

At History's Hinge: How Not to Waste a Crisis

(Adam Garfinkle, 22 May 2020 draft)

Any major crisis, certainly including globe-spanning pandemic disease, brings out both the worst and best in people. That goes for individuals, groups, whole nations, and even humanity itself, depending on the aperture of one's perspective. As it does, the manifest polarization of behaviors—some noble, some heinous, plenty mixed and in-between—poses an ultimate question with a sharpness absent in normal times: Just who do we think we are as a species, anyway?

There is nothing new here. Pandemics date back to at least 3550 BCE in Egypt, and doubtless many others struck before that first-recorded one. In the mytho-theological mode of thinking dominant then and long after, such visitations were typically conceived as tests: Is this scourge a divine punishment for our sins? Are some of us, at least, worthy of redemption? No doubt the pragmatists of the day asked whether the outcome was entirely in God's hands, or perhaps we have a role as a partner to the Creator in shaping our future?

Crisis are still construed as tests, but more often today one written by the oracles of what passes for authoritative modernity: Is humanity by nature a fissiparous, violent, and even genocidal species (one theory of Neanderthal extinction is not exactly reassuring in that regard), or is humanity capable of moral as well as material progress? Can we rise to our "better angels", as Abraham Lincoln once put it, or are we doomed to experience one after another of William Golding's "lord of the flies" moments until, with the help of pathogens but not necessarily because of them, we finally extirpate ourselves from the earth? Does the arc of history really bend toward justice, tolerance, and enlightenment thanks to the slow but steady human exertions of the ages--was the 4th-5th-century monk Pelagius right after all?--or is such a conviction just a teasing conceit? Less expansively but not of trivial interest, does the stress of coping with pandemic disease prove some kinds of governments or social orders superior to others, or not?¹

Such questions have been debated by philosophers as well as theologians in every civilizational zone for millennia. Today we can contemplate them with the help of science, from neurophysiology to cognitive psychology to anthropology to history. Even political science and public policy and administration studies can help, and note that we have never before in human history had the kind of simultaneously generated comparative data on government competency that we now have unfolding now before our eyes, as nearly 190 countries try to cope with COVID-19.

But science can take us only so far. Natural and social science, at their best, can tell us what is; history, as an interpretive or filtered form of empiricism, can tell us at least something of what was. Yet as David Hume famously showed, science cannot tell us what *ought* to be. There are no empirical metrics for moral reasoning, but no templates for social and political life can exist without it, for it rests at the very core of them all.

¹ Examined in my "COVID-19 and the Regime-Type Fallacy," *The American Interest*, April 27, 2020.

Forms of moral reasoning are obviously at the heart of the evolving COVID-19 crisis. We are not concerned only with what is true in a medical/epidemiological sense, but also with what isn't true of our social and political arrangements, but we varyingly think *should* be true. Our ever imperfect institutions have lately and suddenly been subjected to an unplanned stress test at many levels, and many been found them to be particularly wanting. The pandemic will pass in due course as have all similar visitations before it; it is not an existential threat to humanity, just a huge pain in our hearts and souls. Our greater anxiety is, or will soon be, mainly focused on who or what is to blame for newly magnified institutional shortcomings, what if anything can be done about them, and who should have the authority to effect those changes. Indeed, that is already happening as I write.

Put differently, once we understand the limits of empirical knowledge in grappling with what is really at stake, we see that creedal postulates constitute the only possible basis of our future course. It may not matter if we call them theological or philosophical, religious or secular. While not identical, both kinds of cognitive frameworks are more faith-based than science-based, whether we like it or admit it or not.

It follows that since creedal frameworks differ from culture to culture, as they have differed over time in the same cultures, we as a species lack a consensus on a single hierarchy of values. Hence the use of the term “varyingly” just above. The heterogeneity of our approaches, which usually reaches inside societies to some extent as well as spreads over them, spawns disagreement and conflict as well as selective cooperation over occasionally intersecting interests. This is always the case, of course, just as it is human nature that our cooperative impulses are strongest the closer to hearth and home we get, and our competitive impulses are stronger the closer we approach those defined as members of out-groups. It's all just clearer when the stakes seem higher, as they are when we conceive ourselves to be in trouble.

