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Opinion

Why the world must avoid returning to ‘normal’ if and when the coronavirus crisis winds down



- The world must change in the aftermath of the epidemic. Might a new political psychology accommodate more serious science and less narrow-minded nationalism? Blaming China for the outbreak misses the point that nations are in this together

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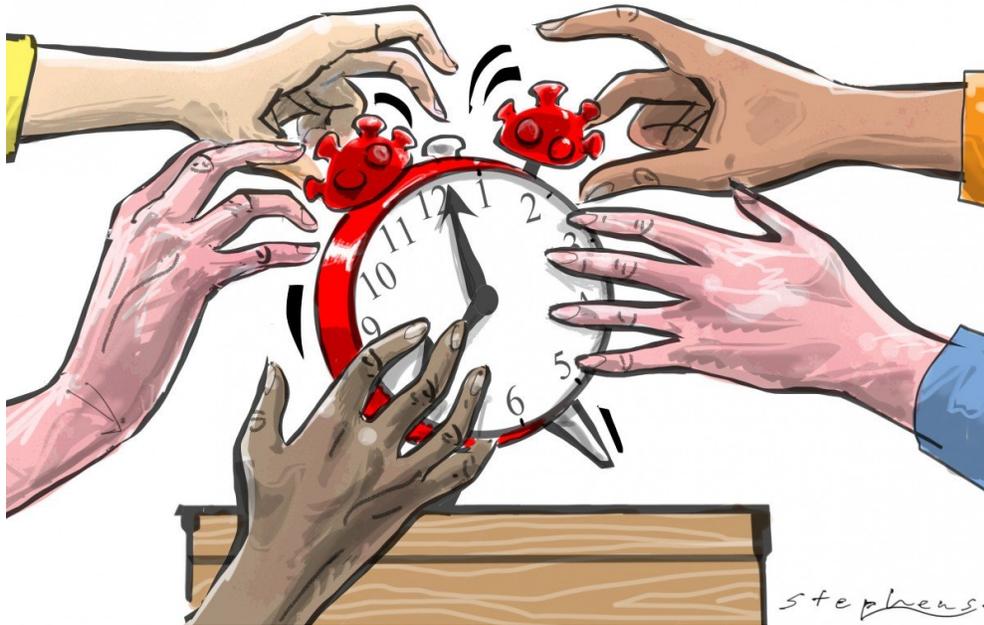


Illustration: Craig Stephens

As horrible as the coronavirus’ spread looks right now, it may not be the worst thing facing us. My worry is that after the epidemic goes into remission, everything will return to normal. And that’s exactly the problem: the world’s “normal” hasn’t been good enough.

One example of “normal”: the governments that performed the most incompetently might fail to learn from those that did the best they could by any standard.

No one is perfect, but if a country like China can spend a fortune on upgrading its navy and Japan can quietly slip countless yen into missile development, just maybe there’s not enough left over to protect the public properly in the event of severe challenges to global health?

Also, it looks as if the Japanese authorities were all but brain-dead when it took them more than 72 hours to impose a lockdown on the Diamond Princess cruise ship.

Another “normal” the world shouldn’t return to: the smugness of institutions. Here, I reluctantly include the World Health Organisation, which either needs more power to intervene under international law, or more staff – or perhaps vitamin shots to get existing staff to move faster. And this is said with sadness.

Yet another “normal” to steer clear of for the time being would be the blame game. Whether it was all China’s fault or a series of blunders along the globalisation highway misses the point: nations are in this together.

Epidemics, pandemics or plagues are unwanted tourists anywhere. Shaming one another is madness, and could lead back to the old world order – of decentralised disarray. There will be more than enough time down the road for recrimination.

China-haters and ideological or religious anti-communists are practically gleeful that the epidemic originated in that Petri dish, Wuhan. I cannot count the number of tweets I have seen or emails I have personally received which, in effect, suggest that without China’s communist authoritarianism, none of this would have happened. Sigh.

The communists came to power in China in the late 1940s and, of course, neither China nor any other country ever had to endure a single epidemic or plague before that, right? Wrong, of course.

Why must self-righteous Americans stigmatise Chinese the way homosexual Aids sufferers were “morally quarantined” in the United States decades ago? We must show more compassion and decency, and work with people and nations even when they make mistakes – as we all do.

Some uninformed Americans are taking a different view – but perhaps they are just being as smug as the Chinese official who stated categorically that Beijing would “liquidate” the virus by April. Good luck with that.

Or such smugness might be rivalled by the complacency of US President Donald Trump, who said: “I had a long talk with President Xi ... two nights ago, and he feels very confident. He feels very confident. And he feels that, again, as I mentioned, by April or during the month of April, the heat, generally speaking, kills this kind of virus,” before adding: “But we’re in great shape in our country.”

This is worrying: who knows whether infection numbers will spike in the US? Smugness is not prevention; complacency is a potential plague.

Trump’s comments might be seen as empathetic, were it not for his extremely annoying presumption that authoritarians are better leaders in a crisis: he and President Xi Jinping certainly are birds of a feather in this regard. But epidemics have no political preference; they are apolitical, equal opportunity killers.

Even a democracy with a reputedly strong health system like South Korea finds itself in the shadow of the menace of the coronavirus. Another such democracy would be Taiwan, which is not a UN-recognised country, of course.

But it is a place with a lot of human beings (24 million ... roughly the population of Shanghai, one of China’s largest cities). And so the Chinese government’s campaign against Taiwan’s inclusion in the WHO now feels particularly patriarchal and parochial, as does Beijing’s assumption that it can handle Taiwan’s health problems.

Well, it can't – it has its hands full with the mainland, as the coronavirus' spread reveals. Beijing's motive was always one of politics, not proper governance: China wants to keep Taiwan boxed in – and far clear of international organisations as much as possible. In the post mortem on the coronavirus epidemic, the world will have plenty of time to think these things through.

But, at some point, Xi owes it to the world – and Taiwan – to take a serious and honest second look at the WHO inclusion issue. Maybe he can make WHO entry an exception?

If the coronavirus crisis does reach pandemic proportions, the world in its aftermath will be anything but the same. Might a new political psychology accommodate more serious science and less narrow-minded nationalism?

Sure, world governance is a ship of fools, as some of us are quick to note. Under the third law of politics, it seems, for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Just look at the United Nations and its hamstrung Security Council with its veto-clipped wings of peace.

So the question is not only how we are to get through the epidemic, but also what we can do that is new afterwards. The world may come to find a measure of peace after it works together to repulse this daunting and potentially overwhelming attack on global health. Ideally, the lesson of the epidemic would be that we have to raise our standards for how we want to live on this planet.

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