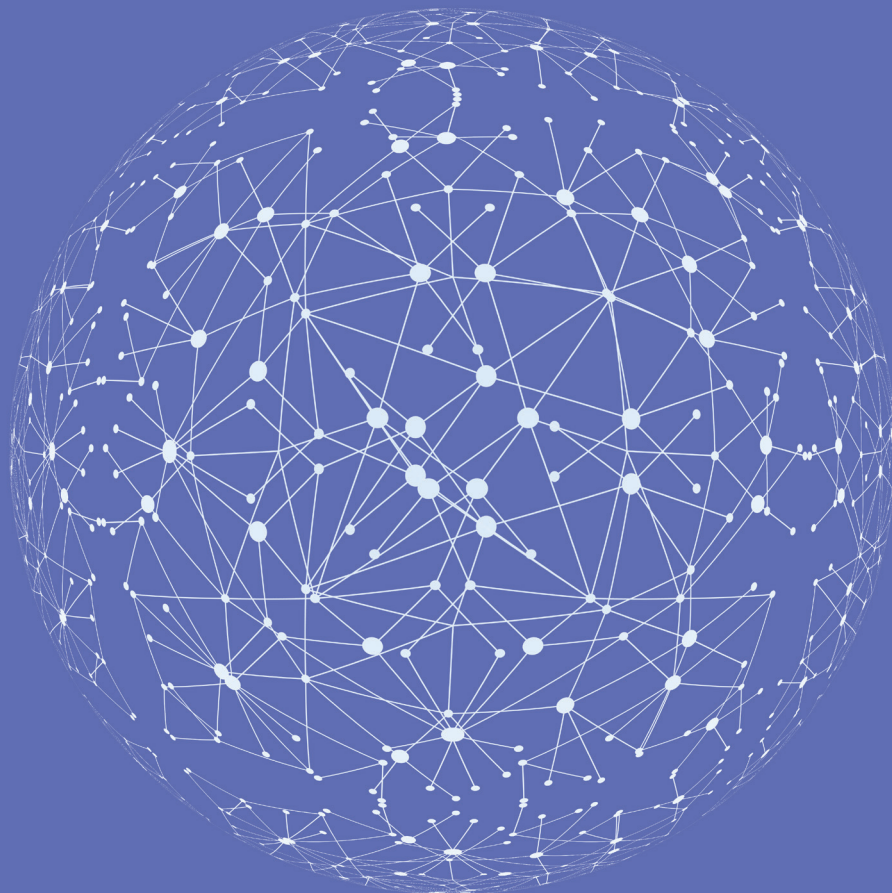


THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: the End of Neoliberal Globalisation?



**Veronika Sušová-Salminen
Ilona Švihlíková
(eds.)**

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Praha

! argument

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Petr Drulák, Tomáš Daněk, Petr Schnur, Michael Hauser, 2020
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Foreword

Veronika Sušová-Salminen – Ilona Švihlíková

The pandemic arising from the new and completely unexpected coronavirus was the biggest event of 2020. Now, after nearly eleven months of this infectious disease raging across the planet, the short and long-term effects of it are pervasive. At stake is more than just the specific impact and consequences of it, i.e. the view of the pandemic as a catalyst for change and transformation. The pandemic can also be seen as a diagnosis, a look at the state of our society and the problems we face. The aim of this compilation is to provide various perspectives on the pandemic in order to create a preliminary reflection on these developments and their enigmatic nature. In this sense, the pandemic has become a window to a hitherto uncertain future, a diagnostic tool for taking stock of the current situation of the world. Our compilation, which undertakes this dual reflection on the pandemic, consists of essays from the perspective of economics, ecology, philosophy, sociology, culturology, political science and historical science.

The virus in the world of neoliberal globalisation

The last forty years have been largely characterised by neoliberal globalisation. The main engine for it has been market relations, technology and technological changes, asymmetric interdependence and other interrelated attributes. These processes have been accompanied by integration, dramatic cultural changes, the weakening position of nation states in international relations, the financialisation of individual econ-



omies, deindustrialisation as industrial capacity moves from the centre to the periphery, increasing social inequalities in global and national contexts, and a worsening environmental crisis that cannot be properly understood without the social bonds that underpin it. It should be added that the promises of neoliberal globalisation were never quite in tune with reality. Our Czech context provides a good example. The only reality that emerged from the promises of the post-communist transformation of the 1990s was the local declaration that neoliberal globalisation had ‘triumphed’. Instead of the dream trip to Europe, however, the Czech economy and society embarked on a journey that left both of them stuck in a dependent role on the edges of the European Union, which itself is no longer able to hide the problems confronting it with sustainable development (beyond GDP growth rates).

The first visible disruption in neoliberal globalisation was the financial crisis of 2008, which highlighted both the structural problems of this model (financialisation and its risks) and the unsustainable means for dealing with it politically. This led to the socialisation of private losses, followed by a wave of cuts in public spending (i.e. in services provided by the state to its citizens). Taxpayers were told that these cuts were necessary and the only resort, all the while the taxes they paid were used to rescue banks and financial institutions. In 2008, the rot left behind by the neoliberal model of globalisation inspired very strong reactions in the political sphere. The institutions created by neoliberal globalisation, including the European Union, had not only begun to lose their way, but also trust and legitimacy. The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016 can be seen as the culmination of this process, a manifestation of the crisis of American democracy after more than four decades of harsh neoliberalism.

For today’s society, the typical crisis is always a public one. It is the completely logical consequence (and goal, it should be said)



of neoliberalism, which is based on worshipping the individual and organising social relations through market relationships, through supply and demand, through deregulation and general economisation, and through privatisation and commercialisation. The motto of neoliberals is private property and limited government. In fact, it is government that rules for the benefit of a small group of wealthy individuals and corporations, and so unsurprisingly it maintains a strong police presence. Today, neoliberalisation affects all aspects of social life, including our privacy. Market relations have penetrated culture, education and, naturally, healthcare. Culture is commercialised, sold and above all consumed. Education is not only becoming commercialised as well, but it is subject to the strict logic and needs of the market (the mantra of education is preparation for the ‘labour market’). Healthcare is undergoing partial privatisation. In many parts of Europe (especially the eastern half) there is increasing pressure to enact financial contributions for treatment, and basic democratic values like equality have begun to be denied. In the most extreme cases, the right to life and care have become an issue in relation to social status and income. This weakens the social and economic functions of the democratic state as an institution of society, while overall responsibility is consciously transferred to the family in accordance with Thatcher’s slogan ‘individuals and their families’. From here, we are just a step away from another important ally of neoliberalism – social conservatism. The European post-war welfare state, whether the Keynesian model or ‘Soviet’ type, has been gradually dismantled piece by piece. It involves more than just gutting, privatising or outright abolishing its institutions. Neoliberal subjectivity has now become deeply engrained beyond Western societies, clearly evident in the responses to the global health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The nature of any health crisis caused by a rapidly spreading infectious disease calls for collective solutions and social



solidarity. Obviously individuals and individual states cannot fight the pandemic in isolation. In addition, the market and the relationships based on it appear to be the wrong prescription for dealing with this crisis. Healthcare systems calibrated according to market needs have proved incapable of providing rapid and necessary mobilisation. Moreover, the relocation of production capacity to Asia, especially to China (which represents one of the main manifestations of neoliberal globalisation), impeded the Western fight against the disease in its early stages. A large part of medical supplies and basic pharmaceuticals are made in Asia and imported to Europe and other countries. The crisis has forced Western governments to face the harsh reality that they have no control over the tools they need to combat the disease. The downside of globalisation has thus been revealed in one of its weakest areas.

The disease in conflict with individualism

In a Western context, the fight against the pandemic and neoliberal individualism has shown two completely different worlds in conflict with each other. On the one hand, a contagious disease with a high rate of infection and burden on healthcare systems (i.e. overloading their technical and human capacities) requires collective action under the motto ‘one for all and all for one’. This goes for both the state (support, coordination, organisation) and individuals (restrictions on consumption, leisure time, etc.). On the other hand, there is a neoliberal demand for a ‘return to normalcy’, even at the cost of sacrifices, and for the economy to take precedence over all else. The reaction in this case has been essentially twofold: neoliberal economists making speeches and appeals on one side, and ordinary citizens, alienated by neoliberalism, living in fear (not unjustifiably) for their livelihoods on the other. Neoliberal economists are fighting to protect a doctrine that the coronavirus has fundamentally challenged, already sev-



eral times over. Both cases have seen expressions of market Darwinism that has no fear in claiming, for example, that the deaths of already ill seniors is the cost of a working economy. There is nothing surprising about this in the Czech environment, because generational conflict has been an integral part of the post-communist transformation since its inception.

After almost a year of the pandemic, we can say that the West, which tends to lecture other countries about the supremacy of its values, has fully betrayed its neoliberal antisocial roots. Meanwhile, the societies that sought to suppress the virus at the outset instead of embarking down the road of a 'twisted' trade-off between mortality and the economy have not only significantly lower mortality rates but better economic conditions. But you have to go to East Asia to find these societies. Naturally there are many in the West who do not attribute this success to any particular type of political regime, rather to the capacity of the state, the quality of its leadership, and their high degree of trust in society.¹

In the context of Western societies today, this state of affairs has once again revealed the fact that, although solidarity is often talked about in the highest circles, the European Union has been severely undermined by four decades of neoliberalism. This is not just about solidarity between the individual and society, but solidarity as the basis of the social and economic policy of the state for the benefit of its citizens. Citizens today in the Czech Republic and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe have little confidence in the state or its public institutions working in their favour. The paralysis of solidarity as the backbone of society and this distrust in the state, its institutions and, of course, in representative democracy (political parties, parliament, elections) have complicated the overall management of the pandemic. It is complicated further by the crisis in values brought on by neoliberalism. In the public sphere this crisis is showing ever more signs of desublimation,

¹ For example, Fukuyama, Francis: *The Pandemic and Political Order. It Takes the State*, in *Foreign Affairs* July/August, 2020, p. 26.



a psychological process where negative emotions and otherwise socially unacceptable impulses are given free rein. With its emphasis on individualism and privatisation, neoliberalism has become one of the ways to remove the mechanisms of sublimation from the public sphere.² That is why we hear some people publicly, and shamelessly, declare that the death of a few thousand pensioners is not such a big deal to them.

Negative crisis or an opportunity?

At first glance, the pandemic seems to have become another catalyst for the ongoing crisis of Western societies and the Western system of domination as we have known it since the early 16th century. In this scenario, the result will be the continuation of a negative crisis, i.e. a crisis that will not be used for much-needed reform (or, if you like, revolution). But there is also a second possibility, namely, that the pandemic will contribute to a recovery that demands the rejection of neoliberal dogma, which, to be blunt, is another killer (and not only in the times of the coronavirus). History has been ruthless towards civilisations: the inability to learn from mistakes and crises is unforgivable.

Our compilation looks at the pandemic from different perspectives and in the context of the contemporary world and its contradictions.

Geologist Václav Cílek sees the pandemic of the new coronavirus as a composite crisis characterised by the concurrence of a number of crises at once. Cílek thus presents the current pandemic as part of a much broader process of change and crisis, including climate change.

Sociologist Jan Keller focuses on the impact the pandemic has had on services, which in the past was seen by many as a way out of deindustrialisation. Keller shows that at the moment, the pandemic has impacted services in different ways, although none of them spells a rosy future for the sector.

² More in Brown, Wendy: *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism. The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. Columbia University Press: New York, 2019, pp.164–165 (Kindle edition).



Political scientist Petr Drulák shows that crises like the current pandemic have two forms of impact: those of coercion and those we learn from. Drulák draws attention to the ongoing crisis of the liberal state in a new, pandemic context, with regard to the future of Europe as dictated by changing international relations.

Culturologist Tomáš Daněk observes the socio-cultural impacts of the pandemic on society in terms of the current situation, but also sees them as a chance for a fundamental, positive turn for contemporary global civilisation. Daněk believes that the main source of change must be a ‘revolution of the head and the heart’, a healing of interpersonal relationships from the bottom up.

Historian Petr Schnur addresses some of the political implications of the pandemic in the context of contemporary Germany, distinguishing a ‘corona policy’ from a purely epidemiological struggle. Schnur shows how the pandemic has clashed with the rules of today’s anti-discourse, which has very concrete consequences for democracy and the fight against disease.

Economist Ilona Švihlíková provides a first diagnosis of the economic changes wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic and their future outlook. She points out that the pandemic has re-emphasised the ongoing crisis in Western societies based on the neoliberal paradigm.

Philosopher Michael Hauser sees the coronavirus pandemic as a turning point in the entanglement of long-term crises that had culminated in the financial meltdown of 2008. Hauser wonders whether this turning point will lead to the recognition of the true state of affairs and thus change the present neoliberal capitalist understanding of the economy, society and the global world.

Historian Veronika Sušová-Salminen traces the history of pandemics and epidemics in the past of human societies. Using three specific cases – the Black Death, the mass epidemics



that followed the discovery of America, and the ‘Spanish’ flu – Sušová-Salminen looks at how the changes and transformations were not just social and environmental in nature, but purely political as well.

Our aim is not to systematically explain the effects of the new coronavirus pandemic, which is not possible anyway due to the ongoing developments accompanying it. We seek to capture specific moments and draw attention to several important contexts within the framework of a freely conducted debate. We believe the work that follows will evoke profound interest in our readers and, above all, inspire further discourse on the matter. ●



A composite crisis of the past and the situation today

Václav Cílek

Such a pervasive revolution resulted in the extinction, creation and development of many cities.

Niccolò Machiavelli, Florentine Histories

Introduction: the synchronicity of devils walking in a group

In this article, the term composite crisis is understood as a crisis which, like a rope braided from different materials, consists of several causal undercurrents not necessarily related to one other. An example can be a protracted economic crisis combined with a volcanic eruption that ruins the harvest for two or three years.³ History has sometimes seen phenomena that ancient authors⁴ interpreted as a total change of circumstances, a period when the very foundation of the world changes, and therefore different aspects of society sooner or later change with it to varying degrees. Metaphorically, we can say that when the trunk changes, then so too do the branches.

When we looking back in time, we recognise, for example, the first or second half of the Renaissance, but not any individual decades marked by periods of quiet, waiting for change and moments of radical transformation. They are acutely observed, however, by the participants of a certain epoch. Historical time is usually longer than the experience of the individual, so it is

3 By mid-September 2020, California was one of the states hardest hit by Covid-19. Temperatures reached 49°C and fires raged there and in neighbouring Oregon, the four largest fires ever recorded in the history of both states. Economists fear that the damage to both regions is irreversible. Oregon saw 500,000 people evacuated at one point. Power supply was cut off in many places and photovoltaic production ceased as a result of smoke from the fires. In some places (Oroville) people had to be evacuated for a second time on account of the fires reaching areas previously affected by torrential rains. Temperatures on the outer edge of the jet stream fell from 38°C to 0.6°C and it snowed in the Rocky Mountains. There has not been weather like this in living memory. The Weather Channel, Covid tracker.

4 E.g. Thucydides: *The History of the Peloponnesian War*: 'Old stories of past prodigies, which had not found much confirmation in recent experience, now became credible. Wide areas, for instance, were affected by violent earthquake; there were more frequent eclipses of the sun than had ever been recorded before; in various parts of the country there were extensive droughts followed by famine; and there was the plague which did more harm and destroyed more life than almost any other single factor. All these calamities fell together upon the Greeks at the outbreak of war.' (Penguin: New York, 1986, p. 48). Tacitus: *Annals*, Book XVI: 'Upon this year, disgraced by so many deeds of shame, heaven also set its mark by tempest and disease. Campania was wasted by a whirlwind, which far and wide wrecked the farms, the fruit trees, and the crops, and carried its fury to the neighbourhood of the capital, where all classes of men were being decimated by a deadly epidemic. No outward sign of a distempered air was visible. Yet the houses were filled with lifeless bodies, the streets with funerals. Neither sex nor age gave



difficult to speak only of the 'coronavirus crisis'. We perceive it, perhaps as a future historian would, only as one act in a much wider and more diverse stream of change.

Contemporaries of the Peloponnesian War experienced it as two wars separated by a decade of peace, although 'peace' here actually means preparation for another war. It is similarly possible to see the First and Second World Wars as one conflict or the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917-1918 as a single revolution. The future observer may think in terms of the Anthropocene, which, in accordance with Crutzen's original design, began with improvements in the steam engine in 1784⁵, or the period of the great acceleration⁶, whose beginnings can be traced back to 1945, 1960 or 2000.

As I write this article – in September of 2020 – we are being overwhelmed by the coronavirus agenda, but despite the blanket coverage by the media, two other crises are constantly beckoning our attention – the economy and the climate. It is therefore more realistic to think about the present as a composite crisis, beginning visibly with the economic crisis of 2008⁷ before encompassing movements like Extinction Rebellion ten years later, and continuing now with the coronavirus pandemic. Our inability to find a stronger causal link between the three constituents of *economy-climate-coronavirus* than a general statement on the risks of globalisation denotes the uncertainty or ambiguity that have always allowed composite crises to take hold. They project themselves as a synchronicity of real or seemingly unrelated causes, behave like a nonlinear system, attract singularities, undergo a period of chaos, and generally conclude with the regeneration of society. Elements of destructive destruction and creative destruction appear in them.⁸

Every crisis, every historical moment, is unique. History does not repeat itself, but individual motives and the need for social change do, as does the opposite need for the stability and sim-

⁵ Crutzen, P.J., Stoermer, E.F.: The Anthropocene, in *Global Change Newsletter*, 41/2000, pp. 17-18.

⁶ McNeill, J. R.: *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.

⁷ Determining the beginning is almost always a matter of deliberation, because each beginning has its own beginning and so on.

⁸ The concept of creative destruction is associated with the work of the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, but we can imagine it more clearly, for example, as the Great Fire of London, which destroyed beautiful buildings but also created the modern city. In terms of progress (whatever that word means), this is usually a positive development, but in terms of cost and suffering as well. A good example of the creativity that arises from hard times is the emergence of nation-states after 1918, but at the cost of human suffering in 1914-1919.



ilarity of human nature.⁹ We use our knowledge of history not to guess the future but to keep us from blindly blundering into misfortune. The evolutionary goal of any crisis is not simply self-defence, but to defeat it creatively. This instils positive motivation and a new attitude about life in the response. Mental health tends to benefit more from being a part of change¹⁰ rather than being part of a system that, even at great expense, seeks to save a form of the world that cannot be saved.

The Roman version of history

In 2017, Kyle Harper wrote a book on the eternal theme of ‘The Fate of Rome,’ but added an interesting subtitle: ‘Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire’¹¹. There are about 200 different hypotheses on the fall of Rome. History is almost always the result of many different sociological and natural processes, which are interconnected more like a neural network than a sequence of causes and consequences. Complex systems like a globalised society or climate change almost always defy the possibility of identifying one major driving force of history, but the processes that lead to fundamental changes can be ‘illuminated’ from various angles. Let us focus here on the factors that interest us today, on the issues of disease and climate change, but knowing full well that this could include consideration of the army or food security. The Roman army, which had about half a million soldiers and auxiliary units at its height, not only shrunk to half that size later on, but mostly employed provincial mercenaries who had learned Roman military tactics. Similarly, the import of grain by land from Gaul cost at least fifty times as much as shipping it from Egypt.

Edward Gibbon, author of the famous work *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, addresses the problem philosophically by saying that the fall of Rome was inevitable and natural due to disintegration brought on by prosperity, and it happened at the moment the artificial support structure

⁹ ‘If we think objectively about the flow of history, we come to the conclusion that the world has not changed since its beginnings and good and evil have gone hand in hand throughout its existence. The only change we can observe is how they spill over national borders into other countries.’ Machiavelli, N.: *Reflections on Governance and the Military*. Prague: Odeon, 1968, p. 262.

¹⁰ Sinek, Simon: *Start with Why*. Penguin: New York, 2009. Sinek points out that fear or panic leads to tunnel vision, i.e. we see only a part of the whole, and he says that if we were able to do everything, then we would not need each other.

¹¹ Harper, Kyle: *The Fate of Rome. Climate, Disease and the End of an Empire*. Princeton University Press, 2017. The book was deemed inspirational but often through inaccurately interpreted reading. See the excellent three-part (!) review by J. Haldon et al.: ‘Plagues, Climate Change, and the End of the Empire. A response to Kyle Harper’s The Fate of Rome 1-3’, in *History Compass*, 2018, pp. 15-17.



had been removed. The empire collapsed under its own weight. At the beginning of our era, about a quarter of the Earth's population, about 75 million people, lived in the Roman Empire, and the capital itself had up to one million inhabitants. By 650 AD, Rome had only around 20,000 inhabitants. Procopius even claims that the population dropped to 500, but this number may be skewed by his Christian-inspired attempts to show the collapse of the pagan world as well. So what then happened to Rome and what role did climate and disease play in its demise?¹²

Ancient tradition is remarkable in that historians and philosophers have observed the fate of at least sixty major city-states over the course of several centuries, covering an ensemble of civilisation unimaginable today. In his book *New History*¹³, Zosimos set himself to the task of describing the crisis situation: *'For as Polybius informs us by what means the Romans in a short space of time attained a vast empire, it is my purpose to show on the other hand, that by their ill management in as short a time they lost it.'* His cycle of civilisation is described in these words: *'In their cycle, states most often go from order to disorder, and then rise again from disorder to order. Nature no longer allows human things to stagnate in peace. So when they reach the highest perfection and can no longer continue to go up, they must necessarily fall. And again, when they fall and reach the deepest bottom of disorder, and therefore cannot descend deeper, they must necessarily rise again. So everything falls from good to evil and rises from evil to good. Peace is born of war, idleness of peace, disorder of idleness, and decay of disorder. Similarly, order is born of decay, bravery of order and from this come fame and fortune. In this way, countries are doomed. When that happens and people get wise to misfortune again, they return to order, unless some extraordinary force wipes them out.'*

According to Zosimos, the full force of plague and war can only be manifested during poor government: *'Gallus was so supine in the administration of the empire that the Scythians in the*

¹² There is no room for it in this article, but a similar study can be made on the Black Death of the 14th century and the long-distance transport of disease from China and the colder fluctuations of the Little Ice Age, which in certain years led to famines, uprisings, wage hikes and economic crises.

¹³ Zosimos, *New History*. London: Green and Chaplin (1814), Book 1.



first place terrified all the neighbouring nations, and then they laid waste all the countries as far by degrees as the sea coast ; not leaving one nation subject to the Romans unpillaged, and taking almost all the unfortified towns, and many that were fortified. Beside the war on every side, which was insupportably burdensome to them, the cities and villages were infested with a pestilence, which swept away the remainder of mankind in those regions.'

Climate and primary productivity

The classical model of civilisation in crisis is based on population increases during fruitful decades, where agricultural surpluses also provide for the emergence of institutions and complexly organised societies. During climate change, which in recent centuries saw Central and Northern Europe afflicted with cold and humid years that ruined the grain supply, the soil is no longer able to feed all people. Wars, famines and epidemics break out and society as a whole contracts into a more localised and simpler mode. Southern Mediterranean Europe and the forest-steppes of Eastern Europe depend on dry interim periods for their primary productivity. Of course, there is certainly more to it than this, because society has its own psychological and social dynamics manifested, for example, in secular cycles.¹⁴

The Roman Empire reached its peak during the so-called Roman climatic optimum and began to decline as the climate cooled and became more humid. K. Harper distinguishes the following climatic periods:

Roman climatic optimum: 200 BC – 150 AD

Roman transitional period: 150 AD – 450 AD

Late ancient Little Ice Age: 450 AD – 700 AD

The situation is not entirely clear, however, since different regions, namely on the Mediterranean coast, react differently.

¹⁴ Turchin, Peter: A Theory for Formation of Large Empires, in *Journal of Global History*, 2009/4, p. 191. London School of Economics and Political Science. See the author's other works on secular cycles.