This simple observation helps us to frame the key question before us: How can we manage not to waste the COVID-19 crisis? We stand at a hinge point in history, and also a molten moment where possibilities for change are much greater than usual. Choices beg making at every level of our planet's social order, and one way or another, deliberately, absentmindedly or by dithering default, we will make them.

It will prove easier--not easy in many cases, bur *easier*--to reach consensus on local and national levels. On the global level the extent of our values and interests heterogeneity remains great. So the COVID-19 crisis may come to be seen in retrospect as a hinge-point when people finally managed to overcome key obstacles in the path of building a more just, compassionate, tolerant, prosperous, and secure world. But I doubt it. Or it may be seen as an accelerant that dumped humanity into a new Dark Age, this time a global as opposed to a mere European one. I doubt that too, but less surely. Or it may be seen as a stimulus for disagreement over what, exactly, it did bequeath. That, I think, is most likely. But we don't know; time will tell.

However it comes to be seen, the choices before us veritably drip with the warm dew of responsibility, at least for those who believe in human agency. But while we have collective responsibility for the world's future, we are not organized to exercise that agency as a single “international community”, as many like to imagine exists. Jet-set liberal internationalist salons can articulate what seem a baker's dozen of good ideas for reform in a single hour, and then in the face of the aforementioned heterogeneity of values and interests spend a lifetime trying to implement just one of them—with no guarantee of success.

We face another kind of challenge, too: It is still early in this crisis, and there is much we still don't know, but people demand answers and solutions now, and in the face of uncertainty decision-makers of all kinds have to act. This is a formula for disagreement, conflict, error, and trouble, all of which we have seen vividly on display in the United States over the past few months.

We *do* know that the COVID-19 era will not span just a few weeks or months, for we already foresee its development in four successive stages: medical/epidemiological, economic, socio-political within nations, and geopolitical among nations. After the sequence has been unfurled, the four aspects will overlap and recombine like waves on the ocean. As I wrote the initial draft of this essay on April 2, the social and political ramifications of the crisis were already emerging on the national level. What things would look like on, say, June 2, not at all that far into the future as futures go, no one could have been sure. On April 2, 2021? Anyone's guess.

That radical uncertainty is part of the reason that time has seemed to come unstuck. We all sense it: Time passing both faster and slower simultaneously. On February 2 those living in East Asia, particularly in and around Wuhan, China, were already contending with an influenza epidemic, but the nature and potential danger of the coronavirus to the world at large was not yet clear. Hopes for containing it remained realistic even in many experts' assessments. Just a month later that was no longer the case: Disaster had struck northern Italy and moved into the rest of Europe and North America, and into Iran and much of the Middle East. COVID-19 had been given its name and declared a pandemic with global reach. The insidious nature of asymptomatic infection vectors had become clear. Infection rates and deaths were skyrocketing; radical international travel restrictions and draconian social-distancing and lockdown measures were put into place on every inhabited continent, albeit unevenly. Markets crashed and soon the dire economic implications of the pandemic began slowly to sink in. Even now, on May 22, how all this will resolve no one really knows.

How to Think About What's Ahead

What we can do now, at the least, is study with care and discernment how people are reacting to the crisis, for that will tell us more about the future than any factual description of medical or even economic realities. *It is our reactions that form the mirror whose reflections show us the true nature of a humanity under duress, and where that nature will likely lead us.* Three aspects of the reactions to the current crisis are most important. Let me just state them, and then briefly speak to each one.

First, people at all levels of society and throughout all societies—political leaders, intellectuals, businessmen, journalists, clergymen, and everyone else—tend to see the problems posed by the pandemic in terms they already understand, and aligned with ideological proclivities they already embrace. Thinking either anew or synoptically about a novel threat to the human order is not easy and relatively few will manage it, certainly at first when disorientation beclouds judgment.

