

COVID and Capitalism: A Conversation with Richard Wolff

Vincent Lyon-Callo

*How do we make sense of the ways in which COVID-19 has developed and been responded to in the United States? How can nondeterminist class analysis help us to understand why the pandemic has impacted the United States so severely compared to other nations? What do these policies and experiences reveal about current capitalist economic and social relations within the United States today? Are there possibilities for interventions through a nonessentialist Marxist analysis and understanding? On a beautiful June afternoon, Rethinking Marxism coeditor Vin Lyon-Callo discussed these questions via zoom with his former professor, long-term RM board member, and host of the quite popular public intervention *Economic Update*, Richard Wolff (lightly edited for content and clarity).*

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VINCENT LYON-CALLO: When I first sat in your class focused on many Marxisms, more than three decades ago, and began to see the rich tapestry of Marxist scholarship, I could not imagine we would be here today so many years later discussing a global pandemic. What an interesting time this has become and what a privilege it is to talk with you again today.

Let's start off with an easy question: On your *Economic Update* on June 8th, 2020, (Wolff 2020c) you discuss a very practical question: Why is it that the U.S., with 5 percent of the world's population, has 30 percent of the world's deaths from COVID-19 thus far, and what might be the Socialist alternative? This leads to other questions, such as: How can that be, despite the fact that the U.S. also is one of the world's wealthiest countries? Why is it that so many Americans are getting so sick and dying? Might it have something to do with the vast inequalities that existed in the U.S. prior to COVID-19 even arriving?

RICHARD WOLFF: As with all good questions, there are many factors that play in. You might even say that it is complexly overdetermined that we have 5 percent of the people of the world and 30 percent of the deaths from COVID-19. So let me go through just some of them. Absolutely, the inequality in this country means that, yes, we are one of the wealthiest countries in the world, but what has to be added

is that we are one of the most unequal, in terms of the distribution of wealth and income, of the so-called industrialized nations. That inequality condemns large numbers of people, almost all of whom live at the low end of the economic pyramid. They have bad diets, they have overcrowded housing, they have inadequate health care, and they often have unsafe working conditions. We all know what the story is, so it should not be surprising that even though the United States is rich, its extreme inequality makes the poor very vulnerable to any disease, particularly one that passes through infection.

But I would actually like to focus on a different kind of explanation, which will apply not only to the United States but also to other countries who have had bad experiences with this virus. I am thinking of Italy. Here is the argument that I would like to advance. What do you need to do? What two things that are crucial? To prepare your population for a dangerous virus and to manage the virus once it enters your community. So how do you prepare? You prepare by having on hand, in adequate numbers and adequately stockpiled, all the necessary equipment. That is what preparation means. So you have produced, stockpiled, and distributed ventilators, masks, gloves, ICU units in hospitals, beds, and trained personnel. You do not have to be a trained epidemiologist to know that dangerous viruses have been with the human race from day one. A horrible one in 1918 killed 700,000 people in the United States. In recent years, we have had SARS and Ebola and a dozen others which are well-known and well documented. There is no excuse for not being prepared. The cost of such a preparation is a small fraction of the amount of wealth we have already lost in the United States from not being prepared. There is no efficiency argument. Indeed, any efficiency argument would go the other way. So, then, why? Well, the answer is capitalism.

It is not profitable for companies to produce a mask or a bed or a glove. To produce these things, to store them in some warehouse, let alone to stockpile them all over the country, waiting who knows how many months for the next virus to show up, is not profitable. The risk is enormous. You are just not going to do it as a capitalist. You can find more profitable, less risky investments elsewhere. How do we know that? Because that is what they did. They did not make the stuff, and we were not prepared.

In that situation, you could have [the] government come in and say the following: "Private capitalism stinks at being prepared for viruses; it is an unreliable engine for preparation, so we the government will be the offsetter; we will take on the risk and we will take on the expense because private capitalism is a failure here and we must compensate." You would buy all the supplies and the test kits you might need for a disease that enters our country, and you would have it available. You would take the necessary steps at the government's expense.

Why did the government of the United States not do that? The answer is that it has long ago been captured by an ideology that runs roughly as follows: If it is not privately profitable to do something, then it should not be done. So the government of the United States did not do what it could have done. Through the

failure of the private sector and the complicit failure of the public sector, we were not prepared. That's three-quarters of the answer to why we have suffered so badly from coronavirus.

Let me drive the point home one more step. Might there be an example I could point to where the government of the United States did do exactly what I just said? The answer is yes. The military. It is not profitable to make a missile or a rocket and store it. So the government comes in and buys all that stuff as fast as it comes off the assembly line and pays to store it and distributes it and trains the people to use it. The rationale is national security. But the notion of national security for health reasons doesn't work. That leads me to the final part of this. Why doesn't it? Why hasn't the medical-industrial complex—the four industries which monopolize the medical industry in this country; doctors, hospitals, medical insurance companies, and the drug and device makers—why haven't they been smart enough to develop an ideology that says the government should come in? The answer is obvious. If you brought the government in to make us secure for a future, well, then why aren't you bringing the government in to make us secure right now with Medicaid for all or a single payer or any of the other plans? That's too ideologically dangerous for them. So they can't do for themselves what they enviously watch the military-industrial complex do brilliantly for itself.

