

The Ways After

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“The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned” (W. B. Yeats, 1920)

“COVID-19 was the lightning before the thunder” (P. Khanna & K. Khemka, 2020).

1. The bare facts

1A. A RIDDLE, WRAPPED IN A MYSTERY, INSIDE AN ENIGMA

SARS-Cov-2 is not at all like the agents of the “common cold”. Bigger, much more contagious, endowed with a many-in-one ability for wrecking havoc in different organs and functions of the human body, this virus is the stuff of nightmares. Well-informed scientists have argued that it evolved from bats to human hosts by natural processes; and that remains the most likely hypothesis. This does not negate that Wuhan houses the most advanced-level laboratories devoted to experiments with viruses in China. And that those experiments try to augment the toxicity of the pathogen and its ability to enter body cells. Both American officials and Chinese diplomats have engaged in the blame game about the zero-point of corona. Something is certain: “infodemics” is here to stay.

There were plenty of Cassandras, to be sure. “The coming plague” and many other works were easily prescient. To no avail: politicians do not deal in likely future risks. The prestigious Center of Disease Control at Atlanta used to be the spearhead of the fight against epidemics the world over. Barely propelled during the Obama Administration, and starved of funds by the current one, it made a botch in the present emergency.

1B. THE ANSWERS TO THE PANDEMIC: UNDER THE EUROCENTRIC LENS

Amidst the gallop of the white horse of Pestilence in the West, one could hear a ripping of robes: about the battering that “Third-World” countries were about to suffer.

The reality is more nuanced. Besides the Asiatic “usual suspects”: Taiwan, Hong-Kong, South Korea, China itself... New Zealand is being hailed as the shiny example of containment. As of late May, it had had around 1,500 certified cases and about 25 five deaths. Now, this affluent country is essentially made of two very big, sparsely populated faraway islands, relatively easy to close. Take Costa Rica, with a larger

population, crammed into a space smaller by a factor of more than five. What is worse, with porous borders with two hotbeds of coronavirus (Nicaragua's official figures there are not worth the paper they are written on). Its figures by the same dates: 1,000+ thousand certified cases, 10 deaths (12 at the time of writing). In Africa: Ghana, Rwanda, Botswana... have developed testing kits and impressive strategies, overlooked among the Western fanfare. South Africa deployed high-technology against the virus. Senegal started preparing against the pandemic in January. Vietnam stands apart in the whole world by the number of tests performed by number of inhabitants. It closed its borders already in January. To put matters in perspective: towards the end of April Germany had effected around twelve tests per each detected infection; Vietnam had done by then over 600 (!). No deceases reported. This might seem a bit rich; but certainly there the virus was stopped on its tracks.

My favorite example is Kerala in India. Home to 35 million people (fairly small by Indian continental standards), this state has long being governed by a benign brand of Communism. It enjoys a strong public health system. As soon as late January it started to organize. At some point nearly 170,000 people were quarantined. Kerala is no island, its hinterland is the huge Indian subcontinent, where matters are certainly less tidy. As of mid-May there had been four casualties. For sure, people at Kerala trusted their sanitary authorities after a victorious fight just two years ago against Nipah — a less contagious, but far deadlier virus.

In summary: the main weapon against Corona was speed, that is, political vim and political acumen. When "The Economist" writes that USA is not doing too badly, since its fatalities rates compare with Europe's of two months ago, something is seriously amiss in the Western perspective. All the big countries in the EU, and a good number of the smaller ones, acted late. As did the WHO itself. (Germany is touted as a partial exception. According to refined "generative" epidemiological models, it was just lucky, i.e., there is an unknown factor.)

2. Blasted into the past: the Old Normal

Coronavirus harks back to the way the world was: largely governed by (hunger and) health issues. In the summer of 1564, the vicar of Stratford-on-Avon, not far below from the register of birth of one William Shakespeare, resignedly wrote "hic incipit pestis". Luckily for us, William survived. The pictures of masked people and deserted streets during the influenza epidemic of 1918-19 eerily recall present ones. Recurrent epidemics of all kind, made worse since the birth of cities, have been the lot of humanity in all of memory . The Athenian plague, the Justinian plague, the Black Death, measles and smallpox brought by the Europeans to the New World and Australasia, the misnamed Spanish Flu of 1918-19... have led to upheaval. Sometimes there were positive outcomes. The Black Death hastened the demise of serfdom. But there are always losers: noblemen were not amused. Within living memory of this writer, the "Hong-kong flu" of 1968-69 killed some 2-3 million of people, several times the figure of Covid so far.

The concept of Old Normal is more pervasive. Who this writes is a typical "boomer". It was not fun to spend one's youth under the shadow of nuclear war. Nevertheless, in

the second half of twentieth century, the Western World enjoyed peace, freedom from extreme want, giant steps forward in medical and agricultural technology, and other unprecedented bonuses. Even the sky above was clement: it has been noted that the frequency of natural catastrophes during the period was appreciably smaller than it is today. Now we have runaway global warming and ever more dangerous hurricanes. The net of institutions created by America after the Second World War worked for the mutual benefit of many countries. (Let us not forget the torment of China under Maoism. Or in Latin America the succession of military coups against elected governments and bloody dictatorships, drummed up by paranoid fear of communism in the US.)

After the Soviet Empire collapsed around 1990, globalization and the idea that it would hasten the “end of history” permeated discourse for a while. This was already asinine then. In the sphere of international relations, the rivalry between an old power and an ascendent one brings us back now to the first part of the last century. The newcomer then suffered less and less the haughtiness of the old. Instead of biding its time, it was tempted to strike too soon — with well-known consequences. It is hard to escape the overall impression that the “Great Moderation” in the West, roughly between 1950 and 2000, was a product of that undervalued, irreducible factor: luck.

3. The internet’s big beasts

Most everybody is doing “virtual” work. In many ways this is a positive development — but see our last section. Education, office work, financial services... will be permanently transformed by this. Now, even before corona, it was easy to distinguish true technology companies from mere users of the platforms trying to disguise themselves as “technological”. Most of the big beasts: Huawei, Apple, Foxconn, Cisco, Microsoft... belong to the hardware/software backbone of the internet and its main uses. Almost as central are the logistics and consumer-centered companies completing the GAFAM roster. Already before the crisis, it was easy to distinguish them from those claiming to be high-tech on the basis of a more or less “clever application”. The fiasco of We Work was already plain. Lots of “savvy operators” contracted heavy debts to acquire Airbnb sites... Good riddance.

Big Internet has sinister aspects, loss of confidentiality and privacy not least of them. Let us put this aside. Being indispensable for modern life, internet and its management are “critical infrastructure”. They should be regarded as utilities, just as are provision of water and power. However, they are in private monopolizing hands. One trembles at the idea of putting them in the hands of the state. But modern-day Sherman and Roosevelt would be well advised to break them, for the benefit of competition and the common good.