

Another Time of Renewal: Pandemics, Power, and Knowledge

Joji KIJIMA
Office of Global Initiatives
University of Tsukuba (Japan)

Abstract

This commentary first presents a genealogy of pandemics and world orders. Second, it highlights multiple origins of pandemics especially COVID-19 and the Spanish flu. Third, it shows the shortcomings of international organizations such as WHO and sovereignty against a global pandemic. Fourth, it compares the cases of Taiwan and Japan in their responses to COVID-19 and China. Fifth, it discusses the limits of existing knowledge and the exploration of transdisciplinary knowledge to take on the unknown. Finally, after reiterating this commentary, it concludes by drawing attention to the social responsibility of scientists and decision-makers across national borders.

Keywords: pandemics, hegemony, knowledge, COVID-19, Spanish flu, social trust

0. Introduction

Over the course of human history, we have learned that pandemics can change history and that they are too important to be left to the scientists (Zakaria 2020a). In today's world, following the outbreak of the novel coronavirus or COVID-19, one of the “factors responsible for successful pandemic responses” is social trust, according to Francis Fukuyama (2020: 26). Certainly, without social trust, the stability of existing society and authoritative knowledge cannot be sustained. The ‘regime of truth’ in the Foucauldian sense begins to fall apart, and its re-construction starts anew (Foucault, in Rabinow 1991). While mankind continues to be attacked by COVID-19 without sufficient defense provided by existing knowledge, citizens around the world are losing confidence in the ability of existing experts and their authoritative knowledge to cope with the pandemic and provide reliable guidance in the public sphere.

In the international arena, while the struggle for global hegemony has intensified between China and the United States, the legitimacy of both states has greatly suffered from existing domestic problems reinforced by COVID-19. For instance, the fragility of ‘one country, two systems’ in Hong Kong, as agreed in the Sino-British Joint Declaration of July 1997, has been exposed by Beijing’s implementation of its new national security law in July 2020 against pro-democracy activists. The new law undermines vital components of the liberal capitalist system, such as freedoms of assembly and speech, and it indiscriminately applies to both the residents of Hong Kong and non-residents anywhere in the world (Elegant 2020). In the case of the United States, social violence broke out over the killing of an African American man named George Floyd by a Caucasian policeman during an arrest. Protests against ‘systemic racism’ consequently spread across the United States and Europe, and historical monuments symbolizing European colonialism and slavery have been toppled in those Western countries. Accordingly, neither China nor the United States have been able to present a model for the rest of the world to emulate in the post-COVID-19 era.

In this commentary, I first present a brief genealogy of pandemics and world orders to show that it is not the first time in history that the world has gone through a time of renewal with a pandemic. Second, I highlight multiple origins of pandemics, such as COVID-19 and the Spanish flu, to demonstrate that states contending for hegemony have behaved similarly. Third, I point out the shortcomings of international organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), and the limits of discriminatory responses to the indiscriminate attack by a global pandemic. Fourth, I briefly compare the cases of Taiwan and Japan in their responses to COVID-19 and China. Fifth, I discuss the limits of existing knowledge and the exploration of transdisciplinary knowledge – based on experience and events in the renewing process of becoming (Stenner 2017; Whitehead 1925/1967) – to take on the unknown. Finally, after reiterating this commentary, I conclude by drawing attention to the social responsibility of scientists and decision-makers across national borders.

1. Large-scale historical changes

1.1. The present time

COVID-19 is indiscriminately attacking humans across national borders, challenging the authority of nation-states, and possibly changing the order of nation-states. We may very well be going through what Robert W. Cox (1996) refers to as a “large-scale historical change” again. For instance, “America is still exceptional, but no longer in a good sense” according to Fareed Zakaria (2020b). In terms of successful and unsuccessful responses to COVID-19, size does not matter as “[w]inning the fight against covid-19 (*sic*) does not require a huge bureaucratic apparatus. Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea have relatively small governments” (Ibid.). At the same time, “Denmark, Norway and Germany have also done very well, and they have relatively large states” (Ibid.). In all the successful cases, the states are “smart”, which means that “government bureaucracies are well-funded, enjoy considerable autonomy, are not burdened with excessive rules and mandates, and recruit intelligent people who are accorded respect for working in the public sector” (Ibid.). In the novel world of our making, only “smart” – rather than big or small – states with governing capacity re-emerge on the surface (Ibid.).