Then there is the failure to manage it. Once you blow the preparation. Once you have awareness that you are going to suffer, you're going to lose a lot of people, you're going to have millions of people get sick. Then the political apparatus kicks in. Whoever is in power has to minimize the damage or the party or the leader will suffer because it is on their watch when everyone gets sick. So you need a government that doesn't want to test people because it doesn't want public awareness. We have, if my numbers are correct, less than 5 percent of people who have been tested. That means we don't even know where the disease is, who has it, who is symptomatic, who is not symptomatic. All of the key questions, we don't have an answer ... We also have 20 to 30 million people who are unemployed and could be given the training to test people. We have all the people who can be the testers, and we can test everybody in a week. What's the issue? It's a total mismanagement, but not because we can't. Obviously, we could test everyone. We are a rich country, we have the people, and we could produce the equipment. This has become a political football. The Democrats are going to blame the Republicans. The Republicans have to pretend there is no issue, they are going to get everyone back to work, we're going to get everything back to normal. Normal is the only hope they have to make this horrible collapse, both healthwise and employmentwise, go away. For me, those are the key variables coming together to make the American experience so, so awful.

Last point: Last week there was a *Time* magazine article prepared by two physicians in the United States. The article was wonderful because it begins by saying that, here in the United States, the disease has infected 340 people per million. In China it was 5 people per million. No matter what the fudging of numbers—on

both sides—may have been, with these orders of magnitude, there is no excuse. The rest of the *Time* magazine article was about the utter failure of the United States. Not just in relation to China, but they list about twenty other countries, all of whom have way better numbers than the United States. Those include Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, not just Vietnam and Cuba, who have very good numbers. My last point is that, even in a capitalist country, if you have a culture that says the government isn't some kind of fundamental evil, the way it is in our culture—South Korea has that. The government is revered. The government is given—from your and my perspective—too much respect. But, whenever the government has a historically developed authority and respect in a country, it can come in and make the compensation for capitalism's failure. That was so missing in the United States. That's why England is so bad. And, ironically, it is why Italy was so bad. Italy used to have a left-wing orientation; they are going through a period of neoliberal kind of hegemony in reaction to the old Communist Party. So you could explain them, too, as the government was lost in that fog of neoliberal, laissez-faire nonsense that made them unable to step in, in a timely way. Which, by the way, in Italy they deeply regret.

LYON-CALLO: Italy, though, has eventually lowered their rates much more than the U.S.

WOLFF: Right, right. That is because they have that culture. And the left wing, which wants the government in there because of the old notions of Socialism, they attacked the right wing on just the point I'm making, and so the right wing was badly hurt. That's partly why Italy's politics are not as right wing as they could have been. Their mismanagement of COVID-19 brought back the leftist culture, and that is one of the reasons why you're seeing the right-wing government come down like a ton of bricks suddenly. Because they're in danger politically of the consequence of COVID-19. That may happen to Trump here, too. We'll have to see.

LYON-CALLO: The other component of this is the economic. We have massive unemployment in the United States. But, with social distancing being a public health requirement, was not massive unemployment necessary as so many businesses needed to close temporarily? Or is mass unemployment from COVID-19 better understood as failure of capitalism itself, as you argued recently (Wolff 2020d)? Might it be that massive inequality and economic precarity are not inevitable? Has there not been very different experiences in other spaces, such as Cuba or even in Italy, as you discussed on a recent broadcast about Marcora Law (Wolff 2020a)? Are there lessons that people in the U.S. might learn from looking at the experiences in those places?

WOLFF: Well, I think the answer is to compare capitalist countries. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in mid-March, unemployment in Germany was 5 percent and unemployment here was listed officially at something like

4 percent. Today, ten or eleven weeks later, unemployment in the United States, depending upon how you count, is 16 to 20 percent, maybe more. In Germany it went from 5 percent to 6 percent. So how do you explain the quadrupling of unemployment in the United States and a mere 20 percent increase in Germany? I could use France—the numbers are roughly the same as Germany. I could even use England, whose numbers are closer to Germany and France than to the United States.

What's going on? You can't do in those countries what you can do here. It's kind of an extension of what we just said about Italy. The power of the labor unions in France, Germany, and England and the power of the Left is such that, had you tried to throw a quarter of your labor force out of work like we did here, you would have seen street protests that would make what we've seen in the past two weeks look like a picnic. Those governments would have fallen. The countries would have come to a complete halt. It was out of the question. It was so out of the question that even conservative turds like Boris Johnson or Angela Merkel or Emmanuel Macron could not even imagine it. They did not propose it. Instead, they went to the businesses and said, "It's a collapse; people cannot come to work. It's a supply shock of the most profound sort. We're going to have the worst recession or depression in probably half a century, if not an entire century. So here's the deal. We will bail you out, we will print money, but on this condition: part of the money we give you will be used to pay a minimum of seventy percent of the regular salary and wages of your labor force; you can fire nobody, and you guarantee the job will be here, however long this lasts." That's what they did. The United States did not do that. So the interesting question for me is, what the hell is going on here? Again, the state is powerful in Germany, France, and England. It's never gone to the point of a type of religious fundamentalist notion that somehow the government is bad, an idea pushed by the [U.S.] governmental officials to pander to the private sector's desire to have the government fund them and never compete with them. They tried to achieve that in Europe, but they couldn't pull it off. That's why there is the difference.

