

## COVID-19 Lockdowns are Central Planning

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## Introduction

2020's SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic-induced panic led politicians to implement lockdowns and issue stay-at-home orders that follow in a long line of government attempts at central planning over the past century. With only a few notable exceptions among the fifty states, elected officials and career bureaucrats could not resist the opportunity to seize on emergency powers and media attention afforded them by the onset of the novel coronavirus.<sup>1</sup> Milton Friedman's words "the self-interest of people in government leads them to behave in a way that is against the self-interest of the rest of us" could not be truer.<sup>2</sup> This is not to be construed as a denial of the existence or serious health effects of the COVID-19 virus, but rather as a critique of state governments' actions following its emergence in the United States.

In mid-March, the publishing of inaccurate epidemiological models gave government the sensational information they needed to get the wheels of government planners turning.<sup>3</sup> With the help of health department functionaries reciting latest upticks in aggregate infection case counts at widely publicized daily press briefings, these officials appeared fully convinced that they were somehow capable of protecting their constituents from the predicted horrors that lay ahead.<sup>4</sup> While attempting to curtail outdoor activities on California's beaches Governor Gavin Newsom revealed this underlying belief at an afternoon briefing saying, "My job as governor is to keep you safe."<sup>5</sup>

The present government-induced crisis once again demonstrates that the intellectuals of the political class responsible for these policies have, in the words of Thomas Sowell, "been insulated from material consequences" and "enjoyed immunity from even a loss of reputation after having been demonstrably wrong".<sup>6</sup> One such example being the early praise given to Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York for his handling of the pandemic. Not only did he win an Emmy Award for his press briefings and write a best-selling book on leadership, but he retained enough support to remain in office despite scandals surrounding policies that led to high death tolls in nursing homes across the state.<sup>7</sup>

Government and intellectual elites' desire to plan economic activity reaches back to early recorded history and were even hypothesized by Plato in the *Republic* and the *Laws*.<sup>8</sup> "Plato is a consummate planner" as can be observed in his vision for organizing every level of activity in the

<sup>1</sup> Jeff Deist, "The Absurdity of Covid "Cases"," *Mises Institute*, 2 Oct. 2020. <https://mises.org/wire/absurdity-covid-cases>.

<sup>2</sup> Milton Friedman, *Why Government Is the Problem*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 1993), 11.

<sup>3</sup> John Miltimore, "'Astronomically Wrong' in COVID-19 Predictions, Says Leading Epidemiologist – and the World is Paying the Price," *Foundation for Economic Education*, 2 July 2020. <https://fee.org/articles/modelers-were-astronomically-wrong-in-covid-19-predictions-says-leading-epidemiologist-and-the-world-is-paying-the-price/>.

<sup>4</sup> Deist, "Absurdity," 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Taxis and Adam Beam, "California governor's beach closures order sparks anger," *Associated Press*, April 30, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-us-news-ap-top-news-gavin-newsom-ca-state-wire-2903c0c62f97116e9ef6f5425ad0a7ac>.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Scherer and Josh Dawsey "Andrew Cuomo, once touted as the 'gold standard,' finds his brand tarnished by multiple crises," *Washington Post*, 25 Feb. 2021. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/andrew-cuomo-crises/2021/02/25/8b52da66-7772-11eb-8115-9ad5e9c02117\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/andrew-cuomo-crises/2021/02/25/8b52da66-7772-11eb-8115-9ad5e9c02117_story.html).

<sup>8</sup> David E. Trueblood, "The Problem of Central Planning," *Mises Institute*, 8 Apr. 2010. <https://mises.org/library/problem-central-planning>.

hypothetical colony of Magnesia.<sup>9</sup> The push for central planning in the United States dates back to the nation's formative years. Progressive Era writer Herbert Croly described the battle between the visions of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. He contrasted Jefferson's preference for individualism and minimal government planning with Hamilton's policies of "energetic and intelligent assertion of the national good" and "efficient national organization of American activities," asserting Hamilton knew the nation would "be protected only by an energetic and clear-sighted central government."<sup>10</sup>

In the twentieth century, multiple examples can be found of the horrific outcomes of central planning policies taken to logical conclusions.<sup>11</sup> Even when focusing solely on the outcomes of central economic planning and disregarding political repression and war, millions of men, women and children met ghastly ends due to such government policies in the twentieth century alone. Six million individuals, mostly in the Ukrainian agricultural regions, died of starvation under the Soviet's collectivization efforts in 1932-1933.<sup>12</sup> Again, ignoring other forms of violence, Mao's Great Leap Forward of 1959-61 led to an estimated range of 20 to 43 million victims of famine brought on by central planning. Millions more died of starvation in government planned "ruralization" and collectivization campaigns as recently as the 1970s and 80s, in locations as varied as Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Mozambique.<sup>13</sup> North Korea's totalitarian planned economy continues to the present, and as recently as late 1998 was suffering from centralized policy-induced famine that led to upwards of a million deaths, with some estimates much higher.<sup>14</sup>

Sadly, the consistent historical failures of central planning has not deterred modern-day politicians who are positive that this time they will succeed.<sup>15</sup> Ludwig von Mises explained the correlation of state planning to socialist and communist ideologies and noted that "if people speak of 'planning' they mean, of course, *central planning*, which means *one plan made by the government* - one plan that prevents planning by anyone except the government."<sup>16</sup> John Stuart Mill pointed out that humanity is not made up of automatons whose actions can be centrally directed, saying "Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides..."<sup>17</sup> Human flourishing depends on individual choice and cannot occur in a centralized environment.

