

Viral Encounter: Experiences, Lessons, and Options

Göran Therborn

Abstract: The present essay deals with the problem of the pandemic COVID-19, focusing on socio-economic and geo-political aspects. It begins with a discussion of the on-going pandemic with regard to the inequalities it has rendered visible and deepened further; the poverty it has ignited. It goes on in discussing the ways in which the states have handled the pandemic, with their challenges and failures posed by the coronavirus. At the end, the present work outlines the prospects of the emergence of the post-Western world, as well as more unequal and more divided.

Keywords: pandemic, crisis, working class, inequality, post-Western world

The Pandemic Experience, Its Lessons and its Sociopolitical Consequences

The COVID-19 pandemic 2020-2021? will be a landmark of world history, because of its planetary simultaneity and because of its geopolitical and social effects, which have had more impact than its contagion and mortality. The so-called Spanish flu – actually from Kansas, USA – of 1918-19 was much more devastating in terms of human lives. How many remains unknown, but the most elaborate estimate says at least 49 million. The heaviest losses were in British colonies, contagion carried by colonial soldiers returning from World War in Europe. India lost 18.5 lives; USA 680,000.

The pandemic has been, and is, an experience of suffering and loss for millions of people around the planet. For us privileged survivors, it has been a life-engraving learning experience. It has shown us the historical impact of contingency, the planetary common and its eradicable divisions, the ephemera of many middle class dreams, and the fragility of all ordinary peoples' lives in a world of recurrent pandemics and economic crashes under the clouds of approaching climate catastrophes. Our encounter with COVID-19 has accelerated the current dynamic of the world, towards ever more inequality and privileges for a few, towards a post-Western century. It has sharpened the ecological, social, and political alternatives and has raised the stakes, to the point of forcing us to make a clear choice between war and peace, facing the possibility of a US-China war.

Pandemic Inequalities

The pandemic experience is one of differential vulnerability and unequal outcomes. The coronavirus and its management are operating as amplifiers of prevailing social divides, of age, ethnicity, gender, and class, and tendencies, while also creating new cut-ups through combinations of different viral exposure and economic-social situation. The rich are becoming richer, and the poor poorer; the fortunate are becoming more fortunate, and the unfortunate are becoming more miserable.

115 million more people have been pushed into extreme poverty (living on less than \$1.90 a day), making a global total of about 800 million (according to the president of the World Bank last September). At the same time, the stock exchanges of New York and Shanghai are rising to record values, fed by the “stimuli” disbursed by central banks and governments. Children are more resilient to Corona than adults, but when schools close children without internet lose their education. The educational divide widens; a divide that may mark a generation. Even in rich countries like the UK and the US, the loss of school lunches means less to eat for many. In mid-July, one in seven of US households with children reported insufficient food, in August one in eight, the US Bureau of the Census found in its surveys. Women and young adults are more resilient to COVID-19 than men and older adults. But both the former are more likely to lose their jobs and being left out of employment. Poor ethnic minorities, in rich as well as poor countries, are more vulnerable to contagion, due to their mode of livelihood and/or housing conditions.

Upon the existing class structure a new, binary structuration is imposed. Among the owners and executives of capital, all very well protected from virus and from loss of position and income, there is a new sectoral divide. In the first seven months of this year, the stocks of the five BigTech corporations, Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, Microsoft, and Facebook rose by 37 per cent, that is, making their owners – among them the richest men on earth – 37% richer, whereas the shares of all the others on the Standard & Poor list of 500 big US corporations declined by six per cent. Since January 1st 2020 the tech-dominated US Nasdaq stock exchange has increased 25 percent in value. Many smaller businesses are going bankrupt.

Among employees, there is an upper-middle class, who are able to keep their job, their salary, and their safety by working from home. Employees with the highest salaries have the lowest risk of unemployment. Then there is an “essential” service class, caring for, feeding, and protecting the more privileged classes and their parents, to a nationally varying extent also the less privileged. They have to work harder than ever, they get their income, but little safety, running big risks of becoming infected. The ordinary working class is also sliced up into two. On one side there are workers with formerly a full-time stable job, now mostly unemployed but furloughed with a twenty to forty per cent cut in their income, if they are lucky to be Europeans, or receivers of some kind unemployment compensation. At the bottom you have the previous temporary workers in the North, and the so-called informal, rights-less workers in the South, who have lost their livelihood, although they may get some public help. For the rest they have to ask for charity.

