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THE FORUM

Forum: Thinking Theoretically in Unsettled Times: COVID-19 and Beyond

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This collection of essays seeks to theorize the politics of the COVID-19 pandemic in international relations (IR). The contributions are driven by questions such as: How can theorizing help us understand these unsettled times? What kind of crisis is this? What shapes its politics? What remains the same and what has been unsettled or unsettling? In addressing such questions, each of the participants considers what we may already know about the pandemic as well as what might be ignored or missed. Collectively, the forum pushes at the interdisciplinary boundaries of IR theorizing itself and, in so doing, the participants hope to engender meaningful understandings of a world in crisis and encourage expansive ways of thinking about the times that lie beyond.

Esta colección de ensayos busca teorizar la política de la pandemia de la COVID-19 en las Relaciones Internacionales (RI). Las contribuciones se basan en preguntas tales como las siguientes: "¿cómo nos puede ayudar la teorización a comprender estos tiempos sin precedentes?," "¿qué tipo de crisis es esta?," "¿qué determina su política?," "¿qué continúa siendo igual y qué ha sido inestable o desestabilizante?." Al abordar estas preguntas, cada uno de los participantes considera lo que posiblemente ya sabemos de la pandemia, así como lo que podría ignorarse o pasarse por alto. De manera colectiva, el foro presiona los limites interdisciplinarios de la teorización de las RI en sí y, al hacerlo, los participantes esperan generar entendimientos significativos de un mundo en crisis y alentar formas expansivas de pensar sobre los tiempos que yacen más allá.

Cet ensemble d'essais cherche à théoriser les politiques de pandémie de COVID-19 en relations internationales. Ses contributions sont axées

autour de questions telles que: Comment la théorisation peut-elle nous aider à comprendre ces temps troubles? De quel type de crise s'agit-il? Par quoi ses politiques sont-elles façonnées? Quelles sont les choses qui sont restées inchangées et celles qui ont été déstabilisées ou déstabilisantes? Pour aborder ces questions, chacun des participants se livre à une réflexion sur ce que nous savons potentiellement déjà de la pandémie ainsi que sur ce que nous aurions pu manquer ou ignorer. Collectivement, les participants à cette tribune repoussent les limites interdisciplinaires de la théorisation des relations internationales en elle-même et espèrent ainsi engendrer des compréhensions significatives de ce monde en crise et encourager des modes de pensée globaux pour les temps qui nous attendent.

Separating the Old from the New, or the Death of Liberal Order (Not from COVID-19)

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I have been asked how—as an IR scholar—I understand the COVID-19 pandemic. Since so much has been said and written about it already, I begin by reflecting on what has irritated me most in public discourse on the topic, that is, the widespread tendency to exaggerate the novelty of COVID-19 and everything to do with it. This is not only a problem with respect to this pandemic. For about twenty years, the words "crisis," "unprecedented," and "new" have been heavily overused in political discourse. IR scholars, politicians, journalists, and citizens alike seem to perceive what comes to their attention as new, even when it is not, and to hyperbolize the expected impact of these supposedly novel developments. The US news and scholarly sources after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for example, were replete with declarations that we were witnessing the dawn of a new era, that the world and international politics would never be the same. Today, Campbell and Doshi (2020) speculate that "the coronavirus could reshape global order"; according to the more definitive Kissinger (2020), "the coronavirus pandemic will forever alter the world order"; and Fukuyama (2020a) warns that "the pandemic could lead to the United States' relative decline, the continued erosion of the liberal international order, and a resurgence of fascism around the globe."

Without wanting to accuse anyone personally, such hyperbole not only transports a scarcity of historical understanding, but also fosters a collective sense of bewilderment and urgency that, in turn, supports hysteria. This cannot but undermine the quality of our response. As Chandler (2020a, 2020b) rather uncritically notes, as a consequence of the current acute sense of crisis, "acting normally, not panicking, not overreacting, is seen as dangerous and hubristic." This undermines rational decision-making, and it can blind us to other developments that may be more significant.

As scholars of IR, we have the luxury of not needing to sell copies or collect hits. That comes with a responsibility to think before we open our mouths. Our view of world politics should be informed by the *longue durée* and by a comparative perspective. We should know that, very often, "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" and be more circumspect about declaring novelty. Perhaps Fukuyama (2020b) came closer to the truth on another occasion, when he stated that "the pandemic is not a game changer; it is an accelerator of deep trends that were already at work". Perhaps, it is not even that.

We should also know that change is a constant as we look through time, that history *is* change, and that we lose precious time by outguessing each other about where all this will lead that would be better spent responding to the here and now. This is why I find it important to consider what is old and what is new in the current moment and untangle change from continuity to counteract hyperbole. My argument is that the COVID-19 pandemic does not really challenge the IR canon; it can

be understood well enough without resort to new concepts or theories. Rather, it highlights a fundamental societal problem that has crept up in the *longue durée*. It brings into sharp relief the lack of consensus on even basic facts produced in our increasingly fragmented media and academic environment. We need to wake up to the challenge this poses to the authority of science as well as to liberal modes of governance, both of which depend on the possibility of evidence-based reasoned discourse.

