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May 28, 2020

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form and the changes we make—we will determine how well we as a society, and maybe as a species, can weather the next crisis.

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"God is dead, and Marx is dead," Howard Zinn used to say. "But Yossarian lives."[3]

Catch-22 ends with Yossarian plotting an escape, determined to desert, running for the nearest neutral country.

We, of course, cannot desert. There is nowhere to run to. Between humanity and the virus, there is no neutral territory. We have to fight where we are.

Kristian Williams is the author of Between the Bullet and the Lie: Essays on Orwell*, and* Resist Everything Except Temptation: The Anarchist Philosophy of Oscar Wilde*, both on AK Press. He is a member of the Institute for Anarchist Studies (IAS).*

[3] Howard Zinn, "The New Radicalism," in *The Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997) 623.

metaphors are overdone, that is true. And, as Eula Biss points out, neither the cause nor the end of the Covid-19 outbreak will resemble that of an actual war: "Viruses don't have nationality," she says. "They don't have politics. This virus does not have intent. It can't be negotiated with. There will be no truce."[1] That is all true as well. But it does not mean that there is no enemy, only that the enemy is not the virus.

Yossarian knows: "The enemy … is anybody who's going to get you killed."

This fact seems to have been understood, deeply and intuitively, by the thousands of workers—in slaughterhouses, warehouses, auto factories, restaurants, and retail outlets—who have walked off the job rather than risk their lives for the company's profits.[2] When it comes to public health, the demands of solidarity are not only a matter of political principle, but of biological imperative. By refusing to work in unsafe conditions, these workers are not just defending themselves, but protecting everyone they may come into contact with—their coworkers, their families, all of us.

It has become almost cliché to say that the coronavirus epidemic has laid bare the injustices inherent in our society. It follows that a solution cannot be limited to a vaccine or a cure. We must also address the structural causes that leave poor people and people of color especially vulnerable to crises of all types. Most obvious in our present circumstances are the difficulties accessing health care, the paucity of paid sick time, overcrowded or inadequate housing, and the uncomfortable fact that the most essential jobs are often the lowest paid. Our war doesn't end when the pandemic recedes and the death rate drops. By what we do now—the connections we

[1] Quoted in "War, What Is It Good For?" *On the Media*, https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/episodes/on-the-media-war-what-is-it-good-for, April 3, 2020.

[2] See: "COVID-19 Strike Wave Interactive Map," *Payday Report*, https://paydayreport.com/covid-19-strike-wave-interactive-map/, accessed May 26, 2020.

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the irrationalities of the government's response. There may be other reasons, or other kinds of explanations, that account for the various problems I've mentioned—to say nothing of the rush to "open the economy," the misallocation of vital and scarce medical supplies, or anything that Donald Trump has said, done, or tweeted.

But then again, there may not be.

Joseph Heller has erected a landmark by which we can orient while we search for other and subtler explanations in the fields of psychology, economics, or political science. Heller's is a vision of war as a kind of office politics writ large—enormous in consequence, but in conduct no less petty. There are still the bullying bosses, the toadying assistants, the sad ambitions, pointless rivalries, and inexplicable feuds—and such things may just get you killed.

Why this state of affairs is allowed to continue is another question, and here, too, Heller is of use. In one scene, Yossarian, the protagonist, is on leave and goes to visit his favorite brothel. He finds it empty, save for an old woman with a dark shawl. She is distraught and tells him, "The mean tall soldiers with the hard white hats … came with their clubs," and chased away the girls. "They would not even let them take their coats. The poor things. They just chased them away into the cold."

Yossarian is indignant. "They couldn't just barge in here and chase everyone out," he protests.

But the old woman is wiser. She knows the score, and the score is always 22. She says, "Catch-22 says they have a right to do anything we can't stop them from doing."

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There are those, I know, who will blanch at reaching for *Catch-22*—or any other war story—as a point of comparison. War

yond even the typical bureaucratic inefficiency and asinine regulations, they face the demands, not so much of military necessity, but nearly of its opposite: the perpetual conflict between competence and rank, the maintenance of discipline at the expense of efficacy, and the peculiarly irrational, self-defeating, and occasionally genuinely suicidal, inclinations of any hierarchy faced with a crisis to which it is not equal.

On the other hand, the system is itself hostage to the greed, vanity, foolishness, petty ambitions, and vindictive squabbles of its various functionaries. Somehow, ever-present, there is a war and it has got to be won. But no specific rule, procedure, or order is ever issued with winning the war in mind. Far more pressing are questions about whether Milo Minderbinder's syndicate will profit, whether Doc Daneeka can continue to collect flight pay without having to fly, and whether Colonel Cathcart will ever get his photo in the *Saturday Evening Post*, which would be a real feather in his cap. These are the kinds of motives that drive the operatives of any complex organization, the determinants of their decisions, the real agendas they pursue.

