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In the Storm

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With half of humanity confined, forced to remain indoor, the fear of this highly contagious virus is creating an unprecedented situation and has already attracted a great deal of comment. To the "nothing will be the same as before" and "there will be a before and after" - analyses more worthy of an exhausted cycling champion than of enlightened intellectuals - is it possible to offer a wiser reflection? It is very difficult to imagine what all the consequences of this health crisis will be, but the predictions of some may once again be disproved. On the other hand, we might reflect on what is happening in our societies and on the international scene and about what seems to have already changed in our countries and for Europe.

TRIUMPH OF THE NATION STATE AND RETURN OF THE BORDERS?

At the first alert, governments decreed the closure of borders. Fourteen of them in Europe immediately suspended free circulation guaranteed under the Schengen agreements; there are about twenty of them today. The Polish-German border is even guarded by the army! Is this 20th century response really effective? The answer must be "No", not if you look at how the virus has spread, as it ignores walls and creeps into all human and material contacts. On the other hand, closing borders, even partially, is useful to stop or reduce travel. But this does not necessarily just cover national borders. Regional quarantines have been attempted in Italy, the United States and Catalonia. In fact, some governments used the emotional power of the border instantly for political purposes, to reassure public opinion, even before any analysis of its effectiveness had been carried out. For it was necessary to devise exceptions immediately, with a view to ensuring the provision of vital needs...

Governments around the world have been caught off guard and have struggled to demonstrate their relevance. They have been quick to announce national or even nationalistic measures such as bans on the export of medical equipment. Often unfairly criticized for their short-sightedness and even legitimate hesitations, they have constantly tried to show that they are in control of the situation. Of course, it was the national framework that was magnified, and many critics have been quick to predict the "return of the nations". However, nothing is less certain. It very quickly became clear that this health crisis could only be overcome through cooperation. And,

within the European Union, the first "national moment" has been followed by true European solidarity. The care of patients and the organisation of their transfer, the provision of medical equipment, are concrete examples of cooperation and solidarity, which have been expressed in the European framework, but not limited to it. Little by little this cooperation is spreading from the States concerned by the virus to those, which have been affected, and those, which are soon to be affected. Finally, the poorest countries will certainly require major international commitment to combat the contagion.

In this health crisis, the national framework is exploding under the effects of contagion. Borders will not stop the virus, neither will States working alone. Contrary to the first movements, governments are gradually integrating into the regional or multilateral framework rejected or criticized by many of them not so long ago. For Europeans, the time has come to organise their mutual aid more effectively.

This is all the more important since others on the outside are again trying to weaken the Union with disinformation and propaganda. China and Russia have even tried to exploit the suffering of a devastated Italy, by rushing to help allegedly - to a country that helped China in February with the delivery of masks and equipment under the framework of European aid.

Citizens have turned to their Nation States, the constitutional guarantors of the collective interest. They expect security for the price of their contributions and protection for the price of their support. Have they been satisfied or disappointed? Here again, the first instinct

has been that of the citizen and they have accepted emergency measures, for want of anything better. But doubts and criticism, questions and anxieties are already emerging as to the Nation States' ability to respond to these increasingly difficult demands. For Europe, this questioning is fundamental because it concerns the relevance of the preferred level in terms of public action. For all democracies, it is the effectiveness of the Nation State that is being questioned. It is not certain that it will find itself strengthened.

Because, with the Covid-19 pandemic, authoritarian regimes have embarked on a campaign to demonstrate that their governments are more effective than those of democracies.

ARE DEMOCRACIES MORE EFFICIENT THAN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES?

Intense Chinese propaganda is being deployed to make people believe that deaths in the West are due to the disorganization and disorder of democratic regimes. Russia and other rivals, happy to demean the image of Europe, enthusiastically relay it. It is echoed within the European Union itself by its traditional opponents, who are now fewer in number, and by the purveyors of a sense of decline.

They have therefore embarked on an unbridled propaganda campaign regarding the inefficiency of democratic regimes and, by the way, the European Union. This action has found relays in countries surprised by the extent and speed of the contagion. The authoritarian measures taken by the Chinese have, moreover, rubbed off on Western countries lacking tests and protective equipment, and the haste with which they have decreed the confinement of their population reflects this influence. However, the brutality of the Chinese authorities, which drove whistle-blowers to their deaths, as they implemented their decisions by force and coercion, cannot be transposed to democracies.

