

Scene on Radio

BONUS EPISODE: Pandemic America (Season 4, Episode 6.5) Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/bonus-episode-pandemic-america/>

[Sound: iPhone Siri tone.]

John Biewen: Call Chenjerai.

Siri: Calling Chenjerai Koo-muh-nye-ah-ka mobile.

[Sound: Phone rings.]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey John.

John Biewen: Hey Chenjerai. How's it going in Philadelphia?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Ooh. (Sighs.) It's challenging.

John Biewen: Yeah. You are Chenjerai Kumanyika, I'm John Biewen. We're the two guys making this season on this podcast. For folks who want to know more,

listen to other episodes, where we say more about who we are and what we're doing.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right.

John Biewen: We're kind of interrupting *Scene on Radio* Season 4, with this special coronavirus episode. Tell the people where you are, Chenjerai.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Well, I'm in Philadelphia in my studio upstairs, which is also my office, daycare center, gym, library, place where I cry and panic, things like that.

John Biewen: Right. And I am in Durham, North Carolina, in my makeshift studio. I've got kind of a pillow fort surrounding me on a desk here in what is also the guest room.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So we are practicing the social distancing thing. But we wanted to make this bonus episode to really cut that distance a little bit and just get in touch with y'all. So I guess what we're doing is physically distancing but socially podcasting. And I just want to say, there's a lot of information out there right now about this crisis, including on podcasts... so what we're NOT going to

do is to make a big shift and devote our show like the biology of the virus itself and all this other stuff.

John Biewen: Yes, we are not going to become another coronavirus podcast. In fact, we're hearing from quite a few of you that the story we're telling about democracy in America, and how it works and doesn't work for people, feels deeply relevant to what's happening right now. And we think so, too. So we're gonna keep on telling that story, we're gonna continue with *The Land That Never Has Been Yet*. And we're lucky to be in a position to do that. We're able to keep working, and in fact we have a lot of the recordings in hand for several more episodes, what we were planning to do with the series. So we're gonna just keep building those episodes and putting them out.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And, you know the whole spirit of this series is to really draw the right lessons from history. And so, we wanted to take a few minutes to talk about some things we see happening with this covid-19 crisis and how they relate to themes we've been talking about in Season 4. And later we also want to talk about actions that all of us can take.

John Biewen: Yes. And normally on this show we pretty much focus on our role of telling stories and providing information and analysis. And we're gonna keep doing that but we feel sensitive to the fact that during a crisis like this, it seems

like it's just not enough to share information, or to express concern for the people who are really being hurt or the people who are putting themselves on the line for the rest of us. We feel the need to be taking some kind of action and to suggest that our listeners do the same, find some way to do something.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, the thoughts and prayers are good but also not enough. So, stick around, we'll get to that. But yeah, let's talk about some ways in which the current crisis really seems to echo the story we've been telling in our series on American democracy. And, you know, really going back to the first episodes, we looked at how the most powerful people, the colonial settlers, really saw profit, and keeping the country profitable, as this priority that trumped everything else. And then in our conversation in Episode 2 with Woody Holton, we saw that that focus on profit actually trumped democracy, right? Literally building wealth, at the expense of all kinds of things including people's lives.

John Biewen: Exactly. And remember Woody's observation that was so key, that the framers of the Constitution believed that in order to maximize capital investment and economic growth, you had to restrain democracy, that capitalist growth and democracy were in conflict or in tension with one another, and you kind of had to choose how much of each of those things you wanted. And then in Episode 3 we saw how that notion played out in the following decades with respect to the vast expansion of the cotton trade and slavery.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And when you look at that, it turns out that yes - it was great for the economy, in the sense that the economy is the same thing as wealthy people's profits. But it was not great and was in fact oppressive and lethal for enslaved people, Native Americans, and even poor white folks, a lot of poor white folks, who together constituted most of the country.

