

New Horizons Hub: the changing nature of capitalism after Covid-19

For all the harm it has caused, Covid-19 has provided a chance to rethink capitalism on both sides of the Atlantic. Some degree of convergence towards a better model is desirable and perhaps even possible, write our friends at VoxEU. Here are our top selection of this week's stories from ING authors and our trusted third-party providers

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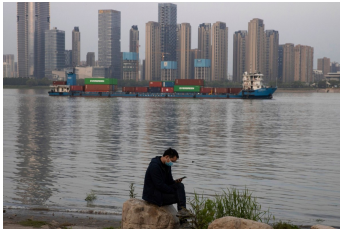
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Informal sector workers are particularly vulnerable

The World Health Organization and numerous national governments have made detailed recommendations on how people can best protect themselves from the new coronavirus.¹ The prevailing recommendations have four main elements:

1. **Learning:** A fundamental requirement is to be able to receive reliable information on local disease incidence and protection measures. Compliance with this recommendation requires access to communication tools: radio, TV, phone, the internet.
2. **Isolating:** Social distancing (including lockdown as its extreme form) to lower the reproduction rate of the virus by reducing contacts per day. This requires both a personal behavioural response and suitable home-infrastructure. A dwelling with walls, a roof, and closures is desirable. In settings with large (often extended) families, intra-household transmission becomes more important; a sufficiently low density of people in the dwelling is

- advantageous. And there must be certain facilities: for example, you can't isolate as effectively if you have to leave the dwelling or yard to go to the toilet.
3. **Washing:** Regular handwashing with soap and water is strongly emphasised for protection from the virus. This too requires suitable facilities within the residence.
 4. **Treatment:** If key symptoms (fever, difficulty breathing) develop, seeking medical help is advised. This requires physical access to health-care facilities.

The belief that these non-pharmaceutical measures can help contain the spread of illness is consistent with the available evidence. However, virtually all of these recommendations require household environments that support the capacity to protect from the virus – what we call the 'home environment for protection'.

The home environment for protection is the result of past wealth-constrained choices, and these are unlikely to change quickly. Dwelling attributes such as size, construction, and location (determining access to treatment) cannot be easily adjusted in response to the immediate virus threat; nor is health all that people care about when allocating their resources. All of the aspects of the home environment for protection are likely to be affected by wealth, meaning that poorer households have less capacity to follow WHO recommendations. This is to be expected between countries as well as within them.

Exacerbating matters are the likely behavioural responses to the WHO recommendations. Even if following all the recommendations is feasible given the dwelling and possessions, being poor in terms of income or wealth can be expected to reduce people's capacity to survive in isolation for anything more than a short period (as discussed further in Ravallion 2020).

For informal-sector workers in countries with limited social protection, staying home is likely to entail a potentially devastating loss of income. There is evidence that people in poorer regions reduced their mobility for work and other activities less than those in wealthier regions (Bargain and Aminjonov 2020). Poverty diminishes an individual's capacity to isolate and hence protect their family from the virus.

Thus, there is both a direct wealth effect on the capacity to socially isolate and an indirect effect via the attributes of the home environment that allow individuals to follow the recommendations for protection. Social protection policies responding to the pandemic focus primarily on the direct effect, by aiming to support consumption (especially of food) of the particularly needy while in isolation (Gentilini et al. 2020).

So what do we know about the indirect effect?

A key quote from the article:

The developing world, and especially its poorest half, is ill-prepared to protect itself from this virus. The recommendations that have been implemented on a massive scale in the rich world must be considered near fiction for the world's poor. Given the virus's infection rate, the likely degree of exposure among a large segment of the population of the developing world also points to a serious concern for the entire population.

If poor families have a low health environment for protection, then complementary policies will be needed to help protect the poor from the virus. While challenges in supporting the food system as well as cash and food transfers have been emphasised in recent policy discussions, inadequate

home environment for protection cannot be ignored.

The housing stock cannot be changed rapidly. But some things can be done now. The current infrastructure for information (particularly mobile-phone coverage) holds promise for getting out public health messages and information on how to access consumption support. Policies such as distributing or subsidising sturdy face masks, soap, and improved water access could be feasible in the near term and justified by both external benefits and equity impact. Home-grown innovative adaptations to the realities of life in the developing world will be crucial.