Even in the much smaller Czech lands, the response of individual areas to dry years, for example, can be distinguished. Medieval and prehistoric agriculture worked with little grain. Two to three kernels of grain (sometimes up to five) had to be harvested to yield a single kernel. To contend with this low yield, societies developed bins, grain warehouses and public granaries. Having enough food for the entire community in the event of a barren year was of central importance to the rise of civilisation. Key years were 120 AD – drought in North Africa, 165 AD – the beginning of the Antonine Plague, and 250 AD – years of dampness followed by the Cypriot plague and first fall of Rome.¹⁵ There was also the great pandemic of the Justinian plague, which began in 541 AD and devastated the Mediterranean for another 200 years at intervals of about twenty years.¹⁶

Of particular interest is the connection between the Justinian plague to the coldest winters (536–540 AD) of that entire millennium, which can be seen in the annual growth rings of trees. According to Procopius, sunlight had to struggle to reach the Earth's surface. The veil of volcanic dust made the sun look more like the moon. This situation lasted for at least 18 months and was accompanied by global famine, documented from China to Scandinavia. It was in these years that the first Slavs came to the Czech Republic. The Mediterranean experienced a wave of aridity (drought) that led to the abandonment of several dozen Byzantine cities. Their remnants have been preserved in Syria as entire city blocks rising up to the second floor.

Repeated decimation by the plague weakened the Byzantine Empire and triggered a series of major migrations, notably of Slavs and Avars. Palestine fell in 614, and in 626 the Persians and Avars tried to conquer Constantinople.¹⁷ Historian William Rosen believes that the well-organised Islamic expansion led to the creation of Europe, which saw that it could no longer

15 There was a complete transformation of Roman institutions, including the newly defined role of the emperor and system of government. Rome recovered after 250 AD, but never regained its former prominence.

16 McNeill, W. H.: *Plagues and People*. Anchor Books: New York, 1976/1998.

17 Rosen W.: *Justinian's Flea. Plague, Empire and the Birth of Europe*. New York-London: Viking/Penguin, 2007.



rely on the Byzantine Empire for protection. It had to create its own large and competent military and administrative force.

Plague and lifestyle

The Romans were mainly city dwellers. Their cities drew migrants from various parts of the empire, from Gaul to Bactria (partly located in present-day Afghanistan), and they supported long-distance trade, the import of exotic food, and circus games. The transport of animals mostly started in North Africa, from a semiarid ecosystem near the tropical zone that is today's Sudan. The combination of rodents, fleas and camels also posed a virological risk. Supplying cities with clean water was a matter of life and death in this situation, but they still had the reputation for being 'cemeteries' because diseases could not be prevented there. The famous ancient physician Galen was aware that plague often struck after very rainy or hot summers and usually led to famine and the flight of people to the countryside. The weakened empire did not have enough people or food for further expansion, so even in the time of Marcus Aurelius, Rome struggled to protect its borders.

When nature becomes the enemy

For centuries in European history, nature has been seen as a source of pleasure and harmony, but there have also been decades of climate problems, typically flash floods, droughts and fires, and this gives people the feeling that nature has turned against them. Agricultural history has so firmly rooted mankind in the environment that such 'hostility' evokes an 'end of time' response, especially if it is accompanied by volcanic eruptions and unusual phenomena in the sky. Part of nature's hostility to mankind was likely imprinted during the early years of Christianity. Nature needed to be overcome with hard work and will power, and only today are we beginning to reap the fruits of the feeling that nature must be controlled.



People from the world of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages never disappeared, only their way of life was simplified. For a period of at least two centuries, money disappeared over a large swath of Europe, used as a source of metal or ornaments. Some areas, such as Egypt at the end of the 6th century, suffered the consequences of too much specialisation when the wheat market there collapsed. On the other hand, a number of cities grew, especially in the Levant. Each region had its own slightly different story to tell, depending on how well they adapted to the situation and were able to benefit from it. The ancient gods could no longer help the world, and so the worship of the Virgin Mary began to spread, but compared to recent European traditions, she was more of a cosmic power than human or godlike mother. When Edward Gibbon pondered the end of Rome, he was not surprised that it had happened, but that the empire had endured long enough for the new culture of the early Middle Ages to arise from its ashes.

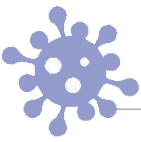
Conclusion – what to make of it?

The following considerations can offer no more than an estimate of the situation or a working hypothesis on how to approach the world, but let us go beyond the uncertainty and try to formulate them here:

1. I think the basic question today is the nature of the crisis. If the coronavirus is an ‘unfortunate coincidence’, we can expect a return to the world of past relationships, with the future perhaps poorer and simpler, but similar to the world we have known. In that case, it would be okay to try to save ‘yesterday’s world’.¹⁸ However, if the coronavirus epidemic is part of an ongoing composite crisis, then investing in change, i.e. in the ‘world of the future’, becomes necessary.

2. Given that climate change is manifested by the unprecedented acidification of our oceans, by anomalously warm

¹⁸ Zweig, Stefan: *Svět včerejška* (Yesterday’s World). Torst: Prague, 1994.



summers, major fires, heavy wind storms, drenching rainfall and drought, all in an environment where two other major warming mechanisms – the gulf stream system and solar activity – are weakening, it is probable that we are entering a new climate stability and so find ourselves at the beginning of a chaotic transitional period.¹⁹ This would mean that ‘yesterday’s world’ is literally history. It is the same situation that Athens experienced after the plague of the Peloponnesian War, ancient Rome following a series of plagues in the first centuries of our era, early medieval Europe after it was abandoned by a Byzantine Empire devastated by two centuries of the Justinian plague²⁰, and Europe of the late Middle Ages, afflicted by a great crisis that resulted in the flowering culture of the Renaissance.²¹

3. Examples of crises with a possible return to a state close to the original one include the transitional periods between the Old and Middle Kingdoms and Middle and New Kingdoms of ancient Egypt or some of the Chinese crises. In this case, however, ‘stability’ is maintained by the course of natural conditions, e.g. the Nile floods.²² An example of a crisis where a return is no longer possible is the transition between pagan antiquity and the early Christian Middle Ages, which did not last for the typical 100-200 years, but for a longer period of time because it entailed a cultural revolution in human values. It did not end until the Renaissance, which is when we first perceive the beginnings of globalised consumerism. It is possible that this 500-year period that marks the world today will end in the coming decades.²³ The reason, simply enough, is that increased consumption leads to carbon dioxide emissions, which are one of the major causes of climate change. The culture of frugality demands a completely different mindset.

4. The current climate crisis places the highest demands on energy production and consumption. Jevons paradox and the Khazzoom-Brookes postulate²⁴ show that energy-saving tech-

19 Ying, Cuil, Schubert, B. A., Jahren, A. H.: A 25 m.y. record of low atmospheric CO₂, in *Geology*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1130/G47681.1>.

20 Rosen. W.: *Justinian & Flea. Plague, Empire and the Birth of Europe*. Viking/Penguin, 2007.

21 White, A.: *Plague and Pleasure. The Renaissance World of Pius II*. The Catholic University of America Press, 2014.

22 Bárta, Miroslav: *Příběh civilizace* (The Story of Civilisation). Academia: Prague, 2016.

23 Pitirim, Sorokin: *The Crisis of Our Age*. (1948) N. Berdyaev also writes about this topic in his essay *The New Middle Ages* (published by Pavel Mervart, 2004).

24 Jevons paradox was first described by one of the founders of mathematical economics, William Stanley Jevons, in his 1865 book *The Coal Question*. He found that a more efficient steam engine, designed to reduce coal consumption, actually increased it because energy became cheaper and there-



niques are inefficient. Important is not to produce the item in question or to provide the service. The thing goes completely against the spirit of advertising or buying newspapers and leads to dematerialisation and greater localisation. The current crisis is therefore likely to lead to the usual chaotic periods of collective psycho-spiritual crisis, but will eventually result in a new kind of culture.

5. Complete growth is probably unpredictable, but it helps when we can proceed on the basis of the individual or collective experience of resilience. The basic steps are: (1) orientation in the problem, i.e. continuous monitoring and learning, (2) creating physical, mental and social resilience. This helps mainly at first, but then the need to actively overcome the thing becomes apparent, because resilience itself is the situation of a besieged city that does not fall, but becomes exhausted. This stimulates (3) the need for positive values and especially creativity, which is often followed by (4) transcendence, especially in really severe crises.²⁵

6. The power of the good life means a situation where you have enough wealth at your disposal to lead a good life, but it does not destroy the living foundation of the planet, rather it maintains its biogeochemical processes and thus affects the climate and operation of the entire earth system. The principle of the good life in an environment with limited resources can be shown in the distribution of money, water or energy. The annual energy consumption per capita in European countries is 120-180 GJ, but in the USA and Canada it is higher than 300 GJ. Not surprisingly, the richest people consume far more energy, so we can talk about energy inequality. In the mid-1960s, water consumption in what was then Czechoslovakia was around 260 litres per person per day, and it was expected to reach the American level of around 500 litres per person per day by around 1990, but in fact it dropped to 80-100 litres as a result of unexpectedly

fore more affordable. In 1980, economist Daniel Khazzoom teamed up with Leonard Brookes, chief economist at the British Atomic Energy Agency, to describe a phenomenon we now call the Khazzoom-Brookes postulate. Originally, they wanted to reduce the risk of another oil crisis by introducing new, more fuel-efficient cars. Their research showed that if you save energy in one place, you can spend the money saved not only on a bigger car, but also in a completely different economic sector. If we drive less, we can save up for a vacation in Thailand. In the end, energy-saving technologies only help us consume even more energy. The Khazzoom-Brookes postulate has been defined as a phenomenon where microeconomic savings can lead to macroeconomic waste. Jevons paradox and the Khazzoom-Brookes postulate are sometimes supplemented by the famous Parkinson's laws, originally developed by economist and sociologist Cyril Northcote Parkinson during his service in the British government. Basically, the steps taken to simplify a system (more workers with a better division of labour) actually complicate it when a certain number of people are involved. Parkinson tried to mathematically calculate how big an expert commission could be without doing any work and found that it was 19.9-22.4 members. He claimed that the number of members still able to agree is around five to eight. Evolutionary economist Kenneth Boulding used the reasoning of Thomas Robert Malthus to propose a 'completely gloomy theorem' that states that 'any technical progress can help people escape poverty only for as long as poverty limits the number of people. Any improvement will allow the population to grow and will soon allow more people than ever before to live in poverty, thus increasing the total amount of human suffering.'

²⁵ Frankl, V.E.: *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*. Trans. P. Babka. Portál: Prague, 2016. Frankl says: 'Those who were probably capable of sur-



high prices in the 1990s, without however any perceptible detriment to personal comfort.

Under consideration in poorer countries is a system where the consumption of 50 litres per person per day, for example, will be understood to be the right of every human being to water, and it will be cheap, while higher consumption will be subject to progressively higher water prices. We need to realise that although we may be able to handle higher water consumption in the Czech Republic, this is no longer the case in Greece or the Mediterranean. Similarly, we need to start looking at energy and food consumption as a human right to a certain point, and from what point it becomes a luxury that threatens the quality of life of other people. V. Smil estimates that the quality of life (meaning having a decent environment and all the basic needs for personal growth) requires 100 GJ per person per year, but new technologies can reduce this consumption even more. For the time being, our civilisation counts on having almost unlimited energy for cheap consumption, but this is the path to systemic environmental problems, climate change, and indebtedness charged to nature, to the poorer part of the population and to future generations. Determining how much energy we have available in a mindful and caring relationship with the world, and managing it accordingly, should be our goal.²⁶ ●

In my beginning is my end. In succession
 Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
 Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
 Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
 Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
 Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
 Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
 Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.
 T.S. Eliot: East Coker²⁷

²⁶ For details, see Smil, V.: *Energy and Civilisation, A History*. Cambridge USA: MIT Press, 2017.

²⁷ Throughout the text of this essay, I quote from a number of literary sources. It is not an end in itself. I am only returning to old principles at this stage of the information age, according to which



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wisdom based on the experience of previous ages is necessary to assess the situation. Poetry is also an educational means for developing the imagination and recognition of emotions. Inspired emotional intelligence is one of the most powerful tools for getting to know the world of numerical and technical information. See, e.g., Hirshfield, J.: *Nine Gates. Entering the Mind of Poetry*. Harper Perennial, 1998. The author says that the work of poetry is to explain and amplify the state of being... Every good poem is an awakening of language to new relationships, a moment when, according to Aldous Huxley, the gates of consciousness open up.



The virus in the services sector

Jan Keller

In discussing the effects of a pandemic on society and the economy, we should not confine ourselves to data enumerating declining production and sales or economic growth. The seriousness of the whole situation is a little different.

For more than half a century, it was thought that the economic and social problems associated with deindustrialisation would be solved by relocating workers to the services sector. The second half of the 20th century saw louder and louder discussion about the arrival of the post-industrial world, which was evidenced by the fact that the number of people working in the tertiary sector had exceeded the number of people working in factories. It first started in the United States during the 1950s, with the countries of Western Europe following one or two decades later. At the time, it was somewhat naively assumed that it was a more sophisticated form of what had been achieved during the demise of agrarian society, when the workforce moved from the fields to the factories, people earned more money, economic growth jumped exponentially, and this made it possible to start mass consumption.

It turns out that the rise of the services sector did not repeat this logic. Unlike in the previous case, people are now moving away from work with high productivity growth to activities that have much lower, and for many reasons. To put it simply, men are losing well-paid jobs in factories at the same time as women are entering services where they earn much less on average. It is only one of the reasons why the incomes of lower and middle-class households in economically advanced societies have at best stagnated, at worst declined. As some sociologists have pointed out, this schematic optimism overlooks the fact



that labour productivity in the services sector is growing on average two to three times slower than in industry.²⁸ At the same time, the services sector is growing faster and faster, and the people who work in it expect wages and salaries at least as high as those in industry.

The difficulty in defining services

The term 'services' has many meanings. It was used to designate very different activities, but eventually became a waste bin for those that simply did not fit into the usual and well-established economic categories. An example of such a residual definition: What is a service? Generally speaking, it is something that contributes to the satisfaction of an individual or collective need other than through the transfer of property or material goods.²⁹

Also at the sociological level, the term obscures more things than illuminates them. It is used both to provide services to someone who is socially higher than the provider and to someone who is socially lower. In addition, the same expression is used for the provision of services to those who are socially equal to the provider, and finally for the provision of services without a provider, i.e. self-service. In this respect, the concept of services helps to conceal the stratification of society and make the process of growing social polarisation invisible. As if everyone, regardless of their income and wealth, belonged to the same category of 'the serviced'.

The concept of services nevertheless covers inequalities in other ways. The same term refers to the provision of completely unskilled services as well as expertly trained ones. At the same time, it is evident that in the first case the provider is completely subordinate to the client being served, while in the second one, i.e. the case of highly specialised and professional services, the client is completely dependent on the provider and can easily become their hostage.

²⁸ Perret, Bernard, Roustang, Guy: *L'économie contre la société*. Paris: Seuil, 1993, p. 57.

²⁹ Chauvière, Michel: *Trop de gestion tue le social*. Paris: La Découverte, 2010, p. 27.



Not even the various typologies of services, of which there are a confusing number, make things any clearer. They are more like proof that certain activities seen side by side in the category of services are only there because they could not be classified into other categories. These typologies are built around rows of criteria, many of which are mixed together within individual items. Services can be distinguished, for example, according to the nature of their provider or conveyor, i.e. according to whether they are provided by an individual or by a company, the public sector or private sector. We can also divide them according to the nature of the recipient, who can be a specific person or the anonymous public. The typology can also be based on the nature of the service provided. This can be a question of whether it involves intellectual or manual output, whether it serves direct consumption or producers of other services, or perhaps to what extent the service provided is a necessity or, on the contrary, a luxury.

By interweaving different criteria and emphasising the particularly frequent activities, the following typologies emerge:

- 1) Commercial services (private transport, shops, hotels and restaurants, tourism, sports, household operations, various consultancies)
- 2) Public sector services (healthcare, education, social services, culture)
- 3) State administration and local government services (state and city offices, post offices, railways, courts, army, police)
- 4) Financial services (banks, finance, insurance companies)
- 5) Information services (media, internet, libraries)
- 6) Industry-related services (wholesale, warehouses, transport, repair and maintenance)

Trying to quantify the share of the economically active services in the sector can be misleading. Getting started is to some



extent based on a certain statistical operation. It is enough, for example, to detach transport, catering and building protection from the company they work for and move them from industrial production to the services sector. The nature of the work performed in this area does not have to change at all, but change nevertheless happens. Taking employees from the company and transforming them into a subcontractor of special services for the same company is often accompanied by a decrease in wages, job security and deteriorating working conditions. That is what makes restructuring like this so popular.

The provision of services can be clearly distinguished from the production of goods. Services are defined in principle as something that can be monetised, but lacks the characteristics of ordinary goods. Unlike the usual factory assortment, the service is invisible, it cannot be stored, it must be consumed when and where it is produced. In addition, its value depends to a large extent on the quality of the relationship between the provider and customer, especially on the level of trust between them. Among other things, this significantly complicates measuring the level of productivity of the services provided.

Economists usually distinguish between market and non-market services. The first category includes services that share the features of commodity production, i.e. primarily the relationship between supply and demand, which is reflected in the price. These include retail, hotel and restaurant operations, repair and some personal services like hairdressers, fitness centre operators and tax advisors. Non-market services form the core of the public sector and include healthcare, education, the operation of cultural facilities and the provision of social care. Services in this category are not normally provided on a market basis and it is extremely difficult to measure their productivity. Sometimes this is contradictory, as the example of healthcare shows, where productivity is measured by the



degree of success in treating the flow of patients, even if reducing this flow through effective prevention is desirable. Another example is social work. Its success can be measured by the ability of clients to take control of their lives, i.e. without the assistance of social workers.

Common features of services

The services sector, however we define it, is characterised by a high degree of added value and relatively low consumption of raw materials compared to the production of tangible goods. This is not always the case for some types of services, though. Services are often less investment-intensive than conventional production. But not even that applies to everyone. The provision of services tends to be less concentrated than industrial production, but this is not the rule. In services, work productivity grows more slowly than in industry. In some cases, it grows faster than in industry. Employment in services grows as a whole faster than in other sectors of the economy. But this is not the case in all services. Unlike industry, services are significantly made up of women. Unlike some industries, however, some services are not dominated by women in any way.³⁰ In the process of developing the services sector, two areas have clearly come to dominate. One segment of newly emerging and rapidly growing services is related to the fulfilment of leisure activities and the mass onset of tourism. The second segment, which is not so much talked about, represents 'personal services', which are increasingly used by households. The vast majority of activities in these two segments take the form of face-to-face contact, where the service provider must deal with the client in person. As is usual for services, not even this characteristic applies to all cases. With the help of technology, some services can be widely automated and thus sharply increase work productivity, while in other services, especially personal services, which include the time spent

³⁰ Misař, Miroslav: *Tertiary Sector*, Prague: Svoboda, 1969, p. 44.



with the client, this is not possible. It is simply impossible for a nurse to treat five percent more patients every year, for a teacher to test five percent more students every year, for a social worker to manage a growing number of clients every year. None of this can be done without reducing the quality of the service provided, which includes the time spent with the client.

Both low-productivity services and automated services with high productivity present problems. Job losses can be expected anywhere there is a tendency to replace human labour with machines. The introduction of ATMs cost many bank clerks their jobs, many postal clerks have lost their jobs and will continue to lose them as a result of Internet growth, many sales clerks are losing their jobs as a result of turning stores into 100% self-service. Meanwhile low productivity and thus low salaries will persist in those services which, for various reasons, cannot be automated to the same extent. It will be increasingly difficult to create and maintain jobs in a sector that offers good working conditions and decent pay. These job opportunities simply do not earn enough to provide work and a comfortable wage. As Jean-Lewis Laville notes, the low growth rate of productivity in services offers only two options: either to increase the redistribution rate between sectors of the economy or to pay mostly meagre wages in the services sector.³¹

What matters to us at this moment is the effect the global pandemic is having on the two service segments mentioned above – leisure activities (including tourism) and domestic help, especially if the pandemic comes in ever-increasing waves. Already at this stage, we are witnessing how hard the first of these two segments has been hit by the virus. The livelihoods of millions of travel agents and tour operators, workers in land, air and marine-based companies, in hotels, bars, restaurants and tourist resorts, and the manufacturers and sellers of sou-

³¹ Laville, Jean-Louis: *Sociologie des services*. Paris: ERES, 2005, p. 10.



venirs, have been put at risk worldwide. According to available data, a comparable disaster has not yet occurred in the second of the two sectors, domestic assistance. The difference can be ascertained when looked at from a sociological point of view. Where tourism offers a number of well-paid job opportunities with a decent social perspective, household services, overwhelmingly driven by female help, are usually low paid and their working conditions are among the least attractive. This has led to a slightly cynical observation: By taking advantage of the mass influx of women into the labour market, the services sector was an opportunity to pay low salaries without, in some areas, any prospects.³²

Services and social structure

The mass onslaught of services is at the core of two competing hypotheses about the form of our social structure in a post-industrial society. According to one of them, the transfer of labour from industrial production to services has significantly strengthened the middle class. Part of the middle class is increasingly recruited for the public sector, especially for education, healthcare and other related areas. Another part operates in the private sector, either as owners of small and medium-sized companies or as mid-level managers in large companies and corporations. The hypothesis of the middle classes growing in strength and social recognition is advanced mainly by those who at the same time talk about the arrival of the educated society or information society.

The second major hypothesis holds that the establishment of a services society will not lead to greater social status for many of those who have worked in industry so far, rather to their declassification. The proponents of this hypothesis, who are in the minority, point out that a large number of poorly paid and less valued jobs are created in services compared to standard jobs in industry. They are mainly subordinate

³² Gadrey, Jean: *L'Économie des services*. Paris: La Découverte, 2000, p. 88.



positions in companies that specialise in various services and, to a considerable extent, the providers of personal services. Compared to the industrial society, the services society creates significant social polarisation, but at the same time a loss of class awareness and weakening of the bargaining position of those who make a living from working with their hands or brains.

Arguments over the validity of the first or second hypothesis have been going on for half a century. The situation is complicated by the fact that different trends are taking place in different countries in this respect. As Jean Gadrey notes, the degree of equality in a country is important for the nature of the services society. Unequal societies cannot have the same type of economy as more egalitarian countries do. In the United States, the highest income decile is seventeen times greater than the lowest income decile. Hence the strong tendency of the upper classes to be served by the lower. The existence of wide gaps in inequality means that household services, even social services, work in a dualistic way, i.e. at two speeds. One pole of services is highly sophisticated and can only be paid for by very wealthy clients, while the other pole offers low prices and quality and is intended for clients of modest means. Two-speed services are growing not only in hotels and restaurants, in leisure time and access to culture, but also in healthcare, education, even in the justice system.

In Scandinavia, the income ratio between the upper and lower deciles is only five to one. Personal services are limited to those absolutely required and they are provided by organisations with highly qualified employees. In an egalitarian country, the price of personal services would be very high because the poorly paid get only slightly less than the highly paid.³³

According to the same author, we can distinguish between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian types of service company. The condition for the massive creation of jobs in the USA,

³³ Gadrey, Jean: *Socio-économie des services*. Paris: La Découverte, 2003, p. 110.



which led to a decline in unemployment, was the dualisation of status and income. The rich are served by an army of new and cheap domestic servants (taking care of their safety, their property, keeping their homes supplied, walking their dogs, parking their cars, etc.). This type of service economy creates a large number of low-skilled, low-paid jobs with poor social protection, poor job security and poor working conditions. But at the same time there is a significant number of high-quality and very well-paid service jobs in Anglo-Saxon countries. Taken on average, the level of remuneration and quality of services provided in the Anglo-Saxon type are comparable to the Scandinavian type.

Looking for averages in the services sector can be a tricky business because those employed in market services tend to have different positions than those employed in non-market services, regardless of the country. The former include the employees of small private businesses operating in retail trade or household services. Their working conditions are poorly regulated and their salaries not good. Then there are the services provided by the state or public institutions. Thanks to the redistribution of fiscal resources, these services can be offered mostly or entirely free of charge, and the employees who work in this segment are so well remunerated that there has been a redistribution between individual sectors. This form of service economy is characteristic of the Scandinavian type.

The role of the coronavirus in social polarisation

The greatest threat of the pandemic to the future of the services sector so far has been to leisure activities, especially tourism. As opposed to home services, this segment employs large numbers of specialised professionals, from pilots, airline and ship crews, interpreters and tour operators to the staff that maintain local tourist attractions. There are plenty of highly lucrative opportunities here for travel agencies, for hotel, bar



and restaurant owners, for the operators of seaside resorts and spas, and all summer and winter recreational complexes. The vast majority of them have gravitated to the middle and upper middle classes, and their prospects in a world without the coronavirus were among the most promising. If the pandemic does not subside, a large proportion of these people will lose their livelihoods and their colleagues or staff will lose their jobs. The process of ruin here can be very fast. All it takes is a few poor summer or winter seasons.

