

Duel Plagues: Coronavirus and Corporations

by Virginia Rasmussen

We are inundated with articles and hours of daily commentary on the nature of the coronavirus attack, the locations of largest impact, the heartbreaking news of illness and death, the latest instructions on safe behavior, and status of the search for a vaccine. The U.S. government's response is mired in the absence of focused initiative; in daily presidential lies and babble; in the scarcity of supplies for exhausted medical workers, in over-extended postal employees, police officers, grocers, and essential workers staffing front lines everywhere.

The United States "has never in its history seemed so pitiful... Trump, his party and Rupert Murdoch's Fox News became vectors of the pestilence," wrote Fintan O'Toole in the *Irish Times*.

Agreement mounts that our so-called democracy and the planet itself are under siege, an assault delivered by a tiny virus feasting on earth and human patterns out of balance. These conditions are not new. They've been long fed by the wear and tear of human ebullience, economies driven by endless having and getting, and by

assaults on the natural world that jeopardize life and health.

Throughout recent decades many people with financial security and comforts aplenty coveted more of both. In this country, wealth flowed toward a moneyed class leaving many with nothing to spare. Before this current viral assault, at least 20% of our population struggled in outright poverty. That figure now climbs by the day.

A Virus of Civic Consequence

While the man in the White House is a fierce vector in today's poisonous politics, our history harbors many vectors of antidemocratic disease and unequal fortune. **Peddling the frivolous along with the essential, corporate viruses infested the political-economy and the country's Main Streets for nearly 200 years. Their legal assault on work, production, the conduct of business, and democratic governance has been relentless and sweeping. Business ruled.**

A recent article in *The New Yorker* by Jill Lepore titled "In Every Dark Hour," the author addresses the status of democracy

in the world today, claiming that, as in the nineteen thirties, democracies are dying. In many countries matters of equality, inclusion, participation and the rights of survival are under siege or barely exist.

Addressing these injustices is not high on our own nation's agenda. The author points out that the global "Democracy Index" rates the U.S. as "flawed," and surely it's deteriorated further in recent months! Lepore describes the nation as laboring under "misinformation, tribalization, domestic terrorism, human rights abuses, political intolerance, social media mob rule, white nationalism, a criminal President, the nobbling of Congress, a corrupt Presidential Administration, assaults on the press, crippling polarization, the undermining of elections, and an epistemological chaos that is the only air that totalitarianism can breathe."

Our communal and political work demands that we engage the challenges to *real* democracy, grapple with its meaning and what that requires of us. The forces that confuse and divert us from such priorities run deep and long through our history. **Albert**

Camus in *The Plague*, helps us grasp the forces at work in these times. Like the coronavirus plague the threat to democracy “never dies” but lies in wait, unnamed and invisible, until the conditions are right to “rouse its rats and send them to die in some well-contented city.” Camus tells us the “only way to fight the plague is with decency.”

Can the Body Politic Pull Through?

The assault on democratic life and self-governance tells a similar story. The few who would gather endless wealth and govern the many did much to create the fertile conditions that unleashed this “corporate virus.” **The public and its political leadership, smitten by a new world of technology and productivity, provided ideal circumstances for the pandemic of corporatism. Of the many rights corporate leaders sought, most were granted by the courts: cheap labor; bargain-priced natural resources; ready access to land, seas and railroads.** Corporate leaders pressed for legal authority to produce whatever they would and received it. They killed and maimed workers with impunity. They pursued the constitutional rights intended for natural persons and received them. They wanted money declared a form of protected speech and the courts delivered. The corporate contagion was rampant.

Corporations are legally empowered to call the shots, to define work, to deny workers safe conditions, to shape priorities, to abuse the earth, to

manipulate our politics. Those powers make of them a pandemic presence, a deadly affliction upon people and planet.

The story continues under the present administration which gave corporations “relief” from hundreds of laws intended to limit corporate assaults. Current federal priorities emphasize unfettered production, profits and stock market highs no matter the cost to communities or employees. This is a lethal agenda, a virulent infection.

As we find a way to rid ourselves of the Covid 19 plague, can we work to free ourselves from the “corporate pandemic” that rules us? Can we grasp that our subordinate relationship to the corporation is a sweeping threat to the goal of democratic governance? Might we learn the story that brought us to these critical times and drive out both viral and corporate infestations?

Resources:

--POVERTY FACTS: The Population of Poverty USA; <https://www.povertyusa.org/facts>
--Fintan O’Toole, “Donald Trump has Destroyed the Country He Promised to Make Great Again.”The Irish Times, April 25, 2020.
--Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” The New Yorker, February 25, 1967.
--Alain de-Botton, “Camus on the Coronavirus,” The New York Times, March 19, 2020.
--Jill Lepore, “In Every Dark Hour,” The New Yorker, February 3, 2020

To create a nation free for democracy, contact Move to Amend and join the critical work of denying corporations the right to govern and thus a contagion in the body politic. (www.movetoamend.org)

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By What Authority (ISSN: 524-1106) is published by the Program on Corporations, Law & Democracy. The title is English for *quo warranto*, a legal phrase that questions illegitimate exercise of privilege and power. We the people and our federal and state officials have long been giving giant business corporations illegitimate authority. Today, a minority directing giant corporations and backed by police, courts, and the military, define our culture, govern our nation and plunder the earth. **By What Authority** reflects an unabashed assertion of the right of the sovereign people to govern themselves.

POCLAD is a group of 7 people instigating democratic conversations and actions that contest the authority of corporations to govern. Our analysis evolves through historical and legal research, writing, public speaking and working with organizations to develop new strategies that assert people’s rights over property interests.

BWA is a tool for democracy proponents to rethink and reframe their work. To that end we encourage readers to engage us with comments, questions and suggestions.

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