IN THE SHADOWS OF COVID-19

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Introduction

Now entering the third year of its dreadful career, COVID-19 (the Coronavirus disease officially designated as SARS-CoV-2 by the World Health Organization),[1] shows few signs of abatement. As with previous pandemics,[2] its planetary reach is amplified by twenty-first century global connectivity and acceleration.[3] On the surface, COVID-19 unifies human experience, flattening cultural, class, ethnic, and racial variations.[4] On closer scrutiny, however, it has shown considerable differentiation in that experience marked by unequal access to wealth, power, or opportunity.[5] The negative effects of the pandemic on women, for instance, have been noticeably more severe than on men.[6] Similarly, the pandemic has affected the elderly more severely than the young. In turn, the rich/poor divide that mars international society has been difficult to disguise. This reality is aptly captured by a recent heading of an article in *The Guardian*: "The Two Pandemics",[7] the one referring to the Global North, the other the Global South. Within each constellation, a fundamental breach is noticeable between over-privileged and under-privileged populations.

The pandemic not only acutely exposes the historical effects of global and regional inequalities but brings into sight the durable injustices distributed across international society.[8] A globalized world is at the same time a highly fractured political and economic space. The pandemic has also served as a powerful countermovement to globalization which, quite ironically, aided its transnational dispersal. Reinforcing national barriers,[9] COVID-19 has revitalized latent myopic, even xenophobic mindsets.[10] The global scope of the pandemic is well matched by chauvinism served in ample measure, both in imaginary tales of the origin of the infectious disease and in large reservoirs of prejudice harbored toward potential carriers of the invisible enemy.[11] Attacks on people of East Asian origin in several Western countries uncover the deep rootedness of cultural or racial prejudice.

A key feature of the pandemic is its contradictory nature: closure and porosity. On the one hand, COVID-19 underscores the latent state-centric propensity to put up the barricades. On the other hand, the pandemic has also revealed the virtual impossibility of national sequestering.[12] Globalization has guaranteed swift transnational connectivity and spread. Despite prodigious efforts to prevent its spread, the virus has demonstrated an innate capacity

to ignore national borders. The vast advances in biomedicine, hygiene, and global health, especially in the West, have appeared helpless in the face of COVID-19. The pandemic continues to baffle governments, disrupt established patterns of public and private routine, and propel seemingly dramatic shifts in social behavior. What was once considered normal has rapidly reconfigured itself as careless.

Major shifts in human interaction are best captured in a new vocabulary of the pandemic, indexed by the term 'social distancing'. Alternatively, the rediscovery of commonsense hygiene, the use of masks, or reattachment to the outdoors has underscored the ordinariness of desirable behavioral change. At a more profound level, COVID-19 exposes the actual fragility of human existence in the face of an unseen submicroscopic infectious agent. This revelation, however, seems ephemeral at best as nations eagerly await a return to the old ways: business as usual. Embedded in intractable patterns of wealth creation and globalized exchange, national elites are reluctant to radically rethink new frameworks of being or belonging. The necessity of forging a new contract with nature remains as elusive as before. Despite the magnitude of the crisis which has dramatically tested international society, a common strategy to meet the challenge of the pandemic is still missing. The state-centric character of world politics has reasserted its stamp even in regions presumably committed to a cosmopolitan approach in meeting big challenges. In Europe, for instance, the nationalist tenor of response to COVID-19 tends to sharply negate decades of efforts toward building a common political community. In theory, the pandemic provided a unique opportunity to validate the strengths of the European Union, but it is a test it seems to have failed. The rising tide of populist sentiment in Central and Eastern Europe has drowned hopes of regional solidarity, leave alone universalism.

Fault Lines

Since its announced appearance in the last quarter of 2019 in Wuhan, China, COVID-19 has reaffirmed the presence of two salient fault lines characterizing international society: its fractured nature and the troubled relation between humanity and nature. Firstly, the pandemic has revealed the contours of a divided world, expressed most blatantly by nationalism: the buttressing of borders and border controls, mandatory quarantine, and preferential treatment of nationals above 'foreigners. Well entrenched, these practices have been enhanced in the face of the pandemic. The free movement of populations, a cherished principle of Europeanness, for example, quickly succumbed to a culture of fear of the 'Other'. Although the patterns show considerable heterogeneity, parallels with other regions paint an even darker picture. The notion of sealing off the country from the virus has been the typical response. From the perspective of commonsense, the curbing of mobility seems both necessary and desirable. Breaking the chain of infection is neither draconian nor unethical. The real issue, however, is not about the legitimacy of state action to erect barriers, but the naturalness of this option. Implicit in this action is the speedy reenactment of an unbridgeable divide between the nation and humanity. The universal character of bordering highlights the essential fact that international society remains politically split. Despite claims of globalization, the world exists as a plurality. In place of a genuine *global* response to COVID-19, nation-states have sought self-help and self-protection. The recognition that the pandemic is likely to stay, mutate, and cause further havoc in the coming months and years without international coordination, mutual help, and cooperation has been in short supply.

