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THE UNITED STATES AND COVID-19

Hairpin turns

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With 4 percent of the world population the US has 25 percent of cases and 22 percent of the world's Covid-19 deaths. Worldometer data for the US are 14,983,425 cases, 287,825 deaths and climbing (12.5.2020). November and December see the US' highest number of additional daily cases across the country, also in the rural states. American deaths per million of population (870) place the US in the neighborhood of the UK (897), Mexico (845), Spain (989), Brazil (828), and Peru (1,091).

In December 2020 the US is still at square one: no agreement on basics, no plan, no organization. No hammer, no dance. Cases and deaths are rising fast. Eight months after Covid-19 was acknowledged, the US still doesn't come near the threshold of planning, testing, and tracing that most countries passed eight or nine months ago. The federal government is in disarray and state and local governments are improvising amid contradictory pressures.

An iconic power center, the White House doesn't practice social distancing, holds indoor gatherings without use of masks, and hosts super spreader events. White House staff, secret service personnel, chief of staff Mark Meadows, and members of the Trump family have tested positive. The public conversation is mired in mixed messages.

A large advanced economy, a model society by some accounts, in a state of confusion and impasse. What explains this tragic failure? Many blame Donald Trump. Trump is responsible for inept policies and disinformation on a mass scale. But Trump is not to blame for American healthcare being geared to profitable private care, not public health. Trump is not to blame for the limitations of federal government, a weakness by design that goes back decades. This is a society that JK Galbraith described decades ago as a society of 'private opulence and public squalor' (1958). American society and economy tilting towards private, not public services has deep roots. They match conservative moorings that are entrenched in American

governance. Hence, this chapter considers three themes: governance, American capitalism, and the GOP as hairpin turns in the United States' forward motion.

Governance

Late 18th-century institutions in a combination known as the constitution form the bedrock of American governance. The institutions served to secure the representation of states in the governance of the American Union. From the outset, the constitution was a compromise between the northern states and the Southern plantation slaveholding states, with the new capital Washington in-between. To secure the union, the Southern states were given in-built guarantees: each state in the union is represented by two senators; the president is chosen by an Electoral College of state delegates; the president and senate appoint federal judges. According to the Second Amendment, the right to bear arms, the states can call on armed militias to guard against a tyrannical government. *Changing the constitution* requires the approval of two-thirds of both the representatives and the senate as well as three-quarters of the states. This 1788 compromise and some later adjustments embed conservatism in the American Union. The objective was to keep states together, not people.

At the time, the union consisted of four million people who were mostly farmers. Now it means that North Dakota and South Dakota with a combined population of 1.5 million are represented in congress by four senators while California with 39.5 million people is represented by two senators. Wyoming with 600,000 people is also represented by two senators. A country where 82 percent of people live in cities is governed by a senate whose majority represent thinly populated states with a mostly rural population. While cities account for well over 90 percent of US economic growth they function under the veto power of rural majority states, most of whose elected officials are conservative in outlook.

The American senate is not like the first chamber of European parliaments or the House of Lords in Westminster, whose role is to provide counsel and amendments to legislation. In contrast, the American senate has evolved as the powerhouse of politics. The senate decides on passing legislation, cabinet appointments, appointments to head government departments and to the Supreme Court. According to the filibuster rule, it takes 60 senators, out of 100, to pass votes, another legacy of bygone times. The senate can block legislation, appointments, international treaties, or withhold ratification of agreements adopted by the White House or the Representatives. Even basic international agreements such as nuclear non-proliferation, covenants to counter violence against women or environmental regulation can remain without senate ratification; hence, the senate is the bottleneck of the United States and the bottleneck of the world (Nederveen Pieterse 2008). In the words of law professor Sanford Levinson, 'The US Senate is an affirmative action program for white, rural, Christian conservatives, who have an increasingly powerful veto over America' (in Luce 2020).

In this setting, even though national elections are major media spectacles every two years, electoral shifts have limited impact. Even if the opposition party gains

a senate majority, it takes 60 senators to pass a bill. Even if a bill is passed it can be overruled in another round. This explains why decades of social struggle have had limited impact.

The Electoral College means that voters choosing a presidential candidate are actually casting a vote for an elector. All states, except two, use the ‘winner-take-all’ method in which all electoral votes are awarded to the winner of the popular vote in that state, no matter the margin of victory. The Electoral College means that millions of votes are counted but don’t count. It means that the presidential election is decided by a handful of states; ‘swing states’ decide (Wegman 2020).

