

TEN QUESTIONS POSED BY THE VIRUS

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) is reopening several questions that were considered resolved by the end of the last century. It is upending our familiar world that was built over the last century, challenging certitudes that held our sanity. Our life after the pandemic will be defined by at least 10 questions on the prevailing organising principles of humankind.

First, the virus has resurrected the classic utilitarian question in an immediate life and death situation: whether or not, how many, and whose deaths will be acceptable for a greater common good. "I'm sorry, some people will die... that's life," [declared Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro](#). "You can't stop a car factory because of traffic deaths," he said. That an ageing population is an economic burden on society has long become our common sense. There is indeed an incentive in their dying — social Darwinism, the survival of the fittest principle has never been tested this close to the bone. Data will be harvested to debate the relative net utility of different responses to the virus. Was Kerala rational in saving the lives of a [nonagenarian couple](#)? What is the balance between economic and social goals?

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Second, what is national power? "We need to have more 'germ games' like we have war games," Bill Gates said some years ago. The U.S. is the pre-eminent military and economic superpower. The diminishing potency of military hardware has been constantly demonstrated since 26/11, but that has not reduced the global appetite for weaponry. Strategies for expanding national power involve extracting and transferring public wealth to global corporations while the accompanying politics deludes the masses into a faux sense of power. The paradox of power is global. India is in a particularly pitiful situation. Hindutva nationalism's celebration of militarism has correspondingly reduced the attention on social infrastructure. Its middle class speaks about India's dubious military prowess but an unwanted encounter with the country's healthcare infrastructure may have disrupted their fantasy. Will there be a new understanding of power and security?

Third, whither globalisation? All countries have tried to enforce border controls to stop the virus, which ironically also demonstrated their futility. Global cooperation and multinational governance can be jettisoned only at the world's peril as we know now. A more serious threat to humanity, climate change, has always appeared distant, but this one is urgent. Hence, the question is not whether we have more or less globalisation but about its character. It is now a profiteering expedition of soulless greed. Can there be a new globalisation where humanity and environment take precedence?

Fourth, how much more power will the state accumulate? The 9/11 security horror, followed by the 2008 economic crisis, had ushered in the steady comeback of the state. This pandemic could ascribe divine powers to the state. Their dread now hysterical, the citizenry seeks benevolence and control from the state. We see ingenious uses of technology for surveillance.

Fifth, will this expanding state be increasingly democratic or progressively authoritarian? China and Singapore showed that authoritarian measures work; Germany showed that democratic and inclusive methods work too. But Italy and the U.S. showed that individualism and markets can impede collective goals. India, which has deployed a hybrid of democratic and authoritarian measures, remains an open test case.

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Sixth, what will happen to the neoliberal wisdom that unbridled competition of all against all improves efficiency and brings progress? “This is not the way to do it. I’m competing with other States, I’m bidding up prices,” New York Governor Andrew Cuomo lamented. It is not that competition is universal — the poorer undercut one another while the richer cartelize in a neoliberal world. Cuba, considered inefficient, has sent healthcare professionals to many countries. The virus tells us that competition is risky; cooperation could be redeeming. What is the alternative? Chinese President Xi Jinping, in his speech at the 19th Communist Party Congress in 2017, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his speech to capitalist moguls in Davos in 2018, outlined alternatives to liberal orthodoxies. Collectivisation has a new life. Italy has nationalised Alitalia; Spain has nationalised all hospitals. History may not have ended.

Seventh, what will happen to populism? Populists have shown remarkable resilience in the face of crises, not necessarily by resolving them, but usually by blaming other countries, communities and political opponents. All populists around the world will have a virus-mutated version; they will use the new context to advance their pre-existing agendas. Which of them will tighten their grip over their countries? Will anyone face public wrath triggered by the pandemic and wilt?

Eighth, the inhuman exploitation of labour under globalisation, labelled ‘efficiency’ and ‘competitiveness’, has been concealed by the glitz of globalisation and consumerist seduction. Reports on sweatshops in the developing world have occasionally explored the exploitation of labour, but the virus has brought the lives of labourers out into the spotlight, in a parade of shame — working 16-hour days but unable to get paid leave or healthcare in the U.S; migrant labourers in India walking several days to go home; and the wretched labour camps in West Asia.

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The ninth question is whether we need to travel as much as we do. At the end of 2019, when the virus was just about launching its global tour, some were travelling for no better reason than keeping their frequent flier status. In October, a report commissioned by the U.K.’s Committee on Climate Change had called for “a ban on air miles and frequent flier loyalty schemes that incentivize excessive flying.” An emergent no-fly movement still struggles to get attention but now it might. “May be we can save a few business trips now that we know that these digital tools work well,” Ola Källenius, CEO of Daimler/Mercedes-Benz, told BBC. The travel of the privileged has a parallel parody too: the large-scale forced relocation of people.

The tenth is how our idea of community and boundaries has changed. The COVID-19 crisis has let loose contradictory forces. On the one hand everyone is confined within the tiniest spaces, but on the other, the crisis has also urged us to community action. Neoliberalism had made all human interactions transactional, and each transaction standalone. Such short-termism delinked the current quarter from the next; the current generation from the future — the prevailing approach to climate change being instructive. A sustainable organising principle of humanity will require a conception of self-interest that is not immediate in terms of time or geography. The risks and rewards need to be spread over a longer period of time and larger expanse of space. And that is the most consequential challenge thrown up by the pandemic.

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