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COVID-19 and the end of technological innocence

By **Thomas Gomart**

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COVID-19 has acted as a catalyst for international relations. It has accelerated and amplified trends that were emerging before the crisis, such as the central and growing role of cyberspace, the normalization of surveillance capitalism, and the intensification of Sino-American rivalry. Europe is becoming a major battleground for Washington and Beijing. For Europe to maintain its sovereignty, it will need to make significant investments, particularly in 5G.

politique étrangère

“All force exhausts itself; the faculty of guiding the course of history is not an inalienable possession. Europe, which inherited it from Asia three thousand years ago, will not, perhaps, retain it forever.”¹ An echo of this prophecy made by Ernest Lavisse (1842–1922) can be heard amid the dramatic crisis of 2020, the main impact of which can be understood as both a passing of the baton between Europe and Asia, and of the “capacity to shape history” or, more prosaically, “the power to govern.”² The latter is being put to the test by COVID-19, and while the cause of this crisis may be health-related, its effects are playing out in the technological arena. Through the lockdown, instigated by public authorities under pressure from medical organizations, of more than four billion individuals who have never before been so interconnected, the pandemic has triggered an enduring short-circuit in the ongoing process of globalization.

Two key characteristics make this hybrid health and technological crisis unique. The first is the disparity between the number of victims—compared to earlier episodes of disease-related demographic impact—and

1. Ernest Lavisse, *General View of the Political History of Europe*, trans. Charles Gross (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1891), 172.

2. Nicolas Rousselier, *La Force de gouverner. Le pouvoir exécutif en France XIX^e-XXI^e siècles* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015). Translator's note: Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

the scale of the measures taken in response. The second is the disparity between the physical nature of the means required to stem the problem (hospital beds, masks, testing, and so on), and the virtual nature of the means deployed to get through it on the political level (communications, media networks, digital solutions, and so on). This crisis has merged into already existing cycles of cooperation, competition, and communication warfare—that is: mobilization, guidance, and mind control—which have as their ultimate aim the imposition of particular models of government and of behavior.

The question is, therefore, whether technology exhausts or, on the contrary, reinvigorates “the power to govern,” with its implication of a degree of dominance of which few actors are capable. The replies to this question are taking very different forms in different regions, states, and organizations, providing a foretaste of the turbulence to come. This crisis, “encompassing the whole earth,” traces new “global lines,” in the sense intended by Carl Schmitt (1888–1985).³ It is along these lines that the slide from one spatiotemporal order to another will take place, its progress accelerated by the digital platforms.

In channeling the exponentially increasing flow of data, these platforms contribute to a redistribution of power. In 1996, John Perry Barlow (1947–2018) published *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, announcing to the governments of the industrial world: “We must declare our virtual selves immune to your sovereignty, even as we continue to consent to your rule over our bodies.”⁴ COVID-19 brings to an end such technological innocence and reveals the extent to which cyberspace has become the terrain of choice for surveillance capitalism and for the confrontation between political powers. It also shows how far these two phenomena have become interwoven with each other in at least three areas.

Geopolitics

From geopolitics springs “metageography,” understood as the delineation of major global divisions. It produces a framework mapping out strategic equilibria, value chains, and the international division of labor. In the context of a transition of power, the creation and imposition of mental maps becomes a primary objective in the information war.

3. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (New York: Telos, 2006), 50 and 86.

4. John Perry Barlow, *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (Davos, 1998), available at <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>.

Toward a geopolitics of the epidemic

For the last forty years, Asia has been presented as the prime example of an economic emergence that is frequently explained by reference to cultural factors. By bringing pressure to bear on the balance of power between Asia and the West, COVID-19 is accelerating the move from an attitude of lively competition to one of possible confrontation, bypassing economic considerations. Long-term cultural essentialism and a short-term focus on economics have skirted around any reflection on the differences between respective political models “which are in play at the present moment, and will continue to be in play in the immediate future, linking contemporary geopolitics and geo-economics to the long, slow cycles of civilizational change.”⁵ The pandemic is forcing a reconsideration of the ways in which East and West are mutually exclusive or mutually compatible.