Similarly, for other leading scholars of international relations, the “fight against COVID-19” is equivalent to a “war” that re-defines the world order. For example, John Ikenberry (2020) puts the present situation in historical perspective as follows:

When future historians think of the moment that marked the end of the liberal world order, they may point to the spring of 2020 – the moment the United States and its allies, facing the gravest public health and economic catastrophe of the postwar era, [...]. [I]t is precisely at a moment of global crisis that great debates about world order open up and new possibilities emerge. This is such a moment.

Others, such as the following scholars may be more pessimistic about the current situation. “The United States lacks both the will and the resources to consistently outbid China and other emerging powers” while “the United States has to first get its own house in order. China will face its own obstacles in producing an alternative

system” (Cooley and Nexon 2020). On the one hand, they are optimistic to the extent that “[a] reinvigorated U.S. foreign policy apparatus should be able to exercise significant influence on international order” (Ibid.) On the other hand, they warn that “Washington must recognize that the world no longer resembles the historically anomalous period of the 1990s and the first decade of this century” and that “[t]he unipolar moment has passed” (Ibid.).

To say the least, the future of democracy or the liberal way of life has been put on the line because of COVID-19, as summarized by Larry Diamond (2020) in the following passage:

If, when this pandemic finally abates, the dominant global narrative becomes ‘It was China’s authoritarian system that helped us, while the democracies of the West floundered and selfishly turned in on themselves,’ humanity will emerge from this devastating crisis into a radically different and more dangerous world, one deeply hostile to freedom and self-government.

1.2. Historical lessons: the plague and the Spanish flu

In the mid-fourteenth century (1347-1351), the bubonic plague – or the Black Death – hit Europe very hard, resulting in the deaths of some 25 million people (about one-third of the population). Actually, one of the earliest recorded instances of the use of biological warfare was in 1347 when the Mongolian army attacked the fortified city of Caffa in Crimea by catapulting the infested corpses of its own dead men into the city (Schneider 2017). Nevertheless, it was after this worst plague in human history had hit the cities of Europe, Florence in particular, that the Renaissance was launched and the transition from the middle ages to modernity was made.

In the last century, during and after World War I (1918-1920), the Spanish flu, the deadliest flu in human history – originating from a U.S. Army training camp in Fort Riley, Kansas, rather than Spain – killed 20-50 million people. That is more than the total number of people – 17 million – killed in World War I itself (1914-18) (Andrews 2020). The pandemic was misnamed because journalists from Spain, a neutral country during World War I, were practically the only ones who could report

on the flu, unlike other journalists who were suppressed by wartime censorship in their countries. Consequently, those in countries undergoing media blackout, since they could only read Spanish news sources about the pandemic, incorrectly assumed that the flu originated in Spain (Ibid.). “An unusual characteristic of this virus was the high death rate it caused among healthy adults 15 to 34 years of age” – the prime generation of military service (Jordan *et al.* 2018). It was later explained as a ‘cytokine explosion’, an immune overreaction in healthy individuals that can lead to severe inflammation and a fatal buildup of fluid in the lungs (Roos 2020). More politically, the spread of the Spanish flu during World War I and the aftermath of the War led to “the collapse of European domination” and the emergence of the United States as “the most powerful” nation in the world (Watson 1992/2009).

