



Project Syndicate: Notes from Lockdown

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I. Where We Are & What I Am Doing

As of now, the guess is that one person in 80 in California has or had the coronavirus. We rank 30th among the United States with 40 confirmed (and probably 60 true) coronavirus deaths per million. I am trying not to catch the disease, so that I do not then become one of those who spread it. I am going for long (isolated) walks in the hills of Berkeley and Oakland. I am watching lots of old movies. I am trying to let the orange-haired baboon who is President Trump live rent-free in my brain only between 8:00-8:15 PM, and spend only 8:15-9:00 PM thinking about coronavirus. And otherwise I am trying to play my position.

II. I Am, for Relaxation

Rewatching old movies: I was, first, most impressed this time through by: *The Thin Man* and *After the Thin Man*—1930s detective comedies, **William Powell & Myrna Loy** directed by W. S. Van Dyke with story by Dashiell Hammett and screenplay by Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich. I found myself most interested by the

portrayal of class in America in the 1930s that Hollywood was then serving up. I was, second, profoundly re-impressed by: *Stardust*—2000s romantic fantasy, **Claire Danes & Charlie Cox**, with over-the-top-supporting-excellence from Robert De Niro, Michelle Pfeiffer, Ricky Gervais, Mark Strong, and Ian McKellan, directed by Matthew Vaughn with story by Neil Gaiman and screenplay by Vaughn and Jane Goldman.

Rereading **Barry Eichengreen**: *Hall of Mirrors: The Great Depression, the Great Recession, and the Uses-and Misuses-of History* (about the Great Depression and the Great Recession) and *The Populist Temptation: Economic Grievance and Political Reaction in the Modern Era* (about the repeated erosions of democracy in the global north in the 20th and early 21st centuries). They are both excellent—even better than I had remembered. I can no longer just walk down the hall to Barry’s office and talk to him. But, as Niccolo Machiavelli, in one of the first generations in which a person could have a personal library, said, when he went into his library he: “enter[s] the ancient courts of ancient men... received by them with affection... I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their kindness answer me...” It is, actually, not the same. Barry’s books are not a Turing-class instantiation of his mind, but they are a remarkably close substitute.

Reading **Glen Weldon**: *The Caped Crusade: Batman and the Rise of Nerd Culture*: Why and how the character of Batman has turned out to have more legs over the generations than the others of the “superhero” genre, precisely because he is not a superhero, and on the dialogue between character, writers, artists, and readers that has produced so many different forms and emotional tones in the tellings and retellings of the stories of what is still, recognizably, the same character.

Frank Miller & David Mazzucchelli: *Batman: Year One*: Available on Kindle Unlimited, and perhaps the best telling of the “Dark Batman” version of the story.

Gwendolyn Leick: *Mesopotamia: The Invention of the City*: Our current mode of human existence has remarkably deep roots in the choices made by the societies of Sumer and Akkad more than four millennia ago. What those choices were, and how they have echoed and continue to echo.

Tobias Straumann: *1931: Debt, Crisis, and the Rise of Hitler*: The best thing I have read in a decade about how the policymakers of Germany did even worse in the mid-stage of the slide into the Great Depression than the policymakers of Western Europe and North America did in the Great Recession.

Notes, etc.

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NEXTSTEPS: slides, audio...

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