In his book *Bilan de l'histoire* (published in English as *The Sum of History*), René Grousset noted that Europe had discovered east Asia on three separate occasions—with Alexander the Great, with Marco Polo, and again in the sixteenth century. On each of these occasions, it was a surprise. The “classic Mediterranean traditions” had the impression of encountering similarly classic cultures, “though forged out of elements incomprehensible at first glance.”⁶ After the work of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the Jesuits played a key role in mediating between East and West, their work with Chinese cartographers and on the harmonization of historical chronologies leading to a unified understanding of the respective conceptions of space and time.⁷

In the twentieth century, the “discovery” of Asia by the United States began a new era of global capitalism. In 1946, René Grousset foresaw the consequences of the absorption by China of American over-production, and also the moment in which the Chinese continent would become the New America: “On that day, what is now an Asian outlet for the American factory will become closed to it, or worse still, will be transformed, turning against it in every market, becoming a formidable competitor.”⁸ That is where we now are, with the strong sense of a missed rendezvous between East and West, and more specifically between China and the United States: never in the last forty years has the degree of mutual defiance been so intense.

5. Christian Grataloup, *Vision(s) du monde. Histoire critique des représentations de l'Humanité* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2018), 130–1.

6. René Grousset, *Bilan de l'histoire* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2016), 139. Translator's note: English here sourced from the translation *The Sum of History* (London: Tower Bridge Publications, 1951), 90.

7. Claude Meyer, *L'Occident face à la renaissance de la Chine* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2018), 221.

8. Grousset, *Bilan*, 326.

Toward new ways of articulating civilization

In terms of historiography, the importance assumed by world history has led to a “de-Westernization” of history writing. As an example, Pankaj Mishra believes that for Europe and the United States the twentieth century still seems to be largely defined by the two world wars, while for the majority of the world’s population, the key is to be found in the political awakening of Asia.⁹ This historiographical development can also be heard in a geopolitical discourse promoting “Asian values” by way of

China is resolutely preparing itself to take over global leadership

the Singaporean model. Kishore Mahbubani has become the emblematic spokesperson for this view: a victim of its own *hubris*, the West can only decline to the benefit of China and India.¹⁰ Parag Khanna considers the return of Asia “to the cockpit of history as a natural destiny.”¹¹ For Asia henceforth, the

aim is not to replace the West, but to fashion it, as Europe once fashioned Asia. China is resolutely preparing itself to take over global leadership. For Yan Xuetong, this assumption of control is possible once the emerging power has shown itself to be “more capable and efficient” than the dominant power. “Strategic credibility”—the first step toward “international authority”—is acquired through “moral actions” derived from values that are common to all of humanity.¹²

In taking this perspective, a return to the debate between Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington may prove worthwhile. Fukuyama saw the fall of the Berlin Wall as a sign of the final triumph of democracy and of the market economy, forgetting a little too quickly the repression of Tiananmen Square. Huntington foresaw a “clash of civilizations,” believing that the frontiers between cultures, religions, and races had once again become the principal fault lines. Now, thirty years on, the question can be legitimately asked as to which of these two events—Tiananmen or Berlin—has played the bigger part in shaping the development of globalization. 9/11 and its aftermath lent strength to Huntington’s thesis, while the entry of China into the World Trade Organization (WTO), in the same year, was in line with Fukuyama’s. One thing is certain: of all the great

9. Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire. The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 8.

10. Kishore Mahbubani, *Has the West Lost It?: A Provocation* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

11. Parag Khanna, *The Future Is Asian. Commerce, Conflict, and Culture in the 21st Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 11.

12. Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 2–24.

powers, it is China whose ideological corpus has changed least over the Cold War and post-Cold War period.¹³

Toward a new hierarchy of values

Recent changes in the ideological environment into which COVID-19 has emerged have not been noticed by Western opinion thanks to the universalism believed to be inherent in Western values. The “efficiency” observed of Taiwan, Korea, and Singapore is often attributed to “Asian values” which, in simplified terms, favor the group over the individual. In 1994, Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015), former prime minister of Singapore, was interviewed by Fareed Zakaria on this issue.¹⁴ The transcript of the interview makes clear the extent to which the “tracing” technologies used to investigate the spread of the virus were already in preparation in his government’s forceful approach to drug users. For Lee Kwan Yew, the West has turned the idea of the inviolability of individual rights into dogma, to the detriment of the family, which remains the fundamental unit of social organization. And it is not the role of the government to replace the family.

The Singaporean model was a direct inspiration for Deng Xiaoping. Beyond the economic efficiency, the cult of meritocracy, and the Confucian ethics, what the Chinese authorities paid most attention to was its spectacular economic growth, achieved without the introduction of Western-style democracy. Since then they have worked intensively to occupy the intellectual ground from which to promote their own model, the effectiveness of which would be in sharp contrast to the United States. As an op-ed in the Chinese *People’s Daily* put it in July 2017: “Like it or not, China’s system confers advantages over the fractious democracies [. . .]. The modern, prosperous, and strong China of today is a product of efficiency and effectiveness [. . .]. Perhaps the US could learn a thing or two from the China model.”¹⁵

COVID-19 has spurred almost self-parodic propaganda efforts on the part of the Chinese authorities. It exploits the rejection of Western ways that has been in evidence in China, Russia, and most Muslim countries for a generation. Western culture and its pretensions to universality have now been “rejected for the nth time,” according to Chantal Delsol, who writes that the “clash of civilizations” mostly takes the form of a broad-based

13. Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos, China’s Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 4–5.

14. Fareed Zakaria, “Culture Is Destiny. A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew,” *Foreign Affairs*, (March/April 1994).

15. Curtis Stone, “The Malfunctioning of the US System is making China ‘great again’” *People’s Daily*, July 18, 2017, available at <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0718/c90000-9243062.html>.

“anti-Western movement.”¹⁶ This rejection is accompanied by a revival of ideological ambition in the Chinese Communist Party, which is mobilizing the most sophisticated technological means in the service of total thought control. “Big data” and artificial intelligence are to be used to help bring about optimal economic development through social control, linking data analysis to social credit in order to “create the most perfect surveillance state the world has ever seen.”¹⁷ This is not the place to discuss the feasibility of that project; but the reversal of perspective brought about by COVID-19 must be duly noted: it is now less a question of infusing “universal values” into the East, than of infusing, by technological means, “Asian values” into the West.

International politics

Among the eight civilizations that he described, Samuel Huntington saw Islamic and Chinese civilizations as posing the greatest threat to the declining West. He also foresaw a “Confucian-Islamic” connection. What has happened to this, a generation later? This hybrid health and technological crisis is already having visible impacts on energy, climate, and digital policy; at the heart of the matter is the ability of the various regions of the world, and in particular of Europe, to adapt to the Chinese and American forms of “imperialist interpenetration.”¹⁸

Chinese influence in the Islamic world

COVID-19 and oil prices of less than twenty dollars per barrel are impacting not only the balance of power within the Arab and Islamic world, but also the external pressures on a region that is key to the functioning of highly carbon-dependent economies. The three main oil-producing countries—the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Russia—have embarked on a price war to bolster their respective market positions at each other’s expense. As a consequence of the lockdown, the three main oil-consuming countries—China, India, and the European Union—have halted, to varying degrees, the productive parts of their economies, leading to a crisis of demand. Unlike China, India, and the European Union, the United States already had, before the crisis, a degree of flexibility in terms of energy supply, and this had created the conditions for the withdrawal from the Middle East that was begun by Barack Obama, and was then accelerated by Donald Trump. Russia has found a way to exploit this withdrawal in order to regain a foothold in the region through its military intervention

16. Chantal Delsol, “Le crépuscule de l’universel,” *Politique étrangère* 84, no. 1 (2019): 24–5.

17. Kai Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonised: Life in China’s Surveillance State* (Exeter: Old Street Publishing, 2019), 7.

