

Easing the Lockdown: Some of the Issues

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After my first letter a month ago (it seems like forever!), I am back with some concise remarks.

1. There is no need to peruse the sacred books to realize that the current pandemic brings man in general, and Western man in particular, face-to-face with his inclination towards *hubris*. Pride will always come up against the complexity of nature, which surpasses and thwarts human works. I hope that the sorcerer's apprentices, like certain ideologues of artificial "intelligence", will find food for thought in this.

2. Some people have criticised me for calling out governments' negligence towards the outbreak of Covid19, because, they say, it was "unpredictable". Perhaps our ideas of predictability are different. In 2015, Bill Gates solemnly sounded the alarm, saying that viruses are a much greater threat to the world than nuclear weapons. Many other less famous personalities issued similar warnings.

The more complex a phenomenon, the harder it is to date the appearance of "black swans" even when they are identified. This is the real, almost insurmountable challenge. In my letter of 30 March, I alluded to the outbreak of a digital pandemic. That such an event will occur can be taken for granted, although when and how cannot be predicted. We must be ready for it.

3. States, whose primary responsibility is to protect their citizens, must maintain a state of preparedness to react to disasters that are foreseeable but not dateable. Public choices depend at least as much on the risk culture of societies as on the quality of their bureaucracies and leaders. From this perspective, Germany performed much better than France during the first weeks of the current pandemic, although both countries spend roughly the same amounts on their health systems. The United States' unpreparedness is particularly disturbing. In Asia, the situation is different because of the frequency of epidemics.

4. When talking about public choices in these matters, a distinction must theoretically be drawn between prevention and reaction and then

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adaptation, both at national and international level. Prevention and response or adaptation are actually linked, because the less prepared one is for a disaster beforehand, the costlier the response and adaptation are afterwards. Societies, too often mired in immediate goals, tend to reject the public cost of prevention. This is true in all areas.

The pandemic's speed caught Western leaders off guard. Their first choice, with the means at hand, was to save as many of the sickest coronavirus patients as possible, even refraining from raising the issue of the economic and social consequences of the measures taken to achieve this end. They cannot be blamed for this.

In France, for example, it is estimated today that, without containment, the number of deaths could be about ten times higher: around 200,000. But, once the initial astonishment passes—itsself the consequence of unpreparedness—faced with figures on this order of magnitude, the whole world must reason more broadly. For example, it is impossible to ignore the devastation that a sharp drop in global economic activity, or the confinement of hundreds of millions of poor people on five continents, is beginning to cause. Famines and the resurgence of other diseases loom. It is feared that the number of the pandemic's indirect victims will ultimately be much higher than the number of deaths directly caused by the coronavirus.

5. From the medical point of view, the main immediate concern is to give doctors and researchers the resources they need to carry out the full range of their tasks in the best possible way. But the debate on easing restrictions goes far beyond the debate among medical experts, who, viewed from an anthropological perspective, are one tribe among many. Easing restrictions involves making public choices with trade-offs that include interests that had previously been put on hold. Like it or not, governments have no choice but to make economic and social calculations.

6. The main issues are international. Alongside admirable behaviour, the earliest weeks of the crisis saw rising passions, tensions, panic, hysteria, every-man-for-himself attitudes, the search for scapegoats or the exploitation of the situation for propaganda purposes. But the form of interdependence called globalisation is a fact. In the short-medium term, no country, in particular neither China nor the United States, will be able to bounce back on its own. In Europe, as superior

as it seems today, Germany needs France as much as countries in the south and vice versa. Countries with weak state structures, such as many in Africa in particular, need help from wealthier ones. This is a time not for ideological grandstanding but for cooperation in the interests of all in order to quickly achieve a reasonable balance between the imperatives of health and those of economic recovery while waiting for drugs and vaccines.

7. The medium-long term future of globalisation looks like this. The arguments of economists in favour of the free movement of goods, services, capital or people are well known. Under certain conditions, they remain relevant. The most important of these conditions is the strengthening of international cooperation. This brings us back to our starting point, in other words complexity. The more complex interdependence is, the more cooperation and, therefore, short, medium and long-term coordination, are necessary. The greatest financial crises, like those in the late 1990s and 2007-2010, were caused by lack of foresight and cooperation. This is also true in the geopolitical realm (I am thinking of the blunders of the "Arab Spring") or of course in the case of the current pandemic.

Taking account of the long term in international cooperation implies strong, well-run institutions, as is still the case with the International Monetary Fund. Most, like the World Health Organisation, need deep reforms. But increasingly the international system is ideologically heterogeneous. Defiance, withdrawal and concealment dominate at every level. The world is radically devoid of leadership. If this situation persists, crises will multiply on different scales, hastening the return to protectionism, a misguided interpretation of the idea of "strategic asset", an overly protective view of production or supply chains and, ultimately, populism.

8. I will conclude with a word on Europe, recalling first of all that Ifri had chosen the European Union's future in light of Sino-American competition as the leitmotiv of its 40th anniversary. This theme seems to me to be more relevant than ever. Over the past year, we have seen Germany resigning itself to the idea that the transatlantic relationship may have structurally changed in nature. Regardless of whether Joe Biden wins the election, the Atlantic Alliance will never again be what it was during the Cold War. Meanwhile, the Germans and French have begun to view China in a different light. They now feel the need to protect themselves from it. France and Germany

remain, as they have always been, the pillars of European construction. Both countries know, as do the Union's other members, whatever they may say, that in the world to come there will only be strength in this Union. European Council meetings are seldom exciting. But last week's virtual gathering showed once again that, despite fears, Europe is moving forward in the most serious crises. The geopolitical stakes are huge. In the immediate term, it is a matter of proving that "Brussels" can successfully meet the two major challenges of the moment: efficiency and democracy.