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The Corona Silk Road and the Welfare State

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While the coronavirus continues to spread around the planet, it is not too early to reflect on the long-term implications of this virus for human social organization. Like earlier diseases, the infection has spread from east to west across Eurasia. China, where the virus originated, appears now to be emerging steadily from the crisis. Of course, the political system that facilitated a draconian shutdown when the scale of the pandemic became apparent was also the system that suppressed facts and delayed an appropriate response in the early stages.

Given the evidence from Wuhan, European states have no excuse for their own torpidity in the early months of 2020. By the middle of March, invoking a notion that has been around for some years already in connection with the “Belt and Road” initiative, China is sending vast quantities of medical equipment and teams of doctors and paramedics westwards along the “Health Silk Road” (Sengupta 2020). Last week, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán rushed to the airport to greet the first deliveries to his country, hailing them as a success for his foreign policy of opening to the east. Similar photo opportunities have been conspicuous in Italy, another partner in the “Belt and Road” initiative. Chinese generosity (dismissed contemptuously by critics of the regime as “virus colonialism”) has also extended to countries not yet fully enveloped in the new Silk Road networks such as Spain, where mortality has been particularly acute in recent weeks.



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Tuesday welcomed a flight from China that brought supplies to help the country battle COVID-19. Orbán said the shipment included over three million masks, 100,000 testing kits and 86 ventilators (March 24, 2020).

Within the EU, supra-state solidarity has been entirely missing so far. There has been no consistency in policy, not even in the implementation of border closures. Britain, predictably, declined an invitation to participate in an EU-wide scheme to coordinate ventilator supplies, on the grounds that it was no longer an EU member and would make its own provision. This extreme case exemplifies a more general nationalism in responses to the crisis. While Chinese medical aid is meeting existential needs all over Europe (quite apart from its symbolic character), Chancellor Merkel remains opposed to “Coronabonds,” i.e. to making substantial material transfers to the weaker members of the EU. President Macron draws on the same military metaphors as populist leaders in London, Budapest and Warsaw. Everywhere, it is the *national* community that has been temporarily shut down, but which, if it adopts the correct collective behaviour under firm leaders, will eventually emerge all the stronger.

Fears that politicians such as Orbán will seize the moment to undermine the institutions of democracy are not unfounded (soldiers are already conspicuous on Hungarian streets). But a more likely outcome of the coronavirus in western Eurasia is that citizens will be reminded of the vital importance of both their welfare states and their democracies. Both have come under severe pressure in recent decades. The neoliberal dogma of the minimal state has been rapidly jettisoned as the authorities everywhere rush to maintain their economies. It will be morbidly instructive in the aftermath of this crisis to compare which states managed to protect their populations more effectively. A shutdown affecting almost all the population may initially

generate sentiments of equality, but these will not persist if it quickly becomes clear that some have much more economic security than others, not to mention better access to health care. China does not have universal health coverage, but it comes much closer than the US to meeting norms and standards that citizens take for granted in Scandinavia.

An optimistic prognosis would be this: first, the evident benefits of welfare states based on national solidarity will eventually give rise to new forms of international solidarity and universal health care for all human beings; second, if this crisis proves more effective than the financial crisis of 2007-8 in weakening the hegemony of what Karl Polanyi called “market society,” it will simultaneously defuse populist counter-movements that are just as virulent and dangerous as the coronavirus.

Reference

Sengupta, Chiranjib 2020 (22nd March) ‘Coronavirus: How China is building a silk road of health. Beijing takes the lead in shaping global response against coronavirus’: <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/coronavirus-how-china-is-building-a-silk-road-of-health-1.70556307>