Medical staff care for a critically ill COVID-19 patient at a hospital in Wuhan, China in early 2020. (Photo credit: AFP via Getty Images)

Let’s Revive the Economy Like We Contained COVID

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Human society succeeds in carrying out its functions because so many perform their work with skill, generosity, and attention to the common interest. Medical professionals in the current COVID-19 crisis are outstanding; so also are service workers, farm workers, professionals, and factory workers.

But the world’s top leaders are exceptionally self-seeking. Consider the rulers of the ten most populous countries, from China to Mexico, comprising nearly 60% of humanity. Or the CEOs of the world’s top 10 corporations, from Saudi Aramco and Amazon to China’s Tencent, controlling 30% of all global capital. Which of these leaders shows any devotion to the common good or social welfare? Thanks to their grasping greed, the year 2019 was arguably a global peak in corporate and government irresponsibility, yielding environmental degradation, political oppression, and social inequality. For the rest of us, are we helpless in the face of those who hold concentrated power? And what is the meaning of “we”? Is human existence that of separate nations, subdivided by race, gender, continent, education, and wealth? Or does “we” include all who share the consequences of our crumbling environment?

The year 2020 changed reality and changed outlooks. The deadly threat of the novel coronavirus caused heartrending losses for many, along with social disruption and sharp economic cuts. Despite the turmoil, the impulse to save lives triumphed, benefitting millions. Common people are supporting each other with energy and imagination. As so many have said, “*we are all in the same boat*.” That is, we are all in the same boat as living persons, even though people play different roles in economy and society. But are the corporate and national leaders also in the same boat? Or do they see themselves in separate boats, protecting wealth rather than

life?

For the moment, basic humanity supersedes the socio-economic roles we play. It is demonstrably the case that common people have halted the advance of COVID-19, even though leaders claim credit for reducing the death toll. How did common people succeed in seizing the moment and limiting the pandemic? A look at history shows the changes of the past century that made this success possible.

The year 1918 was far more disastrous than 2020. A virus much like COVID-19 spread in 1918, killing roughly 50 million people worldwide. This flu ravaged the US and Europe; it was far more horrific elsewhere. People fought the pandemic with their will to live, with available knowledge, and through cooperation, but were overcome by the limits on knowledge and especially by their division into separate, isolated groups. The virus triumphed, with deaths of 2,500 per 100,000 population. Even in the relatively healthy US, death took more than 500 per 100,000.[1]

What a difference a century can make! The current COVID-19 pandemic, terrible as it is, has so far caused deaths at no more than 15 per 100,000 worldwide. The US mortality rate is less than one tenth what it was in 1918–19. The impulse to preserve human life has become more powerful in our own time.[2]

Today’s lower mortality depends on more than medical technology: social changes and stronger human community are reducing the toll. Between 1918 and 2019, bitter struggles led to complex transformations. The slaughter of two World Wars, economic collapse, and Cold War threats of nuclear destruction brought the dismantling of empires and weakening of racial hierarchy. A new system of some 200 nations arose, most with constitutions setting the goal of democracy. Schooling and literacy advanced among people everywhere; medical, public-health, and other knowledge advanced among specialists. Mobile phones now keep most humans in touch with family, news updates, and shared culture. Wars and hatreds have not left us, but humans today have much greater contact and common identity than a century ago. Notions of equality, social welfare, and preservation of life spread widely during the past century.[3]

During the same century, societies became highly efficient yet overly hierarchical. In the USA and elsewhere, society and economy divided into four main sectors, beginning with the households of the common people. Three sets of institutions

expanded: private businesses, governments, and foundations such as hospitals and think-tanks. These institutions served different social needs, relying on different sources of income (sales, taxes, and transfers). All three types of institution came to be ruled by CEOs, for whom democracy has little meaning. Yet every institution was expected to provide its services effectively and had to rely on efficient employees, from professionals to part-time workers. Households provided the employees, relied on services, and kept the institutions functioning through their contributions.

