Part I. THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE GLOBAL WORLD

Societal Impacts of Covid-19: Lessons from History for the Global Ecumene

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This paper explores political, economic, and cultural causes and consequences of pandemics. Historically, pandemics have occurred when increased globalisation produces a critical mass within which pathogens can more easily persist. Populations then adapt in ways that include transformation of economic relations, improvements in public health and welfare, enhanced religiosity, and increased authoritarianism. Pandemics do not so much cause social change as catalyse changes already under way.

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Pandemics occur after periods when humanity has been growing larger and better connected (Cartwright 1974; McNeill 1976; Karlen 1995; Cohen 1989). The movements of merchants and armies, building empires and establishing trade routes, provide conduits by which disease can reach previously unexposed and susceptible peoples. Trade-induced prosperity and political pacification increase and concentrate population, making it easier for disease to spread and for an outbreak to sustain itself as one person infects many more. The opening of the Silk Roads and understanding of the Indian Ocean monsoon in the first century AD led to major, semi-synchronised pandemics in western and eastern Eurasia over the next few centuries, including probably measles, smallpox and bubonic plague. The Black Death of the fourteenth century has been associated with the conquests of the Mongols as they brought the whole area from China to Eastern Europe under control and travelled across it to and fro at horseback speed. When the conquistadors and settlers opened up the New World, they brought Old World diseases with devastating effect, their germs were more deadly than their guns (Diamond 1997). The slave trade and the European colonial empires helped diseases like yellow fever and cholera extend their range across the Atlantic and through Eurasia. The second, most deadly wave of the 1918 influenza seems to have begun among the troops gathered from all over the world in northern France at the end of the 1914–1918 war.

It is therefore to be expected that pandemic disease should again be threatening the global community, after a century when world population has grown by a factor of four, while all the world's major population centres are within 24 hours reach of each other and exchanging thousands of jet travellers a day. Experts and philanthropists have been warning for some time of a scenario like the current Covid-19 outbreak (TED 2015). This has not even required great foresight, since there have already been several recent epidemics

that suggested the potential to become a general medical emergency, from AIDS in the 1980s to Ebola, SARS, MERS and H1N1 (swine flu). If Covid-19 has caught the world relatively unprepared, it is because, as Garret Hardin observed, disaster is often foreseen but 'psychologically denied' (Hardin 1969). A particular precipitating factor today is the opening up of China, and its dramatic economic growth, becoming, as Britain was once described, the workshop of the world, an epicentre of global exchange and interaction. This, perhaps alongside other issues, such as the handling of numerous animal species that may be reservoirs of disease, may be why many new infections seem to come from that part of the world.

Given that the causes of the present pandemic have historical parallels, it makes sense to ask whether there might also be parallels in terms of consequences. A study of the political, economic and cultural changes that have followed in the wake of past pandemics may help us understand the issues that will face the world and its constituent countries as they emerge from the experience of Covid-19.

One kind of change that has been attributed to past pandemics is that of greater social justice and equality, involving increased social mobility and opportunities for ordinary people, a fairer share in the products of their own work, and health and welfare programmes that aim to improve their life conditions. A classic example of this is the link drawn between the Black Death and the end of feudalism in England. The drastic reduction in population, by a third or more, made labour scarce so that wages doubled or tripled through the law of supply and demand, and people travelled more freely to where their work was most desired. Meanwhile, enterprising peasants were able to buy up land cheaply and establish a new class of prosperous farmers between the masses and the traditional elite. Similarly, cholera outbreaks in the nineteenth -century England led to the creation of Boards of Health that brought in improvements to public health like closed sewers. It is also, perhaps, no coincidence that, after the 1918 influenza, government spending on health and worker welfare in Britain increased by 150 per cent in a year and had quadrupled by the end of the subsequent decade (Mitchell 1988: 590).

Another kind of change is cultural and psychological, such that religious and spiritual values become more outworldly and eschatological, concerned with personal purification and redemption. Here, a classic example is the flagellant movement that swept Europe after the Black Death, when people whipped themselves to atone for society's sins. Significantly, this was a movement outside the control of the established church, many of whose personnel had died in the plague and which had perhaps lost prestige given its inability to prevent the disaster, and it arguably paved the way for the Protestant movement that would emerge over the following 150 years. The rise of Christianity in imperial Rome and the rise of Buddhism in China during the first centuries AD have also been attributed to the pandemics of those times (McNeill 1976).

More negative kinds of change involve tendencies towards authoritarianism, conflict and war. The legitimacy of existing governments can be undermined by their failure to protect their population, while the experience of fear makes people inclined to follow alternative, more hard-line leaders who appear to offer clear and confident solutions (McCartney 1991; Pozrvanović 1993). There can also be a rise in xenophobia and in scapegoating of vulnerable groups. Jews were often accused of spreading plague, and expelled or murdered, while in the Milan plague of 1630 innocent people were executed as plague 'anointers' having confessed under torture (Cartwright 1974: 46; Anonymous 1844).