Second, the heightened emotionalism that naturally enshrouds many people at times like these conduces to both extremist thinking and the polarization of expectations unhinged from reality. Some people are now wildly optimistic about what the pandemic will bring, while others expect “the end of the world.” Many temperate souls resist such sirens, but, oddly enough, at such

uncertain inflection points it is even possible to overdo temperance. The argument that pandemic crises do not change reality so much as accelerate trends already in evidence sounds soberly right, and in many historical cases—the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918-19 is a case in point—it has been right. Yet major changes did emerge from other pandemic crisis experiences, and here the Black Death of the 14th century is an illustrative case. It sired European proto-modernity. Justinian’s Plague short-circuited a major geopolitical shift, and it propelled a significant migration of already exiled Jewish communities away from the Mediterranean Basin and into northern Italy, France, and the Rhineland.

It’s just that the *ways* these changes developed rarely resulted from deliberate effort; more often, they emerged slowly and in roundabout fashion as demographic, technological, social, and economic changes combined to produce novel end-states that no one could have anticipated during the flames of crisis, let alone could have directed from its midst.

Third, as already noted, crises are molten times. They call forth innovative ideas and invite new political constructions. They furnish both reasons and pretexts, too, for people to defect from inherited or cherished concepts, beliefs, rules, and expectations. As a consequence, the Overton Window moves much faster than it does in normal times; policy options once presumed to be beyond political possibility can suddenly seem nearly inevitable, and heretofore normal ways of doing things can seem obsolete overnight. The demand for options grows, and as nature abhors a vacuum, that demand will summon a supply. Not all innovations are wise, however. In the heat of worry people often do hasty and regrettable things. “Fear gives bad advice”, once said Yelena Bonner, and she was as usual correct.

So here is the rub: If individuals, groups, nations, and nations attempting to act in concert adopt wise measures, we can at least hope the crisis will not have gone to waste; but if they adopt short-sighted and thus ill-suited, selfish, and venal measures, the various layers of the post-COVID-19 world will disappoint any reasonable hope of redeeming for good purposes the suffering it is causing. The problem is that many of the options that come on offer, even at the national level, are likely to be suboptimal due to the inescapable tunnel vision and emotional derangement likely to shape them.

So we see the three aspects of ongoing reactions to the crisis come together to form a single mirror. Now, however, let’s take them apart for a closer look.

MORE OF THE SAME

Even amid a novel crisis, most people continue to think in well-worn grooves. The coronavirus doubles as a kind of Rorschach Test; people see in the ambiguity what they are accustomed to seeing or want to see. It brings out a general form of the evoked set, or confirmation bias, in many people. This is a secure way to think but not often a useful one.

So in the realm of academia economists see the crisis in mainly economic terms, political scientists in political terms, IR neo-realists in geostrategic terms, and so on. At less refined levels of human intellection, anti-Semites hither and yon see the whole thing as a Jewish plot. In India, some uneducated Muslims attack government health workers, thinking them intent on infecting the faithful; meanwhile, many BJP Hindu nationalists blame Muslims for spreading the virus by spurning social distancing edicts. Nervous and power-hungry authoritarian rulers on at least four continents, focused on the risks generated by their own illegitimacy, see the

crisis as an opportunity to extirpate street protests aimed at them, or else to block the efforts of pesky opposition forces.

In the United States some rightwing nativists claimed well into March that the coronavirus was a hoax—a mere common cold—perpetrated by the “fake liberal media” to scare people into giving up their liberty and privacy rights, and to undermine President Trump’s re-election prospects. At the same time, some liberals branded the White House’s initial, if belated, travel ban on incoming flights from China and Europe as “racist” in inspiration.

Pet, parochial, and proprietary concerns are also being preserved as top agenda items by integrating the pandemic crisis as a dependent variable into pre-existing obsessions. So those persuaded, accurately or not, about a sharp rise in inequality see the crisis overwhelmingly in terms of what it shows about inequality. Those obsessed with global warming see it as a demonstration of what a climate change crisis will be like. “Davos Man”, as Samuel Huntington named the archetypal cheerleader of global “turbo-capitalism”, cares that the crisis not unwind globalization. Populists and their supporters hope, on the contrary, that it does. For partially related reasons of their own, so do salafis in the Muslim world and atavistic religious fanatics everywhere.

