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At What Cost: Modern Capitalism and the Future of Health (Preface)

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PREFACE

2020 was a banner year for followers of the apocalypse. Massive fires, often aggravated by heat waves and droughts, burned forests and houses in California, Washington, Oregon, Nevada, and Colorado as well as in Indonesia, Brazil, and Australia. A record-breaking 30 tropical storms or hurricanes hit states on the Gulf and Atlantic coasts as well as in the Caribbean, killing almost 400 people, destroying homes and communities, and imposing costs of more than \$ 33 billion. And of course there was the COVID-19 pandemic, estimated by the end of 2020 to have infected at least 60 million people and killed at least 1.5 million around the world. In the United States alone, the pandemic put 30 million people out of work temporarily or permanently, pushing many into hunger and food insecurity, homelessness, and misery.

Political apocalypses also proliferated. Around the world, authoritarian, nationalist, anti-democratic or corrupt governments undermined democracy in Brazil, Turkey, Poland, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, leading to predictions of the collapse of liberal Western civilization. Racial and economic inequality, already at record levels globally and in the United States, further widened, precipitating the largest mass mobilizations in U.S history. The election defeat of President Donald Trump in November raised hope for a restoration of democracy in the U.S. but the almost 74 million votes he received signaled the continuing support for his brand of denigrating science, challenging norms of decency and compassion, and supporting the ultra-rich.

The catastrophes of 2020 amplified a cascade of other long-brewing health and social crises—human-induced climate change, a persistent crisis of affordable housing, growing burdens of chronic diseases, rising “deaths of despair” from drug overdoses, alcoholism and suicide in many wealthy countries, increased surveillance and interference with people’s private lives through digital technologies, and a level of political polarization and disrespect for truth that jeopardized rational discourse as a strategy for solving problems.

While the spectacular disasters of 2020 attracted public and media attention, less noticed were the daily tribulations that ordinary Americans faced in their pursuit of health, life, liberty, and happiness. For the 34 million Americans with diabetes and the 88 million at risk of the disease, every meal can be a battle to find tasty, healthy food they can afford. For the 10 million Americans estimated to have lost their homes in the Great Recession of 2008 or the 500,000 Americans who now sleep on the street every night, safe, stable housing remains an elusive goal. For the 44 million Americans who have outstanding student loan debts totaling more than \$ 1.7 trillion, the American dream of supporting a family, buying a house, and having a better life than your parents often seems out of reach. About two in five American workers—53 million men and women—earn low wages, with many lacking benefits, health and safety protections, or the right to unionize. The synergistic impact of these experiences disproportionately affect Blacks,

Latinx, recent immigrants, and women. Their constant struggles can make day-to-day living an ordeal and undermine self-esteem, dignity, and hope for the future, key foundations of health.

Will the human and environmental costs inflicted by the disasters of 2020 and before create new openings for imagining a different, more sustainable world? Or, as we saw in the national response to the 2008 financial crisis, will the nation's commitment to business-as-usual whatever the cost predominate? Will the power that has been concentrated in the hands of corporations and the wealthiest Americans over the last few decades again enable them to resist meaningful changes that improve the well-being of humanity and our planet? These are the questions I explore in *At What Cost*.

My explorations are shaped by my experiences as a public health researcher, practitioner, and activist. For the past four decades, I have studied and taught how social, economic, and political forces shape the health of communities and the opportunities for improving health and reducing health inequalities. With community organizations, schools, youth organizations, local government officials, my students, and other health workers, I have contributed to planning, launching, and evaluating health programs and policies created to reduce the health and social problems that threaten well-being in the United States and elsewhere. As an activist, I have had the privilege of participating in and studying many of the social movements that have struggled to create alternatives to health damaging policies and social structures. Two centuries of public health history have convinced me that it is the mix of science, public health practice, and social mobilization that leads to improvements in the health of populations. My goal here is to discover the magic blend of these three in these times that can reverse the damage to health and the cost to society of recent political and economic changes in the American economy.

For many years, those of us who came of age during the Cold War avoided using the word capitalism, fearful of its old-fashioned resonance or its risk of precipitating McCarthyite retaliation. Many chose more anodyne terms—free markets, neoliberalism, private sector—hoping perhaps to engage rather than alienate defenders of the status quo. More recently, in public health scholarship, the term “commercial determinants of health” has been used to describe how markets and the quest for profits shape health and disease, a term that may further obscure the roots of global threats to health.

In *At What Cost*, I choose to use the word capitalism, focusing on the variant that has emerged in the last few decades, what I call modern capitalism or 21st-century capitalism. I argue that recent changes in capitalism have precipitated or aggravated both the apocalypses of 2020 and the slower-motion disasters of the last two decades. In this view, modern capitalism has become the fundamental influence on individual and global health and disease, shaping the spread of pandemics, the impact of human-induced climate change, and the growing burden of chronic diseases like cardiovascular conditions, diabetes, and cancers. Capitalism also creates the actual options ordinary people face in their daily pursuit of what I call the pillars of health: food, education, health care, work, transport, and connections to others.

For these reasons, I have come to believe that understanding the economic system called capitalism, its influences on well-being, and its variants and alternatives are essential tasks not only for public health researchers, practitioners, and activists, but also for concerned citizens,

reformers, and social movements. For those who seek improvements in global and individual health, avoiding the word and idea of capitalism is like physicians avoiding the mention of bodies for fear of embarrassing others. By describing the pathways by which recent changes in capitalism have disrupted or complicated people's quest for those pillars essential for health, I hope to spark conversation, debate, and strategizing about alternatives.

In a hopeful sign, public opinion polls show that many, especially young people, now question whether capitalism as practiced can safeguard our present and future and a new generation of scholars are subjecting this system to the intensive scrutiny that may suggest alternative paths.

As I discuss in the last chapters of the book, charting ways to reduce the costs to human and planetary health of the current configuration of capitalism does not require readers to agree on the specifics of what comes next or on what brand of the many varieties of capitalism and socialism now on offer around the world will follow.

But making progress in resolving the grand challenges to well-being facing the world in the opening decades of the 21st century does require some new commitments. Above all, it requires rejection of the dogma that there is no alternative to the world the way it is. It also requires a commitment to collecting and analyzing the evidence that documents the true costs and benefits of the current system, not a faith-based adherence to market fundamentalism whatever capitalism's costs to current and future generations and our planet. It requires those seeking both incremental and transformative change and those committed to racial justice, gender justice, environmental justice, food justice, and health justice to search for common ground, shared agendas, and collective strategies rather than pursuing moral purity, siloed goals, or exclusionary principles.

Throughout the book, I profile a few of the many organizations and individuals who are showing the way to forge such unity and highlight the obstacles they encounter. In the United States, as President-Elect Joe Biden and Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris chart their directions for their administration and then begin to implement these plans, these organizations and individuals have the opportunity to, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt once famously put it, make these leaders do the right thing.

In 2020 what became clear is that our future could be far worse than our present. But the events of the year also showed but by acting together, we might muster the vision, power, and strategies for a far better world. As in every prior period in human history, when crises disrupt normal life, they also precipitate new social and political tidal waves that in turn open possibilities and hope in the United States and around the world. In *At What Cost*, I invite readers to define a role for themselves in riding these waves to a better, healthier, and more sustainable world.

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