

Covid-19 in the USA: Mismanagement, scapegoating, and limited popular consciousness



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By Charles McKelvey

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In an article in The New York Times, Michelle Cottle summarizes well Trump's mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic: "Day after day, the president has come before the nation in news briefings and on Twitter, spreading not simply nonsense but dangerous nonsense — downplaying the risks of the virus, peddling quack remedies, misrepresenting the availability of diagnostic testing and protective equipment, picking fights with governors struggling to protect their states and, of course, deflecting blame onto everyone from the World Health Organization to the Obama administration."

As the toll in sickness, death, and economic ruin mounts, the prospects for Trump's re-election appear to be weak, especially if the Democrats can put together a united front, presenting themselves as a national coalition government that seeks unity and a return to normalcy. However, Trump could take the political upper hand, if he were to identify a scapegoat that would effectively channel the popular suffering, anger, sense of loss, and confusion toward a target other than himself. Consistent with his capacity to rhetorically connect to the anxieties of the people, it appears that he has identified an effective scapegoat, namely, China.

The strategy of the Trump administration appears to be to disseminate the false claim, not supported by scientific evidence nor information in the hands of U.S. intelligence services, that the novel coronavirus originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, China. The story could develop in one of two ways. If the idea can be successfully disseminated that China deliberately created the virus as a bioweapon, this could function as a pretext for a war with China. On the other hand, if the story were to be that the virus escaped from a Chinese laboratory accidentally, this would function to rally the people behind the Trump administration in support of economic sanctions and compensation payments to the USA by China.

China makes a very good scapegoat. Its alternative political structures of popular assemblies, mass organizations, indirect elections, and a vanguard political party are not known and even less understood by the people. China becomes an easy target, utilizing popular misassumptions with respect to authoritarianism and human rights. There are a number of intellectuals, of the Left and the Right, who make a living by peddling ideas that exploit the ignorance of the people with respect to China. In this China-bashing, The New York Times and the Trump administration are allies. As a result, the intellectual terrain is well prepared to convert China into a scapegoat for the failings of the United States.

At the same time, in the ideological terrain of the United States, there are unresolved issues of anti-communism that can be exploited. When the Nixon administration began relations with China, the change in diplomacy was not accompanied by an ideological reevaluation, a rethinking of the nation's conceptions about Communist China, which had been shaped in the contest of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Later, with the Chinese opening, and the U.S. turn to neoliberalism, there were increasing economic relations with China, and increasing economic dependency on China, again without a reformulation of the national understanding of what China was and is. In this situation, China can become a target for channeling the resentment of those who suffer from the consequence of neoliberalism, either by being left behind economically, or by being ideologically alienated from a world that is not of their own making.

In addition, the scapegoating of China makes possible the identification of internal enemies, including the politicians that have been soft on China and have permitted the exodus of jobs to China, as well as corporations more interested in making money in China than in protecting the workers and communities in the United States that are the base of their current wealth.

In addition to these factors, there also is old-fashioned racial prejudice. In the nineteenth century, there were anti-immigration efforts in the United States that were driven by anti-Chinese prejudice, that was particularly strong on the West coast. As is well known, racism survives in the United States, although often in a more subtle form.

The truth is our most powerful arm, and it must be utilized to bring down the scapegoating of China before it has a chance to further poison the body politic. There is much intellectual work to be done with respect to China, and unfortunately, intellectuals in the United States do not have a good track record in developing the kind of historical and political-economic explanation to the people that would be required in this case. However, China provides fertile ground for such an historically and intellectually informed emancipating formulation. China is taking the cooperative road to ascent, fundamentally different from the conquest and exploitation undertaken by the European colonial and imperialist powers. China, therefore, represents not so much a threat to the United States, as a challenge. China seeks to play a leading role in an alternative world order in which the United States has a place, no longer as a hegemonic neocolonial

power, but as a major economic actor, and in which the American promise of democracy, always present in U.S. popular movements, can attain its most mature expression.

David Brooks takes a different approach. He sees Trump as a “ripper,” one whose strategy is to divide. Brooks maintains that Trump and other rippers of the Right and the Left are given prominence by a polarization industry. He believes, however, that the pandemic is bad for the rippers, because it is unifying the people. He notes that the overwhelmingly majority of the people support social distancing rules and increased testing. He declares: “we are now more united than at any time since 9/11. The pandemic has reminded us of our interdependence and the need for a strong and effective government.” He maintains that the “weavers,” those who weave the fabric of the society together, should seize the moment. He cites the example of the 24-hour streamathon, “Call to Unite,” in which it has become clear that people “are eager to build a different future.”

Initiatives like “Call to Unite” are well intended, and they are a hopeful sign for all of humanity; but they will not be enough. U.S. society has for decades indulged in a slothful, undisciplined, anti-intellectual ethnocentrism, which has left the people in a condition of ignorance with respect to fundamental world historical dynamics. Without such fundamentals, the nation lacks the foundation for the creation of a consensual understanding of national and global reality and a consensual formulation of principles and values, which has to be the foundation for united action in defense of the common good. It is not enough to want a different future; there has to be a scientifically and historically informed concept of that different future, not in its details, but in its fundamental concepts and values. Since we have not done the necessary work to prepare ourselves for the Call to Unite, it is unlikely that a constructive, transforming, collective course of action could emerge from it.

To develop our understanding, listening to others is necessary, and listening to others includes reading the speeches and writings of leaders and intellectuals from other worlds. Because we have not done this, we are not aware that the leaders and intellectuals of the Third World plus China have formulated the basic principles of a different world and a different future for humanity, and that they have done the political work of having said principles formally endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

That formulation of a vision of a better world, undertaken more than a century ago by the leading voices of the peoples that constitute majority of the world population, ought to be the basis of our own reflection on a different future for the nation and for humanity. We collectively should have begun this task of reflection on the alternative voice from below in the 1970s, but we do not have the right to assume that it is now too late.

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