

16 April 2020

COVID-19: Speculative Social Impacts - Part 2



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.

A crisis such as the COVID-19 epidemic serves as a stress test for the system – a dye inserted and circulated to highlight its functioning in terms of efficiency and capacity. The relevant system is the national polity for that is where the locus for meaningful action resides. Of particular interest are the Western democracies. Serious questions already had been looming as to the degree to which the state retained the authority, as well as competence, to address effectively collective need and collective challenges. They are especially salient in the United States where the movement to reduce government, to privatize public institutions, and to free markets from regulation have reshaped the relationship between the institutionalized commonweal and its component parts.

The response to the COVID-19 crisis brings into sharp relief some of the practical consequences of this trend – as deepened under the rule of the Trump presidency and his obedient Republican allies in the Congress.

First, a fair judgment as to overall performance comes from Dr. Anthony S Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases who pronounced: **“The system does not, is not really geared to what we need right now ... It is a failing.”**

He explained that the nation’s public health system would have proven inadequate, and lagged in response, even if a responsible person who recognized the danger had been in the White House. That assessment refers to two shortcomings: 1) the availability of medical supplies and facilities which has been hurt by budgetary constraints going back to the 2008-2009 financial crisis (albeit not as extreme as those imposed in the United Kingdom); and 2) structural weaknesses. As to the latter, the fundamental truth is that the United States has no integrated, national public health system. That is due in part to the federal features of the American government. Public health responsibilities are spread among states, counties and municipalities with Washington playing a role as a financial underwriter and coordinator in times of emergency (in theory). That condition has been aggravated by the abolishment of some of those coordinating mechanisms and the appointment of inept officials.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

It is essential that we bear in mind the larger context. Health care in the United States is organized as a private for-profit system supplemented by poorly funded public facilities. The same holds for health insurance with the twin exceptions of MEDICARE (for the aged) and MEDICAID (for the indigent). The Obama innovations did not change this reality – a hodge-podge of organizations and programs. It only put in place some new rules and some money to extend minimal coverages provided by private corporations. These arrangements mean that the system is designed so as to respond to the needs of individuals rather than the needs of the public as a whole. In America, the word “public” – as in public health, public education or public welfare – means a sum total of individual needs, not the common good. From this perspective, the operative norms of the American government have an affinity to the country’s underlying political philosophy.

Both dimensions of the country’s polity did shift significantly toward the ‘collective/public interest’ end of the continuum with the New Deal. It can be reasonably argued that a consensus prevailed, indeed, took deeper root, over the next forty years. Its reversal, punctuated politically with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, is a historic phenomenon which has received relatively little attention – much less explanation. Its neglect in academic as well as political circles reveals the near totality of its success. With the United States serving as model, mentor and increasingly as agitator, the movement has spread across the Atlantic with Britain being the leading emulator thanks in good part to Margaret Thatcher. It is no coincidence that the response of the government in Westminster to the COVID-19 epidemic so closely resembles that in the United States – this despite marked differences in political constitution and structure of public health institutions.

Do these features of public life in the United States preclude, or at least strongly militate against, a more incisive, concerted strategy for managing natural crises? Obviously, the character of political leadership figures prominently in the equation. In the immediate aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, President Teddy Roosevelt managed to get 100,000 blankets along with other supplies to the city within 4 days. An approximate performance might be beyond the capacity of today’s Washington government, but it surely can do better than what we’ve seen over Katrina, Puerto Rico and now COVID-19. That said, current American conceptions of the federal government will have to change for there to be a marked shift in preparation for, and management of national crises. Unless the state is generally viewed as the custodian of the collective welfare, and the instrument for exercising the collective will, capabilities will continue to lag behind the needs of prudent contingency planning.

In the present era, Americans exhibit a certain schizophrenia in their attitude toward ‘big government.’ Their support for lavish funding of the military is unqualified. At more than \$1 trillion annually (including Intelligence expenditures and long-term benefits), it represents roughly 60% of all discretionary spending budgeted by Washington. It puts the squeeze on health, education, environment protection and all other social needs. Yet, no candidate for elected office dares to say a word that conveys other than unwavering dedication to keeping these allocations in place. As to the federal government’s role in bolstering big business, in particular the financial sector, there is similar equanimity toward the deployment of governmental powers and dollars to aid those in distress. Moreover, the Federal Reserve concerns itself with the well-being of the entire financial sector. In March, it poured \$1.5 billion into financial markets to keep them on a steady keel while reverting to a drastic Quantitative Easing strategy that gave banks near unlimited access to funds at 0% interest. These steps evoked no protest from the characteristically reticent Democratic opposition or the mainstream media.

Will the COVID-19 crisis have lasting effects on the body politic of the United States – or elsewhere in the West? Most likely, the net effect will be a strengthening of the status quo and those interests who are its principal beneficiaries. The calls for national unity, for solidarity, for working together, all carry the subliminal message that any conflict or contestation threatens the ‘war’ against the virus. Already, the American presidential campaign is losing its edge as it gets overlaid by the avalanche of COVID coverage. Trump’s attempt to arouse xenophobic emotions, by labelling it the “Chinese virus” is a foretaste of what is to come as he seeks to obliterate his own gross failings with a new narrative. Meanwhile, he and Congressional allies are redoubling their campaign to press their reactionary agenda. Signs of a similar logic unfolding are evident in Great Britain, Italy, and – less blatantly – in France. They most likely will succeed in the short run. The ‘X’ factor in the equation is the seemingly inescapable prolonged recession that is in the offing. That can only aggravate the conditions that sparked the so-called “populist’ political rebellions of recent vintage. The fragile artifice of communalism produced by the Corona epidemic looks too thin to contain their revival.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

The Ambassador Partnership LLP is a **unique specialist** partnership of former Ambassadors with unrivalled networks of influence in almost 100 countries. We provide discreet services to resolve your international problems and to improve your capacity to operate effectively wherever you need to.

We are **dispute resolution** specialists and **political risk** experts.

To discuss how we can help you to manage your political risk please call:

Tracey Stewart

Partnership Secretary

+44 (0) 7950 944 010

tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com

www.ambassadorllp.com