Household services are far safer in this regard. These are workers employed by private individuals, working for a wage, directly in their households. The provider of these services no longer lives together with the client, nor provides them for multiple households. These positions are usually subordinate and poorly paid. In France today they account for 1.23 million people, or 5.5% of wage earners. This type of service provision has been spreading in practically all economically developed countries, especially since the 1990s. Household services went into decline following World War I and were considered pre-modern for most of the 20th century. After World War II, it never occurred to anyone that they could be among the fastest growing segments in the services society.

The return of this form of service is dodgy from an economic point of view. Adam Smith famously considered the disappearance of servants working in unproductive personal services and going instead into production as one of the preconditions for boosting national wealth. The opposite process is now taking place. Many are promising that it will help alleviate several economic problems, by reducing unemployment for one, especially among the less skilled workforce. It should help maintain jobs in those countries immune to the threat of delocalisation. It should enable qualified women to better reconcile their families and careers. Caring for the elderly directly in households should be the answer to an ageing population.



For all these reasons, the European Commission has been actively promoting this segment of services since 1993. Its list of justifications includes the need to increase the employment rate of women, to free up skilled women for more demanding jobs in the labour market, and to give the low-skilled the opportunity to earn at least something. Personal services undertaken in households are, in this view, beneficial for gender equality, as they enable qualified women to aspire to the same career as men.

Until now, this strategy has only been assessed primarily at the level of social structure. The results indicate that the growth of this segment of the labour market contributes to the social dualisation and polarisation of society. The consumption of these services is growing rapidly in the richest decile of the population, as only the richest can afford to consume both household goods and services despite the tax deductions offered to all households for purchasing these services. Such state support for these services, as in the case of France, has seen the steepest increase occur in only a few upper centiles of the richest households. Should the tax deduction for this type of service increase, the main beneficiaries would be the richest. Although these services are subsidised in this form, their costs are still too high for less affluent households.³⁴

The profile of this type of service in terms of the impact of the pandemic has not yet been examined in detail. It is clearly one of the high-risk groups. Employees work in private, so it is difficult to supervise their hygiene and adherence to safety. Even the labour inspectorate lacks access to their workplaces. During the day, they work in several places, periodically moving between them. In the vast majority of cases, they move around in areas with a high concentration of people, usually in large cities. They typically avoid areas with a lower concentration of people because their wages do not take into account the time it takes them to travel.

³⁴ Carbonier, C., Morel, N: *Le retour des domestiques*. Paris: Seuil, 2018.



Unlike the tourism industry, where activities can be reduced or completely interrupted for a certain period of time, there is no respite for household workers. The services they provide form part of the daily operation of the household. They are a prerequisite for maintaining the livelihood of its members. Where their jobs involve caring for children, the elderly and disabled, their presence in the household is often a condition of survival. If the pandemic gets a grip on this sector, the consequences of it for society and the lives of its people can be more fatal than the cancellation of summer or winter holidays. ●

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A painful lack of pain

Petr Drulák

Big crises bring about big changes. We therefore attribute watersheds to wars, revolutions, invasions, and also epidemics. Will the Covid-19 epidemic be such a watershed? We do not know yet. It has hit most countries around the world hard, but so far there is no indication that its impact is comparable to the consequences of wars, revolutions or plague. Nevertheless, their effects are there and will continue to be so. Let us try to identify them.

We will start by clarifying how crises shape further developments. Their effects can be boiled down to two: lessons learned and coercion. Next, we will show that the most significant effects today can be absorbed within the common denominator of the crisis of the liberal state, which the pandemic did not cause, but certainly intensified. Finally, the question arises as to how this crisis will affect the future of Europe.

Lessons learned and coercion

Further analysis calls for us to distinguish two types of impact – lessons learned and coercion. Lessons learned is the conscious effort to avoid a recurrence of the crisis or to prevent the negative phenomena that caused it, accompanied it or were exposed by it. It confirms the human capacity to reflect on events and not repeat previous mistakes. But the very existence of this ability is questionable. Hardened realists believe that people are incapable of such a thing, and that is why they are doomed to make the same mistakes as they did in antiquity.³⁵

At the other end are progressives, who believe that just as people have learned to fly and communicate over the Inter-

³⁵ This belief led Robert Gilpin (1981), for one, to the conclusion that political laws do not change, and that what we know about the politics of ancient Greece also applies to contemporary politics.



net, they are able to learn to get along with more justice and efficiency and less violence. They usually welcome any technological change as a step towards universal brotherhood. Let us remember the techno-optimism associated with the vision of a global Internet community or Facebook friendship. They look at global disasters as opportunities for humanity to learn and aspire to a better future.³⁶

Realism and progressivism can be combined with the thesis that every real lesson is subject to a painful experience³⁷ and continues to instruct as long as that painful memory persists. For example, World War II still seems like a painful experience in European memory, and the thought patterns, institutions and policies taken away from it still retain a certain power and relevance. However, the lessons learned from it may not be the right ones for the circumstances of future developments. Erroneous instruction can trigger further crisis. The spectre of a 'new Munich' warns us against dangerous concessions, but it can also lead to unnecessary escalation and aggression.

Crises nevertheless have implications whether or not people take note of them or allow themselves to learn from them. The great plague of the 14th century deprived Europe of a third of its population, causing the cost of labour to increase and improving the lot of serfs. Nuclear weapons forced the superpowers to moderate their positions in the second half of the last century, thus avoiding direct armed conflict that could have escalated into mutually assured destruction. Crises change the objective conditions of life and decision-making, grassing over old roads and building new ones.

Recent experience warns us against overestimating the value of these lessons. The Americans took what they learned from the 9/11 terrorist attacks to start a war on terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq. After criticising them for it, France embarked on its own destructive action in Libya. The Great Recession did not lead to a reassessment of the foundations of

³⁶ For example, the aftermath of the Second World War saw a wave of European and world federalism, compare (Reves 1945).

³⁷ Karl Deutsch (1968) notes the connection between learning and suffering. But this idea already follows from Hegel's lordship-bondage dialectic, for it is the suffering and exploited bondsman who learns, not the lazy lord in all his comfort.



financial capitalism, the Great Migration Crisis did not force European countries to reconsider the laws and international treaties that force them to adopt migratory openness. On the other hand, painful memories are also at work, suppressing the appetite of Western powers for military intervention and inducing international financial institutions to attempt a return to Keynesianism.

The crisis of the liberal state

The pandemic has once again showed the fundamental weaknesses of the liberal state. They are nothing new, but pandemics give them much more tangible form. I will focus here on the following movements that have their impetus in the liberal state, but which are turning increasingly to it: the government of multinational corporations, the digitisation of the economy, public debt, the juristocracy, and distrust of the elites. But before we get into analysing them, let us recall the story of the liberal state.

The liberal philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries defined their idea of the state in relation to the reality of absolute monarchy. Whereas absolute monarchy relied on the primacy of state power and its claim to govern society, the liberal state gives primacy to the private individual and steps aside. It is there to protect the rights of individuals, especially property owners, to ensure the individual is not threatened, and to divide state power between rival groups.³⁸ The basic liberal tendency is to hand state power over to the leading members of society. It is not for nothing that the liberal state has been characterised since the 19th century as a government of merchants and lawyers.³⁹

The state nevertheless still retains elements of absolutist power from the past. Although liberals seek to dismantle them, the more intuitive among them realise that the expansion of private power at the expense of the public would lead

³⁸ Locke and Montesquieu thus laid the foundations of the concept of the liberal state still valid today, cf. Manent (1987).

³⁹ Compare Tönnies (1887/1920).



to a power vacuum, and thus to self-destruction.⁴⁰ For most of the twentieth century, liberal states have been protected from a self-destructive tendency by various threats: world wars, fascism, and communism. The fear of this pain forces them to maintain, despite their beliefs, a relatively strong state. This has been changing since the 1970s, when communism or war between the superpowers were no longer perceived as immediate threats, and so there was nothing to stop the tendency to bring the liberal state to fruition.⁴¹ After almost half a century of this fruition, the pandemic has revealed that the liberal state is in fact in a deplorable state.

Building a liberal state, or rather demolishing the state to create a liberal form of it, has had significant economic and political consequences since the beginning – transferring public interests into private hands. The wakeup call of the pandemic includes a reminder that the production of medicines in the richest countries is in the hands of multinational corporations, which are driven by profitability rather than health priorities. Other private entities play an important role, like the Gates Foundation, which uses corporate money to help determine global healthcare trends. Private control is therefore not limited to production and distribution itself, but it also applies where information is concerned. In matters of life and death then, public authorities and the media depend on what private owners and their managers tell them.⁴² According to a number of analyses, the link between private ownership and public policy has made healthcare one of the sectors most prone to corruption. However, private capital can exert its main influence quite legally because corporations control the rules of the game and so do not need corruption.

As an example, France experienced a professional and public dispute in 2020 over the effectiveness of Covid-19 treatment between proponents of the tried-and-tested anti-malarial chloroquine and the newly tested remdesivir. In both cases,

⁴⁰ For example, Schumpeter (1967/2004) was aware of the self-destructive tendencies of both democracy and capitalism.

⁴¹ This is not a neoliberal flight, as we sometimes hear from left-wing liberals, rather only a consistent fulfilment of the original liberal programme.

⁴² Compare Kohler, Dan et al. (2016).



there was doubt as well as preliminary optimism. However, the mainstream media and their experts focused on highlighting treatment using the completely unknown remdesivir, which costs thousands of dollars. The well-known, one-hundred times cheaper chloroquine, in use for several decades, fell out of favour.

When an article appeared in the influential medical journal *Lancet* in May that suddenly discovered new negative side effects of chloroquine, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended stopping tests with it to treat Covid-19. It was immediately revealed that the company whose data provided the basis for the article had refused to provide the necessary additional information.⁴³ The journal pulled the article, changed its editorial policy and the WHO reconsidered its recommendation. The French authorities nevertheless withdrew chloroquine from open sales in the autumn.

Then in October (October 15), tests carried out under the auspices of the WHO did not show that remdesivir can actually treat Covid-19, it does not save lives, it can only shorten convalescence by a few days.⁴⁴ The drug manufacturer, pharmaceutical giant Gilead, has had this information since the end of September (September 23). However, this did not prevent it from concluding a contract with the uninformed European Commission (October 8) for a \$ 1.2 billion drug supply. Gilead has downplayed these results and, with the help of US authorities, is flying around its lobbyists⁴⁵ in their global campaign to promote remdesivir. The touching story last spring about how a Czech scientist representing Gilead sent remdesivir to Prague to save a dying taxi driver shows one of the local forms of this campaign. The Czech president decorating a Gilead employee bathes the scenario in local Kafkaesque-Švejk colours.

The problem with the whole case is not that different drugs are being tested, and we cannot, of course, know in advance how the tests will turn out, rather that certain products are fa-

⁴³ Compare [Retraction—Hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine with or without a macrolide for treatment of COVID-19: a multinational registry analysis - The Lancet](#), 5. 11. 2020.

⁴⁴ Compare [Campion, Etienne, „Remdésivir inefficace: comment la Commission européenne s'est laissé séduire par Gilead“, *Marianne*](#), 5.12. 2020.

⁴⁵ The health policy of the Trump administration is largely in the hands of people connected to pharmaceutical companies, including Gilead. Compare [Don't Let Big Pharma Make a Killing by Profiteering off COVID-19 Treatments | Common Dreams Views](#), 5. 11. 2020.



voured in advance by manipulation and regardless of objective data. We are dealing with a demonstration of the power of the multinational company, which, for reasons we do not have to speculate about, has the road in front of it cleared by experts, the media, regulators and politicians.

The pandemic has also reminded us that our reliance on multinational corporations leads to the loss of geopolitical control over sectors that are vital to society. For example, Europe has learned that '80% of the active substances needed to make medicines are imported mainly from India and China'.⁴⁶ Similar vulnerabilities likewise affect almost all important sectors. Not only does our supply of penicillin depend on Asia, but also mobile phones, computers and many other things without which everyday life would collapse. Corporations do not consider long-term geopolitical risks, nor do their governments have to talk them into doing business. On the contrary, if they can, they engage their governments to look after their interests.

We do not, however, need to search Asia or from among the pharmaceutical companies for the real economic winners of the pandemic. We can find them in the digitisation sector. They are battling for control of cyberspace, which, unlike the real world, is not infested with physical viruses and they know how to deal with the virtual ones. Their premier league is denoted by the abbreviation GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft). While the real economy is swamped with losses in 2020, GAFAM is experiencing yet another period of growth. Their revenues in the first nine months of 2020 have increased compared to the previous period, for some even dramatically; Google 9%, Apple 4%, Facebook 17%, Amazon 35% and Microsoft 13%.⁴⁷

In other words, as traditional businesses go bankrupt, the digital giants are getting bigger and the jaws of inequality are opening up wider. This trend was already here before

⁴⁶ These figures are presented by liberal Dita Charanzová (2020), Vice-President of the European Parliament. This does not prevent her from committing herself to free trade, as she believes in dialogue with the pharmaceutical industry and in incentives to get them to return to talks. If they get more public money to add to their huge profits, they will certainly be in favour of dialogue.

⁴⁷ Compare [Chart: Tech Giants Shrug Off COVID-19 Crisis | Statista](#), 6. 11. 2020.



the onset of Covid-19, but the pandemic strengthened it and will probably permanently change the behaviour of business towards digitisation. This also applies to the digitisation of payments, which is increasing due to hygienic reasons. It raises not only the issue of replacing physical circulation with electronic transfers and the associated problem of privacy (payments cease to be anonymous), but also the issue of digital currencies. Their widespread use will inevitably lead to a loss of state control over monetary policy, which has already been substantially weakened by the neoliberal independence of central banks from political control; the extreme example is the European Central Bank. But now there is a risk that even these public institutions will be sidelined and currency will come under the control of private entities, as it was in many places during the gold standard in the 19th century, but this time without any material basis or public political authority. GAFAM will acquire the royal right of minting.

Another major economic consequence of the pandemic is a sharp increase in public debt due to falling GDP and the government measures to rescue the most affected. The gross indebtedness of developed economies is likely to jump from 104% to 124% of GDP during 2020, with no improvement expected in the coming years.⁴⁸ Debts will start piling up, and liberal economists will warn against ending state aid before resuming economic growth.⁴⁹ Despite the liberal idea of the minimal state, experience has once again shown that in crises nothing replaces the state. The same companies that have been cutting public budget revenues for years through tax optimisations and evasions are now demanding higher spending.

Although public debt is often associated with the Keynesian welfare state and prosperity, it has the opposite effect under current conditions. Capital mobility has reduced the state's ability to progressively tax that capital. The tax burden necessary to repay the debt is therefore borne mainly by the middle

⁴⁸ According to estimates of the International Monetary Fund, compare [IMF DataMapper](#), 6. 11. 2020.

⁴⁹ Compare [The budget deficits of the eurozone countries are encroaching a trillion euros - Novinky.cz](#), 6.11.2020.6. 11. 2020.



classes and all consumers through indirect taxes; no one escapes them, but when it comes to revenues, their attitudes are degressive. The neoliberal system has moreover nearly eliminated inflation, which has been below 2% in developed countries for a long time, and in 2020 it even fell below 1%. The Keynesian policies of the last century were carried out under the conditions of inflation many times higher, which, in addition to stimulating growth, also contributed to the rapid elimination of real debt. We are returning to the conditions of the 19th century, when the state debt was a permanent burden and a certain source of rentier income that most members of society never enjoyed.⁵⁰

The pandemic has also highlighted the strength of the judiciary in European countries. For several decades, the European judiciary has been trying to judge, re-evaluate or enforce political decisions. This has also been the case during the pandemic, for example, let us mention two cases in October 2020. The Berlin Regional Court overturned the decision of the Berlin Senate to close restaurants after 23:00, saying the measure did not have a significant impact on the spread of the virus. French investigators conducted house searches of current or former members of the government (including the former premier and current health minister), who were responsible for combating the coronavirus in the spring. They are investigating suspicions that the government had been too hesitant in taking protective measures.

Both decisions, in Berlin and Paris, were taken by democratically elected officials on the basis of the expertise at their disposal. Like any political decision, they estimated and determined a threshold beyond which certain risks and costs cease to be acceptable to society and need to be avoided, again at some cost. They were elected to do this and to answer for it to their constituents. Today, however, the judiciary seeks to have elected officials answer to them and to set the threshold

50 Piketty (2013/2015) explains the fundamental difference between public debt in the 19th and 20th centuries and, using the example of the United Kingdom, shows how, in conditions of zero inflation, debt served the wealthy classes.



of acceptable risks and costs themselves. The European Court of Justice has been doing this for many decades. The rule of law, which emerges as a defence of individuals against the will of the ruler, becomes an instrument of the will of judges and prosecutors against democratic governments.

The pandemic has also sparked a number of rumours and conspiracy theories about the origin and nature of the disease. The most widespread ones have become the basis for resistance to any protective measures. Although some of these ideas are downright bizarre, their popularity is understandable, based on previous manipulations. Let us therefore distinguish the apparent nonsense of ideas such as 'Covid-19 is not very different from the flu' or 'the pandemic was triggered by Bill Gates' from legitimate distrust of information provided by governments and the mainstream media.

During the epidemic, government communication only strengthened the distrust. Although there were understandable uncertainties on a number of issues, medical science had a clear idea, for example, of the effectiveness of masks against infections: under clearly defined conditions, they provided effective protection, but there was no point in using them widely. This was stated in March 2020 by the WHO and other professional authorities.⁵¹ Although no one said that Covid-19 differed from other infections in this regard, within a few months the mask, similar to remdesivir, became the mantra by which everyone swore.

Governments, whether democratic or authoritarian, and the media, whether private or public, are naturally manipulating information according to their agendas, which seldom coincide with consideration for the public interest. The strongest manipulation does not take the form of an obvious lie, rather an incomplete truth. Reminiscent of a joke from the past:

A Soviet athlete is in competition against an American and loses. The newspaper says, 'The Soviet athlete finished in second, the American second from last'.

⁵¹ Compare [WHO Information on the Use of Protective Equipment and the Type of Profession for the Assignment of Respirators and Masks – Current Information on COVID-19 \(mzcr.cz\)](#), 6.11. 2020.



The report was true, but it concealed the fact that there were only two competitors. This pattern superbly captures the nature of information under liberal capitalism: the concealment of essential facts and the embellishment of whatever is deemed desirable, as in the case of remdesivir or masks.

The democratic plurality of information ought to shorten the life of these manipulations and discourage them beforehand. But with the strengthening of private stakeholders, this plurality is limited twice over: at the source and in the medium. For example, pharmaceutical corporations are the source of information on medicines and the mainstream media is controlled by corporations with their own interests. Opportunities for impartial reporting are declining. The information, however, is distorted not only by ownership control but also by ideology. The ruling liberal progressivism consistently demonises and excludes from mainstream opinion everything that questions liberal capitalism. In fact, it is a self-defeating tactic, because it opens up space for the wildest of speculations and undermines the legitimacy of the system.

European heritage

It is certainly possible to imagine that the main players will learn from this crisis. Governments and parliaments may recognise that there is a need to restore public power to regain control of currencies, finance and key sectors of the economy, to restore geographical boundaries disrupted by economic globalisation, and the boundaries of authority erased by the expansion of the judiciary. If so, Europe would experience a wave of constitutional changes, progressive taxation, the socialisation of large assets, and a fundamental revision of the principles and institutions of European integration.⁵² Even companies and other social players would conclude that they need public power themselves and that the distrust of society caused by their misinformation threatens them inherently.

⁵² As imagined by Thomas Piketty (2019), for example.



They should voluntarily give up their monopolies and open up public debate to all. There are no limits to the imagination.

Such lessons, however, would probably require a more painful experience than the one prepared for Europe by the pandemic. It is therefore more realistic to take note of Schumpeter's conclusion about the absence of the self-preserving instincts of liberal capitalism or Lenin's jibe about capitalists selling the ropes that were used to hang them. Let us assume that the trends made visible or stronger by the pandemic continue. Europe has a painful future looming ahead.

Public authority will further weaken. Government dependence on multinational corporations and their global networks will grow, making Europe vulnerable to geopolitical rivals. Economic power will continue to concentrate in the hands of overweening corporate owners and economic inequality will become ever more pervasive. Attempts to restore state power will fail against resistance from European institutions and increasingly powerful judiciaries. The ruling liberal elite will face dwindling public support as the media propaganda escalates and so-called populists use this escalation and their campaigns of demonization to reject the last barriers to the powerful forces of hatred. Violence and conflict will increase.

A helpless Europe on the brink of civil war will arouse the interest of global predators. The struggle for European succession will break out. The strongest global players will clash for control of European assets: cultural goods, strategic territories, and the remaining production and services where Europe still retains a comparative advantage. Who will it be? The geopolitical powers of China, Russia, India, Turkey and the Middle East will join the multinational corporations (in the footsteps of the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century), with a certain part going to rump Europe, too. Germany, inflated to the borders of the medieval Holy Roman Empire, will be able to use its enormous economic potential



and negligible strategic capabilities to aspire to the position of a global Switzerland.

The US faces similar challenges as Europe. However, their sovereignty (which includes GAFAM, among others), strategic strength and geopolitical isolation make their prospects of overcoming them a bit more favourable. Although they will have enough to worry about, they can also intervene in the fight for Europe's succession and grab something for themselves. The future may find them in a position to the world's island of Eurasia and Africa similar to the one England had to Europe for centuries.

Global players will dominate Europe with the cooperation of local elites, who will put themselves at their service under conditions of general disintegration. This will pose no dilemma for most of them. They can even celebrate the dismantling of Europe as another step towards overcoming nationalism and building internationalism instead. The way their collaborating ancestors in the last century joined Greater German, Soviet and American internationalism. ●

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Covid-19 in the Era of Neoliberalism*

Tomáš Daněk

This article will not address the impact of the coronavirus on the physical health of people, as there are experts in viral epidemics for that. The article will mainly deal with a **description**, that is, an analysis of the socio - cultural impact on society and the situation that it caused. At the same time, I will deal with a **prescription**, that is, deal with what it is supposed to be and what are the chances of using this condition that we find ourselves in, for a fundamental positive turn in our contemporary global civilization. We are in a unique historical situation, because our current way of life is now changing. It is a paradox that viral pandemics are not frequently mentioned in history textbooks, despite the fact that they had a major impact on human history. More often, only wars are mentioned. The plague epidemic, for example, had a vast impact on changing the social hierarchy. Covid-19 forced us to slow down our accelerated life a bit so that we would not one-sidedly pursue material values, but reflect on the more important values of life. Much depends on how we make meaningful uses of our current free time. At the same time, this situation has forced people to take an interest not only in their daily private lives, but more and more in public affairs.

This coronavirus has revealed how the current globalized world is technologically, economically, portably and informatively more interconnected than ever in human history, and it is by no means easy to escape its impact on society. In an instant, the whole of society has become a ubiquitous controlled

* Translated from Slovak by Caroline Kyzek (Žilinská univerzita v Žilíně)



society without any protest. Simultaneously, the coronavirus is a convex mirror of the crisis, reflecting the contemporary global civilization. Nowadays, the world has become a large laboratory, where experiments are being carried out on a large scale. Society will soon find out how this will function in the future.

