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COVID-19: Speculative Social Impacts – Part 1



Michael Brenner is Professor of International Affairs Emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh and Fellow of the Center for Transatlantic Relations SAIS/John Hopkins. His articles on international affairs and public policy have appeared in *International Affairs*, *SURVIVAL*, *Foreign Policy*, *World Politics*, *Politique Étrangère* (Paris) and *Internationale Politik* (Berlin). He also is the author of *Terms of Engagement: The United States and The European Security Identity*, Washington, D.C: Center for Strategic and International Studies), and *Toward A More Independent Europe*, Egmont, Royal Institute of International Relations, Brussels.

Professor Brenner has held previous teaching and research appointments at Cornell, Stanford, MIT, Harvard and the Brookings Institution.

To assess the wide-ranging speculations as to the lasting effects of the COVID-19 crisis with a modicum of rigor we should begin by differentiating between two categories of possible change. One covers those that are likely to emerge over time as the outcome of largely individual modifications of behavior. This is what we might call the socio-cultural realm. Will we become more or less dependent on impersonal communication?; will ‘virtual’ learning grow to the point where *in situ* teaching (especially in universities) gives way to expanded distance learning built around MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses)?; will the trend toward a highly individualized, and therefore anomic society be reversed? Will local communities regain their vibrancy and capacity for collective endeavor?

In another category are politico-economic systemic changes. These characteristically do not evolve by small increments, ‘organically’ so to speak. Rather, they are the outcome of intentional actions which involve organized, sustained effort - albeit personal initiative and direction by leaders play a significant role. It is true that there is some interplay between the two categories. A deeper sense of community generated by informal cooperation to deal with the challenges of the epidemic as well as the pervasive rhetoric stressing that “we’re all in this together,” could encourage a greater readiness to think in terms of collective national need relative to the pursuit of particular interests. That connection, however, is anything but a foregone conclusion.

The preliminary evidence is that attitudes in the political arena are resistant to any meaningful shift in public philosophies. What is happening at present in Washington is a case in point. There, the tight alliance between the Trump administration and the Congressional leadership remains committed to its agenda of favoring the corporate interests, the private sector and those at the very top of the income bracket. The President himself, backed by senior officials, has dragged his heels in a reluctant, piecemeal marshalling of the resources of the federal government to provide the means – material and administrative – required to contain spread of the virus. Due in part to the steady degradation of relevant public agencies (a phenomenon that predates the Trump Presidency although accelerated by it), it has left critical agencies of government like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

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in such an impaired condition as to render them almost useless. Still, there is much that could have been done that the White House refuses to do, e.g. mobilizing the stocks and the capabilities of the country's enormous military apparatus, inventorying and coordinating the distribution of critical supplies, directing private companies with relevant capabilities to meet explicit targets, etc. Instead, the administration has explicitly told state governors that each should fend for him/herself. This is unprecedented.

Let us return our attention to the questions of communalism, solidarity and state competence with which we began this discussion. First, as to political-social philosophy. One positive development is that the vise grip of austerity economics on the minds of the political class has been broken. That is especially so in Great Britain. In the U.S. its grip never had been quite as tight; there, it was used as a cudgel by the 'Right' to roll back social spending. On the continent, the picture is cloudier. In Berlin, and in Frankfurt at the European Central Bank, the discredited Ptolemaic economics still reigns. Indeed, national governments remain locked into the chastity belt imposed by the *Stability and Growth Pact's* fiscal rules. It may be that by dint of circumstances wherein almost no one will be able to meet legally stipulated budgetary restraints, some loosening will have to occur. That is far from a given, though.

Second, will there be a shift in the balance between the collective interest/needs and private/individual interests? The answer is probably 'yes' if we think strictly in terms of practical measures to improve on performance in crisis management. It would be logical to look at China, South Korea, Taiwan etc. for instruction on how to get that done. When, though, have Asian societies ever been a model for the West? Certainly not when China maintained its growth trajectory in the great financial crisis by following Keynesian economic precepts.

The framing of the issue is important. It is not simply a question of 'big' government vs 'small' government. Rather, it is primarily a matter of where the authority and resources of the country are used. In the United States, there is no protest when huge sums are spent on "National Security" or when the Constitution is violated for purposes of mass electronic surveillance. The "government is bad" motif that is embedded in popular mythology only is activated when debate flares about social programs or privatization of public functions. In Europe, does it serve the cause of minimal government for 22 of the 27 EU governments to ignore the Brussels law requiring transparency on financial transactions that carry the potential for money laundering? – or, is it simply a case of powerful interests and powerful persons throwing their political weight around?

In the U.K., an analogous semantic game is played by the anti-government forces to mask their ulterior purpose: to slash public services (NHS) and to privatize public assets (rail, water, natural gas). Margaret Thatcher pronounced that "there really is no such thing as society" – by which she meant that the commonweal, the collectivity, the general will were just ideological flourishes. David Cameron's "Big Society" was predicated on the same beliefs. His vacuous notion mimicked George Bush the Elder's "thousand points of light." Instead of a state that is custodian of the collective welfare, we should count on voluntary initiative to meet general needs. Logic may tell us that neither approach will provide competent health care or decent public transport. In practice, what the "Big Society" produced was Grenfell. Yet, this dogma remains the philosophical touchstone for the Tory Party and much of the political class beyond. Boris Johnson's admission that "there really is such a thing as society," made in response to the wave of volunteer medical workers, is unlikely to alter that basic political and practical policy truth once the crisis subsides.

Finally, will there be a narrowing of the present distance between ruling elites and the populace at large? That, after all, is the precondition for a reinvigorated public realm marked by real debate over

real matters – with an alteration in the current constellation of forces as a genuine prospect. A more engaged populace, informed by a main stream media more conscientious in performing their public service functions, is the *sine qua non* for generating the type of herd immunity that will safeguard us against a new wave of autocratic leaders.

Part 2 of COVID-19: Speculative Social Impacts will be published on 16 April 2020.

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tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com

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