On the contrary, the criticism, protests and scepticism of the people of Europe towards their governments have not prevented them from being exemplary and accepting the confinement, from mobilising themselves in particularly remarkable outbursts of generosity and solidarity. Democracies are demonstrating their

extraordinary vitality. Health workers are showing self-sacrifice and putting themselves in danger in the name of public interest, even for the sake of one life. Others, civil servants and private sector employees, are at their posts, responding to the needs of the population: food, transport, security, all economic sectors are witnessing increasing rates of active involvement. No, the citizens of "old Europe" have nothing to envy when it comes to serving the collective interest. Research is being boosted by the urgency of the situation and could quickly lead to concrete results. Companies are multiplying initiatives to make up for the shortages – which the States were unable to anticipate – of equipment and products which will eventually be achieved very quickly.

Other authoritarian regimes, having attempted the same manoeuvres, are now demonstrating their limitations. Russia and Iran, but, more seriously, North Korea, are in danger of registering many deaths due to their very nature. Tolerating neither freedom of thought, allowing no criticism, they stifle creativity and the competitive pursuit of excellence.

Democracies, like others, were caught off guard by the rapidity of the spread of Covid-19, but when the time comes to analyse their response, it will be clear that they were exceptionally responsive and resilient in a previously unknown way. Governments and parliaments have managed to decide and vote on an exceptional scale of measures in an unusual time frame, almost €4 000 billion in Europe twice the United States, to support their populations and economies. Constitutional governments have been able to adapt procedures and rules, sometimes based on decades or even centuries of experience and tradition, in record time.

The superiority of democratic regimes has already been demonstrated. Individual freedom allows for the best, collective freedoms organise it. Democracies, which allow excellence through competition and respect for the individual, will very quickly show their real effectiveness through results.

We must therefore counter the lies of opportunistic propaganda, which exploit the distress of victims for ideological purposes.

WHEN THE VIRUS TRAVELS THE SILK ROAD...

Pr. Sansonetti of the Collège de France^[1] has demonstrated that the spread of Covid-19 followed exactly the busiest air routes. Starting in China, where the "species jump", i.e. the contamination of human beings due to the disregard of hygiene rules or due to traditions such as the sale of live animals, the virus spread like wildfire to Europe before continuing to America and then spreading across the entire world.

Seriously compromised for its long denial of the rapid spread of the virus across its territory, the Chinese government has been far more shaken than it appears. The whole promise of the Communist Party is to ensure the security and prosperity of its citizens who, in return, give up their freedom of expression. The recurrent lies of its leaders, who denied the epidemic, the opacity with which they surrounded the number of victims and the very origin of the evil, the pressure exerted on the World Health Organisation, so that it only declared the state of pandemic at a rather late stage, conceal a resounding failure of the authoritarian, centralised Chinese system and of its current leader. We might never know the exact number of deaths in China, but various credible sources already estimate that these will be greater than all the deaths worldwide due to Covid-19. And we might discover that the outbreak had been smouldering since early autumn and had been carefully hidden for as long as possible.

The whole Chinese project to become the world's leading power is under challenge, both internally and externally. Despite the restrictions on freedoms, Chinese social networks indicated that there is growing dissatisfaction. Emotions were high after the death of Dr Li Wenliang, the ophthalmologist who had warned of the virus and was arrested by the police on charges of "spreading rumours online" and "seriously disrupting social order".

Externally, China's image has been severely damaged because contamination by a virus coming from an animal species highlights hygiene practices that are far from the criteria required of a developed country. The denial of the seriousness of the internal situation confirms that, for the country's leaders, the image of the Communist Party takes precedence over the health of its inhabitants, since China

is in a race for world supremacy and must demonstrate its alleged superiority. The pressure it brought to bear on the World Health Organization reinforces the mistrust we must have in its regard.

Finally, the course taken by the virus, along the Silk Roads, challenges the entire "One Belt, One Road" project, which aims to surround China with countries that pay "tribute to the empire"; because everyone will now want to relocate as much of their production as possible, rather than being seduced by abundant external credits.

It is primarily for China that Covid-19 is bad news. It will come out of this crisis probably impoverished and its image durably damaged. Despite recent statements, it will not see its industrial facilities restart at full capacity for a long time to come. Its containment is not over; the epidemic's balance sheet is far from being stabilized. This explains the dual attitude of the Beijing leaders, who are trying both to play the international cooperation game and to develop aggressive propaganda in the name of the supposed effectiveness of their model.

Europeans must avoid entering this game at a time when the United States is turning in on itself.

AND THE AMERICANS NO LONGER WANT TO LEAD WORLD AFFAIRS?

