Rewriting history on COVID lockdowns, New York Times reaffirms its support for “herd immunity”

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On March 22, 2020, at the height of the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman coined the mantra for Trump’s back-to-work campaign, writing, “The cure cannot be worse than the disease.” By this, Friedman meant that the limited lockdowns and other public health measures then in place had to be ended and society fully reopened, to resume the flow of profits to Wall Street.

As part of their commemoration of the five-year anniversary of the pandemic, the *Times* has chosen to reaffirm their support for the ruling elites’ “herd immunity” policy, recently airing a special episode of their podcast The Daily titled, “Were the COVID lockdowns worth it?” to which they answer definitively “No.”

Hosted by the chameleon-like Michael Barbaro, who always pliantly suits his narrative to serve the interests of the powers-that-be, the episode featured Princeton University academics Stephen Macedo and Frances Lee discussing their recent book, “In COVID’s Wake: How Our Politics Failed Us.” The central purpose of this work of historical revisionism is to portray the US’ limited lockdowns in the opening weeks of the pandemic as misdirected policies, while chastising public health officials for focusing solely on reducing death rates.

In addition to the *Times* interview—listened to by roughly 4 million people—this right-wing book has also been promoted by CNN’s Fareed Zakaria and other mainstream media pundits.

The absence of epidemiologists, pandemic experts, and historians in such a critical discussion raises obvious concerns. The *Times*’ choice not to include experts in the field of public health exposes their hostility to any genuine analysis of the systemic causes of the spread of COVID-19 from the outset.

At the heart of Macedo and Lee’s argument is the assertion that public health officials and policymakers were aware, through various modeling studies and simulations, that in a globalized context lockdowns would be ineffective at stopping pandemics and preventing loss of life.

Covering up the failure of capitalist governments to provide any social planning to address the needs of their populations during lockdowns, Macedo and Lee falsely portray these public health measures in themselves as the source of a cascade of negative impacts, including business shutdowns and substantial economic losses, focusing in particular on the impacts of school closures on children.

After questioning a “general social fixation on the number of deaths,” Macedo and Lee denounce the supposed suppression of public discussions on “alternative” pandemic management strategies, by which they mean the far-right “herd immunity” policy of mass infection and death. Barbaro innocently asks them about “this alternative vision, the Great Barrington Declaration,” co-authored by Stanford health economist Jay Bhattacharya, to which they voice full support.

When it was first released, the Great Barrington Declaration was widely denounced by scientists and public health experts, with the WSWS correctly characterizing it as a “manifesto of death.”

Barbaro does not probe the fact that Macedo is directly linked to Bhattacharya, confirmed this week as Trump’s director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In effect, the not-so-subtle subtext of the interview is the total accommodation of the *Times* to Trump’s war on science and public health.

With these far-right positions raised and accepted early in the discussion, Barbaro then asks the central question:

> Is there any case to be made that with a new and deadly virus, that everyone was learning about in real time, that if government leaders thought that any of these measures had any chance of working or even just buying time until a vaccine was available, that as a result, it was worth a try? I mean, I guess to distill my question, is a deep, singular focus on saving lives okay?

Macedo replies:

> I don’t see how it is if there are significant costs involved, including the currency of life. These policy choices always involve a variety of values. ***And we have to not simply focus on the one indices of saving lives*** … there wasn’t enough public deliberation about these matters. Too much power was accorded to narrow experts in public health and epidemiology, in particular. [Emphasis added]

The cold and calculated delivery of these remarks, treating lives as mere entries in an accounting ledger, raises profound concerns about the intentions behind this disreputable book, its authors, and the *New York Times*, all of which express the ruthless economic interests of the capitalist ruling class.

At no point does Barbaro challenge his guests on these statements or their strong endorsement of the Great Barrington Declaration’s “strategic plan.” He also fails to engage with the extensive body of literature that had long predicted such a pandemic and the failure of world capitalism to prepare. Notably, the studies cited by the Princeton University professors did not merely highlight the likely failure of broad public health policies, but emphasized the necessity of investing in an international One Health strategy to avert such a catastrophic outcome.

As part of their rewriting of history, Barbaro and his guests are forced to

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cover-up the grim reality that roughly 30 million people have now died of COVID-19 and its myriad long-term health impacts, while an estimated over 400 million people globally are grappling with the effects of Long-COVID. Flowing from this, they refer to the pandemic solely in the past tense, distorting the basic scientific truth that the pandemic is ongoing and continues to infect, debilitate and kill millions of people globally each year.

Instead of reckoning with these catastrophic failures of the capitalist system, the interview panelists' central conclusion is that lockdowns should never again be implemented in response to any future pandemics. In a particularly twisted logic, Macedo and Lee argue that since mass COVID infection was supposedly inevitable, and the poorest workers would suffer the most, lockdowns would only exacerbate their plight. In this disturbing narrative, the economy and the pursuit of wealth are deemed far more sacred than human life.

These fascistic arguments are being advanced under conditions in which H5N1 "bird flu" is threatening to begin human-to-human transmission, once-eliminated measles is surging across the US and globally, and the response of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. is to promote quack remedies like Vitamin A and cod liver oil, while casting doubt on the importance of vaccines.