18. Pierre Bellanger, “De la souveraineté numérique,” *Le Débat*, 170 (2012): 152.

in Syria, but Russian interests there are different from those of China. The extremely energy-hungry economic models adopted by China and India require them to build long-term relationships with oil-producing countries. Looking toward 2030, these two will be the world's two main importers of oil, which is why both have been making competing efforts to secure their sea lanes.

In addition to an acceleration of underlying trends, the COVID-19 crisis may soon lead to changes of posture in three countries in particular—due note first being taken of the very severe control measures being taken by Beijing, in the name of the fight against terrorism, against the Muslim populations of Xinjiang. The first of the three is Iran, which is feeling the full force of both the health crisis and the drop in oil prices. Before the crisis, the sanctions had in no way prevented Tehran from carrying out ambitious military operations or from exerting direct influence on four capitals: Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Sana'a. To finance itself, Iran must continue to export to China which, in turn, invests in Iran. The health crisis should therefore bring China and Iran closer together, all the more so if, as the American election draws nearer, tensions between Washington and Tehran increase.

The second country is Saudi Arabia, which, despite the collapse in oil prices, still has the means to take on massive debt in order to refinance and attract investment. Under attack from Iran, it has learned to its cost the limits of American and European military support. The overtures to Russia appear to have been short-lived after the break-up between OPEC and Moscow, which has led to a price war that has exacerbated the mismatch between supply and demand. After Japan, China is Saudi Arabia's second biggest buyer of oil, a fact that should encourage Riyadh to increase its contacts with Beijing. The effect of this would be to involve China, through the antagonism between Iran and Saudi Arabia, even more closely in the Middle East.

By virtue of its historic agency and its demographic significance, the third country, Egypt, occupies a key position in the search for Sunni leadership, with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates on one side vying with Qatar and Turkey on the other. While financed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt is experiencing a period of renewed economic strain and political repression, which can only encourage it to seek other external sources of finance. By drawing closer, China would be behaving in line with its ambitions in the Red Sea, as illustrated by the permanent foothold it has secured in Djibouti. Egypt is one of the keys to China's strategy for gaining access to the Mediterranean, which should recommend a close watch on developments in Beijing's

relations with Tunis and Algiers. COVID-19 is accelerating Chinese penetration of the Mediterranean, abandoned some time ago by the United States. This represents a major challenge for the people of Europe, now left to stand alone.

The exacerbation of Sino-American tensions in Europe

A “technological blitzkrieg,” with this health crisis seen as a preparatory phase

The China/Europe/United States triangle is the focus of attention because it accounts for more than half of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). COVID-19 will not affect this overall proportion, but it will impact on the three actors’ respective shares. The United States will pursue its policy of decoupling, simultaneously targeting strategic economic sectors. While industrial relocations might be encouraged (as is the case with the Japanese authorities) it is ultimately the economic actors who will carry them out, according to their own industrial strategies. Chinese economic actors, operating under strict controls, will directly enact decisions taken by the Communist Party. Contrary to the commonly held view, China is not buying up the world. It is buying what it needs in order to reduce its dependence on other countries.¹⁹ At the same time, it intends to achieve the technological supremacy that will enable it to challenge American global leadership.

The American response to COVID-19 reflects the level of disorganization afflicting the federal administration after four years of the Trump presidency. While the whole world waits to see the outcome of the November 2020 elections, it would be wrong—whatever the result—to imagine that the United States will renounce its existing power politics. Quite the opposite is the case. The US fears a “technological blitzkrieg,” with this health crisis seen as a preparatory phase. This expression, used recently by US Attorney General William Barr (who began his career as a China specialist in the CIA), shows how the United States sees the rollout of 5G as the central issue in a decisive technological battle. The outcome of this will be played out during the next presidential term.²⁰

Dominance in 5G technology will be decisive in seizing economic opportunities valued at twenty-three trillion dollars by 2025. Barr has taken note of the dominant position of China (through Huawei, which controls forty percent of the global market), followed by Europe with 31 percent,