2. The making of COVID-19

2.1. Name calling and dual logic

While the Spanish flu was misnamed in spite of the fact that it originated from an army training camp in the United States rather than Spain, the Wuhan coronavirus has been renamed COVID-19. China has fervently protested against any naming that indicates the novel coronavirus is from China despite the fact that the first infection of the coronavirus was found in the Chinese city of Wuhan. The United States has insisted on referring to it as the ‘Wuhan virus’ or the ‘Chinese virus’ on many occasions, even during a G7 meeting in March 2020. In return, China has been more offensively accusing the United States as a possible origin of the novel coronavirus and claiming that “China is a victim” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2020; Xinhua 2020; Sackur 2020) – that is despite the fact that China kept its borders open for months during which Chinese nationals were able to travel abroad, even after the outbreak of the novel infectious disease. Applying the Maoist technique of using existing contradictions to one’s advantage, China discursively took advantage of the dual logic of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’, anticipating that the distinction would *not* be maintained anyway once the spread of the virus came full circle and became truly global. Having said that, while there are claims that the Spanish flu originated from a bacterial vaccine experiment at the U.S. Army training camp, there has not been any strong attempt by the United States to correct what has already been misleadingly known as the Spanish flu either (Makow 2006; Barry 2018).

Nevertheless, once the spread of COVID-19 extended to countries outside of China, the Chinese government started implementing its international quarantine policy towards such countries as Japan and South Korea while externally mobilizing the discourse of China as ‘victim’ (Hirai 2020). In fact, in order to gloss over the image of perpetrator and construct the image of the first victim of COVID-19 by sharing its own experience, China started sending humanitarian supplies such as face masks, test kits, medicine, and other such to nations that were later hit hard by the pandemic. At the same time, China’s new generation of assertive ‘wolf warrior’ diplomats (taking their label from Chinese action films) took advantage of those countries in crisis, expecting to receive praise or trade deals (e.g. the use of Chinese 5G technology) in return. In the meantime, the same diplomats rhetorically, economically, and legally retaliated against those countries that questioned the possible origins of COVID-19 in China (The Washington Post 2020; Bishop 2020).

2.2. Sino-American origins of the coronavirus: biological and financial

The existence of COVID-19 can now be traced back, for at least thirty years in time, to bats in China – even though, according to a recent scientific study, it still is unclear how the novel coronavirus spread to humans (Boni *et al.* 2020). Regarding the possible pathways to humans, the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) has been mentioned as one possibility given the large numbers of bats used there for experiments and its proximity to the seafood market where twenty-seven out of the first forty-one patients infected with COVID-19 visited (Xiao and Lei 2020). The laboratory, rather than the seafood market, has been suspected as a possible origin of human infection with COVID-19 because fourteen out of those forty-one patients never visited the wet market and bats have never been sold there (Ibid.; Huang *et al.* 2020).

Surprisingly, the Wuhan laboratory that conducted research on coronaviruses, including “gain of function” research or “controversial experiments to find out how they might mutate to become more infectious to humans”, was funded by the United States government (namely the U.S. National Institutes of Health) up until late April 2020 (Arbuthnott *et al.* 2020; Fendos 2020; Trager 2020; Guterl 2020). In other words, while the biological origin of the coronavirus may be in China, the financial origin was in the United States until recently.

3. World Health Organization (WHO) and the limits of sovereignty

It is now clear that China never alerted WHO to the discovery of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan in time. According to the 2005 International Health Regulations (Article 6.1), a member state is required to notify WHO of “a public health emergency of international concern within its own territory” within twenty-four hours (World Health Organization 2008). It was WHO’s local office in China that found out about it online and notified its regional office on 31 December 2019. In fact, following a U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee report made public on 12 June 2020, WHO has finally corrected its timeline of COVID-19 and has admitted that it had to find out about the initial state of the outbreak by itself last December (AFP 2020; Wong 2020; U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee 2020).

In the meantime, on 31 December 2019, the Director of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Taiwan, a Chinese-speaking country affected by SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003, also notified WHO about online reports indicating the human-to-human transmission of a SARS-like “atypical pneumonia” requiring patients to be isolated for treatment in Wuhan (Ibid.; Nojima 2020). While Taiwan requested WHO share the information with its member states, WHO replied that Taiwan’s concerns would be forwarded to expert colleagues but would not be posted on its internal website for the benefits of other member states (Ibid.). This decision was possibly affected by China’s long-time objection to Taiwan’s participation in WHO based on the claim that Taiwan is part of China. Nonetheless, on the same day, Taiwan – in the midst of its presidential election – enhanced border control and quarantine measures that later turned out to be critical for its extraordinary success in fighting COVID-19 with only seven deaths in total.

