

Neoliberal dogmatism: Coronavirus and the “survival of the fittest” in the Netherlands

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As of April 11, the Netherlands is suffering the fifth highest per capita Covid-19 death rate in the world, reporting 24,413 confirmed coronavirus infections and 2,643 Covid-19 deaths in a country of just 17 million. Center-right Prime Minister Mark Rutte was slow to respond to the crisis domestically and has pushed harsh loan conditions for emergency financial measures to aid other member states in the European Union [1].

In this interview, Pepijn Brandon explains how decades of neoliberalism established the political and economic conditions that have made the Netherlands so vulnerable to the coronavirus and how a “survival of the fittest” mentality continues to endanger public health. Pepijn Brandon is a Dutch social and economic historian specialized in the history of capitalism. He is the author of *War, Capital, and the Dutch State (1588-1795)* [2]. He is currently in the U.S. as Harvard University’s Erasmus Lecturer on the History and Civilization of the Netherlands and Flanders. This interview is part of No Borders News ongoing international coronavirus coverage.

No Borders New: Why has the coronavirus spread so quickly, and Covid-19 deaths been so high proportionally, in the Netherlands How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.

Pepijn Brandon: Currently, on 11 April, the official death toll stands at 2,643 with a total of 8,386 patients having been admitted to a hospital with a proven Covid-19 infection. Slightly under 25,000 people have tested positive. Given the overwhelming numbers that we are faced with here in the US at the moment that might not sound as much, but you have to keep in mind that the Netherlands is a country of only 17 million inhabitants.

I think we should be very careful drawing conclusions based on the partial figures we now have, especially when making country to country comparisons. For one thing, we are still in the middle of developments. Also, it is clear that different countries have radically different approaches to testing and recording death rates. However, it is noteworthy that on both accounts, the official figures presented by the Netherlands are on the conservative side. Contrary to the WHO’s advice of “testing, testing, testing,” the approach in the Netherlands remains to test on a far more limited scale than most other rich countries. The official death rate of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) in turn only includes those who have been clinically tested for the coronavirus. Meanwhile, the national statistical bureau (CBS) has measured a spike in excess deaths that is far higher than the official figure for the number of coronavirus-related deaths,

admitting this weekend that the actual death toll might be twice as high as the RIVM figures suggest.

NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?

PB: The Dutch government has been notoriously slow in its initial response to the crisis. The first 12 cases were detected in February, and by mid-March the number of people hospitalized had passed one hundred with 13 people dying from the disease. Still, by that time the Dutch government was still advocating the controversial “herd immunity” strategy, keeping schools and large sections of the economy open. It only started backtracking on this strategy when the number of infected started to escalate rapidly, opting for what has been described as a “lockdown light.” This included closing schools, bars and restaurants, and non-essential businesses that require personal contact, and restricting travel, but no restrictions on traveling inside the country or visiting public places. These followed only at a later stage.

NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system's greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?

PB: There is no denying that the Dutch health care system has been overwhelmed by the coronavirus crisis, to the point where Dutch patients had to be transported to Germany where the ICU capacity is larger. There is a serious case to be answered here, which is not just about government policy during the present crisis, but about the ravages caused by successive governments' extreme neoliberalism. Of course, we didn't need the coronavirus crisis to prove the dangers of combining market fundamentalism with the provision of an indispensable public service such as health care. In October 2018, two large hospitals filed for bankruptcy. When the then-Minister of Health Care Bruins, who belongs to Prime Minister Mark Rutte's center-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy [3], was asked why he was not willing to save the hospitals in the same way that the Dutch government had earlier saved banks by injecting billions in tax money, his blunt answer was that “a collapse of the Dutch system of payments is incomparable to the care for patients, so I will not go there.” The result was that from one day to the next, the two hospitals put a stop to necessary treatment of patients. Last year, an official committee concluded that the cold and business-like dealings with the hospital bankruptcy indeed had posed an acute danger to patients' lives.

It is incredible to see the Dutch government's reluctance to abandon this approach even in the face of an actual global pandemic. The most obvious case has been the lack of testing capacity. Until last week, even nurses and doctors in hospitals did not have access to sufficient tests. This was at first presented to the public as the natural result of the rapidity with which the crisis developed until it became apparent that the real reason was that almost all hospitals in the Netherlands were contractually bound to one particular pharmaceutical multinational, the Swiss company Roche, for an essential testing fluid. Only under great public pressure, and after losing much precious time, was the Dutch government willing to put pressure on Roche to make the method for manufacturing this fluid public. It did so at the same time as installing a special task force for increasing testing capacity headed by Feike Sijbema, former CEO of the Dutch health multinational DSM which under his leadership worked in close partnership with Roche. It is not hard to predict that the “solutions” this task force now implements will be guided by the same underlying principals that produced the problem in the first place.

NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from governing

parties.