The world after Covid-19 will be different, whether we want it to be or not. We the people, are primarily screenwriters, but at the same time also actors of this world's stage. By our daily actions and words, we influence the future direction of this world. At the macrosocial level, this is reflected when changes occur primarily at the microsocal level. No savior will do it for us. It is our responsibility alone. As stated by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, power comes from below. A change at the **micro-level** (family, school, church, etc.) can bring about a change of power relations at the **macro-level**. What happens at the lowest levels ultimately has an impact on the highest state level. Foucault argued that power is not essential, that is, tied to only one center of power, but relational, that is, it exists in dynamic and dialectical power social relations that are not constant, but continuously malleable and flexible.⁵³

As the Polish - British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman stated, we live in **liquid times**; in an age of social and economic uncertainty where people are increasingly afraid of an unknown and invisible liquid danger, which is not easily identifiable, but which seems to surround and threaten them everywhere. Bauman argued that **modern selfish individualism**, which caused the erosion of tightly bound communities, was to blame. The virus functions precisely during these uncertain times, and the unpredictability of an ambiguous future has increased even more.⁵⁴ According to the contemporary South Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Hana, depression is characteristic of a time when man is exposed to the **extremity of openness and endlessness**, because he has lost the abil-

⁵³ Buraj, Ivan, *Foucault a moc*. Univerzita Komenského: Bratislava 2000, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Bauman, Zygmunt, *Tekuté časy: Život ve věku nejistoty*. Academia: Prague 2008, p. 57.



ity to make long-term commitments. In this system, one is constantly forced under the pressure of performance to sell and exhibit oneself as a commodity, whether it is in the sphere of work, social networks, or even in private. Today's man who submits to a flexible dynamic market lacks a solid identity that is in liquid decay. His identity is fragmented, like a kaleidoscope, because he has to perform independent and incoherent actions in this system, in order to survive at all.⁵⁵ In a private, natural, everyday way of life, a person may exhibit completely different behavior from when they must place the mask of their public and professional lives. This causes a schizophrenic alienation from life. As the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek claims, it is a so-called **toxic identity**.⁵⁶

Presently, culture is deeply underfunded and its interest from the state is diminishing. Without culture, changes for better society are not possible. The media deliberately places an effort to increase their viewership and at the same time, profitability, to constantly shock its viewers. In this way they spread fear and hopelessness in order to paralyze any activity amongst the population. We will overcome fear only when we re-evaluate our values and shift them from material ones to spiritual ones. If a person returns to his authentic self, he will not be afraid of anything and will be internally balanced and nothing will break him. At present, in this era of economic uncertainty, only visible fear has surfaced.

The coronavirus has actually revealed the population's reaction to fear of the unknown, in an era of economic and social uncertainty, because unlike influenza, which is *de facto* curable and comes and goes regularly every year, the opposite is true of Covid-19. All the more it can respond to various threats by way of panic and a collective mass psychosis. As Jan Patočka claimed, the **mood** of the situation that we find ourselves in, concerns not only our corporeality, but also our surroundings and the world. We can assert that the current mood of the situation concerning the coronavirus has affected almost every person.

55 Byung-Chul Han. *Vyhořelá společnost*, Rybka Publishers: Prague 2016, p. 65.

56 Žižek, Slavoj: *Jednou jako tragédie, podruhé jako fraška*. Rybka Publishers: Prague 2011, p. 61.



The system seeks to force, through ubiquitous control, people to become accustomed to blind adaptation by various measures, which will only suit the authorities. There is an attempt to **atomize people** in order to safeguard their own interests. At the same time, the system seeks to detach people from other views. Then, collaboration between people will not be possible and the system has more control over them.

If people still do not lose their natural self-regard, the system will not have power over them. The coronavirus is being politically abused and the attention that plagues modern humanity is being deliberately diverted. This includes the climate crisis, migration, unemployment, corruption, etc.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the greatest technological, economical, transportable and informational connections took place in the history of mankind under the term, globalization. During the corona crisis however, there is a kind of backwardness, i.e. **deglobalization**. Contemporary Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev claims that the world after the coronavirus only sharpened certain trends that were present before the arrival of the virus. These current trends will intensify and cause profound changes in our politics, economy and way of life.⁵⁷ Borders are closing, countries are isolating themselves, and instead of working together to develop a vaccine, they compete with each other to be the first to invent it. The latent trend of globalization has shown that under the superficial interconnection of the world there is only mutual rivalry and competition between nations, which is based only on economic profit and an unregulated market. In a system where money matters instead of people, no progressive development is possible. A real connection and unification of the world after the corona crisis can thus be achieved only if this unification is based on stronger and deeper foundations. This unification needs to be based on humanity and culture- not money. The future of human civilization is primarily based on cooperation, which will not be forced, but above all, voluntary.

⁵⁷ Krastev, Ivan, *Už je zítřa? Aneb jak Pandemie mění Evropu*. Karolinum: Prague 2020, p. 15.



Psychological Warfare

In 1937, the Czech writer Karel Čapek wrote the timeless work *The White Plague*. Let's take a brief look; in an unspecified country, there is an epidemic of the so-called white disease, which affects mostly older people. There is no effective cure in the world for this yet. At the state clinic led by the court, Dr. Galén arrives with Dr. Sigelius. This doctor of poor patients discovered a procedure for the treatment of the white disease, which he anxiously protects. As a doctor at the front in the trenches, he saw many dead people and therefore reserves the right to lasting peace around the world. In the end however, the team will suffer a scandal because the dictator of this state prepares for a fierce war against a smaller neighboring state.

We are in a state of **information warfare**, the aim of which is to totally conquer the human psyche and cause fear in people, so that they will be much more tolerant with the system and more prone to submit without any resistance. Czech Brigadier General Karel Řehka states that we are in a state of **hybrid warfare**. It is defined as "a war waged with the simultaneous, flexible and highly adaptive use of conventional and unconventional methods, mutually supportive, used at all levels and using all available means, including unofficial players, insurgency, terrorism, political, economic and legal instruments, but the deployment of advanced weapons systems and operations in cyberspace."⁵⁸ Wars in the 21st century do not follow a precise pattern, but rather obliterate the boundaries between war and peace. A war can go on in "peace" without officially being declared. As Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz stated, "war is a continuation of politics using other means."⁵⁹

According to the English historian Eric Hobsbawn, if 20% of the population died in World War I, then 50% of the civilian population died in World War II. In the current wars, up to

⁵⁸ Řehka, Karel, *Informační válka*. Academia: Prague 2017, p 22.

⁵⁹ von Clausewitz, Carl, *O válce*. Academia: Prague 2008, p.13.



90% of the population will die and it is likely that it will be 100% without the use of military forces. The current invisible drone wars are a continuation of this trend.⁶⁰

The current state of emergency is in the form of **total mobilization**, as described by the German writer Ernst Jünger during the First World War. During that time, the entire state apparatus was enveloped in services to the war, to which propaganda, literature, production, and natural resources were subjected. In addition, "human resources" were to be sacrificed for the sake of winning.⁶¹ War is a huge waste of human, financial and material potential. Similarly, lobby groups from large pharmaceutical companies are interested in prolonging the current state of emergency. It is an interconnection of business, media and politics. The state apparatus does not mobilize in order to fight poverty and curable diseases, but instead to singularly use up all resources for the coronavirus, even if it causes greater economic, social and cultural damage. In the end, large pharmaceutical companies will only get rich in the short term at the expense of our long-term future.

It was the German philosopher Carl Schmitt who said that politics are always divided into binary friend-enemy positions. He was critical of liberalism, which pretends to be value-neutral. This type of ideology may be the worst, because under the guise of "human rights," it can cause the foulest of imperialist wars.⁶² Hobsbawm, who was previously mentioned, claims that when standard wars took place, soldiers were distinguished by uniforms; this however, is no longer the case. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues that today the paired categories of friend and foe in Western politics are not specifically determined. Instead, ordinary life, referred to as the Greek word *zoe*, goes on by its exclusion and inclusion in power relations. In contrast, the word *bios* means a social and political life that adds meaning to it.

⁶⁰ Hobsbawm, Eric, *Globalizace, demokracie a terorismus*. Academia: Prague 2008, p. 23.

⁶¹ Ernst, Jünger: *Válečný deník 1914–1918*. Academia: Prague, p. 35.

⁶² Schmitt, Carl, *Pojem politična*. Oikoymenh: Prague 2007, p. 10.



In 1948, the WHO (World Health Organization) defined health not just by the absence of diseases, but as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. Belgian doctors even sent an open letter to all Belgian media and authorities, expressing concern about the developments in recent months regarding Covid-19.⁶³ According to them, **prevention** has a particularly positive effect on health and the immune system. Such prevention includes physical exercise in the outdoors, healthy emotional social contacts, balanced nutrition, stress reduction, etc. This is in direct contrast to the current situation, where quarantine, isolation, and restrictions on social contacts, sports activities, etc. are ordered, which all consequently increase anxiety, depression, and fear. Ultimately, this only reduces the defense capability of the immune system. Hygiene is very important in these times, but psychological hygiene is much more important. A healthy psyche affects the body's immunity. If stress is spreading, as it is at present, it will trigger various diseases.

British strategic communications expert Steve Tatham uses Jowett and O'Donnell's definition of propaganda as a "deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perception, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."⁶⁴ *Homo consumens*, that is, a person who consumes, will buy more and get into debt. This makes people much more dependent on the market and the advice of experts.

As ironically stated by the previously mentioned Agamben in the controversy with Slavoj Žižek on the current viral pandemic, we are primarily at war with ourselves: "It is not surprising that for the virus one speaks of war. The emergency measures obligate us in fact to life in conditions of curfew. But a war with an invisible enemy that can lurk in every other person is the most absurd of wars. It is, in reality, a civil war. The enemy is not outside, it is within us."⁶⁵

⁶³ Hnízdil Jan, Svět se dal do pohybu. Ledy se lámou, *Jan Hnízdil - Názory Aktuálně.cz (aktualne.cz)*

⁶⁴ Tatham, Steve, *Strategic Communication. A Primer*. Defence Academy of the UK: Shrivenham 2008, p.6.

⁶⁵ More: *I filozofové myslí koronavírusem aneb Stačí nám pouhý život?* - Euro.cz, 2.4.2020.



The Shock Doctrine

According to Canadian journalist and activist Naomi Klein, the shock doctrine is a political strategy to use the great crisis to support policies that systematically deepen inequality. It benefits 1% of elites and harms 99% of the entire population. At present, according to Klein, suitable conditions have been created for governments and global elites to take political measures, against which there would otherwise be great opposition if we were not all disoriented. Times after crises can be characterized as calamitous capitalism. It is a way to mobilize private business to profit directly from some large-scale crisis. And that is exactly what is threatening in response to the current viral pandemic. As Klein says of the current state of the viral pandemic, “They’re not doing this because they think it’s the most effective way to alleviate suffering during a pandemic—they have these ideas lying around that they now see an opportunity to implement.”⁶⁶ The longer the global viral pandemic lasts, the more negative impact it will have on the economy and this can trigger a global economic crisis. The treatment should not be as drastic as the disease itself.

The capitalist system itself has been in a structural crisis for a long time, as the crisis in 2008 was “solved” by even more indebtedness and the purchase of precious time. Profits were then privatized, but costs were socialized into society. There can be a catastrophic economic impact in a situation where panic causes a reduction in demand. The coronavirus can be a detonator. As the French philosopher and psychologist Michel Foucault succinctly stated in the book *Discipline and Punish*, “The epidemic is the dream of the powerful.”⁶⁷ Various measures must be taken gradually so that people become accustomed to them, and drastic draconian measures should not be taken immediately, because people would instantly rebel. It is reminiscent of the so-called experiment with two frogs. We throw the first frog into the hot water. The frog senses it and jumps

⁶⁶ Naomi Kleinová: Elity budou chtít pandemii zneužít. Je tu ale i naděje na změny (denikreferendum.cz), 17.3.2020.

⁶⁷ Foucault, Michel, *Dohlížet a trestat*. Dauphin: Prague 2000, p. 80.



out of the water immediately. On the other hand, we throw the second frog into cold water, which we will gradually heat. The frog gets used to it, as if nothing happened, until the point when it is too late. The water starts to boil and the frog finally boils in it. Similarly, we are threatened by constant cuts in the social sphere, to which we have become accustomed to, hence making it normal. We are just passively watching as various reductions in social standards take place, without even noticing, because everybody is only noticing information about Covid-19.

If at the beginning of the corona crisis was just a clearly definable fear of infection, then now the fear turned into anxiety of liquid, invisible and ubiquitous control. If there is fear in society, it is very easy to manipulate and control. It is a kind of sophisticated psychological warfare. In the political and social spheres, it will be easier to pass reforms that normally would not pass, and the majority of the people would not even protest. In other words, we feel the danger and fear of an infection that is unseen, but paradoxically everywhere. At present, a kind of collective psychosis is spreading, where a person seems to live in constant fear and continually and obsessively checks his condition in case there is suspicion that it could be Covid – 19, even if it is just a common cold. In addition to the coronavirus epidemic, an epidemic of fear is spreading, which is far worse and paralyzes human behavior.

As Giorgio Agamben argues in his book *Homo Sacer*, at the beginning of modern times, natural life begins to be incorporated into mechanisms and calculations as politics changes into **biopolitics** and there will be concern for the preservation of *zoe* (life). As he states “the development and triumph of capitalism would not have been possible, from this perspective, without the disciplinary control achieved by the new bio-power, which, through a series of appropriate technologies, so to speak, created the ‘docile bodies’ that it needed.”⁶⁸ Bauman argued, that

⁶⁸ Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo sacer*. Oikoymenh: Prague 1995, p. 11.



in the beginning of modern times, fear management, which had to create a protective network after the disintegration of the original protective networks and gradually created a modern welfare state, which guaranteed social security to the population. This state model exists, but it is currently in crisis. If we are to make plans for the future, then we need to control the present. Only internally free people will not be controlled by fear. As the German philosopher Martin Heidegger said, man must accept his own mortality. He should not be controlled by the fear of life and should try to live his life to the fullest, marked by the innate ability to love, cooperate and show generosity. Only then is man authentic and free.⁶⁹

Modernity itself is always in movement, and the current corona crisis is the convex mirror to it. At present, Cartesian dualism of **subject** and **object** prevails. The subject can be described as *res cogitans* (a thinking thing) that is independent of the reality of the object *res extensa* (an extended thing) which it encompasses. The same view of the world turns to the subject itself as a boomerang, which is also understood only as an object and a number in an anonymous system, and is based on an ever-increasing power. The current regime uses extreme subjective idealism to distract man (through commercial media and consumption) from the unpleasant capitalist reality of the exploitative system in the spirit of the motto: *everyone has their own version of truth*. It's just a step away from the saying *everything is permissible*. The Enlightenment, for example, which was a reaction to the "age of darkness", came with a one-sidedness as it tried to classify everything into categories.

Virtual Reality is More Real Than Reality Itself

The panic that ensued due to the virus showed what was already hidden in a latent form into a visibly displayed form. What has long been hidden is now floating on the surface from the subconscious of this society to consciousness. The corona-

⁶⁹ Heidegger, Martin: *Bytí a čas*. Oikoymenh: Prague 2018, p. 41.



virus will certainly subside over time, but what remains in the human subconscious will be the fear of physical contact and even greater individualization and moving into the privacy of one's own shell. What is true in the individual sense of the word will also be true in the case of collective consciousness. It will have an impact on future generations who have not even experienced the current situation, since the spirit of this time will be transferred to them. Due to the current disruption of public events, a fear of any such events will remain. Weddings, political debates, family celebrations, etc. are canceled. The trend of moving into virtual space will be further strengthened and the handling of various procedures will be moved to the Internet. It is an effective way to reduce the cost of physical space for less expensive virtual space. Payments by cash will not take place due to the risk of "contamination", but everything will be paid for by credit. For protection, masks must be worn, because if we fail to do so, we could irresponsibly endanger other people. However, it is also necessary to be aware of the psychological impact on the individual and society, even if it will be worn for a long time, of course until the calamitous situation stabilizes. Even previously, society has been more or less depersonalized, and for many people, wearing masks creates a certain "liberation" and they can hide, as if in greater anonymity. Simultaneously, there was also a tendency to avoid physical contact. Under the mask, we do not see the emotions or facial expressions of a person. This can be used negatively by various agitators, because it is more difficult for a person to discover what the other intention is. At present, there is a greater opportunity for us to learn to look a person in the eye, because it is a **source of empathy and feelings** for other people. The eyes are, after all, the window to the soul...

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (whose work *Simulacra and Simulation* influenced the creators of film *The Matrix*)



argued that we live in an era of **simulacrums**, where virtual reality has more and more reality than reality itself. Physical reality does not seem to have its own existence, but instead ubiquitous mass media images influence and ultimately have an impact on reality itself.⁷⁰ Of course, this is not an end in itself, but such a situation has occurred so that the system has more and more control over people's minds and bodies. The 17th-century English philosopher George Berkeley stated "to be is to be perceived." In today's society, this would be "to be is to be perceived through virtual and media reality." In other words, he who is not on social networks is as if he did not exist...

The coronavirus will further strengthen the already existing trend of moving from real to virtual space. Covid-19 will serve as a pretext for people to restrict social contacts and thus ban gatherings, as these gatherings could lead to various protests. The digital influence of our lives will be further enhanced. Real human contact however, is irreplaceable. Everything will be solved electronically, because it is faster, cheaper and more efficient. At the same time, it is a pretext that people do not pay in cash, but by contactless card.

The Spiritual Cultural Revolution

The coronavirus has revealed hidden subconscious passions that may not have manifested under "normal" circumstances. One must now think of what to do with one's free time. Covid-19 has an ambivalent impact on interpersonal relationships. On the one hand, there has been a negative impact on partnerships that have been laid on a fragile foundation. Those relationships have not withstood the present circumstances and have not been able to work through the current difficult situation together. On the other hand, there has been a positive impact, where thanks to Covid – 19, many couples who otherwise may have not gotten to know each other, were

⁷⁰ Baudrillard, Jean, *Dokonalý zločin*. Periplum: Prague 1995, p. 70.



able to know one another. **Lifelong partnerships** were able to be formed. If two mature people meet in this current difficult situation, it will rather strengthen their relationship, because in this situation they have developed a superior perception to the essential values of life. Above all, they are based on **spiritual values** and not only material ones. These couples are also a positive example, because they spread positive energy around them in this turbulent time. In other words, relationships that were established on a materialistic basis alone, where the relationship is not the goal but only a way of fulfilling a consumerist way of life, have generally crumbled. A person is then seen as an interchangeable consumer object, which is easily replaceable, because life is understood by this immature and infantile view. On the contrary, relationships that are based on **love** are eternal because the partners are mature and irreplaceable. A relationship is based on personal responsibility for oneself and for the other partner. A person is then accountable for their words and actions. By being an adult, a person is able to take responsibility for his or her own life and knows that their words and actions have some impact in the real world. A global crisis will not destroy them, but rather will further strengthen their relationship. Only those who love are eternal; those who does not love, but only hate, are finite.

If modern civilization is to arise from the malicious destructive behavior towards society and the planet, then the establishment of a positive remedy must come primarily from the healing of interpersonal relationships. Change to a better and more stable society will only come if relationships are based on love, trust, fidelity and empathy. Political revolutions that are dictated from the ruling class and based on the misapprehension of human nature in the 20th century, have failed. There must come a revolution of the heads and the heart, that is managed from the common people. The maturity of human



society lies in the fact that there are no coercive practices in it, but **voluntary cooperation** based on rational and coherent beliefs. Everyone would like to change society, but not everyone wants to change themselves.

The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka claimed that modern man does not have a unified view of the world because he lives in two parallel worlds; his natural everyday world and the world created for him by modern science. The disunity that has permeated our whole lives is the main reason for our crisis. We have lost a unified view of reality and our information about it is always only fragmentary. Modern man therefore, suffers from a kind of figurative "schizophrenic view" of the world.⁷¹ At present, our natural living world is colonized by the current capitalist system, where scientific discoveries do not serve the truth and the pursuit of a better world, but patented inventions are used by financial capital. Therefore, we must revive the natural world of our lives, but not by the negation of science or the return to some previous forms of existence, because what has already disappeared can never be restored to its original form. Science must serve the general humanization of mankind and not the class interests of a selected few who benefit at the expense of humanity. Scientific development therefore, cannot be abolished, but it should be directed towards progressive development. There is a need for the unity of the natural world and science, which is not static and dogmatic, but rather a synthesis of the dynamic and critical. This cannot be done in a one-sided technocratic way. We should defend the independence of our natural world from the present world and reform the current spiritually emptied technocratic world. There should not be a naive and unconscious worldview, because despite laying stable groundwork, it would be an easily influenced predatory current system that tries to influence man as much as possible in its favor. It must be scientifically validated. On the other hand, technocracy

⁷¹ Patočka, Jan, *Fenomenologické spisy I*. Oikoymenh: Prague 2008.



without humanity stands on liquid sand, because it will later turn into the dehumanization of mankind. The technocrat overestimates reason, at the expense of emotion. A naturally simple person who goes about their ordinary everyday life, in turn, overestimates emotion, at the expense of reason. It is therefore necessary to unify reason and emotion.

According to his phenomenological reasoning about history, Jan Patočka revealed the variances between the pre-historical and the historical world. The pre-historical world is unproblematic and simple; all life takes place in the realm of the house. The only goal in life is to work, which has become the means of sustaining life itself. The moment a problem enters the historical world, so a person enters history. It turns out that not everything is clear, and one reveals what is hidden between what is and what is to be. It is at this moment that one embarks on the path of history and goes from the pre-historical to the historical life.

Creating changes for a better society can only be done if we do not close our eyes to the reality of the contemporary world, while at the same time we stand firm with our vision and transcend it with a positive ideal. The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel argued that historical development can only progress if a dialectical response to negativity is positive. Positivity is preserved from the negativity of the past, and it will remain positive and be highlighted for a new higher synthesis and combined to create a **dynamic critical synthesis**. Positivity is not a given state, but above all, an activity that must be constantly strived for. Hegel argued that in history there is a dialectical law of opposites of negation within the thesis, antithesis, and final synthesis. Today, we see as the main thesis to be fought, a consumer lifestyle and selfish individualism, with all negative aspects of society.⁷² Against this is the *antithesis* of an authentic, spiritually mature life that will be socially focused on building a better and fair

⁷² Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Filosofie dějin*. Nová tiskárna: Pelhřimov 2004, p. 14.



society. There would be a final *synthesis* of a better, social, just and humane society.

Currently, since traveling around the world is limited, there is an exceptional opportunity to get to know the cultural and natural beauties of one's homeland. It is then that one can appreciate the environment that they live in and realize that the most important values are right in front of them. Time has slowed down a bit and one can also recognize the value of silence and contemplation. We are becoming more and more aware of the value of nature during these times and how it is detrimental for our healthy mental development. Overall, only living in harmony with nature can direct civilization through progressive development and divert it from its predatory relationship to nature. At the same time, we have found that we do not need to live a consumerist lifestyle. There are more important values in life. The time of irresponsibility towards society and the planet is over. It is time to take responsibility. ●

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(Not only) the coronavirus lockdown of democracy The political implications of one pandemic

Petr Schnur

Motto: *'Democracy is a debate.'*
T. G. Masaryk

*'The only measure of freedom in a country
is respect for the rights of its citizens.'*
Edward Snowden

Prologue

The 'corona' case⁷³ can be grasped in several ways, on a medical, economic, social and purely personal level. The scope of anti-coronavirus (i.e. epidemiological) measures, on the other hand, raises questions about the political implications of the Covid-19 viral disease. Another basis for this collection is the fact that the levels mentioned above do not exist in isolation, rather they form intersections of the dynamics of today's social development. But just as these individual perspectives intersect at present, so the fact cannot be overlooked that the economic and political circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic cannot be separated from the past, from German, European and global developments to the 'dissolution' of the Eastern bloc. This view consciously takes the opposite method of confronting the current problem than government circles do along with the broader political establishment and mainstream media.

73 The term in quotation marks does not assess its biological quality, but expresses the set of circumstances that accompany its occurrence. It is therefore the name of the virus with its socio-political implications.



Of course, this article does not claim to cover the full range of causes, consequences and side effects associated with restrictive anti-coronavirus measures. The reason is not only the breadth and depth of the issue, but also the fact that significant parts of it are up for speculation at the moment. There will be no avoiding it, however, to the extent that it works in the context of reflecting on the relationship between the pandemic and politics in terms of a possible threat to democratic freedoms. In this sense, it is necessary to point out any clues and questions that could well indicate a permanent threat to the constitutionally guaranteed rights and freedoms of citizens. It will seek to inspire readers to think about the way in which state power, including the mainstream media, treats critics and criticism. In other words: how do the actions of state power correspond to the universal claim of a so-called free society to transparent democratic debate, to itself even.

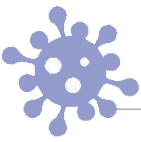
This is the direction of our view of the new coronavirus pandemic and its political implications.

Prelude

The ‘corona’ case strongly polarises German society. The situation is the same or similar in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and other European countries. Officials write this off as extremist tendencies, even suggest a psychological lapse among those who have not joined supporters of the government’s anti-coronavirus policy. But is it really so?