Nevertheless, we should be cautious about reading from past experience directly across to contemporary circumstances. For one thing, mortality from Covid-19 seems likely to be at much less than one per cent of the population in even the worst affected countries, while the vast majority of those who die are elderly and / or suffering from a prior illness (in the UK, 90 per cent [Campbell and Caul 2020]). This is very different from the Black Death, which killed a third or more, including the young and able-bodied. Hence, there can be little expectation that the labour scarcity and rise in real wages that followed the Black Death will be repeated in the case of the present pandemic. Population may even increase if lockdowns induce a rise in the birth rate. Similarly, past plagues occurred at a time when people had little understanding of the mechanisms of pandemics, attributing them to bad airs or divine wrath. The ignorance was not total. The Italian invention of quarantine in the 1370s and the English law of 1388 prohibiting discard of slaughterhouse waste into rivers showed a rudimentary understanding of contagion and sources of infection. Yet this is nothing like the knowledge we have today, of what causes disease and how it spreads, or of medical technologies to combat it. Such knowledge, perhaps, engenders a sense of control that is less likely to produce the religious and mystical response of historical peoples who must have felt helpless in the face of an arbitrary threat.

Furthermore, the effects attributable to previous pandemics are not as clear cut as has been suggested so far. For instance, while disease outbreaks led to public health initiatives in industrialising Europe, societies elsewhere adopted a fatalistic attitude, regarding hygiene as unnecessary and efforts to prevent outbreaks as futile. Improvements in social welfare that followed the 1918 influenza may be attributable to the war as much as to the pandemic.

Thus, the idea of pandemics as agents of social justice is problematic on close examination. Even before the Black Death struck, in 1349, the feudal system was already in decline in England, with peasants resisting demands for labour service and commuting their obligations into money rents (Dyer 1989). Then, after the Black Death had depleted the working population, the peasants' increased bargaining power was opposed by legislation fixing wages at the levels applying before the pandemic and prohibiting peasants moving from their lord's lands. While this, like most price controls, failed to hold back market forces, it cannot be considered a new dawn for political emancipation. Somewhat later, in 1381, the Peasants' Revolt failed when its leader was killed and the protesters were dispersed in return for promises that would later be broken. Nor were the political changes of this time solely due to the Black Death, for England was also fighting the Hundred Years War, another source of social disruption. Struggles over taxation for the war were themselves a cause of unrest and a means of wringing concessions from the king.

The key message from the centuries following the Black Death is not that elites were stimulated by the outbreaks to introduce a freer and fairer society, but that they were intent on holding back change and maintaining the status quo. Not just in Britain, but also in France and Spain, governments legislated to prevent wages from rising and to keep people in their places (Heaton 1948: 208). Sumptuary laws prohibited commoners from purchasing fine clothing and other elite products, so as to reinforce status boundaries. If the state became more concerned with public welfare, it was not so much because its conscience had been pricked but because it feared the potential for disorder of a more assertive peasantry (Fraser 1984: 31). What can be said is that the sheer scale of the pandemic served to precipitate change. The chronic misery of the poor was easy to overlook when things were

going well, but when there was no one to work the fields or serve in the aristocratic house, the condition of the workforce impinged more forcefully on the elite's worldview. High death rates, of the order of the Black Death, were actually nothing new, but they had previously afflicted only individual villages following local famine or disease (Cipolla 1978: 89). The point of the Black Death was that it was universal and impossible to ignore.

Pandemics should not actually be seen as random, exogenous shocks. Peter Turchin has shown that they are associated with and are components of recurrent general crises, which themselves are driven by overpopulation and the structural changes it causes in society (Turchin 2008). Plague was common during the crisis of the seventeenth century, when wars, civil wars and rebellions broke out all across the Old World, and it died away in the eighteenth (Turchin 2008; Schöffer 1978: 92). Cholera epidemics accompanied the revolutions of the mid-nineteenth century (Robertson 1952: 399; Turchin 2008). Overpopulation encourages disease outbreaks in several ways. High density makes it easier for disease to get a hold. Pressure on resources and general impoverishment make the masses less resilient. Military conflict and turmoil arising from these pressures also aid the spread. At the same time, a pandemic is part of the solution, as high mortality and suppressed birth rates eventually bring population back in line with what the society can support. Crises and pandemics therefore go in cycles. Turchin has determined that such a cycle is unfolding once again, likely bringing crisis to the western world in the 2020s, so that the current pandemic is part of this general phenomenon (Turchin 2020).

