



The Twilight of the Extroverts

And Other Unlikely Facets of the Post-Pandemic Order

Ian Lesser

The Covid-19 crisis has inspired a seemingly endless stream of analyses about the post-pandemic world. With few exceptions, thinking about what comes next has been extraordinarily linear and conventional. The widely shared consensus envisions a straightforward extrapolation of trends already visible before the severe health and economic crises affecting societies worldwide. In this view, the current crises are, above all, accelerators of change. From technology to social behavior, from politics to international security, we will see more of what we already saw coming, and see it sooner.

Yet there are alternatives to this Covid “gives history a shove” thesis. Looking out over the medium term, say five to ten years, here are five non-canonical possibilities to consider. Some are reassuring, some deeply troubling. To be honest, some are long shots. And several of the possible paths noted here are mutually incompatible. But they are all worth considering, if only as relief from the flood of more conventional scenarios.

V-Shaped Sociology

Economists and financial analysts debate the potential for a V-shaped economic recovery. A quick and sustained rebound looks less and less likely. But what is the outlook for social behavior? Economic stringency will impose constraints of its own, of course, and these may reduce the ability of people to travel, whether for business or pleasure. This may not change the impetus to return to normal, and as fast as possible. Conventional thinking already holds that there will be no return to pre-Covid patterns of travel and in-person meetings of all kinds. Some believe we have seen the end of global gatherings, from Davos to run-of-the-mill business and civil society events. In this view, networking as we know it has been dealt a deathblow, never to recover. Really? In an alternative vision, there will be a tremendous pent up demand for direct personal interaction, even if at a smaller scale. It is even more likely to be the case for tourism, which has seen many severe disruptions since Thomas Cook’s time. After months of inertia, people may well follow the writer Nikos Kazantzakis’ advice: “We are birds not oysters, let’s get up and go.” The consequences for global health may not be so uplifting.

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I suspect that not a few people working in occupations where success has required steady networking and socializing have secretly enjoyed the imposed isolation of the last months. Will they readily return to past

patterns? Many members of the chattering class have gotten used to chattering from home, or not at all. Should this become a persistent pattern of behavior, many traditional ideas about mobility and professional advancement, not to mention celebrity, could be upended. More profoundly, the experience of the pandemic has raised the stock of smaller, well-governed states. New Zealand is the exemplar, but there are other good examples at the international, national, and local level. Increasingly, quiet competence may trump triumphalist rhetoric and nationalist bombast. The analogy can be taken too far, of course. But nation states, too, divide roughly into extroverts and introverts when it comes to diplomacy and the use of power. Beyond the health emergency, management of a protracted economic crisis may also fuel more inward-looking public policies. Will Covid-19 spell the twilight of the global extroverts?

The Great Slowing

This is the antithesis of the pandemic as great accelerator idea. Far from giving history a shove, the Covid crisis and its economic fallout could actually impede or reverse some of the trends we have taken for granted or viewed as inevitable. Over the longer term, it is not inevitable that the post-pandemic world will see an ever more powerful and self-confident China throwing its weight around successfully in international finance and geopolitics. A protracted slump in trade and growing economic nationalism could deal harshly with China's export-led model. And China's profligate global investments may become a financial and political burden, weighed down by non-performing debt.

It is widely accepted that globalization is in decline, fueled by economic nationalism. In all likelihood, the dramatic global economic contraction—the OECD now expects output in the developed economies to experience the largest peacetime drop in the past 100 years—and the growing role of governments in recovery will reinforce this trend. But it is also possible that the need for revived global trade and investment will cause even nationalist politicians to think twice about this course.

Other trends could slow or go into reverse under conditions of health insecurity and economic stringency. There has been some progress in increasing European defense budgets as a contribution to burden sharing in recent years. Will publics and governments continue to support this in the face of other pressing spending priorities? Perhaps not. At the political level, publics everywhere in the post-pandemic world are likely to demand more from government—and expect more of a say in governance. This is not necessarily good news for authoritarians and would-be authoritarians. Democratic systems and civil society may prove more buoyant than often assumed.

While Nobody Is Looking

Turmoil and conflicts may proliferate beyond the gaze of distracted policymakers and publics on both sides of the Atlantic. As attention is focused inward or on animating conflicts at a global level, much can happen that will nonetheless affect the relatively secure societies of the West. This is already happening in Libya and on the Indian-Chinese border. Brazil is poised on the brink of political collapse, and the possibility of a military coup there cannot be dismissed. Nigeria and other countries in West Africa continue to be destabilized by jihadi groups. A variety of what used to be termed “rogue” states may feel emboldened by the perception that the international community is looking elsewhere. They may or may not be correct in this perception. But the risk of brinkmanship and miscalculation is surely growing. A not-so-rich north and an impoverished south may both see the rise of new extremist networks with novel grievances and motivations beyond the religious

and ideological bases that have shaped our thinking about terrorism in recent decade. We are rightly focused on health and economic shocks, but unconventional security shocks may also be on the horizon.

The Great Convergence

It has often been assumed that American and European societies are either diverging or separated by unbridgeable divides on issues as diverse as secularism, guns, social welfare, and the use of force. The advent of the Trump administration and the rise of nationalist and nativist forces in Europe have cast this issue in sharper relief. This is one area where the pandemic and the economic collapse may well accelerate forces of convergence already visible before the current crises. This convergence could take positive or negative forms. On the negative side, economic nationalism, xenophobia, and unilateralism could gather further strength on both sides of the Atlantic. The global consequences of this in the face of similar, even more vigorous tendencies elsewhere are disturbing—and well discussed in the global debate.

The more positive convergence scenario has received less attention, but could be more likely. Under pressure of severe health concerns and economic insecurity, societies on both sides of the Atlantic will demand similar things. In this process, the United States could come to look more like Europe in key respects. Health care will be a critical issue. Americans are increasingly aware of the dysfunctional nature of their health care system and the existence of better models elsewhere. Tremendous unemployment coupled with America's looming retirement crisis could spur a new wave of social welfare arrangements on the pattern of Roosevelt's New Deal. The crisis has forced leaderships everywhere to vastly increase the role of the state in economic life. Under these conditions, the American and European social systems may well converge, as they did in the 1930s (even with dramatically different leaders and ideologies).

Finally, and indirectly related to the current social strains, societies on both sides of the Atlantic are coming to grips with their own legacies of racism, violence, and intolerance. The dramatic protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States have had echoes in Europe, and with good reason. History has been harnessed to nationalist and revisionist agendas in recent years. It can also be a force for reconciliation and convergence for societies with similar concerns. The pandemic and economic stringency are not destined to drive us apart.

About the Author(s)

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