[The full original article first appeared on VoxEU here on 27 June 2020](#)

From Smoot-Hawley to ‘America first’ and ‘strategic sovereignty’

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Source: Shutterstock

The Great Depression can teach us a lot about the current crisis

This month marks 90 years since the US signed into law the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act (SHTA). It was formally called “An Act to provide revenue, to regulate commerce with foreign countries, to encourage the industries of the United States, to protect American labor, and for other purposes”. Proposed by Senator Smoot and Representative Hawley just before the Wall Street crash in 1929, the Act was meant to create jobs and reduce unemployment by keeping imports out – a sentiment that had grown stronger by the time Herbert Hoover signed the act in 1930. Moreover, it was argued that the US government would benefit from additional tariff revenues.

Notwithstanding the intent of the architects, the actual effects were different. The toxic combination of failed monetary policy, a broken gold standard, and increasing protectionism contributed to pushing US unemployment from 8% in 1930 to 16% in 1931 and as high as 25% in 1932-1933. With the collapse of the Credit Anstalt in Austria in 1931, Europe too suffered from record unemployment, exchange-rate controls and rising protectionism. And failed cooperation on international economic policy only made the Great Depression worse (see Irwin 2019, 2020 and Ahamed 2009).

The example of Great Depression protectionism is instructive for the world today. We are yet again

at a point in history when protectionism is on the rise – and when governments are considering (and already pursuing in some cases) ‘beggar-thy-neighbour’ policies in the belief that such measures will boost jobs and growth. “America First” seems to be the guiding ethos of US international economic policy. Europe is debating whether it needs ‘strategic autonomy’ in a post-Covid world, and China is accelerating its own ambition of creating ‘indigenous innovation’ by restricting markets to foreign firms. Many supporters of these concepts are not shy about the essence: shielding domestic economies from imports.

Decades-long waves of trade openings in emerging and developing markets have now come to an end. While there are differences in the scale and scope of new trade restrictions, policy makers seem to have forgotten the lessons offered by protectionism during the Great Depression. In our view, there is clear evidence of significant potential benefits from continued openness. At the same time, the structure of the global economic system, and the underlying national policy machinery that distributes the gains from the system, are under strains that can no longer be ignored. Otherwise the system may again collapse, just like it did 90 years ago.

and yet there are many differences between now and then

But while there are uncomfortable similarities between the trade policy environments of 1930 and 2020, there are also important differences. Today, a greater part of value added (in particular jobs) depends on trade. Back then, many countries were locked into a gold standard that could not handle pressures of both deflation and huge balance-of-payment imbalances. Government expenditures did not have built-in automatic stabilizers to help an economy recover from an economic slump. Unlike today, the business cycle could not be revived by slashing taxes or boosting public spending: business taxes were not particularly high in the first place and there was no system in place for government transfers or creating public jobs. These differences between 1930 and 2020 translate into very real challenges to continued cooperation on international economic policy.

On top of cross-border financial linkages that transmitted contagion in both the Great Depression and Great Recession, we now have far stronger cross-border linkages on the real side of the economy. These follow from the emergence of global supply chains (aka global value chains or GVCs) managed by large global enterprises. The emergence of GVCs has proven a vehicle for increased efficiency and rapid transmission of technical change and has served to more closely link local employment to global production (see for example Cali et al. 2016). Yet, stronger cross-border linkages may both facilitate more rapid transmission of technology driven shocks affecting labour demand (Baldwin 2016, Baldwin 2019), and transmission of economic shocks of one region to employment in other regions (Acemoglu et al. 2016, Acemoglu et al. 2015, Acemoglu et al. 2012). This translates into a very real fear about future conditions of employment. Local dependence on global supply chains has also been important in determining the economic impact of Covid-19 shutdowns, which again serves to highlight how imposed restrictions have impacted GVCs negatively and subsequently exposed countries to cross-border economic policy contagion. Potentially, this has dramatic implications for employment, and it strains the viability of critical supply lines, for example in the case of medical supplies.

