

The Coronavirus Holds Up a Mirror to Existing Societies: What Will They See?

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The coronavirus pandemic is presenting our political systems with what used to be called in British boxing “the old one-two”—a jab with the left hand followed by a knockout punch by the right. The jab is the virus itself. The punch is the socio-economic crisis that will follow, should the pandemic last more than a very few months. During the pandemic itself, the evident threat to life and health may generate a certain instinctive human resilience. Economic misery prolonged over years, and with no exit in sight, will test social and political patience far more; perhaps to the breaking point.

Recognizing the future, even greater threat from climate change and its effects, I would very much like to think that the pandemic's impact on all nations will lead the rulers of the great powers to moderate their pointless

feuding with each other and concentrate on the real threats to their states and populations. If the death rate is high enough, this may be so; but given their record since the pandemic began, I would not like to bet on it.

The direct effects of the pandemic on social and cultural attitudes may also be more limited than many predict. Much attention is naturally being paid to the last great global pandemic, the Spanish flu that started in the last year of the First World War, and killed more people than that conflict. It is also being widely remarked how little was the effect that pandemic had on cultures and societies.

Admittedly, one reason was that we were tougher in those days. Populations had not only gone through the war, but had grown up with the ever present threats of typhus, diphtheria and smallpox, and as recently as the 1890s even cholera. What did eventually destroy the German, Italian, Japanese and other political systems and lead to the triumph of monstrous ideologies was the long-lasting social dislocation and economic instability produced by the war, ending in the disaster of the Great Depression after 1929.

The coronavirus will make our societies gloomy. The economic crisis may drive them mad. The pandemic may in some ways help create a psychological and cultural basis for extremism by extinguishing the naïve liberal optimism about continual human improvement that has characterized the West for generations, and in a different form is also held by the Chinese Communist state. That is fine if our societies become more serious. I very much doubt that the historians of the future will find much to mourn in the disappearance of either the mass or the elite cultures of the past generations. One should, however, be cautious about welcoming cultural pessimism, given the effects such sentiments had in Europe from the 1890s to the 1940s.

More immediately, the pandemic will, of course, threaten the popularity and even the legitimacy of different regimes and political orders, depending on how well they do in containing the virus. The direct political effects of the pandemic are, however, likely to be quite ambiguous. It will blur the distinction, on which Western state ideology and propaganda are founded, between “democracies” and “dictatorships”—since Western democracies have been forced to adopt measures of authoritarian social control, which were unimaginable only a few weeks ago.

This does not mean, however, that authoritarian states will necessarily be better at containing the pandemic. In the Far East, authoritarian China and semi-authoritarian Singapore have done very well in limiting infections, but so have democratic Taiwan and South Korea. What matters is to have strong and legitimate states with the ability to deploy resources quickly, and populations which are willing to trust expert advice and follow government orders. Without these qualities, both autocratic and democratic orders will lose respect from their people—perhaps terminally.

That, however, is nothing compared to the political damage that will be done by a depression on the scale of the 1930s. If the Far East, Europe, and North America remain in lockdown for the rest of the year, then economic disaster seems unavoidable. This is not certain though. The example of the Far East would suggest that lockdowns can be effective in containing the virus within a reasonable space of time; and if they can be lifted again in the summer, the direct economic damage may be just about manageable. On the other hand, air travel and tourism will remain massively disrupted until a vaccine has been developed and whole populations have been inoculated.

Moreover, we seem to be on the verge of an immense human catastrophe in South Asia, Africa, and perhaps parts of Latin America. As far as most of the populations there are concerned, there is simply no realistic possibility of lockdowns being effective; and in any case, if they are extended for very long, people will begin to starve. Mortality may be reduced by the fact that the populations are so much younger than in Europe. On the other hand, they are also prone to a whole range of debilitating health conditions, and hospitals are desperately limited. It seems likely therefore that these regions will have to be kept in isolation (assuming that this is possible) until a vaccination program has been developed and implemented.

The crisis will undoubtedly lead to a far greater emphasis on the powers of nation-states and the need to strengthen these powers. International institutions have been almost wholly absent from the response to the crisis. In the case of the European Union, this may be seen as the defining moment when the process of integration began to go rapidly into reverse. If the economic crisis is really deep, then the euro is highly unlikely to survive. The EU will not disappear, but it may return to something more like the old

Common Market, stripped of the euro, the Maastricht Treaty, Schengen and the aspiration to an “ever closer union.”

A diminution of the EU and its hopelessly exaggerated ambitions will be no great loss. Democratic European nations existed before the EU and will continue to exist after it. As for a less expansive and more inward-looking U.S., that would be a gift to humanity; and if China and Russia could also spend more time looking inward and less time trying to project their power outwards, that would also be good for everybody, including themselves.

But what will our poorer, gloomier populations see when they look inward? Will they see societies that are capable of concentrating on things that really matter, of generating new social solidarity and common sacrifice, of creating technological progress in the interests of society and the world as a whole, and of preparing themselves for the future and even greater challenge of climate change? Or will they see societies embittered by the loss of material goods, divided along ethnic and social lines, and stirred up by politicians to new hatreds? And if existing leaders fail to meet the crisis (as Trump and Biden in their different ways both seem set up for failure), what kind of new leaders will take their place?