The events of 9/11 marked more than an imaginary line between the illusions of the post-communist era and the reality of the ‘fight against terrorism’ over the next twenty years. This ‘fight’ meant a ‘lockdown’ of international law, the militarisation of the foreign policy of the transatlantic community combined with the gradual curtailment of constitutional rights within it.⁷⁴ The colour revolutions and ‘humanitarian interventions’ became foreign policy initiatives where domestic

⁷⁴ Compare, for example: Krempf, Stefan: *Terrorismus und Bürgerrechte im Internet*, [Terrorismus und Bürgerrechte im Internet | Telepolis \(heise.de\)](#). And on the further restriction of basic freedoms by President B. Obama: *US-Regierung lockerte NSA-Beschränkungen per Geheimbeschluss*, Spiegel, 9.9. 2013, [Obama-Regierung lockerte NSA-Beschränkungen per Geheimbeschluss - DER SPIEGEL](#).



forces were not enough for a political coup. In our context, the *moral justification* for supporting political coups on the soil of sovereign states is now important. The concern for *human rights* and the moral obligation to the oppressed provided *carte blanche* justification to ignore the valid norms of international coexistence: *morality is superior to law*. We shall return to this topic later.

The drama and depth of the process of adapting Europe to American politics can be clearly demonstrated by two events: the war against Iraq in 2003 and the Arab Spring in 2011. In the first case, most European states, led by France and Germany, opposed the US-British assault on Baghdad; eight years later Paris and London led a war coalition against Libya and Syria. Needless to say, most European countries willingly followed them, either individually or under the EU banner. And television, radio and the press did not question these activities. Quite the contrary.

As the frequency of military interventions and political upheavals grew, distrust in the selflessness of transatlantic 'human rights engagement' began to as well. More and more people have asked why, in the name of democracy, are we helping to destroy secular Syria, while fundamentalist Saudi Arabia is our ally. Or what has been the democratic value of the Ukrainian coup in Kiev's Maidan, whose hard core members belonged to the armed component of the Bander neo-Nazis. The wiretapping of the German chancellor and other politicians by the American NSA came as a shock. Astonished citizens were posed the question of how it was possible that, while the federal authorities saw Putin's trolls and hackers behind every tree, the apparent espionage attack on Germany by its US ally was waved off. And because no politician or mainstream media⁷⁵ was willing or able to give a satisfactory answer, the answer was sought outside the mainstream media. Domestic and foreign investigative websites, the Russian stations *Russia*

⁷⁵ These are the newspapers (print or internet), radio and television, referred to in German as 'Leitmedien', which do not question the prevailing political-economic system, do not take issue with the so-called centrist policy at key points, and do not provide space for balanced opinion or discussion. These include the vast majority of large private radio and television stations, as well as all public service media. Earlier critical papers such as *Der Spiegel*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Zeit* or *Frankfurter Rundschau* are now fully integrated into the 'centre' line.



Today or *Sputnik* and others have become alternative sources of information, the names Snowden, Assange and Manning symbols of the new struggle for the preservation of democratic freedoms.

A meaningful view of the corona case is possible only in the context of this development. Not having it negates any understanding of the worries over the dismantling of the democratic state and rule of law, inasmuch as the controversial anti-coronavirus measures appear to be exceptional in the singular situation of a mass threat to human health. As a result, growing scepticism, including the defensive reactions of a large part of society, take the form of a kind of political schizophrenia, the psychosis of a people manipulated by foreign agents, political extremists and conspiracy theorists.

And so the current situation represents – most likely temporarily – the culmination of a chain of crisis events and phenomena within the prevailing political and economic system, generally called neoliberal, and its associated ‘real democracies’. The aim of this article is to draw attention to the fact that the confrontation between the civic and media periphery and the centre of power and its offshoots signals the growing *dynamics of a degenerative development within the transatlantic structures of the last twenty years*. Whether ‘corona’ will intensify this trend, push it to the next, higher stage of development towards an authoritarian form of government, remains a key question for the future of the democratic state and rule of law.

Now that the subject of our dissertation has been enunciated, it is necessary to emphasise what is not in it. This article is not ‘about the virus and its degree of danger’, it does not speculate about its origin or the role of Bill Gates in it. This is not to say that seeking answers to these questions would be illegitimate. Investigating the role of large global investors and interest groups, i.e. *pressure groups*, and debating their



political influence not only in relation to the ‘corona’ case is essential if democracy is to have any chance of survival. At this point, however, it would go beyond the scope and possibilities of our work.

Methods of ‘anti-discussion’ or ‘Information is not knowledge’

Let us start by introducing the basic rules of democratic debate. They include a willingness to reflect on the opponent’s arguments and changing point of view, respect for those who hold a different opinion, to listen to the other person, and a clear definition of one’s own position.

And now let us turn our attention to the ‘anti-discussion’. The scepticism about anti-coronavirus measures, which is being expressed by more and more people, is part of a long process of general crisis in the prevailing political system and experience with ‘information’ on other important domestic and foreign policy events.

At the communicative level, there has been a *dramatic loss of transparency* regarding policy decisions on key issues of society. Their illogic and inconsistency are accompanied by a diminishing willingness of the state power for democratic debate. Even this problem can only be outlined here, but the mere mention of it is all the more important when ‘centrist politics’⁷⁶ increasingly resorts to repressive measures. At the same time, the role of the mainstream media became fatal once it had abdicated its own role in the fundamentally critical reflection of centrist politics in earlier matters of domestic and foreign policy. The absence of critical self-reflection in the media was clearly demonstrated in the way the Arab Spring was reported.⁷⁷

According to the Federal Center for Political Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung), the function of the media is to convey information, form opinions and control political power.⁷⁸

76 This term refers to political entities that accept all the main principles of the prevailing neo-liberal system, including its transatlantic structures and supranational institutions. In the context of Germany, these are the CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Die Grünen. In addition to them are the foundations and thought factories connected to them, often affiliated with American partners or financial sponsors. But even in Die Linke and AfD parties have people and caucuses with a ‘centrist’ tendency.

77 An example is Der Spiegel. In 2013, it criticised the American media for blindly supporting the US-British invasion of Iraq, without reflecting on the same approach used in Libya and Syria in 2011. At the most, the democratic credentials of certain ‘rebels’ and the dilemma of military tactics were questioned, not the aggression itself. For more: Die Kriegstrommler, *Der Spiegel*, 19.3.2013, [Die Rolle der US-Medien im Irakkrieg - DER SPIEGEL](#) and *Der unheimliche Krieg*, *Der Spiegel*, 28. 3. 2013, [LIBYEN : Der unheimliche Krieg - DER SPIEGEL 13/2011](#).

78 On the role of the media in a democratic society, see the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Center for Political Education), *Funktionen der Medien in einer demokratischen Gesellschaft I und II*, [Funktionen der Medien in einer demokratischen Gesellschaft I und II](#) | bpb.



At the same time, the Center emphasises that the information must be complete, factual and comprehensible, the discussion free and open. Finally, investigative journalism is one of the methods of control.⁷⁹

This excursion into the world of general definitions intends to underline the media's *responsibility* for democracy as enshrined in German Basic Law (Grundgesetz) and the danger of underestimating anti-democratic tendencies. Simultaneously, the question arises as to which method is used to silence critical voices where arguments are lacking. It should be emphasised that in this context it is not the political or economic ties that stand at the forefront, rather the *method* of silencing critical voices.

In conclusion, the following should be summarised. If the media surrender their social responsibility as defined by the Basic Law, their educational role will change into an instrument of political manipulation and ideological indoctrination.

The totality of one 'truth' or Lockdown plurality

At the heart of the corona issue is undoubtedly the degree of threat to human health by Covid-19, which determines the extent and quality of measures to protect the population. There is no doubt that in the first phase of the viral 'invasion' it is logical to introduce more stringent measures, during which time the most appropriate way to fight the epidemic will be sought. In a society characterised by the *complexity of economic, cultural and social ties*, a kind of 'round table' might be expected, a Covid taskforce composed of independent experts from individual branches of healthcare, economics and social relations. There is certainly no need to underscore the exceptional position of virologists, which should imply all-around interest in their free professional discussion. There can be no doubt that the degree of acceptance of anti-coronavirus measures would not suffer as a result – on the contrary. The same can be

79 Ibid.



expected of a round table if it credibly seeks a balance between the effective protection of public health and the minimisation of economic damage and social sacrifices.

None of this happened, and it was already clear during the first lockdown in the first half of the year that the nature of anti-coronavirus measures had not been determined by medicine, but by a government in coalition with a narrow clique of virologists and a broad but completely one-sided media campaign. Alternative concepts in the fight against Covid-19 failed to get a wider media presence, which meant the de facto exclusion of expert discussion. The only visible player was a team composed of the Federal Government, the head of the Bavarian CSU Markus Söder, the director of the Federal Institute for Infectious Diseases (Robert Koch-Institut/RKI) Lothar Wieler, virologist Christian Drosten of Berlin's Caritas, and Karel Lauterbach, an epidemiologist and SPD member of the Federal Assembly. And if, by chance, virologists with a different diagnosis or alternative concept managed to get on the air, they did not have the slightest effect on the steadfast anti-coronavirus policy. On the contrary: the current line was not only maintained, but made even more stringent, along with an emotionally-charged atmosphere that completely negated the *strategy of a rationale-based fight* against the disease.

Here we come to the fundamental question: how to maintain a political line based not on the predominance of arguments, but on a quasi-information monopoly? Even in the 'corona' case, we are witnessing the application of a method known from the past. We have already addressed the political opportunism of the mass media, now we will focus on two phenomena that have in the past created a stereotype of power manipulation and political supremacy: fear and the moral argument.

Fear and morality as political weapons

Inducing and cultivating a sense of permanent fear among the masses has always been one of the ancient methods of



gaining, maintaining and strengthening power. Fear provides a strong and emotionally destructive movement, and from the point of view of the power elites, it is essential that it not be turned against them, but instead be channelled outward for their benefit.

Since the events of 9/11, Western society has been almost constantly bombarded with various threat scenarios: terrorism, which in recent years has been compounded by the 'Russian threat', climate warming and now the pandemic. If we look at these scenarios more closely, we will find that they relate to different foreign policy and domestic policy areas that overlap and reinforce each other with their adherents. We are dealing with terrorists, foreign agents, political populists and extremists, fighting disinformation, hate speech and conspiracy theories. The result is a permanent fight against them, against their perpetrators and agents, all the while your average citizen is more or less willing to increase the authority of the powers that be and at the same time reduce the degree of controlling them. This atmosphere of fear⁸⁰ is used to create an abnormal state that gradually becomes normal and as such is accepted by its citizens – all of course in the interests of saving democracy.⁸¹ The fight against terrorism allows for both military interventions and increased control of society, and an alleged threat from Russia for increased arms expenditures and NATO's eastern expansion. Meanwhile the current fear of infection forgets to ask, for example, whether the fear of a lack of beds⁸² in intensive care units has any real basis in fact, and if so, whether the cause is not due to a rigorous systematic reduction in healthcare expenditures. We will return to this point later.

Forecasts of a climate catastrophe and the Covid-19 pandemic threat, not to mention the refugee problem, show an important specificity in comparison to the two previous scenarios: at first sight, they look *politically neutral*. Refugees are

80 During the coronavirus epidemic, there has been a permanent media confrontation over the numbers that are supposed to prove an increase in infections and subsequent mortality. The problem lies in both their quantity and quality. As already mentioned, voices that authenticate them on the basis of expert analysis are given space only on the media periphery and have no influence on government anti-coronavirus policy. For others, see here: [Mehr als 10.000 Corona-Tote in Deutschland seit Pandemie-Beginn](#), AFP, 24. 10. 2020, [Mehr als 10.000 Corona-Tote in Deutschland seit Pandemie-Beginn \(msn.com\)](#), [Inzidenzzahlen deutlich höher?: Technische Störung beim RKI sorgt für Daten-Panne](#), Express, 23. 10. 2020, [Inzidenzzahlen deutlich höher?: Technische Störung beim RKI sorgt für Daten-Panne \(msn.com\)](#) and [RKI meldet mehr als 19.000 Neuinfektionen binnen eines Tages](#), Welt, 31. 10. 2020, [RKI meldet mehr als 19.000 Neuinfektionen binnen eines Tages \(msn.com\)](#).

81 The gradual prolongation of the planned measures restricting the course of public life and the preparation of the population for further restrictions on civil liberties is also symptomatic. Here, too, see examples: first one week of lockdown, shortly after the chancellor's statement about the 'hard winter'. More: [51 Prozent befürworten Beschränkung von Grundrechten](#), DPA, 27. 10. 2020, [Stobls Vorschlag eines Corona-Lockdowns stößt auf Skepsis \(msn.com\)](#), [Corona: Angela Merkel rechnet mit harter zweiter Welle im Winter](#), Der Spiegel, 11. 11. 2020, [Corona: Angela Merkel rechnet mit harter zweiter Welle im Winter \(msn.com\)](#). For an example of how the fear and dread of illness can influence thinking so much and rearrange the hierarchy of political values, see here: [51 Prozent befürworten Beschränkung von Grundrechten](#), FAZ, 27. 10. 2020, [51 Prozent befürworten Beschränkung von Grundrechten \(faz.net\)](#).



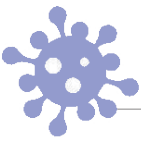
people in need, so it is necessary to provide them with shelter, and the climate covers the entire planet. Any disruption to it would affect all of humanity, regardless of ethnic, political or religious affiliation. The same goes for the viral epidemic.

Given the growing scepticism of citizens about the information provided by the mainstream media and their growing distrust of the political 'centre', the question arose on how to legitimise the measures enacted and at the same time silence any critics. One crucial point where all three entities converge: the problem of legitimising the endless war against terrorism, military interventions and the militarisation of foreign policy towards the Russian Federation. Whenever policy lacks logic and in fact causes a crisis situation in itself, the problem of insufficient evidence and supporting arguments must naturally arise. And this, from the point of view of power, becomes a problem when its expansionist aims are hampered by constitutional and applicable law, both international and national.

So how to justify the unjustifiable, such as the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, the invasion of Iraq, the destruction of Libya and the devastation of Syria? How to silence the voices that pointed to these acts of aggressions five years ago in connection with the mass migration taking place and warned of the economic, political and social consequences of the uncontrolled influx of migrants into Europe? And how to deal with those who question the measures established for the climate and 'corona' cases and dare to doubt the selflessness of those who make the decisions regarding them? One effective solution, it seems, is to *turn the empirical into the emotional, the legal into the moral*.

Anyone failing to toe the official line is deemed a troublemaker worthy of pillorying. Protecting the climate and human health are among the highest, noblest values of human existence, which means that these 'clueless' individuals can only be morally deficient.

82 More: „Dramatischer Mangel an Pflegekräften in Deutschland“, DW, 27. 10. 2020, ["Dramatischer Mangel an Pflegekräften in Deutschland" \(msn.com\)](#) – medical staff, [Zahl der verfügbaren Intensivbetten in Deutschland geringer als gedacht, Welt](#), 1. 11. 2020, [Zahl der verfügbaren Intensivbetten in Deutschland geringer als gedacht \(msn.com\)](#) – capacity of intensive care units.



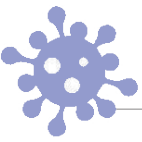
So let us repeat the basic observation: where political decisions become moralised, there is no need for arguments because they are empirical in nature and open to attack, whereas moralism has its roots on the transcendent plane. However, this fact makes morality ambivalent in the sense of accepting a political argument, for it presupposes belief both in its general validity and in the legitimacy of its application in a specific context. The problem arises where, for whatever reason, its credibility fails. And it is precisely this phenomenon that has been confronting the political ‘centre’ and the more or less interconnected media with growing frequency, which evokes the question of the control mechanisms of a system in which authoritarian tendencies are increasingly evident, but whose constitutional-legal form is still representative democracy.

Methods for silencing criticism

So far, we have outlined a situation where the mass media, described as ‘mainstream’, are less and less fulfilling the democratic task assigned to them by the Basic Law (Constitution) of the German Federal Republic. The reasons vary, here we can only sketch them: unprecedented concentration in the publishing sector, staff connections to foundations, transatlantic thought factories or political parties, dependence on advertising or financial sponsors. For example, if Bill Gates donates €2.3 million to *Der Spiegel* magazine, whose circulation has dropped dramatically in recent years⁸³, it can hardly be expected that this medium would subject such a generous donor to a critical look under the magnifying glass.

We have indicated here the factors that have influenced and continue to influence the situation on the media ‘market’. Censorship can come directly from the editor-in-chief, who is more responsible for capital investment than to the constitution. If political opportunism and the desire for a career are at stake, then something that might well be called *self-censorship*

⁸³ Der ideale Dünger für neue Verschwörungstheorien, *Cicero*, 22. 5. 2020, „Spiegel“-Förderung durch Bill Gates - Der ideale Dünger für neue Verschwörungstheorien | Cicero Online.



comes into play. A warning signal about the distortion of the political system and a reminder to civil society about it is also evident in the social sphere, where people are increasingly prevented from saying what they really think.

How is it possible that things have got so far?

The reason is psychological pressure through new, 'modern' ideologies with a moral superstructure, what is generally called today political correctness. Since they are promoted by most of the political spectrum and media, they are becoming a constant repetition of the social norm. The individual methods of their application could be described as follows.

On an individual level, it is the tarnishing and demonising of individuals, political groups or states. Anyone who publicly dares to doubt the wicked character or mental disorder of the tarred and demonised is automatically expelled from the democratic collective by media stooges, meaning outside the political game. We have already observed such a course of state power in connection with any critique of the migration policy and climate crisis narrative.

The concept of *conspiracy theory* is closely related to this phenomenon. Tacking it on is enough to politically disqualify alleged supporters and suppress their arguments. The experience that many 'conspiracy theories' have proved to be harsh reality changes nothing.

In connection with 'corona', we are witnessing a combination of both cases in demonstrations against anti-coronavirus measures. The mass media will not question whether democratic political culture might welcome demonstrations for the preservation of constitutional freedoms out of fear for their future the same as if hundreds of thousands of people took to the street to demand martial law – albeit with masks on. The only theme they are interested in, whether real or imaginary, is the presence of right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis among the demonstrators or those who resort to violent self-expres-



sion. At the same time, their ‘reporting’ resonates to suggest that peaceful demonstrators actually use militant extremists to do what they themselves do not have the courage to do.⁸⁴ If we recall, in diplomatic terms, the more than lenient attitude of the government and ‘mainstream media’ towards the rampaging Ukrainian ultra-nationalists in Kiev’s Maidan and elsewhere, then the conspiratorial problem must appear in a somewhat different light to the rational citizen than how it was presented by the media. There is no need to speculate here on the possibility of provocation by security officials in order to increase their powers.

The growing confrontation between the power elite of the political ‘centre’ and those who consider pluralism to be the basis of free democratic debate has seen political or economic sanctions applied increasingly often, and not just against artists, journalists or writers who find their livelihoods cancelled. Criminal punishment stalks those in direct contact with the coronavirus issue, as evidenced by the recent case of Friedrich Pürner, Director of the Aichach-Friedberg Health Department. His transgression was to publicly criticise the coronavirus policy of the Bavarian government.⁸⁵

Klaus Reinhardt, president of the German Medical Chamber, demonstrated the extent to which self-censorship or fear of losing your job can go. He expressed doubts about the effectiveness of face masks, and therefore about the sense of using them in the context prescribed by the current regulations.⁸⁶ Within two days he had confessed his mistake and told the public that after reading the appropriate studies, he now recommended wearing masks.⁸⁷

The pervasive political and legal situation surrounding ‘corona’ shows that the fear of employment proscription is not the only symptomatic phenomenon of the sharpening confrontation between the government and its critics, but also between the two poles of a polarised society.⁸⁸ The threat of violence

⁸⁴ This concerns a demonstration in Leipzig organised by the so-called *Querdenker*, similar ‘information’ could be read in connection with previous protests, see *Neonazis machten für “Querdenken” die Drecksarbeit*, *T-online*, 9. 11. 2020, [Demo in Leipzig: Neonazis machten für “Querdenken” die Drecksarbeit \(t-online.de\)](https://www.t-online.de).

⁸⁵ Wegen Kritik an Corona-Politik: Gesundheitsamt-Chef wird strafversetzt, *RT*, 7. 11. 2020, [Wegen Kritik an Corona-Politik: Gesundheitsamt-Chef wird strafversetzt – RT Deutsch](https://www.rtl.de).

⁸⁶ Ärztepräsident Reinhardt rudert zurück, *Tagesschau*, 23. 10. 2020, [Nach Aussagen zu Alltagsmasken: Ärztepräsident Reinhardt rudert zurück | tagesschau.de](https://www.tagesschau.de).

⁸⁷ Seehofer nennt Aussagen des Ärztepräsidenten „unerklärlich“ – Der rudert zurück, *Welt*, 23. 10. 2020, [Corona: Ärztepräsident rudert nach Zweifel an Alltagsmasken zurück - WELT](https://www.welt.de).

⁸⁸ “Querdenker“-Bus geriet in Connewitz in Hinterhalt, *T-online*, 9. 11. 2020, [“Querdenker“-Bus geriet in Connewitz in Hinterhalt – mehrere Verletzte \(t-online.de\)](https://www.t-online.de).



by ‘pro-corona’ militants in a hostile social atmosphere and the negative stigmatisation of ‘weird conspiracy theorists’ have turned the right to demonstrate and free speech into a new theory of relativity. The same goes for those subject to arbitrary fines set by the police. For example, the new police law on fees allows law enforcement to impose a fine (or fee if you will) for ordering a person to leave the place where he or she is or else enforcing the move themselves. It is certainly not difficult to imagine a situation where the police, for reasons of maintaining order, start to show the door, so to speak, to participants at a politically ‘incorrect’ demonstration.⁸⁹

Conspiracy theory or polit-fiction? Critical lawyers called the Bavarian Police Act of 2018 the toughest since 1945.⁹⁰ Heribert Prantl, a lawyer and publicist whose career so far suggests nothing of political dissent, described it with these words: ‘The law ... damages legal certainty... It gives the police powers that only the secret service has thus far had. It gives them weapons the army has. And it gives them the right to intervene and arrest as only prosecutors and judges may do in a state governed by the rule of law. The new police act turns the police into a government agency that can do almost anything it desires.’⁹¹

What else to say? Perhaps only that the Bavarian police law is supposed to serve as a model for the whole of Germany. And that the widespread support it enjoys includes the CDU leadership, who spoke out in favour of greater police powers after the Leipzig demonstration.⁹²

On the road to totalitarianism?

Let us now repeat the basic principles of democracy. They include the *right to protest* and controversial views must have *equal access to the media*, especially in cases where any interference in the life of society is ultimately at stake. A viral epidemic, in our case Covid-19, is of course a health context,

⁸⁹ Einschränkung von Bürgerrechten durch die Hintertür, *Telepolis*, 11. 2. 2020, [Einschränkung von Bürgerrechten durch die Hintertür | Telepolis \(heise.de\)](#).

⁹⁰ See original text [here](#). Comment here: Neues Polizeigesetz in Bayern: Massive Befugnis-Erweiterung für Beamte, *Abendzeitung*, 28. 3. 2020, [Neues Polizeigesetz in Bayern: Massive Befugnis-Erweiterung für Beamte | Abendzeitung München \(abendzeitung-muenchen.de\)](#).

⁹¹ See here: [Polizeiaufgabengesetz \(Bayern\) – Wikipedia](#).

⁹² CDU-Spitze fordert nach Corona-Demo mehr Befugnisse für Polizei, *FAZ*, 1. 9. 2020, [CDU-Spitze fordert nach Corona-Demo mehr Befugnisse für Polizei \(faz.net\)](#).



so it cannot be a debate between a mechanical engineer and epidemiologist, but when the presenters have equivalent professional qualifications, then the democratic rules of the game demand that sufficient space be created at least in the public service media. It must never be forgotten that the people in an apparent majority have the power to influence political decisions. However, a problem with this theory arises whenever the representatives of the people in the majority cease to represent their constituents and no possibility of a plebiscite exists. When they concentrate so much political power in their own hands so as to paralyze checks and balances and suppress civil disobedience with police repression!

In the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany we find *Section 20.4*, which codifies the *right of all Germans* to resist in the event of a threat to the country's political order, defined as a democratic, legal and welfare state, unless there is another defence.⁹³ This mandate was enshrined in the law with classical types of dictatorships in mind, but how to seek and establish, via *general consensus*, a turning point in a post-democratic world that would justify a de facto open and popular uprising against the government?

