

The World after Corona

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WHAT happens when the earth awakes from the corona nightmare? The question has aroused much speculation and a range of answers. Has the crisis brought an end to the world as we know it? Will it herald a brave new dawn in which we realise that we really are all in it together and must treat other humans, animals and our precious planet with greater care and respect? Or will it be a case of the same old, same old – the same old poverty and inequalities, the same old tribal nationalisms, the same old dogmatic religious and secular beliefs, the same old egotisms, the same old animal abuse, the same old rape of the earth, and all the other self-inflicted miseries that belittle us.

There are at least three scenarios:

- (a) the crisis will act as a wake up call and change us for the better;
- (b) we will pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and carry on just as if nothing had happened;
- (c) the crisis will actually make bad things worse.

Take the last hypothesis. When the Black Death ravaged Europe in the 14th century, towns and cities shut themselves off to outsiders and attacked, banished and killed scapegoated minorities, usually Jews who were blamed for poisoning the wells. Pogroms followed: 2,000 Jews were burned alive in the so-called ‘Valentine’s Day Massacre’ on 14th February 1349 in Strasbourg and possibly 6,000 were killed in Mainz in August. In short, the Black Death fuelled the flames of antisemitism, even though many Jews themselves suffered in the plague. 20 years later the Brussels Massacre of 1370 wiped out the entire Belgian Jewish community

The second scenario seems to fit the aftermath of the 1918-20 ‘Spanish Flu’ pandemic, which killed at least 50 million, including a quarter of a million in Britain (indeed it might well have killed more than the First and Second World Wars put together). Yet there is no evidence that it had any major effect on human behaviour one way or the other – it didn’t, for example, end great power rivalry and usher in an era of global cooperation – though it did have serious economic results, with areas of highest exposure suffering the most.

The current crisis will also lead to a major economic downturn. The Office for Budget Responsibility warned in April that the UK’s GDP could plunge by 35% in the second quarter of the year and by 13% for 2020 as a whole. An OECD report in March stated that, among OECD countries, Ireland’s economy was predicted to be the least damaged by coronavirus containment measures, but it was still set for a major blow with the annual fall in GDP being 4% to 6%. The Irish government, however, expects it to fall by 10.5%. Some economists predict that the annual rate of global growth could fall by as much as 30% in 2020, pushing possibly 500 million into poverty.



“The task before us now, if we would not perish, is to shake off our ancient prejudices and to build the Earth... The future of the world is in our hands.”
— PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

In such a severe recession, who benefits? In *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) Naomi Klein, quoting Milton Friedman that “only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change”, outlines the pessimistic view. Disaster 1 – economic slump, earthquake, military conflict or pandemic – is followed by Disaster 2, which is basically what the powerful do to maintain or strengthen their privileges. The 2008 financial crash is a good example. Billions were spent on bailing out the banks, while 30 million around the world lost their jobs in the next three years. Social services and the poor bore the brunt of austerity policies as thousands flocked to food banks while billionaires whose net worth doubled bought bigger yachts.

The pessimistic view also argues that the crisis will reinforce authoritarian rule and narrow nationalism. The world will not only be less prosperous; it will also be less open and less free. Governments have adopted emergency measures to deal with the pandemic and many will be reluctant to relinquish these powers when the crisis ends. An example is surveillance, where the technology is developing fast. In China it is currently identifying suspect coronavirus carriers, tracking their movements and identifying their contacts. In the future it could be used for more sinister purposes to track, monitor and manipulate minds. Big Brother may be lurking in the shadows.

The trend towards authoritarian rule already evident in many countries such as China, Russia, Brazil and Hungary – where Viktor Orbán recently passed a law allowing him to rule by decree – has coincided with the growth of flag-waving governments. This growing nationalism, often with a religious dimension, is not confined to dictatorships: it also extends to democracies like the USA, the UK and India. Trump has branded the virus as ‘Chinese’ and plans to close America’s borders to immigrants. In the UK, Brexit was clearly an effusion of predominantly English nationalism, while in India Modi’s Hindu nationalism is tearing the country apart and threatening the very survival of the large Muslim minority.

