

ECONOMICS OF CORONAVIRUS

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The pandemic and the end of the liberal world order as we knew it

By **Gregorio Bettiza** On **Apr 19, 2020**

The global politics of the current Covid-19 pandemic intersect in complex ways with the liberal world order: its making, ongoing crisis, and potential unmaking. What the characteristics of this order are, and whether we have ever come to inhabit one to begin with, are hotly debated issues 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, regimes and rules designed to collectively manage, regulate, and govern multiple aspects of world affairs from security, to economics, to cultural heritage, and the environment. Second, the liberal order is marked by the spread of capitalist modes of production and accelerating processes of economic globalization. These are mostly organized around neo-liberal logics which require a scaling back of the state and thrive on the (relatively) free movement of resources, 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 generally – although not exclusively – stemming from powerful Western actors.

The paradox of the coronavirus pandemic is that it very much thrives on the back of the forces that structure this world 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, quickly becoming coronavirus hotspots. The rolling back of social securities and healthcare systems in a neo-

liberal age of austerity, privatization, and casualization have considerably undermined the capacity of societies and states to respond promptly and adequately. Continued poverty and huge disparities in much of the Global South, are leaving the developing world particularly vulnerable and unprepared as the pandemic moves in their direction.



People take part in a pro-democracy protest in Hong Kong on Sept. 29. Adryel Talamantes/NurPhoto via Getty Images

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 the dynamics unleashed by the pandemic interact with and accentuate forces that have already been destabilizing this order over recent 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 suffered, even broken down in many instances. Nationalism and xenophobia are on the rise, all while countries compete for medical supplies, machineries and patents to protect their citizens at the expense of others. Borders have quickly hardened and closed, even in the supposedly borderless Schengen Area. The European Union and its Central Bank 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. US and Chinese global rivalry, which had taken a turn for the worse since the election of Donald Trump, has intensified even further.

Curbing the virus has required that significant parts of the global economy come to a standstill. Signs of an impending recession, if not even depression, are notable as businesses around the world are going bankrupt, supply chains are being disrupted, unemployment is drastically soaring, stock markets are tanking, and public deficits are ballooning as states step in to forestall a complete economic and social meltdown. Meanwhile, the *internetization* of our lives and economies is dramatically 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. As of mid-April, according to official statistics (if these are to be trusted), the US and major European states including Italy, France, the UK, Germany and Spain have all surpassed China in either the number of cases or deaths (or both). As economic crisis breeds populism, the world may likely see further democratic backsliding. Hungary, where the parliament has allowed Prime Minister Victor Orbán to rule by decree circumventing democratic institutions and practices, may be a warning sign of things to come.

Simultaneously autocracies have seized 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. Autocracies have appeared to many as more efficient systems, but also more solidary ones. In Italy, for instance, China, Russia and Cuba have all sent aid and are winning over hearts and minds. Merkel's Germany and Trump's America are generally framed instead as unreliable, if not downright hostile, partners. Civil liberties are being threatened as authoritarian states, but increasingly democratic ones too, expand their surveillance capabilities. Covid-19 is also proving to be a further boon for surveillance capitalism, with companies like Google/Alphabet collecting new forms of personal data through online coronavirus screening tools.

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 or more tailored, but nonetheless desperately needed, reforms 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 systems, research, and education, accompanied by a revived trust in science and expertise. Citizens and consumers may become increasingly conscious of and resistant to the ever more intrusive forms of surveillance modern technologies facilitate. Decreasing emissions and pollution brought about by 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 more pluralist international system may be in the making with multiple regions of the world actively contributing to global knowledge and norms.

2020 is destined to become an important benchmark date in the unfolding crisis of the liberal world order. There are two possible horizons. The first is a more pessimistic one of rising divisions, authoritarianism, and surveillance, born from an analysis of how the current pandemic and its responses intersect and potentially reinforce a series of ongoing, worrying, global political developments. This assessment, however, should be interpreted more as a warning than a prediction of an ineluctable fate. History is not deterministic.

Thus, the alternative scenario points to the fact that societies have recurrently had the capacity in the aftermath of critical junctures to create a better world for themselves. 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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