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<sup>9</sup> Christos P. Baloglou "Economic, City Planning, and Environmental Proposals by Plato in the City of Atlantis and of the Laws," in *The State as Utopia*, (The European Heritage in Economics and the Social Sciences, no. 9), 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Croly and Franklin Foer, "The Federalists and the Republicans," In *The Promise of American Life*, (Princeton, MA: Princeton University Press, 2014), 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> Sowell, *Intellectuals in Society*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Stéphane Courtois and Mark Kramer, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 159.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 589, 694, 704.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Haggard and Marcus Nolan, "Hunger and Human Rights: The Politics of Famine in North Korea," *U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea*, 2005.  
[https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Hunger\\_and\\_Human\\_Rights.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Hunger_and_Human_Rights.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Kristian Niemietz, "You Can't Argue Against Socialism's 100 Per Cent Record of Failure," *Austrian Center*, 2020. <https://www.austriancenter.com/cannot-argue-against-socialism-failure>.

<sup>16</sup> Margit Von Mises, *Economic Policy: Thoughts for Today and Tomorrow* (Chicago: Regnery/Gateway, 1979), 28.

<sup>17</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 49.

State direction of economic activity overrides individual choice by its dependence on coercion and undermines political and personal freedom.<sup>18</sup>

### COVID-19 in March 2020

With COVID-19 first affecting Wuhan, China, western nations followed the Chinese pattern of centrally planned, authoritarian style lockdowns in order to limit the virus's spread.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, most U.S. state governors and health officials instantly leapt into totalitarian planning through executive orders.<sup>20</sup> One may ask how these pandemic-spawned "emergency measures" correlate to central planning if our form of government is still a constitutional representative republic, and our economy still nominally "free market." No free market can truly exist if citizens are "forced to live according to the plan of a planning authority enforcing its unique plan by the police, i.e., the social apparatus of compulsion and coercion".<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the lack of legislative consent for these measures across the several states undermined any hint of public representation.<sup>22</sup> The measures that followed the spread of COVID-19 reflect central planning archetypes and illustrates that this attempted top-down "planning" is the forcible suppression of millions of people's plans by a government-imposed plan.<sup>23</sup>

Starting in March 2020, government officials in most states began issuing executive orders with arbitrarily created lists of "essential businesses" that would be allowed to remain open to serve their communities during the now infamous "15 Days to Slow the Spread" initiative.<sup>24</sup> Though well intentioned, these mandates were not limited to 15 days in any one of the 44 states where "stay-at-home" orders were issued, with the minimum lockdown timeframe being 28 days.<sup>25</sup> These health mandates that closed most businesses and regulated even the most rudimentary activities were not based in representative legislating, but in unilateral rulemaking.<sup>26</sup> Basic, daily personal decisions were suddenly the purview of government planners, contrary to Adam Smith's wisdom that "every individual, it is evident, can, in his local situation, judge much better than any statesman or lawgiver can do for him."<sup>27</sup> Precisely what state government responsibilities should be in a health crisis can be argued, but emergency actions must remain congruent with the U.S. Constitution, and it is state legislatures that are vested with making law, not state governors.<sup>28</sup> Even in "red states" with Republican governors, the restrictions only began easing after a minimum

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<sup>18</sup> Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose*, (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Ebeling, "Government Policies Have Worsened the Coronavirus Crisis," *American Institute for Economic Research*, 21 Oct, 2020. <https://www.aier.org/article/government-policies-have-worsened-the-coronavirus-crisis>.

<sup>20</sup> David D'Amato, "The Real Threat Posed by COVID-19 Lockdowns," *Cato Institute*, 5 Dec. 2020. <https://www.cato.org/commentary/real-threat-posed-covid-19-lockdowns>.

<sup>21</sup> Ludwig Von Mises, *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality*, (Auburn, AL: Mises Institute Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>22</sup> D'Amato, "The Real Threat," 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Sowell, *Intellectuals in Society*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> Heather Mac Donald, "Four Months of Unprecedented Government Malfeasance," *Imprimis*, 2020, 2-3.

<sup>25</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>26</sup> Luke Wake, "Why governors shouldn't have unchecked emergency powers," *The Hill*, 1 Sept. 2020. <https://thehill.com/opinion/judiciary/514101-why-governors-shouldnt-have-unchecked-emergency-powers>.

<sup>27</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Press), 1981, IV.ii.