The emergence of a truly global economy has brought greater potential for growth and technology transfers, especially when linked to local economies. But it has also brought greater potential for disruption of local labour markets, for the viability of local communities, and even for the viability of national tax regimes. There is evidence of local labour market collapse following

rapid economic growth on the other side of the planet (see for example Autor et al. 2013). Tax minimization by firms that rival national economies also means that the viability of public finances is challenged, even when we are not falling into a deep recession/depression (Egger et al. 2010, Egger et al. 2019).

Like in 1930, there are loud calls for more protectionism which, for the most part, draw on ideas and policy initiatives that were conceived long before the pandemic started. Even if these ideas are dressed-up in popular-sounding terminologies – ‘America first’, ‘strategic sovereignty’ or ‘value chain repatriation’ – they all boil down to the same intention: reducing imports and reducing dependency on others in the belief that such actions create more jobs and prosperity. The anniversary of the SHTA should remind us that protectionism can lead to unintended and unwanted outcomes, and that trade restrictions during an economic crisis would make the situation worse rather than better. There are very real challenges posed by the current crisis which need to be confronted directly. Else we may prove Mark Twain correct yet again: “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.”

The full original article first appeared on VoxEU [here](#) on 26th June 2020.

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Capitalism: "cut-throat" or "cuddly"?

None of us had predicted the pandemic we are currently experiencing, nor the severe global economic downturn it has caused. For all the harm it has brought into the lives of so many people worldwide, the Covid-19 crisis may have one merit: namely, to serve as a 'wake-up call' for reforming capitalism in the different forms it takes on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the US, the epidemic has brought into focus the tragedy of all those individuals who are not insured – or poorly insured – against job losses and health problems (Furman 2020).

In Europe, the crisis has shed light on the rigidities and lack of coordination in the innovation response to the Covid-19 shock. Unavoidably, the crisis has prompted existential debates on how to think about the 'after-Covid world' (Goldberg 2020).

The US model of capitalism and Western European models – in particular, those of Germany and the Scandinavian countries – are often viewed as opposites: 'cut-throat' capitalism versus 'cuddly' capitalism (Acemoglu et al. 2012). Cut-throat capitalism is good for innovation but generates inequality not only in income but also in employment and health protection. Cuddly capitalism is better at redistributing income and at protecting employment and health but worse at producing frontier innovation.

How are the US and Western European models dealing with and responding to the Covid-19 crisis in terms of employment, health protection, and income support on the one hand, and innovation on the other hand?

A key quote from the article:

Both 'cutthroat' and 'cuddly' capitalisms are implementing changes to deal with their structural weaknesses during the Covid crisis. The US has implemented some short-term income support measures to reduce the risk of poverty, but it has not adopted structural measures to reform its system and move towards a cuddlier capitalism.

In Europe, on the other hand, the Covid-19 crisis may be an opportunity to move towards a new model of capitalism in which both innovation and the protection of citizens are promoted. This is not a naive ideal: states can have it all.

The Scandinavian model of flexi-security has shown that countries can have both generous social protection and vibrant innovation. Germany has also achieved an impressive balance in this regard. Other European countries need to move in the same direction by incentivising innovation while continuing to protect citizens from social and health risks. The Next Generation EU package currently discussed by European leaders has the potential to stimulate a transformative recovery, making Europe a caring and innovative place.

[The full and original article first appeared on VoxEU here on 25th June 2020.](#)

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Source: Shutterstock

A V-shaped recovery is now probably a fantasy

Although it seems like ancient history, it hasn't been that long since economies around the world began to close down in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Early in the crisis, most people anticipated a quick V-shaped recovery, on the assumption that the economy merely needed a short timeout. After two months of tender loving care and heaps of money, it would pick up where it left off.

It was an appealing idea. But now it is July, and a V-shaped recovery is probably a fantasy. The post-pandemic economy is likely to be anemic, not just in countries that have failed to manage the pandemic (namely, the US), but even in those that have acquitted themselves well. The International Monetary Fund projects that by the end of 2021, the global economy will be barely larger than it was at the end of 2019, and that the US and European economies will still be about 4% smaller.