China, on the other hand, did not announce the human-to-human transmission of the novel coronavirus until 20 January 2020 and did not lock down the city of Wuhan until 23 January 2020 – two days before the Chinese New Year (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, June 2020). It was not until 30 January 2020 that WHO finally designated the spread of COVID-19 as a global pandemic.

Put differently, COVID-19 could have been prevented from becoming a pandemic, or China could have at least bought more time for the rest of the world, if China

had made more information available and closed its borders weeks or a month earlier, as suggested by a University of Southampton study which stated that the number of COVID-19 cases could have been reduced by 95% if actions had been taken three weeks earlier (Lai *et al.* 2020). Accordingly, the indiscriminate attack of COVID-19 on humans has laid bare the limits of a discriminatory inter-sovereign organization and sovereign states.

4. Taiwan and Japan Compared

Taiwan, due to its experience of SARS and general suspicion toward China, started, among other measures, enhancing its border control on 31 December 2019 – for example, boarding planes and assessing passengers on direct flights from Wuhan for symptoms before they could deplane (Wang *et al.* 2020). They subsequently denied entry to all travelers from China on 6 February 2020 (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control 2020). Japan, on the other hand, only denied entry to Chinese visitors from Hubei Province, including its capital city of Wuhan, on 1 February, and Zhejiang Province on 13 February (The Asahi Shimbun 2020). The Japanese government did not even impose a two-week quarantine on other visitors from China until 6 March – the day after the Japanese government announced the cancelation of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s planned visit to Japan in the Spring of 2020 (Kyodo News 2020; Reuters 2020).

In other words, Taiwan was at least one month ahead of Japan by March 2020, and the difference can be attributed to the difference in their attitudes toward China. While Taiwan did everything it could to prevent another SARS-like disease from hitting Taiwan again, it would seem that Japan tried to be politically correct and delayed border control and quarantine measures until it became clear that the visit by the Chinese President would not be going ahead as planned. As a result, while Japan has 1,602 deaths (i.e. 12.7 per million), Taiwan only has seven (i.e. 0.3 per million), as of 7 October 2020.

5. Renewing knowledge and regaining social trust

Pandemics such as COVID-19 indiscriminately challenge Nobel laureates and first-year students from China and the United States alike with million-dollar questions of the unknown. For example, mysterious brain damage caused by COVID-19 is now

compared to a similar reaction to the Spanish flu in terms of ‘encephalitis lethargica’ (Zandi 2020; Walsh 2020; Varatharj *et al.* 2020; Paterson *et al.* 2020; Roos 2020). According to Dr. Michael Zandi of the National Hospital of Neurology and Neurosurgery in the U.K.:

[...] the 1918 influenza pandemic was linked to the epidemic of encephalitis lethargica (sleeping sickness) that took hold until the 1930s [...] early reports of encephalitis in COVID-19 have shown features similar to those in encephalitis lethargica [...] our immune system can appropriately fight the virus but may start to attack our own cells [...] via an inflammatory mechanism known as a cytokine storm, or through mechanisms we don’t yet understand (Zandi 2020).

In an interview with the BBC’s Lucy Hockings, Paul Garner, a ‘long-hauler’ of COVID-19 with after-effects and professor at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, states that it is “a very frightening illness even for people in infectious diseases”. Even for experts like himself, COVID-19 is “bizarre with unexpected turns and new symptoms and crazy things happening”. On the one hand, Garner agrees that “[f]urther research is good”, on the other hand, he represents the desperateness of patients by emphasizing that “we need stuff now!”. In response, Avindra Nath, a neurologist at the elite U.S. National Institute of Health, states that he and his colleagues “really don’t know”. He points out “the problem with the medical profession is that you’re limited by the testing that’s available to you clinically”. Unfortunately, it seems that even top medical professionals of our time “don’t find anything from the tests that are available”. (Hockings 2020).

