

The Earth Does Not Belong to Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk

Posted by Joan Russow

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Only one thing truly hurt him at a gut level, and it wasn't the endangerment of his vice president in a Capitol attacked by a rabid mob sporting the Confederate flag, MAGA hats, and anti-Semitic T-shirts. Nor, believe it or not, was it even the threat of being the first president in American history to be impeached twice; nor having Deutsche Bank (which kept him afloat for years) and other major corporate entities suddenly sever ties with him; nor even having one of his major financial supporters, Sheldon Adelson, die on him. For Donald Trump, the biggest blow of last week was reportedly the Professional Golfers' Association, or P.G.A., announcement that it was taking its 2022 championship match away from the Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster, New Jersey. In other words, the man who had visited golf courses more than 300 times during his presidency had suddenly become the golf equivalent of an undocumented immigrant and, according to those close to him, that truly gutted him.

As to what gutted so many other Americans in the last year, ranging from evictions to job loss, racism to death by Covid-19, this president could clearly have cared less and the eternally richer billionaires of this country didn't seem to give much of a damn either; nor, in fact, did his wife Melania who, in what may have been her final message from the White House, vaguely bemoaned violence on Capitol Hill only after she had fiercely bemoaned her own treatment by unnamed critics (salacious gossip, unwarranted personal attacks, and false and misleading accusations on me).

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As it happens, with just days left in Trump's presidency, the self-proclaimed richest, most awesome superpower on planet Earth is now a basket case of the first order and a symbol around the globe of what not to do in a pandemic. As even the Washington swamp deserts Donald Trump, Joe Biden and crew face a hell on Earth of a kind that TomDispatch regular Liz Theoharis, co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign and author of *Always With Us?: What Jesus Really Said About the Poor*, lays out vividly on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Tom

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Martin Luther King, Jr.'s True Legacy

2020 will go down as the deadliest year in American history, significantly due to the devastation delivered by the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, count in nearly two trillion dollars in damage from climate events (many caused by, or heightened by, intensifying global warming), a surge of incidents of police violence inflicted on Black and Native peoples, and millions more Americans joining the ranks of the poor even as small numbers of billionaires soared ever further into the financial heavens. And it's already obvious that 2021 is likely to prove another harrowing year.

Many have claimed that those rioters (and the president's infamous base more generally) were all, in essence, poor, working-class white people. In reality, however, among those who have led such racist attacks are business leaders, executives, and multimillionaires. As author Sarah Smash writes, *Poor uneducated whites* are neither the base/majority nor the explanation for Trumpism: stories now abound of middle-class and even affluent white insurrectionists leading and joining the hateful charge at the U.S. Capitol.

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Questions Must Be Raised

At the same time, the wealth of America's 651 billionaires increased by more than \$1 trillion to a total of about \$4 trillion. At the start of 2020, Jeff Bezos was the only American with a net worth of more than \$100 billion. By the end of the year, he was joined by Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, and Elon Musk and just last week Elon Musk passed Bezos as the richest person in the world.

A recent report by the Institute for Policy Studies and Americans for Tax Fairness put it this way:

This last point is especially damning since the first and largest Covid-19 relief bill, the CARES Act, handed out billions of dollars worth of benefits to the upper-middle-class, the rich, and corporations. Most of us will only remember the \$1,200 checks that went to some of those in need, but the bill also included provisions that favored the already well-off, including higher corporate interest deductions, flexible corporate loss rules, increased charitable tax deductions, and big tax breaks for the super-rich. Other parts of the CARES Act like the Paycheck Protection Program, as well as significant allocations to universities and hospitals, gave generously to large corporations and the wealthiest of institutions.

Of course, the acceleration of inequality and tepid policy solutions to poverty are hardly unique to the United States. This year, the Bloomberg Billionaires Index recorded a 31% increase in wealth among the 500 richest people in the world, the largest single-year gain in the list's history. Meanwhile, the United Nations Development Programme projected that the long-term effects of Covid-19 could force 207 million more people across the globe into extreme poverty. That, in turn, would bring the official U.N. count of those making less than two dollars a day to

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more than a billion, or a little less than one-seventh of the world's population — and, mind you, that's at the onset of a decade that promises escalating economic dislocation, mass migration, and climate crisis.

This week, President-elect Joe Biden will be sworn into office and inherit a crisis that demands bold action. He has already said that on day one he will commit his administration to confronting the pandemic, the recession, systemic racism, and climate change. Four months ago, during an event with the Poor People's Campaign, he also told an audience of more than a million people that together we can carry on Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign, which is based on a simple, moral truth: that we're all created in the image of God and everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. He concluded by promising that ending poverty will not just be an aspiration, it will be a theory of change to build a new economy that includes everyone.

On the anniversary of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. (who, had he not been assassinated, would have been 92 years old this January 15th), it is only fitting to share these still timely and prophetic words of his:

Exchange Mr. Musk and Mr. Bezos for Mr. Rockefeller and Mr. Ford, and King's words couldn't be more timely, could they?

After all, every January, students, workers, and community members sign up for service projects to celebrate King's birthday. In fact, MLK Day is the only federal holiday designated as a national day of service, when people paint schools, clean up trash, serve lunch to the hungry, and so much more. Over the last few decades, the spirit of volunteerism has become inextricably linked in the American imagination to King's life and this year will be no exception.

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Today, amid unprecedented social, political, economic, and health upheaval, and the need to mask and social distance, even President-elect Biden's inaugural committee is organizing a day of service.

Reagan's noxious remarks remind us that Dr. King was once considered a profound threat to the established order. The reality of Dr. King's radical life has over time been almost unrecognizably smoothed over into an image that, so many years later, even Reagan, even Trump, might applaud. By casting Dr. King as an apolitical champion of charity, however, Americans have whitewashed not just his legacy, but that of the Black freedom struggle he helped lead, which broke Jim Crow, thanks to the most militant kinds of organizing.

Through a wicked transmutation of history, those with the most money and power in society are now allowed to use his name as a bulwark against the collective action of poor and dispossessed people, propping themselves up instead. Today, with carefully excerpted texts like "everyone can be great, because everyone can serve" as proof, King's words are all too often manipulated to sanctify a truly superficial response to the burning crises of systemic racism, poverty, homelessness, hunger, and so much more. Yet even a cursory glance at the historical record should remind us all that King represented an incendiary reality in terms of the America of his time (and, sadly, of ours, too) and that there was nothing corporate-friendly about his image.

We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask

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the question, "Who owns the oil?" You begin to ask the question, "Who owns the iron ore?" You begin to ask the question, "Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?" These are the words that must be said.

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