Because of its simultaneous global character, the COVID-19 pandemic is probably the largest unequalizer in modern history. It is everywhere driving intra-national inequality. Its effects on inter-national inequality remain to be measured up, although it is already clear that the

chasm between the world's rich and poor households has widened even further.

State Pictures

The uneven pandemic challenge threw a flashlight on governments and states, their style of power, their effectiveness or ineffectiveness. On the blustering, capricious, and incompetent governments of Brazil, UK, USA and others, on the lethally brutal deployment of police and military in, e.g., India, Kenya, the Philippines, and South Africa, the advanced digital surveillance in China and South Korea, and, at the other end, the low-key governmentality of Sweden, implementing the advice of its Public Health Authority with non-policed closures and social distancing. At the same time the virus outbreak revealed the hollowness of the Swedish welfare state after decades of municipalization, privatization, and neoliberalization, under Social Democratic as well as bourgeois governments. They had fragmented public health care, handed over much old age care to corporate capital accumulation, promoted by right-wing regional and local governments, particularly and fatally in highly virus-exposed Stockholm.

Government-population relations were also highlighted. The nationally unprecedented political polarization in the US, the oppositional politicization of the pandemic management in many Latin American countries, in Argentina most aggressively, and in Spain, the enduring popularity of Narendra Modi, despite his brusque and brutal lockdown of India, the gradually increasing frustration and anger in several European countries, the government-opposition concert in Scandinavia, and the trustful popular obedience in East Asia.

There has also been an acceleration, diffusion, and deployment of state surveillance capacity. Digital mass surveillance is a US invention. From Edward Snowden we learnt that the US secret services (NSA and CIA) are monitoring all internet and all telephone communication on the planet. However, this is discrete, secret surveillance, meant to be unknown by the population, especially of the United States who would be most angered by such updated police state practices. Therefore, the machinery has not been used in the US for tracing COVID-19 contagion and contact risks. Instead, pandemic surveillance has been led from East Asia, China with Taiwan and Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore, which are technologically advanced and have disciplined communitarian and digitally savvy populations. From there, contact tracing apps spread massively across Eurasia, from Indonesia and India to Norway and Iceland.

Lessons

The first and most obvious lesson is the fragility of human civilization even at high levels of productivity and consumption and with technological skills, capable even of entering and supplementing the

human brain. By industrial animal husbandry and by the destruction of many animal habitats, humanity has come closer, more exposed, to the viral world with its limitless supply of malign viruses. This microscopic viral experience arrives as we are about to learn the macroscopic forces of a wounded planet – the consequences of climate change – which are reminding us of their existence with massive flooding in Africa and Asia, with aggressive wildfires in Australia and California and Oregon, and with a melting Arctic.

The second hard lesson is the political vulnerability of human solidarity and the dysfunctionality of the current geopolitics of states. In the national panics of late March and April, old international cooperation and alliances suddenly meant nothing, as borders were suddenly closed, even between the Nordic countries, which have been in a passport union since 1952. Movements of paid for protective gear within the EU were stopped (temporarily), and NATO allies USA and France were competing for protective gear on the tarmac of airports, in Bangkok and in France.

At the level of policy, there are above all two lessons. The health of populations depend crucially on alert and knowledgeable governments with strong public health care systems. Two groups of countries were successful in coping with the viral attack because of early and well-orchestrated interventions: the epidemic-experienced, strong, and digitally highly skilled developmental states of East Asia, and the foresighted, well-organized Nordic welfare states, except Sweden but together with the antipodal easily isolated sister government of New Zealand. Privatizations have turned out a drain and a weakness. Private old age homes became houses of death under the pandemic, in Bergamo Italy, in Madrid, in Belgium, in Stockholm, in Seattle and New York, and further. Private capital accumulation has no interest in storing protective equipment, nor in developing vaccines for popular diseases.

Secondly, developed states in the current contexts of low inflation and interest rates, have discovered their enormous economic capacity to borrow and print money. In the face of the pandemic, there were suddenly ample public resources of support available, and even in countries like Trumpist USA and Bolsonaro Brazil not only for business bailouts but also for unemployment compensation. Tory “austerity” was demonstrated not being an economic constraint but an ideological right-wing option, suddenly passé.

