

The World That Is Coming: Pandemic, Movements and Change

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Many committed intellectuals and activists share a similar conviction: the pandemic has revealed the limits of the corporate capitalist system and the damage it has caused through neoliberal policies, austerity and the fast destruction of nature. Movements for social justice and progressive intellectuals claim the crisis should be treated as a moment of rupture that will bring significant changes into our lives, our societies and our world. Scholar-activists and movements have drawn countless scenarios for ‘alternative futures’. Most see in the pandemic crisis the confirmation and the deepening of crises they have denounced in earlier work, framing it as the crisis of corporate globalization, capitalism (Amadeo, 2020) or the Anthropocene (Kothari, in [Chapter 21](#) of this book), or as a civilization crisis (Escobar, in [Chapter 38](#) of this book).

Dozens of opinion articles and petitions have circulated stating that we need to build a fairer society after the pandemic, with more robust public services and access to healthcare for all, universal revenue and better working conditions. This chapter highlights the importance of the battle for the interpretation of the pandemic and the crisis it has generated. However, it is essential to get rid of the illusions underlying some of these stances and the simplistic view that the crisis will bring about social change by itself, that the world will change ‘because it simply can’t go on like this’.

Opening new horizons

Opening new horizons of possibility has always been a crucial role for social movements. While the dominant actors impose the idea that ‘there is no alternative’ to their world order, social movements challenge them, claiming that ‘another world is possible’. They introduce dissents, debates and reflexivity into a world order that is taken for granted, contributing to social change, to the ability of a society to transform itself, ‘to produce itself’ more conscientiously, as sociologist Alain Touraine would say.

This role is even more important in times of crisis. Crises break up routines and ‘business as usual’. They provide opportunities to reflect individually and collectively on our values and aims. The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply shaken our daily lives and many of the ‘certainties’ of our geopolitical, economic and social system. Forced to implement a lockdown to limit the virus’s dramatic spread, the defenders of the dominant world order frame the ‘return to normality’ as the purpose of a ‘national unity’¹ that gathers policymakers, corporations, workers and the whole population in a common struggle against COVID-19. Activists insist on the opposite, that what is presented as ‘normality’ is not the only way and is actually part of the problem. ‘Nothing could be worse than a return to normality’, claims Indian activist Arundhati Roy.²

In the heat of the pandemic, progressive movements have had some success in spreading arguments far beyond activist circles, at least in Western European democracies. After years of austerity in public services, governments spend lavishly to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and of the economic crisis. State interventionism in the economic sector is rising, and several governments argue for a relocalization of the production of ‘essential goods’. Those who used to promote budget cuts in public hospitals took part in the daily handclapping to support nurses and medical doctors.

Until early March 2020, French president Emmanuel Macron implemented austerity plans in public hospitals and refused to attend to the claims of nurses and medical doctors who conducted the longest strike in the sector in French history. In his two speeches to the nation at the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020, Emmanuel Macron’s perspective was very different. He described the public hospital workers as ‘national heroes’. The state increased the hospitals’ budget during the crisis, and the president swore that there would be major changes in public policy, explaining that ‘the day after the pandemic will not be like the day before’:³ ‘We will have to question the model of development that our world has been committed to in the past decades’.⁴ A fervent defender of free trade, the president now talks about ‘economic sovereignty’, provides massive loans to key ‘national corporations’ and even considers nationalizations. The pandemic may even

succeed where one of the longest general strikes in French history has failed: in getting rid of the major neoliberal pension reform.

Three lessons from the global financial crisis

Such a change of stance echoes declarations by another French president in the early aftermath of the global financial crisis. On 23 October 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy declared that ‘the ideology of the dictatorship of the market and public powerlessness has died with the financial crisis’.⁵ Alter-globalization activists could not say it better; at the 2008 European Social Forum, they shared the conviction that ‘the [financial] crisis has proven us right. Now governments will have to take into account our arguments and stop neoliberal policies’.

The aftermath of the global financial crisis took a very different path. A few years after the crisis, the dominant narrative put the burden of the economic crisis on European welfare states, paving the way to austerity policies across the continent. It led to a decade of social crisis, and increased inequalities that set the ground for historic rises of right-wing populists. In most European countries, austerity policies targeted public services and the public health sector, limiting its efficiency to cope with today’s pandemic.