The current economic outlook can be viewed on two levels. Macroeconomics tells us that spending will fall, owing to households' and firms' weakened balance sheets, a rash of bankruptcies that will destroy organizational and informational capital, and strong precautionary behavior induced by uncertainty about the course of the pandemic and the policy responses to it. At the same time,

microeconomics tells us that the virus acts like a tax on activities involving close human contact. As such, it will continue to drive large changes in consumption and production patterns, which in turn will bring about a broader structural transformation.

We know from both economic theory and history that markets alone are ill suited to manage such a transition, especially considering how sudden it has been. There's no easy way to convert airline employees into Zoom technicians. And even if we could, the sectors that are now expanding are much less labor-intensive and more skill-intensive than the ones they are supplanting.

We also know that broad structural transformations tend to create a traditional Keynesian problem, owing to what economists call the income and substitution effects. Even if non-human-contact sectors are expanding, reflecting improvements in their relative attractiveness, the associated spending increase will be outweighed by the decrease in spending that results from declining incomes in the shrinking sectors.

Moreover, in the case of the pandemic, there will be a third effect: rising inequality. Because machines cannot be infected by the virus, they will look relatively more attractive to employers, particularly in the contracting sectors that use relatively more unskilled labor. And, because low-income people must spend a larger share of their income on basic goods than those at the top, any automation-driven increase in inequality will be contractionary.

There can be no economic recovery until the virus is contained

On top of these problems, there are two additional reasons for pessimism. First, while monetary policy can help some firms deal with temporary liquidity constraints – as happened during the 2008-09 Great Recession – it cannot fix solvency problems, nor can it stimulate the economy when interest rates are already near zero.

Moreover, in the US and some other countries, “conservative” objections to rising deficits and debt levels will stand in the way of the necessary fiscal stimulus. To be sure, the same people were more than happy to cut taxes for billionaires and corporations in 2017, bail out Wall Street in 2008, and lend a hand to corporate behemoths this year. But it is quite another thing to extend unemployment insurance, health care, and additional support to the most vulnerable.

The short-run priorities have been clear since the beginning of the crisis. Most obviously, the health emergency must be addressed (such as by ensuring adequate supplies of personal protective equipment and hospital capacity), because there can be no economic recovery until the virus is contained. At the same time, policies to protect the most needy, provide liquidity to prevent unnecessary bankruptcies, and maintain links between workers and their firms are essential to ensuring a quick restart when the time comes.

But even with these obvious essentials on the agenda, there are hard choices to make. We shouldn't bail out firms – like old-line retailers – that were already in decline before the crisis; to do so would merely create “zombies,” ultimately limiting dynamism and growth. Nor should we bail out firms that were already too indebted to be able to withstand any shock. The US Federal Reserve's decision to support the junk-bond market with its asset-purchase program is almost certainly a mistake. Indeed, this is an instance where moral hazard really is a relevant concern; governments should not be protecting firms from their own folly.

Because Covid-19 looks likely to remain with us for the long term, we have time to ensure that our

spending reflects our priorities. When the pandemic arrived, American society was riven by racial and economic inequities, declining health standards, and a destructive dependence on fossil fuels. Now that government spending is being unleashed on a massive scale, the public has a right to demand that companies receiving help contribute to social and racial justice, improved health, and the shift to a greener, more knowledge-based economy. These values should be reflected not only in how we allocate public money, but also in the conditions that we impose on its recipients.

As my co-authors and I point out in a recent study, well-directed public spending, particularly investments in the green transition, can be timely, labor-intensive (helping to resolve the problem of soaring unemployment), and highly stimulative – delivering far more bang for the buck than, say, tax cuts. There is no economic reason why countries, including the US, can't adopt large, sustained recovery programs that will affirm – or move them closer to – the societies they claim to be.

The full original article first appeared on Project Syndicate [here](#) on the 1st July 2020.

The hot hand pushing you to experiment a little

Our understanding of how people react under different conditions can change as data and research methods develop, and previous studies are re-examined....



What are the chances?

Have you ever felt you were on a winning streak? The “hot hand” refers to the idea that once you’ve started to score, you’ll keep hitting those shots, winning big, over and over. It’s common in sport. Fans talk of it. Commentators speak of it. Players claim they feel it. But does the hot hand really exist or is it merely a feeling?