A New World Emerging: Post-Western

The world after Corona will be an angry, more divided, and increasingly post-Western world. There will be much anger over the losses and inequalities of the pandemic, and over the incompetence and arrogance of many governments. What form and direction this anger will take is impossible to predict, however, due to the fractured multidimensionality of post- and pre-industrial politics. There are hardly any larg

programmatically egalitarian movements and parties around, so the field is open for all kinds of political entrepreneurs, not excluding committed egalitarians though.

The world after Corona will no longer be a world of neoliberal globalization and of unchallenged US and Western supremacy and domination. This was something in the air after the Millennium turn, when inter-national inequality began to bend down, for the first time since the Industrial Revolution, and after the Western 2008 financial crisis. But 2020 will probably be remembered as the year of a geopolitical tipping point. The pandemic laid bare the weakness of the Western powers in handling it, both in terms of health and in economic terms, in comparison with China, and at least with respect to coping with the virus also when compared to the whole of East Asia.

By midnight Greenwich Mean Time on October 1 2020, the death toll per million inhabitants from COVID-19 in the big countries of East Asia was, 3 in China, 12 in Japan, 8 in South Korea, and 0.4 in Vietnam, on average 5.9. Among the big powers of NATO the corresponding figures were USA 640, Germany 114, UK 621, and France 493, on average 489, i.e., 86 times higher than in East Asia. In relation to the population, deaths in the USA were 213 times the number in China. (www.worldometers.info/coronavirus) The difference approximates the casualty ratio between colonial and indigenous forces in the Euro-American colonial wars, this time inverted.

Economically, according to all mid-late September international estimates, world GDP will decline by 4-5% in 2020. Alone among the large G20 economies, and in the whole world almost, China is growing in 2020, by about 2% – returning to strong growth in 2021 – while the US will decline by 4%, the Eurozone by 8%, and the UK and India by 10%. By early September, Chinese exports are alone back at 2019 levels, ironically after a 20 per cent increase of exports to the United States (according to the OECD).

In frustration over its own failures, the US abdicated from cooperative world leadership by leaving the WHO in the midst of the pandemic, as it had already on climate change, and declared economic and ideological war against China. The outcome of that is still open, but it means the end of the post-World War II economic pax Americana. Pandemic experiences provided the triggering context for an economic and ideological war in gestation, once it became obvious that China was becoming a big power without becoming a second USA.

After the pandemic a post-Western century is likely to emerge. US military and economic domination will not go away any time soon, but its world hegemony is slipping, and the 21st century will see the big Asian elephants enter centre stage, China and India each with a population four times that of the US, Indonesia three times that of Germany, and four other Asian countries more populous than Germany. To follow this epochal shift will be a fascinating experience, for curious citizens of the world as well as

for social scientists, but also a cognitive and civic challenge.

The new Cold War has already started, and it will have its generous share of prejudice, deliberate disinformation, and ideological distortion. There will be great pressure to conform, to the Western or to the Eastern side. And many journalists, scholars, and politicians will enrol enthusiastically as warriors. For those who don't want to enrol, particular cognitive efforts, skepticism, and vigilance will be needed.

The US-China conflict will pose great problems for the climate movement, subverting the chances of planetary climate agreements. A US-China war would be disastrous for the planet, hindering necessary concerted planetary action, even if the war were to be militarily limited. Therefore, the climate movement will have to become also a neutralist peace movement.

“1945” or “1932”? The Context and the Options after the Pandemic

How the pandemic will end is still unknown. Will it be defeated or will it have to be accommodated? What shape will the economic crisis and recovery take, a V, a U, or an L, or a K? In other words, a rapid return to normalcy, a slow recovery, a prolonged recession, or an aftermath extra socially polarized between top and bottom added to the pandemic polarization? In any case, because of its unique planetary grip, the Corona pandemic is likely to become a historical landmark, meaning that there will be an important after as well as a before.

Modern North Atlantic history has two previous compressed such after moments, 1932, after the outbreak of the (continuing) 1929-31 Depression, and 1945, after the end of WWII. 1919-20 is another candidate, but its most dramatic outcomes, in some countries, national independence, parliamentary democracy with universal or male suffrage, and socialist revolutions are none of them likely to be central to post-COVID-19.

