

PANDEMIPOLITICS

Polemics on pandemics

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Pandemipolitics and the (Potential) Unmaking of the Liberal World Order

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The global politics of the current Covid-19 pandemic (i.e. ‘pandemipolitics’) intersects in complex ways with the making, ongoing crisis, and potential unmaking of the liberal world order. What the characteristics of this order are is a hotly debated issue in international relations. Rather than using a clear-cut definition, I tend to think about the liberal order as coming together around four interlocking features which constitute our contemporary, post-Cold War, globalized international system.

First, this order is characterized by a progressive growth of international institutions and rules designed to collectively govern multiple aspects of world affairs. Second, the liberal order is marked by the spread of capitalist modes of production and the forces of economic globalization, largely organized around neo-liberal logics which require the scaling back of the state and thrive on the (relatively) free movement of goods, finance, and people worldwide. Third, this order facilitates and legitimizes the global diffusion of liberal values and institutions, including democratic regimes and universal human rights norms, while simultaneously delegitimizing and stigmatizing non-liberal worldviews and identities. Fourth, and finally, driving many of these processes and structures, are ideas, practices, and interests largely stemming from powerful Western actors.



The paradox of the coronavirus pandemic, as John Heathershaw already observes in his [post](#), is that it very much flourishes on the forces which structure this order. International mobility and economic interdependence have contributed to the rapid spread of the virus outside Chinese borders. It is not an accident that some of the most open, rich, and globally connected regions and cities – whether it is Lombardy in Italy, London in the UK or New York in the US – have been hit the hardest. The rolling back of social securities and healthcare systems in a neo-liberal age of austerity, privatization, and casualization have undermined the capacity of societies and states to respond adequately. Continued poverty and disparities in much of the Global South, are leaving the developing world particularly vulnerable as the pandemic moves in their direction.

Yet Covid-19's diffusion and international responses – which unsurprisingly include important curbs on globalization and a reassertion of the state – simultaneously intensify the current crisis of the liberal world order. This is especially the case as pandemipolitics interacts and accentuates existing forces which have been destabilizing this order in past decades: financial and economic crisis; ongoing power shifts, most notably from the West to the East; and the rise of populist, nationalist, and authoritarian politics across regions.

Global cooperation has been sorely lacking. Nationalism and xenophobia are on the rise, while countries compete for medical supplies, machineries and patents to protect their citizens at the expense of others. Borders have quickly hardened, even in the supposedly borderless Schengen Area. Collective European institutions have appeared slow, divided, and out of step with the challenges the situation is posing them. The festering cleavage between Northern and Southern European countries has rapidly reopened and widened, most notably in the context of the ongoing Eurobond debate. American and Chinese global rivalry has intensified even further.

Curbing the virus is requiring that substantial parts of the global economy come to a standstill. A recession, if not even depression, is in the making as businesses are going bankrupt, supply chains are being disrupted, unemployment is soaring, stock markets are tanking, and public deficits are ballooning. Meanwhile, the *internetization* of our lives and economies is accelerating. Under conditions of lockdown, online giants like Google, Facebook and especially Amazon are becoming even more powerful. Lesser known platforms like Zoom and Houseparty are finding their way into our lives (and data).

Liberal values and institutions are coming under considerable stress. Democracies, principally Western ones, have appeared incompetent and in disarray as they have struggled to keep Covid-19 at bay. According to the available statistics (as of early April), the US and many European states have all surpassed China in the number of cases and deaths. As economic crisis breeds populism, the world may likely see further democratic backsliding. Hungary, where Prime Minister Victor Orbán now rules by decree circumventing democratic institutions and practices, may be a warning sign of things to come. Simultaneously, autocracies are appearing to many as more efficient systems and are seizing the (propaganda) moment. Despite bearing important responsibilities, China is effectively presenting itself as part of the solution rather than the problem to the global pandemic. Civil liberties are being threatened as states significantly expand their surveillance capabilities. Covid-19 is proving to be a further boon for surveillance capitalism too.

It may not be all doom and gloom. Another future is possible. As the coronavirus exposes the contradictions and accelerates the crisis of the liberal world order, opportunities for radically changing course may open up. These may include a newfound appreciation, rather than persistent delegitimation, of the state as the provider of public goods and social safety nets. We may see greater investments in healthcare and research, accompanied by a revived trust in science and expertise. Citizens may become increasingly conscious of and resistant to the ever more intrusive forms of surveillance modern technologies facilitate. Decreasing emissions and pollution in a world in lockdown, are likely to provide powerful new data and narratives supporting the fight against climate change. A renewed sense of interdependence and solidarity, that we are all part of a common humanity, could enable greater and fairer forms of global cooperation. A less Western-centric international system may emerge with other regions of the world contributing more actively to global knowledge and norms.

2020 is destined to become an important benchmark in the unfolding crisis of the liberal world order. What lies beyond it is yet unknown. Two different horizons of possibility were explored. A more pessimistic one of rising divisions, authoritarianism, and surveillance, born from an analysis of how current pandemipolitics potentially reinforce a series of ongoing, worrying, global developments. This assessment, however, should be interpreted more as a warning than a prediction of an ineluctable fate. Societies and polities have recurrently had the capacity in the aftermath of critical junctures to create a better world. Which scenario will materialize in the coming decade remains uncertain. What is likely is that today's global pandemic will bring to an end – for better or worse – the liberal world order as we knew it.

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