<sup>28</sup> Wake, "Why governors shouldn't have unchecked emergency powers," 2020.

of 28 days, with continued limitations on economic activity.<sup>29</sup> In many instances, specifically in states with Democrat governors such as New York, New Jersey, Michigan and California, the “stay-at-home” orders lasted for 6 weeks or more.<sup>30</sup> When governors of either party began reopening their states, it was mostly with heavy-handed restrictions dictated by executive orders moving forward.<sup>31</sup>

What is wrong with this terminology that has now become so familiar, the so-called “essential workers” and “essential businesses?” Nothing, except that any business that consumers voluntarily transact with is essential, perhaps even more so for those who are employed by said businesses.<sup>32</sup> The problem lies with the government deciding by fiat which workers or businesses are “non-essential,” how many hours a day an “essential business” should be open, how many patrons it can serve at a time, or what constitutes a meal or how many entrances should be accessible.<sup>33</sup>

In the market, unlike government programs that can be funded by decree, businesses rise and survive based on individuals deeming their product or service “essential.”<sup>34</sup> No business can survive for any length of time if customers are not voluntarily willing to part with their limited resources to acquire that business’s product or service.<sup>35</sup> Customers deem businesses “essential” with their patronage; “money talks...,” as the saying goes. However, in 2020, many politicians and media networks in the U.S. went as far as publicly condemning “non-essential” business owners who attempted to remain open or reopen too soon as “selfish” and leveled the threat of coercive enforcement through fines, criminal charges and the shutoff of utilities to maintain subservience to the central plan.<sup>36</sup> F.A. Hayek pointed out that central planning is an “official creed, to which adherence must be enforced” and requires that all “public criticism or even expression of doubt must be suppressed because they tend to weaken public support.”<sup>37</sup>

### Examples of Central Planning Outcomes

There are many historical illustrations of central planning, some that led to far more gruesome outcomes than others. Examples range from the New Deal to Soviet Communism, two contrasting precedents that were at one time often associated together in academic literature.<sup>38</sup> Soon after Stalin consolidated power in the Soviet Union, private businesses were banned, and the government took over full control of every aspect of economic activity as Soviet leaders believed

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<sup>29</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>31</sup> Mac Donald, “Four Months of Unprecedented Government Malfeasance,” 2020, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Sunde, “All work is essential: What COVID-19 teaches us about vocation,” *Acton Institute*, 19 Nov. 2020. <https://blog.acton.org/archives/117668-all-work-is-essential-what-covid-19-teaches-us-about-vocation.html>.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Amanda Snell, “The Essentialness of “Non-Essential” Business.” *Foundation for Economic Education*, 19 April 2020. <https://fee.org/articles/the-essentialness-of-non-essential-businesses/>.

<sup>35</sup> Mises, *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Snell, “Essentialness of “Non-Essential” Business,” 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, [1944] 2007, 175-176.

<sup>38</sup> Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 107.

that “planning was the very essence of Marxism.”<sup>39</sup> The Soviet Five-Year Plan would dictate what items, and in what quantities, were to be produced, completely detached from the reality of supply or demand.<sup>40</sup> Shortages of food and consumer goods were a hallmark of the centrally planned economy, and production quotas of any particular good were subservient to the goals of rapid industrialization and national defense, while quality of goods and living standards suffered.<sup>41</sup> The most heinous outcome of these policies occurred in the Ukrainian region of the Soviet Union in the 1930s, when Stalin’s regime collectivized farming by force and coercively allocated all agricultural products grown in the region to other areas, leading to mass starvation of millions of Soviet citizens.<sup>42</sup>

During Mao’s infamous “Great Leap Forward” in 1950s China, the central planners of the Chinese Communist Party were going to modernize agrarian China by brute force and arbitrary dictates. Farmers were instructed to turn their efforts toward new “essential” pursuits such as iron smelting rather than farming, and it is estimated that at least 20 million Chinese citizens starved to death due to these policies between 1959 and 1962.<sup>43</sup> The Chinese Communist Party clung to their centrally planned economy less tightly than the Soviets, slowly liberalizing economic policy following Mao’s death, just under 30 years after the Chinese Communists had consolidated power.<sup>44</sup> Unlike the Chinese government, the Soviets under Gorbachev in the mid-1980s made insufficient attempts at economic reforms in the *Perestroika* or “restructuring” period, but it was too little, too late as the economically inept planned economy collapsed in 1991.<sup>45</sup> The totalitarian Chinese regime lives on of course, but its economy has moved away from many of its earlier Marxist/Maoist planning attributes and has adopted many capitalist economic principles.<sup>46</sup>

Further evidence of the failure of planned economies can be observed in more recent times as well. The economic disparities between the free market economy of West Germany and East Germany’s planned economy were made clear to even the most passive spectators when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.<sup>47</sup> Presently, the shocking example of as nearly a completely centrally planned economy as ever recorded can be observed in North Korea. The differences between North and South Korea are well known, showing that, as in divided Germany, within the same culture, at the same point in history, a centrally planned economy leads to lower standards of living and economic performance.<sup>48</sup>

In the United States, the Great Depression was an economic crisis that led to “year after year of central planning, price and production interventionism, along with monetary and fiscal madness.”<sup>49</sup> The American left and totalitarian fascist regimes of the inter-war years held similar

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<sup>39</sup> Catherine Evtuhov, David Goldfrank, Lindsey Hughes and Richard Stites. *A History of Russia*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 663-664.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Evtuhov et al., *History of Russia*, 664, 667.

