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Pratsinakis, M.; Tzaninis, I.

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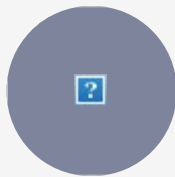
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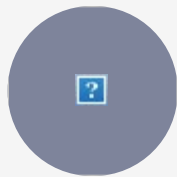
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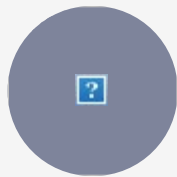
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Not for the people: pandemics and the selective foresight of western neoliberal capitalism

Manolis Pratsinakis and Yannis Tzaninis

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On 26 March, during a European Union summit, nine of the 19 countries in the Eurozone called for the EU to issue 'corona bonds' in order to help all member states counter the damage caused by the pandemic. With Germany leading the refusal to issue such bonds, the Dutch Minister of Finance followed suit, calling Brussels to investigate why some countries did not have enough financial room to handle the economic consequences of the pandemic. The Dutch minister's response, described as "repugnant" by Portugal's prime minister, revived memories of the North-South tension over the handling of the Eurozone crisis. It recounts the morality tale of the thrifty Northerner vs the profligate Southerner, albeit in a grossly inappropriate context: in a period whereby Italy and Spain were facing huge fatalities and whose health systems struggled, in part due to the [strict austerity policies imposed by the EU](#) in the wake of eurozone crisis.

The Dutch minister's statement seems to be resting on the assumption that the economic problems are country-specific and that his country will prove to be economically resilient. It also rests on the conviction that countries ought to have acted pro-actively. This trust in the virtue of being pro-active, however, does not sit well with the Dutch government's early lax handling of the pandemic, [disregarding scientific evidence about asymptomatic transmission](#).

Subsequently, in a period when the spread in Italy started to increase dramatically, and while there [were clear indications](#) that the more globally connected and mobile countries in the West would be hit severely by COVID-19, the Dutch government, along with other European governments including the UK, proposed implementing a less interventionist approach relying on the common sense of its people while hoping for herd immunity to develop.

On 11 March WHO announced the COVID-19 spread as an pandemic, expressing deep concerns about 'the alarming levels of inaction'. With several East Asian countries implementing measures proving to be effective in limiting the spread of the virus and highlighting the significance of early intervention, no government in the West could really claim they were caught unprepared. And yet most chose a 'wait and see' attitude, practicing no foresight on securing the protection of their citizens and limiting the global spread of the pandemic.

It has been already shown that western neoliberal capitalism is short-sighted,^[1] especially when it comes to environmental emergencies. Now we get a glimpse of its short-sightedness on a severe and rapidly spreading pandemic. Its ostrich strategy also reveals yet another instance of Western-centric narcissism as instead of emulating the fairly successful response in East Asia, most Western governments, with very few exceptions, assumed they would deal with the pandemic effectively but have failed miserably.

The irony is striking: in the so-called [Global Health Security Index](#), which measures a country's preparedness against epidemics, Western countries rank the highest, with the USA, the UK and the Netherlands ranking in the first three places respectively. And yet, the human fatalities in those countries are considerably higher

than other world regions^[2].

It was the fear that the hypermobile models of capitalism, which they championed, would be paralyzed that contributed to their initial inaction. The idea of needing to go on with business as usual was widely circulated early on by several official bodies. In the UK the government explored the idea of only isolating the vulnerable people for four months. In the US, the lieutenant governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, went as far as declaring that it is better for the old to die than halting circulation in order to [‘save the economy’](#). The neoliberal governments in several advanced capitalist countries feared equally that they may have to take responsibility to pay wages and support furlough workers and the would-be unemployed, provide public services and even nationalize businesses. Their key concern became the maximum number of deaths and infections that would not disrupt business as usual.

By late March, after limited early intervention, total or partial lockdown had to be enforced in most countries in the West. This reveals (once again) not only how contemporary capitalism is full of contradictions but the very real fragility of the system: two weeks of global quarantine, essentially immobilizing Western economies, and economists started predicting a Global Recession or even an incoming Depression. And naturally not everyone is hurt equally by such crises.

[Privileged immobilized workers](#) rightfully worry about the suspension of rights, the tightened state surveillance and the ensuing ramifications after the crisis, but much more pressing are the worries of the hypermobile individuals who are tasked to care for the immobilized ones. Not only are their [mobile livelihoods in stress](#), but are also put in health risks as no sufficient protection is provided. Potentially even more dangerous is the situation of the elderly in care homes, migrants and refugees in camps, inmates and adults and [children without a home](#). This pandemic has brought societies to a standstill unequally: physically vulnerable members and those employed in crucial (but devalued) professions are most at risk. Meanwhile the commonly hypermobile middle and upper classes are getting a taste of forced immobility, albeit from the comfort of their homes, a policy that Western States have long enforced on refugees and migrants.

[Manolis Pratsinakis](#) is the Onassis Fellow at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford and [Yannis Tzaninis](#) is Urban Geographer and Postdoc Researcher at the University of Amsterdam

^[1] Harvey, D. (2007). Neoliberalism as creative destruction. *The annals of the American academy of political and social science*, 610(1), 21-44.

^[2] As those lines are written, they rank among the ten countries with the highest death toll relative to their population (excluding countries with population lower than 100,000)

Regions

Europe