

COVID-19 in the Light of History

Serious epidemics can have far-reaching social, cultural, and geopolitical consequences. The plague which devastated Athens in 430 BC – in the second year of the Peloponnesian War, when an Athenian victory still seemed within reach – claimed a quarter of the population, some 75,000 people including Pericles. His successors were weak and incompetent, and Athens suffered a precipitous decline in the observance of “every rule of religion or law,” according to Thucydides. Not until 415 B.C. had Athens recovered sufficiently to mount a major offensive, but due to the poor quality of Pericles’ successors the Sicilian expedition ended in an utter rout.

The Antonine plague (A.D. 165-180) was actually caused by smallpox rather than *Yersinia pestis*. It took [up to five million lives](#), about 25 percent of those affected. Approximately one-tenth of the population of the Empire died, more than a third in some regions (Gaul, Lombardy, the Rhine Valley). The Roman army was devastated, leaving frontiers vulnerable to barbarian penetrations. Germany’s leading early historian of ancient Rome [Barthold Georg Niebuhr](#) concluded in 1827 that “the ancient world never recovered from the blow inflicted on it by the plague which visited it in the reign of Marcus Aurelius.” It was the precursor of the Third Century Crisis and the subsequent long-term decline of Rome’s power and authority.

The Black Death (1347-1351) killed 30 to 60 percent of Europeans and caused massive religious, social, and economic disruptions. In the 17th century it struck again, with deadly ferocity but not the same geographic reach. Its effect on the city of Milan was presented with impressive accuracy in [Alessandro Manzoni’s 1828 *I Promessi sposi* \(*The Betrothed*\)](#), Italy’s equivalent of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*.

The COVID-19 outbreak initially looked to most Westerners like a periodic epidemic in the manner of porcine and avian flus, SARS, or West Nile virus: a temporary problem which affects other people, usually far away. This virus turned out to be different, however: hitherto unknown, highly contagious, untreatable, and lethal enough to warrant radical measures to contain its spread. The Chinese tried to hide the magnitude of the problem until late January, the Europeans did not quite believe it even as the disaster hit Italy in February, and the Americans finally grasped the seriousness of the threat in the second week of March.

The pandemic's future course and cost cannot be predicted. It does appear certain, however, that the world is experiencing changes which are likely irreversible. The contours of its geopolitical impact are becoming apparent in the rapidly changing patterns of mental mapping, political decision-making, and economic flows in the three panregions that matter in today's world, Asia-Pacific, Europe, and North America.

In all three we are witnessing rapid rejection of globalization, multilateral mechanisms such as the World Health Organization, and transnational institutions – most notably the European Union – in favor of the revitalized sense of national cohesiveness and national interest-based survival strategies which are developed and pursued by the newly energized sovereign nation-state. It is to their governments that nations great and small have turned.

State-led crisis management has given governments of different ideological hues enormous new powers. In the United States unfortunately it includes the creation of trillions of fresh dollars ex nihilo, which will benefit a limited number of megacorporations while further undermining the long-term stability of the financial system. For good or bad, the State is back with a vengeance, and it can be predicted with complete certainty that governments will not give up willingly their expanded powers once the virus is contained.

Corona's one notable geopolitical consequence is the collapse of the neoconservative-neoliberal sacred cow known as "America's global leadership role." This is not necessarily a bad thing if its corollary is a general decline of the neocon-neolib joint venture known as the American Empire. By contrast, after a faltering start marked by the Chernobyl-like disinclination to be open about the nature and magnitude of the problem, China acted with impressive speed and efficiency to contain the virus. Beijing's measures seemed draconian in the West when they were imposed, with stony resolve, in the province of Hubei and its capital Wuhan on January 23.

Interestingly, three other success stories in dealing with the virus are Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea. Unlike China they are democratic in institutional form, but they are closely related to the Middle Kingdom in Huntingtonian terms. A civilization which promotes respect for authority, delayed gratification, and communal interests over individual rights is seen as more efficient in protecting its members while continuing to function than the Western model.

It is too early to make assessments of COVID-19's long-term impact, but it is reasonable to conclude that it will be significant and long-lasting, perhaps even that "nothing will ever be the same again!" That cliché is invoked whenever people think they are facing an event of metahistorical significance. Sometimes its use is justified: Sarajevo 1914, the Bolshevik revolution, Hiroshima, and the fall of the Berlin Wall fit the phrase. More often it is not. Versailles 1919, JFK's assassination, Neil Armstrong's "giant leap," Watergate, 9-11, the Lehman Brothers' collapse, and many other alleged watersheds eventually turned out to be less momentous than initially claimed.

Some turning points are not recognized immediately. The Bastille riot could have ended, a year or two later, like the Glorious Revolution did across the Channel a century earlier. Only with the horrors of 1792 it became clear that "he who has

not lived before the Revolution does not know the sweetness of life." More recently, the impact of nuclear weapons on the grand-strategic thinking of the two principal Cold War adversaries took over a decade to mature.

There are megacrises which are immediately seen, initially by the lucid few, for what they are. The Guns of August hit an ostensibly well ordered and stable world like a thunderbolt. "The lights are going out all over Europe," Sir Edward Grey presciently remarked a day before Britain declared war on the Kaiserreich, "and they may not come back in our lifetime." Arguably they never did: over the ensuing four years a vibrant civilization, unmatched in its fruits and vigor, was mortally wounded and thrown into the abyss in which we live now.

The current epidemic has the potential to be an event of historic significance by reawakening natural bonds of kinship-based loyalty among Westerners. Sir Kenneth Clark defined decades ago the challenge the Western world is facing today: "It is lack of confidence, more than anything else, which destroys a civilization." But not all is lost, it seems. After the initial shock, millions of Americans and Europeans who love their lands more than any others, and who put their families and their neighborhoods before all others, are the ones fighting the epidemic with resilience and stoicism. Those who had been telling them that their attachments should be global, and that their lands and neighborhoods belong to the whole world, are now consigned to the dustbin of history.

There is hope, and all will be well, because there is God.

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