

## 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.

LOUIS A.G. WILKES

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 supressing 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



美国早在去年夏天就已经发现了两百多例病因不明的肺炎，并出现了死亡病例，当时一种观点认为这可能与电子烟有关。另外，美国最近还有数千万人感染流感，其中死亡1.6万人。有关专家认为，那些被认为是流感患者有可能是感染了新冠病毒，因为这两种流行病的症状有些相似。



Top Comments

李建明(林洁莹)13506505620  
 污名化？2019年军运会在武汉，美国人在此，病毒感染源头就是美国人！！！！！！

夏新生  
 你这头猪在弃贪腐分子代言

叶子  
 现在越来越多的证据已证实新冠肺炎病毒的发源地在美国，科学家要努力严查这个病毒是在美国什么地方泄露出来，来危害世界人民！

我爱我的祖国  
 可能就是美国先发生的吧？网上流传的都是说美国。

心的方向  
 初始病毒在哪里出现发源就在哪里。不用再东扯西扯的，这种扯比病毒更可恶，流氓恶棍的嘴脸，恬不知耻。

308  
 病毒来自月球！地球上只有美国人登上过月球！

Top to bottom::

"The 2019 military games were in Wuhan, and the Americans were there. The source of the viral infection is from the Americans!!"

"Now more and more evidence has confirmed that the birth of the new crown pneumonia virus was in the United States. Scientists must work hard to confirm the virus that harms the people of the world comes from the United States!!"

from contracting the virus<sup>1</sup>. We should perhaps therefore be thankful for our democratic systems (while recognising that they are not infallible).

The *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 *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 its 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)<sup>2</sup>. 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 'open up; the economy for Easter again<sup>3</sup> 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 *raison d'etre* of a *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

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<sup>1</sup>Salo, Jackie (2020), *Coronavirus doctor Li Wenliang's mother demands answers after his death*. [online]. Available at: [www.nypost.com/2020/02/09/coronavirus-doctor-li-wenliangs-mother-demands-answers-after-his-death/](http://www.nypost.com/2020/02/09/coronavirus-doctor-li-wenliangs-mother-demands-answers-after-his-death/)

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Matthew (2020), *Fact check: Coronavirus originated in China, not elsewhere, researchers and studies say* [online]. Available at: [www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/03/16/coronavirus-Fact-check-where-did-covid-19-start-experts-say-china/5053783002/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/03/16/coronavirus-Fact-check-where-did-covid-19-start-experts-say-china/5053783002/)

<sup>3</sup>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-up-and-raring-to-go-by-easter/2020/03/24dced0a12-6d65-11ea-b148-e4ce3fbd85b5\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/health/trump-wants-us-economy-opened-up-and-raring-to-go-by-easter/2020/03/24dced0a12-6d65-11ea-b148-e4ce3fbd85b5_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<sup>4</sup>. 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 derisible 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<sup>5</sup>. 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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<sup>4</sup> 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-BB11SdL](http://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-BB11SdL)

<sup>5</sup> Chapman, Ben (2019), Weatherspoon boss Tim Martin gets 44m richer after Tory general election landslide [online]. Available at: [www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/weatherspoons-boss-tim-martin-wealth-general-election-result-a9245926.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/weatherspoons-boss-tim-martin-wealth-general-election-result-a9245926.html)

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*Images:*

*'Flat Earthers Call Trump's Space Force Idea 'Impossible', Lyne Lucien (thedailybeast.com)*

*Screenshots by the author*