U.K. have been affirmed by the even more recent report by [The Health Foundation and The Institute of Health Equity \(2020\)](#) titled, *Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Report*.

The report attributes the country's high death-toll to: (i) 'the governance and political culture' that have 'damaged social cohesion and inclusiveness, undermined trust, de-emphasised the importance of the common good' (ii) 'widening inequities in power, money and resources' which 'generate inequalities in health generally, and COVID-19 specifically,' and (iii) 'government policies of austerity' that 'succeeded in reducing public expenditure in the decade before the pandemic ... the effects were the regressive cuts in spending by local government including in adult social care, failure of health care spending to rise in accord with demographic and historical patterns, and cuts in public health funding' (2020: 6). The explanations for the pandemic debacles of the U.S. and U.K. offered by these reports are in keeping with the critique of this paper. Together, they are an indictment of the four-decade old project of neoliberal globalisation.

Yet while the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the corpse of neoliberalism, neither the ideology nor its acolytes seem willing to go quietly into the night. Ryan laments the prospect of neoliberal continuity: 'If neoliberalism ... survive(s) this pandemic crisis, it also has the potential to become immune to critique and, quite fearfully, perhaps become even stronger' (2021: 90). Such fears appear justified. After all, as I have argued, neoliberalism's individualistic—and, necessarily, anti-statist—posture continue to be embedded in the discourse of 'herd immunity' and of 'living with Covid' (see [Kuldorff, Gupta & Battacharya 2020](#)). And they seem to be gradually becoming official policy in much of the West and beyond, with highly vaccinated Singapore being a notable Southeast Asian example (see [Ong 2021](#)).

The convergence between neo-liberalism, herd immunity and living with Covid hardly seems accidental. With these ideas appearing to be nourished by a libertarian-derived individualism inherent to the heart of historical capitalism, they seem consistent with the priority for businesses to carry on as usual while the system culls those that it deems weak and dispensable. This is indeed the very idea of living with Covid: to have everyone accept the possibility of dying from COVID-19 doing all the things we did pre-pandemic. Never mind about questioning the social, economic, and ecological sustainability of pre-pandemic life. For many national governments adopting such a narrative, the latest objective has been to get most of their

populations (60-80%) vaccinated. Important a goal as that may be, they mostly regard vaccination alone to be the pandemic's silver bullet, and, apparently, their only responsibility to public health. In keeping with the central thesis of this paper, I submit that the conception of SARs-CoV-2 as endemic and the concomitant strategy to live with Covid represent the latest iteration of herd immunity arguments. They are similar insofar as they implicate the neoliberal desire not only to return to pre-pandemic business as usual but to minimise the role of the state in doing so. Like no other comparable event in the recent history of the world, the extent of death and disease due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the lead nations of the West has exposed the misanthropy that belies an unconstrained commitment libertarianism and its neoliberal offshoots. The project of neoliberal globalization has run its course. It is past time to consider other ways of being in the world.

Conclusion

Our lives, like our social systems, and our natural ecologies, are grossly out of balance. The COVID-19 pandemic, and our institutional (non)responses to it, serve as an ample demonstration of this unbalance. My concern in this paper has been to take issue with globalization on one hand, and neoliberalism on the other, with the former serving as a euphemism for the latter. The rhetoric of globalization conceals the perniciousness of neoliberalism and its entanglements with coloniality. I have in this paper removed the veil that permits such a concealment, dispensing with the illusion that globalization consolidates cultures and communities. Instead, I have highlighted the perniciousness of the underlying logic that fuels globalization. It is precisely in seeing past the wishful but illusory rhetoric of globalization and wishing to re-present things more accurately, that I submit the term neoliberalism to be more appropriate than globalization. Given our deep civilizational crises it would seem necessary that we call things what they are.

