

Pandemic 101: There Is a Crack in Everything, We Have to Let the Light in

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You must have found yourself in a situation where, although you know that what you are saying is true to you and you are open to dialogue, the person you are sharing with shuts you up. A lack of common ground limits dialogue and, for real communication to happen an attitude of openness is required.

Ted Aoki, an educator at the University of Alberta, creator of “Curriculum in a new key,” was a bilingual and bicultural person. He proposed a curriculum for education inclusive of lived experiences inviting teachers and others to create and educate from a “bridge,” a space in the middle where new things are allowed to emerge. His focus was in the “House of Being,” a place where authentic being with others is the main concern.

Aoki, aware of the East-West conversation, perspectives and ideologies, wanted to encourage dialogue between two world views. He illustrated enlightenment with words from the poet Leonard Cohen:

There is a crack in everything; that’s how the light comes in. (1)

The exchange of views can be made more difficult when the dominant Media increasingly deforms truth, offering propaganda and lies instead. It is challenging to be balanced in such a situation; many people prefer to remain in the easier road of “belonging” rather than questioning. I can still expose my views but I often feel as the “Martian” in the room.

Although, I am used to be different and often joke about coming from another planet, I know there are limitations when perceived as an outsider in the land. Still, my experience with the political suicide of my own land, the end of concerns for the well being of all people – vulnerable, poor, children, women, elderly, disabled, ill, has showed me much. I witnessed the surge and collapse of urban guerrillas, a military coup and a return, to be soon betrayed, to a project for the people. These experiences have value in increasing understanding everywhere. And yet, experiences from the third world are viewed often as somehow irrelevant, the first world thinks itself somehow unique and untouchable.

This pandemic, almost a curse, has made visible something the Western world may want to ignore: its incompetence in dealing with a serious challenge requiring thoughtful and caring

political stewardship and effective collective action. We are still dealing with the consequences of the 2008 economic collapse, and, more recently with the financial crisis emerging in connection with this pandemic forcing the closing down of economies and the isolation of people.

Western countries, although strongly affected, deny it becoming a bit desperate in allocating responsibility. Desperation, like hatred, is not a good advisor; it often turns to blaming others for our limitations and follies. In such cases, ideology and propaganda come handy in defining someone to blame. It is our story, the story of the West and of our view of the “other” found in the Eastern world, identified as different, less than us, often the enemy we are free to conquer, plunder or destroy. Remaining blind to what is taking place is no longer an option. Remaining quiet to what we see makes us complicit, while crimes and destruction this time may include the world itself.

Pandemics 101

In developed Western countries, the pandemic, initially ignored, became very stressful, problematic. Inevitably leading to a questioning of our ways: How can we (the center of what is right) have been so wrong about this virus? Still, almost everywhere in the western world -developed or not, there was denial of the seriousness of the pandemic and its effects on the economy and people. Mystifications about science keep affecting how we deal with it. Public outrage and rallies question appropriate health measures taken to protect us.

It is mayhem and reminds me of how people can take to the streets against a ridiculous change, like the new taste of Coke, but can fail to ask with similar fortitude for better working conditions, a living wage, public health, education, housing or increased equity. We are dealing with an organized disinformation machine, or too many people are lost in the fog and need to be rescued.

The most interesting information emerging thanks to the pandemic, challenges dominant definitions about who is “essential” to society and the economy. It became obvious that well paid lawyers, accountants, financiers or corporate CEOs are not essential. Workers are.

Health care workers, food industry workers, transportation workers, teachers and child care workers, people producing our food or working in commerce and so on, proved to be essential to our survival.

In Canada, and because of the risk essential workers face, an incentive was added to their wages; it was small and temporary but it highlighted that their role is essential to us. This insight about who is truly essential to life should not disappear with the pandemic, but remain with us to help us move, beyond the romantic praising of essential workers, into working with them ensuring a living wage. It should also encourage us to examine the economy we are allowing to thrive, and its dominant ideology devaluing workers, the creators of value, and promoting the rich and top earners, an overhead all of us pay for. (2)

The Economy yes, but what kind of Economy?

