



## The World Health Crisis: A Historic Chance for a New Global Political Project

**With a special emphasis on the responsibility of the academic milieu\***

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### Abstract

*In order to understand “What the world will look like after the pandemic”, we must first understand the present we inhabit and learn from the lessons of the recent past. The COVID-19 pandemic is merely the latest—if, unfortunately, greatest—of the various crises that have continuously eroded the foundations of our global representative democratic system since its creation in 1956. Yet unlike its predecessors, it strikingly highlights the various sectors of society serves to highlight their respective shortcomings and occasions an objective, ruthless and thorough examination of the economic, political, social and moral implications and consequences inherent to their revival. We are thus afforded a historic opportunity to fundamentally recalibrate the essential pillars of global society along fairer, more sustainable, more inclusive and more transparent lines. This Herculean task will require the collaboration of countless specialists, scholars and leaders across all sectors of society, whose sage input – based on collective millennia of accumulated expertise and wisdom in a “society of knowledge”—will prove invaluable to elaborating new societal guiding principles appropriate to the realities of the new millennium. This new cultural model must not only countervail the oncoming societal, cultural and economic shocks of rapid technologization, globalization and worldwide development, but also safeguard a vision of hope and confidence in mankind’s chosen path forward—while allowing for ad-hoc recalibrations of its constituent parts when proven ineffectual. The existing global networks of power, capital, knowledge and wealth can thus be reshaped into a new framework within which each of the world’s countless citizens can not only be, but also become.*

In order to understand “what the world will look like after the pandemic”, we must first understand the present we inhabit and learn from the lessons of the recent past.

The past months have highlighted two major positive aspects: the personal responsibility of individuals who, irrespective of particular political regimes, or the quality of administration, or of the varying degrees of economic and social development, have shown a high civic responsibility; and the degree to which advancements in communication technology could prove useful in the event of a pandemic.

\* This article is the author’s keynote opening speech for the video conference on *How will the world look like after the pandemic?* organized in May 2020 by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Levant Culture and Civilization and the Black Sea Universities Network.

At the same time, the current global situation is highlighting the mediocrity of political leaders, the inefficiency of economic and financial systems based on maximizing profits in solving matters of public health, the limitations of current medical science and of science in general, as well as the risks associated with technology's unbridled progress. Two tales from our childhood, the Emperor's new clothes and the Sorcerer's Apprentice, seem transposed into modern-day reality.

In hindsight, in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mankind experienced two crises: the crisis of globalized terrorism, beginning with September 11, 2001 and the financial crisis between 2004-2009. After each of these crises, we were told—as we are again being told in the present crisis—that “the world will not be the same”. However, our post-crisis experience has shown that the world did in fact remain the same; and that, in time, things even got worse. The repressive actions that followed 9/11 did not end terrorism; on the contrary, terrorist acts became more frequent, because the solutions were limited to foreign military interventions and intensifying internal security measures, instead of pursuing broad international efforts to create a culture of peace.

The disastrous effects of the economic crisis of 2004-2009, brought on by reckless fiscal policies, were primarily felt neither by the banks, nor by the banking system itself, which played an essential role in its propagation. Neither were ratings agencies blamed or their credibility questioned, so the existing system continued unhindered, laying the groundwork for similar crises in the future. Betrayed by the administration, it was the citizens themselves who had to suffer and pay the price for the crisis.

The military-industrial complex, the political leadership and the banking system proved incapable to deal with these crises back then. We cannot expect them to do so now.

When the Great Depression hit in 1929, Albert Einstein stated that a crisis cannot be solved by those who produced it. This is why I believe that, as long as political leadership is dominated by mediocrity and populism and the economic milieu focuses solely on maximizing profit, the responsibility falls on the academic milieu to elaborate a strategy that can protect mankind, citizens and democracy alike, and to control the ways in which technological progress and biomedical research can ensure the common good and limit their negative effects. Current governments obsessed with adherence to regulations preventing the virus' further spread on the one hand and with budgetary restrictions on the other, may well see the trees, but lose sight of the forest. It is high time that the academic and research community got involved in a debate on the future of the human society. In a globalised world, where the main social actors are only interested in achieving aims concurrent to their own interests, the only critical voice can come from the academic milieu, which can underpin an analysis capable of tackling interconnected economic, social, cultural, educational and moral issues.