19. Meyer, *L’Occident*, 146.

20. Attorney General William Barr, “Keynote Address” (presented at the China Initiative Conference Center for International and Strategic Studies, Washington, DC, February 6, 2020).

via Nokia (17 percent), and Ericsson (14 percent). Without mentioning Samsung and others, he points out the need for the United States to consider forming consortia with Nokia and/or Ericsson. This idea deserves a great deal of attention on the part of European authorities over the coming months. China is using the deployment of 5G as the spearhead of its penetration into Europe (and elsewhere). The divisions among EU member states over this issue illustrate the difficulty faced by the EU in producing a strategic response rather than a regulatory one. If the European Commission was truly aiming to participate on a geopolitical level, the development of 5G by European economic actors would become an absolute priority.

The United States retains a significant geo-economic advantage over China and the EU, inasmuch as its companies still dominate the technology sector. The position of the EU is particularly alarming. In March 2019, there were twenty-seven American companies in the global top forty (in terms of market capitalization); there were eight Chinese firms, four European (three Swiss and one British), and one Korean company. Of the twenty-seven American companies, six were in the technology sector; of the eight Chinese companies, two were in the technology sector. The highest placed European technology company was in fifty-eighth place.²¹ More nuanced analysis may be helpful, but it is clear that tech company rankings can only be consolidated by this crisis, and that the EU does not have actors in the sector in sufficient numbers or of sufficient size to prevent Sino-American rivalry from pushing ahead at its expense.

Diplomacy

This geo-economic backdrop barely features in current diplomatic exchanges between China and the EU, as they prepare for a special summit in Leipzig in the second half of 2020, when Germany will be holding the EU presidency.²² China and Germany have both benefited hugely from the last two decades of globalization thanks to their export-led economic model, which has underscored German economic leadership within Europe—it accounts for nearly one third of eurozone GDP. Germany's position will probably come out of the crisis reinforced by the coronavirus crisis, to the detriment of France, Italy, and Spain.

21. PWC, "Global Top 100 Companies by Market Capitalisation," (July 2019); available at <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2019/top-100-market-capitalisation-2019.html>.

22. Translator's note: Since the time of writing, this summit has been postponed due to the ongoing COVID-19 situation.

Changes in Chinese diplomacy

Throughout this crisis, China has been publishing clichéd propaganda about the effectiveness of its model in the majority of European capitals, revealing the ideological motives behind its mask of pragmatism. But, well aware of the damage being done, Chinese diplomats have worked hard to improve their image, underlining the great importance to them of European countries and then, without batting an eyelid, expounding their view that 2020 is expected to be “a great year for EU-China relations,” with frequent high-level exchanges.²³ The case being presented by China at least has the advantage of clarity: the deterioration of Sino-American and transatlantic relations creates a unique opportunity for the EU to “team up with China.” The EU must take care to avoid protectionist measures which would turn it in on itself and would represent a defiant posture with regard to China. This is the “moment of truth” for China and Europe. A direct frontal approach like this invites a long, hard look at the state of transatlantic relations, which are being profoundly affected by COVID-19.

European countries have been doubly destabilized: by the absence of an agreed approach with Washington, and by the evident wish of the US not to exercise any leadership. European diplomats appear disoriented by a United States that is “currently in an appalling state,” as if its most fundamental internal structures were in need of an overhaul.²⁴ From the start, Donald Trump has consistently put economic pressure on the EU and military pressure on NATO, which has shaped Europe’s dividing lines even more closely along the contours traced out by the Chinese through their “17+1” initiative and through bilateral agreements such as that signed with Italy in March 2019. In other words, Europe is becoming one of the main theaters of operations in the struggle for influence being waged between The United States and China. Washington should therefore focus its efforts on the “17+1” in order to counteract Chinese influence, while simultaneously limiting any European flirtation with the idea of strategic autonomy.²⁵

Toward multipolarity, but not multilateralism

China is exploiting this situation by presenting an image of itself as a partner committed to international cooperation and multilateralism. While