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The CEOs forgot about the pandemic of 1918. They also forgot about their need to serve the public. They ruled for themselves and for close allies, assuming that divisions among common people gave them freedom to dominate. Household members had complaints about inefficiencies in the system of meeting social needs. Employees had complaints about inefficiencies and dangers at work. Even the small institutions—small business, local government, and small charities—had complaints about behavior of the CEOs. But as long as common people remained fragmented, there was no firm basis from which to press leaders to act as leaders should. Such societies were democracies in the sense that many had rights to vote, but not in the sense that there was sharing in social processes or decisions.

The events of 2020 changed all that. The simple issue this year is the preservation of life. Humans worldwide have saved millions of lives and have shared in doing so. Employees in health care and many other fields did the work of saving lives; so also did household members through social distancing, but also as employees. The results show the high value given to life today, with results from 10 to 100 times better than in 1918. In following the impulse to save lives, communities decided to set aside the economy for a time, assuming that they would reconstitute it through sharing. Those who preferred to prioritize the economy over saving lives had to give way to the majority. Common people took on the task and succeeded: the casualties have been high but could have been far higher. While there is much to do for the rest of 2020 in overcoming the pandemic, surviving COVID-19 from January through May 2020 has been the enactment of a remarkable sort of global democracy, engendering widespread debate that resulted in concerted and effective action.

We know that 2021 is coming: we need to make plans for reviving the economy. Already, leaders are doing as they did before, and not only in Brazil and China. When the US Congress created loans intended to protect small businesses and their workers, banks and government officials gave all the money to the biggest applicants. Congress adopted parallel legislation for direct payments to households, but only some of the money has been distributed.[4] For the moment, low-paid and unemployed workers receive almost no support for their work on behalf of all. Still, they are protecting lives.

(Photo credit: MEDPAGE TODAY)

On May 25, the senseless killing of George Floyd linked the issues of life and economy. People on every continent spoke up to claim that his loss was one too many: it confirmed the unfairness of losses sustained by people of color and all those required to live and work in conditions of high mortality. In the midst of the 2020 pandemic, all were catapulted into the economic choices of 2021.

“A rising tide lifts all boats,” reply the CEOs, as they pocket their tax cuts and

bailouts, relaxing in their imaginary separate boats. Workers attend to the leaks in the big boat, even as their drinking water may be contaminated by lead. Meanwhile the CEOs call out for even more police, seeking to maintain stock prices by quelling any protest of inequality.

In reality, we are all in one boat. We have shown ourselves able to protect lives, gaining a glimpse of a world in which lives are truly valued. Now we can see the prospect of a world in which the value that we produce can be shared equitably among all who live. The George Floyd demonstrations are a statement of the terms on which the economy should be re-opened—by sharing and reallocating resources to public health and social welfare, limiting the galloping inequality that plagues us all.

While turning attention from pandemic to economy will require difficult choices, the experience of 2020 provides two lessons for people of every nation. First, the leaders ignored science in facing COVID-19, while common people combined their knowledge of public health with a desire to live. This has been an exercise in informal democracy; its success is overcoming the expressions of denial and greed from a minority. Second, commoners can hope to rebuild the economy of 2021 as we have fought the virus of 2020, with concern for life and collective endeavor, relying on the knowledge in the minds of all. Common people, having demonstrated their competence, their unity, and their support for life, do not need to relinquish economic decisions to the CEOs. Within our single boat, we prepare to make difficult decisions and ask important questions. Can we ensure that our corporate and national leaders are responsible to the citizenry and not just to themselves? Will it be possible to maintain the ties among people that shined so brightly in the worst days of the pandemic?

Notes

1. Afred W. Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

2. Comparing current Covid-19 mortality with estimates for 1918-19 of 50 million globally and 500,000 for the U.S. Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic* ; Siddharth Chandra, "Pandemics that changed the World. Historical Reflections on Covid-19," *Journal of Global History* (forthcoming). It is important not to neglect analysis of Africa, Asia and Latin America, as public-health levels and education

levels in those regions continue to advance.

3. For a narrative of global social change since 1900 in the context of an analysis of institutional evolution since early times, see Patrick Manning, *A History of Humanity: The Evolution of the Human System* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 235–55.

4. “Wealthiest Hospitals got Billions in Bailout,” *New York Times*, 25 May 2020; Pamela Herd and Donald P. Moynihan, “The Coronavirus Stimulus is Playing Hard to Get,” *New York Times*, 13 April 2020.

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