

On the Coronavirus, