The Sleeping Bull in a China Shop:
Exploring how Covid19 elucidates exploitation along the crosshairs of the occident vs the orient, and class stratification, in a neo-liberal age.

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Night and Day; East and West. Two signifiers of the same spectrum that represent opposites. In a social imaginary that Marshall McLuhan referred to as the 'global village' (1962, p293), that which was distant is now close; what was remote is now accessible and is part now part of the landscape. Yet, is not the dichotomous 'Occident verses the Orient' an unproductive and awkward juxtaposition? It has been profitable for a few, at the detriment of the many. Reason is a fragile thing in a time of post-truth populism. Just as we have witnessed the centuries long-debunked 'flat earth movement' rising up again, we also come to see how hard it may be to redress false sentiments of 'otherness'. So, is now not the time to double our efforts and meet this ad hominem head on with rationality and a sensible unifying discourse on a never attempted global scale?

Living in Nanjing, China, I am watching CoVid19 like a bull in a metaphorical [fine]china shop (an apt expression considering the direction of the global chain of production), crashing its way through the West. Now, around me in China breathes a sense of optimism that we have ‘beaten’ what other countries now must contend with. However, it is almost as if the virus’ journey West turned it into an entirely different beast. It has become an illusory Cerberus being fought from different angles. I don't speak here of its bio structure, but of the socio-political response. A cacophony of disunity, disobedience, and discord have drowned out any chance of an effective response as governments hesitate, the states and countries trying to urgently outbid each other for hospital supplies and equipment. So I ask: why were we so woefully ill-prepared for something we know to be a, periodical reality?
It’s time to think laterally instead of from the top down. This could have been countenanced if we lived in a time of more representative politics. From this, the present article will suggest two potential reasons why adequate preparations were not made: First, the establishment’s (the dominant group within a nation) dogged pursuit of power and market hegemony over all else is breeding incompetence in other areas - truth and integrity in media reporting; representation in government; justice in jurisprudence. Secondly, and as a result of the first points, I argue that the world has taken its construction of the metaphysical distance between the West and China too literally, overlooking the very tangible and concrete human movement between the two.

This may be starting to sound like the angling of a sino-fied expatriate, but I have my issues with the Chinese government’s dealing with Covid-19 as well. For instance, how they squandered invaluable time and resources at the inception through trying to ‘save face’ (an ironic attempt, as it often is); by announcing a city-wide lockdown, yet allowing ten hours for people to flee; and by suppressing those who tried to make the public aware of the virus. Most notably, Dr. Li Wenliang, who tried to blow the whistle back in January, was censored and subsequently died.
from contracting the virus\(^1\). We should perhaps therefore be thankful for our democratic systems (while 
recognising that they are not infallible).

The \textit{foci} to clarify here is two. First that the 'distance' between the East and the West is both 'real' and 
'constructed'. The former, with improvements in communication and transportation, has shrunk as the 'global 
'village' has expanded. In the latter, it has not. A distance that spatially can be traversed ever-quicker, but 
ideologically and humanistically, is still perceived to have an unbridgeable vastness. In his well-known book 
\textit{Orientalism}, when describing the Western construction of the 'East', as part of a ‘European imaginative 
geography’, Said said that:

"Europe articulates the orient...rationality is undermined by eastern excesses, those mysteriously attractive 
opposites to what seem to be normal values...[but] "sovereignty” alone does not rule men, there is such a thing as 
judgment, they say...Oriental mysteries will be taken seriously, not least because they challenge the rational 
Western mind to new exercises of it’s enduring ambition and power." (Said, 2003, p57)

This enduring construct is evident at the highest levels of public office and spread by means as simple as a 
 xenophobic utterance, e.g. Trump’s disparaging term for Covid-19: "Chinese Virus".

Furthermore, the conspiratorial notion that the Chinese government would manufacture this for their own self 
gain is ludicrous. It should be noted that this fallacious rhetoric is not one sided, and also has a sino-centric 
equivalent making traction on Chinese social media (e.g. see the screenshot conversations above)\(^2\). That said, our 
‘Western’ values embrace freedom of speech, and we should reactively know to regard information when it is 
presented to us more critically, perhaps. It is a right, but also a privilege, not to be abused. At any rate, both are 
baseless propaganda, and these discriminatory by-lines function as a distraction from the true issues at hand.