The logic of neoliberalism has constituted the central, operative dynamic that has shaped the globe's social systems for over the past four decades. It is to neoliberalism and its libertarian-inspired cognates (e.g. individualism, freedom), popularised by Austrian and Chicago School free-market (neoclassical) economics since the 1970s, that I attribute the most dismal of government performances in managing the pandemic. It is unsurprising that neoliberalism's vanguard nations, the U.S. and U.K., count to be among the worst performing governments in the developed world in managing the pandemic. In view of this, it seems reasonable to say that those governments still choosing to pursue neoliberal policies during the pandemic do so at the peril of inflicting utter destruction upon their societies. Since such destruction will invariably be borne most heavily by the most vulnerable such a course of action would seem like an abdication of the traditional responsibilities of government.

There should be no doubt as to why the wealthiest Western nations have endured such gratuitous devastation and death in the face of the pandemic. I have here disclosed neoliberalism's singular contribution to precipitating the social disaster before us. Neoliberalism, after all, has involved the corporatisation of the state and its re-purposing towards market-friendly ends, a phenomenon which has manifested in the state's financialization today. Finance has been the essence of neoliberalism in that it embodies the supposed virtues of the market as the bearer of truth. Abetted by revolutionary developments in information technologies, financialization has been the governing process and logic of the global system over the past four decades. And since one of the consequences of financialization has been the imposition of austerity on governments, we have observed states around the world cutting back on their traditional (liberal) function of public provisioning, sometimes abandoning it altogether to make way for private, corporate healthcare profiteers. Whereas traditional state-sponsored health provisioning is based on the needs of a country's population, for-profit corporate healthcare provision exists exclusively for the maximisation of corporate profits. The former is predicated on a notion of social reproduction and care and based on human need, whereas the latter on economic production based upon the proclivities of greed. In many areas of social

provisioning, we have noticed the liberal justification for the state increasingly becoming obsolete over the past forty years, snuffed out by neoliberalism, which is effectively the ideology of the rentier class.

The cutback in national public health spending by neoliberal governments in favour of pro-market and profit orientation has meant that many nation-states have become increasingly vulnerable to pandemics and other public health crises. Austerity, or for-profit healthcare is short-term in orientation, which militates against preparation for contingencies. Certainly, maintaining additional capacity in the healthcare system—much needed in times of crises—is to be avoided in the interest of maximizing earnings and minimizing costs. Such ill-preparedness in public health cannot be made more obvious than by the devastation wrought by the current COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps it is exactly because of the failure of many neoliberal governments in the West—as well as non-West—to prepare for public health emergencies that herd immunity has been morphed into a convenient pandemic strategy in such countries. This is a contrast with the predominant state-sponsored strategies of many East and Southeast Asian governments. This herd immunity strategy has been deployed to provide convenient pseudo-scientific cover for a return to business as usual, while allowing the virus to spread. With the narrative of ‘living with Covid’ now being popularized, the need for the appearance of scientific legitimation could soon become superfluous: living with Covid, as with neoliberalism, is unabashedly social Darwinian in character.

For these reasons, I submit that herd immunity or living with Covid is neoliberalism applied to the field of public health management. It can alternatively be termed ‘neoliberal epidemiology,’ which is an oxymoron. While epidemiology is a cornerstone of public health, its neoliberal expression is centred neither on the public nor on health since ‘there is no such thing as society’ *a la* Thatcher. It is a strategy that seems committed to only the survival of the fittest individuals. If the weak are eliminated in due course, so be it. Such is the perfidious ideology of neoliberalism. It is significant that the very same moral issues that have been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic are also at stake in the looming ecological crises and climate emergency: either ‘we’ solve it together, or not at all. There is no ‘self’ without the ‘other’—no ‘I’ without ‘we.’ Yet neoliberalism is antithetical to the notion of a shared existence. If the past four decades have been marked by neoliberal globalization, the epoch has surely been brought to an ignominious end by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, in what is a quintessential unfolding of globalization itself. The neoliberal project is morally dead. COVID-19 has displayed its corpse. It is time that it be entombed.

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