All of this and plenty more proves, as if more proof were needed, that ideology is a brain disease, particularly when it is propelled by fear and shaped by bigotry and opportunities for self-dealing. Alas, a symptom of this disease is that when beliefs and reality collide, so much the worse for reality. Ideologues do not first see and then define, they have first defined and then they see....whatever they want to see, and disregard the rest (apologies to Paul Simon).

Even worse, perhaps, ignorance overwhelmingly tends to conflation and rigid dogmatism, while knowledge tends to distinctions and healthy skepticism. That is why ideological thinking appeals so strongly to the poorly educated and the weak of mind (not necessarily the same people), for it affords an economical, though usually mistaken way to interpret an otherwise daunting complexity. And worst of all, novel crises tend to deepen and further derange pre-existing ideological thinking, because the craving for simple answers grows in rough proportion to the sprawling confusions naturally generated by such crises.

We need not worry much about ideological thinking affecting doctors, nurses, and lab techs. They are trained otherwise. We need worry a bit more about economists, but economists are typically bound at least to some extent by what the data tell them. But when it comes to politicians and their supporters among the general public, we need worry a lot. As Charles Frankel once said, “. . . ideas should not be dismissed out of hand as so obviously simple-minded as not to be taken seriously. Simple-mindedness is not a handicap in the competition of social ideas. . . .”—and, he might have added, especially in a crisis. What this means, in a nutshell, is that grooved thinking going into a crisis ends with the grooves even deeper than when the crisis began.

OPTIMISTS AND PESSIMISTS

Ideology of a sort also shapes the polar optimism and pessimism characteristic of interpretations and future expectations within a major crisis. But it is admixed with temperament. Some people are by nature pessimistic, while others have a sunnier disposition.

Lincoln once said that people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be, and that is largely true. What Lincoln did not explain, however, is why some people make up their minds one way and others make them up a different way.

The will to see a silver lining in every dark cloud is an admirable trait. Optimism can be a force multiplier, as a former boss of mine liked to say, a goad to effective action. But like all good things and traits, too many and too much of them do not avail. As Walter Lippmann once wrote, “It is a disease of the soul to fall in love with impossible things.” It is a kind of falling in love that acts as a drug and leads one astray. That is what some seem to have suffered in this crisis.

Thus one commentator claims that “. . . the global COVID-19 pandemic will be seen in retrospect as the ‘great accelerator’ that moved us from the continuity of the past to a new era. Only an event that uproots all preconceived notions, an epistemic break, has the power to alter the human condition. . . . [O]nly catastrophic plagues and wars have ever prompted societies in the past to fundamentally address social inequality. That applies across the board to other challenges. . . . In time, and by the sheer evolutionary instinct of our species, *geopolitics will inexorably adapt to the nature of microbes*, not the other way around.”²

There is only one problem with this prediction: No historical basis for it exists. How did geopolitics adapt constructively to the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918-9? With World War II and the Holocaust? How did geopolitics adapt to the Black Death of the 14th century, or to Justinian’s Plague of the 6th century, or to the plague that struck Athens in 420 BCE?

Yes, scientific and medical communities were impelled to make major progress after recent, 20th-century epidemics struck, and they are likely to do so again, to great and benign effect. But to see this kind of progress as “inexorably” spilling over into politics, let alone geopolitics, is unwarranted. Functional cooperation does not dictate political outcomes. Politics is, for better and for worse, an autonomous domain of human culture, and there is at base a stunningly simple reason for this: “Science and technology are cumulative,” noted John Gray, “whereas ethics and politics deal with recurring dilemmas.”³

Politics is of course affected by and affects developments in culture, economy, and even the paths of applied science, but it does not march in lockstep with any of them. So far, global *politics* is responding to COVID-19 by backing away from globalization. *We are witnessing political social distancing on a global scale* in parallel with physical social distancing on of local and personal scale. As Pascal Lamy has said in a European context, in rough translation from French: The nation is solid, the European Union is liquid, and globalization has become gaseous.