Over the past 20 years, Republicans have won the popular vote just once yet have had the presidency for 12 of those years. Because of the skewed apportionment of Electoral College vote numbers in favour of the thinly populated and rural states, a vote in California is worth less than a third of one cast in Wyoming.

(Schama 2020)

Fundamental constraints also apply to the American legal system: ‘the American judiciary is ... the most potent force for conservatism in America, especially since the end of the civil rights era as it became dominated by big money ideological think tanks’ (Lanza 2020). The Supreme Court is not part of the constitution but derives from early 19th-century dispute settlements (Rasmus 2020). The Supreme Court is another bulwark of conservatism. The ideology of originalism—stay with the original texts—that is held by the conservative Federalist Society and conservative judges, parallels the ‘fundamentalism’ of 1920s American Protestants (stay with the original Bible text) and is about as relevant; in effect, it serves as a pretext for archconservative interpretations of law (Rennix and Nimni 2018).

According to the Second Amendment, states can call on armed militias as recourse against tyrannical government. Part of the definition of the state is the monopoly on the legitimate means of violence; armed militias are legitimate, so in this sense the United States is not a state. Guns in wide circulation, increasingly military grade firearms, have long contributed to the escalation of violence and the militarization of policing. The US leads the world in gun deaths. The response to any crisis is to buy more guns and ammunition. In 2020 in response to the pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests, Americans have bought 17 million guns (Beckett 2020).

Institutional reforms are possible in times of crisis. The Civil War produced the Declaration of Emancipation; the Great Depression led to the New Deal; segregation in the South produced civil rights legislation; Vietnam War protests led to the end of the draft. Yet in-built conservative leverage is such that over time conservatives can claw back many progressive gains.

Time and again the US has seen powerful social movements, movements that have inspired people worldwide; worker movements, the civil rights movement, women’s movements, peace movements, LGBT, and environmental movements.

Decades hence, where are the achievements? The unionization rate of American workers in the private sector is 7.2 percent. Black American living standards remain a fraction of that of whites. Voter restrictions and gerrymandering in Republican-led states are severe. Police kill blacks with impunity nearly on a weekly basis. Women in the workplace face sexual harassment and nondisclosure contracts, and abortion rights may be rolled back. The Pentagon and the national security apparatus are larger than ever with a combined annual budget in the order of a trillion dollars.

American police are equipped like an occupying army. Their training of 12 to 16 weeks mostly deals with how to use their equipment. In Germany and Scandinavia it takes two years of education to become a policeman; in Japan it takes four years. Because of cuts in local government budgets, the police are given more and more tasks, such as dealing with domestic disputes, mental health, poverty and homelessness, but are not trained or equipped to deal with them.

Rural support is the foundation of authoritarian rule worldwide. In Europe it was the basis of support of aristocracy and church, fascism, and Nazism. Rural votes sustain conservative parties the world over. In Malaysia, the UMNO party has ruled since independence for 61 years (with an interruption in 2018) largely on the basis of the kampong vote.

Also the world's largest economy and mightiest military power is governed by conservative rural power. Their power is enshrined in the senate, the Electoral College, the courts, the Supreme Court, and states' rights, all of which safeguard conservative power. In contrast to the national rhetoric of democracy, together these institutions ensure a society that is structurally conservative. The talk is of democracy but other leading institutions—corporations and the armed forces—are not democratic institutions either. As world hegemon, the US aims to promote democracy worldwide and wages wars to 'bring democracy to the Middle East', while in international rankings of democracies the US ranks only 25th. In 2017 the US was downgraded from a 'full democracy' to a 'flawed democracy' in the annual Democracy Index report of the Economist Intelligence Unit (2017, 2018). Ranking criteria include an underdeveloped political culture, low levels of participation in politics, and issues in the functioning of governance, which doesn't even take into account the institutional fundamentals discussed above.

Dixie capitalism, the revenge of the Confederacy

The Confederacy lost the Civil War. 'The Confederate States of America was defeated, definitively defeated, politically and militarily' (McCurry 2013). Yet the compromises with the Southern states made at the outset have given them lasting political heft (cf. McCurry 2012, Lepore 2019). The South lost with the Emancipation Declaration and regained ground with Jim Crow, lost with civil rights legislation and regained ground in the Reagan era.

