

Bread Lines in the US

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It happened in the US before. It's happening again in various ways at a time when perhaps harder than ever hard times may be just beginning.

First some background and related thoughts.

The Great Depression of the 1930s in the US followed prosperity marred by excesses in the 20s. The October 1929 stock market crash changed everything, ordinary people hit hardest.

Earlier goods times left out America's underclass. Prosperity in the 1920s didn't include most Blacks, other people of color, a new immigrant generation, poor southern sharecroppers and tenant farmers, nor many others in the US nationwide.

Throughout its history, America, Land of Opportunity has always been overshadowed by inequality between the haves and have-nots.



Unemployed men standing in line outside a depression soup kitchen in Chicago 1931. (Public Domain)

In 1962, Michael Harrington's "The Other America" exposed the nation's dark dark side enough for Jack Kennedy to ask White House Council of Economic Advisor chairman, Walter Heller, to do something about it.

Following JFK's state sponsored assassination in November 1963, Lyndon Johnson (on January 8, 1964) "declare(d) unconditional war on poverty in America."

It fell way short of addressing the extent of the problem nationwide. Today, Washington's bipartisan criminal class is going the other way — marginalizing the rights and wealth of ordinary people so privileged ones can be richer and more powerful.

Almost 60 years ago, Harrington said the following:

"In morality and in justice, every citizen should be committed to abolishing the other America, for it is intolerable that the richest nation in human history should allow such needless suffering."

"But more than that, if we solve the problem of the other America we will have learned how to solve the problems of all of America."

It didn't happen in the 1960s. Today, things are on a slippery slope toward becoming a ruler/serf/totalitarian society that's more intrusive, unsafe and unfit to live in than earlier — what only a grassroots national convulsion can have any chance to stop and shift things in a positive direction.

Change always comes bottom up, never top down. Privileged classes don't change unless pushed hard.

In times like now, reality hits home hardest when many US workers above the poverty line are added to its underclass.

It happened during the Great Depression. It appears to be happening again now.

While growing mass unemployment won't be a permanent state, what will follow when current crisis conditions end?

Will the US return to pre-COVID-19 conditions or is permanent transformation underway that will change the lives of ordinary Americans irreparably?

As explained in an earlier article, crises are times when ruling authorities convince people to sacrifice personal freedoms for greater security — not realizing that both will be lost.

Ruling authorities take advantage of times like now by instituting draconian policies they're unable to introduce during normal times without risking mass rebellion.

The US is permanently at war abroad against invented enemies, what the scourge of imperialism is all about.

Most people are unaware that what's happening abroad is ongoing at home by other means.

Post-9/11, human and civil rights were sharply curtailed. Enormous amounts of wealth were transferred from ordinary people to the nation's privileged class.

A secretive military, industrial, national security state threatens everyone everywhere — a scheme for unchallenged global dominance by eliminating whatever stands in the way of achieving this diabolical objective.

Anyone challenging what's going on risks being treated as a national security threat, including investigative journalists like Julian Assange and whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden for exposing US wrongdoing.

Speech, press, and academic freedoms in the US are more greatly threatened than ever before, most people none the wiser.

The US needs enemies at home and abroad to advance its agenda so they're invented to justify what's unjustifiable.

The Global War on Terror is the greatest hoax in modern times - along with the no-peace/Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Big Brother is real watching everyone. The nation I grew up in no longer exists. One-party rule with two extremist right wings today threatens virtually everything just societies hold dear.

In my 9th decade, I may never be around enough to know how things turn out longer-term.

Will ordinary people be transformed into serfs to serve the interests of the rich and powerful?

Will America be consumed by its arrogance and hubris? Will it destroy planet earth and its life forms?

America was never beautiful when I was young. Today its ruling class may enslave the majority, eliminate nonbelievers, or kill us all by its rage to dominate unchallenged.

Image on the right: An impoverished American family living in a shanty, 1936 (Public Domain)



Pre-1930s poverty in the US became far greater after the 1929 stock market crash. Many in the middle class and some high-income families experienced it for the first time.

The American dream became a national nightmare for the great majority in the country.

Unemployment increased from 3% to 25%. Today it may go much higher.

In the 1930s, some US cities experienced up to 80% unemployment because of lost manufacturing and construction activity — dropping 54% and 78% respectively.

Around 80% of auto manufacturing halted. Suicides increased. Politicians and businessmen feared rebellion.

FDR's New Deal was largely motivated by wanting to save capitalism at a time when echoes of 1917 revolution in czarist Russia were still audible.

Roosevelt reportedly said: "If I fail, I shall be the last one." He took office when the US was in upheaval.

NGOs were overwhelmed with requests for help and needed it large-scale, the same true for states and local communities.

A national solution was needed then and again now. During the Great Depression, Roosevelt partly delivered.

There was New Deal leadership. Today there's Donald Trump, and a dubious cast of characters surrounding him. They and most congressional members are largely indifferent to growing public needs.

It took buildup for war and WW II to end hard times in the 1930s because federal programs spent too little, why Great Depression years continued for a decade.

An alphabet soup of programs were initiated to revive the economy and help the

unemployed.

Lots of jobs were created but not enough to end hard times. A small-scale food stamp program was established for needy federal workers, not all Americans in need.

Charitable organizations distributed free bread and soup to impoverished Americans in New York, Chicago and elsewhere.

Mobster Al Capone fed the hungry on the city's south side under a banner that read:

“Free Soup Coffee & Doughnuts for the Unemployed.”

