

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 corona. 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

COVID and Capitalism: A Conversation with Richard Wolff

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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

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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 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

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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: 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 that 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.

LYON-CALLO: One last question. 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

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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 antiessentialist 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 over-

determination 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.

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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 the coronavirus. 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.

This is the first part of an interview that will appear in Vol. 32, No. 4 of Rethinking Marxism.

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