John Biewen: So in those cases from our series, and in others that we've looked at, it seems clear that building a healthy economy, as the ownership class understands that, is usually not the same as achieving wellbeing for most people. And here we are today, this argument still seems to be very much with us.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So, you look at what we're dealing with right now with this crisis, there's a lot of evidence suggesting that this thing of prioritizing profit has a lot to do with why our disaster preparedness is so far from what we need right now. Most of y'all have probably heard that Trump dismantled a pandemic preparedness team inside his administration that had been created during the Obama administration. But what you really have to look at is how he explains his reasoning for this. In a press conference where he was describing why he cut the pandemic team and other things, he said, "I'm a business person...."

Donald Trump: Some of the people we've cut, they haven't been used for many, many years, and if we ever need them we can get them very quickly. And rather than spending the money, and I'm a business person. I don't like having thousands of people around when you don't need them....

Chenjerai Kumanyika: "I don't like having thousands of people around when you don't need them." So, there you have it, right?

John Biewen: Yeah, so in his businessman's view, those people on the pandemic team weren't, I guess, being productive.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And so there's all these ideas circulating that everything in the world should operate like a business and that somehow businesspeople are the best equipped to do everything. But in this case what you see is that business instinct was incredibly shortsighted. When we've actually known about these kinds of flus for decades, and people have been warning about just this kind of global pandemic -- including Dr. Anthony Fauci, who's playing such a prominent role right now. He's the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and you've probably seen him talking about this. He's been warning about flu pandemics at least since the 1990s. But with that government pandemic unit cut from the budget, the decision of whether or not to develop and

mass-produce vaccines and tests was an **economic** decision left in the hands of people figuring out, like, are we gonna profit from this?

John Biewen: And so now here we are in March 2020--and by the way, I think I'll mention we're recording on March 26th. I think it's important to say that because this thing is changing so fast that this is gonna sound outdated in a week or two. But right now the pandemic is in full flower, and the administration is still sidelining and kind of minimizing the role of Dr. Fauci and other public health experts. So, that focus on short-term profits helped to get us into this mess because we weren't prepared, and then now that we're in it, it's still shaping how we respond. So this week, as we're recording this, there's a running debate in Washington about when to "re-open" the economy. Some people, including the president, are talking about doing that very soon, while we're still seeing the virus caseload growing rapidly. Public health experts say, the difference between continuing an aggressive lockdown, making most people stay home in isolation, as opposed to a more half-assed effort that starts to send a lot of people back to work, putting them in contact with other people—the difference could be literally hundreds of thousands more deaths over the coming months. And apparently that's a trade-off that some people are happy to make.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. And while folks are having that debate, what you really have to look at is who has a seat at the table, and who's positioned to

influence the outcome, including these kind of rescue bills and stuff like that. It's powerful people on Wall Street, who want to get people back to work, and have a megaphone and have access to the president's people and congressional leaders. But what about the people who are gonna do most of the dying? You have like some public health experts who are speaking up, certainly movement people are speaking, but really, where's their seat at the table in our democracy?

John Biewen: It's all pretty stark, in light of some of the themes we've been covering in Season 4. You have people right now openly talking about trading lives for money. The Lieutenant Governor of Texas said that he and other people, older people, would be glad to "take their chances" with the disease if it means saving their grandchildren's jobs – if it means, and I'm quoting him here, "keeping the America that all America loves." Meaning, I guess, an America with a strong economy. Now, never mind that that statement reinforces the mistaken idea that somehow older people are the ones who are vulnerable to coronavirus and not younger people which obviously is not true. But putting that aside, this very idea--and a reporter on Fox News said, again I'm quoting, "Every life matters, but....what's the balance?"

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean Dan Patrick [Texas Lt. Governor], he don't speak for my grandma and your grandma, and he don't speak for vulnerable people

who are actually gonna face this, so yeah, that's crazy that he would say that. And I don't even want to say crazy. It's not even crazy. There's a totally coherent economic calculus to what he's saying. And so it's almost like sixty years from now, when people are making podcasts about this period, right? You can imagine, sixty years they're making a podcast talking about the pandemic of 2020, they're gonna be saying some of the same kinds of things that we're saying about the 19th century and about the history of American democracy: Decisions were being made with an eye on the economy, and profits for business leaders, but they sacrificed the most vulnerable.