<sup>42</sup> Evtuhov et al., *History of Russia*, 668-669.

<sup>43</sup> “Great Leap Forward,” in *Britannica*, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Friedman, *Free to Choose*, 53.

<sup>45</sup> Evtuhov, et al., *History of Russia*, 781-799.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Sowell, *Applied Economics: Thinking Beyond Sage One* (New York: Basic, 2009), 267.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 62-63.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 62-63.

<sup>49</sup> Ebeling, “Government Policies Have Worsened the Coronavirus Crisis,” 2020.

“preferences for collective, surrogate decision-making from the top down.”<sup>50</sup> Though private business operations were not prohibited outright, the first years of the New Deal’s government direction of the economy was considered a “kindred experiment” alongside Italian Fascism and Soviet Communism.<sup>51</sup> This level of government planning did not end the Great Depression, but rather prolonged it throughout the decade.<sup>52</sup> This style of “State Socialism” often arises in times of crises, allowing the private corporations and entrepreneurs to operate, but under direction of state planners, which is “a gross error,” in the words of Mises.<sup>53</sup>

Fortunately, in 2020 no U.S. state governor’s “stay-at-home” mandate requisitioned food stuffs or prohibited purchasing food at the local grocery store. However, many state and local government directives effectively rendered millions of Americans incomeless when their jobs were deemed “non-essential,” greatly inhibiting their ability to obtain even basic necessities. As in every historical example of central planning, the general disregard for the individual’s needs by state planners and government elites has been exhibited since the original stay-at-home orders were issued in March 2020.<sup>54</sup> Despite federal efforts to inject stimulus funds into the economy to mitigate economic harm during the lockdowns, millions of Americans did not even qualify for the initial round of stimulus checks due to not meeting requirements.<sup>55</sup> For millions of others the one-time stimulus checks and delayed dispersal and other difficulties in receiving increased unemployment benefits or small business loans were too little too late for millions of Americans.<sup>56</sup> The Paycheck Protection Program did little to prop up employment rates.<sup>57</sup> Small businesses that could not as easily absorb the loss in profits suffered disproportionately during the lockdowns, losing major market share to large corporations.<sup>58</sup> The number of active business owners dropped

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<sup>50</sup> Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 105.

<sup>51</sup> Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 107.

<sup>52</sup> Ebeling, “Government Policies Have Worsened the Coronavirus Crisis,” 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Von Mises, *Socialism*, 256.

<sup>54</sup> John Cooper, “Shaming “Lockdowns for Thee, But Not for Me” Politicians,” *The Heritage Foundation*, 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/public-health/commentary/shaming-lockdowns-thee-not-me-politicians>.

<sup>55</sup> Josh Lederman, “Many Americans won’t get coronavirus stimulus checks,” *NBC News*, 6 Apr. 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/falling-through-cracks-many-americans-won-t-get-coronavirus-checks-n1177266>.

<sup>56</sup> Emily Peck, “The Stimulus Isn’t Enough,” *HuffPost*, 17 Apr. 2020. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/stimulus-isnt-enough\\_n\\_5e98e825c5b6ead1400a24fb](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/stimulus-isnt-enough_n_5e98e825c5b6ead1400a24fb).

<sup>57</sup> Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, Nathaniel Hendren, Michael Stepner, “How Did COVID-19 and Stabilization Policies Affect Spending and Employment?” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Nov. 2020. [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w27431/w27431.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3ucfgXIJV\\_IC47PPFt0W9rYC3hRowmTnBrlASnRlAuqi0OWV1c9x2zQ0](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w27431/w27431.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3ucfgXIJV_IC47PPFt0W9rYC3hRowmTnBrlASnRlAuqi0OWV1c9x2zQ0).

<sup>58</sup> Douglas MacMillan, Peter Whoriskey and Jonathan O’Connell, “America’s biggest companies are flourishing during the pandemic and putting thousands of people out of work,” *Washington Post*, 16 Dec. 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/business/50-biggest-companies-coronavirus-layoffs>.

from February to April 2020 by 3.3 million individuals.<sup>59</sup> Business rating site Yelp noted that over 97,000 businesses closed permanently between March-August of 2020.<sup>60</sup>

For the individuals who resisted the plan, police arrived to arrest business owners who refused to keep their businesses closed long after the initial “15 days to slow the spread.”<sup>61</sup> These same mandates limited consumer purchasing options of many goods and services through their guidelines for “essential businesses” that closed or limited operating hours of small businesses. Even pro-lockdown Harvard epidemiologists conceded that dining at 7 p.m. was not inherently riskier than dining at 10 p.m. and would do little to limit infections.<sup>62</sup> A far more obvious display of government officials’ dissonant and arbitrary decision making was the endorsement of mass gatherings for protesting social justice causes while keeping small businesses closed and shutting down “lockdown protests” in the name of public health.<sup>63</sup>