While it is our system of democratic institutions that hold us accountable and protect us from spurious or harmful 
tendencies, there are cracks in this which have become clearer now than ever before. Take the political coldness 
of total lockdown in Wuhan, China. For those in the West who may exaggeratedly deride this ‘totalitarian' action 
(it’s authoritarian), we could ask, was not Trump's cold-hearted market focus to ‘opened up; the economy for 
Easter again\(^3\) not colder still?

This segways us to the second focus, and a return to my own ‘Western’ context: the self-serving culture of the 
British Establishment, that has been under the rubric of Neoliberalism since the 1970s (Jones, 2015, p44). 
Empirically, it is simply not in the interest of the many. Would the UK populous actually be safer with a US style 
health system? Would we really be healthier under TTIP? Are the privatised rail stock or energy sector really more 
utilitarian? Most pertinent, does the US economy matter more than the lives of the people? Empirically, no. This 
is little more than the \textit{raison d’etre} of a \textit{laissez-faire} marketplace that creates new avenues of supply and demand 
via the subversion of humanitarian interests. In short, the unregulated commodification of everything is arguably


\(^3\text{Wagner, John; Dennis, Brady. 'Trump Wants U. S Economy 'opened up and raring to go' By Easter. [online]. Available at: www.washingtonpost.com/health/trump-wants-us-economy-opened-uo-and-raring-to-go-by-easter/2020/03/24dceca12-6d65-11ea-b148-e4ce3bd85b5_story.html}
the distinction between pre-1970s capitalism and the neoliberalism of today. For more examples, one just has to look at the disunity and conflict of interest that the US states and hospitals are faced with because Trump, in perpetual fear of losing his base, doesn't want to seem ‘socialist’ by taking control of the supply chains. These decisions have left states and institutions to engage in a domestic bidding war, and indeed in some cases, against the federal government itself. This is demonstrably not in anyone’s best interest, except for the companies selling the goods. While this circus unfolds in the USA, back home in the UK the desirous Tim Martins of pub-franchise Weatherspoon’s fortune tells his forty thousand staff to find a job at Tesco because companies like his supposedly don't have the fiscal liquidity to support their staff, yet mere months before he had donated two hundred thousand pounds to the Conservatives, spent one hundred thousand pounds on pro-Brexit beer mats to push for a no-deal Brexit, and profited to the tune of forty-four million for his troubles, increasing his personal wealth to over half a billion pounds in the process. Here we have men with legs akimbo over politics and business, casting a dubious shadow over both.

That the established powers of the West had every opportunity to prepare for the pandemic, yet failed, brings to light the top-down and longitudinal failings of the current world order, between he-who-sells his labour and he-who-owns his own production, and between the 'East' and 'West'. Indeed, they are not mutually exclusive and are both tools of extortion. Evidently, ours is 'to reason why'. Now with these contradictions in clear light - the hemispherical hegemony and the misaligned self-agency in our stratified societies, all within a 'global village' and 'democracy' - now is the time to push for change, as the deficiency of these roles, this status quo, is clearer than ever.

To further the metaphor, I argue that there needs to be a civic centre as well as a bank in order to improve the prospects of the 'global village' ever becoming more than just an ironic moniker. On national levels there needs to be more societal equality of opportunity, and better representation in government, but also more state autonomy from, and regulation of, the markets. Just as we separate church and state, or science and religion, so it needs to be with capitalist interests and governance. And finally, we must see more international multilateralism. Covid19 could have been mitigated, but when it comes to humanitarian and environmental issues efforts fall far short of the ingenuity seen in the capitalist ventures of the global market. At risk of sounding pollyanna-ish, imagine the possibilities of global cooperation instead of 'inter-national' zero-sum gaming. Covid19 is both an economic problem and a socio-political one. In the age of neoliberal economics, market interests reign supreme. Perhaps it is time political outliers and the academic milieu started educating the populous about neo-Liberalism and its mis-sold quasi-religious slogans of the 'invisible hand' and the 'trickle down' in more illuminating detail, but most importantly, got serious about actionable and realistic alternatives. After all, an alternative that is incomplete and incoherent, is no alternative at all.

Ours is to reason why, and Covid19 has magnified these injustices along the lines of the crosshair in our sights.

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4. Klar, Rebecca (2020), Michigan governor says states bidding against each other for medical supplies is ‘creating a lot more problems for us all’ [online]. Available at: www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/michigan-governor-says-states-bidding-against-each-other-for-medical-supplies-is-creating-a-lot-more-problems-for-us-all/ar-BB115di


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Images:
'Flat Earthers Call Trump's Space Force Idea 'Impossible', Lyne Lucien (thedailybeast.com)
Screenshots by the author