Not just in Germany does the overall 'corona' situation raise a fundamental point in society about the state of the republic and the real validity of the constitutional order. The question on the agenda is whether the clock is ticking or the sand has already run out. Opinions may differ on the 'before' or 'after', but if the mainstream media and established parties are already sounding the alarm, then it should be clear to everyone that the situation is now serious. For example, the weekly *Die Zeit* is warning against the 'surveillance state' (*Überwachungsstaat*) in the aftermath of the recent bill of the CDU/CSU and SPD based on the *time-limited standards* of the 'internal counter-terrorism fight' of 2002, enacted completely below the radar of a citizenry preoccupied with 'corona'.⁹⁴

⁹³ Section 4: 'All Germans have the right to resist anyone who undertakes to nullify this mandate if other remedies are not possible.' [Artikel 20 des Grundgesetzes für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland – Wikipedia.](#)

⁹⁴ The Water is Boiling, *Zeit*, 6. 11. 2020, [Überwachung: Das Wasser kocht schon | ZEIT ONLINE.](#)



The newspapers are asking how it is possible that everyone has been blind to this development. The question is perfectly justified; all it lacks is a critical look into the mirror and at its own role in it.

While *Die Zeit* is temporarily coming out of hibernation, alternative media is stirring up the rest of society over the first warning signals.⁹⁵ Let us recall that they have already been tagged with conspiracy labels and not only by ‘centrist’ politicians, but also by the mainstream media, often in the service of Moscow.

Of the traditional parties of the ‘old’ Bonn Republic, only the liberal FDP has not allowed itself to get dragged into the unified coronal coalition. Apart from the AfD and Die Linke, parties on the opposite fringes of the political spectrum, it is the only party that openly expresses concern about the principle of the division of power and fate of democracy.⁹⁶ It maintained this position during the parliamentary vote on the new Anti-Infection Protection Act (*Infektionsschutzgesetz*), which provoked a heated debate in the Bundestag and mass protest in front of it. The criticism concerns both the procedural issues of the presentation made and its content. Here are some of the points. The content was not consulted with the opposition, the new law contains ambiguous wording with a wide scope of interpretation, for example, when a curfew can be ordered. Section 28a was identified as the stumbling block in this context. Among other things, it generally means that the degree of danger to justify the introduction of those measures is not precisely defined. The volatility of these critical points is underscored by the ‘undermining’ of parliament, for this law concentrates power in the hands of the Minister of Health.

We have already talked about police powers, but it should be added that the police are not the only security force with an enormous increase in authority; the secret services are not left behind.⁹⁷ That this is a European trend is clear from looking

⁹⁵ [Zerstörte Demokratie | Rubikon.](#)

⁹⁶ [The FDP warns of restrictions on the rights of citizens in the corona crisis, RND, 18. 3. 2020, Corona: FDP warnt vor Einschränkung der Bürgerrechte in Krise \(rnd.de\).](#)

⁹⁷ [On the secret services: New surveillance powers for secret services, Netzpolitik, 13. 11. 2020, Staatstrojaner: Neue Überwachungsbefugnisse für Geheimdienste \(netzpolitik.org\).](#)



across the English Channel at the British Isles, where a series of ministerial decrees, i.e. outside the purview of parliament, has led to the ‘*greatest expansion of executive power in one generation*’.⁹⁸

Intermezzo: Coronavirus or neoliberalism?

Today and every day, citizens are confronted with horror scenarios about hospital capacities, specifically beds in intensive care units. Let us now leave aside the fact that this terrifying ‘information’ differs strongly from the daily experience of those who have access to medical facilities, whether as an employee, a patient, or through contact with these people. At this point, the important question to ask is what caused this situation with capacity in the first place: a coronavirus epidemic or a policy of systematic cuts in healthcare spending? A look at the statistics for the healthcare sector after 1995 gives a clear answer.

While there were 2,325 hospitals in Germany in the mid-1990s, their number had decreased to 1,942 by 2017. Three years later, there were only 1,400, fully corresponding to the critical shortage of carers and doctors.⁹⁹ That was still too many for the neoliberal lobby of the political ‘centre’. And so last summer, the politically very influential Bertelsmann Foundation proposed that the current number of hospitals be further reduced to 600, of course in order to increase the quality of healthcare!¹⁰⁰

If the government and mainstream media were really concerned about the health of the people of Germany and the ‘corona’ implied a moral, social and political reminder of it, if the European Union really cared about the future of Europe, they would have to first of all revise all Euro treaties that have imposed a policy of privatisation and reduction in social spending on Member States.

Epilogue: An attempt at balance and perspective

Our experience thus far with anti-coronavirus measures, how decisions are made about them and the way they are presented

⁹⁸ On the situation in Great Britain: The British Corona Law: ‘The greatest expansion of executive power in a generation’, *Telepolis*, 27. 9. 2020, [Britisches Corona-Gesetz: "Die größte Expansion exekutiver Macht seit einer Generation" | Telepolis \(heise.de\)](#).

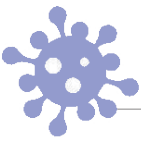
⁹⁹ For the gradual reduction in the number of hospitals, see here: [Krankenhäuser in Deutschland \(lb-immowert.de\)](#) On the problem of the shortage of care staff, see here: [Krankenhäuser: Zahl der Intensivbetten ist schon vor Corona angestiegen, aber das Personal ist knapp, Telepolis](#), 9. 10. 2020, [Krankenhäuser: Zahl der Intensivbetten ist schon vor Corona angestiegen, aber das Personal ist knapp | Telepolis \(heise.de\)](#). For forecasts of the shortage of doctors before 2019, see here: [Deutsches Krankenhausinstitut warnt: Bis 2019 fehlen über 37.000 Ärzte, Deutsches-Krankenhausinstitut-warnt-Bis-2019-fehlen-ueber-37.000-Aerzte \(medi-learn.de\)](#).

¹⁰⁰ Better care is only possible with half as many clinics, [Eine bessere Versorgung ist nur mit halb so vielen Kliniken möglich \(bertelsmann-stiftung.de\)](#) and the reactions of medical associations: Bertelsmann Stiftung sees 600 hospitals as sufficient for care, 15.6.2019, [Bertelsmann Stiftung sieht 600 Krankenhäuser als ausreichend für die... \(aerzteblatt.de\)](#).



in the mass media, including the treatment of critical voices and those who voice them, is beginning to raise concerns about the fate of law and democracy. It is not only the path to totalitarianism that leads to the usurpation of power by the army or a political party, a violent coup that abolishes the democratic constitution and its institutions, or makes them an instrument of a new dictatorship. Totalitarianism can also arise from the gradual **undermining of constitutional institutions by systematically detaching the executive from the 'burden' of case law, and thus from democratic control**. This means that the political system assumes a new quality based on the sum of many 'minor' changes. It is not the task of this article to speculate on whether the current trend is the result of the targeted efforts of power elites, or whether that sum of internal and external factors has set in motion a dynamic that has spiralled out of control for society as a whole. Whatever the case, it is important to emphasise that the result would be just as bleak: at the end of the process, the living institutions of the democratic state and rule of law will be dead political open-air museums.

The previous section on fear has shown that global threat scenarios in the form of climate catastrophe and viral pandemic are outwardly presented as apolitical, the solution of which requires unity at all levels: national, European, global. Both pose a global challenge to humanity and have been co-opted by politics. Put more precisely, it is 'centrist' policy and an entirely exclusive policy. The rest of society is neither a political/ideological competitor nor a partner in a democratic debate seeking the best possible solution, rather an enemy from the left or the right who must be silenced. If the enemy does not willingly withdraw, if fear and smear campaigns fail to do the trick, then severe repression must come next. And it is typical that the 'democratic' mainstream media is sounding the alarm and calling for tough action from politicians and security



authorities. Once the intellectual pride of German journalism, now a full-fledged member of the mass media, Die Zeit advocates the proclamation (sic) of a ‘*master plan against right-wing extremism*’.¹⁰¹ Today that extremism is behind everything that dares to question the policy of the ‘centre’.

The danger of the anti-democratic, authoritarian transformation of Europe does not lie in the individual democratic deficits, but in their sum. The repressive apparatus can establish itself step by step within the state in the interplay of internal and external factors just as easily as deploying the Bundeswehr abroad.

The idea of German soldiers becoming involved in aggression against other countries was still unimaginable in the early 1990s. Everything started with digging wells in Africa as part of ‘humanitarian missions’, then moving on to a ‘peace-building’ deployment in Bosnia¹⁰² and ending with the ‘humanitarian bombing’ of Yugoslavia. Bosnia and Herzegovina became the testing ground of a qualitative breakthrough towards combat deployment¹⁰³, and today it is clear that the transatlantic ‘centre’ has cast aside all barriers in this direction. And only political whiners and friends of ‘illegitimate regimes’ oppose it and snivel about how it all compares to the Basic Law.

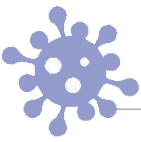
Three lessons can be drawn from the history of the Bundeswehr following the collapse of the Eastern bloc. First, in today’s real democracy, it is possible to act against the constitution without affecting its *formal* validity. Secondly, temporary mandates and measures have so far always proved eternal. Thirdly, accepting this state of affairs is not a matter of principled attitude, but of habit.

So where are we heading post-coronavirus? Could what we are witnessing be a pervasive accumulation of state power, the centralisation of Europe through the institutions of the European Union and the advancing abdication of the binding nature of legal norms, which in practice means an increase

101 We need a plan against right-wing extremism, *Zeit*, 21. 2. 2020, [Verfassungsschutz: Wir brauchen einen Masterplan gegen Rechtsextremismus | ZEIT ONLINE](#).

102 All official information here: [Bosnien-Herzegowina – EUFOR \(bundeswehr.de\)](#).

103 Historic step for the Bundeswehr, *NWZ*, 29. 8. 2005, [BOSNIEN-EINSATZ: Historischer Schritt der Bundeswehr \(nwzonline.de\)](#).



in the uncontrolled power of executive bodies? At this point, let us just try to make a brief prognosis based on individual findings.

If we look for logic in the strategy of the government and its political and media offshoots in the fight against the coronavirus epidemic, then at least we will not avoid the possibility that it lies somewhere outside the field of health. There are several indications for this possibility.

The current system of global neoliberalism is in a severe crisis that offers, according to critical analysts of economics and finance, no way out under the prevailing conditions. But the fact that Klaus Schwab, the founder of the World Economic Forum (WEF), shares this same conviction is what makes the whole thing fascinating. He, too, argues that neoliberalism has run its course and now there must be a qualitative change, which he calls the ‘**great reset**’. The basic idea of opening a new chapter in human history is that the engine must be shut down, the forces regrouped and restarted. It must be noted that this explicitly refers to the coronavirus pandemic.¹⁰⁴

In the interests of the planet and of all humanity, no one with any common sense doubts the need for a fundamental change in the prevailing economic and political system. The problem is something different. Schwab’s recipe does not question the position of power elites or the leading role of capital, but only puts both in a new, centralised global framework.¹⁰⁵ In other words, the new start will be made by the same people, the same interest groups, the same parties and the same supranational institutions that are responsible for the current global trouble, with only extended powers to control the reset system.

The precondition for the successful application of the model of world reconstruction according to the WEF’s idea is therefore the constitution of a technocratic, authoritative form of government on a global scale. And the current situation surrounding the ‘corona’, with its authoritarian tendencies, at least corresponds to the plan for the new start of green capitalism.¹⁰⁶

104 | More: [The Great Reset | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](https://www.weforum.org/). Interview with K. Schwab on this topic here: „Der Neoliberalismus hat ausgedient“, *Zeit*, 21. 9. 2020, [Klaus Schwab: "Der Neoliberalismus hat ausgedient" | ZEIT ONLINE](#).

105 | In Kürze: „The great Reset“ von Klaus Schwab - Eine Buchbesprechung von Dave Brych - YouTube.

106 | Klaus Schwab does not question the principles of the capitalist economic system. See: „Der Neoliberalismus hat ausgedient“, *Zeit*, 21. 9. 2020, [Klaus Schwab: "Der Neoliberalismus hat ausgedient" | ZEIT ONLINE](#).



Coronavirus and changes in the world economy

Ilona Švihlíková

The Covid-19 pandemic hit the world in 2020. It revealed which governments and approaches are able to deal with this unprecedented threat and which are failing. But the coronavirus has also served as an accelerator and amplifier of changes, which, often little noticed, have taken place before it.

One thing is for sure, the world will not be the same after the pandemic. Despite the strong pressure to 'return to normalcy' and the influence of political decision-making, the sooner governments realise that the coronavirus represents a turning point in development, including new positive opportunities, then the more they can take advantage of it to rebuild and modernise their economies.

This article focuses on changes in the world economy, ranging from the hierarchy of the international division of labour to changes in the structure of economies due to, among other things, growing digitisation. The coronavirus has highlighted the importance of national governments and the effectiveness of government in general, topics that are likely to occupy us further, because recovering from the coronavirus and modernising as a result of it require a strong and agile state.

The coronavirus as a symbol of the end of the West¹⁰⁷

Although the fight against the coronavirus is not over yet, comparisons can be made on how well the governments of individual countries have performed. The countries of the West, which are considered morally and technologically superior to the rest of the world, do not fare so well.¹⁰⁸

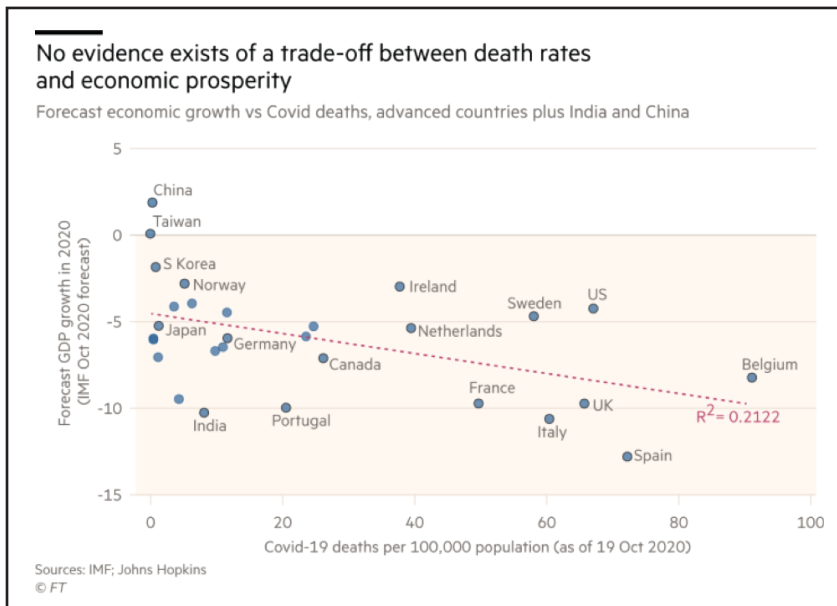
107 This part draws very loosely on the author's article for *!Argument*: Spengler was right. This is the end of the West. *!Argument*, 14.10.2020. *Spengler měl pravdu. Toto je konec Západu – !Argument* (casopisargument.cz).

108 See, e.g., Salmon, Andrew: Why East beat West on COVID-19, in *Asia Times*, 15.05.2020, *Why East beat West on Covid-19 - Asia Times*.



Comparisons show that the countries that did not accept a *trade-off* between the number of infected/dead and economic growth have performed the best. Unfortunately, most Western countries adopted this twisted *trade-off*, but as far as ‘sacrifices’ to the god of GDP are concerned, more deaths, in the end, were in vain. On the contrary, the countries with collapsing healthcare are the same ones with collapsing economies.

At the other end of the scale, the countries that put the lives and health of their citizens first are doing the best. In addition to China, there are other Asian countries like South Korea, Vietnam, as well as Japan and Taiwan. This is clearly stated in a graph from the *Financial Times*.



Source: Wolf, Martin: Ten Ways the Coronavirus Crisis Will Shape the World in the Long Term, in *Financial Times*, [link](#), 3. 11. 2020.



Western governments, which like to boast of their 'higher values' nor which miss an opportunity to blame the cultures of other countries for abusing human and sexual minority rights, have resigned themselves to their collapsing healthcare systems, have abandoned seniors to the disease, or are directly asking 'how many dead is a reasonable price to pay'. It has been this approach to the pandemic, a mixture of incompetence in providing effective governance and utter cynicism (as in the United States, for example) that the West has lost any right to moral supremacy.

Of course, Western hypocrisy is nothing new, but the visibly poor effectiveness of their governments (compared to Asian countries), together with a population that cannot be disciplined even in times of the unprecedented threat of a global pandemic, certainly is.

The emphasis on individual needs and their immediate satisfaction, leading to the glorification of selfishness, is an expression of the neoliberal ideology that has ruled since the 1980s. The distraction of Western society can be seen in more than just the outcome of a particular election. On the face of it, the coronavirus crisis requires solidarity, compassion for vulnerable groups and, above all, the ability to maintain discipline and obey the rules. Instead, the West boasts of 'demonstrations for freedom' (or having the freedom to go to a bar is worth more than your life) and the spread of conspiracy nonsense, which indicate not only decaying education and intelligence, but also utter disorientation in the modern world. Another factor is the distrust of anything that comes from official positions. Distrust in the elite does have a certain justification. For decades, the citizens of Western countries have been listening to the 'trickle-down effect', the idea that wealth flows from top to bottom, and that companies cannot be asked to pay more taxes because then they would take themselves and their jobs elsewhere. They have been witnessing



the declining power of the nation state (often relinquishing that power voluntarily), the growth of the power of wealthy individuals and corporations, and the growing precariousness of their own position. Experiences like these make it difficult to build trust in a progressive and effective state. Add to this the catastrophic quality of Western ‘elites’ (starting with US President Donald Trump and ending with the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who only knows how to wash her hands) and the decline of the West is clear.

Such combinations are not going to help the West to ‘maintain’ its privileged position in the world economy. Rather, it reflects a long-term (and well-deserved) fall. How can any ‘society’ (or a collection of atomised and therefore very well manipulated individuals) survive when it is unable to respond to threats against its very existence?

The coronavirus shows what a dead end it is to demand rights for more and more bizarre minorities when these rights do not entail responsibility and solidarity towards weaker or vulnerable members of society. A society intent on ‘amusing itself to death’, which cannot live without bars and the night life, is reminiscent of a defiant teenager who has no clue what responsibility means.

The coronavirus has confirmed what Oswald Spengler wrote a hundred years ago. We are living in the era of the end of the West.

A change in the international division of labour

The international division of labour has had a hierarchical structure since the 1980s, i.e. since the beginning of the era of globalisation, one dominated by multinational corporations. These corporations control about 80% of world trade. They use complex production chains to decide which production operations go to which economy. This gives them enormous control over added value in the economy and thus over the standard of living in any given country.



The last decades have been characterised by the creation of long production chains. These have been made possible not only by neoliberal policies (such as the liberalisation of trade and capital), but also by low shipping costs and the development of modern technologies that enable real-time cooperation between different parts of the world.

Nothing expresses the era of globalisation more than fragmented production, where products that we cannot even call high-tech are made in many countries, on many continents. Multinational corporations have been able to exploit the low cost advantages of countries outside the developed world to relocate much of their production capacity there. The East, Southeast and South Asia in particular have become the main centre of production in recent years for a number of reasons. It is not the purpose of this article to analyse the process that creates global value chains; important is that the multinational corporations of developed countries stand at the forefront of it. The exception is when developing countries try to catch up with them – they use their own multinational corporations for this purpose, which are usually under some state control or else are entirely state-owned.

The fragmented production process makes it possible to exploit cost advantages in a broad sense, from lower wages to missing social standards or a ban on trade union organisation. American economist Joseph Stiglitz would call this ‘the race to the bottom.’ Criticism of multinational corporations intensified after the Great Recession, from the use of child labour and tax evasion to the enforcement of ‘tailor-made conditions’, i.e. rent-seeking in nation states, but other critical aspects of complex production chains remain somewhat in the background.

With his strategy of ‘decoupling’ or disconnecting from China, President Donald Trump tried, at least rhetorically, to get American companies to relocate their production back to the US. At the

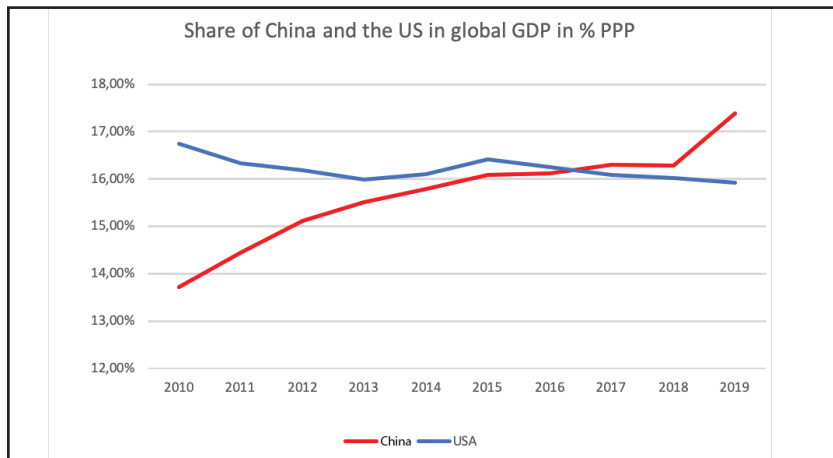


same time, modern technologies enabling localisation (so-called re-shoring) worked in the same direction.¹⁰⁹ Although we can see a certain amount of production returning to home countries, this trend was relatively weak prior to the outbreak of the pandemic.

The coronavirus, however, highlighted another aspect of the globalisation-era production chains – strong interdependence and vulnerability, a lack of strategic thinking (especially in the EU), and the reluctance and inability to subordinate multinational corporations to the power of the nation state. Only in this way can a democratic system maintain its legitimacy.

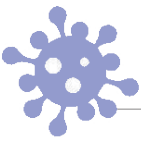
At the beginning of the epidemic, EU countries found that they did not even have the production capacity for such basic goods as the surgical mask. Although the Czech Republic got high marks for grassroots improvisation, which has a long tradition in our country, if anything it showed the power of China's productive capacity. It was able to quickly move to de facto war production, including the construction of a hospital within a week.

Graph 2: The rise of China and decline of US economic power



Source: IMF: WEO Database, October 2020

109 UNCTAD: COVID-19 will likely transform global production, says a UN report. *WIR*, 16.6.2020, [COVID-19 will likely transform global production, says UN report | UNCTAD](#).



If however Western countries are truly serious about their unacceptable dependence on long chains, then the solution is not in ‘even closer globalisation’, rather the opposite – in strengthening the role of the state, which must define the strategic productions it wants to control (but not necessarily own). This is a completely different position and philosophy, because most Western countries have given way to multinational corporations, i.e. have tried to create tailor-made conditions for them, including tax schemes, subsidies and other tools for rent-seeking (ergo parasitism on public budgets).

Trump’s concept of decoupling involves pressuring other countries to ‘choose’ between the United States or China. This choice is impossible for many of them (e.g. South Korea, Vietnam or Japan). His concept can be extrapolated to a bloc layout of the world. The weakening position of the US is evident in the long run, but the completely uncontrollable coronavirus epidemic indicates that the decline in US economic dynamics will contrast even more with China’s resumption of growth. In addition, China’s share of export markets is growing¹¹⁰ at the expense of countries unable to maintain their production due to the pandemic because it has never followed the path of ‘compromises’ between its economy and the health of its citizens.

Apart from foreign interventions, where the US president has quite a lot of room for manoeuvre, the complicated political situation in America promises no fundamental change in its economic outlook. Some commentators even believe that the United States is becoming ‘unmanageable’.¹¹¹

The role of the state

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of nation-state borders and the ability of governments to respond to unprecedented threats. Governments are facing not only the health and safety consequences of the pandemic, but also

110 Bradsher, Keith: Trump’s Tariffs? Coronavirus? China’s Exports are Surging Anyway, in the *New York Times*, 31.8.2020, [China’s Exports Are Surging Despite Tariffs and Coronavirus - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/31/us/politics/trump-tariffs-coronavirus-china-exports.html).