Today, we have a responsibility to work together for the common good, owing to our immediate social responsibility to prevent the abuses of power that could occur as a result

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*“Intellectual solidarity can constitute a foundation for creating a new global political architecture.”*

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of the state of emergency under which most of the world is placed. Let me be clear. I am not referring to a direct involvement in politics. The period of 1989-1990, when the intellectual elite of Eastern Europe successfully mobilised millions of people to end the dictatorial regimes and the Cold War, remained unique in history. In my opinion, the phenomenon of liberated populations who elected university rectors, writers, philosophers and scholars as the first democratic heads of government cannot be replicated in the current century.

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*“The academic and university establishment must be cleansed of the virus of populism and science’s fundamental mission must be reaffirmed: the search for truth.”*

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In the current context of financial interest groups either overtly or covertly manipulating public opinion, coupled with a degradation of our social climate, the top representatives of the current academic milieu cannot engage in, but are called upon to arbitrate and coach the political game.

There can be a positive collaboration between the academic and political spheres. In order to answer the challenges inherent to times of rapid change, politics can draw inspiration from science in order to reorganise itself along shared values: an authentic and balanced dialogue that favours an exchange of ideas, and respect for the truth. The academic milieu can be viewed as a precursor and a model for cooperation without exclusion or liminality. Intellectual solidarity can constitute a foundation for creating a new global political architecture.

Does the academic milieu have anything to learn from politics? Certainly. It can learn from the successes, and moreover from the failures of the political environment in order to become more prudent in crafting economic, political and social projects for which thorough impact assessment surveys have yet to be carried out, and whose implementation is outsourced to third parties. From statesmen’s experience, academics and scholars can learn what it means to be responsible for decisions that dictate the lives, freedom and sometimes the death of millions, and which can lead to the collapse, emergence and progress of entire countries. Let us not forget that statesmen can pay for these decisions with their careers, with their liberty, or even with their life.

The academic and university establishment must be cleansed of the virus of populism and science’s fundamental mission must be reaffirmed: the search for truth. Academic research does not hinge on political correctness, and scientific truth is not certified by the number of likes, shares or upvotes it receives. Yet in order to restore the academic environment to its previous capacity as an intellectual and moral model, we must rectify the compromises which academic research and higher education have made in pursuit of financing interest or enhanced visibility. To use scientific discoveries for the common good and in respect of universal values is a moral responsibility to society in its entirety, especially so in an age of digital discoveries that threaten to nullify the human component, leading to the automation of society.

In my opinion, this debate must follow two main avenues of inquiry. The first must focus on the responsibility of the academic milieu and scientific researchers to develop a sustainable strategy capable of capitalising upon scientific and technological progress.

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*“The essential differences between political systems stem from the ways they manage uncertainty.”*

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The second line of inquiry must tackle progress from a moral and ethical perspective. It is in this vein that pressing topics such as artificial intelligence and medical engineering need to be debated. It is my belief that such a debate is of the utmost importance, especially so in times of crises, when the fundamental values of mankind need to be defended.

The current world health crisis must be examined in all its guises: economic, political, social, and moral. The meaning the mass media almost exclusively confer is that of a cataclysm, or a disaster. In ancient Chinese culture, however, the ideogram for “crisis” signified both “danger” and “opportunity” at the same time.

Which opportunity? The opportunity for a change. Whose change? The change of the system. Which system? Of the current economic and political system. How attainable is this? For now, we understand that we cannot do without the current financial system in the absence of a functional alternative concept, but we can nevertheless limit the banks’ greed; we cannot dismiss the current internal and international security arrangements, but we can limit their abuse. This does not mean that a change must not be prepared in advance, as the recent health crisis has highlighted something even more profound: the dissonance between the current globalised political and economic system, and the cultural model that served to define it upon its conception.

One major issue lies in the fact that the dissonance between the real and the speculative economy on the one hand, and that between bureaucratic administrations and their citizens on the other, have negatively affected an element essential to both democracy and the market economy: **citizens’ trust**. There is the risk that public discontent, put on hold during the crisis, might feed into movements bereft of ideology or leadership, channeled by personas without an identity and mobilised along social networks, which, taking advantage of the anomy created, could then generate a protestocracy that threatens representative democracy and creates the premises for a drift towards authoritarian regimes.

In order to regain the trust of our citizens, merely restarting the social dialogue is not enough. It is necessary to create a new **cultural model**, as no new political project can be successful if not preceded by and founded upon a cultural model, one relying on moral values. These are the only values capable of linking together the positive energies of society.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century requires a new cultural model, one that is not only able to counteract the economic and social shocks of globalization, but also capable of creating a vision of hope in a future characterized by chaotic developments and uncertainty. We now have a historic opportunity to put forward such a project.