Many governors seemed to have no awareness of the interconnectedness of the modern economy and effectively limited the supply of food and other items through the shutdowns of “non-essential” businesses in the supply chain, such as processing plants and delivery services.<sup>64</sup> This was made clear by the many news stories of crops rotting in the field or meat being discarded because farmers and packing plants could not get their products to market.<sup>65</sup> Though, fortunately, the outcome has not turned out as deadly, these government rules and restrictions indicate cases of attempted central planning. The top-down dictates were made slightly more palatable to the masses because, in this instance, Wal-Mart was still open, though just for a portion of its normal hours and with only one available entrance, and maybe with some of the “non-essential” aisles taped off.<sup>66</sup> This arbitrary selection of so-called “essential businesses” by politicians and technocrats exemplifies the outcome of planners who are “preoccupied with the notion that their own special knowledge exceeds the average special knowledge of millions of other people.”<sup>67</sup>

One may point out that the previously mentioned regimes were tyrannical dictatorships, so it is little surprise such economies could not thrive. While some private businesses continued operating during the COVID-19 lockdowns, the reality remains that this was still attempted central planning by many state governments. The increase of such government interventions as we observed during 2020, “thrusts the economy into hopeless calculational chaos” (Rothbard 2020,

<sup>59</sup> Robert Fairlie, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Small Business Owners: Evidence from the First Three Months after Widespread Social-distancing Restrictions.” *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jems.12400>.

<sup>60</sup> Anjali Sundaram, “Yelp data shows 60% of business closures due to the coronavirus pandemic are now permanent,” *CNBC*, 16 Sept. 2020. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/16/yelp-data-shows-60percent-of-business-closures-due-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic-are-now-permanent.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Bill Hutchinson, “New Jersey gym owners arrested after repeatedly defying COVID shutdown orders,” *ABC News*, 27 July 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Karen Weintraub, “Massachusetts is calling for a curfew to curb rising COVID-19 infections. Experts say it's probably not enough,” *USA Today*, 7 Nov. 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Ryan McMaken, “The Moral Authority of the Lockdown Fetishists Is Gone. Thank the Protestors and Rioters,” *Mises Institute*, 2 June 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Antony Davies and James Harrigan, “Meat Supply Disruptions Are the Bitter Harvest of the “Non-Essential Worker” Fallacy,” *Foundation for Economic Education*, 1 May 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Mike Shedlock, “Food Rotting in the Fields But Shortages in the Stores,” *The Street*, 26 Apr. 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Nick Sibilla, “Michigan Bans Many Stores From Selling Seeds, Home Gardening Supplies, Calls them “Not Necessary,”” *Forbes*, 16 Apr. 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 229.



248). The concept of a “mixed economy” can be summed up by the idea that private businesses operate, but at the direction of state planners.<sup>68</sup> However, Mises elaborates that there is no actual “mix,” as either individuals in the market or government planners dictate economic activity, but it cannot be both simultaneously.<sup>69</sup>

### Decentralized Knowledge

Attempts to plan economies can never accurately predict the desires of individual consumers or movement in markets because all necessary information cannot be held or acted upon by one individual or central source in real time, in the manner an individual can react to their own circumstances and new information.<sup>70</sup> Government planners do not have the necessary knowledge or incentives to successfully make decisions that will benefit individuals or businesses.<sup>71</sup> The singular focus by the political elite on limiting the spread of the COVID-19 virus required the subordination of all other negative externalities, both economic and health-related.<sup>72</sup> Overlooking unintended or secondary consequences is a classic political maneuver that can only be maintained for a limited period.<sup>73</sup> The complete command economy implemented by the U.S. government during World War II illustrates this cause and effect in a less tyrannical light. For a limited time, and with widespread public support, the government ordered all economic activity with the singular purpose of defeating the Axis Powers, but with the prerequisite secondary consequences of fixed wages, rationing and shortages of consumer goods.<sup>74</sup>

Choosing how and what businesses should operate not only ignores market principles and historical data, but also overlooks spontaneous order, the continuous and uncountable number of voluntary transactions of individuals pursuing their own interests that cause society to flourish.<sup>75</sup> Government attempts to direct economic activity contribute to what Nicolas Berdyaev termed “dehumanization,” as “man is emptied of every inner value.”<sup>76</sup> The efficacy of central planning is undermined by the limitations of aggregating knowledge to a single entity.<sup>77</sup> A government functionary in a state capital has no idea when a given citizen wants to eat or needs to shop for or what any particular business’s margins or requirements are to remain viable or the amount of tips a waitress counts on each month to make ends meet. Arbitrary occupancy and operating hour limitations on restaurants for instance are difficult to rationalize, even in the name of public

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<sup>68</sup> Ludwig Von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, (Mansfield Center, CT: Martino Publishing, 2012), 257.

<sup>69</sup> Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, (Auburn, AL: Mises Institute Press, 2008), 259.

<sup>70</sup> Margit Von Mises, *Economic Policy: Thoughts for Today and Tomorrow*, (Chicago: Regnery/Gateway, 1979), 29.

<sup>71</sup> Milton Freidman, “Market Mechanisms and Central Economic Planning,” *American Enterprise Institute*, 1981, 5.