A second fault line COVID-19 has once again exposed relates to the problematic relation between nature and

humanity. Conceived and consolidated at least since the Industrial Revolution, this relation has assigned nature only a subservient role, resulting in its exploitation and abuse. Against this backdrop, the climate crisis becomes intelligible not simply as a "natural" phenomenon, but the historical outcome of the poor treatment nature has received and continues to receive at the hands of industrial civilization. More to the point, it is the lopsided prosperity of the richer sections of this civilization that lies at the source of the climate crisis. Eventually pushed to its extremes, nature is showing signs of fracture, threatening not only humanity but all forms of planetary life. The pandemic itself is a manifestation of the unbearable pressure on the animal world.[13] Industrial society and its spread have come at a massive price: the growing proximity of humans and animals. Urbanization and zoonotic transmission have increasingly acquired an elective affinity. The roots of the current pandemic lie in the interchange between animals and humans. Despite knowledge of this basic fact, there are few signs of a basic reset in the relation between nature and humanity. The preferred responses to the climate crisis and its visible effects have largely consisted of modest alterations in the behavior of nations and populations.

Suspension/Deferral

Reminiscent of "post-apocalyptic horror movies"[14], the current pandemic displays a distinct capacity to simultaneously suspend and accelerate time. Since its graduation from a public health emergency to pandemic status on 11 March 2020,[15] these contradictory aspects encapsulate its eerie quality. With repeated lockdowns, COVID-19 appeared to have carried the authority to stop the clock. Normal routine was not merely interrupted but put into abeyance. The ordinary became extraordinary, a clear reminder of the hidden power of nature over society. With its invisible force, the pandemic not only suspended large swathes of human activity but generated unprecedented levels of social trauma.[16] In addition, the sameness of action uncannily released the impression that time had acquired an autonomy of its own, freed from human bondage. Time kept racing with a virtual contempt for human forbearance. The lost days of COVID-19 in 2020 remain palpable. Take the 2020 Tokyo Olympics that were held in 2021, as if 2020 had been erased from historical memory.

Reflecting on the pandemic, "suspension" is a very productive notion with several associated meanings: adjournment, interruption, postponement, moratorium, abeyance, and deferral, to name just a few. On this list, two words stand out: interruption and deferral. COVID-19 embodies the idea of interruption, stressing a basic rupture in the fabric of time.[17] Clearly, the pandemic registers a breach in the flow of things. Deferral is an equally evocative term. The easiest way to think about it is postponement. In the shadow of COVID-19, time is experienced as if it were not moving. Yet, time is moving as if it was out of control. Things appear still, but time is being lost. Hence, the impatient wait for things to get back to normal.

The unavoidable state of suspension and deferral has received a predictable response in the form of a techno-scientific fix (vaccine, prevention, coexistence). Furthermore, this response has been largely trapped within national containers with only modest levels of international cooperation.[18] All the pathologies of international existence—life within a divided political world—have come into play. Notwithstanding the urgency and magnitude of the crisis, the standard answer remains embedded in the desire to return to the *status quo ante* without fundamentally reconsidering how to repair the fault lines. Rather than stirred, the Westphalian framework of societal action has been reenergized. Similarly,

the tortured relation between a fast-urbanizing civilization and an embattled nature has hardly generated basic onto-logical questions. The hegemony of techno-scientific solutions appears as unshakeable as before. Although the climate emergency and the ongoing pandemic require radical answers, the available repertoire of answers has been both famil-iar and inadequate. The recently concluded COP-26 in Glasgow is a good example of halfway solutions embracing the strategy of deferral. Human dependence on fossil fuels has been retained while the problem has simply been kicked down the road. Equally disconcerting is the persistent issue of overcrowding nature which stays into the background while techno-scientific resolutions are rolled out.

The twin reality of the pandemic (with others to come) and climate change raises profound questions that de-mand serious answers. For a global society dedicated to limitless economic growth under the neoliberal regime, these questions are existential in nature. At best, the available menu of choice is to carry on economic growth on a dual car-riageway in which a new spirit of cooperation and compromise remains tethered to the political status quo. Wedded to the doctrine of limitless economic growth driven by unchecked consumption globally, the state-system persists on the road to perdition. Although the grip of neoliberal thinking over policy has shown signs of easing with active state intervention in the economy,[19] the neoliberal mindset remains firm.