The experience of the 1930s in this country is peculiarly absent today. We have a level of unemployment like then. We have a desperate situation like then. Why are we not doing what we did then? For example, between 1934 and 1941, roughly fifteen million people were hired by the United States federal government. Why are we not doing that now? Why are we not training and hiring some of them to become testers so we know where our disease is? Why not assign some of them to do all of that infrastructure rebuilding that everyone agrees needs to be done? Why are you paying, for example, an extra \$600 per week unemployment benefit to have them do nothing? Why don't you pay them even an extra \$800 to do something? Build a park, do the things that were done in the 1930s. Why not have another WPA, do some cultural work around the country? Lord knows we need it. It would be a spectacularly successful program. Let's remember when Roosevelt did that, he got reelected three times. He taxed the rich and

made these programs for the unemployed. And the brain-dead Biden—and I don't mean that because he's old—but the brain-dead Biden, Clinton, Cuomo, it doesn't even occur to them. They don't admit the difference between the United States and Germany. They pretend that there is no such difference. The media follows suit and doesn't talk about it. Every time I am on radio or television, I tell people about the experience in Germany. You should see the faces of the questioners. They look at me like a puppy that just got caught doing something it shouldn't on the rug. Come on. It's an amazing testimony. As my buddy Steve Resnick would have said, it's another case of the power of ideology. What it is, what you can see or not see, even in your immediate environment. It's amazing. And don't get me started on the silence of the AFL-CIO. It's beyond words. It's a silence that's beyond any noise they could make.

LYON-CALLO: And we have this massive government intervention. Mnuchin says he won't even tell who got the money. As you point out, we are in the midst of a class war. With massive unemployment, wealth will be further concentrated, and economic inequality, which was already disturbingly large, will become even greater at the end of the health crisis. Employers will likely impose wage cuts and austerity measures upon workers as there are more people competing for fewer jobs. School systems, state governments, working people, and small businesses are all suffering. And they are somehow hoping on a dream and hope that Trump, Steve Mnuchin, and Larry Kudlow will decide to change their stripes and give states funding that will trickle down or, perhaps, some direct help to formerly working people.

Their plan, though, seems to be to open the economy despite a lack of a vaccine, a lack of excellent treatment options, continued shortages in supplies, and the warnings from public health officials that we are largely following the pattern of responses to the influenza pandemic of one hundred years ago. Schools, malls, restaurants, factories, and public facilities are opening up without adequate plans to ensure social distancing. Capitalist pressures for profits and working people who are economically desperate are pushing policies and pushing public health concerns aside. U.S. capitalism is in a crisis (Wolff 2020e), and the answer is to make people go to work and shop in unsafe conditions. It seems that we as a society are agreeing to push a second wave of the virus in a quest for economic normalization. As the Secretary of the Treasury stated during the stock market plummeting on June 11th, "We can't close the economy down again" (Franck 2020). The choice is presented as mass unemployment versus massive spread of the virus. And as long as those dying are mostly black, working class, Native American, prisoners, or those in nursing homes, it seems like many Americans are fine with the massive-spread-of-the-virus option. But are those our only options? It's easy to understand the economic perspectives and policies of Mnuchin and Kudlow. But how can we best understand this acquiescence to it with the seeming belief that the best we can

hope for is that they will somehow change their minds if we just ask them enough times. How does that make any sense?

WOLFF: I ask myself that question all the time. My first part of an answer is a quote from a fellow whose leadership I have always admired. A man named Lenin. Lenin was asked by his associates at one point the same question: Why do the Russian people, in this case, why do they accept the horrific conditions that are imposed on them? Why do they have a tsar who they revere even though he maintains the system of oppression, of poverty, of all the horrors of Russia? Why are the mass of people so passive? Lenin's answer is very famous. He said: "For decades nothing happens, and then, in a few weeks, decades happen." I don't have an explanation. I wish I did. But I think there's a kind of deep people's wisdom in all of this. People make a pretty correct estimate of where the power lies. And they see that the police, the military, and the government are able and willing to use really extraordinary force against them.

Part of them are outraged by watching that cop put his knee on George Floyd's neck. Yeah, they're outraged, but they're also scared because they know: *That could be me*. Lots of white people, when they were teenagers, had interactions with cops. They're very aware that the cop who pulled them over one night when they were having too much fun, they could tell from his face and his actions that, had he been able to get away with it, he would have beat them. He was certainly abusive to them. They know.

And that's the job of the police. They're supposed to do that, and they do it. They're not supposed to do it to the "wrong people," and they make mistakes, but they do it. And people do understand that, they're in trouble, and if they speak up, they're going to be in more trouble. So they're hesitant to do it. It's not that they agree with police misbehavior. It's not that they think it ought to happen. It's not even that they don't snap sometimes when it happens to them. But getting going, in some ongoing way to begin to define their lives as a life of struggle—I think we have to wait. I wish we didn't, but I think we have to wait. And by waiting I don't mean things have to get worse before they get better. That's always wrong and not necessary. What you need mostly, I think, is a credible alternative. In my experience, what people need to become activated or motivated is they have to see something that has a chance. They don't need a guarantee of success, but it has to have a chance. If what the Left projects is something which, while correct, doesn't look like it has a chance, you're not going to have many people go with you. It's too dangerous. They're not going to do it. That is why you have to have organization. One of the things people have to see is that you are organized. You have people coordinating, dividing the work, getting the work done. Producing a proper leaflet that looks right. Producing a demonstration that's organized, that has monitors keeping the police away. Part of the notion that it might succeed is that it is sufficiently organized. Americans are really bad at that.