<sup>72</sup> Amy Anderson, “The Science Is Not Settled on COVID-19 Guidelines,” *The Heritage Foundation*, 4 Nov. 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/health-care-reform/commentary/the-science-not-settled-covid-19-guidelines>.

<sup>73</sup> Sowell, *Applied Economics*, 13-14.

<sup>74</sup> Friedman, *Free to Choose*, 94-95.

<sup>75</sup> David Boaz, *The Libertarian Mind*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 26.

<sup>76</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Fate of man in the Modern World*, (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1961), 55.

<sup>77</sup> F.A. Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” *American Economic Review* XXXV, no. 4 (1945): 12.

health.<sup>78</sup> Outdoor dining in many cities was shut down while airliners continued to come and go from international airports in the same metropolises every day.<sup>79</sup> Government planners cannot make efficient or fully informed decisions due to lacking the “knowledge necessary to control a vast, diversified, and complex economy.”<sup>80</sup>

The availability of knowledge to a central authority is limited, while decentralized decision making increases the amount of knowledge available to be acted upon, leading to the “generation and use of more information than is possible under central direction.”<sup>81</sup> Any entrepreneur or business that can predict or luckily guess market demand will typically be rewarded with increased profits. Politicians and bureaucrats, on the other hand, have their own incentives and thus cannot know the wants and desires of thousands or millions of individuals who will be affected by their decisions.<sup>82</sup> The effects of government mandated interventions in the economic process are not voluntary for the individual and therefore necessitate coercion. This can be observed in the massive slowdown in economic activity and unemployment spikes beginning in March of last year.<sup>83</sup> When politicians and bureaucrats inject their commands into the economy, it artificially interrupts the ongoing information transmitted by prices that would alert buyers and sellers of the available supply and current demands of the market.<sup>84</sup>

### Central Planning Requires Coercion

History shows that central planning requires coercion to enforce its policy program. The *Communist Manifesto* states that freedom and individuality must be abolished on the path to the utopian planned economy of the proletariat.<sup>85</sup> Some may argue that human flourishing cannot occur apart from basic survival, thus allowing for some amount of economic planning to ensure health precautions. However, attempts to coercively “plan” Americans into “staying safe” from the virus overlooks the reality that “self-preservation and development is the common aspiration of all men.”<sup>86</sup> The combining of political and economic power quickly devolves into tyranny.<sup>87</sup>

For most Americans, voluntary precautions would have been sufficient to mitigate their personal health risks from the COVID-19 virus.<sup>88</sup> Individuals were already taking safety

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<sup>78</sup> Brad Polumbo, “Why Andrew Cuomo’s Latest New York COVID Restrictions Make Zero Sense,” *Foundation for Economic Education*, 12 Nov. 2020. <https://fee.org/articles/why-andrew-cuomo-s-latest-new-york-covid-restrictions-make-zero-sense>

<sup>79</sup> Dakota Smith, “L.A.’s outdoor dining ban came from the county. Garcetti is still facing heat for it,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 Nov. 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-11-30/garcetti-la-restaurants-outdoor-dining-ban-coronavirus>.

<sup>80</sup> Pierre Lemieux, “Zico and Ammo under Price Controls,” *The Library of Economics and Liberty*, 8 Oct. 2020. <https://www.econlib.org/zico-and-ammo-under-price-controls>.

<sup>81</sup> F.A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 77.

<sup>82</sup> Sowell, *Applied Economics*, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Snell, “Essentials of “Non-Essential” Business,” 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Friedman, *Free to Choose*, 13-15.

<sup>85</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848], (New York: International Publishers, 2020), 24-25.

<sup>86</sup> Frederic Bastiat, *The Law* [1850], (Auburn, AL: Mises Institute, 2007), 3.

<sup>87</sup> Friedman, *Free to Choose*, 2-3.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Epstein, “Coronavirus Overreaction,” *The Hoover Institute*, 23 March 2020. <https://www.hoover.org/research/coronavirus-overreaction>.

precautions before state governors began issuing “stay-at-home” orders. Spontaneously in early March 2020, travel began to tail off, schools were closing, and businesses were instituting increased hygienic measures without government mandate.<sup>89</sup> Once state governments had instituted new health measures, it was then their opportunity to formally enforce actions that were already voluntarily adopted by many individuals and dictate to citizens what they could and could not do. Various jurisdictions handled things differently, of course, but from late March onward, far too many examples were seen of police powers being brought to bear on citizens who defied the governmental plan.<sup>90</sup> As Bastiat noted, “the law has been perverted through...bare egotism and false philanthropy.”<sup>91</sup>

The state-level government response to COVID-19 in many states was a hastily cobbled together attempt at central planning, dictating what Americans needed and how they could go about meeting those needs, assuming these individuals still had resources to acquire needed items and shortages notwithstanding. The outcomes of policies enacted to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 show us why central planning always fails.<sup>92</sup> In 2020, many policymakers fell into the classic pitfall of only focusing on the immediate effect of the initial policy implementation, and failing to foresee the possible long-term outcomes of such interventions.<sup>93</sup> In fact, the magnitude of these failings are still becoming apparent as businesses continue to shutter across the U.S. at an alarming rate, and the virus continues to spread despite the supposed well-intentioned government health mandates that showed little benefit.<sup>94</sup>