[Music] [Break]

John Biewen: Let's think about, really, who is most vulnerable now? And it's the same groups of people who are usually most vulnerable, right? Black and Indigenous folks and other people of color, and poor folks generally.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yes. And I mean I want to be clear. There are all kinds of people who are in a precarious financial situation right now, more likely to suffer from economic collapse, and also in jobs where they're forced to go out and work when it's not safe. And for these people, the whole idea of social distancing isn't really reality. You know, healthcare workers, grocery workers, gig workers. And a lot of people living paycheck to paycheck, who are also facing the reality of being

laid off, right? But Black and brown people are also disproportionately in all of those categories.

John Biewen: Exactly. So, related to all that is the question of who gets help in a crisis like this. And we're seeing that struggle play out in lots of places, including in the U.S. Congress. Do you send emergency money to corporations, to keep them whole, and for that matter to prop up the stock market? And to a large extent, yes, that's what Congress has done with that 2 trillion dollar aid package. Democrats insisted on some accountability for that money, that the companies getting that aid couldn't just lay off most of their workers, at least not right away. And there is help, checks going out to regular people. But the impulse of the power structure in Washington, in both parties, is still to a very large extent this kind of trickle-down idea. Give huge amounts of money, the biggest amounts of money, to corporations and their shareholders, and a whole lot less directly to the people who need it right now to pay their bills.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. And again, we're still talking about these struggles as if it's just two sides in the marketplace of ideas, two equally valid approaches debating in a democracy about how things should go. But is that what it is? I mean, look at this crisis right now. Is that really what it is? Or is it a debate between people who have a democratic vision, of people ruling, support for the masses of people, and people on the other side who are, intentionally or

unintentionally, defending and maintaining an antidemocratic, plutocratic, top-down society?

John Biewen: Hmm. There's another theme from our series that I see echoed right now in a big way. We've talked several times about the way that major crises can create opportunity for people to push forward progressive change, ideas that are seen as radical and outside the mainstream that can suddenly seem reasonable in a time of crisis, and how that happened as a result of the Civil War and the Great Depression. But at the same time, there is the opposite danger, isn't there.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: In any kind of crisis, what you have is the potential that certain groups, already positioned with power and certain anti-democratic projects already underway, are able to use moments like this to push their agenda forward while everyone is a little disoriented and kind of looking for a quick solution.

John Biewen: So even in a moment where people are trying to activate the power of the federal government--because the federal government can do things that nobody else can do. Asking the federal government to take action and respond to the crisis, things like ordering and enforcing physical distancing and

things like this huge rescue package, at the same time we have to be wary of that same authoritative, centralized power.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Absolutely, and I just want to be clear. I think the federal government absolutely does have to act. But the question is, act how? One thing our editor Loretta pointed out was that a historical precedent for this is the Patriot Act. This was enacted during a time of panic and disorientation after September 11th, it had a lot to do with surveillance and fears about terrorism. But it included things that many people feel in retrospect should have been looked at more carefully, because it laid the groundwork for all kinds of oppressive policies and practices. So, sure enough, we've already seen reports of this outrageous proposal from Attorney General William Barr, to create new so-called emergency powers to detain people indefinitely without a trial if the courts aren't able to meet because of the pandemic. And you see other kinds of opportunism: police asking for new powers; cruise line companies asking for subsidies, and getting them; other changes to government decision-making practices that would make things go faster but with far less transparency or accountability.

John Biewen: All right. So, the whole situation is genuinely alarming and we've talked a lot about reasons to be troubled in this moment and I think for good reason. But I think at the same time, we both want to point out there are a lot of remarkable things happening with regard to what you might call democracy from

below. And again this connects back to our series, I think, *The Land That Never Has Been Yet*. And it can seem like sort of a never-ending bummer, this story we're telling of the profound flaws that have always existed in American democracy. But I think, Chenjerai, you and I don't really see it that way, right? We feel like the series includes a lot of moments that should inspire hope.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Absolutely. I think the reason some people miss the hope in our series is that in the examples we've explored, the hope, and democratic advocacy, is coming from below. It's coming from oppressed groups. So the people that most Americans are used to admiring and looking up to – which you know, I'll say it, that *white* Americans are used to looking up to, we're often showing those people to be deeply flawed and not so awesome as the high school history books say they were. But look at what enslaved Black people, and free Black people, achieved in bringing about Reconstruction. Or ordinary women, or working people and labor organizers in pushing for the New Deal.