111 Luce, Edward: Biden Risks Being a Lame Duck President, in the *Financial Times*, 5.11.2020. [Biden Risks Being a Lame Duck President | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](https://www.ft.com/content/1c1c1c1c-1c1c-1c1c-1c1c-1c1c1c1c1c1c).



economic problems. While speed and relief programs received precedence in the spring, it is clear that the pandemic will change the structure of economies and the international division of labour as such in the longer term. The state is therefore faced with challenges other than creating aid programs for certain sectors: recovery and modernisation. Believing the Covid-19 pandemic provides, like every crisis, an opportunity for change is no exaggeration. Some countries will respond better than others and will use the crisis to introduce political and economic measures that they would not address at all under 'normal operations'. Controlling a pandemic, then using it to modernise economies, could well give certain countries a significant advantage (China, for example, is doing very well). Meanwhile others will find themselves gliding along because they have been infiltrated by lobby groups that reject any change (Czech Republic).

The active role of the state must stand on at least two pillars. The first is having sufficient resources. In addition to emergency aid, the state must secure long-term resources to use for modernisation. Both recovery and modernisation are controlled processes (better supported by bottom-up activities). The second pillar is the government's ability to think strategically in the long run, define the country's strategic outlook (internal and external with a view to the international division of labour and its hierarchy), and push through and implement its decisions. These two pillars will be the space where it comes to the crunch in the coming years.

The situation will be complicated by governments undertaking recovery and modernisation in combination with a heavy debt burden. They will have to choose, moreover, when to discontinue individual aid, how to do it, and how to address the structural rebirth of some sectors of the economy (real estate, tourism, etc.).

Massive indebtedness is not always perceived as problematic. For example, the IMF has completely reversed its position



and now notes that countries with good access to financial markets can take advantage of record low interest rates and 'grow' their way out of debt.¹¹² The IMF's rather optimistic forecast depends on governments being able to define engines of growth and to stimulate them, and that growth will contribute to reducing their public debt-to-GDP ratio. The possibility of extending the monetisation of debt cannot be completely ruled out, although the extent to which the direct financing of the government by the central bank can be expected in countries like the Czech Republic is questionable.

Similar as in the framework of fiscal consolidation, the issues of tax quotas and the composition of the tax mix will inevitably come to the fore again. Martin Wolf believes that richer groups will be invited to 'pony up' to make the recovery process fair.¹¹³ It cannot be excluded that the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic will increase the pressure for tax fairness. We already see some signs of it in Spain. However, the Czech Republic is a country that is unmistakably heading in the opposite direction. The permanent changes in the tax mix introduced by the government this year deepen the tax injustice between employees and the self-employed. The government has abolished one of the last property taxes that exists in our country (real estate acquisition tax), and the abolition of the tax on super-gross salary¹¹⁴ proposed by the ANO (YES) Movement party will not only chop 90 billion out of the budget, but will mostly benefit high-income workers.

Structural changes

The acceleration and amplification function of the coronavirus is most evident in structural issues, both within the structure of the domestic/national economy and the structure of a strongly hierarchal global economy.

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit the services sector hard. This sector is the largest in developed countries, both in terms of

112 IMF Says Austerity is Not Inevitable to Ease Pandemic Impact on Public Finances, in the *Financial Times*, 14.10.2020. [IMF Says Austerity Is Not Inevitable to Ease Pandemic Impact on Public Finances | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#).

113 Wolf, Martin: Ten Ways Coronavirus Crisis Will Shape The World in Long Term, in *Financial Times*, 3. 11. 2020. [Ten Ways Coronavirus Crisis Will Shape The World in Long Term | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#).

114 Income tax paid by employees based on the combined sum of their gross salary and their employer's labour costs (health insurance and social security).



GDP and employment. Services were supposed to be the sector of the ‘future’, where workers made redundant in traditional industries due to productivity issues could find employment.

The most affected sectors are those related to the mobility of people (transport, tourism) or which require the proximity of a ‘buyer’ (gastronomy, culture). The affected sectors that will undergo significant change also include real estate (use of office space). The coronavirus has changed the way we live, the way we work, the way we communicate. Many of these changes will be permanent. Home office or working outside the normal office (where there is an internet connection) may not be 100%, but it will definitely keep growing, along with decreasing the need to build more and more oversized office space. The sector focusing on exhibitions, congresses and trade fairs has also been severely affected.

As usual for crises, some sectors will be ‘cleansed’ of overcapacity, as state aid cannot go on indefinitely. The situation is untenable for the Prague gastro scene, where companies depend on a constant influx of mobile foreign clients. On the flip side, new possibilities open up for companies working in digitisation (e.g. communication tools such as ZOOM), producing robots (which can be used, for example, for disinfection in hospitals) or companies focusing on virtual reality (for situations where museums are closed, etc.)¹¹⁵ As a strong external shock, the coronavirus has accelerated the digitisation and application of modern technologies by many years. This, of course, also applies to education, an area the author of this article is very familiar with.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted a hallmark of globalisation – complex production chains. These long production chains, which fragmentise the production process between many countries and continents, have allowed multinational corporations to take advantage of price differences between countries. They have been growing for the past 30-40 years.

115 Pandemic Boosts Automation and Robotics, in the *Financial Times*, 20.10.2020, [Pandemic Boosts Automation and Robotics | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](https://www.ft.com/content/2020/10/20/pandemic-boosts-automation-and-robotics).



The pandemic, however, has shown that these chains do not only bring benefits (i.e. they have always brought benefits, mainly to the parent companies of multinationals), but they are also a symbol of vulnerability. Criticism of long production chains have thus resonated with the attitude of US President (a lame duck at the time of writing this article) Donald Trump, who made the return of production to America one of his priorities.

Modern technologies, including greater automation (where cheap labour ceases to be the main advantage) or decentralised production technologies (3D printing) are among the considerations many governments need to undertake in order to strengthen and control strategic production in their countries (typically France). For countries like the Czech Republic, which are in a dependent position, this represents a direct threat to the model of integration into the international division of labour that they have relied upon in recent decades. Dependent countries face the bitter admission that their economic structure (unless the government comes up with a locally oriented recovery plan) is someone else's to decide.

So many factors play a role in shortening production chains. This process can fatally transform the process of globalisation.

Conclusion: the future of globalisation

As a process encompassing fragmented production run by multinational corporations (i.e. the main actors determining the hierarchy of the international division of labour, unless a strong state stands in their way), globalisation began to weaken after the Great Recession. Ever since, typical patterns indicating that the volume of goods in international trade is still growing (thus the problems in statistics related to the movement of intermediate goods) are in the process of disintegration.¹¹⁶

Economists have not been able to agree on whether globalisation has 'only' peaked, or whether it is a gradual end to this

116 E.g. Richter, Felix: Has Globalisation Passed Its Peak?, in *Statista*, 26.5.2020, [Chart: Has Globalisation Passed Its Peak? | Statista](#).



stage in the development of capitalism. For many developed countries, the coronavirus has now revealed the somewhat bitter fruits of outsourcing production to ‘cheaper’ countries, when, for example, EU countries found in the spring of 2020 that they did not have sufficient production capacity to produce such a basic commodity as the surgical masks mentioned above. Instead, the situation in the Czech Republic was saved by a grassroots movement.

The process of globalisation has, of course, been damaged as well by the rift between the United States and China, an expression of the growing rivalry between the fading power and rising star. The emergence of global blocs thus seems increasingly realistic, with all the dangers that this scenario presents.

The process of globalisation is not going to disappear overnight, but it can be expected that strategic considerations will be reflected more in the economic policies of developed countries and that they will try to return important products to their homelands. A dominant role will be taken by the state, which will be more or less necessary for the recovery and modernisation of economies. However, ‘virtual’ globalisation involving the sharing and transfer of thoughts, ideas, instructions, manuals, etc., will not disappear. This type of global cooperation is not threatened by the pandemic, rather by censorship and evoking the spirit of McCarthyism, especially in the United States.

The Covid-19 pandemic hit the world hard, but in addition to the lessons learned, it also offers development opportunities for countries run by quite bold and strategically thinking governments, which understand that this is the moment for them to ‘get the jump’ on the coming decades. The first step is clear: admit to yourself that there is no going back in time, ‘going back to February 2020’. Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change. Whoever demonstrates greater competence and



intelligence will own the 21st century. This ability, however, has not been shown by the countries of the West, but by those in the East. ●

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The Covid-19 pandemic as a turning point, or Why neoliberal capitalism is not a farce, but a tragedy

Michael Hauser

There comes a point in tragedy when there is a sudden turn of events that could not be inferred from previous episodes, but at the same time, in retrospect, these episodes were headed for it. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, a messenger from Delphi relieves Oedipus of the fear that he is responsible for the plague that has struck Thebes. But when the messenger reveals his full past, Oedipus recognises the terrible fact that he had killed his father and sleeps with his mother. This turn of events, known as *peripeteia*, has brought the recognition that Oedipus, celebrated as the saviour of the city, is the cause of the plague that threatens to destroy all of Thebes. This knowledge, called *anagnorisis*, is understood as the recognition of the true state of affairs. Aristotle writes of it as the transformation of ignorance into knowledge, when we recognise either someone for who they truly are or unknown circumstances and contexts that establish the true nature of previous episodes.¹¹⁷ According to Aristotle, this recognition has the greatest effect when it is associated with the turning point of an event, which is to say *anagnorisis* is the result of *peripeteia*. In this way, we can also recognise things that do not emerge from the story, such as various coincidences or natural conditions, i.e. *anagnorisis* is not necessarily connected to *peripeteia*. Likewise, *peripeteia* does not have to be accompanied by *anagnorisis*.

¹¹⁷ The Poetics of Aristotle, trans. S. H. Butcher. Macmillan and Co.: London, 1902, p. 39 (1452a).



In the context of the current pandemic, it is remarkable that Homer's *Iliad*, which marks the beginning of European culture, starts off by describing the events put into motion by an epidemic. In the first song of the *Iliad*, Apollo blights the Achaean army with a plague to punish King Agamemnon for the offence he committed against the priest Chryses, whose daughter he seized as war booty. This led to a dispute between Agamemnon, the commander of the army, and the central hero Achilles that came close to giving the Trojans victory over the Achaeans. The plague-epidemic became the immediate impetus for the innumerable storylines that depict this founding work of European culture. It was a turning point in the monotonous skirmishes between the Achaeans and Trojans, which had gone on for ten years without any resolution. It was *peripeteia* caused by an epidemic, but it was no longer accompanied by the recognition of its consequences. *Anagnorisis* as the recognition of the end result of these events was not part of the *Iliad* at all. The account closes with the funerals of the heroes Patroclus and Hector, and we learn nothing about the fall of Troy or the end of the war. The turning point is void of any knowledge of the end of the story.

In a certain sense, Covid-19 resembles the epidemic that appears at the beginning of the *Iliad* in that it too represents an immediate impetus of events. In the *Iliad*, the epidemic is a manifestation of divine wrath, incorporated into the mythical image of the world, but its meaning remains relevant. Above all, it represents a turning point, the consequences of which the characters are completely unaware of. They interpret the plague only as Apollo's intervention for Chryses and the attempt to retrieve his daughter. It was an offence, however, quite within the practices of their day. It is possible that Apollo himself, who was the god of prophecies that foretell the future, never realised, never experienced an *anagnorisis* of the outcome of events he unleashed by afflicting the Achaeans



with plague. After much action and upheaval, defeat finally comes to the Trojans, on whose side Apollo had stood.

Covid-19 is a pandemic that can be considered a turning point. Many experts and thinkers agree that the world will not return to the state it was in before the pandemic. Covid-19 has evoked a situation that corresponds to a turning point, i.e. the *peripeteia* that appears in tragedies, epics and other classical genres. But is there *anagnorisis* here as well, the recognition of what this pandemic has revealed and in what direction it is pointing? Covid-19 represents a *peripeteia* that, in most cases, still lacks a corresponding *anagnorisis*. From this point of view, Covid-19 is similar to the plague we encounter in the *Iliad*. There is a special connection here. The *anagnorisis-less peripeteia* described by Homer infuses the beginnings of European culture, and Covid-19 is also *peripeteia* without sufficient *anagnorisis*. Homer's literary depiction of the plague in the *Iliad* stands at the beginning of European culture. Covid-19, in a sense, comes at the end of a certain period of European or 'Euro-American' culture and civilisation, based on the idea that liberal democratic capitalism will always be here with us, because despite all its shortcomings, it is the best possible system. The Covid-19 pandemic is a turning point because the long-term crises that manifested themselves in the financial crisis of 2008 and in other types of crises since the late 1980s, when the 'new world order' emerged, have become entangled or, to use Althusser's expression, 'condensed' in the process.¹¹⁸ The pandemic was the immediate cause of this entanglement or condensation, with a health crisis intertwined with a crisis of democratic representation, an economic crisis with a psychological crisis.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected not only the non-privileged part of society or, above all, poor countries, but all social classes and countries. The pandemic has revealed to one and all the state of the public health systems on which the

118 The concept of the 'condensation' (the 'fusion') of crisis processes and their contradictions, as well as other Althusser concepts, can be used, in my opinion, as analytical tools in describing the current pandemic situation. However, an Althusserian analysis of Covid-19 is not the subject of this article. For an explanation of these concepts, see Althusser, L., *For Marx*. The Penguin Press: London, 1969, p. 99, <http://www.marx2mao.com/Other/FM65i.html#s1>



health and physical survival of potentially every citizen depends. According to the director-general of the World Health Organisation Tedros Ghebreyesus, the pandemic has exposed the weakness of public health systems not only in poor and medium-rich countries, but in the richest countries as well.¹¹⁹ Healthcare systems are also collapsing in countries such as the United Kingdom and United States. Joe Biden speaks of a ‘very dark winter’ because American healthcare is unable to cope with such an onslaught of the disease. Although the financial and political elite have access to private healthcare facilities offering the best possible care, they cannot avoid contact with people who pose a potential risk of infection. While neoliberal capitalism has endowed financial elites with extreme wealth, underfunded healthcare systems are collapsing and Covid-19 is spreading en masse. Neoliberal capitalism, through long-term cuts in public spending, has led to consequences that now threaten the proverbial one percent of the richest. Covid-19 is more democratic than any liberal democracy that seeks to have most of its people shoulder the negative consequences of neoliberal capitalism, i.e. austerity measures, while the moneyed elites continue to grow extremely rich. Covid-19 is a pandemic in the original sense of the word. It concerns, without exception, the whole of society, which is how this Greek term can be translated. ‘Pan’ expresses the whole of something, and ‘demic’ refers to ‘demos’ (‘people’, or ‘society’ in today’s understanding). By its name, every pandemic revives a sense of democracy and erases social privileges, even if only partially. Workers, low-level employees and the precariat must continue to work in large factories with a high risk of infection, while other social classes have remained relatively safe at home. But to some extent, the pandemic threatens everyone, including financial oligarchs, high-ranking managers and politicians. Covid-19 was a sudden turnaround in the distribution of risk in the neoliberal economy. A situation has arisen where the

119 | Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on the Dangers of Politicising the Coronavirus Pandemic, in *Time*, 24.9.2020, [Tedros on the Dangers of Politicizing the COVID-19 Pandemic | TIME](#).



risk to health and life applies to potentially every member of society, in all countries of the world. As a *pan-demic*, Covid-19 has democratised the negative consequences of neoliberal policies that had hitherto affected most of society, but left the rich and a narrow privileged minority untouched. For the first time, the financial and political elite have personally experienced the negative side of neoliberal capitalism, right at the level of their physical bodies.

In the first half of the 1990s, Jacques Derrida expressed the negative side of liberal democratic capitalism and its crisis processes in a broader context in the book *Specters of Marx*. In it, he argues with Fukuyama's thesis that liberal democracy means the end of history, and calls the euphoria of liberal democratic capitalism the most blinded and delirious hallucination of our time. He calculates the crisis processes that this collective hallucination has made almost invisible. Derrida cites, for example, unemployment as the result of regulated deregulation, which is socialised as suffering; the massive exclusion of the socially disadvantaged from participation in democratic life; the expulsion and deportation of refugees; the ruthless economic war between European countries, the United States, and Japan; the inability to manage discrepancies in the concept, norms and realities of the free market (protectionist barriers protecting the economies of rich countries versus abolishing this protection in poor countries); the mafia structures that have metastasised into the socio-economic fabric of society, into the circulation of capital, and into state institutions; the contradictions between international law and its institutions that subordinate international law too much in line with European concepts of the state and sovereignty, where the interpretation of international law is dominated by the most powerful nations, and therefore not all countries are equal before it.¹²⁰ Derrida portrays this state of affairs against the background of Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet and quotes

¹²⁰ Derrida, Jacques: *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Routledge: London – New York, 1994, p. 81.



Hamlet's famous line that 'the time is out of joint'. Derrida calls these crisis processes of liberal democratic capitalism the plagues of the 'New World Order'. These crisis processes are a plague because they spread uncontrollably in the body of liberal democratic capitalism. Fukuyama's hallucinations at the time prevented the recognition that there were indeed several types of plague in the celebrated 'New World Order'.

Against the background of Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, we can understand this hallucination as an objectively given blindness, due to which we cannot recognise that the celebrated king, who is supposed to save us from the plague, is in fact the cause of it. Fukuyama's hallucinations were caused by the changing ideological coordinates of the Cold War in the 1970s and 80s, with the Eastern bloc beginning to appear as a totalitarian 'evil empire'. This image gained social traction certainly as a result of the overall decline and collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc in general (the suppression of the Prague Spring of 1968, the war in Afghanistan becoming the Soviet 'Vietnam', the lagging behind in technological and scientific development, etc.). Fukuyama's hallucinations were not the result of immediate manipulations, rather were provided 'objectively' by previous worldwide developments. The blindness to the plagues of the new world order caused by these hallucinations can therefore be understood as an objectively given blindness, reminiscent of the blindness of Oedipus, which arose from a message he could not know, which had to be revealed to him. Liberal democratic capitalism has been plagued by the same Oedipal blindness that prevented this 'king' from realising that he was not the saviour of the world from plagues, rather he himself was the cause of them. The blindness today corresponds to a 'fateful' blindness, which is not caused by any individual's inability to see the true state of affairs, but by historical developments since the 1980s, when liberal democratic capitalism began to appear as the salvation



from the plague of totalitarian evil. In doing so, crisis processes were triggered like new plagues. This fateful blindness is not an element of farce, rather tragedy.

The plagues of the new world order that Derrida writes about became more visible after 2008 and the global financial crisis, which deepened the crisis of democratic representation and created the conditions for the rise of nationalism and conservative populism. But only the pandemic of 2020 marks an actual turning point, because it struck not only at the periphery of the societal system, but also at its 'heart'. This pandemic suggests the medieval understanding of the plague as any disease that brings mass death and 'infests' society. Covid-19 has so far claimed a total of 1.3 million lives and infected 54 million people.¹²¹ Europe and the United States have encountered nothing like this since the Spanish flu epidemic after World War I. The global spread of this current plague was made possible by the crisis processes that Derrida referred to as plagues in a metaphorical sense. These are the plagues of liberal democratic capitalism in condensed form, spreading with the real plague and just as capable of affecting the physical body of any human being. The bodies of those sick and dead from Covid-19 can be understood in what we read about the various plagues of liberal democratic capitalism, terms such as 'regulated deregulation' and the underfunding of public systems. Only this plague, which depicts the crisis processes to date on the level of physical bodies, allows the leaders of liberal democratic capitalism to get rid of their blindness just as Oedipus did after the report from Delphi. The advent of Covid-19 is a *peripeteia* in the development of crisis processes, which Derrida called the plagues of liberal democratic capitalism. It is a *peripeteia* that makes it possible to get rid of the blindness to the crisis processes that have enabled their global spread.

In this situation, liberal democratic capitalism no longer manifests itself as farce, as it did during the financial crisis

121 Figures of the World Health Organisation as of 17 November 2020. [Weekly epidemiological update - 17 November 2020 \(who.int\)](#).

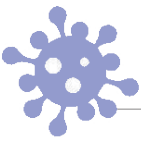


of 2008, rather it has the nature of tragedy. In his book *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009), Slavoj Žižek wrote that the reaction of the political and moneyed elites to the financial crisis resembled farce, because their solutions for the recovery of the economy missed the reality of global capitalism. Žižek used Marx's famous comment that world-historical events come twice: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Žižek explained this farce as the political and moneyed elites living in a specially isolated world accessible 'only to members'.¹²² They are not affected by the reality of global capitalism, which they create through their decisions and oligarchic interests. However, Covid-19 broke through the closed doors of this club and democratised the physical existence of its members. Covid-19 is a real *pan-demic* that touches everyone, including the chosen members of this club. Unlike the financial crisis of 2008, their response to the pandemic and proposed rescue procedures will therefore have an impact on themselves as well. This impact not only concerns the issue of their financial wealth, but to something more substantial, namely their physical existence. If this elite does not get rid of the blindness caused by living in the club of the chosen few, their wrong decisions will have real consequences not only for the whole of society, but for their own lives as well. The reaction of the moneyed and political elite to Covid-19 is no longer the farce of 2008, but has acquired the features of tragedy.

Tedros Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the World Health Organisation (WHO), has shown the way forward with his call for international solidarity and a change in access to medicines. The coronavirus vaccine needs to be distributed worldwide in such a way that it is given to the specified at-risk population of each country, not to everyone in some countries. Political leaders should commit to making the vaccine a 'global public good'.¹²³ The pandemic has created a situation that requires a change in the view of medicines and medical

¹²² Žižek, S., *First As Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Verso: London – New York, 2009.

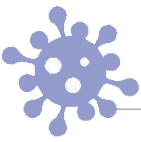
¹²³ Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on the Dangers of Politicising the Coronavirus Pandemic, in *Time*, 24.9.2020 [Tedros on the Dangers of Politicizing the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) | TIME.



devices and, in order to fight Covid-19, make them a public or common good. This requirement comes first and foremost not because of the idea of equality and social justice, but to enable the survival of as many people as possible in all social classes and in all countries. In the global world, the spread of Covid-19 cannot be stopped within a single country or class, but a global approach can be undertaken to ensure that the coronavirus vaccine does not become a commodity that only some can afford, rather it becomes a public good. Slavoj Žižek drew the logical conclusion from these statements by the director-general of the WHO that if we understand public or common goods as a basic socio-economic principle of communism for the present, then it is in the purely pragmatic and egoistical interest of every person and every country that we apply this principle and thus establish communism across the planet. According to Žižek, this communism, based on planet-wide common goods, is not a utopian dream, but expresses what must be done in order to survive. Žižek writes that the Covid-19 pandemic is a strong argument for changing the capitalist concept of ownership, which not only prevents us from fighting the pandemic effectively, but has previously created conflict with the 'shared' nature of current digital technologies, communication networks and scientific practice, the further development of which requires them to become public or common goods. Žižek believes the pandemic has shown that the global introduction of the principle of public goods is a matter of necessity, similar to the measures taken during 'war communism' in Russia in 1918.¹²⁴

Tedros Ghebreyesus, Žižek and other representatives of public institutions, experts and thinkers have undergone the act of recognition, i.e. *anagnorisis*. They have recognised the true state of affairs and deduced from it what needs to be done to get out of the current health crisis linked to the economic and psychological crisis. However, most political leaders are

124 | Žižek, S.: *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World*. OR Books: London – New York, 2020, p. 92.



still reluctant to achieve this same full recognition, which they suspect points toward global solidarity and communist principles as the answers necessary to the current entanglement of several crises. Previous crisis processes reached a turning point, a *peripeteia* that has not yet been accompanied by a complete and effective *anagnorisis*, which will change the current neoliberal capitalist understanding of the economy, society and the global world. If this *peripeteia* continues without a corresponding *anagnorisis*, we will all become part of a great global tragedy, the end of which has no horizon. ●

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Diseases stalk people, or Epidemics and pandemics in history

Veronika Sušová-Salminen

Epidemics or pandemics are an integral part of human history and to a large extent we are accustomed to their acute presence. In this article, we look back at three different historical epidemics (pandemics) – the Black Death in Europe, the conquest of America in the 15th and 16th centuries, and a special case of the ‘Spanish’ flu pandemic of the early 20th century. These examples should help us find answers to two main questions: How much did epidemics or pandemics cause social change or transformation, and what types were they?

The Covid-19 pandemic surprised and caught everyone off-guard. At the beginning of the 21st century, ‘technological man’ simply did not expect to have his highly individualised living habits, lifestyle, work, and ideas about the world restricted by a single microscopic organism almost overnight. The harsh truth, however, is that infectious diseases have always been an integral part of human history. Long into the modern era Western societies tragically struggled with outbreaks of smallpox, typhus and cholera to name a few. Only with the advent of modern medicine (especially vaccination) and emphasis on new standards of hygiene in urban areas have the most common infectious diseases been eradicated. But not all and not everywhere. The first finding that we can make about an epidemic or pandemic at the outset is that they are the result of a social way of life. Said another way,



they are the result of the way in which society is organised and how it interacts with nature and the environment.¹²⁵

Experts have assumed that infectious diseases with characteristics that lead to epidemics are related to agriculture or an agricultural, sedentary lifestyle. The idea is that the nomadic life of hunting and pastoral groups did not create the conditions favourable for infectious diseases and their transmission (or for epidemics and pandemics). They came up with three phenomena, all of which lie in the wake of agriculture, cities and trade, or what we understand as 'civilisation'.