What Is Old

Without disputing the obvious facts that the novel coronavirus causes suffering and poses a range of policy challenges (e.g., see Barua 2020), it is good to begin this reflection with an essential reminder: viral outbreaks are a normal part of biological life on planet Earth. It is not the slightest bit odd that a heretofore unstudied form of the coronavirus should begin to affect humans, and it is obvious that humanity should struggle to control and manage the resulting epidemic. Biology has affected the rise and fall of prior civilizations—why should ours be any different? Not only do we have a literature on *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Diamond 1997) that diseases have always mattered in world history, but there is also insightful previous literature on the political impact of pandemics. Most notably, Aaltola (2011) has examined the role played by health anxiety and governments' ability to protect their citizens from infectious disease for the legitimation of the modern state.

It should furthermore surprise no one that this epidemic became a pandemic, and thereby a global concern. Notwithstanding all ongoing disputes about just how new or "deep" globalization really is, people do move around more and in greater numbers than ever. As Harvey (2020) has recently put it, "one of the downsides of increasing globalization is how impossible it is to stop a rapid international diffusion of new diseases. We live in a highly connected world where almost everyone travels. The human networks for potential diffusion are vast and open." Luckily, trans- and international governance, further features of globalization, are also still around to help us respond to this pandemic. For example, the UN's World Health Organization (WHO) works to monitor, inform, advise, and help coordinate efforts to contain the spread and mobilize medical responses. Many other multilateral and bilateral fora facilitate the regulation of mobility across borders or the sharing of medical resources, among a host of other measures.

What we can see, more generally speaking, is that the present crisis unfolds not in a new world but very much in our old one, with pre-existing structures, processes, and dominant ideas. We still have a capitalist world economy, at least by most accounts (cf. Wark 2019), more and less affluent nation-states, more and less democratic governments, and governmental and nongovernmental organizations operating in a multilevel governance system. We also maintain dominant ideologies that continue to shape our policy responses. For example, in both the United States and the Netherlands we can see how difficult our liberal bias makes it to respond to the pandemic the way China did (for better or for worse). In short, many of the basic elements that explain international and national political outcomes—structures, processes, and ideas—have not changed.

Globalization has helped make the novel coronavirus a global problem. Globalization also provides some means to address it. Still, as pointed out in Sterling-Folker's contribution, policy responses have overwhelmingly been developed at national and subnational levels. That also is not surprising. In crisis, under time pressure, people deal with what is in front of them. It takes enormous effort in such a situation to keep a bigger picture in mind, to operate strategically, and additional effort to convince others to do the same. In the European Union, where I live, we can see this quite clearly. Initial responses were national level and largely uncoordinated. It took several months for the first significant coordinated policies

(e.g., quarantine times) to reach the public view. Even a year into the crisis, the European level of governance, so strong at other times, seems almost absent when it comes to this policy area. Here we see the limits of international cooperation emerging from coordination problems, conflicts of interest, and high short-term salience for national survival, fully in line with what the neo–neo synthesis in IR could have predicted (Waever 1996).

As a result, just as other features of globalization are not evenly spread across the globe, neither are the problems caused by this pandemic nor their solutions, as the forum contributions by Wilcox and Ozguc underscore. Rates of contagion and mortality rates differ substantially across and even within states. Undoubtedly, many future studies will examine the causes of these differences. What seems prima facie plausible is that, next to population density, levels of state control and societal cohesion matter for contagion rates (Brzechczyn 2020), and the quantity and quality of medical infrastructure matter for mortality rates (Liang et al. 2020). Compliance with restrictions is greater where enforcement is tougher or societal cohesion is stronger—the two typically being inversely correlated. More IC beds, ventilators, and doctors are better than fewer. Medical insurance coverage and better funded health care systems help save lives, especially among the lower classes. All of that seems predictable.

Another old hat is that, as with anything that arouses strong feelings in people, a health crisis is instrumentalized by some political agents for political gain. The political game is, after all, also still the same. Whether it is attacking a rival country's crisis management, placing blame on the WHO simultaneously (and oddly) as an ineffective and dangerous layer of supranational governance, or using the outbreak to weaponize electoral campaigns—none of this comes as a surprise to students of politics. In this context, we have little to gain from waxing hysterical about "medical populists" popping up everywhere (e.g., Lasco 2020). Politicians simplifying complex issues to attract voters, demonizing their political enemies, and claiming to have a monopoly on the solutions is hardly new. Neither is the securitization of health concerns (Chandler 2020b; Hoffman 2020).