They were so traumatized after World War II, in my judgement, by the destruction of Left organizations starting in 1947, and followed by fifteen years of the systematic destruction of labor organizations, of the Socialist parties, of the Communist Party, and of all the little groups that they spawned. This left a general sense on the left in American imagination and in the population that you better see really good organization or you are going to be getting involved with something that is going to be destroyed like all that was destroyed. I think there is much more of a collective memory of that than Americans will admit to. I think that half the families of America had an uncle or a sister or a cousin who was a Socialist or was a Communist or was a CIO militant, and they heard the stories during the family picnic of what happened to those family members when the government drove them out of a job or deported them or worse. Those stories are part of our culture. I think that's one of the reasons that the young new left that keep being born are as attracted to anarchisms of one type or another. They have in their leftism an aversion to organization as part of their inheritance of what was done.

LYON-CALLO: And it's not just that period during the 1950s either, right? You also had groups like the Black Panthers, and they were systematically attacked and destroyed, with leaders killed or imprisoned. And that's just one example. As my nineteen-year-old son brings up, this is a country that murdered Fred Hampton and bombed an entire neighborhood in Philadelphia to destroy MOVE. Why would anyone feel safe?

WOLFF: That's right. They burned a whole section of the city with MOVE. They didn't bother to even put the fires out.

LYON-CALLO: So what you're saying is that, for people to act, they need to have the hope that the action is going to have a chance of success.

WOLFF: Right. Otherwise, you are inviting them to self-destruction, which is not an attractive invitation.

LYON-CALLO: To act differently, to do more than hope that those in power do something to help, there has to be some example of that action working. To allow your desires for something different to come to the surface, the possibility of success and something different has to be conceptually understood as possible, even if not likely.

WOLFF: That's right.

LYON-CALLO: So I am wondering about your thoughts on the present moment. You said we have to wait, but could organization be emerging that might aid in moving beyond liberal or neoliberal reform and towards systemic changes? Do you see signs today that possibilities of moving beyond liberal reform and towards the necessary systemic changes to build alternatives to capitalism are emerging—perhaps in Black

Lives Matters, the Sanders campaign, national Poor People's Campaign, Cooperation Jackson, or the reception to your own work and the reaction to discussing democratizing the workplace? Is it possible that these movements can begin to organize together to create those possibilities for people to see?

WOLFF: I have never been a pessimist. Maybe I'm guilty of some degree of wishful thinking, but maybe that's a necessary part of being involved in social change. You have to believe in the possibility, and maybe you see signs of it. But let me start very personally. We are now coming up on 200,000 YouTube followers for Democracy at Work. I have 100,000 Twitter followers. By the way, I don't do that by myself. I have a team of people working with me. I never did radio or television in my life. For most of my career teaching at UMass, or before that Yale, I would get an invitation to go on a show and speak maybe once every two to three months—I think that was more than most of my colleagues got, because I was always politically active.

So starting in 2010—so it's now ten years old—everything changed. The crash of 2008 changed this country in very fundamental ways. I think we're still watching the ripples. Even as we enter a worse crisis, we're still engaged with the ripple effects of the 2008 crisis. Clearly, Occupy Wall Street was one result. Clearly, the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign was another result. And I'm a result. My life changed from being the professor you knew at UMass to being a public-intellectual, activist type of person. You're the third interview I've done today, and I will have more this afternoon. And that's my normal day. That has nothing to do with me. It has to do with the audience that creates the demand for what I do, for what I deliver. Imagine you're the type of person who whistles the same jingle all your life so the people close to you get annoyed after a while: we've heard that jingle forever, just stop whistling. And then, one day, everyone gathers around and pleads and begs with you to sing the jingle. You say, "But I thought you hated that jingle," and they reply, "Yeah, but the world has changed." That's me. I'm not saying what I didn't say before. I've been a critic of capitalism for most of my adult life. Just to give you an idea. Next month, you may see a long article in the magazine *Hustler*, about Socialism, which they asked me to write for them. I only give you that as an example because you're going to find my article between lots of images of naked women. And why did I do it? Because that's an audience I can't reach normally, for better or worse. It turns out that Larry Flynt, who owns that thing, follows my work, and he likes it. That's all over the United States now, often in situations you would never dream of. And I think they get it; they get that something has radically altered. The viewpoint is not that things have changed; the viewpoint is becoming darker. It's becoming: everything is falling apart. You get it on the right, you get it on the left, you get it even in the middle now. Somewhere an awful lot of people understand that we are falling apart as a society. Having to choose between Trump or Biden is proof that we're falling apart. So I am very hopeful.

Let me give you one more example. I don't know if you ever visited a little town called Ashfield when you were at UMass. It's maybe twenty minutes north of Northampton, and I know you were active in Northampton, so maybe you've visited.

LYON-CALLO: Yeah, a small rural town.