PB: The most remarkable aspect of the Dutch government's response to the crisis, even in comparison to most of its nearby neighbors, is its absolute insistence on clinging to the most brutal expressions of neoliberal dogmatism, even in the face of this crisis. Overall, it has stuck to the deeply moralist, and shockingly ableist, line that stopping the spread of coronavirus is a matter of personal responsibility and individual behavior. The international response by the Netherlands has been especially cruel. This came to the fore during a sharp clash between the Dutch Minister of Finance Wopke Hoekstra and his Italian and Spanish colleagues over European Union (EU) loans to the most severely-impacted countries in Southern Europe. Reminding us of the despicable role that the Dutch government played in subjecting Greece's Syriza government to EU financial dictates in 2015 [4]. Even in the midst of this pandemic, the Dutch government insisted on using emergency loans as a lever to enforce even more stringent austerity policies throughout the eurozone [5]. Similarly, the Dutch government has put a series of extortionist demands on St. Martin and other Caribbean islands (territories that still have formal ties to the Netherlands) when they asked for financial support.

As the peddling of the notion of "herd immunity" shows, the internal policy of the Dutch government has hardly been geared towards saving lives. As in other countries, the economic rescue measures announced by the government are steeply skewed towards saving large corporations' profits. For instance, the government is currently working on a rescue loan of billions of euros for the Dutch airline KLM, while at the same time allowing the company to push through mass lay offs in the midst of this crisis. The government has also been reluctant to come to the aid of the self-employed, initially claiming that these workers were simply choosing not to earn a wage during a crisis. Yet successive governments in the Netherlands have pushed hard for the dissolution of standard employment relations in favor of self-employment, which often proves to be only a disguised form of extreme wage-dependency. For example, due to the state-led destruction of the public postal service, many workers in delivery nowadays are formally self-employed, while in practice they have become the new day laborers of the platform or gig economy. Of course, the Dutch government has not produced the Corona crisis. But it has produced the crisis behind the pandemic, a social breakdown that in all likelihood awaits us in the wake of the coronavirus.

NBN: What about the far right such as Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom?

PB: The far right in the Netherlands, as their counterparts elsewhere, has from inception pushed the idea that the pandemic should be seen as a "foreign threat" that can best be fought by closing the borders and by a policy of "the Netherlands first." Beyond that, the far right has in many ways been as erratic as the mainstream right, or as Trump for that matter, in veering from spreading panic and fake news to pandering to business demands to open up the economy as soon as possible. However, when tracing the impact of the global rightward turn on the politics of the coronavirus crisis, I think we have to look beyond formal responses and identify a deeper pattern. One of the most shocking aspects of public debates in the past couple of weeks in my view has been the extremely cavalier way in which politicians and media commentators are talking about the potential of mass death. The Dutch press at the moment is full of articles that unashamedly discuss to what extent rescuing the elderly and the sick is worth sacrificing the economy. I cannot see this as separate from a global attack on the very notion of solidarity in favor of a deeply racialized, nationalistic rhetoric of "survival of the fittest," that has been spearheaded by the far right globally. We are also seeing extreme economic liberalism, state repression targeting the control of individual behavior, and a far-right approach to the population are not at all mutually exclusive. But then, should that really surprise us? The particular kind of dystopia that we are currently facing has been long in the making.

NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions? How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis? Are there any efforts to make demands for social justice, national health care, emergency economic measures for unemployment pay, stopping rent and debt payments, etc.?

PB: Overall, the scale of the crisis, combined with the notion that you should not politicize a national disaster, has made the parliamentary left all but invisible in the last couple of weeks. Nevertheless, I think we should not underestimate the degree to which the elements of a response that puts human lives above profits, one that is based on solidarity, exist everywhere. Even without a strong formal political expression, this has an impact. That the government had to backtrack on its “herd immunity” strategy is largely due to parents’ and teachers’ refusal to keep their children in school. Nurses and doctors are fighting for better equipment while fighting to save lives. Trade unions have been vital in highlighting the lack of testing in homes for the elderly and other non-hospital care facilities and exposing the government’s lack of responsibility. Even today the government’s policy means that around one million workers in “non-essential” tasks are still being forced to go to work. My Facebook wall is full of heartwarming examples of solidarity and mutual aid.

But it is also clear that the coronavirus has raised the stakes. We are facing a crisis in our public health system combined with a pandemic, an economic crisis, a crisis of social reproduction and care, and a crisis in the valuation of human life in general. Even mainstream publications are now saying that it is unfathomable that post-coronavirus society will return to business as usual. However, unless we collectively develop a politics that is capable of responding to the crisis at each level, the real danger is that we will be forced into a society that retains all the worst features of what went on before. And this will only be intensified by unprecedented levels of austerity to pay for the losses that big business has suffered in the last couple of months by national governments wielding greatly enhanced powers, a far right preying on people’s deepened fears, and massively enhanced techniques for exploitation outside the workplace.

P.S.

- NO BORDERS ON APRIL 12, 2020:
<https://nobordersnews.org/2020/04/12/pepijn-brandon-coronavirus-and-the-survival-of-the-fittest-in-the-netherlands>

Footnotes

- [1] The Guardian. Available on ESSF (article 52922), [Covid-19, finance and the EU : Fear and mistrust as eurozone ministers debate reconstruction](#).
- [2] <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/1022-war-capital-and-the-dutch-state-1588-1795>
- [3] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/dutch-netherlands-freedom-party-elections>
- [4] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/02/eurogroup-jeroen-dijselbloem-dutch-finance>
- [5] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2020/mar/31/solidarity-members-eurozone>

[-coronavirus-dutch-coronabond](#)