In the early stages of the pandemic, “1945” looked like a possible end, at least in some parts of the Americas and Europe. Neoliberal marketization and privatization obviously could not cope. On April 3 the Editorial Board of the *Financial Times* declared: “Radical reforms are required to forge a society that will work for all. Governments will have to accept a more active role in the economy. They must see public services as investments rather than liabilities, and look for ways to make labour markets less insecure. Redistribution will again be on the agenda.... Policies until recently considered eccentric, such as wealth taxes, will have to be in the mix.”

The founder and director of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Klaus Schwab, is expecting “a period of massive wealth redistribution from the rich to the poor and from capital to labour”, and the “death-knell to neoliberalism”, but only after “massive social turmoil.”¹

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¹ Schwab and Malleret 2020, pp.78, 83

This progressive reform outlook is reminiscent of the overwhelming rejection of miserly pre-Keynesian Conservatism and Liberalism in 1945. Von Hayek's 1944 idea then that a Social Democratic welfare state would be a “Road to Serfdom” was ridiculous, and so have the contemporary claims of neoliberalism come to be.

A better, more egalitarian world seemed possible, seriously confronting the threats of climate warming, with public health and old age care for all, an education system which gave all pupils and students an equal chance, a progressive taxation which kept inequality in check and could finance public services and security for everybody, and a reformed capitalism no longer driven by shareholder value. A world also committed to combat racism, sexism. The spirit of 1945 is still there in FT's call for a “new Social Contract” in World Economic Forum planning for a “Great Reset”, and among progressive think tanks in many countries.

However, a “1945” scenario implies that the evil forces of inequality and violence have all been decisively defeated, in historical 1945 they had literally been burnt to ashes in Berlin and Tokyo. This is unlikely to be the case when this pandemic ends.

With the sharpening of geopolitical conflicts as well as of intra-national conflicts, the end of the pandemic crisis is more likely to land us in a “1932” situation, which means a broader range of outcomes, including disastrous ones. Then there were three major options. One was progressive social reform, chosen in USA and the Scandinavian countries. Another was violent authoritarianism, of which Nazism-Fascism was one variant, but more common was a reactionary sub-current, triumphant in Japan, in Eastern and Southern Europe (except Fascist Italy), with Latin American off-shoots. A third variant was an anal conservatism, plodding through a darkening crisis with an upper-class insouciance from a bygone time, e.g. in Britain and in France (before the interlude of the Popular Front).

A 2020s Green New Deal or social democracy would be a rational option, egalitarian, ecological, non-violent, listening to the climate experts and to a phalanx of distinguished egalitarian economists – headed by Thomas Piketty and including four recent Nobel Laureates, Joseph Stiglitz, Angus Deaton, Abhijit Banerjee, and Esther Duflo – the first in the history of the discipline. Above all, it would be a humane politics recognizing, heeding, and committed to the non-privileged people of humankind.

Where are the political forces strong enough to carry this out? The answer remains open. There is support all over the world, and there will be struggles for post-pandemic radical reforms, but there will also be fierce resistance against transforming existing power structures and privileges.

The authoritarian, inegalitarian, and violent, if not properly Fascist, forces today have certainly not been crushed. We had better not forget that these forces took the world to World War II. Nor, that part of the story

behind both WWI and WWII was that rising powers were challenging existing world rulers, Germany challenging Britain, Japan challenging US. Today, the rise of China is seen as an unacceptable threat by the main spectrum of political influencers in the US, and increasingly also in the EU, Britain, and Japan.

And like in 1932, there is today the default option of conservatives, of doing little or nothing but trying to preserve the status quo on a wounded planet burning with drought, ablaze with wildfires, and drenched by flooding – at the same time. The current world is mostly governed by conservative governments, almost all Asia, with the uncertain exception of China, virtually all Africa, most of Latin America – where the two major exceptions, Argentina and Mexico, are particularly weakened by the effects of the pandemic – North America, with either Biden or Trump, most of Europe outside Iberia and a couple of Arctic outposts (Denmark and Sweden). However, in the current, more fluid political landscapes conservatism is neither invulnerable in front of, nor immune to radical social movements, particularly ecological movements.

At the end of the pandemic there will be an option of equality, climate adaptation, and peace – hardly of social revolution – but only as an option dependent on contingent forces and leadership still to be constituted. As in 1932 there will be other options, already discernible and more widely offered, likely leading to prolonged misery for the non-privileged and to human disaster, by war or by climate catastrophe – or both.

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Volume 7
Issue 3