In order to fill in part this intellectual vacuum left by authoritative knowledge, alternative knowledge has been provided by emerging experts in civil society. For instance, in the same interview with the BBC (Hockings 2020), Dr. Fiona Lowenstein of the Body Politic COVID-19 Support Group, a non-governmental organization, reveals that “[t]he question of the unknown is the huge reason why community care and peer counseling is so important”. She points out that it is “very difficult to find detailed information about the average experience”. She also points out that there is “some misleading information that people my age, twenty-six, and people without pre-existing conditions really couldn’t (*sic*) get sick from this virus”. Dr. Lowenstein further laments that “it can even be difficult

to find a doctor who understands your experience”. The NGO leader then calls for alternative community-based medical support and draws attention to the gap her NGO has been able to fill:

The group has been incredibly crucial because there is that aspect of emotional support but also because people are actually offering tangible advice on how to navigate medical bias, navigate the medical system, sharing a list of providers who understand the issue and can be helpful (Hockings 2020).

In other words, in order to renew knowledge and regain social trust, it is necessary to reassemble existing knowledge across disciplines and respond to the indiscriminate challenge to humanity posed by COVID-19. Such transdisciplinary knowledge is gathered into the grasped unity of events such as COVID-19 in the renewing process of becoming (Stenner 2017; Whitehead 1925/1967). More specifically, in order to cope with COVID-19, transdisciplinary alternatives have been suggested to “make choices, informed deeply by science but also by economics, politics, ethics, and other disciplines” (Zakaria 2020a). For example, at Harvard University, Danielle Allen, professor of political philosophy trained in the classics, ancient Greek, and Latin, has taken action to “liberate knowledge” from the schools of public health, medicine, and various laboratories into the public sphere in a coordinated way (Zakaria 2020c; Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics 2020). There are also other emerging ‘experts’ to tackle the common theme of COVID-19 from a very wide range of disciplines (Ohniwa *et al.* 2020). As a result, renewed “epistemic communities” across existing disciplines are expected to emerge through problem discovery as we overcome the current pandemic crisis (Haas 1992).

6. In lieu of a conclusion

This is another time of renewal for humanity brought on by another pandemic. Pandemics such as COVID-19 indiscriminately challenge humans across national borders, the authority of states and world order as they did in the fourteenth and twentieth centuries. The limits of inter-sovereign organizations – which discriminate sovereign states without recognition – against an indiscriminate global pandemic have been laid bare. No hegemonic candidate seems to enjoy legitimacy

in the society of nation-states while their own citizens take their discontent to the streets and try to undo history that was used to construct the nation-states. The limits of cutting-edge knowledge have been exposed. Alternative transdisciplinary knowledge has been sought and intellectual authority is ‘up for grabs’ as the production of a renewed regime of truth gets under way.

Although the biological origin of the coronavirus may be found in bats that possibly came from some cave in the Southwestern part of China thirty years ago, as a recent scientific study suggests, there is also the financial origin of the coronavirus in the United States as has been reported by journalists. With tax money, the American government had been funding Chinese scientists to make the deadly virus more infectious to humans, which nonetheless may have nothing to do with the current outbreak of the human-to-human transmission of the coronavirus. In any case, it is relieving to know that such funding has been recently stopped. Accordingly, it is vital that the transparency of science and technology is maintained by the freedom of press and that of speech. That way, citizens can be kept informed about innovations and their security aspect with possible social consequences such as COVID-19 vaccines in development. Science and technology can then be trusted again. Finally, there are arguably “punishable elements” in science and technology as scientific research evolves from knowing natural law to using it for human interests (Tomonaga 1982/2001; Fujigaki 2018). If the use of nature has international consequences for different societies, there must be punishable elements that are transnational as well.

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