COVID-19, Climate Change, and Nuclear Proliferation

The ongoing pandemic is a clear warning of imminent existential threats to humanity. Paradoxically though, while COVID-19 has heightened awareness of human vulnerability in the face of nature it has shifted focus away from other longstanding and growing threats. The danger of nuclear annihilation, for instance, appears to have receded into the background. Climate change, and now the pandemic, have eclipsed the menace of stockpiling and modernization of nuclear technology, including other weapons of mass destruction (WMD). At least since the horrific atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, several nations have embraced the delusion that their security can be assured with the acquisition of nuclear and other WMD. The processes that have resulted in materializing this myth have already caused incalculable harm to human and natural life.[20]

Driven by either by paranoia or the fictitious notion of supremacy over others, these states continue to pursue the acquisition and deployment of nuclear and other destructive weapons. The continued proliferation of WMD, both vertical and horizontal, has a direct bearing on the climate crisis.[21] As the pandemic shows, these weapons are unlikely to save individual nations in a highly integrated and interdependent, albeit politically fractured, world. There is irre-futable evidence of the damaging effects of WMD on the environment and human life. Hence, a more comprehensive approach is needed that does not discriminate between new and persistent existential threats. There are, however, those who implicitly make a distinction between peaceful and unpeaceful uses of nuclear energy, presenting the former as the panacea for tackling climate change.[22] Typically overlooked in positive endorsements of nuclear energy is the ques-tion of radioactive waste and its storage.[23] It is futile to think of addressing climate change without the elimination of WMD. In the context of Hobbesian insecurity, however, it is difficult to imagine how rationality can prevail over narrow national interest.

As COVID-19 has abundantly illustrated, the political divides between nations produce an environment that not only discriminates between new and persistent threats but actively discourages durable levels of international coopera-

tion. The speed of mutation only confirms the limitless potential for new variants of COVID-19 to emerge, from Alpha, Beta, to Delta, and now Omicron. Without eliminating vaccine apartheid between the rich and poor countries,[24] the prospects of the end of the current pandemic remain slim. Global, not merely national, action is essential to materialize the notion of "medicine without borders."[25]

The malady of short-termism also appears incurable, a persistent feature of crisis thinking. Once the current problem has left the stage, the old routine usually prevails. The problem, however, is that the intersectionality between pandemics, climate change, and nuclear proliferation ensures that past normalcy cannot be restored. Without embracing a long-term perspective on the triple threats *simultaneously*, there can be no lasting solution to any of the threats. Such a perspective would entail a consideration of past conflicts, recognition of the futility of nationalist solutions to existential threats, and the urgency to strengthen and reform international institutions that reflect the interests of humanity. The ongoing pandemic has intensified the indispensability of global bodies that transcend parochial state-centric national interests but also uncovered the diminished capacities of existing international organizations like the United Nations.[26] Despite its admitted limitations, however, the UN remains critical to any viable movement toward global solutions, especially toward cultivating universal awareness.

Conclusion

A more immediate pathway to better manage COVID-19 lies in the idea of "medicine without borders."[27] Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has concretized this notion with a call for "a Covid pandemic non-proliferation treaty." As Brown notes, "Only when we reject vaccine nationalism and medical protectionism will we stop outbreaks becoming pandemics."[28] This elementary idea contains considerable merit. The late recognition of the urgency and need for worldwide distribution of vaccines offers some glimmers of hope. A similar awareness is required to approach the perennial threats posed by WMD and climate change. By any practical measure, the journey toward a genuine appreciation of mutual interdependence is likely to be cumbersome and prolonged.

Equally salient is the dual recognition of human and planetary vulnerability that places a massive responsibility on the current generation of political leadership globally. Without the will or the courage to confront the existential threats, however, the march of folly is likely to persist. In the context of resurgent nationalism and new forms of populism, the aspiration to build a genuine international community appears utopian and unrealistic. However, the pandemic also carries the seeds of change toward repurposing international society. In similar fashion, the growing youth activism to stem the climate crisis presents considerable promise. Blended with the historical and current struggles for nuclear non-proliferation, the resistance for change within international society may not be so permanent. To what extent the seeds of these efforts will bear fruit or merely produce weeds remains an open question. In either instance, the stakes are very high.