In December 1931, the Chicago Tribune headlined: “120 000 meals are served by Capone Free Soup Kitchen” — a PR triumph for Big Al at the time, who also was public enemy No. 1.

He showed up at times to shake hands and offer encouragement to the downtrodden.

Like other soup kitchens at the time, he served three meals a day. On a Thanksgiving Thursday, he served free beef stew for everyone. The site is now a parking lot.

The term breadline refers to poor, hungry people lining up for free food. During the Great Depression, some stretched for blocks daily.

Initially run largely by private organizations and churches, government got involved because of overwhelming public need.

They operated in cities and towns nationwide. They offered little nutritional sustenance but something was better than nothing.

During his 1928 presidential campaign, Herbert Hoover said the US was “nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land.”

In their book titled “A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression,” Jane Ziegelman and Andrew Coe discussed feeding the hungry at the time.

Beginning in early 1930s, breadlines grew in number and size to feed the hungry without jobs.

In 1931, growing numbers of hungry Americans belied Hoover's claim that “nobody is actually starving.”

Ziegelman and Coe documented grim subsistence diets nationwide in urban and rural areas.

Malnutrition caused large-scale outbreaks of pellagra, rickets and other diseases.

In the run-up to WW II, large numbers of draft-age US men failed their physicals because of the ravages of the 30s on human health.

In 1932, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company dismissively said “(a)s a people, we are given normally to overfeeding.”

(We should) not be surprised if, under the present conditions of enforced moderation, many

have enjoyed better health than ever before.”

Cold hard reality was polar opposite. Hoover and FDR were similar and different at the same time.

Both figures had great reservations about people living on the dole. Hoover was largely unbending. Roosevelt adapted to the notion that desperate times call for desperate measures.

Eleanor Roosevelt was far more than first lady. She was a social welfare/human and civil rights champion and integral part of New Deal programs — publicly and behind the scenes.

Along with helping the poor, unemployed, and hungry during the Great Depression, she believed civil rights for all was the litmus test for society.

Last week, Bloomberg News headlined: “The Recession Bread Lines Are Forming in Mar-a-Lago’s Shadow,” saying:

“In Palm Beach, a diner races to feed laid off workers. Food banks and pantries (are) see(ing) surge in demand and long-term need.”

With growing millions of unemployed nationwide, breadlines are becoming the new normal, including near Trump’s Florida white house.

“(A) brutal new hunger crisis is emerging among laid-off workers that has begun to overwhelm the infrastructure that normally takes care of the needy,” Bloomberg reported.

Some hunger in America facts:

According to Feeding America before COVID-19 emerged, “1 in 7 people struggle(d) with hunger in the US.”

Millions of families with children are food insecure, not sure of obtaining enough food to get by.

Households with children are most vulnerable. The problem affects virtually “every community in the country” in urban and rural areas.

Many food insecure households don’t qualify for food stamps because of large-scale cuts to the program approved by Dems and Republicans.

Food banks and other hunger relief programs support them as much as possible.

Hunger affects young and old, including the underemployed, especially when teetering on possible unemployment.

Millions of US households struggle daily with tough choices — between feeding their families, paying rent or servicing mortgages, seeking medical help when ill, heating homes in winter, and finding a way to handle other essential needs.

Pre-Covid-19, Feeding America’s south Florida director said her operation fed over 700,000

people in four counties, including wealthy Palm Beach County.

Now “growth is exponential,” she stressed, a three-fold increase in funding needed to feed the hungry in south Florida alone.

Local food banks and pantries had no contact from the Trump Organization, the White House, or DJT’s Mar-a-Lago — despite multiple requests for help from Feeding America.

With hunger, unemployment and poverty growing exponentially in the US, how will ordinary people cope if harder than ever hard times are long-lasting?

Things are developing into a far greater crisis than during the Great Recession of 2008-09.

Feeding America and other food banks are hard-pressed by inadequate funding at a time of burgeoning need nationwide.

Many can’t keep pace with growing demand that’s likely to increase ahead.

US policymakers and major media scared most people to death over COVID-19. When lockdowns, shelter in place, and social distancing end, their lasting effects will remain.

When perfect storms erupt, their effects are long-lasting after calm returns.

This storm may have considerable upside before subsiding, including possible multiple waves of COVID-19 outbreaks.

Likely economic and financial pain will hit ordinary Americans hardest, along with likely further erosion of human and civil rights.

Once policies are in place, they’ll likely be hard to reverse short of national rebellion.

What’s unfolding today may be looked back on ahead as a time when the nation entered the abyss of lost rights and well-being for the majority of its people.

Perhaps things will never be the same for them in their lifetimes. An unacceptable new normal may become the new status quo.

With most Americans living from paycheck to paycheck, sharply rising unemployment may cause an unprecedented level of long-lasting deprivation in the country, and its harmful effect on human and emotional health.

None of what’s unfolding should have happened. If the nation was run by government of, by, and for everyone equitably, Americans would be in good hands to deal effectively with whatever situations arise.

Sadly, polar opposite is true. COVID-19 isn’t the great crisis of our time, not by a long shot.

It’s government of, by, and for the super-rich and their cronies, by scheming self-serving politicians.

US governance is composed largely of white men who operate extrajudicially — who lie, connive, misinterpret and pretty much do things ad libitum in discharging their duties as they see fit for themselves and deep-pocketed funders.

It's a nation of men, now laws, equity or justice. As unacceptable as things have been pre-COVID-19, they're likely to get much worse ahead.

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