

Fear, Hate, and Competence:

Could COVID-19 Be a Turning Point?

By VESNA PUSIC

THE global COVID-19 health crisis has shocked the world, making us all aware of the need for a major rethink of international relations, multilateral organizations, organized healthcare, poverty, sovereignty, and many other aspects of human society. However, this crisis did not occur in a healthy, prosperous, and comprehensible world. Had this been the case, we might have been more prepared, more united, and less rudderless in confronting it. Instead, it comes at the tail end of three major catastrophes in just over a decade. All have been disastrously disruptive, exacerbating inequality, marginalizing accountability, ridiculing and punishing solidarity, and upending the value systems that different peoples and societies have long upheld — if not exactly living by them, at least using them as a yardstick for their way of life. What all these crises have in common is the prominent global resurgence of two instruments of mass mobilization: fear and hate.

The first was the financial crisis of 2008, which produced bailouts for banks but brought austerity to the middle class and the poor. It neither broached the issue of inequality nor addressed that of poverty. Although you could argue that people were still generally better off than those of previous generations, personal experiences highlighted the absence of any improvement to their lives, instead underlining how life was deteriorating, or at best stagnating. In Europe the crisis generated insecurity and fear. Countries of Southern Europe were tagged with the derogatory acronym PIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain). Those whom the crisis hit hardest thus bore the blame for this global misfortune.

Second was the refugee and migration crisis of 2015. The result of wars in Iraq and Syria and a major “misunderstanding” between Europe and Turkey, it produced fear which rapidly morphed into an unreasoning hatred of refugees and migrants. Populist leaders were quick to recognize the opportunity it presented for public legitimization of extreme nationalism, racism, and bigotry. This ethos was reflected in countries on other conti-



WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus attending the 147th session of the WHO Executive Board held virtually by videoconference on May 22, 2020 in Geneva.

nents and in completely different parts of the world that had nothing to do with the European–Middle Eastern refugee crisis.

Third was the populism crisis of 2016. Although Europe and the rest of the world in general had their populists before 2016, some of whom had gained power, the real crisis truly took hold upon Donald Trump’s election as U.S. President. This turned the entire value system topsy-turvy, evident in alternative facts, or not speaking the truth, when lying became acceptable to the extent of being the new normal. Targeting minorities gained legitimacy, hate became a standard tool of politics, and the “elite” became an important focus of hate and hate-speech. But close scrutiny informs us that the focus was never on the money elite, the power elite, the military elite, or the celebrity elite, but rather on the knowledge or competence elite. Competence, or the understanding that a certain amount of knowledge is a prerequisite to doing any job well, is the true enemy of populism. In addition to minorities, therefore, the populism crisis mobilized the hate of competence. Protected by the language

of anti-elitism, populists gained support from the very people who would suffer most from their policies.

Then comes the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This crisis provoked global fear and high uncertainty. The scales of the old, uneasy equilibrium between freedom and security suddenly tipped decisively in favor of security. But both societies and institutions were conditioned by the three previous crises over the past decade, where the values and standards of freedom and liberal democracy had come under a wave of attack and revisionism. So the “Corona Dictators” had a relatively easy job. They first tried to pinpoint a scapegoat by calling COVID-19 the “China virus,” by encouraging people to inform on each other amid quarantines and lockdowns, by blaming Italians, and by blaming the EU. But as the pandemic’s meteoric spread spared nobody, competence was clearly the only way of dealing with it. People wanted competent leaders and crisis managers, and doctors equipped to curtail and manage the pandemic. They sought scientists who could find a vaccine, and journalists who could keep them abreast of measures taken. All of a sudden truth and competence were vital for survival. But, again, hate as a political tool for avoiding responsibility lurked just below the surface. It was evident in the blame and hatred leveled at other countries, at political and social groups, and at science and scientists. It moreover generated a miasma of hate among citizens, directed against those who went out instead of staying home, who did and did not wear masks, who selfishly stockpiled toilet paper, and who “usurped” ventilators.

Conspiracy theories, denial, contradictory responses, confusion, the blame game, and political exploitation of the crisis abounded, and still do. But at the same time, unlike the previous three crises, this crisis may potentially reverse the following major global trends that until recently seemed an unavoidable curse of global politics.

The pandemic has necessitated confronting the omnipresent trend of dismissing knowledge, science, and competence. In spite of rampant conspiracy theories, the vast majority of people want to hear information from scientists and doctors whom they can trust because they base their advice on knowledge and facts. All of a sudden, scientists have become popular public figures, and the hope that scientific research will result in a vaccine has debased the formerly ever-arrogant and aggressive anti-vaxxers. That cities and whole nations have taken to applauding their health workers each evening demonstrates that the COVID-19 crisis has alerted the majority to the importance of competence, and to

the vital role played by the knowledge elite.

Although primarily associated with the U.S., “my country first” became a slogan and an attitude that many leaders, political parties, religious groups, and social movements adopted as their own. It succinctly expressed the sentiment they had tried to promote for years, one that is not patriotism, despite the fact that most people love their country, even though they may dislike its government. It is a sentiment that has nothing to do with love, but rather a sort of competitive isolationism. The message is: we can go it alone, we don’t need anybody else, and we don’t care about anybody else; there is one set of criteria for ourselves and another for everybody else. In a strange way it is an inferiority and superiority complex rolled into one, which renders international organizations superfluous and one-sided, multilateral agreements irrelevant, and dismantles international law. COVID-19 has made that attitude tragically laughable. A pandemic knows no borders, no nations, no border patrols, and no walls. And to successfully confront it, scientists, governments, and societies must work together. The China-Africa COVID-19 Summit, held virtually in June, is a good case in point: understanding your own economic interests means understanding that you need a functioning, healthy business and trading partner. These types of concerns can be successfully addressed only by joint efforts. The COVID-19 experience has not silenced the “me first” voices, but it has demonstrated to billions of people how irrelevant and potentially dangerous they are.

Finally, COVID-19 has shown that the world cannot successfully confront a major crisis without investing a modicum of fundamental trust and accountability in international relations. No matter how cynical or self-centered you may be, this experience has shown that you will become neither a global leader nor even a regional leader if you cannot be trusted. Even on a local level, truthfulness, trust, and accountability have been laughed at and dismissed for some time now. But at a time of global crisis, the world is incapable of functioning without these factors. It is not a matter of sentimentality or self-righteousness, but of efficiency. And whichever potential global power is first to grasp this and competently navigate with it will gain the upper hand. ■

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