The South had been in competition with the industrial North through the 19th century; the Civil War was a contest between the plantation economy of manual labor (and slavery) and the industrial economy of mechanical labor, and the

South lost (Davis 1984). However, upon the profit squeeze of the late 1970s, the industrial North found recourse in the plantation capitalism policy package of the South—low taxes, low wages, low services, no unions. When the Reagan era recast Dixie capitalism as a winning formula of growth, the South finally won the economic contest with the industrial North. Rollback government, deregulation and tax cuts became keywords ever since. Plantation capitalism, that is, labor without rights or with minimal rights (no unions), refurbished as the free market is the revenge of the Confederacy (discussed in detail in Nederveen Pieterse 2004). The policies deployed by the South to undo Reconstruction were repackaged under fresh headings (supply-side economics, monetarism, the Chicago school, the Laffer curve). When the poorest states of the US became the new standard, the US took a path of steadily growing inequality. The Reagan era dialed back many achievements of the New Deal. It reversed progressive taxation and the financial sector that had been reined in after the crash of 1929 was deregulated and made a comeback. New Deal social market capitalism gave way to high-exploitation capitalism, Walmart capitalism, capitalism without a moral compass. Stagnant wages, rising cost of living, rising productivity, rising inequality combined with corporate deregulation, efficiency, and cost benefit analysis as societal beacons. Ronald Reagan's 1980 and 1984 election victories established the new pact. Sunbelt Republicans (Goldwater, Nixon, Reagan) replaced East coast Republicans (Rockefeller and GHW Bush). Republicans embracing the Southern strategy and becoming the Confederate party (Frank 2004, Blight 2020) solved many dilemmas.

You want more democracy? The free market will keep you busy. 'Get government off our backs'? Welcome corporations on your backs. 'Starve the beast' (the beast of federal government social spending)? There go the GI bill, labor unions, social protection, the American dream, the Great Society. Here come industries without unions, deindustrialization without a safety net, and down the road are crystal meth in rural towns, the opioid crisis and 'deaths of despair' (Case and Deaton 2019). New Democrats of the Clinton brand add gender rights and identity politics to the mix while rolling back social rights, from the welfare to the workfare state, in the shiny new combination of 'progressive neoliberalism' (Fraser 2017).

The American Covid-19 failure, according to Rana Foroohar, is 'Fifty years of policy come home to roost': 'Decades of bad choices have relentlessly favoured the interests of the private sector in the US' (2020). American healthcare is geared to profitable private care, not public health. Each hospital is a profit center. The failures are basic: 'Broken data system stymies hospitals' (Evans and Berzon 2020). Consider a report on nursing homes in the US:

Across the country, nursing homes are looking to get rid of unprofitable patients—primarily those who are poor and require extra care—and pouncing on minor outbursts to justify evicting them to emergency rooms or psychiatric hospitals. After the hospitals discharge the patients, often within hours, the nursing homes refuse them re-entry, according to court filings.

(Silver-Greenberg and Abrams 2020)

Seventy percent of US nursing homes are for profit. Nursing homes have been a major site of Covid-19 deaths, also among nurses and staff (Editorial 2020). Hospitals and medicines for profit, both at exorbitant rates, are part of the picture. Hospitals can put indigent patients on the street. In the name of efficiency, hospitals don't have surge capacity and are unable to cope with a public health crisis. Extrapolate the profit principle to every sector of society, media and social media, prisons, detention centers for undocumented migrants, higher education, and so forth. Student loan debt affects 30 million people and stands at \$1.6 trillion, at interest rates of 7 percent, higher than anywhere in the world (in the UK they are capped at 2.75 percent).

Neoliberalism is plantation capitalism. It means, in short, capitalism without benefits, capitalism stripped of social cost, permissive capitalism. It means promote corporations, neglect and denigrate government agencies and institution, and ignore or sideline social forces, such as labor unions, consumer rights, and communities. Implementing this over four decades yields underfunded, dysfunctional government agencies that lag behind the corporate sector in organization, efficiency, and prestige. Under the neoliberal banner, government itself becomes anti-government government. Neoliberalism comes with several distortions. The 'free market' gradually turns into corporate monopolies. Deregulation with the adroit aid of lobbies and corporate lawyers becomes regulation that benefits the strongest corporate players. Shrink government by cutting taxes means cutting social government while increasing security and law and order spending. Cost/benefit analysis and the profit principle are applied across society while underfunding public services in the name of efficiency. Prisons for profit, elderly care and nursing homes for profit, healthcare for profit become organizing motifs. Corporate media must be profitable. Funding for public broadcasting is marginal (\$3 per person per year is absurdly low by international standards). Hence, the public sphere is a corporate sphere and is short of reflection.

The Covid-19 failure is part of the harvest of decades—defund social services, fund security spending. Rollback government is justified as a rejection of 'big government'. However, actual government size and spending don't shrink but just change composition, from service and social government to security and law and order government.