Much has been written about the United States' withdrawal, their new priority for the Pacific and the fact that they are now turning away from Europe to focus on their principle competition with China. This health crisis confirms this orientation and once again highlights its consequences. The American President, who currently chairs the G7, might have had a chance of reasserting the leadership of the world's greatest power and, at the same time, of the West, if he had confirmed the Camp David meeting on 7 June next. Instead, he has decided to replace it with a videoconference, and it is clear that his priority is primarily electoral. He was quietly moving towards re-election, strengthened by his isolationist and nationalist discourse. The rapid spread of the virus in the United States forced him to overreact, especially since, in his inimitable style, he had long denied the seriousness of Covid-19. The United States may well record the largest number of victims of this pandemic in the West.

¹. Conference by Pr. Philippe Sansonetti 16 March 2020
<https://college-de-france.fr>

Will they learn the lesson that only broad international cooperation can overcome this epidemic and that they are in the best position, with allies in the freedom camp, to take the initiative? Nothing could be less certain. Will they consider that their alliance with Europe would allow coordinated action, perhaps shared scientific advances and the implementation of multilateral cooperation, which is essential, for example, for the poor countries which will have to face the virus? This would be good news, but it is far from certain.

America's tremendous innovative capabilities are now in demand. The lead taken by its digital giants will be sustained for a long time to come. The virtual world and networked communication are replacing social relations that are already changing. Huge profits are to be expected for those who market and monetize them. But it's not all about profit! Will Europe see this as an opportunity to invest in this field of activity while respecting individual freedoms?

AND EUROPE FINDS ITSELF IN THE MIDDLE ...

Once again Europe will have started by losing the battle of communication. As usual and as swiftly as ever, critics were quick to cry foul of the European Union. Admittedly, there was reason to do so. The first move by the Member States was to close their borders and announce, each in their own right, huge national support plans for their economies. More seriously however was that the Italians were expecting their partners to make a few strong gestures of solidarity, given how violent the attack of disease was and how many deaths it was causing. Europeans and the common institutions were once again unable to choose the words and actions that would express genuine solidarity between States. The "first phase" was truly negative. It showed how much the sense of belonging to the same political grouping has deteriorated in recent years. The "second phase" has been more reasonable.

Belatedly, but not excessively so, cooperation between Europeans has been established first at central level, then between States and regions. The European Central Bank, after an initial hesitation, was able to rise to the occasion. Its plan, ready to inject up to €750 billion into the European economy, is commensurate with the dangers. It constitutes a safety net that no European Member State, even the richest, can afford.

Then the States started to coordinate and almost all have adopted the same measures to guarantee the survival of their citizens and businesses. More than €4,000 billion have been made available in this way.

The common institutions, the Commission and Parliament, have acted at their level. €37 billion have been immediately redirected from the Structural Funds, State aid policy has been provisionally reformed, and the Commission has proposed to activate the general exemption clause of the Stability and Growth Pact, now endorsed by the European Council. The external borders have been closed. To meet requirements, the 3% GDP deficit and 60% GDP public debt limitation rules have been put on hold. There is a health emergency and the Commission, which has no real competence in this area, has mobilised with the few resources at its disposal in its field of activity: facilitating the movement of essential goods, the urgent manufacture of necessary medical equipment, building up stocks, financing the repatriation of nationals and the search for a vaccine to the tune of €140 million, etc. The Commission is also working on the issue of the European Union's external borders.

This time, the lessons of the 2008 crisis seem to have prevailed over the slowness of procedures that are still too diplomatic, and in the future we can expect greater pooling of health resources at EU level.

On the other hand, it will take a lot of time and energy to regain real solidarity between Europeans. The refusal of the Netherlands and Germany, at the European Council of 26 March, to consider joint loans to allow each Member State to meet the enormous and lasting financial requirements to eradicate the virus, shows how far we have to go before Europe really feels European and Europeans really feel that they belong to the same community. Nine Member States called for the creation of joint loans, "coronabonds", to combat the pandemic. Jacques Delors' cry of alarm gives an idea of the dramatic nature of these debates: "the lack of solidarity puts the European Union in mortal danger - the bug is back". The acrimony of the remarks made in this respect by several heads of State and government confirms this. The Union is probably at an important turning point. Will it survive this moment? It will be difficult this time to settle for an insipid,

complex compromise, when more than 20,000 Europeans have lost their lives as a result of the epidemic.

When it comes to life and death, everything else is relative and the emotion, often legitimate, takes precedence over everything else.

OUR LIVES HAVE ALREADY CHANGED

The impact of the pandemic on the lives of citizens and their relationships will be lasting. It is already noticeable. Fear pervades every household and is disrupting behaviour. Containment is producing, as yet, undetectable effects. Erecting walls between beings after having built them between States and people is to go one step further towards individualism. The urban exodus to which containment measures have given rise is a good example of this. It has been spectacular in France, which has more than 3.4 million secondary homes, a record in Europe. It occurred in disregard of all safety measures and surely contributed to the spread of the virus. It happened quite naturally before it was criticised and before some people considered prohibiting it.