23. Interview with Chinese officials, April 23, 2020.

24. Interview with a diplomat of a European country, April 21, 2020.

25. See, for example, Aaron Wess Mitchell, “Central Europe’s China Reckoning,” *The American Interest*, April 23, 2020; available at <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/04/23/central-europes-china-reckoning/>. Wess Mitchell was assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs from 2017 to 2019.

fully aware of the dangers, its representatives no longer refrain from using the notion of a kind of second global cold war, which “would be a disaster not only for China and the United States, but also for the EU.”²⁶ The reality is that European countries are facing a simultaneous undermining of multilateralism by both China, and by their principal ally, the United States. They are suffering the consequences of four years of methodical deconstruction by the American administration, and from more than a decade of no less methodical control exerted by Chinese diplomats over the apparatus of the UN. Because of their lack of strategic credibility, the European nations must now reach terms with China on climate issues, and with the United States on technology.

The focus on the China/Europe/United States triangle turns attention momentarily away from two key actors on the international scene who actually share very close relations—Russia and India—, as well as from African and Latin American countries. In fact, it is India that presents the greatest challenge to the foreign policy being pursued by China, which directs perhaps too much of its strategic resources into its rivalry with the United States.²⁷ Given its geopolitical and geo-economic weight, the United States is undoubtedly in a position to lean more toward unilateralism than China. Europe, on the other hand, is working hard to simultaneously redefine its relations with Russia, Turkey, and Iran, and with the Arab and Islamic and African countries, all the while attempting to maintain its own internal cohesion. With its internal economic asymmetries, already exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, will it prove to be capable of all this?

It is in the nature of institutions to seek to last over time. However, the system that has evolved around the UN is now being placed under great strain by US disengagement, by the Chinese offensive, and by European hesitancy. Unless there is a change of attitude after the election, the Americans will not wish to play the part of ultimate guarantor—that is one of the primary consequences of this crisis. They believe it costs them more to maintain that position than it is worth. In contrast, China sees in the crisis a tool with which to isolate Taiwan, and exercise global influence. Europe has never stopped defending multilateralism, but in its own way: lots of talk, and no real achievement.

The system that has evolved around the UN is now being placed under great strain

26. Interview with Chinese officials, April 23, 2020.

27. Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire, China and the World since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 461.

The current crisis raises a problem of confidence in the UN system, particularly in respect of the World Health Organization (WHO). In order to function, multilateralism must mutate. In order to survive, it must no longer be merely a diplomatic and institutional system, but increasingly a continuous process of association forming, involving coalitions of actors, and including multinationals, churches, NGOs, and expert networks. This evolution will pose new problems in terms of funding and direction, but it will allow it to be more inclusive and to more effectively act for the common good.

Toward surveillance capitalism

This hybrid health and technological crisis is forcing states to rethink the terms of their economic diplomacy, particularly when it comes to actors in the digital sector. The debate over contact-tracing apps has focused on the possible exploitation of personal data and the restriction of freedom enabled by their use. In this sense, the COVID-19 crisis is accelerating the advent of a surveillance capitalism founded on the continuous harvesting of individual and collective data. Tech platforms are assuming the functions of states, just as states are transformed into networks—hence, there is an interpenetration of resources, which is forming a new architecture of decentralized systems, some private, some public, for national or international purposes. There is also constant harvesting of data of every kind. In this regard, states are not at all passive, inasmuch as they use these systems to rationalize their services and adapt them to social needs. But with one unmentionable aspect: espionage, in all its forms. By redistributing power, such integration blows apart the demarcation between the public and the private, with states turning ever more systematically to private solutions, while the platforms profit from access to public databases.