WOLFF: Right. Ashfield is a nice, small rural community with probably about one thousand residents. Last Saturday I was there, and I couldn't drive down the main street. Virtually the only street in Ashfield. Why? Because there was a demonstration. A demonstration in Ashfield by the citizens of Ashfield. There were at least 150 people walking down the main street, carrying handmade signs. A good number of them were on the city board of selectmen, so the cops had to be careful. I would say that if there were ten African American people, that would be a high estimate. The demonstration was overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly thirty-five years of age or younger. All carrying "black lives matter" or signs about police. It was an amazing thing. When I spoke to people, they couldn't remember in the history of Ashfield such a thing happening. And this is happening in communities across the United States. Something was touched in those people, overwhelmingly white, that this was somehow their issue. I am frankly amazed at what I hear.

Two weeks ago, a group of people I know set up a motorcade around the country for people to march, about not paying your rent. They counted forty-five cities two weeks ago that had a motorcade of some sort around a rent strike. They did it again this last weekend and reported seventy-five cities. They grew. I find this spectacular. This is activism, this is mobilization, this is people feeling that they have to do something. It's not so much important what they do. The important thing is that they're doing something and that they figure out what works and what doesn't. The important thing is that they've gotten off their rear ends and they're not just going to sit and watch it on TV.

LYON-CALLO: And there are efforts in some of these movements to build longer-term organized plans out of these efforts. For example, Kali Akuno and Cooperation Jackson. You could do the easy thing of supporting their call for a general strike on the first day of each month. But that is just the start of their program of action to build community-based economies, to take back control of land, to democratize workplaces and build cooperatives, to build universal basic services for all people, to institute a Green New Deal, and more. It's the bringing people in to do something easy, and then there's building for more that can be done once people have the concrete example of having participated in an organized fashion and not been punished. The National Poor People's Campaign is acting similarly. It's about giving people the courage to have hope and desire so that they might be able to begin working together for the systemic changes needed so we can all live well.

WOLFF: I have worked a bit with Kali Akuno and Cooperation Jackson. So I know about that much more than some of the others. But I can tell you first of all that Kali Akuno is an extraordinary leader. I wouldn't say it if I didn't believe it. He has a very long-term commitment. He has a very long-term strategy. He understands exactly what you just said about the importance of a momentary act, but the even greater importance of long-term roots. They have enormous problems in Jackson, Mississippi. They have a very hostile governor, a very hostile legislature, and there they are in the middle of the capital city of the state of Mississippi. But they are very creative. They have a very good group of people working with them. Yeah, if we had one hundred of those around the country, we would be in a very different place politically. And Kali is very attuned to alliances with other groups around the country. There isn't the go-it-alone mentality that you sometimes find. I have enjoyed working with him. He has asked me, and I've spoken with his organizers down there. We've had conferences, and that's mostly his initiative. He wanted them to have some of the theoretical stuff that we do to be part of their training, part of their ongoing efforts. I found that very satisfying, but also very hopeful as I find so much of what's going on.

LYON-CALLO: I have a question that might appear to be a little less hopeful for just a second. You and I would prefer an embracing of Socialism or Communism (and surveys suggest that many young people in the U.S. would like that as well). But what we see in so many places across the globe is angry and disenchanted people turning to right-wing nationalist populism. We see this in Brazil, India, Turkey, the Philippines, Hungary, the U.S., rising popularity of such movements in much of Europe. Can you offer an explanation for why such right populist movements have been so successful politically—even when they have such poor records of altering the conditions that they run upon? And, as we see in the U.S. and Brazil, they are also quite awful at keeping citizens well within the ongoing pandemic. Given these actual conditions, how do we on the left learn from them and offer a compelling alternative?

WOLFF: Let me give you my answer. Maybe it will surprise you. I'm going to be blunt to get the idea across. I think most of the people in all of the countries you mentioned have a gut-level understanding that capitalism stinks. That it serves the rich. That it serves a minority, and that it is at their expense unless they can cleverly escape from the trap and have a decent life somehow, somewhere, and find a little niche somewhere where they won't be exploited. They know that.

LYON-CALLO: So the sense of trying to escape when imagining transforming is too difficult.

WOLFF: Okay. Then they encountered in the twentieth century a vast movement from the left. A movement of labor unions. A movement of Socialist parties or Communist parties. A movement that said capitalism doesn't work, and most

people agreed. It was a movement that said it was going to be the vehicle for change. It said that if you join us, if you vote for us, we are going to change this system so it doesn't do to you what you know it does to you. And the people responded. Not all of them, but a clear mass of people went that way and supported Socialism. And it was punctuated by the horror of World War II, and World War I. Those were blamed on capitalism, and rightly so. No other system had ever had a world war with such horrors. My mother, for example, was introduced to Socialism out of her growing up in Germany in a society that was horrified by what happened in World War I. Her sister became a pacifist because of the war, and she became a bit of a Socialist. Then in World War II you had it again, but this time it had something that the first war didn't. Namely, a massive movement of resistance to the Nazis. Italian resistance, French resistance, Scandinavian resistance, and so on. The leaders of those resistances were always Socialists, Communists, leftists. They became heroes. And in the aftermath of the war, the mass opposition to capitalism was captured by the Left because of the history of the Second World War. The early postwar governments in places like France and Italy had Communists holding cabinet positions. They had to. So what happened after that postwar period? Here's the crux of my argument. The Left did not know how to achieve what the mass of people had been led by them to expect. They couldn't. It's not altogether their fault. It was the strength they could not achieve. It was the influence they could not wield. And it was a lot of mistakes they also made. Part of that was getting caught up in the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. It was a failure of nerve. It was the successful economic growth that Western Europe and the United States had coming out of World War II. Long story short, the Left could not realize its project. And even where Socialists became the government, they didn't do very much. I mean, yes, in Europe they got national health, they got subsidized housing and subsidized family life and some subsidized food. So they got some things that helped, but they did not fundamentally change the capitalist system, which is what they had defined themselves as doing. And so, here comes the punch line. I think the mass of people abandoned them. Out of disappointment. Out of disinterest. Out of anger. A little bit of all of them. And said, we're done with you. You promised and you didn't deliver. And we're not paying attention to you. And if there's another politician who gives us this promise that there's going to be change, he or she better give us a different version than you gave us because we ain't going with you.

