Our Fragile Bodies: Economic Change, the Nation-State and the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Like most major events in history, no one could have anticipated that by December 2019 the world was set to experience a dramatic change. However, a year after the outbreak of a new type of coronavirus in the city of Wuhan in Hubei, China, it is clear that the disastrous COVID-19 pandemic, which has since kept humanity in standby with a colossal number of infections and deaths, has altered how we presently conceive the world and how, in turn, international interaction will be redefined in the future.

When compared with the physical world, of slowly, cumulative changes, human history changes at a relentless rate (Taleb 2010). Human societies have been characterised by their constant struggle against devastating threats such as war, political dislocations and natural cataclysms. At the same time, in just a few millennia, we have deliberately made great achievements like no other species. A few centuries ago, for instance, the possibility of reaching outer space was a deed merely reduced to wild imagination. On such a vertiginous journey, only a few things have remained constant, but there is a fact that seems to be repeatedly confirmed. While it takes centuries for great civilizations to emerge, any great state can fall apart suddenly, bringing down with them the entire international order they support. Nothing illustrates this better than the severe impact that pandemics have had on human societies, destroying over and over and in no time the institutions we laboriously build. As the coronavirus has come to remind us, pandemics embody a universal challenge for human kind. The unpredictable and quick devastation that infectious diseases can inflict upon societies has no comparison, and there is little that we do to prevent them, despite our great technological progress.

In light of this constant and the severity of our present confrontation with the newest version of such calamities, it becomes natural, and compulsory, for us to address how deep the coronavirus pandemic will impact our societies. Future generations will be better equipped to accurately portray the origin, development and true historic scope of this pandemic. Nevertheless, our generation has the unique responsibility to discuss, from a first-hand account, the impact that this catastrophic event has had on our present institutions and our own selves (Birn 2020).

This piece contributes to such an aim by dissecting the two tendencies that are embedded in our reactions to the coronavirus: the unfolding of a speculative future and the reaffirmation of ideological canons. The present epidemic crisis has highlighted our fast-tracking advancement towards intensive automatisation and digitalisation, as tools that make economic engines less vulnerable to the fragility of the human body. On the other hand, it has also reiterated the stability of nationalism as the main political frame for responding to nature's forces, in contrast to the precarious development of our cosmopolitan unity.

Pandemics and economic transformation

History provides us with excellent analytical tools to grasp how pandemics affect human societies and shape their development (Brook 2020). Pandemics have stricken humanity basically since the species appeared on the Earth, and their influence on human lives has been recorded since ancient times. However, there are two instances which certainly stand out for their multidimensional impact on largely interconnected societies and at key points in time. The first case is the spread of the bubonic plague across Eurasia in the 14th century, commonly known as the Black

Death, which was disseminated through the vast commercial networks formed after the expansion of the Mongolian empire. The second is the importation of smallpox into the Americas in the 15th century, after the arrival of the first European conquistadors. Both cases truly represent global epidemics because they reached multiple societies and had systemic economic, social and political repercussions across continents, as it seems will the case with the coronavirus pandemic.

With regards to the Black Death, it is estimated that a third of Europe's population, around 25 million people, perished following the waves of bubonic plague that hit the continent in the mid-1300s. Given such a catastrophe, the entire social and economic fabric of the continent was inevitably doomed to change. The drastic reduction of population forced European towns and cities to employ labour more efficiently. Paid labour became more and more significant and expensive, in correlation with the severe scarcity of workers, and cities had to compete with each other for the resource, in order to remain economically viable. Better wages created more wealth and consumption, which in turn brought about productivity. With this, more sectors of the society incorporated themselves into productive activity, especially women. In the political sphere, paid work offered common people more social freedom and leverage. Slavery was mostly unfit in a context of scarce labour and rapid urbanization –the elites had to give up being masters and opted to pay salaries. A considerable reduction in the gap between lower and upper classes took place, creating more internally cohesive societies and thus stronger in the face of outside threats (Frankopan 2016, 190-2).

