

KRASTEV The seven early lessons of the global coronavirus crisis

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The new anti-globalist moment could weaken populist political actors who, even when they have a point, do not have a solution.

These are strange days we are living in. We do not know when the Covid-19 pandemic will end; we do not know how it will end; and, at present, we can only speculate about its long-term political and economic impact. Historians are clear: epidemics are events, not trends. As the historian of medicine Charles Rosenberg has put it, “Epidemics start at a moment in time, proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, follow a plot line of increasing revelatory tension, move to a crisis of individual and collective character, then drift toward closure.”

Rosenberg has also argued that epidemics put pressure on the societies they strike. This strain makes visible latent structures that might not otherwise be evident. As a result, epidemics provide a sampling device for social analysis. They reveal what really matters to a population and whom they truly value. Every known epidemic has been framed and explained not simply as a public health crisis but also as a moral crisis. Certain social groups have been blamed for its emergence and spread. This drama is now playing out with Covid-19, first in China and then in many countries worldwide.

It is too early for any conclusions about the lasting impact of a major global crisis that has just started, but here are seven early lessons.

The first is that the pandemic will force the return of big government. After the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, many observers believed that crisis-born mistrust in the market would lead to greater faith in the state. This idea was nothing new: in 1929, following the onset of the Great Depression, people demanded strong government intervention to offset the failings of the market. In the 1970s, it was the other way around: people were disappointed with government intervention, so they started to believe in the market again. The paradox of the Great Recession of 2008 is that mistrust in the market did not lead to demand for greater government intervention.

Now, the coronavirus will bring the state back in a big way. Covid-19 made people rely on the government to organise their collective defence against the pandemic, and they rely on the government to save a sinking economy. The effectiveness of governments is now measured by their capacity to change people’s everyday behavior. In the context of this crisis, people’s inaction is the most visible action.

The second lesson is that the coronavirus provides one more demonstration of the mystique of borders, and will help reassert the role of the nation state within the European Union. One can already see this in the closure of many of the borders between countries – and in the fact that every government in Europe is focusing on its own people. In normal circumstances, member states would make no distinction between the nationalities of patients in their health systems but, in this crisis, they will likely prioritise their citizens over others (this is not a reference to immigrants from other regions but Europeans with EU passports).

The coronavirus will strengthen nationalism, albeit not ethnic nationalism but a type of territorial nationalism. In TV reports and in governments' announcements one can see that that co-nationals travelling from corona-infected areas are as unwelcome as any foreigner. To survive, the government will ask citizens to erect walls not simply between states but between individuals, as the danger of being infected comes from the people they meet most often. It is not the stranger but those closest to you who present the greatest risk.

The third lesson of the coronavirus relates to trust in expertise. The 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis generated a great deal of popular discontent with experts. "We don't trust experts" was the winning cry of the populists. But in the current crisis, professionalism is back. Most people are very open to trusting experts and heeding the science when their own lives are at stake. One can already see the growing legitimacy that this has lent to the professionals who lead the fight against the virus. The return of the state has been made possible because trust in experts has returned.

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The fourth lesson is open to interpretation but very important nonetheless. Unfortunately, the coronavirus could increase the appeal of the kind of big data authoritarianism employed by the Chinese government. One can blame Chinese leaders for the lack of transparency that made them react slowly to the spread of the virus in December 2019, but the efficiency of their response and the Chinese state's capacity to control the movement and behavior of people has been impressive. In the current crisis, citizens constantly compare the responses and effectiveness of their governments with those of other governments. And we should not be surprised if, the day after the crisis, China looks like a winner and the United States looks like a loser. The crisis will also additionally escalate the America-China confrontation. The US media is openly blaming Beijing for the spread of the coronavirus, while China tries to use the failures of Western democracies to respond effectively to the challenge in order to claim the superiority of its model.

The fifth lesson concerns crisis management. What governments learned in dealing with economic crises, the refugee crisis, and terrorist attacks was that panic was their worst enemy. If, for months after a terrorist attack, people changed their everyday

behavior and stopped leaving their houses, this would help terrorists achieve their goals. The same was true in 2008: a change in behavior often increased the costs of the financial crisis. So, in the early stage of Covid-19, leaders and citizens responded with messages to “stay calm”, “get on with life”, “ignore the risk”, and “don’t exaggerate”. Now, governments have to tell citizens to change their behavior by staying at home. And governments’ success in this depends on their capacity to scare people into behaving as instructed. “Do not panic” is the wrong message for the Covid-19 crisis. To contain the pandemic, people should panic – and they should drastically change their way of living. While all previous crisis of the 21st century – 9/11; the Great Recession; the refugee crisis – were driven by anxiety, this one is driven by pure fear. People fear infection, they fear for their lives and for the lives of their families. But for how long could people stay home?

The sixth lesson is that the Covid-19 crisis will have a strong impact on intergenerational dynamics. In the context of debates about climate change and the risk it presents, younger generations have been critical of their elders for not thinking about the future seriously. The coronavirus reverses these dynamics: now, the older members of society are much more vulnerable and feel threatened by millennials’ visible unwillingness to change their way of living. This intergenerational conflict could intensify if the crisis lasts for a long time. In the classical 20th-century nightmare, a nuclear war threatened to kill almost everybody, and almost at the same time, while in the case of coronavirus, young Europeans who decided to party in the time of new plague risk getting sick for a week while their parents risk dying.

The final lesson is that, at a certain point, governments will be forced to choose between containing the spread of the pandemic at the cost of destroying the economy, or tolerating a higher human cost to save the economy. Over time, some may conclude, the cost of a non-working economy will look more threatening than the risk of more infected people.

It is still early days in speculating about the long political impact of Covid-19. But it is already clear that it is an anti-globalisation virus, and that the opening of borders and mixing of peoples will be blamed for the catastrophe. Historically, one dramatic aspect of epidemics is the desire to assign responsibility. From Jews in medieval Europe to meat mongers in Chinese markets, someone is always blamed. This discourse of blame exploits existing social divisions of religion, race, ethnicity, class, or gender identity.

The coronavirus crisis has justified the fears of the anti-globalists: closed airports and the self-isolated individuals appear to be the ground zero of globalisation. It is ironic that the best way to contain the crisis of individualistic societies was to ask people to wall themselves in their apartment. Social distancing has become the new name for solidarity.

But, paradoxically, the new anti-globalist moment could weaken populist political actors who, even when they have a point, do not have a solution. It will be the ultimate irony of history if Donald Trump loses the forthcoming US presidential election

because of a radical backlash against globalisation that he championed, and if he ends defeated by a virus that originates from China and has the name of Mexican beer.

It remains to be seen exactly how the crisis will affect the future of the European project. The pandemic has dramatically reshaped the EU's response to all the other crises it has faced in the last decade. Fiscal discipline is no longer the economic mantra, even in Berlin, and there is no European government that, at the present moment, will advocate opening borders to refugees. But it is clear that, ultimately, the coronavirus will call into question some of the basic assumptions on which the EU is founded. What we had not foreseen, as the poet Stephen Spender wrote long ago, is "Wearing of Time/And the watching of the cripple passed/With limbs shaped like questions."

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