Infectious diseases often have an animal origin, the result of specific interactions between human communities and domesticated animals. This process of transmission is technically called zoonosis. Infectious diseases that cause epidemics or pandemics are associated with agrarian society. This is first and foremost due to the agricultural way of life making it possible to have numerous and denser human settlements. According to American anthropologist and geographer Jared Diamond, their numbers are 10-100 times greater than hunters and gatherers.¹²⁶ Another source of disease was the very environment in which farmers traditionally lived, including hygienic conditions, the use of faeces for fertiliser, and cohabitation with livestock within a single dwelling. The urban environment then created a perfect incubation space for viruses and bacteria. The causes are obvious. First, population density, and second, the hygienic conditions of medieval (but also modern) cities (zero sewerage, contamination of water sources, personal hygiene). In addition, it was also the case that cities represented trading centres that drew both merchant caravans and farmers there to sell their goods in local markets.

The domestication of animals is considered a major source of human infectious diseases. Today, biologists are able to identify their closest relatives through molecular analysis. For

125 For more, see Shah, Sonia: *The Microbes, the Animals and Us*, in *Covid-19. A Shock to the System*, in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 2020, pp. 6–14.

126 Diamond, Jared: *The Guns, Germs and Steel. The Fate of Human Societies*. Norton&Company: New York-London, 1997, p. 205.



example, measles is closest to rinderpest, which suggests that the measles virus was most likely caused by the transmission of rinderpest to humans and its adaptation to human biology. *‘That transfer is not at all surprising, considering that many peasant farmers live and sleep close to cows and their faeces, urine, breath, sores, and blood. Our intimacy with cattle has been going on for 9,000 years since we domesticated them – ample time for the rinderpest virus to discover us nearby’*, says Diamond.¹²⁷ A similar genealogy of transmission has been hypothesised for a number of human infectious diseases: cattle are likely the source of the viral diseases tuberculosis and smallpox. Influenza is again considered a gift (i.e. transmission of the virus) from pigs and ducks. Whooping cough originates in pigs and dogs, while malaria is probably the result of transmission from birds (perhaps ducks too).¹²⁸ The situation is also similar for current or newer viruses. The HIV virus that causes AIDS is probably a transmission from monkeys to humans.

The thing about microbes is their ability to adapt and change. According to Diamond, *‘diseases represent evolution in process, and microbes adapt by natural selection to new hosts and vectors’*.¹²⁹ In a new environment, microbes must look for new ways to live, to reproduce and spread. From a purely biological point of view, the pandemic of the new coronavirus should not, therefore, surprise us at all.

The Black Death 1348–1351

The Black Death, or epidemic of the plague, is the first disease to go down in history as a trading import, which is to say an infection spread by the trade routes that connected remote areas of Asia and Europe. The Black Death was actually a Eurasian pandemic (i.e. ‘globalised’) that also affected Africa and caused huge demographic losses in Europe in the mid-14th century (1348-1351).

We do not know its exact origin, one of the reasons being the lack of historical sources. The bacteria *Yersinia pestis* is

127 | Diamond, op.cit., pp. 206–207.

128 | Diamond, op.cit., p. 207.

129 | Diamond, op.cit., p. 209.



thought to have first appeared either on the border between Manchuria and Mongolia, or perhaps on the border between Myanmar and the Chinese province of Yuanan. But there are other theories that the plague originated in the area controlled by the Golden Horde (today's Russia), which was geographically closer to its European epicentres.¹³⁰ We know that medieval China went through a major epidemic between 1330 and 1350 with far-reaching demographic consequences. According to historian Mark Harrison, who has focused on the relationship between trade and epidemics, it is not possible to prove whether this Chinese epidemic was caused by the same plague, i.e. the same type of infectious disease as occurred in Europe.¹³¹

As stated above, the plague appears to have spread from Asia to Europe along Central Asian trade routes, which were the main commercial highway between China and Europe. In her book on the medieval world system, historian Janet Abu-Lughod comprehensively points to the interconnectedness of the medieval (not yet capitalist) world, where Europe was only one of its secondary subsystems.¹³² The disease spread through trade and cities. Despite the medieval nature of roads, it acquired a de facto pandemic character. In Europe, the plague first appeared in Crimea in 1346, specifically in the Genoese-founded port of Caffa (which supports Benedictow's theory that the disease originated in the areas controlled by the Golden Horde). It is believed that the plague spread from Crimea to Byzantine Constantinople in 1347. The following year it appeared in the African cities of Cairo, Alexandria and Tunisia. Trade routes in the Mediterranean became the main network of the plague. It reached Europe through the trading centres established in the Sicilian port of Messina and the French port of Marseille. It also spread along inland routes, along important European rivers like the Rhône, Loire, Rhine and Po. From the north of present-day Italy, the plague crossed

130 Benedictow, Ole: *The Black Death, 1346-1353: The Complete History*. The Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2004, p. 60.

131 Harrison, Mark: *Contagion. How Commerce Has Spread Disease*. Yale University Press: New Haven-London, 2012, p. 2 (Kindle Edition).

132 Abu-Lughod, Janet J.: *Before the European Hegemony. The World-System A.D. 1250-1350*. Oxford University Press: Oxford-New York, 1989.



the Alps and spread to Austria and Central Europe, while merchant ships brought the plague to the Atlantic coast, to the Baltic and North Sea and further north. In all these places, the disease found a favourable environment, namely the lifestyle in medieval cities. And cities paid a high price for the disease. In some cases, they lost up to 70% of their populations due to the plague¹³³, which can rightly be described as a demographic collapse. Overall, the epidemic is estimated to have killed between a third and 45% of Europeans.¹³⁴ The latest estimate has 94 million people living in Europe in 1300 and only 68 million in 1400. The demographic decline between the beginning and the end of the 14th century is mainly attributed to the highly infectious plague, which was estimated to have killed between 50% and 60% of those people it infected.¹³⁵

In his book *The Great Leveller*, the Austrian historian Walter Scheidel understands epidemics or pandemics as one of the four ‘apocalyptic’ sources of significant change in the distribution of social wealth. According to Scheidel, the plague had great economic consequences. It came to Europe at a time of massive demographic growth, linked to technological innovation, to improved agricultural practices, but also to reduced political instability, which led to an expansion of settlements. All this was reflected in the overall (and demographic) growth of cities.¹³⁶

Although the plague led to a large decline in population, the physical infrastructure remained intact. As a result, land became idle as labour grew scarce and costly. Rents fell and interest rates dropped in absolute and relative comparison to salaries and wages. In Western Europe, the wages of medieval workers increased steadily until the demographic renewal of the 16th century. ‘A reduction in the price of land and food and a rise in the price of labour were bound to favour the poor over the rich and thus were likely to attenuate both wealth and income inequality’, Scheidel argues.¹³⁷ However, as the author further

133 Diamond, op.cit., p. 202.

134 Scheidel, Walter: *The Great Leveller. Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the 21st Century*. Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 309 (Kindle edition).

135 Scheidel, op.cit., pp. 309 and 307.

136 Scheidel, op.cit., p. 310.

137 Scheidel, op.cit., p. 317.



points out, these impacts were different in different medieval societies of Europe, depending on their power structure and ecology. The growth in the power of labour and suppression of inequality can be traced in Western Europe, along with the earlier abolition of the medieval institution of serfdom. Peasants strengthened their positions vis-à-vis their lords, and they achieved greater mobility in their search for more favourable conditions on other estates. In England, for example, the new social class of Yeoman was created, basically representing richer peasants (or the middle class of the peasantry). Their rise seriously weakened one of the basic feudal institutions, which was the manor and its legal and economic power. From here, the path to the birth of capitalism, which was further supported by other processes, gradually opened up.

In other cases, however, the demographic crisis caused by the plague concentrated more power within the manor. Scheidel writes, '*In Eastern European countries— Poland, Prussia, Hungary— serfdom was introduced after the Black Death*'.¹³⁸ The local aristocracy took legal steps to compensate for the fall in their pensions by introducing wage ceilings and prices. In Eastern Europe, the same processes led to an increase in labour duties, payments and restrictions on the freedom of movement of peasants, which is one component of serfdom. This and other components were further strengthened during the 16th century, when the capitalist modern world-system was already forming with its globalising division of labour between new centres and peripheries. Scheidel sees the main reasons for this development in the growing power of the nobility, which was also given jurisdiction over the population, and unfavourable developments in trade and cities. In other words, the effects of the Black Death in socio-economic relations already showed, in the Middle Ages, an east-west axis of divergence on the European continent, which has basically lasted to this day, albeit in other forms.

138 | Scheidel, op.cit., p. 325.



The conquest of America – the biological clash of continents

In Czech thinking, the year 1492 is associated more with the ‘discovery of America’ than with its *conquista*, which is an historically more accurate description of what happened as a result of Christopher Columbus’ journey to India in the autumn of 1492. It was more an act of conquest, or takeover, than an expression of some exclusive curiosity of the Europeans of that time (although, of course, there were actual explorers). This ‘discovery’ represented a huge transformation of the ecology of the planet Earth, probably the largest given that it was essentially anthropogenic.

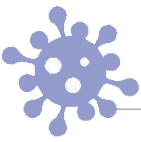
The link established between the three continents of Europe, Asia and Africa with North, Central and South America resulted in the ‘Colombian exchange’¹³⁹, which was the transfer of flora, fauna and infectious diseases. If there was anything particularly typical about this exchange, it was its profound unevenness. This biological clash of continents was tragic on the one hand, but on the other completely transformative on a global scale. Without the Colombian exchange, we can hardly imagine today, for example, the basic diet of most of the planet.¹⁴⁰ Since this article deals with the topic of historical epidemics, diseases will be the focus here. Measles, smallpox, mumps, influenza, typhus and whooping cough were not simply ‘Colombian’ imports from Europe to America, but became a major *conqueror* of American empires and cultures. Yellow fever and malaria arrived in America from Africa, which soon became part of the transatlantic triangle. Today syphilis is considered the only import of an infectious disease from America to Europe, although some doubt the American origin of the disease.

For the native inhabitants, this clash of continents practically meant genocide. American historian David E Stannard even goes so far as to call it the ‘American Holocaust’.¹⁴¹ Eurasian

¹³⁹ Crosby, Alfred: *The Columbian Exchange. Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Praeger: Westport-London, 2003.

¹⁴⁰ More in Nunn, Nathan – Qian, Nancy: The Columbian Exchange: A History of Disease, Food, and Ideas, in *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 24, no. 2 (Spring 2010), pp. 163–188, here: p. 168.

¹⁴¹ Stannard, David E.: *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World*. Oxford University Press: New York-London, 1992, (Kindle edition).



microbes proved much more effective weapons than a handful of conquistadors from Europe, who faced more than a million indigenous peoples. It was the diseases imported from Europe, rather than the military superiority of the Spaniards, that brought down the powerful empires of the Incas and Aztecs. In the conquest of America, the conquerors were helped by very invisible and, it should be noted, often unconscious and unintended allies in the form of viruses and bacteria.

Although Stannard's comparison to the 'burning victim' (Holocaust) may seem exaggerated, the number of victims from this clash of continents equals the wars of modern times. Epidemics of infectious diseases imported from Europe literally decimated the Native American population. Absolutely symbolic is the fate of the first island that Columbus discovered in the waters of the Caribbean Sea in 1492, Hispaniola, where an estimated eight million people lived. Twenty-one years after Columbus' 'discovery', nearly all the local population of 'Indians' (Columbus believed he had arrived in India) had been wiped out, victims to violence but above all to imported diseases. Overall, Stannard estimates the demographic losses in the Americas due to the continental clash as high as 95%.¹⁴² Other estimates suggest that the depopulation of the Caribbean was 99%, and in the rest of America between 50% and 95% (compared to 1650).¹⁴³ Infectious diseases accounted for a large part of it. They were unknown in America and the locals had no immunity against them. Returning to Jared Diamond's biological thesis, one reason for this was that Native American cultures knew little about domesticating animals. Cattle, pigs and horses were unknown to them. Apart from dogs, the only two domesticated animals raised were the llama and turkey. Estimates make it quite clear that epidemics, as one of the major components of the conquest and colonisation of America, were more devastating than the Black Death in mid-14th century Europe.

142 | Stannard, D., Loc. 54 and 55.

143 | JR McNeill, *Columbian Exchange*, in the Encyclopædia Britannica ([link here](#)).



This unintended depopulation of America as a result of ‘discovering’ it did not go without important socio-economic and cultural changes. At the socio-economic level, depopulation meant a shortage of the manpower needed by the colonisers for economic expansion. At the cultural level, it meant the extermination or *rewriting* of indigenous cultures and languages.

From the beginning, the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors were mainly interested in appropriating precious metals or extracting them. Later they set out to use the fertile land for agricultural production and plantations, which were already new forms of agrarian capitalism. To replace the decimated Native American population, slaves were imported from Africa. While this can be seen as part of the Colombian exchange, it also represented the socio-economic expansion of another form of forced labour within the early days of capitalism – modern slavery. This case shows a trend similar to the effects epidemics had in Eastern Europe after the plague. Depopulation and labour shortages strengthened the institutions of forced labour (serfdom, slavery) because they were seen as a tool to cope with the adverse consequences of a scarce workforce in relation to land under peripheral conditions. ‘*The geographic and economic expansion of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century brought with it the emergence – in some cases the re-emergence – of forced labour on both its eastern and western borders (of early modern Europe – VSS)*’, writes historian Peter Kolchin in his parallel histories of Russian serfdom and American slavery.¹⁴⁴ Here again we encounter a trend which, in the new context of the 16th century, is already associated with peripheral capitalism, not feudalism. In the case of the Black Death in Eastern Europe, the demographic effects of the epidemic strengthened serfdom as a feudal institution (which, however, became an institution of early capitalism at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries), as opposed to modern slavery on the American continent becoming a capitalist institution.

144 Kolchin, Peter: *Unfree Labour. American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*. Harvard UniPress: Cambridge Mass.-London, 1987, pp. 1-2. Kolchin sees America as an extension of Europe.



In both cases, this trend was related to the more powerful position of the nobility and plantation owners.

The 'Spanish' flu or Diseases stalk people

The 'Spanish' flu that raged between 1918 and 1919 (in some cases, along with a third wave in 1920) dramatically affected the entire world. On the one hand, this pandemic followed the ancient rule that war and epidemics go hand in hand, although it greatly differed from the two previous examples in many ways. By comparison, it entered into an environment in a large portion of the world (but not everywhere) that no longer functioned fully under the Malthusian rules of agricultural societies (correlations between increasing livelihoods and population), rather under the rules of the industrialised world.

According to conservative estimates, the Spanish flu took the lives of about 30 million people, i.e. three times more than the First World War (almost 10 million victims). The estimates of the number of victims of this pandemic vary widely, however. While conservatives speak of 30 million people, other estimates range from 18 to 39 million or even 50 million people.¹⁴⁵ The disease being 'only' the flu as part of the modern world does not diminish the fact that these are huge numbers.

The effects of the Spanish flu can be considered cumulative with the First World War. The dimensions of the war itself shocked many at the time, and few really expected them. This first industrial war also affected the rear, i.e. hinterland, like never before, not just locally (in places where actual warfare raged), but also in general (with varying intensity, cities were particularly affected by the war). The influenza pandemic, however, was a disease of both the rear, the trenches and the barracks, where it undoubtedly found very agreeable conditions for spreading further, not only hygienically but also psychosomatically.

145 Johnson, Niall P.A.S. – Mueller, Juergen: Updating the Accounts: Global Mortality of the 1918-1920 'Spanish' Influenza Pandemic, in *Bull. Hist. Med.* 2002/76, pp. 105–115, here 108.



The concurrence of this pandemic with the first industrial war means that the socio-economic effects of it are not easily measurable, nor can they be differentiated effectively enough from those associated with the war. Historian Scheidel writes, 'We cannot even tell whether the global influenza pandemic of 1918 to 1920 had any significant effect on the distribution of material resources, coinciding as it did with the equalizing fallout of World War I'.¹⁴⁶ Scheidel argues in his book that war is one of the 'riders of the apocalypse' that will suppress social inequalities. Epidemics or pandemics are among the others. We will use this to look at another dimension of the pandemic, which reminds us of the old Czech saying that diseases stalk people.

While the pandemic was still ongoing in the spring of 1919, a peace conference was held in Paris to negotiate a settlement following the First World War. In the end, the Peace of Versailles was very short-lived and, far from finding a recipe for peaceful coexistence, it created conditions for a new conflict. This is the assessment most historians agree on today. The peace treaty with Germany, which set harsh conditions based on the false thesis that Germany was singularly guilty for the outbreak of war, has been judged quite severely. John M. Barry, the historian of the Spanish flu pandemic, recalls that the peace terms for Germany created economic hardship, a nationalist response and political chaos, all of which were factors in the rise of Adolf Hitler.¹⁴⁷

The Versailles system of peace treaties was the result of the interaction of several representatives of the major victorious powers, notably Great Britain, France and the United States, which re-entered the period of their global ascendancy. Negotiations between British Prime Minister Lloyd George, French Premier Georges Clemenceau and American President Woodrow Wilson were very tense and difficult during the conference. Compromise was hard to reach. One of the points of contention was the question of harsh punishment for Germany, which

146 | Scheidel, op.cit., p. 455.

147 | Barry, John M.: *The Great Influenza. The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*. Oxford University Press: Oxford-New York, 2004, p. 387 (Kindle Edition).



Clemenceau was pushing for against the opposition of the American president. Wilson saw the French terms for peace with Germany as something completely against his principles. The situation reached such an impasse in the spring of 1919 that Wilson threatened to leave Paris without an agreement. He had earlier walked out of the conference room after a dispute with Clemenceau in which the French premier called him a pro-German politician. Meanwhile an illness that had been scourging the world for several months and which, according to some, contributed to an earlier end to the fighting, entered the tough negotiations.

While still in Paris in April of 1919, Wilson suddenly contracted a high fever and severe cough, which his personal physician diagnosed as the Spanish flu. On the same day as the president, another member of the American delegation, 25-year-old Donald Frary, succumbed to it four days after falling ill. The Spanish flu, or the H1N1 virus, had the deadly feature of killing the young and healthy. The American president suffered from cough, convulsions, high fever and diarrhoea. He was confined to his bed and his illness was considered serious, as shown by the notes of his staff.¹⁴⁸ In addition, the president seems to have been afflicted with other complications associated with the disease, apparently neurological in nature. Barry cites a number of complications of the H1N1 disease that indicate mental instability, such as psychosis, delirium, heightened nervousness, suspiciousness, melancholy, depression, and other similar symptoms. Research has confirmed, moreover, that H1N1 could have caused the stroke that Wilson suffered four months later.

Wilson's flu weakened him physically and mentally, in the midst of very important negotiations. However, it also affected the president's mental state, which did not escape the notice of his circle. For example, Wilson become obsessed with the thought that his house was full of French spies watching him.

148 | Barry, *op.cit.*, p. 383.



One of his people wrote, *'Nothing we could say could disabuse his mind of this thought. About this time he also acquired a peculiar notion he was personally responsible for all the property in the furnished place he was occupying.... Coming from the President, whom we all knew so well, these were very funny things, and we could but surmise that something queer was happening in his mind. One thing was certain: he was never the same after this little spell of sickness'*.¹⁴⁹ It thus seems that in the case of a politician nearing sixty-three years old, the virus also left behind neurological problems in its deadly wake.

It was at this crucial stage that the negotiations in Versailles reached a new turning point. Suddenly, and without consulting any of the American delegation, Wilson abandoned all his principles and reservations and gave in to the French premier. This led to the formulation of the peace treaty with Germany that Wilson, in his own words, said he would 'never sign if he were German'. British Prime Minister Lloyd George later wrote about Wilson's nervous and spiritual collapse, which was apparently behind his final capitulation to Clemenceau.

It is quite possible that a single but severe case of the flu that the American president suffered changed the future of Europe and the world. Of course, there has been speculation as to whether Wilson would have given in to Clemenceau even in better shape. But the course of events suggests that the flu had a significant impact on the psyche of the American leader at the most inopportune moment.

Pandemics as major disruptions and reminders

In the past, pandemics have had various social, economic and political consequences that cannot be completely generalised or historically extrapolated. They have often acted in parallel with other processes, which may have differed regionally in a contemporary context. These impacts always correspond not only to the type of disease and the strength of the epidemic,

149 Barry, *op.cit.*, p. 385.



but also to the epoch and overall state of society. Using two examples, we have been able to compare the socio-economic impacts of the macro-social type in the context of agricultural societies. In the first case we observed the consequences of the plague in the context of feudalism, and in the second case in the context of early (i.e. formulating) capitalism. The Black Death of the 14th century resonated as a huge disruption to the social development of medieval Europe. On the other hand, European-spawned epidemics on the American continent were an unintended part of the global process of continental conflict and Colombian exchange accompanying the emergence of modern capitalism and the world as we know it today. These American epidemics had environmental, cultural, and socio-economic dimensions and impacts that largely determined the shape of the future world. These examples show that epidemics and pandemics act as disruptive forces that can upset (or reconfigure) the relationship (in the modern vocabulary) between labour and capital (the privileged) for the benefit of either the former or the latter, depending on local conditions. It can be assumed that something similar, but in the opposite sequence according to the existing numbers¹⁵⁰, will follow the pandemic of the new coronavirus in the specific conditions of today's increasingly significant 'jobless capitalism' (Ulrich Beck).

The case of Spanish influenza focuses its impact at the level of political actors in the context of industrial society, although it also confirmed more general trends – such as the fact that wars and epidemics have often 'replenished' each another for a long part of human history. Pandemics or epidemics are never, however, just anonymous catalysts for wider social or cultural-environmental processes; they concern living people, flesh and blood. Our last example thus shows that the disease not only had demographic effects, usually defined by mortality statistics, but also specific consequences in terms of the politi-

150 According to the ILO, the pandemic has made 500 million jobs worldwide redundant after the first year. Compare: [The pandemic has already cost workers 10% of their income worldwide – ! Argument \(casopisargument.cz\), 20.11.2020](#). On the other hand, it has further enriched the billionaires club. In the United States, for example, an estimated 643 American billionaires added a total of \$845 billion to their wealth just between 18 March and September of 2020. Compare: [The wealth of American billionaires increased by almost a third during the pandemic – ! Argument \(casopisargument.cz\), 20.11.2020](#).



cal decision-making of individuals. This impact on a particular individual ultimately had very serious consequences for the future of Europe and the world, which completely and tragically transcended this one personal story of the disease.

Diseases stalk people. However, the case of pandemics and epidemics of infectious diseases amplifies this expression many times over. Epidemics are a product of the human relationship with nature and our way of life, which has become unsustainable for nature and the planet as a result of the expansion of industrial society. But pandemics also remind us that even in moments when we think we have everything under control, thanks to our increasingly sophisticated technologies, we are confronted with the unexpected power of nature, of which we are, in spite of everything, an integral part. ●

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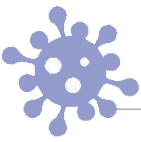
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About the authors:

Václav Cílek is a geologist, climatologist and writer. He works at the Geological Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and at the Centre for Theoretical Studies of Charles University and the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.

Jan Keller is a sociologist and former MEP for the Czech Republic. He works at the University of Ostrava.

Petr Drulák is a political scientist, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic and Ambassador of the Czech Republic to France. He works at the Institute of International Relations and at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen.

Tomáš Daněk is a culturologist, philosopher and publicist.

Petr Schnur is a historian, religionist and publicist. He lives permanently in Germany, where he works as a social psychologist in the pedagogical and psychosocial field.

Ilona Švihlíková is an economist and publicist. She works at the University College of Business in Prague.

Michael Hauser is a philosopher. He works at the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and at the Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague.

Veronika Sušová-Salminen is a comparative historian and publicist. She works as an independent analyst and editor-in-chief of the magazine ! Argument.

Veronika Sušová-Salminen

Ilona Švihlíková

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