ENDNOTES

(1) World Health Organization, "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)." https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

(2) Between 1918 and 1920, the world was struck by the so-called "Spanish flu" that resulted in the death of over 50 million people. Nearly 500 million people were affected by the flu. It is important to note that the world's population at that time was about two billion people. See Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Spanish Flu (H1N1) https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%20about,occurring%20in%20the%20United%20States. For a detailed account of important pandemics in the previous and present centuries, see Adewunmi Falode, et. Al. "History of Pandemics in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 2021, pp. 9-26.

(3) Rosa Hartmut (2013) ([2005], *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, translated and introduced by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys, New York, Columbia University Press.

(4) "The virus does not put us on a basis of equality. On the contrary, it blatantly reveals that our society structurally relies on the incessant production of differential vulnerability and social inequalities." Daniele Lorenzini, "Biopolitics in the Time of Corona," *Critical Inquiry*, 47(2021), p. S44. Sandset notes "the disproportional impact of COVID-19 upon black, Asian, and middle eastern (BAME) communities…The framing of the disproportional impact that COVID-19 has had upon BAME populations has ranged from biological factors, pre-existing health conditions, overcrowded housing situations, and socio-economic status." Tony Sandset, "The Necropolitics of COVID-19: Race, Class, and Slow Death in an Ongoing Pandemic," *Global Public Health*, 16(8-9), 2021, p. 1416.

(5) Sara Stevano, et. al. "COVID-19 and Crises of Capitalism: Intensifying Inequalities and Global Responses," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement,* 42:1-2, 2021, pp.1-17, DOI: 10.1080/02255189.2021.1892606.

(6) Farhana Sultana, (2021) Climate Change, COVID-19, and the Co-production of Injustices: A Feminist Reading of Overlapping Crises, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 22:4, 2021, pp. 447-460, DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2021.1910994.

(7) The author of this article, Kwame Anthony Appiah, writes: "While rich nations focus on booster jabs, much of the world is facing devasting second-order coronavirus effects." Tuesday, 23 November 2021.

(8) Nivedita Saksena (2021) Global Justice and the COVID-19 Vaccine: Limitations of the Public Goods Framework," *Global Public Health*, 16:8-9, 2021, pp. 1512-1521, DOI: 10.1080/17441692.2021.1906926.

(9) "The global crisis unleashed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exposed flaws in our existing state-centric notion of health security." Sadia Mariam Malik, Amy Barlow, & Benjamin Johnson, "Reconceptualising Health Security in Post-COVID-19 World," *BMJ Global Health*, 6 (2021), p.6. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2021-006520.

(10) "In some cases, existing antagonisms – such as those instituted around the figure of the "migrant" or the "asylum seeker", or against established media and scientific institutions and discourse – are being reinforced and charged with new layers of "viral" meaning. Other antagonisms – such as the rejection of the welfare state as "too generous" may be weakened by the experience of a deep public health crisis and mass unemployment. And finally, new antagonisms – such as those articulated by protests against quarantine measures, social distancing and the wearing of face-masks – arise and link up with existing ones, creating new potential lines of conflict and, perhaps, solidarity." Benjamin Opratko, et. al. "Cultures of Rejection in the Covid-19 Crisis," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2021) https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1859575 p. 902.

(11) "COVID related scapegoating and hate crimes have reinforced various, racisms, and extreme violence and human rights violations in Europe's "borderlands" continue and are even exacerbated during the current crisis.", ibid. p. 898.

(12) Judith Butler captures this feature quite well: "The imperative to isolate coincides with a new recognition of our global interdependence during the new time and space of pandemic. On the one hand, we are asked to sequester ourselves

in family units, shared dwelling places, or individual domiciles, deprived of social contact and relegated to spheres of relative isolation; on the other hand, we are faced with a virus that swiftly crosses borders, oblivious to the very idea of national territory." Capitalism Has Its Limits." https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits.

(13) Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso Books, 2020). Malm warns that the climate crisis is likely to dramatically increase the risk of future pandemics.

(14) Florentina C. Andreescu, "A Meditation on Covid-19 Social Trauma," *Journal of Cultural Research*, 25(2), 2021, p. 221. Also, as Antentas notes: "It is an experience that we have never lived but that we have imagined and seen in fiction a thousand times." Josep Maria Antentas, "Notes on Corona Crisis and Temporality," *Dialectical Anthropology*, 44 (2020), p. 317; 315-318.

(15) The World Health Organization declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and a pandemic on 11 March 2020.

(16) 18 Andreescu, "A Meditation on Covid-19 Social Trauma," op. cit. pp. 220-235. DOI: 10.1080/14797585.2021.193725.