So along comes Marine Le Pen or the Northern League in Italy or any of those. They come along, and they basically borrow from the old Socialist platform. We're going to change it all, but it's all going to be done in the name of the nation. But here's the hopeful part of this. They're going to be even less successful than the Socialists because they're not even trying to get greater benefits for the mass of people. They are so connected to the business community that runs these societies that they're not doing anything. They're not going to improve the wages. They're not going to do any of that. So my guess is that they're paving the way for

an even greater disappointment from the mass of the working class with them. But there's a risk here. The risk is that the mass of the working class will throw up its hands and say, "They're all fakers"—the Left and the Right. The second risk is that they will go back into the hands of the same compromising Socialists that they were with before. And then they're going to get the same disappointment again. I mean, Emmanuel Macron used to be a member of the Socialist Party and had a cabinet position in the last Socialist government. He's as much of a Socialist as Ivanka Trump is a Socialist. It's pure political opportunism of the crassest sort.

Here's another risk. You might see an explosion of antifa, anarchism, for a kind of a desperate search for working-class politics, who don't trust the conventional Left and don't trust the conventional Right, all for good reasons, who know exactly who their problem is. It's the business community, and you may see again what you had in Italy a few decades ago, which is a guerilla, anarchistic, bitter, militant effort to topple the system. Bringing down the kind of repression those things usually bring down.

These are all risks of our situation. But I wouldn't exchange it for anything. That's what movement involves. I would even go so far as to say that part of what is happening now—that what is happening now in the United States is a kind of disappointment with Trump. An awful lot of people wanted to believe that this peculiar mix of Republicans with a guy who seemed to have some sympathy for people out of work—remember, he was going to bring back manufacturing and revive the coal mines. He ran on some kind of clue that masses of working people are suffering. Part of Trump's problem is that he's what I'm talking about. Working-class elements that were angry that the Democratic Party had betrayed them and didn't give them what they voted for—the Democrats, for generations—and then went to Trump, they're now seeing that Mr. Trump is a faker. They now see that Trump isn't going to get them one step further. Probably, Trump will get them a whole lot further from where they want to be. They're a little bit ashamed, and they're a little bit chagrined, and they're slowly turning against him.

You said earlier about the interest in Socialism. Yeah, I see the same polls. But I've got to tell you, and I know this from all the questions I'm asked on the radio, on television, and on our website. It is far less a statement about interest in, or commitment to socialism. What it is, is a statement: "I hate capitalism. Capitalism doesn't work. Capitalism is not helping me. Capitalism has betrayed the promises I thought had been made to me by my parents, by my minister, by my relatives, by my teachers, that I should work hard and study hard and get the degree and then the American Dream would fall into my lap and I'd have a nice car and a yard." They're angry at all of that: "I'm really angry. And you know what really makes my older generation angry is if I say I like Socialism. So I'm gonna say that as a way of saying, I'm done with you." They think, "I know Bernie is a hell of a lot more interesting than Joe Biden, and even my grandmother can see that."

LYON-CALLO: Right. It's often more of a statement of what we don't want, but I'm not sure if people know that Socialism is actually what they do want.

WOLFF: Yes. So our job, your job, my job, *RM's* job, is to give substance, to give a hard reality to what saying you like Socialism actually means.

LYON-CALLO: I would agree. One of the interesting parts is looking at COVID-19. Which two countries are clearly the biggest failures? Brazil and the U.S. Both are led by right-wing nationalist populists who said when running that they were going to offer something new for the people. And that is clearly a lie, as neither cares about working people. And now everyone knows that.

WOLFF: But everyone knew it before. Bolsonaro is the Brazilian Trump. And Trump has been a rich, empty-headed playboy all his life. There's nothing there.

LYON-CALLO: But at least he appeared to not be dismissive to the suffering of working people in the middle of the country like Clinton was in 2016. Clinton ran a campaign where it was clear she didn't care about the lives of working people. And Trump said to them that they mattered. Most people probably didn't believe that, but maybe enough were able to convince themselves to believe what they deep down knew was not true. Now working people are confronted with the truth that nobody cares about them. So there is a lot of anger. There are a lot of people who are very angry, sad, and full of despair. And the question is, where can they go? There isn't really an organized Left to offer a path.