It is fine to hope that “the international community” will pull together to confront COVID-19. It is, again in selective, mostly below-the-political-radar ways, likely to do so. But above the radar, not likely under present circumstances. Understand that while local communities are sociological facts, “the international community” is just a metaphor. Its use usually amounts to little more than virtue-signaling by devout liberal internationalists who have either forgotten or never learned that their transnational idealism: does not appeal to most normal people; does

² Nathan Gardels, “Planetary Co-immunity Is on the Way”, *The WorldPost* (Berggruen Institute), March 21, 2020. Emphasis added.

³ Gray, *The Silence of Animals* (2013), p. 75.

not have an autonomous basis in reality separate from the power and reputation of the national states that promote such values; and has a history that includes disastrous lulling distractions such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928.

Pessimists are manifesting equally extreme views in this crisis and are equally liable to be mistaken. “The habit of prophesying doom”, once wrote Raymond Aron, “testifies less to lucidity than to resignation.” It also testifies sometimes to a strange desire to pull the tent down on everyone out of spite, envy, or an illusory desire to live life large, even in an apocalyptic cast of mind. Outsized pessimism in the COVID-19 crisis bears an uncanny resemblance to the more extreme versions of global warming hysteria that have been on display now for years. Whatever else one may say about catastrophe, Armageddon, and garden variety, unnamed end-of-the-world-scale mass-destruction scenarios, they are neither small beer nor boring.

There is something unmistakably irrational about off-the-charts pessimism. It smacks of Freud’s notion of Thanatos—death wish—on a collective scale. And it is at the same time of a piece with some religious themes—note, for example, the descriptions in the Christian Bible’s Book of Revelations—yet it is also antithetical to a key historical function of religious communities. This requires modest elaboration, for the syntax and timbre of religious thinking is relevant here.

It is easy to spot irrationality emanating from anti-modern religious groups these days. Many Evangelical preachers in the United States have defied social distancing edicts to gather their congregants in church, and some of them had their asses rightly tossed into jail for it. Governor Rick De Santis of Florida, mindful of their political power, refused to order churches closed, claiming that it violated religious freedom rights. A woman in a car in Lansing attending a “liberate Michigan rally” was caught on camera telling an admonishing policeman that “she was washed in the blood of Jesus,” so he could save his breath. Ultra-Orthodox Jews ignored social distancing orders in Israel, in Lakewood, New Jersey, and in Borough Park with devastating costs in infections and deaths. Massive Tabligh assemblies in Pakistan and Malaysia did the same. Rajputs in India held a Corona festival back in February, with 10,000 people assembled in the belief that their high Hindu caste protected them from sickness. (It didn’t.)

All true. But one of the oldest functions of religious authority is to recognize the inevitability of human irrationality, especially in parlous times, and to both limit and channel it in useful, or at least harmless, directions. That is why many religious traditions sanction rule-breaking and mischief-making on certain selected days of the year—Mardi Gras and Carnival in Catholic tradition, Purim in Jewish tradition, Holi in Hindu tradition, and so on—but even the rule-breaking is bound by special rules. When irrational pessimism jumps the fence from the bounds of religious tradition and authority, no rules constrain the irrationality, and when that irrationality finds political targets to draw its attention, we often get paranoia-tinged, apocalyptic-scale violence.

Note just in recent times the Holocaust, the Khmer Rouge class-genocide, the Rwandan ethnic genocide, and numerous arguably sub-genocidal items on the list are not hard to recall—massive atrocities against Armenians, the man-made Ukrainian famine, Mao’s Great Leap Forward, the Bosnian massacres, and many others. As G.K. Chesterton said, “When people stop believing in God they don’t believe in nothing; they’ll believe in anything.”

Clearly, dangerous flows of human irrationality are not limited to traditionally religious people; most of the historical record shows just the reverse—that dangerous flows of human irrationality are limited *by* traditionally religious people. Exactly for that reason Churchill predicted that the wars of ideology would be worse than the wars of religion. Now that the two have in some respects merged in our political age, notably but not only in the salafi precincts of the Muslim world, all bets and predictions are off.