We hear about the economy often but mostly the script is the same. I wonder, listening to people whether they know what kind of economy we have. Would they support it if they understood how it works against most of us? In 2017 Rutger Bregman explained clearly that we live in a reverse welfare state, with politicians assuming vast wealth is created at the top

and trying to convince everybody of this. Still, it is the other way around: productivity is not defined by the size of a paycheque, and wealth is not made by top earners but by workers. There are 2 ways to make wealth, he explained, work and rent. Work taps into our knowledge and know-how to create value. Rent uses power to control the value created -land, knowledge, money. Rent extractors or rentiers make their living at the expense of all the people who work and make value. (3)

In the 19th century rent was associated with having an estate and inheritance, and rentiers did not care about showing us they were lazy, overweight and love smoking big cigars. Today rentiers are slimmer, seem to work hard and present a much more pleasant and healthy image. But the main work they still do is ensuring and increasing rent collection. Rent seeking goes from Wall Street to Silicon Valley; there are rentiers everywhere, in Apple, Amazon, Airbnb, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Uber and Big Pharma. We have "platform capitalism," so Facebook's income is rent collected off the millions of people posting pictures and videos. Uber is usurping the taxi sector while Airbnb is doing the same to the hotel industry. Much of the financial sector is downright parasitic: offering loans to everybody for anything while inflating the prices of things and getting a percentage for themselves. (3) When they collapse the state goes to their rescue: a win-win proposition for them but not for us, who carry and pay for state debts while seeing our personal debts grow too. (4)

We can ask: if rentiers are so bad why do we put up with them? For mainly two reasons: the first is that modern rentiers know how to masquerade as decent, hard working people who create jobs. They can afford the best professional image-makers and know how important image is, so they make sure they present well. The second reason is that we are complicit with them and their cash cows, the housing market and pensions. It has worked well: most of us would love to live from rents and in high style. Rentiers can also afford expensive lawyers, make financial contributions to politicians and own the press so they have journalists working for them. Rentiers take the best minds society produces to engross their ranks in draining our economy and our countries of their natural vitality. Recognizing that workers are the ones creating value is crucial in understanding basic economics. Giving workers what they deserve for their efforts is an effective way of controlling rent seekers; it also decreases the cost of doing business, eliminates monopolies and ends opportunities for rent creation. (3)

During the pandemic some rentiers became even richer: more online buying avoiding corona-virus enriched Amazon, and people working from home added to the income of video communications like Zoom. Most essential workers show to work everyday facing risks of contagion, many receive very low wages.

After two years of closing-opening non-essential businesses because of the pandemic, our focus is on getting over it moving to the magic land of "recovery." Long term effects of the virus on the health of people infected and surviving it, or the effects of the pandemic on the economy are not often discussed. When encouraged to think about a return to "normal life" many of us know it will be a "new normal." Some signs of recovery are surreal: Can housing prices go up with high unemployment, loss of income, earnings and profits? Are we doing well despite traveling being limited, tourism and the leisure industry seriously affected and having high personal and national debt? It is surreal to believe that we are richer "for our debts" or that increasing market value of homes can continue to grow for ever. Such surrealism should help us see the kind of economy we are in.

The main challenge we face, however, is one of understanding. Education for instance, what most people believe should pave our road to success, has caused many young people to be indebted and squeezed as they pay interest on debts, receive low wages and face higher costs of living. In 2016, Dean Baker pointed to the myths connected to the economy and markets saying: markets are not from Nature or God but the result of policy decisions. In the US, upward redistribution was structured by policy decisions and, he points, it needs to stop: it is lowering demand, increasing unemployment levels and benefiting only the 0.1% of top income earners, mostly in the financial sector. Worse yet, favouring upward redistribution can trap the US economy in a downward spiral. Baker is relevant to all of us in the West, the US model is the one most follow. (5)

The choices made, Baker points, are not “laissez faire” or “free market,” but operating on government to benefit a select group. Banks have become too-big-to-fail and attempts at regulating them (like Dodd-Frank) are not working: regulators cannot assess risk accurately if they do not see the complete picture. Braking up big banks and recognizing the need to reduce rent-seeking opportunities in order to increase demand and decrease unemployment is the only solution. The impact of decisions is everywhere: a dominant push to reduce budget deficits have favored government extending patents and copyrights, more costly to people in higher prices for meds for example, but invisible in the budget. A reduced dollar could lower US trade deficits but it will increase costs to major retailers and corporations and their low-cost supply chains in the developing world. Thus, policy decisions are political; and those who hold power protect their interests avoiding any change that affects them negatively. In such situations finding someone to blame can be seen as a way out, and Russia and China look like appropriate enemies. (5)

A New Cold War with China

We heard about the “New World Order” from George W. Bush. We still remember the never found “weapons of mass destruction” that led the US and allies into the destruction of Iraq –killing more than 200 thousand civilians, some say many more, in the name of “democracy and the preservation of peace.” The costs of war are high. (6)