Three lessons may be drawn from the aftermath of the global financial crisis when it comes to social change. The first one is that, no matter how large it is, a crisis itself will not generate social change. The latter depends on the capacity of social actors to highlight the questions spawned by the historic situation and to advance alternative political visions and economic rationality (Pleyers, 2010). Social actors play a major role in raising public awareness, proposing an alternative political and economic rationality and pushing towards a concrete implementation of alternative policies and behaviours. There is no predetermined way to get out of the pandemic. Social agency during the crisis and its aftermath may thus have significant impacts on society, economics and politics.

A second lesson is that good arguments and facts are not sufficient to shape the outcomes of the crisis. Sociologist of science Raymond Boudon (1989) demonstrated that the ‘truth’ of economic theories has more to do with their capacity to forge a provisional consensus than with their always highly debatable scientific validity. Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic is at the same time a series of facts that no one can deny and a social reality that is reinterpreted very differently by social actors. It is often embedded in a pre-existing narrative and strengthens previous convictions and worldviews. Facts and sciences are not shared references but are subject to reinterpretations by ideologies and populist leaders who mistrust science. Habermas’s faith in a deliberative public space is challenged in a time of very fragmented public space, social media, fake news and populist leaders.

Hence—and this is the third lesson—the battle over the meaning of the crisis is crucial. The actors who will shape the dominant narrative of the crisis may shape the policies to tackle the pandemic but also lay the ground for new policies in economic, social and democratic matters. As leading Latin American scholar-activist Arturo Escobar put it, ‘It is crucial at this stage to have narratives about other ways of lives, and to have them ready’⁶.

Civil society organizations and networks of movements counterbalance the government messages of national unity. Each sector of the popular or progressive movements frames the pandemic in its own meta-narratives focused on its historic claims and worldview that act as a ‘master frame’ (Snow and Benford, 2002) in its work to produce a meaning of the crisis. Some show the pandemic from different standpoints, from the favelas in Brazil (see [Chapter 11](#) of this book) or the deficient social housing in New York City (Krinsky and Caldwell, [Chapter 23](#) of this book). Others develop gendered and intersectional perspectives on the pandemic, showing that women and minorities particularly suffer from the virus and from the lockdown and cope with most of the crucial tasks of caring in families, communities and public hospitals.⁷ All over the world, progressive intellectuals link the pandemic to the ravages of capitalism (‘Capitalism is the true virus’ has become a trending slogan on social media) and with the ecological crisis. Latin American progressive movements and intellectuals frame the crisis in their meta-narrative which has surged from the confluence of indigenous, feminist, ecological and social justice movements over the last decade: ‘The crisis reveals the deep social, political and ecological crises we are in. Behind the sanitary crisis, there is a crisis of civilization’ (see Sagot, [Chapter 10](#) of this book).

Movements and countermovements

Progressive movements are, however, not alone in this battle to shape the meaning of the COVID-19 crisis. They confront two kinds of ‘countermovements’ (Polanyi, 1944): reactionary movements and a capitalist elite that defends corporate globalization, ‘a social movement for global capitalism’ (Sklair, 2002). The years that followed the global financial crisis showed the ability of the actors who defend corporate globalization and capitalism to impose their narrative of the crisis. In just a few years, they managed to shift the meaning of the crisis and the focus of policymakers from the collapse of global financial capitalism to the excesses of over-indebted welfare states, paving the way for a decade of austerity policies.

Today, the actors that seem better able to seize the opportunities opened by the crisis and the rupture of economic dogmas may be on the same side. In many countries, the COVID-19-crisis bailout has channelled historic amounts of public money (over 500 billion dollars in the first bailout budget

in the US) to large corporations. While activists claimed the crisis should be an opportunity to build a different economic model and reduce greenhouse gas emission, oil companies received their share of public money to cope with the crisis and governments set up massive bailouts and loans for the airlines.⁸ Naomi Klein (2008) has shown how capitalist elites have taken sudden crises as opportunities for imposing neoliberal policies. The COVID-19 crisis may be no exception. This scenario is already being repeated in Ecuador with the COVID-19 crisis, with measures taken by the government to reinforce neoliberal policies during the confinement (Ramírez, 2020). Elsewhere, while most governments have extended their budget to cope with the sanitary crisis, the economic and debt crises that will follow may be seized as an opportunity to shrink social policies.