In economic terms, one might say that if institutions offer perverse incentives, they should expect perverse results. In sociological terms, however, one must observe that *every* bureaucracy, by its very nature, will above all else value and reward the ability to advance within the bureaucracy. Perverse incentives, in that respect, are inherent; non-perverse results occur, if they ever do, more by luck than by design, and almost by accident.

3

In the weeks since my union rep made his comment about Heller's novel, it has become increasingly clear to me that *Catch-22* is a book, not only of its time, but for ours. It supplies the right model for making sense of the anxieties of this crisis and

1

I work for the government. That is ironic, for an anarchist, but the actual job involves relatively few compromises. Specifically, I work as a drawbridge operator for Multnomah County, one of three counties comprising the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area. A week or so after the local advent of the coronavirus crisis, I started telling people that—though my day-to-day job was much the same—working for the government felt like watching state failure from the inside.

The County started off on the wrong foot, sending a memo to every employee assuring us that no cases of Covid-19 had been detected in the area—a full day after Oregon Health Sciences University announced its first coronavirus patient. This snafu was followed by an abrupt decision that non-essential employees should stay home and telecommute—an arrangement for which the employer failed to provide computers, internet access, and in many cases, job tasks. Within a few days, workers were being reassigned to new homeless shelters which were opened, not to increase available services, but to make it at least technically possible for the clients to engage in social distancing. (That is, no new beds were available, but the existing beds were dispersed among several sites.) In theory, workers volunteered to staff these shelters, but I know at least one who was directly "volun-told" by his manager, and I know other people who *tried* to volunteer and were refused because all the shifts had been filled. Workers at one shelter reported receiving no training, no applicable policies, no clear supervision, and no spray cleaner. Later, working alone in a bridge tower, I was supplied a single N-95 mask, while the workers running the shelter were still making do with bandanas.

Other confusions abound: For a while County employees were receiving so many emails from so many different offices, often issuing contradictory instructions, that it was impossible to know what rule was supposed to be in effect at any given moment. I was noti-

fied at one point that there simply *were* no more cleaning supplies; yet they have arrived on schedule and without interruption ever since. And, of course, there are the usual mix-ups about scheduling and disputes over pay, only on a much vaster scale and with much higher stakes. What happens, during a pandemic, if workers are not confident that they will be paid if they stay home after contact with an infected person? Nothing good.

Many of these problems worked themselves out eventually, and yet new difficulties continue to arise. The County is contemplating layoffs and cuts to programming—at exactly the time that "essential workers" are being hailed as heroes, the spike in unemployment is likely to increase the need for public services, and even the International Monetary Fund is advocating Keynesian measures. Layoffs at this moment can only worsen the economic crisis and hobble any future response to the pandemic. Just imagine a second spike in cases, probably in the fall, producing another lockdown and new demands on government services—but with fewer staff available for redeployment.

Covid-19 is only one epidemic that we are facing. We are also facing an epidemic of stupidity.

2

"It's like being stuck in a Joseph Heller novel," a union staffer said to me, and I realized at once that he was exactly right.

Catch-22 is one of those novels that I return to every few years. I would be re-reading it now, but I sold my copy on the theory that it was a book I could always find at the library. Once, it seemed like a safe assumption that there would always be libraries.

Catch-22 tells the story of a World War Two bomber squadron, perpetually engaged in its last tour—*perpetually*, because the required number of missions creeps ever upward. The pilots, the crew, and even the command staff are all starting to crack, and

everyone admits that it would be insane to keep flying these missions. If you put in for a psychological discharge, however, that would show that you are *not* insane; therefore, you must keep flying.

As a satire, the story's targets are nearly innumerable: the cruelty of war, the insanity of militarism, the hypocrisy of patriotism, the demands of the market economy, uncaring physicians, unheroic soldiers, careerist officers, blinkered bureaucrats. Detail piles upon detail, irony upon idiocy, hilarious and despairing in turn. The effect is both comic and tragic, a sense of absurdity uniting the two.

Always there is an element of horror, waiting just off stage, threatening to rush in and overtake any scene, however pleasant or humorous or banal: A day at the beach ends with a horrific accident, a young man torn to pieces by the blade of a propeller; the pilot then commits suicide. An Air Force captain rapes and murders a young woman; he feels no remorse and faces no consequences, as the police are preoccupied with the hunt for AWOL soldiers. When a rebellious airman becomes too much trouble, the army causes him to disappear. And then there is the war: planes collide mid-air, or crash into the sea, or are perforated by enemy fire—or else succeed in their mission, thus raining bombs down on the towns below, and the people who live in them. For all concerned, death, when it comes, is not glorious or heroic. It lacks even the dignity appropriate to a tragedy. Instead, it is painful and bloody, and usually pointless and stupid as well. The sense of insanity, paranoia, and despair, which provide the source of the satire, and therefore much of the comedy, are shown to be justified as the novel progresses and its tone darkens.

In its depiction of the military—or any really large institution—two themes emerge, together forming a paradox: First, every character in the book, combatant or noncombatant, officer or enlisted, doctor or patient, is entirely the prisoner of the system in which he exists. All of them are trapped by the same insane logic. Be-