From a general perspective, the societies which adapted themselves better to the trend were also the ones that benefited the most in the new order. This was the case of Northern Europe, particularly Britain, where hired labour progressively became the norm. On the contrary, the societies which stuck to the restricted mobility of labour were unable to properly address the impact of the bubonic plague, by either lagging behind in the adaptation to the new economic reality, where productivity and not mere labour was the key to success, or by becoming basically unable to cope with it. This occurred in Southern Europe, breeding uneven economic development between both regions (Frankopan 2016, 192-201).

Likewise, the arrival of Columbus into the Americas and subsequent Conquest of the continent by the rising European powers brought about one of the greatest demographic cataclysms in history. More than 35 million people died due to the abrupt and violent occupation of the land; the peoples of the Americas were in a very disadvantaged position in relation to the many technological advances in warfare that Europeans had acquired through centuries of unremitting military conflict back home and in their complex intercourses with Asia and Africa. However, the most dramatic shock came from the invisible enemy in the form of infectious diseases. Influenza, measles, typhus and smallpox, all of which were non-existent in the Americas until then, hit the new continent mercilessly, ending the life of millions of people with lightning speed. Among them, smallpox took on biblical proportions, with estimations that in some regions 90 per cent of the population perished, like in Mexico, where the native people decreased from 25 to 2.65 million some decades after its conquest began, mostly at the hands of the new disease (Burbank and Cooper 2010, 163-4; Wachtel 2008).

The demise of the native population of the Americas was such that, in order to be able to exploit the vast resources of the conquered continent, Europeans needed to import astonishing amounts of labour in the form of a complex system of slave trading across the Atlantic. The great imbalance between abundant natural resources and scarce labour created by the epidemic catastrophe meant that, without such forced displacements, the whole colonial project would have collapsed. People in the millions were taken from Africa to work in the plantations and mines of the newly occupied territories. Similarly to the bubonic plague, which heralded a fundamental change in the political and economic power of Eurasia, the European expansion across the Atlantic carried in its ships a transcontinental contagion that shattered the native population of the Americas and heralded the establishment of a new, global economic circuit, with slavery at its core, setting European nations to become the most powerful empires for the centuries to come (Férnandez-Armesto 2011).

Considering these historic instances, and given the also great magnitude of the present Coronavirus pandemic, highlighted recently by India's severe second wave, we can anticipate henceforth that the world is set to experience a comparable transformation. After a year of the outbreak, we have seen the radical modification or deterioration of

almost every economic sphere. The modern times have already witnessed how natural disasters can cause great financial loses, by significantly dislocating social activity, like when Japan was hit by a ferocious earthquake and tsunami in 2011, or essentially destroy nations, as it was the case with the Haiti earthquake in 2010. However, although this kind of devastation may have some global effects, the reach is fundamentally limited to the national or regional level. On the contrary, given the scale of social confinement, basically in every corner of the world, the fight against the coronavirus has made demands of a kind that humanity has experienced only sporadically. In a short period of time, our global networks of transportation almost collapsed, menacing the restless circuit of production and consumption that constitutes the very essence of modern capitalism and exposing its complex yet delicate balance.

The coronavirus has also signalled the direction in which the world is moving in technological terms, making evident, and most likely accelerating, the fundamental transition into highly automatised and digitalised societies that we are living today. For instance, we have become more aware of the fact that sooner or later societies will have to universally adopt digital payments, as China's case illustrates. Unlike other regions, including developed economies like the Eurozone, where coins are still widely used, China made an almost complete transition to digital money, when the pandemic broke out. China was better prepared, on the one hand, to significantly reduce potential contagion with the avoidance of the physical interaction that the circulation of traditional payments involve. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, China managed to keep its economy active remotely, as most Chinese people were equipped with multiple mobile applications to acquire all kinds of goods, essential or not, when they had to stay at home all of a sudden. There is an ongoing debate on the conflicting relationship between such digital convenience and privacy. Nevertheless, the important point here is that, like no time before, the wide use of sophisticated technology with which we confronted this pandemic, such as personal computers and access to telecommunication networks, made possible to keep a remarkable level of productive activity with a minimum amount of physical effort. The tremendous endurance of the remote economy seems to have set in stone that the future belongs to those actors who are adapting themselves to be less dependent on the fragile human body and are quickly transiting to digitalisation and automatisation, where our traditional limitations in space and time are rendered obsolete (Hawking *et al.* 2018, 183-96).