Economist Walter E. Williams, just prior to his passing in late 2020, noted that, “every action has a cost,” even prioritizing public health through lockdowns during the current COVID-19 pandemic came with massive tradeoffs.<sup>95</sup> This lack of consideration of health tradeoffs by policymakers was best illustrated by the shutting or limiting of non-COVID related medical treatments, such as cancer screenings, chemotherapy and even surgeries<sup>96</sup> and the closure of many outdoor recreation opportunities despite the known positive health effects of being in nature.<sup>97</sup> Worse yet, the original lockdowns did not prevent later resurgences of COVID-19 cases, and multiple governors of states who implemented lengthy lockdowns earlier in the year

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<sup>89</sup> Elizabeth Nolan Brown, “COVID-19: A National Problem with Local Solutions,” *Reason Magazine*, 13 Mar. 2020. <https://reason.com/2020/03/13/covid-19-a-national-problem-with-local-solutions>.

<sup>90</sup> Meagan Flynn and Hannah Knowles, “Dallas hair salon owner chose jail rather than close her doors. She was just released,” *Washington Post*, 7 May 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/05/06/dallas-salon-owner-jailed-coronavirus>.

<sup>91</sup> Bastiat, *The Law*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Lemieux, “Zico and Ammo”, 2020.

<sup>93</sup> Hazlitt, *Economics in One Lesson*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1979), 15.

<sup>94</sup> Jacob Sullum, “How Much Difference Do COVID-19 Lockdowns Make?,” *Reason Magazine*, 15 Sept. 2020. <https://reason.com/2020/09/16/how-much-difference-do-covid-19-lockdowns-make>.

<sup>95</sup> Walter E. Williams, “With COVID Lockdowns Costs Must Be Weighed Against the Benefits,” *The Daily Signal*, 9 Dec. 2020. <https://www.dailysignal.com/2020/12/09/with-covid-lockdowns-costs-must-be-weighed-against-benefits>.

<sup>96</sup> Lisa Rosenbaum, “The Untold Toll — The Pandemic’s Effects on Patients without Covid-19,” *New England Journal of Medicine*. 11 June, 2020. <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMms2009984>.

<sup>97</sup> Nooshin Razani, Rohan Radhakrishna and Curtis Chan, “Public Lands Are Essential to Public Health During a Pandemic,” *Pediatrics*, August 2020. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/146/2/e20201271>.

reinstated a second round of lockdowns in late 2020.<sup>98</sup> These developments continue to confirm that the state cannot understand what is in the best interest of individuals, who in J.S. Mill's words, "should be free to act upon their opinions-to carry these out in their lives, without hinderance, either physical or moral, from their fellow-men, so long as it is at their own risk and peril."<sup>99</sup> This is not simply philosophical hyperbole, as recent scientific studies show that non-pharmaceutical interventions pursued by governments such as mandatory stay-at-home orders and business closures do not lead to a reduction in case rates that could not otherwise be achieved through voluntary measures.<sup>100</sup>

Within the U.S., the failure of centralized, one-size-fits-all initiatives that ignore nuanced variations between states has been repeated time and again.<sup>101</sup> Differences in the impact of COVID-19 from state to state and even within particular states were massive.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, less densely populated states such as Utah and South Dakota issued no statewide stay-at-home orders or lockdowns, and their respective death rates per 100,000 remained lower than states with lengthy lockdowns long after all state-level lockdowns had officially been lifted.<sup>103</sup> The states of Florida and New York have very similar population density and total number of residents.<sup>104</sup> Florida was under lockdown for 32 days in contrast to New York's 84 days under lockdown, however Florida's COVID-19 death totals remained about half of New York's six months after Florida's lockdown ended, despite Florida's population median age being three years older.<sup>105</sup> New York and New Jersey have had some of the highest COVID-19 death rates in the country despite some of the longest running stay-at-home orders and maintained heavy restrictions on businesses, with new stay-at-home orders being issued nearly six months later.<sup>106</sup> Looking outside the US, Sweden took a similar "hands-off" approach, relying on citizens to self-regulate their health risks without implementing severe regulatory measures and their COVID-19 death rate remained far below many European nations that implemented severe lockdown orders.<sup>107</sup>

### Conclusion

As John Stuart Mill pointed out, the "most cogent reason for restricting government, is the great evil of adding unnecessarily to its power."<sup>108</sup> The American Founding Fathers created our system of government based on the understanding that overconcentration of government power

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<sup>98</sup> Jill Cowan, Jack Healy and Thomas Fuller, "California Will Impose Its Strongest Virus Measures Since the Spring," *New York Times*, 3 Dec. 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/us/california-stay-at-home-order.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 46.

<sup>100</sup> Eran Bendavid et al., "Assessing Mandatory Stay-at-home and Business Closure Effects on the Spread of COVID-19," *European Journal of Clinical Investigation* 51, no. 4 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1111/eci.13484>.

<sup>101</sup> Boaz, *The Libertarian Mind*, 371.

