

The world after covid-19

Edward Luttwak on the political repercussions of the pandemic

The virus exposes uneasy truths wherever it infects

Editor's note: The Economist is making some of its most important coverage of the covid-19 pandemic freely available to readers of The Economist Today, our daily newsletter. To receive it, register [here](#). For our coronavirus tracker and more coverage, see our [hub](#)

AFTER 1918 women stopped wearing corsets and men gradually stopped wearing top hats. Both had always been dysfunctional and expensive, but it was not until years of casual wartime clothing had exposed their absurdities that such accoutrements were abandoned.

What are the equivalents of corsets and top hats for the post-coronavirus world? Some things are easily predictable because they are already emerging: online shopping will expand even faster, with the demise of many shops and entire shopping centres. Remote working, now that employers see that it can be effective while saving the cost of office space, will increase. With artificial intelligence replacing employees altogether, the demand for office buildings might fall even faster than the demand for shopping centres.

America's fee-for-service medicine will also come under scrutiny: with physical visits drastically curtailed, it turns out that many tests and examinations were unnecessary, except to increase the bill. And covid-19 marks the end of "why not" international travel because few will want to risk a two-week quarantine, or the prospect that destinations that are reopened will suddenly lock down again.

Yet the biggest impact may be on politics. Looking back, we might call the coronavirus of our affliction "the truth virus". Wherever it has spread, it has revealed submerged truths about political regimes, entire societies and international institutions.

We always knew that China's party regime, under Xi Jinping's autocratic rule, must suppress the truth. What we could not imagine is that despite the country's experience with SARS in 2003, party leaders in Wuhan would conceal the arrival of a similar new coronavirus and silence doctors, including the late Li Wenliang who tried to warn us all. He is now the hero to all sentient Chinese, but the party wants them and the entire

world to admire President Xi instead, in spite of his own blunder in closing Wuhan much too late.

After China, the truth virus went to expose the servility of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the head of the World Health Organisation. He effusively praised China's "transparency" while excluding Taiwan from deliberations in obedience to Chinese demands, in spite of its proximity and vulnerability to the outbreak. On January 14th the WHO tweeted that "Chinese authorities have found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission"—which was literally true, because it had silenced the doctors who called for an investigation of that very question.

When the virus arrived in Iran, it exposed the blind fanaticism of its theocracy. Iran's leaders refused to stop daily pilgrimages by hundreds of busloads of devotees from remote villages across the vast country, many packed together day and night. For the virus, pilgrimages are the perfect diffusion mechanism. Even as government officials were falling ill and dying, it took time to overcome the opposition of those who insisted that the shrines would heal the sick, not sicken the healthy. By then it was too late.

In Italy the virus was especially lethal because of a combination of exceptionally healthy private lives and an exceptionally unhealthy public life. Italians boast lifespans that are among the world's longest (around five years more than Americans, for both men and women), as a result of intelligent eating, strong family support and much outdoor life. With a virus especially dangerous for the very old, Italian death rates were bound to be high, but the shambolic organisation of health care, especially in nursing homes, made it much higher still.

In a country where ministers, regional officials, senior civil servants and famously lethargic judges are much better paid than their foreign counterparts, Italy's doctors are poorly paid. There are excellent medical centers in northern Italy but in many hospitals and nursing homes, especially in the south, hard-working doctors and nurses are ill-served by assistants, staff and even technicians who fail to work, or even show up, knowing their jobs are secure. Particularly in the south, which suffers from high unemployment, hospital jobs are controlled by regional health politicians, who parcel them out to relatives and electoral supporters. After the politicians and their pals take what they can, not much is left over for ventilators.

What truths has the virus exposed in America, which has recorded the highest number of deaths globally, some 80,000 souls so far? Only two truths, both easily apparent. The first is that the United States is not a unitary state but a federation. State governments are largely in charge of public health, so policies vary widely. The other truth is that many of President Donald Trump's adversaries are not content to attack him for his many faults but insist on attacking him for his few virtues as well, chiefly his perspicacity in seeing the dangers of supply chains that extend into China, and his boundless optimism.

Optimism is actually a much-needed commodity as we face a future in which a vaccine remains but a hope. (After decades of effort there are still no HIV or hepatitis C vaccines.) The seemingly discredited remedy of herd immunity, with all its victims, still offers the only alternative to permanent or recurrent lockdowns.

The political after-shocks of the pandemic can already be felt. The European Union has been weakened, perhaps never to recover: when the threat came, national borders were closed virtually overnight. In Italy, where longed-for EU support never came, China and even Russia were praised for sending supplies. Russian army trucks bearing medical material descended on Milan's Piazza del Duomo to great (virtual) applause. That these supplies were denied to desperately under-equipped Russian hospitals might come back to haunt Vladimir Putin.

China's success is a mirage. Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea all outperformed China in taming the virus without hammering apartment doors shut to enforce quarantines. This is a fact well understood around the world, as well as inside educated China, judging by the scorn on social media for the party's attempt to claim credit for having mitigated the disaster that it initially tried to keep quiet.

None of the EU, America and Britain will be measured by their stumbles in reacting to the virus. They will be measured by how fast their economies and cultures recover from their various lockdowns. It is a valid test of the overall quality of their governance, as well as of their societal flexibility, which varies greatly. It was the same after the financial crisis.

But in contrast to the financial crisis, this time no country will emerge unchanged because each has its equivalents of top hats and corsets, some small, some huge. Politicians who defend them will fail. Right now China is recovering faster, but the massive flight of Chinese capital to America tells another story