Significantly, when the authors later concede that the "strict" lockdowns had in fact been porous—ineffective due to lax enforcement—Barbaro chooses not to raise this critical contradiction. It was certainly not a trivial oversight. What might have been the outcome of a genuine, all-encompassing effort to systematically eliminate COVID-19 from every region of the world had the ruling elites earnestly heeded the Public Health Emergency of International Concern declared by the WHO on January 30, 2020?

Indeed, data on mobility illustrate only a minuscule reduction in population movement in the first year of the pandemic post-April 2020. In essence, outside of China and a handful of other countries, the "lockdowns" were implemented in name only, with minimal impact beyond the initial weeks of late-March to mid-April in curbing the spread of the virus. This discrepancy raises fundamental questions about the true origins of the social crisis often misattributed to these ineffective lockdowns.

The reality is that the social crisis unleashed by the pandemic stemmed from the massive reallocation of society's wealth from the working class to the rich, through the unlimited funneling of funds to prop up the stock markets. Oxfam has reported that between March 2020 and December 2020, the world's billionaires saw their wealth increase by a staggering $3.9 trillion.

Over the course of the 50-minute podcast discussion, there is no meaningful dialogue on China's successful Zero-COVID policy, which saved millions of lives for the first two years of the pandemic. While acknowledging China's rapid elimination of COVID-19 shortly after recognizing the outbreak, which proved in practice the success of a comprehensive all-of-society approach, Barbaro and his guests do not commend these efforts. Rather, they criticize them as expressions of a totalitarian regime, ignoring the widespread public support for these measures.

Indeed, life in China largely returned to normal by the spring of 2020, until pressure brought to bear by US imperialism and international finance capital led the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to fully lift Zero-COVID, resulting in 1-2 million deaths in the winter of 2022-2023.

Significant attention has also been given to Jay Bhattacharya and his colleagues' advocacy for Sweden's pandemic strategy, which they present as supposed proof that "herd immunity" was the correct approach. The horrific reality is that in the first year of the pandemic 90 percent of Sweden's COVID-19 fatalities were among individuals aged 70 or older. Of these, 50 percent occurred in nursing homes and 26 percent among recipients of home care services.

In contrast, neighboring Norway and Finland, which enforced stricter lockdowns, recorded much lower excess death rates in 2020—1.5 percent and 1.0 percent above baseline, respectively. Meanwhile, Sweden's economy contracted by 8.6 percent in the second quarter of 2020, whereas Norway and Finland experienced contractions of only 6.3 and 6.4 percent, respectively.

From a global perspective, a World Health Organization (WHO) study revealed that by January 2022 excess deaths had reached almost 15 million worldwide, nearly triple the official reported figures. The analysis showed that in the first six months of the pandemic, countries in the South-East Asian Region that implemented rigorous lockdowns experienced negative excess deaths—indicating lives were effectively saved and overall societal health improved.

Moreover, recent studies demonstrate that even the limited measures in the US contributed to saving lives, with more stringent adherence correlating with greater numbers of lives saved. This directly challenges the assertions made by these "distinguished" Princeton scholars.

The fact that these academics and their *Times* host are so comfortable endorsing a death toll that nears that of the 1918 influenza pandemic in the US, despite decades of scientific advancements aimed at preventing such pandemics, is a testament to the profound degeneration of official American social and intellectual life.

Have they forgotten the numerous times health systems were totally overwhelmed, leading to emergency rooms and ICUs filling beyond capacity? Or the haunting images of bodies stored in makeshift morgues and refrigerator trucks? Or the mass graves on Hart Island in New York City? Evidently, such horrors seared into the consciousness of workers in New York and internationally were not so profound for these complacent, upper-middle-class figures of the American academia and media establishment.

The entire interview was meticulously orchestrated, with the clear objective of persuading listeners to regard public health as ineffective and life as subordinate to economic functions.

Today, five years into the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) stands alone in defending public health and democratic rights. The defense of these principles necessitates a radical realignment of society's socioeconomic structure towards socialism, in which the means of production are owned by workers themselves and the vast resources hoarded by the ruling elites are redistributed to the working class.

On August 20, 2021, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in an important perspective calling for the eradication of COVID:

> The implementation of the eradication strategy requires the development of a powerful international and unified mass movement of the working class. Only a mass movement that is not driven by the profit motive and fettered to the obsessive pursuit of personal wealth can generate the social force required to compel a change in policy.
>
> The basic principles guiding the eradication strategy are based on science and the insistence that there can be no limit on the amount spent to eradicate COVID-19 worldwide. The social interests of masses of people worldwide interact powerfully with scientific truth.
>
> For this strategy to be successful, its proponents in every country must be imbued with a deep scientific understanding of the pandemic. The working-class values and relies on the support of scientists, and the scientific program necessary to eradicate COVID-19 can only be implemented to the extent that great masses of people take up this struggle.

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This perspective takes on increased relevance and urgency today, as the fascist Trump administration seeks to dismantle all aspects of public health, with the full support of the Democratic Party. The systematic undermining of public health is a central aspect of Trump's broader assault on democratic and social rights, and the *Times'* interview with the Princeton University charlatans was a reprehensible effort to assist in these aims.

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