What is more, the coronavirus has reminded us that technology can be liberating for humans too, a means to attain a more meaningful life. As Yuval Noah Harari (2018) recently described in his popular book *Sapiens*, when assessing the technological development of humanity from the prehistoric to the modern times, it seems paradoxical, to say the least, that one of its main outcomes has been the deterioration of the human condition. Industrial production has rested on individual alienation, as Karl Marx alerted us since the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the unprecedented levels of productive activity sustained through virtual and mechanical machines during this pandemic have implied that, thanks to technology, it is feasible to sustain complex economic systems without demanding subjugation to tedious activities, even if we are still at an early stage of such a possibility. Of course, we first need to address the negative outcomes such as the financial impact on those whose sources of income are gradually disrupted by robotics and informatics. It is also true that the long and ubiquitous periods of mandatory restrictions to mobility that we have experienced in the last months have featured the latent tension that exists between our growing development of virtual lives and our very human nature, anchored in basic physical and affective needs.

Identity construction in epidemic times

Very intricate analogies emerge if we refer to the ideological responses that humanity has put into practice in order to understand and react to pandemics. In the case of the Black Death, given the transition between medieval and modern times that European societies experienced when they were hit by it, the event was articulated as an act of God and the embodiment of the permanent struggle between good and evil, between Christians and the infidels. The devastation of the bubonic plague represented a sign of judgement day. The development of scientific knowledge remained precarious, and thus the actual origin and dynamics of the pandemic were fundamentally ignored. For most people, the colossal wave of epidemic contagion, which hit the whole continent, meant nothing but the spread of evil. Praying for salvation was seen as the best, and perhaps the only, course of action to stop the contagion (Langer 1964). As Timothy Brook (2019, 53-60) recounts, this interpretation was not restricted to Europe as some Muslims observers also considered that the source of the plague lay beyond the Islamic territories, in the "land of darkness", the territories of the Mongolian empires further East. In short, the pandemic accentuated ideological differences

existing between groups of different religious beliefs, cementing a long-lasting division between East and West, as clearly defined and mutually exclusive *Others*.

The spread of smallpox in the Americas saw a similar conceptual framing. In the Conquistadors' mind, the uncertainty created by the deadly contagion was matched by a reaffirmation of their medieval thinking, where God prevailed above everything. In the absence of a technical explanation for the outbreak after their arrival on the new continent, they drew on distinctions between *Self* and *Other*. Unlike contemporary accounts that ascribe great importance to military and technological superiority in the swift conquest of the Americas, at the time, the precise role that such factors played in the unfolding events was rather unclear. In contrast, the Spanish conquistadors resolutely believed that the blessing of Christianity explained their progress. As Cortes (in Mirales-Ostos 2020, 269-71) put it, if it were not because God was on their side, it would have been impossible to explain why they kept winning in battle, despise the fact that their numbers were much smaller and despite other adverse conditions such as an unfamiliar and tough terrains. In this vein, as soon as the Spanish realised that the epidemics that hit the New World after their arrival were much more devasting for the local population, they concluded that it was God's work that was again in their favour. They were well aware of their potential vulnerability because they knew that smallpox and other epidemics had had deadly consequences at home before. However, it was impossible for them to conclude that, thanks to previous collective exposure, their immune system was better equipped to fight the contagion. Indeed, it was hurriedly argued that the carrier of the epidemic into the Americas had been a black slave, whose roots lacked divine protection.

We can perceive substantial commonalities with the coronavirus pandemic, albeit expressed with remarkable difference. In contrast to the clear boundaries that were depicted between the Christian world and other groups in Medieval Europe, today, thanks to the development of international trade and institutions, as well as the homogenization of cultural values through capitalism, societies have definitely become more cosmopolitan (Ferguson 2011, 196-255). Most nations and individuals have come to recognise the existence of common global challenges and a predominantly shared future, as a single species, above, or at least side by side, their local identities and beliefs. Thus, it goes without saying that the appalling spread of the coronavirus has stressed that humanity as a whole is extremely vulnerable against the devastating power of pandemics, especially given the sheer size of today's global population and interconnection (Taleb 2010, 315-17). This weakness affects everyone's bodies, minds and societies, regardless of where they were born or live, and despite the high degree of technological and economic development that some nations enjoy.