The casualty isn't just public health. Many government agencies have suffered major cuts and loss of purpose, such as the Food and Drug Administration (which enabled the opioid crisis), the Federal Aviation Authority (Boeing crisis), bank regulation (Wells Fargo scams), environmental regulation, the Immigration Service, and the Internal Revenue Service (functioning at half capacity). The new normal has come with a dumbing down of the public sphere. Media for profit (ratings) means adult public conversation is scarce and collective learning, also learning from other societies, has long been stagnant. The right to be stupid is institutionalized. Denial of Covid-19 and resistance to containment measures are more widespread in the US than in any advanced country. Thus, the American Covid-19 tragedy is part of a wider societal drama.

Peeling Trump and the GOP

The top layer of Donald Trump, on display for all to see, is a media blitz of nonstop lies, distortions, and self-promotion, pettiness on a grandiose scale. Features that characterize Trump's conduct throughout, notes a commentator, are authoritarianism, chaos, and incompetence (Douthat 2020). Plant this in the White House and these attributes spillover across all domains. In campaigning, these features make up a contrarian popular style, in governance, they produce erratic outcomes, and applied to a public health crisis, they spell disaster. Poo-pooing Covid-19, disavowing responsibility, promoting alt-science and politicizing mask wearing add up to a devastating record that is extensively documented. The leader of the world's most advanced and powerful country advised people to try disinfectants as a cure. It is national news when the president agrees with scientists of his government institutions. The result is headlines that are unusual for most heads of state:

Passing off virus burden, White House fueled crisis
(New York Times, *July 19 2020*)

For health agencies, the rock is the pandemic, the hard place is Trump
(New York Times, *September 13, 2020*)

Study finds 'single largest driver' of coronavirus misinformation: Trump
(New York Times, *September 30, 2020*)

To be near Trump is toxic
(Financial Times, *October 10–11, 2020*)

Layer two is the con, 'the art of the deal'. Economic success is a mirage: job growth built on the Obama administration legacy and the stock market high was a result of interest rates that were kept low: 'The real driver, of course, of many of the S&P 500's gains under Trump is the Federal Reserve' (Mackenzie 2020). Make America Great Again? There was no infrastructure investment and no industrial reinvestment to speak of either (high-tech investments bear no relation to Trump policies). Trade war with China didn't lower US trade deficits and came at the expense of corporations and farmers. In foreign policy, America First is America Alone, besides tea time with dictators.

Attitude and bluster consume more public oxygen. White grievance, white supremacy and law and order are GOP refrains, but Trump turned dog whistle into bullhorn. Repurpose or disable government agencies by appointing cronies and opponents of agencies to head agencies (environment, energy, education, justice, national security, postal service) syncs with the GOP tradition of anti-government government.

The top layer, the Trump reality TV show, is what garnered his 2016 election campaign billions of dollars of free air time—bombastic lowbrow entertainment in

the tradition of the American con man is good for ratings. Destroying democracy can be good for ratings too. Network media and social media thrive on polarization theater. The presidency as reality TV, nonstop performance of bad taste, an entourage of con men and grifters, and a cascade of political gossip keep media busy, a morally exhausting assault on standards and values. Conspiracy clouds pass overhead (such as the Trump administration as ‘a transnational crime syndicate masquerading as a government’, Kendzior 2020).

Yet, backstage is where the action is. Fox Business News and the Wall Street Journal are matter of fact. Maria Bartiromo and Freeman (2020) argue, just skip the lowbrow entertainment, Trump’s policies are tax cuts and deregulation. Trump is longer on politics than policy, but tax cuts and deregulation are simply hardcore GOP, givebacks to donors, the reason why billionaires and corporations line up behind the GOP and Trump. Icing on the cake is white supremacy and appointing conservative judges to appellate courts and the Supreme Court. Trump’s anti-immigration policies give demographic solace to white privilege. Arguably the task isn’t peeling Trump but peeling GOP.

The GOP gained influence in the South in the wake of 1960s civil rights legislation when Southern democrats turned republican. The GOP consolidated its position by undermining federal government, the New Deal coalition and the ‘Great Society’. Because aligning corporate wish lists, Wall Street and law and order may not be sufficient to sway small towns and rural counties, states’ rights provide rural attraction. Teaming up with evangelicals (social conservatism and Israel), the NRA gun lobby, patriotism and populist shine close the deal. Hence, Reagan (‘It’s morning again in America’), neoconservatives (‘Simplify, then exaggerate’), the Tea Party (freedom, courtesy of Koch brothers), Fox News (courtesy of Rupert Murdoch) and Trump (MAGA). Trump is an installment in a series: American conservatism, white supremacy, and Dixie economics.