John Biewen: The truth is, those people and those movements have achieved a hell of a lot. They've made this society far more just and equitable than it would have been without their efforts and sacrifices. ...

Chenjerai Kumanyika: The same is true in this current seemingly hopeless moment. In response to all of these phenomena - What we're seeing is

progressive and radical groups around the country, crafting our own visions of what kind of urgent responses we need - and what kind of society we'd like to be in through this crisis and on the other side of it. The lesson being that yeah, the powerful have their vision of how they want to exploit this, and we must push our own vision forward as well.

John Biewen: So ... as we said at the top, we want to talk a little bit about all of us taking some kind of action. And I think we can all agree the most important action any of us can right now, IF we have the option of taking it, is to stay home and do all the things to avoid getting and spreading the virus. That's the heroic thing that we all need to be doing to the extent possible. But, that said ...

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But yeah, as we're taking care of ourselves, we really want to encourage our listeners to think about what else you can do to help people in need. And share with us what you're doing -- we're both most active on Twitter, so if you're on there, let us know. And actually we'll go first. So John, what are some of the things you're gonna do to help people beyond your household?

John Biewen: OK, this is a modest thing -- well, my role in it is very small. But a group that I'm a member of in my city, Durham for All, is a grassroots community group that tries to advance small-d democratic policies both locally and more

broadly, but especially locally. And right now Durham for All is part of a statewide coalition that has called for a People's Platform in North Carolina. These groups put together a petition to the governor and the speaker of the state house, calling for things like: expanded Medicaid to give more people health insurance as folks lose their jobs. A moratorium on evictions, foreclosures, and utility shutoffs. Food distribution centers for people facing hunger in this time. And among other things, protections for our electoral democracy: eliminating restrictions on absentee voting, allowing people to vote online in November, and so on. Those are just some of the provisions.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That sounds great. And it's really just a reminder to everybody listening that if you're out there trying to figure out what you can do and feeling a little bit overwhelmed, you're not alone and you're not starting from scratch. There are probably people somewhere near you coming together figuring out ways to address these things.

I've had some listeners email me and say that they don't like organizations as a way to do things, but I gotta say during a crisis like this I'm really thankful that I'm part of an already organized group of folks - so my organization 215 People's Alliance, and many other organizations in Philadelphia such as Reclaim Philadelphia and the Alliance for Just Philadelphia and actually our city council, have really been pushing for things like a moratorium on evictions and utility shutoffs, which you talked about John, we won that but that's because folks

fought for it. Setting up local, a variety of local resources, information about how to get food, rec centers and schools giving out free meals. Other forms of kinda, like, mutual aid. But also, pushing at the federal and state level. And that's gonna mean calling up some politicians during this time, setting aside maybe some time to do that. Participating in some of these virtual town halls. Because I think it's clear even with tis rescue package, it's not going to be enough to give individual localities what they need to endure this.

John Biewen: Tell you what, share your ideas with us and tell us what you're doing in your community to try to make a difference right now in a tangible way., on Twitter or Facebook. Our Facebook account is Scene on Radio. I tweet @sceneonradio. Chenj?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Twitter I'm at @catchatweetdown. Instagram @Chenjerai.

John Biewen: Thanks as always, Chenjerai for making time to do this. Stay safe, and everybody stay with us. More Season 4 to come -- episode 7 coming on schedule next week and you won't want to miss this one.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Stay safe everybody, and stay in touch...

John Biewen: big thanks always to our terrific editor, Loretta Williams, who's staying safe at home in Los Angeles. Scene on Radio is distributed by PRX. The show comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.