Such a cosmopolitan realisation has greatly conflicted with the way in which we have responded to the pandemic, a response which has been predominantly insular. For instance, despite the lack of scientific consensus about the effectiveness of shutting borders to fight an epidemic outbreak (Voelkner 2019) (pondering the long-term repercussions of severing people from free movement, as it is clear that social distancing precludes initial contagion), the definition of the battle front against the pandemic soon acquired a geographical dimension shaped by the ideological premises of the state-nation, with little room for international discussion. The large international cooperation that is taking place to fight the virus through scientific research, seems slow and limited when compared with the velocity and effectiveness of the policies implemented by national bureaucracies and leaders. In contrast to previous times, for the scientific community, the understanding of the pandemic clearly goes beyond dogmatic beliefs and boundaries –cosmopolitanism certainly works better here than in politics. Nevertheless, science and academia are still fundamentally delimited by the strength (or weakness) of a given nation-state and therefore, in practical terms, we have witnessed the rise of the vaccine diplomacy rather than a concerted effort for global immunisation.

To be clear, the idea is not to assess whether a cosmopolitan response would have worked better than the national one, but that the coronavirus has intensified today's fundamental tensions between our cosmopolitan and national identities. The pandemic has raised a central question about our near future: will humanity soon progress to a more cosmopolitan entity or will nationalism remain as our preferred social system to face global challenges for much longer? By now, it seems that the coronavirus has reaffirmed how effective the nation-state can be in providing societies with clear self-other frameworks, territorial delimitations and accountable leaderships to perform quick and precise responses to existential threats, however errant some may turn out to be. After all, the nation-state is the successful replacement of more embracing institutions, such as modern great empires, which collapsed on their own

weight, and that it is its elasticity and narrow scope which granted it such triumph. Nothing illustrates this better than the European Union's reaction to the coronavirus. In a desperate effort to slow down the swift contagion, EU state members opted for the practical closure of their borders, unexpectedly calling into question decades of cooperation to promote continental unity. This move would have seemed unthinkable just a few months before, yet the emergency brought to light the fact that their gradual removal of physical borders is far simpler than the removal of the national frames formed in people's imagination throughout history (Neumann 1999). Soon, almost mechanically, the coronavirus led to resurfacing of old ideas of alterity between Northern and Southern Europe, Anglo-Saxon and Latin Europe or Western and Easter Europe.

Learning from the past and teaching for the future

Although it is not feasible to assess the ultimate implications of the coronavirus currently, we can be certain that this pandemic has already revealed multiple long-term dynamics occurring in our societies. This pandemic has reinforced prevalent ideological frameworks, highlighting the enormous tensions that exist today between our cosmopolitan and national identities, where nationalism still embodies the backbone of the contemporary world. Given its effectiveness to design and execute particular courses of actions and self-other fragmentations, nationalism is playing today the role Christianity did when the bubonic plague hit Europe and smallpox the Americans, that is, it provides hope and refuge for individuals before overwhelming threats. In economic terms, history is similarly repeating itself, for it seems evident that the pandemic will accelerate new technological revolutions and redefine social participation in production and consumption. Just as Northern Europe adapted better than its southern counterpart to the scarcity of labour resulting from the demographic collapse of the Black Death, those actors that prove unable to cope with the greater demand for technological innovation, brought by the coronavirus, will be simply left behind, which is the preamble of a great economic divide. By the same token, the coronavirus has hinted at the potential for our economies to evolve into new systems of intensive digitalisation and automation (the gradual displacement of the human body from production). The pandemic could trigger a historic reallocation of labour, resonating the one that occurred across the Atlantic, via slave trading, when the European conquistadors rushed to economically counter the demographic tragedy caused by their arrival to the Americas and the abrupt transmission of new infectious diseases.

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