Reactionary movements also draw on the pandemic. Conspiracy theories spread all over social media, giving rise to an unprecedented 'infodemic'. Such discourses embedded the crisis in a broader 'war of cultures' narrative that blames migrants, the 'multicultural society' and 'cultural Marxism' for the pandemic. In several cities, far-right activists set up neighbourhood solidarity initiatives during the COVID-19 outbreak to support their 'own people'. At the same time, they target migrant workers, foreigners or slum dwellers for spreading the virus. Far-right activists protested against the lockdown even when the pandemic was at its peak. In the United States,⁹ rallies against the stay-at-home order and business closure started in Michigan on 15 April, and have taken place in most state capitals, with the support of Donald Trump. In Brazil, the president himself participates in protests against the sanitary measures imposed by the state governors.¹⁰ In Germany, protesters include anti-vaccine activists, anti-Semites, ultra-liberals and conspiracy activists who frame the lockdown as the first step of a coup imposed by Angela Merkel.¹¹ Meanwhile, conservative neo-Pentecostal churches claim 'faith, not science will save us'¹² and bring their support to state leaders who plead to reopen the temples during the lockdown.

Racism has surged in all regions of the world, against migrant workers in India and China, against Asian Americans in the US, against minorities and poor people accused of spreading the pandemic and all over the world against refugees. The United Nations general secretary has issued an alert on what he frames as a 'tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering' unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic. 'As speculation swirled about where the virus originated, Guterres said migrants and refugees have been vilified as a source of the virus and then denied access to medical treatment. And journalists, whistle-blowers, health professionals, aid workers and human rights defenders are being targeted'.¹³ As poor people suffer higher risks of infection due to precarious work and housing, they became the target of a 'racism of class' that often combines with ethnic racism against minorities and people of colour.

Social movements are not the only actors striving to shape the meaning of the current crisis. Governments have portrayed themselves as the key players in the pandemic. They have massively invested in media and public communication seeking to impose their narrative and defending their management of the crisis. China's Communist Party carefully monitors its image as an efficient government able to deal with the crisis, control the pandemic and arrest anyone who dares to challenge this narrative or criticize the crisis management of Xi Jinping.¹⁴ In Hungary, freedom of speech has come under further threat from COVID-19 'emergency measures' that allow Prime Minister Orban to rule by decree and threatens authors of 'false information' with up to five years in prison.¹⁵ This power game to shape the narrative is not exclusive to authoritarian states and populist leaders. The French government is particularly vigilant about public discourses on its crisis management. On 16 April, a woman was detained for four hours under police custody, accused of 'insult to a person holding public authority' for hanging a banner, 'Macronavirus, when will it stop?', at her house.¹⁶

Many governments tend to hide their initial failure to deal with the virus early on by placing the blame on individual citizens who do not comply with the lockdown. In terms of biopolitics and social control, the border between democracy and authoritarian regimes has been partly blurred. The way the pandemic has been managed may pave the way for a new authoritarian era, with biopolitics grounded in new technologies, artificial intelligence and increasing interventions by police forces.

A fragmented battlefield

The battle over the societal meaning of the pandemic crisis is taking place all over the world. However, it is a highly fragmented debate, at least at three levels. First, it takes place in a complex and highly fragmented media space. Social media opens spaces for expression and the spread of alternative information and meanings. However, it also fragments the public space. Each political orientation will overload its social media followers with news and analyses that strengthen their worldview. Mainstream media and television channels remain influential in manufacturing opinions and consent. In most countries, the pandemic has lowered polarization and political conflicts, as the population unite against a common threat. The opposite has happened in Brazil and the United States: the pandemic strengthened the polarization of society, as each pole interpreted the crisis following its worldview and conducted electoral campaigns against the other stances.