Much follows from adopting and successfully proselytizing either an outsized optimistic or pessimistic reading of the COVID-19 crisis. For example, most pessimists think that populists will benefit from the crisis politically, for it will show that populist opposition to the high priests of globalization was justified. The whole system collapsed like a house of cards, with those at the bottom of the pile getting hurt disproportionately. Trump will therefore win in November, and this is the only factor that really matters.

Optimists think populists will suffer politically, at least in countries with free and fair elections. Why? Because they have been manifestly incompetent in handling the virus, dead wrong in their blasé early underestimations of its danger, and irresponsible in their arrogant dismissal of scientific and medical expertise. Trump will lose, of course, and this is the only factor that really matters.

As with many things about the COVID-19 crisis, time will tell. I expect a mixed result on this and most other divided predictions, all of which will blur as the illness passes and reactions to it fade into the rest of our species' kaleidoscope of filtered reality. Whether Trump wins or loses in November, it almost certainly won't be only because of COVID-19 interpretations.

EMOTIONALISM AMID MOLTEN TIMES

Before religion, at least as we know it in the Abrahamic faiths, exported a unified deity out from inhabiting every tree, rock, and animal on earth into a transcendent sphere, human culture was governed by a polytheistic mythic consciousness. Magic ruled, superstition passed for causality, rendering science impossible in principle, and normative religion in the symbolic mode we recognize today did not exist. Today rationality and faith can coexist and even reinforce each other. In early mythic consciousness, not so.

We like to think that the pre-rationalist modes of hunter-gatherer era humanity have been transcended once and for all. Also not so. As Ernst Cassirer described it in *The Myth of the State*, completed in 1944:

The mythical organization of society seems to be superseded by a rational organization. In quiet and peaceful times, in periods of relative stability and security, this rational organization is easily maintained. It seems safe against all attacks. But in politics the equipoise is never completely established. What we find here is a labile rather than a static equilibrium. In politics we are always living on volcanic soil. We must be prepared for abrupt convulsions and eruptions. . . . In these moments the time for myth has come again. For myth has not been really vanquished and subjugated. . . . The description of the role of magic and mythology in primitive society applies equally well to highly advanced stages of man's political life. In desperate situations men will always have recourse to desperate means—and our present day political myths have been such desperate means. . . .

If modern man no longer believes in natural magic, he has by no means given up the belief in a sort of “social magic.” If a collective wish is felt in its whole strength and intensity, people can easily be persuaded that it only needs the right man to satisfy it.

It is both hard and unnecessary to add much to Cassirer’s description. He was writing about the irrationality of fascist political movements in the aftermath of the World War, the Great Depression, and the massive dislocations of the then still-waxing Industrial Revolution. Murderous irrationality attached itself to a populist, anti-religious romantic movement in Germany, one of the most sophisticated and well-educated nations in the world. Germany found its “right man.”

In our own time, we are experiencing the misfortune of the COVID-19 pandemic coming on the heels of some similarly dislocating, anxiety-generating, circumstances. *Alas, what human societies make of a crisis and how they handle it depends in the large part on the institutional and attitudinal context into which it happens to fall.*

In many countries, including many Western countries and certainly in the United States, an abundance of ambient anxiety from a variety of sources clouds the air. Whether because of aftershocks from September 11, 2001, the Great Recession of 2008-9, the disruptions of the technological tsunami roiling labor profiles and much else besides, or the cumulative risk-aversion excretions of sudden unprecedented affluence, which include a social plague of loneliness from record percentages of people living by themselves, people have been struggling to put their finger on what is bothering them. COVID-19 has functioned as lightning rod, summoning together massive amounts of ambient angst and distilling it into one galactic-scale demonic menace. With daily routines and expectations shattered, facing an economic swoon of Great Depression-scale, and witnessing a Federal government that can’t seem to do anything efficiently or in time, many Americans are radically disoriented. To say that the potential for outbreaks of irrationality is high is an understatement.