(17) As Andreescu notes: "Covid-19 pandemic is the first event since WWII that triggered such swift, pervasive, and long-lasting effects. A genuinely global existential event, the pandemic suspended the known and familiar, offering a unique opportunity to look anew at ourselves and our lifeworld. That is the case, as Covid-19 is not only interrupting and reconfiguring our social routines and modes of socialising, but also the very way we understand, experience, and act within the world," op. cit. p. 220. The key point is how the pandemic has "caused an interruption of the flow of social life." A major effect "includes the reorganisation of habitual and institutionalised collective routines." Ibid. p. 225.

(18) Mark Dean & Al Rainnie, "Post-COVID-19 Policy Responses to Climate Change: Beyond Capitalism?" *Labour & Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work,* (2021). DOI: 10.1080/10301763.2021.1979448.

(19) "Even neo-liberal political actors and governments advocated that the state should be the institution to lead the way out of the economic crisis by providing financial support to the economy or offering compensations to businesses and the unemployed." Opratko, et.al. "Cultures of Rejection in the Covid-19 Crisis," op. cit. p. 896. Stevano shares this sentiment: "After decades marked by the neoliberal ideology that views the state as a mere fixer of market failures, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it impossible to downplay the active role that the state plays in capitalism. The visibility and scale of state intervention have increased dramatically during the pandemic, both in terms of the rediscovery of fiscal levers – much spurned in economic policy since the widespread adoption of the principles of the (post-) -Washington Consensus and of new forms of surveillance pioneered via public health interventions." Stevano, ""COVID-19 and Crises of Capitalism," op. cit. p. 2.

(20) ICAN, "The Human Cost of Nuclear Testing," n.d. https://www.icanw.org/nuclear_tests; Remus Prăvălie, "Nuclear Weapons Tests and Environmental Consequences: A Global Perspective," *Ambio*, 43(6), 2014, pp. 729-744.

(21) "Preventing nuclear war and avoiding catastrophic climate change are two of the most basic challenges facing human civilization in the twenty-first century." Matthew Bunn, "Nuclear Disarmament, Nuclear Energy, and Climate Change: Exploring the Linkages." *Nuclear Disarmament: A Critical Assessment (*New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 185.

(22) Samuel Miller McDonald, "Is Nuclear Power Our Best Bet Against Climate Change?" *The Boston Review*, October 12, 2021. https://bostonreview.net/articles/is-nuclear-power-our-best-bet-against-climate-change/. For an opposing view, see Nikolaus Muellner, et.al. "Nuclear Energy: The Solution to Climate Change?" *Energy Policy*, 155 (2021): 1-10. The authors draw the important conclusion that nuclear energy is unlikely to mitigate climate change as its role is, and will be, very limited.

(23) For an overview of some of the difficulties of nuclear waste storage, see John Vidal, "What should we do with Nuclear Waste?" *The Guardian*, 1 August 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/01/what-should-we-do-with-radioactive-nuclear-waste.Originally published for Ensia (Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Industries Alimentaires), Institute of the Environment.

(24) "The threat posed by this pandemic, seen in its geopolitical context, reveals the shortcomings of existing mechanisms

for ensuring access to drugs and vaccines." Saksena, "Global Justice and the COVID-19 Vaccine," op. cit. p. 1519.

(25) "The stranglehold exercised by the G20 richest countries is such that they have monopolised 89%of vaccines, and even now, 71% of future deliveries are scheduled for them. As a result, the global vaccine distribution agency has been able to secure only two-thirds of the 2bn vaccines promised to poorer countries." Brown also cautioned against vaccine hoarding: "despite repeated warnings of health experts, "with 9.1bn (billion) vaccines already manufactured and 12bn expected by year's end—enough to vaccinate the whole world—this the "arms race" we could have won." Gordon Brown, "Covid Won't End Until Rich Countries Stop Hoarding Jabs," *The Guardian*, Saturday 27 November 2021.

(26) "The crisis has shown the weakness and fragility of many global institutions and at the same time has shown the degree to which the global economy relies on global networks and migrant labour." Dean & Rainnie, "Post-COVID-19 Policy Responses to Climate Change," op. cit. p. 4.

(27) Takao's succinct statement, "No one is safe until everyone is safe" encapsulates this notion quite appropriately Toda Takao, "Japan's Leadership in Human Security During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Asia-Pacific Review*, 27:2, 2020, p. 41; 26-45, DOI: 10.1080/13439006.2020.1841950.

(28) Brown, "Covid Won't End Until Rich Countries Stop Hoarding Jabs," op. cit.