This has two immediate consequences. The first is the development of GovTech, or the purchase and use of technological solutions—seen as innovative—by public bodies. The talk is of providing more personalized and inclusive services. In practice, this can entail a rapid concentration of power in the hands of a small number of public-private actors. The second consequence concerns the relationships between states and digital platforms; the latter can henceforth shape the whole future direction of economic, political, and social activity. After all the declarations of principle and the haggling over jurisdiction, few states are capable, on their own, of controlling the behavior of the tech sector, and the platforms also conceive of themselves as sovereign actors. They enjoy great freedom of maneuver compared to the federal authorities in the United States, and have also inserted themselves into a patiently constructed military-digital complex. In China, they are controlled directly by the state. Seen from this

perspective, Europe is unarmed, unable to even join in the competition. If no response to this is forthcoming, Europe will be further outclassed, and all the more so when 5G is rolled out.

Taxation is painted as the ultimate tool for states wishing to even the balance with the tech platforms, and with multinationals more widely, providing new sources of revenue and reducing social inequalities.²⁸ This hybrid health and technological crisis is stressing the fault line on which globalization was built, the line between, on the one hand countries trying to maximize the well-being of their expatriates in their various jurisdictions, and on the other, the multinationals seeking to maximize the benefit to their shareholders, to which end they carry on their operations around the globe, exonerating themselves of any immediate responsibility for their impact, and seeking to escape, as much as is possible, from national jurisdictions.²⁹ For them, the optimal situation is achieved through finding the best way to exploit social, regulatory, and salary differences between their various subsidiary entities. The growth of online working, accelerated by the coronavirus lockdown, will inevitably have consequences for the workforce, and on the transformation of the service sector in advanced economies. Robotization and “telemigrants” are opening a new phase of globalization, which will see more intense—and now remote—competition for online work.³⁰

* * *

Many comparisons have been made between the present pandemic and the Black Death of the fourteenth century, which spread out of Central Asia in 1338, reaching Paris in 1348. It moved along the Silk Roads, which had established the idea of a *continuum* stretching from China to eastern Europe; it also came along the Italian trading networks that connected the ports of the Black Sea and the Levant with the wider Mediterranean basin. This geography is now re-emerging. According to Ibn Khaldun, in a few short years, the effect of the Black Death had been like “rolling up Earth’s carpet, and everything upon it.”³¹ It marked the end of innocence of the medieval period, and brutally cut down Europe’s then highest population.

28. Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, *The Triumph of Injustice: How the Rich Dodge Taxes and How to Make Them Pay* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

29. Raymond Vernon, *In the Hurricane’s Eye. The Troubled Prospects of Multinational Enterprises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 28.

30. Richard Baldwin, *The Globotics Upheaval: Globalization, Robotics, and the Future of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

31. Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Arabs: A 3,000-Year History of Peoples, Tribes and Empires* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 372.

It took several generations for Europe to recover before moving into the great age of discovery.

COVID-19 has not dealt the same massive demographic blow, but it does mark the end of technological innocence. Globalization has been characterized by an intensification of cross-border interdependence, made possible by the rapid transfer of information and communication technologies that have come to act as a new nervous system for much human activity. The hope expressed by John Perry Barlow (in his *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*) that we might see the appearance of a “civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace,”³² one that is more human and more just than that produced by the governments of the world, has for now been extinguished. In the midst of a Sino-American conflict now taking place on many fronts, these technologies—extreme vectors of efficiency, control, and individualization—are facilitating a slide into surveillance capitalism. In this sense, COVID-19 is forcing sovereign entities to face the old dilemma of efficiency versus human dignity, and challenging their capacity to govern.

In *Tout empire périra* (All Empires Fall) Jean-Baptiste Duroselle reminded us that “in the moment of greatest shared danger, *efficiency* appears to take precedence over systems centered on *dignity*,” before going on to add that the latter is mankind’s highest hope: people “do not want to be simply a part of the herd; they want to be acknowledged, responsible individuals.”³³ How can such an aspiration be realized in a world rendered as data? Constraints imposed today for reasons of health, and tomorrow for reasons of environmental emergency, demand a rethink of our technological circumstances as a matter of urgency.



Keywords

COVID-19
Sino-American rivalry
Strategic competition
Information and communication technologies

32. Barlow, *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. Capitalization in original.

33. Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Tout Empire périra*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 1992), 286–8. Italics in original.