New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman calls for letting COVID-19 run rampant

Andre Damon
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Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times* columnist who provided US President Donald Trump with the slogan for prematurely sending workers back to factories ("the cure can't be worse than the disease") has published an article endorsing a policy of allowing large portions of the US population to be infected with COVID-19.

In an article titled "Is Sweden Doing It Right?" Friedman advocates a policy of "herd immunity" that would lead to the deaths of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Americans.

While the term "herd immunity" may sound like a scientific theory, as a policy prescription for the COVID-19 pandemic it is nothing of the sort. It is rather an argument for allowing substantial sections of the population to be infected with a deadly disease.

Friedman argues that Sweden "has essentially opted for a strategy of 'herd immunity' through exposure" by not implementing widespread government-imposed lockdowns.

While there is widespread scientific and public debate about Sweden's policy in fighting COVID-19, Friedman's characterization that the country is simply allowing its population to be infected *en masse* is a gross oversimplification.

Dr. Michael Ryan of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that "nothing could be further from the truth" than to say that "Sweden has not put in place control measures and has just allowed the disease to spread." Ryan noted that while the country has closed high schools and universities and banned gatherings of over 50 people, it has not carried out compulsory closures of businesses and instead urged citizens to voluntarily stay home.

Sweden's failure to carry out widespread lockdowns has been fiercely criticized by doctors, scientists and academics, thousands of whom have signed a letter urging the government to pursue a more aggressive policy. These critics point to the fact that the country has suffered a substantially greater outbreak than its neighbors, with 244 deaths per million people, compared to Denmark (76 per million), Norway (38), Finland (37) and Iceland (29).

But regardless of whether "herd immunity" is the explicit strategy in Sweden, Friedman argues that it should be the explicit strategy in the United States. He declares, "herd immunity is our goal—either from vaccination or from enough people building natural immunity. Those are the only ways to achieve it."

The difference is, however, that "herd immunity" through mass infection will cost the lives of hundreds of thousands, or millions, of people, while vaccination will kill none. To argue this way is to claim that guns and chemotherapy work the same way because both stop cancer.

Friedman continues:

"But when you're in a struggle with one of Mother Nature's challenges—like a virus or a climate change—the goal is not to defeat her. No one can. She's just chemistry, biology and physics. The goal is to adapt.

"Mother Nature does not reward the strongest or the smartest. She rewards the species that are the most adaptive in evolving the chemistry, biology and physics that she has endowed them with to thrive—no matter what she throws at them."

The conclusion that Friedman wants his readers to draw is that any measures to stop the spread of the virus go against nature. If people die, this is part of the natural process of evolution. These social-Darwinist ramblings contradict established scientific consensus, not to speak of all human progress. One might as well

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declare that all of modern technology and scientific medicine goes against “Mother Nature” and her laws.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the WHO has made clear that COVID-19 can and must be contained through massive programs of quarantine, contact tracing and isolation. These policies have proven effective in containing the virus in China, Korea and Singapore.

In this, COVID-19 is like SARS, MERS, Zika and Ebola, which have been contained and all but eradicated through the standard methods of scientific collaboration and the application of aggressive public health measures for fighting infectious disease.

But despite the warnings of public health experts, throughout the months of January, February and March, the Trump administration failed to prepare for a global pandemic that was clearly coming. The United States had no significant COVID-19 testing capacity till March, has far less testing capacity than is necessary, and still does not have any significant contact tracing infrastructure.

The WHO has, moreover, made clear that long-term immunity to COVID-19 has not been proven, and thus “herd immunity” to the novel coronavirus remains theoretical. Even the creation of a vaccine, however critical, is not guaranteed.

The containment of COVID-19 through long-established public health measures is, by contrast, not simply a theory. It remains the most rapid, effective and resource-efficient method to save countless lives.

Stripped of his trademark obfuscations and half-truths, Friedman is arguing for the US government to do nothing to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

As Joel Achenbach of the *Washington Post* recently noted, at the fatality rate of 0.6 percent, “the United States could potentially experience 1 million deaths if half the population became infected and no efforts were made to limit the contagion through social distancing, a vaccine or proven therapeutics.”

Or, as a group of researchers noted in an article in the *Washington Post*, “Using expert estimates that 40 to 70 percent of Americans will be infected with the new coronavirus, a death rate of 1 percent would translate into 1.4 million to 2.3 million people succumbing to the disease—a number closely aligned with early predictions of the likely death toll in the absence of mitigation measures such as a vaccine or social distancing. And that does not account for survivors left with serious heart, lung, kidney and neurological damage.”

Friedman, who has been a leading proponent of US military interventions throughout the world that have killed millions of people, is the subject of a biography titled *The Imperial Messenger*. In this case, he is the messenger of the US oligarchy not in its murderous policy abroad, but at home.

The most shocking element of Friedman’s article is the fact that it does not represent some bizarre alternative reality, but is, in fact, a description of US policy. From the beginning, the Trump administration downplayed the COVID-19 pandemic and refused to make any serious preparations to contain it. Even as cases continued to rise despite widespread lockdowns, the White House began to agitate for a premature return to work, despite the absence of measures necessary to contain the disease.

Now, with the back-to-work campaign in full swing, US capitalism is demanding that lives be sacrificed for profit. As usual, Friedman is the bluntest advocate of this homicidal policy.

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