WOLFF: I agree with you. And I blame the Left. I always believed what I'm about to say, but I know most of my fellow leftists didn't. One of the great achievements of the Bernie campaign in 2016, and until he dropped out in 2020, had the enormous service to us to teach people that millions upon millions of people in America are perfectly comfortable voting for a politician who says, "I'm a Socialist." We are not alone. We have lots of support. So where the hell are the organizations that ought to be collecting the money and the votes and the activism of all of those millions of people? That's our job.

If I can say something in particular to the *RM* type of audience. We have something special. What Socialism means for most Americans that I encounter is about the government. The government is going to do this, or the government is going to do that. It's going to pay for your health insurance; it's going to give you free tuition. And then they point to Scandinavia or Western Europe where governments do all that. I get it. But that's not what we mean. But that's what Americans have been taught for at least seventy-five years. That's why I get questions like, "Isn't the post office Socialism?" What? No, it's not. That's when I give them what I consider the AESA or *RM* contribution. I say, no, Socialism is a reorganized workplace. It's about the transformation of those days we go to work for most of our adult lives. It's about transforming that, so that we are going to be in charge; workers are going to be collectively running these enterprises and not just

working in them. That's how Socialism is going to transform everything from the bottom up, because it's going to transform the workplace.

And here's what I have learned. First, they have never heard this before. This is a rendition of Socialism that is altogether new for them. But it has a second enormous advantage besides being new. The second advantage is that they have not had seventy-five years of indoctrination against that idea of Socialism. Oh, they can tell you terrible stories about the Soviet Union or China or Cuba or how the government oppresses you or the government takes away your civil liberties. They have had all that training. But when it comes to arguing against worker democracy in the workplace, they don't have any training. They just look at me. And I'm talking about the right wing. I go on right-wing talk shows. And they have no answer. My guess is that, as we get stronger, they will come up with better critiques. But right now, we've got a clear, clean shot. It makes me cry that we don't take more advantage of it.

LYON-CALLO: And it's very compelling to students, at least at my fairly conservative school in Michigan. When I get to the sections about democratizing the workplace and introduce them to spaces that might be seen as spaces of possibility and hope, they are shocked by Mondragon, and then I ask them to consider their education and why they have never learned about this large, successful democratic corporation. Or the many worker-run cooperatives in conservative northern Italy. Like you say, they are shocked. We might then look at the factory-recovery movement in Argentina or efforts to build cooperative lives in Columbia or Chiapas. Those are far away, though. But then we might look at the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland or cooperatives in Chicago. If it's possible in Ohio or Illinois, why not in Michigan or Indiana? We call this a democracy in the United States, but where is this democracy? Does anyone you know have democracy in their workplace? How about their homes or schools? Could those become democratic sites? And then they begin to imagine a very different world. As you say, should that not be our focus?

WOLFF: Right. And what would it look for a young person to imagine his or her life in such a world? Socialism has always had to project a vision like that. That's why people gave their lives in countless Socialist or Communist efforts around the world. They weren't doing it for an extra six dollars at the end of the week. Come on! They were doing it because of enormous images in their minds about, what a better world for them, for their children, and all the rest of us. Let me be clear. I think that if we can project that image successfully, we can build a very powerful movement in this country.

Look, even Bernie had a platform. It was very brief and very inadequate. But he had a plank in his platform about co-ops and how he would support and extend co-ops. It was namby-pamby, but it was there. It was there in part because people like us have connections with him and his campaign. You can build from that.

LYON-CALLO: One last question. Let's return to that theme of being at war. Trump voiced early on that we're at war against the virus and we all need to be together in this war. There was even talk for a moment of enacting universal basic income for the duration of the crisis. Of course, that did not happen. "We're all in this together" in the war against the virus became, "You have individual responsibility to act to stay well individually." As you pointed out in the June 1st *Economic Update*, perhaps the sickest version of this is the advice to homeless people on what they individually need to do to keep themselves well (Wolff 2020b).

This rhetorical shift was accompanied by a massive economic stimulus package without any commitment of support for all—not even a commitment to having a potential vaccine being available to all. As we know, the government's intervention has helped certain segments of the stock market to flourish, such that billionaires' wealth increased by \$282 billion in just twenty-three days during the initial weeks of the lockdowns while working Americans became even more economically and emotionally insecure. More recently, the uprisings in the streets around racism and police violence again indicate that we are far from all in it together in the U.S.

You have talked about the class war today in the U.S. We have had decades of embracing privatization, deregulation, automation, and the promotion of the free market in the quest for growth, efficiency, and so-called freedom and individual responsibilities. Both major political parties have embraced one version or another, and that has produced a massive transfer of wealth to the wealthiest. As you write, capitalism is certainly currently in crisis (Wolff 2020e). One can just look at the escalating debt, the number of people and businesses not paying rents or loans, or the opioid and mental health crises to see this.

I would suggest that there has also been a war on black males for the last several decades, sometimes referred to as the war on drugs. Others suggest that the U.S. has been at war against cultural pluralism, indigenous peoples, people of color, and any organized Left for centuries. On the June 1, 2020, issue of *Economic Update*, you highlighted a Federal Reserve report about how 40 percent of Americans making under \$40,000 lost their jobs in a recent six-week period. The mass unemployment is largely impacting poorer, already economically precarious people. In your discussion with Cornell West, you also mention how women and black and brown people have been hurt more than males and white people in general from COVID-19 (Wolff 2020b). We know that people who are older or have some preexisting conditions are most likely to die from COVID-19, but there is also much evidence that Native Americans and working-class black and Latinx people are more likely to die from this virus. And as the work of public-health scholars like David Williams (2020) has shown, there is increasing evidence demonstrating links between the stresses of living everyday with racial and class inequality and the vast health disparities in the United States. It is not individual behaviors but structures of violence producing the disparate economic and health outcomes from COVID-19.