Political and economic solutions imperatively required at present might be expedient in addressing the problem in the short term, but in the long run will not prove efficient unless paired with the use of available intellectual resources to craft a new cultural model for the world to come. To create long-term strategies starting from existing policies, and to later craft a vision of the future based on these long-term strategies—no matter how sustainable they were—are the only means moving towards the future facing backwards. Conversely, should we start from an inspired vision of the future in the present, we can advance facing forward, noticing both forthcoming obstacles and impending dangers at the same time.

The current global health crisis is distracting our attention from one obvious observation, obscured by our obsession with globalisation. We are transitioning from a unipolar world which, by the end of the Cold War, replaced the bipolar world of the East-West divide, to a world of multiple polarities. This multipolar world opens up several new avenues, and today, no model can claim to provide the only solution anymore. Therefore, a critical examination of the globalization project (which cannot now be prevented from coming to pass) is always necessary and welcome, especially now when it appears to have been abandoned by the very states that initiated it, having become uncontrollable; and there is the temptation to use the ongoing pandemic in order to justify this abandonment.

If we continue to shape projects without taking into account the inevitable anxieties involved in a political construct affecting the lives of over seven billion people, then we leave ourselves few opportunities to develop a robust and democratic world. That is why I believe that the long road towards global solidarity should begin within every nation, local community or even family. Here, we often find manifested many of the contradictions typical to the global North/South or East/West divides; yet here we also find the bonding agent of a common ethos. Thus, we can better understand the world we inhabit.

The ongoing pandemic has occasioned an unprecedented situation in the history of mankind: billions of people communally agreeing to self-isolate for extended periods of time. Such a feat cannot but have psychological consequences. On the other hand, our confrontation with the virus and its economic and social consequences have jarred the feeling of security inoculated by authoritarian regimes and postwar “welfare state” democracies alike. **This sentiment of uncertainty**, which today tends towards becoming a new normal, has older roots.

In the evolution of human society, acclimation crises are nothing new; yet at present, they occur much more rapidly and reach much further, a general process that feeds individual uncertainty throughout the global village. The accelerated development of the relationship between technological advancement and the economy has shaken the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the same time announcing two major breakthroughs: globalization, twinned with an explosion of knowledge. These have both drastically heightened uncertainty. In my opinion, politics, as conceived and practiced today, is not yet prepared to manage the great challenges we face in the new century and new millennium—and a recourse to scientific experience might aid in this endeavour.

Over the past century, science, as an outpost of knowledge, has faced similar challenges through veritable revolutions in mathematics and physics brought about by the transition from Euclidean to non-Euclidean geometry and from Newtonian to quantum mechanics respectively. Science has continuously and consistently pressed forward, updating and modifying both its logic and its language.

The crisis of scientific language was overcome through the semantic theory of information. The “fuzzy set” theory gave rise to so-called “fuzzy logic”, kick-starting the study of incomplete information systems which, with the aid of stochastic models, can also analyze real-world processes, whose evolution takes place according to the random rules of chance.

Its applications extended to biology (population dynamics), to economics (fluid exchange rates), to pedagogy (learning processes and algorithms). Chaos theory allows us to analyze the unstable behavior of non-linear dynamic systems, wherein a minute disturbance of the initial conditions can well lead to completely different trajectories. Science has thus proven that uncertainty itself can be described, represented and thoroughly understood.

Politics—in its noblest sense of serving the public interest—must embrace the uncertainty of the future, overcoming the populist drift that is deteriorating and exhausting the limited resources available for long-term projects and counteracting it through a superior political project. It is not about moving politics onto uncertain ground, but rather about regarding individual freedom as the core element of society. The essential differences between political systems stem from the ways they manage uncertainty. Do they embrace uncertainty, and attempt to reach solutions through dialogue? Or do they try to eliminate uncertainty altogether, through the diktat of ideology, religion or wealth?

The efficient management of uncertainty can only take place in a truly open society. Facing high stakes can give rise to behaviors which answer the challenges of reality through adherence to underlying principles. Where we cannot act motivated by the certainty of success, we can then act out of a consciousness of our duty.

Politics in the society of knowledge, and in the globalized world of tomorrow, must be crafted as a complex vision of the future, based on a new dialogue centred on fundamental human values. The current global health crisis, which has brought not our wealth, but our lives to the fore, forcibly imposes upon us a choice between **to have** or **to be**. It is therefore necessary to create a new system of arbitration between power and knowledge capable of reshaping a framework wherein every individual can not only *be*, but also *become*.

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