Last but not least, it is not new that a health-related problem becomes a health scare. Here as elsewhere in (international) politics, we should not underestimate the relevance of fear as a basic driving force of human behavior (Jacobi and Freyberg-Inan 2015; Pashakhanlou 2017). All over the world, citizens and elites have reacted with fear of the virus itself and fear of the expected results of measures taken against it. The balance between those fears largely seems to determine whether individuals find the measures taken in their environment too strict, or not strict enough. Simply put, if my more immediate fear is that my family will starve if I don't go out to work, I will likely oppose a lockdown. If I can comfortably sit out a lockdown in my villa, I will shake my head at those other, apparently irrational people. Both camps, and anyone in between, are furthermore targeted by the manipulations of the instrumentalizers. And all seek cognitive consistency and confirmation, which leads them to embrace some news and not others. The extent and salience of this cognitive social fragmentation, however, are new.

What Is New

Since the advent of Web 2.0 around the year 2004, user-generated content has flooded the media sphere and public discourse. This has the ostensibly positive effect that politically powerful actors, such as national governments, have a more difficult time constructing a dominant narrative to interpret events and guide reactions to them. The early 2020 COVID-19 months provided plenty of opportunity to watch them try, arguably with surprising levels of success, initially. Yet in many countries we have been able to observe that, as the initial shock subsided, alternative narratives began to multiply. Aside from ludicrous alternative theories to explain

or deny the outbreak, what is more problematic is the public diversity of competing views on how we should react. This fragmentation is problematic because it legitimates a wide range of possible responses, from total lockdown to allowing the outbreak to freely run its course. It then becomes very difficult to decide what, collectively, should be done. From this follows that attempts to enforce a collective reading and response will be seen as infringing on liberty. This, effectively, makes liberal government impossible.

In Western liberal democracies, the original impulse of liberalism—the idea that private lives should unfold without excessive public interference—has combined with hyperindividualism and the resulting epistemic relativism to support a sense that anyone's ideas are as good as anybody else's. The social sciences have played their part in this development with the increasing room given to non-foundationalist approaches since the 1970s. The contribution by Shinko in this forum can serve as a self-aware illustration for this type of scholarship. Non-foundationalist scholarship rightfully emphasizes the role of subjective experience and perception in the social construction of our empirical reality. Yet this simultaneously complicates the construction of a shared version of such a reality. The impulse of questioning knowledge claims, including our own, is of course not in and of itself wrong. But it creates two linked problems that have now become highly salient. First, it creates a generalized sense of epistemic disorientation. Second, it undermines the possibilities for scholarship to alleviate this disorientation and to inform decision-making. This has helped foster cognitive social fragmentation, insularity, and polarization. We live in different realities, interact less and less in meaningful ways with others, and lose the basis on which to agree on collective action.

Post-factual politics, also known as post-truth or post-reality, is a combined result of these sociocultural developments along with technological innovations like social media, which facilitate the spread of just anyone's ideas. What is "real" is increasingly up for interpretation and ideologized. The problem of "fake news" is then created by the very fact that their fakeness is disputed, feeding further societal division. COVID-19 times constitute a particularly "futile ground for the spread of false news," because we find ourselves in a "situation of crisis, uncertain futures, collective shock, and the collective fear of death" (Fuchs 2020). Social distancing furthers this unwholesome trend through "the substitution of face-to-face communication that bears the risk of contagion by mediated communication" as well as the "convergence of social spaces in the home" (Fuchs 2020). This makes it possible that otherwise sane people discursively organize in bubbles to, for example, link cellular networks to a zoonotic virus. It makes things worse if leaders of powerful states or influential media outlets like Breitbart embrace this trend. Not only does post-factualism diminish trust in what governments say, in governmental authority, but it also decreases trust in the authority of science, even of hard science. In the COVID-19 crisis, the virus itself is ideologized and thereby removed from the scientific domain. Virologists lose their authority as well.

Liberal democratic elites have, in a way, asked for this loss of authority, and even continue to encourage it, as can be seen in the extremely cautious, if not incoherent, responses of liberal democratic governments to the COVID-19 crisis. These elites strive not to give the impression of an authoritarian response; the problem is that this also precludes an authoritative response. Faith in government is thereby further undermined. This cannot but go very wrong for liberalism. Enemies of liberalism have already been emerging within, like cancer—from cancel culture to corporate censorship of public forums. Now even an ostensibly liberal scholar like Sikkink (2020) can argue that "to protect our collective right to health in the current pandemic situation, we need to balance our individual rights with collective responsibilities." This concedes vast ground to communitarianism: the idea that individuals have duties to a collective that can legitimately curtail their freedom. It shows just how deep a crisis liberalism is in, not merely as a system of

governance, but as a normative foundation of our civilization. Perhaps, in the longer term, this will turn out to be the most significant aspect of these historical times: Liberal government requires science to uphold evidence-based reasoned discourse on which to base decisions. Science requires liberal government to uphold freedom of inquiry and expression. We might just be witnessing them going down together.

Acknowledgments

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