Is there a way that we can think through the lens of overdetermination and anti-essentialist analyses to consider that what is important is class and race and more? Do you have thoughts on how to balance these multiple entry points for our analyses of class and race and other factors? Can that help us to help young people who are angry and disillusioned to imagine possible other worlds? Can such an analysis help us to both analyze the current coronavirus moment and to think through how to actually build alliances, work together, and live in this world together?

WOLFF: I don't have really anything to add to that conversation except what appeared to me early on when Steve and I were first trying to work these things out and what occurred to us then. I haven't really made much progress beyond it. It always struck me that the logic of overdetermination, the rejection of an essentialism, means that those of us who are more interested in the class dimension than others, for whatever peculiar reasons of our history—I wasn't born this way. The influences in my life made me focus on class. I am not saying it's good or bad; that's just who I am. But it's always been clear to me that the conditions of existence of any particular class structure—for example, the capitalist class structure that I am opposed to includes certain kinds of cultural constructs, one of which is race, the notion that people can be divided into some sort of different groups based on pigments in your skin. I understand that those kinds of cultural formations, like religions, are part of the conditions of existence. They are part of what makes capitalism exist and survive and reproduce over time. I think I can show how racism against people with darker skin has played that role for a long time in supporting and sustaining capitalism. So, therefore, racism is my enemy. I have to change these racialized notions. I have to problematize the concept of race. I have to explain to people that it is not a given, that there is nothing about us as human beings that suggests we ought to be classified in a significant way around the pigment in our skin.

So my enemy is racism, and now I discover something. I discover that there are other people like me who have a different history. They were brought up in such a way that the issue that most interested them was racial discrimination or racism. And that's what their focus is, but they get it, like I do, maybe with the theory of overdetermination, or maybe they just do this without self-consciousness. But they come to the conclusion that capitalism, a particular class structure, reinforces the racism that they want to get rid of. We now can make a deal. I'm gonna help you fight racism and you're gonna help me fight capitalism so that we get a different system that neither needs nor allows racism or the class system of the exploitation of one person by another. We make a deal. I help you and you help me. Nobody is subordinating anybody. Nobody is claiming that their entry point is the right one. This is a coalition or an alliance built on the understanding that the kind of economic system we have needs racism and will be weakened if we can defeat racism, and the kind of racism we have will be at least weakened if

we can defeat capitalism. No guarantees. Nobody has to believe that, if we got rid of racism, that capitalism would be gone, or vice-versa. It's a deal. And the deal has to be honored, and the deal has to be worked through periodically. And I say the same thing to feminists on that issue or ecologists on that issue. We've got a deal to make. And if we make the deal, we will help each other in terms of our goals, but we will also build the organization without which none of us are going to realize our goals.

That's the deal. And, you know, I've offered it many times. And I would say that most of the time they do not accept it. I realize that's part of my problem; that's part of our problem. We live in a culture that is very deeply committed to essentialism. I used to make a joke. Steve and I used to make a joke that we have a harder time with our left-wing audiences getting across overdetermination than getting across the notion of class as the production and distribution of surplus rather than the government. They can more easily take this new concept of class than they can take overdetermination. It's bizarre and has been surprising to us, but it's been true. One of the reasons that pushing overdetermination is valuable is that—I think, I hope—is that it trickles down into this gut-level question of how we build organizations that are powerful by drawing in people whose primary interests are different, but are not afraid of that difference.

For example, one of the reasons why I like Kali Akuno is that he gets that. His primary issue is African American people and organizing them and working in an African American majority city like Jackson, but he understands that I need him and he needs me. We get it.

LYON-CALLO: And then we can build coalitions and alliances to work on the many aspects of our collective struggles.

WOLFF: Absolutely. There's no option.

LYON-CALLO: If our goal isn't to be right and that our interest is the essential or primary one.

WOLFF: Right. We've got to get rid of that. That's a killer. And, by the way, that's often the opening wedge for any disruptive people. Whether they're there by accident or they are there because they are working for some government agency. That's the wedge to destroy coalitions. It's been a very big burden on us on the left that we have to get out from under.

LYON-CALLO: Even with my work on homelessness, I've seen that. It happens when people want to focus on one aspect as the determining factor. Not as one of many possible entry points that we need to build alliances to work on but as the determining factor, as though all the rest does not matter. It makes alliances impossible.

WOLFF: That's right. How do we teach people that you can have your entry point, you can have what's most important to you. That's not a problem. It's how you deal

with people who disagree with you. How do you disagree on entry points but work together still?

LYON-CALLO: That's the challenge with these times of living with COVID-19. There are so many areas of impact and possible entry points for acting, but one of them is that there is this profound sense of despair and hopelessness among so many people.

WOLFF: And, of course, having to stay at home due to the virus only makes all of that worse. You are even more isolated. Which, of course, makes the necessary alliances even more difficult.

LYON-CALLO: Of course. Interesting and challenging times. Thank you so much for talking with me today.

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