Those who maintain the hot hand is a fallacy typically refer to a [1985 study on NBA basketball](#), conducted by Thomas Gilovich, Robert Vallone and Amos Tversky. The authors examined data on shots during games both as field goals and free throws, and ran a controlled experiment with men and women varsity players to determine whether the effect could be confirmed by statistical analysis.

“Basketball players and fans alike tend to believe that a player’s chance of hitting a shot is greater following a hit than following a miss on the previous shot,” they wrote. In other words, after a player has a string of successful shots it encourages both players and fans to expect continued success by the shooter. They’re on a roll. They’re running “hot”. But the statistics did not support the belief. Other research seemed in line with these conclusions.

Basketball players who believed they’d experienced “hot hand” dismissed these results. Their experience led them not only to doubt but to refute the research, even though other studies covering different sports came to the same conclusion. In academic circles, the “hot hand fallacy” became a staple example of how perceptions did not necessarily reflect reality. Data rules. Emotions lose.

Looking more closely

Players and fans continued to doubt the research even when it was supported by other studies covering different sports. This irritated academics. The persistence of this doubt may be one of the reasons that – in 2014, 29 years after the initial research – Andrew Bocskocsky, John Ezekowitz, and Carolyn Stein published [a new study on the topic](#).

The researchers concentrated on a key assumption in the original research that each shot was of similar difficulty. The authors called this an assumption of “key shot selection independence”. They were able to concentrate on this because a novel database that included optical tracking data of both the players and the ball became available. The tracking data allowed information about how basketball players actually reacted to their own perceived “hotness” and how other players also reacted.

Analysis of 83,000 shots from the 2012-2013 NBA season showed “that players who have exceeded their expectations over recent shots shoot from significantly further away, face tighter defence, are more likely to take their team’s subsequent shot, and take more difficult shots”.

They showed that players who were “outperforming” continued to do so. The effect was small (1.2 to 2.4%) but significant, given the difficulty of the shot. Arguably a warm rather than a hot hand.

The researchers noted an important caveat in their findings. They noted that their “conception of the Hot Hand as exceeding expectations is different from the popular conception of absolute performance.”

Checking the numbers

[A further study released in 2018](#) took a detailed look at the probability of consecutive performances within the context of multiple coin tosses. This paper took a different approach to interpreting statistics.

If a person tossed a coin three times and got heads on each occasion, what is the probability of flipping a fourth head? Researchers Joshua Miller and Adam Sanjurgo showed that the chance of a continued streak is 42%, which is lower than 50% used in previous studies. The difference comes down to the way chances are calculated in sequences of events, such as tossing a coin. The maths behind this is tricky, even for readers of a journal such as *Econometrica*, which published the paper. “...the bias is subtle and (initially) surprising, even for people well-versed in probability and statistics”, wrote the authors.

The argument was there was a statistical bias in previous studies. When the lower requirement was applied to a range of data used in previous research it supported the idea of hot hand. The extent varied by a range of variables, including skill levels, when applied to a game such as basketball.

Toting up

The debate is not finished. [This 2020 paper](#) finds evidence of a hot hand for free throws in basketball but not for field goals. Maybe half a fallacy? While the initial research seems to be largely correct because people tend to overestimate its effect and see patterns where they probably don't exist, its conclusions are not as uncontroversial as was believed for decades.

The hot hand story illustrates a wider issue. It can be difficult to change your mind, even when the evidence suggests your belief may not be entirely correct. Curiously, this was one of the observations of the original paper. However, [as this 2016 article shows](#), citing people involved in various stages of hot hand research, this difficulty extends to specialists.

There may be two lessons from this story. First, when a behaviour you have been following, even when based on the best information you have available, is not working as well as you hoped, consider modifying it. For example, you may not be hitting your savings goals despite having a good plan. Alternatively, you may be hitting a financial goal but feel miserable. Experiment a little. The information you based the original behaviour on may be less reliable or less relevant to you than first thought.

Second, pass the ball to your hot team mate. Everyone else – except the odd behavioural scientist in the crowd – will think you did the right thing. If your hot team mate scores, you get reflected glory. If she fluffs it, it's not your fault.

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