<sup>102</sup> Norbert Michel and Drew Gonshorowski, "1% of Counties Home to Half of COVID-19 Cases, Oer Half of Deaths," *The Heritage Foundation*, 14 May 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/public-health/commentary/1-counties-home-half-covid-19-cases-over-half-deaths>.

<sup>103</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>104</sup> See Appendix 1

<sup>105</sup> See Appendix 1

<sup>106</sup> See Appendix 1; Cowan, Healy and Fuller, "California Virus Measures", 2020.

<sup>107</sup> Sullum, "COVID-19 Lockdowns," 2020.

<sup>108</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 93.

would obviate self-determination and be “the great danger to freedom.”<sup>109</sup> Human flourishing cannot occur when individual decision making is undermined by government planning schemes in which “men are pawns.”<sup>110</sup> It is becoming clear that in this present version, attempts to plan economic activity in the name of public health do not lead to lower death rates during pandemics, even in the short term.<sup>111</sup> Central planning has ruined economies and prevented human flourishing throughout history and policymakers’ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have once again displayed the many shortcomings of such attempts.

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<sup>109</sup> Friedman, *Free to Choose*, 1980, 286.

<sup>110</sup> Trueblood, “Central Planning”, 13.

<sup>111</sup> Mitch Nemeth, “Lockdowns Haven’t Brought down COVID Mortality. But They Have Killed Millions of Jobs,” *Mises Institute*, 12 Nov. 2020. <https://mises.org/wire/lockdowns-havent-brought-down-covid-mortality-they-have-killed-millions-jobs>.

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## APPENDIX I: COVID Multi-State Comparison

|   | California | Michigan | New York | New Jersey | Texas  | Georgia | Florida | South Dakota | Utah   | Iowa   |
|---|------------|----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|--------------|--------|--------|
| Length of Stay at Home (Days) <sup>112</sup>        | 47         | 67       | 84       | 81         | 29     | 29      | 32      | 0            | 0      | 0      |
| Median Age <sup>113</sup>                           | 37         | 39.8     | 39.2     | 40.2       | 35.1   | 37.2    | 42.4    | 37.7         | 31.2   | 38.5   |
| Population Density (per sq. mile) <sup>114</sup>    | 253.7      | 176.7    | 412.8    | 1207.8     | 111    | 184.6   | 400.7   | 11.7         | 39     | 56.5   |
| Health Index <sup>115</sup>                         | 0.398      | -0.209   | 0.512    | 0.553      | -0.204 | -0.447  | -0.213  | 0.149        | 0.628  | 0.289  |
| Extent of testing per 100k, (Nov. 3) <sup>116</sup> | 47383      | 49136    | 75102    | 52285      | 28425  | 34071   | 47358   | 29716        | 44336  | 28426  |
| Cases per 100k <sup>117</sup>                       | 2363       | 2080     | 2647     | 2726       | 3194   | 3466    | 3784    | 5538         | 3776   | 4238   |
| COVID case total (Nov. 4) <sup>118</sup>            | 934672     | 207763   | 517015   | 242825     | 916773 | 364589  | 805924  | 48854        | 119375 | 133762 |
| COVID death total (Nov. 4, 2020) <sup>119</sup>     | 17666      | 7761     | 33324    | 16371      | 18194  | 8029    | 16890   | 446          | 602    | 1765   |

<sup>112</sup> Ballotpedia, “States that issued lockdown and stay-at-home orders in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, 2020,” *Ballotpedia*, 2020. [https://ballotpedia.org/States\\_that\\_issued\\_lockdown\\_and\\_stay-at-home\\_orders\\_in\\_response\\_to\\_the\\_coronavirus\\_\(COVID-19\)\\_pandemic,\\_2020](https://ballotpedia.org/States_that_issued_lockdown_and_stay-at-home_orders_in_response_to_the_coronavirus_(COVID-19)_pandemic,_2020).

<sup>113</sup> US Census Bureau, “Median Age in the United States in 2019, by state,” *Statista*, Sept. 2020. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/208048/median-age-of-population-in-the-usa-by-state/>.

<sup>114</sup> US Census Bureau, “Population density in the U.S. by federal states including the District of Columbia in 2020,” *Statista*, Dec. 2020. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183588/population-density-in-the-federal-states-of-the-us/>.

<sup>115</sup> United Health Foundation, “Public Health Impact: Overall – Annual,” *America’s Health Rankings*, 2020. [https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/Overall\\_a/](https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/Overall_a/).

<sup>116</sup> Coronavirus Resource Center, “All State Comparison of Testing Efforts,” *Johns Hopkins University & Medicine*, 2021. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/testing/states-comparison>.

<sup>117</sup> CDC Case Task Force, “United States COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by State over Time,” *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, 2021. <https://data.cdc.gov/Case-Surveillance/United-States-COVID-19-Cases-and-Deaths-by-State-o/9mfq-cb36>.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

|   |        |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
|---|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| COVID case fatality rate <sup>120</sup> | 0.0189 | 0.037 | 0.064 | 0.067 | 0.020 | 0.022 | 0.021 | 0.009 | 0.005 | 0.013 |
|---|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.