Second, this battle over meanings is taking place on different bases in each country and world region. On one side, the experience of the pandemic is very different in countries and neighbourhoods where a majority of workers depend on the informal economy as compared to in European welfare states.

On the other side, progressive movements and committed intellectuals in each region interpret the crisis according to the meta-narrative they have built in previous years. For instance, Latin American movements and committed intellectuals see it as the mark of a ‘civilizational crisis’, a narrative that is less diffused in the Global North. International networks of popular movements aspire to bypass these divisions by opening spaces for ‘global dialogue for systemic change’ and building international analyses.¹⁷

Third, the outbreak takes place in a tense geopolitical context (Bringel, 2020; Chapter 35 of this book) that redefines diplomatic alliances and the relations between governments and their citizens. This panorama is not without consequences for social movements. Liberal democracy is far from being the only regime or even a common horizon. Activists engage in this battle over meaning in very different circumstances and at very different risks in authoritarian or liberal regimes. However, COVID-19 arrived after a decade of increasing repression of protests and movements, both in authoritarian and liberal regimes.

Conclusion

Will today’s progressive movements succeed where others failed a decade ago, in the aftermath of the financial crisis? There is no easy path that leads from the pandemic to a better, greener and less unequal world. Once new horizons have opened, it is only the beginning of a struggle to assign meaning to the crisis. The fact that a fairer, more equal and sustainable world is urgently needed is, however, not sufficient to rebuild the world in different ways after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 outbreak is a battlefield for alternative futures (Pleyers, 2020). Progressive, capitalist and reactionary movements compete to impose their narratives and shape policies and society, while governments urge to return to the pre-pandemic ‘normality’ and massively invest in diffusing their own narrative and advertising their management of the crisis. Shaping the meaning of the current crisis and opening new horizons for powerful visions of alternative futures is a major stake and will have a dramatic impact on society, the economic system and the daily lives of billions of people, as well as on the environmental crisis.

Notes

¹ Emmanuel Macron’s first public address on the virus was entitled ‘A united France is our best asset in the troubled period we’re going through with COVID-19. We will hold. All together’: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/12/adresse-aux-francais>

² Roy, A. (2020) ‘The Pandemic Is a Portal’, *Financial Times*, [online] 3 April, available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca> See also Bizberg, in this book.

³ See: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/16/adresse-aux-francais-covid19>

- ⁴ Macron, E. (2020) *Adresse aux Français*, 12 March, available from: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/12/adresse-aux-francais>
- ⁵ Sarkozy, N. (2008) Déclaration de M. Nicolas Sarkozy, Président de la République, sur les mesures de soutien à l'économie face à la crise économique internationale, 23 October. <https://www.elysee.fr/nicolas-sarkozy/2008/10/23/declaration-de-m-nicolas-sarkozy-president-de-la-republique-sur-les-mesures-de-soutien-a-leconomie-face-a-la-crise-economique-internationale-a-argonay-haute-savoie-le-23-octobre-2008>
- ⁶ Intervention in the CLACSO, ALAS and ISA online seminar "Coronavirus y disputas por lo público y lo común en América Latina", 9 April 2020. <https://youtu.be/pOFQlsesL88>
- ⁷ Hirsch, A. (2020) 'After coronavirus, black and brown people must be at the heart of Britain's story', *The Guardian*, [online] 7 May, available from: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/07/coronavirus-black-brown-people-britain-ethnic-minorities
- ⁸ See: <https://stay-grounded.org/savepeoplenotplanes>
- ⁹ Vogel, K.P., Rutenberg, J. and Lerer, L. (2020) 'The Quiet Hand of Conservative Groups in the Anti-Lockdown Protests', *The New York Times*, [online] 21 April, available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/us/politics/coronavirus-protests-trump.html>
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- ¹² Michelle, B. (2020) 'Can faith healing work by phone? Charismatic Christians try prayer to combat the coronavirus', *Washington Post*, [online] 3 April, available from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/04/03/supernatural-healing-christian-faith-coronavirus-pandemic>
- ¹³ United Nations (2020) 'UN Secretary-General Denounces "Tsunami" of Xenophobia Unleashed amid COVID-19', United Nations, [online] 8 May, available from: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20076.doc.htm>
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