THIS pessimistic picture is difficult to refute, but challenge it we must. Every crisis is also an opportunity. When this one ends, if indeed it does, we can seize the time to revolutionise the way we behave in ‘normality’. For if we can pull together now and display astounding feats of kindness and solidarity, there is no reason why we cannot continue along this path afterwards. We already know that crises bring out the best in people, but no emergency in the modern era has been →

as universal and intrusive as this one. When the Spanish flu appeared in 1918, only 30% were literate; now we have a global literacy rate of 86%. Moreover, we are more connected through the media and travel than ever before. We are thus more aware of what is happening. This increased knowledge, faster sharing of information and interconnectedness means that not only is our response to the crisis quicker but also our sense of universal solidarity is increased. We really are all in this together and, while it is true that many of the better off can escape to their country or seaside boltholes, the virus is blind and does not discriminate.

We are also in a better place to learn the current lessons and remake the world. First, it is apparent that free market capitalism, which tends to pursue profit at the expense of social needs, is useless when humankind is faced with existential threats such as the coronavirus. There is no profit in making ventilators or personal protective equipment for an epidemic that might not occur for half a century or longer. Private health care itself is totally inadequate, as America's death rate testifies.

A humane society has to have a public health service free at the point of use. The National Health Service in Britain is a shining example – it is, of course, socialism in action though Conservatives never call it by that name and have starved it of funds over the last decade. But even the free market Prime Minister Boris Johnson is fulsome in his praise and admits that, after all, there is such a thing as society.

Second, it is chastening to discover that the people who are often rewarded the least – nurses, care workers, employees in other essential services – are the very people, rather than the bankers and bond traders, whom we need the most to save us. Most of them are putting their lives on the line every day caring for the sick and vulnerable. Then there are the millions of people who have been voluntarily helping the weak and needy for no reward at all: delivering essential supplies, providing free meals and childcare for overstretched parents, offering crisis counselling, and a whole plethora of free help all over the world. In an article entitled 'Wisdom in a Time of Crisis' in the *Irish Times* (18th April) Annie West gave this crass advice: "Never, ever, work for nothing. It devalues your work and your reputation". Doesn't she realise that it is the people who are presently working for nothing or a pittance who are keeping this planet going?

At the same time, the emergency support schemes introduced in many countries point up the case for a universal basic income (UBI). Words of praise or 8pm claps are not enough. In the UK Parliament in 2017 most Conservative MPs, including Boris Johnson, and the DUP voted against a Labour amendment to end the 1% public sector annual pay increase cap. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the meanness and hypocrisy of many who are now praising these workers to the skies.

Spain is set to introduce a form of UBI for those without an income which Podemos, the left-wing coalition part-

ner, wants to make a permanent part of the Spanish welfare state. This is not, however, a proper UBI which every citizen would receive on a regular basis whether they work or not and irrespective of how much money they already have. The UK's chancellor has introduced a job retention scheme whereby firms putting regular employees on furlough can apply for a grant covering 80 per cent of the average wage up to £2,500 a month, which is roughly the median wage. While it helps, it is not a UBI either because it means paying people on the condition that they don't work, apart from its many other economic flaws. Much better would be to pay everyone a basic income of, say, £300 a week, which would stimulate demand and encourage spending on goods and services.

Opponents of a UBI argue that money would end up in the banks of those who do not need it. But the answer is simple: increase taxes on the better off. British and Irish societies have talked themselves into a position where income and wealth tax increases have become anathema, when in fact they are a hallmark of a just society.

The human race is at a crossroads. Greta Thunberg is correct: the corona crisis has proved that society in its current form is unsustainable. Humanity is now united and acting on the advice of scientists and other rational experts who know what they are talking about and not

ambitious politicians who appeal to the worst emotions. Johan Rockström, a Swedish earth scientist and director of the Postdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, has said that there is a strong correlation between the pandemic and the environmental crisis: deforestation and the wildlife trade raises the likelihood of viruses leaping

the species boundary; air pollution weakens respiratory systems; and the expansion of air travel allows viruses to spread more quickly. It is all part and parcel of the same planetary crisis and it cannot be solved by individual states paddling their own canoes and grabbing what resources they can at the expense of others.

The message of our current predicament and our compassionate response is that only through international cooperation and international institutions which truly reflect our common humanity and our common worth can we mend this broken world. □

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