It follows that pandemics are not in themselves causes of social change and are part of a broader process of crisis and transformation. They can better be regarded as catalysts (Ibeji 2019). Not only does the pandemic highlight the poverty, squalor, injustice and inequality of which it is a result, but, as an intense and salient shared experience affecting every member of society, it creates a moment of collective awareness and attention that makes possible all-encompassing adjustment. In effect, the pandemic casts a spotlight on society's structural inadequacies and fosters the collective will to deal with them.

This is then what we should expect in the aftermath of Covid-19: not exactly a repetition of whatever effects have resulted from previous pandemics, but a new impetus to contemporary changes that were already in progress, even if their ultimate resolution lies some decades in the future.

One of these changes, similar to what has occurred in the past, may be a move towards more paternalistic governments intervening closely in their population's welfare. However, in this case, the result may be not an increase in freedom and autonomy but rather the reverse. As isolation and lockdowns have prevented many workers from earning a living, we have seen governments take responsibility for maintaining people's incomes. This has come at the cost of what would, in other times, be considered an extensive loss of civil liberties, involving restrictions on business, confinement, and new powers for authorities to prevent movement and association, with little judicial oversight. While these are temporary measures to be relaxed in due course, they are arguably consistent with a trend towards enhanced state surveillance and control that has been in place since the beginning of this century. The measures may therefore not disappear entirely once the pandemic is past, but may prefigure a move towards governmental income guarantees in return for tighter restraints on economic, political and cultural activity. Such enhancement of government powers is not necessarily malign and may be accepted by citizens as creating a fairer and

safer society. The assumption of responsibility for income maintenance also aligns with a key concern that had recently been appearing on the radar, namely artificial intelligence and the question of how to support the large fraction of the workforce it is expected to displace over the next 20 or 30 years.

Another possible change is a heightened sense of nationalism and a reduction in internationalism. The closing of borders and governments' preoccupation with their own internal crises has created a de facto nationalist focus. After the Black Death, international trade contracted (Rorke 2006: 270; Smith 1967: 361), and Covid-19 may have a similar effect, reducing economic interdependency and diminishing incentives for avoiding conflict. Although internationalist entities like the World Health Organisation and European Union have stressed the need for global co-operation more than ever in the face of the global threat, they have arguably been discredited by a perceived failure to offer correct advice and practical solutions, leaving countries to fend for themselves. The actual performance of these institutions is less at issue here than the fact that, according to many observers, nationalist sentiment was already on the rise (Snyder 2019) and this is the perspective from which they will be judged. Nationalism is not an inevitable response to the pandemic but, insofar as it was on the agenda to begin with, the pandemic may give new legitimacy and force to the narratives deployed by nationalist thinkers and advocates. At worst this may include xenophobia and ethnic conflict, which again were arguably already increasing in reaction to enhanced global mobility and changing ethnic balances, particularly in the west.

A third area of change that, once more, was already at issue concerns the balance of power in the international system. While the long-term effects remain to be seen, some suggest that, thanks to the decisive curtailment of its own outbreak and aid to other countries, China will be found to have gained in stature as a consequence of the virus, as well as to have increased its penetration of major world economies (Mahbubani 2020; Campbell and Doshi 2020; Borger 2020; Bresnick and Haenle 2020). More generally, if other leading nations have sustained damage to their prestige and their economies because of the virus, this may accelerate a shift, long talked of, towards a multi-polar world – or at least strengthen calls for such a shift and raise the credibility of those calling for it.

What we have also seen from historical example, however, is that change induced by pandemics is not easy, inevitable or what the disadvantaged might wish for. In particular, elites try hard to maintain the status quo and to hold on to their privileges. The changes in the global balance of power are bound to be contested, not only by the hitherto dominant nations but also, perhaps, by those that are opposed to the elevation of their peers and rivals (Pulipaka and Ratna 2020). Within countries, instead of smoothing the way for powerful, interventionist government, the controls exercised during the pandemic may heighten sensitivity to lost freedoms and galvanise resistance. Internationalist institutions may also find a new sense of purpose and co-operation, turning back the tide of nationalism, possibly with more robust methods than before.

We can therefore expect that the pandemic will accentuate geopolitical and ideological struggles that have been taking shape over recent decades, bringing them to the fore, clarifying what is at stake and sharpening polarisation. We cannot be sure how these struggles will proceed or be resolved, for that depends on context and human agency. History informs us not about the outcomes but about the issues that will be in contention. Neverthe-

less, there are certain very long-run trends that are likely to persist: reduced personal autonomy and privacy in return for increased security, which is the bargain demanded for living in societies of greater size and complexity; fewer and larger political units transcending today's Westphalianite states; and a turnover in the international order, with some regions gaining prosperity and influence, and others losing them.

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