The 2008 financial collapse, followed by the pandemic and the 2020 crisis, have real effects. The pandemic caused more than 600 thousand deaths in the US, some say more, and government was unable to prevent its top leadership from becoming infected. The pandemic trapped most of the Western world in a 2 year loop of opening and closing economies with ongoing new cases. China, on the other hand, dealt with the pandemic effectively, with less than 5 thousand people dying from it and its economy functioning within 3 months. Chinese people could mourn their dead and celebrate their COVID heroes. China, aware of its success, attributes it to their “Socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Their model outperformed Western neoliberal capitalism by leaps and bounds, raising living standards, creating public wealth, serving and meeting people’s needs while dealing well with crises. Still, their measure of success (creation of public wealth or raising living standards) is not ours: neoliberal capitalism works mainly at increasing the wealth of a selected group. During their last trade negotiation, the Trump administration asked China to dismantle its state-led economy (planned and efficient) as it “could never compete against the superior free-market economy of the US.” It was a failed attempt by the US elite to have China committing suicide and opening its doors to neoliberal pillaging. Their alternative option seems to be war against China –cold and hot. (8)

The situation with China, argues Noh, is similar to the one Iraq faced: the US is escalating

rapidly while already engaged in a hybrid war with China in multiple domains. There is economic warfare (trade sanctions and tariffs), technological warfare (attempts to seize TIKTOK and attacking Huawei), legal warfare (380 bills in Congress, 14 individual/state lawsuits, legal kidnapping), diplomatic warfare (consulate shutdowns, breaches, callings for “regime change”), military posturing (in the South and East China Seas, strategic weapons encircling China -400 bases: the Pacific Pivot). There is civil subversion (color revolutions in Hong Kong and other places), and academic warfare (FBI’s China Initiative opening cases against Chinese students/researchers in the US while considering all students as potential spies). Finally, information warfare is creating false stories of massive human rights abuses, concentration camps and accusing China of releasing the Covid19 virus on purpose. It is all geared at inciting people to hate China and manufacturing consent for war. (8)

Taking sides...

“China offers a threatening alternative model of development (one) that is non-capitalist, non-Western, and non-colonial. As such, it undermines the west’s neocolonial domination of the third world and its debt-trap-based forced underdevelopment, subservience, and expropriation. It also offers a model of state-led ecological development. All this signals new possibilities of hope and transformation for the world. The ruling classes in the west will go to war to prevent this.” (8)

Canada is involved. The RCMP detained Meng Wanzhou, chief financial officer of Huawei, at Vancouver airport in 2018 when she was in a flight to somewhere else. The RCMP followed a deportation order issued by the US. Since 2018 Meng Wanzhou is under house arrest, wearing an electronic bracelet, a pawn of the US and allies’ strategy to stop China’s development. Many Canadians have raised concerns about her arrest, finding it unlawful and arbitrary, misogynist and racist. But the Canadian government allowed it and it is now caught in the middle of the US-China conflict, apparently unable, or unwilling, to act on its own benefit by freeing her. This pattern is not unique to Canada.

In Australia politicians in power take side with the US in favor of war with China. Mike Pezzullo (Home Affairs Secretary) publicly summons the “dogs of war against China” placing Australia on the warpath. He does it because of the unconditional, even misplaced, alliance of Australia with the US. There is an inability to recognize and accept fundamental shifts in the distribution of wealth and power transforming the world and the regional strategic orders. America is weaker economically, diplomatically and militarily than it has been since WW2. Australia needs a broader and deeper understanding of Asian cultures and language; this skill gap still existing lowers Australian capacities to understand the region and it is role in it, a challenge perceived as dangerous by many Australians. (7)

Can we do anything beyond trying to understand better? We should question what we are told about China, there is plenty of proof of US pervasive lying in Iraq and other countries prior to attack them during “war against terrorism,” a terrorist war itself. We can learn to separate propaganda from truth by paying attention and reading between the lines. We need to be attentive to “projection,” as abusive governments like abusive people, project onto others what they do themselves. Most people understand that wars are criminal and would like them banned.

The costs of US war against Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, both human and material, have been estimated by the Costs of War project in more than 800 thousand civilians killed directly from war violence, unaccounted number of wounded, and a very conservative

estimate of 37 million people displaced (that could be as high as 59 million). Economic costs to the US alone are estimated in 6.7 trillion dollars in budgetary costs, and can be as high as 8 trillion dollars. There are no estimates on the costs to governments and economies of the countries attacked or the others affected by these wars. There are no cost estimates for the care of war refugees, destruction of infrastructure, damages to health systems or environmental degradation. There are no numbers about civilian deaths as a result of malnutrition, lack of water or access to health care, much greater than deaths from combat. (6)

Only deranged people can even consider the possibility of engaging in what it could lead to WW3, or plan on this aware that not only the US but also China, Russia and others have nuclear weapons. But, the American people are not “in power,” a narcissist and parasitic elite is. We need to challenge racist assumptions that construct an “enemy” where there is none. We need to challenge any excuse for war, as war seems to be merely the “plan B” of the American elite.

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Notes

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