In peacetime governments have obtained unprecedented restrictions on citizens' freedom of movement. In a few countries, including South Korea, the best digital techniques have been used to control the movement of contaminated people, and several democracies in Europe and the United States are questioning the appropriateness of their use, prompting Yuval Noah Harari to say that citizen control will now focus on what is "under the skin", i.e. their health status.

However, one of the principles of the rule of law is that restrictions on individual freedoms, in addition to being proportionate and justified, must be limited in time. Will this really be the case? The fight against Covid-19 will set in motion a whole range of new techniques for which governments will develop a taste.

There will not only be negative effects to this compulsory use. Since confinement, working relationships have made use of videoconferencing, replacing travel and reducing direct human contact. Moreover these are being modified by the risk of contagion and there is a growing habit not to

shake hands, to talk to each other at a respectable distance and to avoid meeting each other too closely!

The fear of a second wave of the virus and the prospect of not being rid of the risk of contagion for many months to come will change people's behaviour in a lasting way. They will generate anxiety, behavioural disorders, deep anxiety and existential questioning. It would therefore be wrong to underestimate the impact of the current situation on citizens' behaviour. What will the social, political and economic consequences be?

LONG-TERM IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY

The total shutdown of economies is unprecedented. The crisis it will create is likely to be on a scale that has not been seen for a century, and a divergence of 10 to 15% in national wealth is already forecast for the current year, depending obviously on the duration of the containment. States and Central Banks have opened quite exceptional financing facilities, drawing lessons from the previous crisis and paying posthumous tribute to J. M. Keynes and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The "New Deal" is on everyone's mind and inspires everyone's hopes. The first shock having passed, production is starting up again with the hope of being able to return to its previous rhythm in May.

The sums of money made available to the economies - \$2 trillion in the United States and twice much in Europe - are adding to already huge public debts and spreading the misconception that they will not be paid. Already some people, who are rightly questioning the globalized economic model, are drawing the conclusion that a window of opportunity is now available to speed up ecological transition.

It is true that the relocation movement, which began a few years ago, could grow, but we cannot warn people enough against being too hopeful or for entertaining illusions. Above all, there is an urgent need to restart the economic engine. Without the creation of wealth, there will be no redistribution or "greening", and erasing the current losses will take a lot of time and energy. A more strategic vision of supply chains will certainly be central to leaders' concerns, but it is clear how much courage and imagination it will take to achieve this. The example of medicines is striking in this regard. Everyone wants more funding for pharmaceutical

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research and the best medicines to be made available as widely as possible. But successive governments have imposed the production of cheap generic drugs, i.e. mainly manufactured in countries with low labour costs, mainly in Asia, in order to limit spending on healthcare. While they were able to control prices through social security policies, and in consultation with industry, they have created dependency, and even shortages, as we saw even before the current health crisis. The relocation of productive activities is therefore not as simple as it seems and has certain consequences. In any case, the current health crisis is prompting us to think in more strategic terms.

GREATER STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY

Strategic thinkers have not been surprised by the crisis engendered by the Covid-19. Several of them have highlighted this risk in studies. In the United States, the National Intelligence Council anticipated it as early as 2008 and various French white papers on defence also identified it as of 2013. For over 10 years the possibility of a violent, highly contagious virus has featured in reviews of risks likely to threaten States. It is therefore not a "strategic surprise" in the agreed sense of the term. On the other hand, its likelihood has been underestimated and the form that the contagion has taken has surprised the health and protection systems that are needed to eradicate it. In passing, we note with anguish how much higher this risk is, at a time when terrorism and provocations by certain States are on the increase. No one seems prepared to face chemical or bacteriological warfare, even against a small group who might venture to do so.

The most worrying thing in this period of instability might come from an "opportunistic" attitude on the part of this actor or that, taking advantage of the disorganisation of State administrations. Would democracies be in a position to respond to this? Although the position of the armed forces seems assured, the risk of regional destabilisation or a chain of voluntary or poorly controlled aggressive actions with serious consequences has increased.

Never, perhaps in a long time, has the need for dialogue and cooperation among States been so essential to resolve the current health crisis and reduce the political, social, economic and strategic risks arising from it. However, the spirit of cooperation, and even more so, the idea of solidarity, has witnessed a flagrant decline in recent years.

The European Union, which is the champion and example of this spirit, must set an example within its own borders and try to be its architect on the international stage. The resolution of the current global crisis depends on it. The storm that we are experiencing requires us to lower the sail, to perhaps weave, to change course under the pressure of the elements, but on no account should we leave the helm. With the certainty, as at sea, that after the very bad weather, calm and serenity will always return.

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