How to Not Waste the Crisis

At emotionally hyper-inflected times like these, therefore, the most important asset any nation can have is sound, calm, empathetic, consistent, and competent leadership. So, too, I suppose, for the world at large. So yes, the November 2020 election in the United States is very important, and not just for Americans. It was always going to be important, given America’s global role and posture for the past seventy-some years. But now its importance all but defies estimation.

Why? Because wise leaders in the most influential countries, who will influence leaders at all levels, will understand that we do not need to demolish global economic institutions and patterns and thus replicate the impoverishing nationalist autarky of the 1930s. But we do need to make them more resilient. We do need to better buffer them against the possibility of disruption than the jerry-rigged, capriciously constructed and accident-prone contraption we have has proven able to do. We need architects and builders, not wrecking balls. We need leaders who unify society, not who divide, provoke, mislead, distract, and fear-harvest for narrow parochial and selfish purposes. We need leaders who seek out and promote social synergies, not leaders who are parasitic on national and local community.

The big question in the American context, perhaps, is whether that can be done without confronting, if not wholly deconstructing, the new “malefactors of great wealth”, to quote

Theodore Roosevelt from his 1912 Bullmoose campaign—the global-scale concentrations of private corporate wealth that loom over the same terrain as states, and that as often perforate their sovereign management capacities as support them.⁴

Wise leaders will understand that we must not destroy our international institutions, despite the fact that none of them—not the UN Security Council, General Assembly and World Health Organization; not the WTO, IMF, and World Bank; not the European Union or NATO; not the Arab League, not ASEAN or the African Union—have functioned effectively in this crisis. We need instead to make them work better based on realistic premises instead of on self-preening pious and essentially magical wishful thinking. The crisis has shattered a lot of pretensions, and that is not altogether a bad thing.

We do not need to introduce draconian authoritarian protocols or make government larger, more intrusive, and less accountable. But we do need to adjust the way we prepare, invest in capacity for, and manage major public health emergencies.⁵

We do not, in the United States, need necessarily to institute an expensive Federal-level guaranteed national income scheme, when the nation already strains under a \$25 trillion debt. But we do need to rethink how we can buffer major shocks to the economy in a crisis the way several other democracies have achieved it. Several options are open to us within a market framework; alas, none are yet being seriously considered by the essentially brain-dead tenured American political class.

We do not need and should not try to assure equality of material outcomes, but we in the United States do need to better balance the two central goals of a decent democratic order: dignity and liberty. That means we need to end the plutocratic distortions and rentier abuses that festoon the American political economy, warping markets and exacerbating what is overwhelmingly artificial as opposed to natural inequality.

Every country has its own mending and bending of imperfect realities to attend to, and can use this molten moment to make progress that would have been far more difficult in normal times. But again, wise reform requires enlightened leadership, and sound institutions capable of implementing and sustaining reform efforts over time. In the historic hinge of this moment, whichever societies empower that enlightened leadership can anticipate post-COVID-19 social revival, economic growth, and cultural renaissance. Those societies that do not find it will be in trouble, some in possibly big trouble.

In the end, therefore, the outcomes we care about most will not eventuate mainly on account of the virus; they are and will be about us. Allow me in conclusion to phrase the matter after the fashion of a literary metaphor, specifically Charles Perrault's 1696 story "La Belle au bois dormant," a story brought to 20th-century English-speaking audiences by Walt Disney--I speak

⁴ That problem manifests differently from place to place. It does not so much apply in Singapore, where the government and the corporate structure are not so much institutionally isolated from each other. What is "managed" in Singapore is not just politics and the economy separately, it is the political economy understood as an integrated functional concept. See my "The Coolidge Proposition," *The American Interest*, December 10, 2019.

⁵ My ideas on how this should proceed in the United States are summarized in "Big Government, Small Government, Pandemic Government," *The Bulwark*, April 16, 2020.

of course of the 1959 animated classic “Sleeping Beauty”: COVID mirror on the wall, what kind of species are we, after all?

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