Peel a layer further down and decades of cold war (against big government), decades of a bipolar world order consolidate binary thinking as a national bipartisan matrix—communism v capitalism, authoritarianism v democracy. Hence, the American brand of free market and democracy.

The Reagan period is often interpreted in political economy terms as corporate deregulation and tax cuts, along with social demobilization, like Thatcher in the UK. However, a more momentous accomplishment of the Reagan era is a *political realignment*. Rollback government also meant *rollback federal government* in favor of states’ rights. Keep government small, keep federal government out, the vintage credo of the South (the reason why Southern states staged the rebellion that led to the Civil War) now extends to *all rural states*. This set in motion a Republican compact of the South and other rural states; the Southern strategy morphs into a *rural strategy* and brings into being a GOP block of ‘red states’ (20 in 2016, 21 in 2020), each with two senators. This is the Republicans’ actual master move; mastering the constitution, they gain control of the cockpit of power, the senate.

In a structurally heterogeneous society a crucial variable is *social cohesion*. Emancipation, Reconstruction, the New Deal, progressive taxation, civil rights laws

and the Great Society enhanced social cohesion. Jim Crow, the Reagan tax cuts, the New Federalism of states' rights, media deregulation and polarization undermined social cohesion. Just when the impact of the 2008 crisis sank in, smartphones came on the scene in 2011 and social media escalated polarization. A new motto, 'Let them eat tweets' (Hacker and Pierson 2020), set the stage for Trump, the latest populist gloss of GOP. Thus Covid-19 descends on a divided society.

Taxation, too, is a major tool of social cohesion. Next after tax cuts is tax avoidance (which is legal and a major industry of corporate law). A step further is the view that 'taxes are for suckers', a familiar notion in some circles, and a darker shade further are tax evasion (which is illegal), Swiss banks, and the Panama papers. Contrast this with another perspective. According to Kishore Mahbubani in Singapore, 'to become rich is great but to pay taxes is glorious' (2011). In his view, taxes uphold a social contract.

These polar opposite views sum up the situation in which, in short, Asia (much of Asia) succeeds in dealing with a public health crisis and the US fails. The American failure is the harvest of small government and tax cuts as leading political cults. A virus exposes tax cuts as deadly for an entire society and an economic disaster too. Even for Covid-19 tax cuts are a remedy. A headline sums up the remedy of Stephen Moore, a member of Trump's economic recovery task force: 'The best stimulus: 0% income tax'. 'Instead of collecting and spending \$2 trillion, why not cut out the middleman?' (Moore 2020). In other words, who needs government?

The short story of the United States is: an urban population under a rural government. This is a drama in three acts, each of which adds hairpin turns to the way forward. First, when the constitution took shape the concern was to keep the union of states together; over time, the emphasis has shifted from political cohesion to social cohesion, from the representation of states to the representation of people. Winner-take-all systems are to the advantage of big parties and proportional representation enables small parties and the representation of minorities, yet also creates a risk of secession. A similar equation applies to the constitution of India, which also worried about Partition and also enables big party hegemony (Congress, then the BJP), which has become counterproductive over time.

Second, the Reagan administration installed Dixie capitalism as the new normal and a political alignment of the South and rural states. Corporations, banks, the South, and rural states share an interest in limiting federal government power. The constitution's emphasis on power of the states (senate, Electoral College) makes this possible. Developments from the 1960s to the 1980s generated a blend of political authoritarianism (the senate) and market authoritarianism (neoliberalism). Over time, this set the stage for figures such as Trump. The problem of course isn't Trump but the institutional ensemble that enables such figures.

Societies that rely on corporations for decades suddenly find that in the Covid-19 crisis corporations are missing in action. Societies that opt for small government for decades suddenly find that it takes big and capable government and trust in government to combat a virus. Societies that cultivate division for centuries suddenly find out that combating a virus requires social cohesion.

Many Americans take the US to be the world's most advanced nation ('the greatest') and many people abroad take it to be a place where they would like their children to study, or they would like to migrate to, that is, *until* the Covid-19 pandemic. The refrain is familiar: 'A virus has brought the world's most powerful country to its knees' (Yong 2020). 'Anglo-American brand has been humbled by a microbe' (Luce 2020b). American exceptionalism is back, but the wrong kind. The world has begun to pity Americans.

As the horizon lights up with vaccines and the new Biden administration it is dimmed by the usual problems. Small government doesn't help in organizing the distribution and delivery of vaccines, lack of coordination between federal, state, and local government and confusion prevail; senate Republicans are set to sabotage this democratic administration just as previous ones.

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