

The working class and the rich: Class distinctions exposed by response to Covid-19 pandemic

Benjamin Mateus
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In a news release dated March 3, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned “that severe and mounting disruption to the global supply of personal protective equipment caused by rising demand, panic buying, hoarding and misuse is putting lives at risk from the new coronavirus and other infectious diseases.” WHO estimates that manufacturers of such medical supplies will need to increase production by 40 percent if they are to keep pace with global demand.

The number of cases worldwide is approaching 100,000 with more than 3,300 deaths attributed to Covid-19. New cases in the United States and Europe continue to alarm authorities. Germany just reported 220 new cases yesterday, bringing the total to 482 cases. France, with 377 cases, reported 92 new cases and two more deaths. The United Kingdom, Sweden, Netherlands, Belgium and Norway are seeing an acceleration of new cases. In total, 87 countries and territories around the world have been affected.

The response among the haves and have-nots to the outbreak and ensuing panic that is gripping communities is starkly absurd and farcical in comparison. The working class in the United States lacks any significant savings to shoulder work disruption. From state to state, shelves at grocery stores are being emptied. Community after community is stocking up on essential goods as they foresee the possibility of forced self-quarantine to avoid catching Covid-19. Toilet paper, sanitary wipes and sanitizers are in short supply as stocks are being exhausted.

Millions of Americans do not have health care insurance and will be forced to face the economic realities of an overpriced health system that values fee for services. Many that do have health benefits face

costly premiums or daunting co-pays and deductibles that can set them back financially into thousands of dollars of debt. The case in Florida has highlighted and confirmed these harsh realities. A young man from Miami with flu-like symptoms who had recently returned from China received a bill for \$3,270, just to be told he did not have Covid-19, after seeking medical attention.

Former Vice President Joseph Biden and candidate for the Democratic Party nomination disingenuously told MSNBC reporters that under the ACA the testing for Covid-19 would have been free. What he did not mention is that the hospital charges, blood work, CT scans and nursing care would be duly charged.

Meanwhile, workers across the nation are learning that for nearly two decades bipartisan cuts have been made to public health programs and emergency preparedness readiness. Opportunities afforded by the experiences with SARS and the Middle East Respiratory syndrome to develop vaccine programs have gone unheeded, citing costs to produce such vaccines. This is the nature of for-profit medicine that demands a guarantee on such investments. The estimates for a vaccine discovery and production can run over a billion dollars.

Compounding this dire situation is the barbaric reality that almost a quarter of workers have no guaranteed sick leave. This impacts the service industries most harshly which are also the most exposed to the public because of the nature of their work. In the starkest expression of utter disdain for the health of Americans, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, a former drug company executive, told Representative Jan Schakowsky, Democrat from Illinois, that no

promises could be made to make a vaccine affordable, let alone free for the public. “We can’t control that price because we need the private sector to invest.”

According to an Uber driver by the name of Alvaro Balainez, 33 years old, “If one of us gets sick, we will have no choice but to keep driving. We don’t have medical savings, because we’re barely making enough to pay our rent or bills.” Despite public health warnings, these workers will be compelled, by the sheer realities of their non-existent bank accounts, to carry on working and gamble with their own health and those they will expose.

The *Washington Post* noted that workers who prepare foods at restaurants and school cafeterias or nursery and child day-care workers have the nation’s lowest rates of paid sick leave in the private sector, at 58 percent. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that at least one in five food service workers have reported to work despite having symptoms of diarrhea or vomiting.

President Trump’s remarks only cut across the warnings made by health providers and infectious disease experts about the contagiousness of the disease and higher than expected fatality it poses when he said, “a lot of people will have this and it’s very mild. They’ll get better very rapidly. They don’t even see a doctor. They don’t even call a doctor. You never hear about those people. So, you can’t put them down in the category of the overall population in terms of this corona flu- or virus. We have thousands or hundreds of thousands of people that get better, just by, you know, sitting around and even going to work—some of them go to work but they get better.”

Such concerns are, however, beyond the care or consciousness of the well-to-do. Celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow and Kate Hudson post selfies fitted with designer N95 facemasks that can filter for viruses as they board private jets to dash off to their isolated cabins in Aspen or yachts off the coast of Italy to essentially weather out the pandemic. These exclusive masks have been sold out from surgical department stores and people are on waiting lists to purchase them.

A new luxury-based industry is popping up out of the maelstrom caused by the pandemic that is gathering momentum—luxury brand hand sanitizers with floral notes packaged in designer shaped dispensers. Fanny pack survival kits containing an assortment of first-aid

supplies and biohazard bags are selling for \$50 to \$100. Private jet companies are offering coronavirus-free flights to destinations of choice. Mid-sized jets across the country are going for \$20,000.

Concierge medical services are offering wealthy members private VIP emergency room services. Doctors make house calls to the Hamptons to treat the wealthy so they can avoid the risk of being exposed in crowded hospitals. They are stocking their homes with antiviral Tamiflu, cold medicines like Sudafed, asthma medication like albuterol and powerful antibiotics. They are also making their bids to be first in line to have access to any vaccines that might be developed while they hole themselves in their vacation homes looking forward to spring skiing.

Sollis Health, an exclusive New York-based private health service, is providing home delivery of respiratory masks that include custom fitting. There have also been reports of an eccentric heiress in Southampton, New York, building a high-grade medical isolation room, stocked with kitchen, foods and medical supplies, designed with a self-contained negative pressure ventilation system. This is the prototype for virus “Safe Rooms” that will come into vogue.

Experience in China revealed that infections occurred in family clusters. The afflicted were tended to by the household, exposing everyone to the infection. This will be true in the United States, in Europe or in any country where this infection will catch a toehold, then run rampant. The class distinctions to the pandemic have in mere weeks come to light showing the irresponsible and depraved response to what should be a globally coordinated effort to contain and mitigate this deadly pathogen.

The rich and their astronomical wealth play like Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, running to a deserted villa in the countryside of Florence, escaping the black death wiling away the time in their fantasies till the plague runs its course.



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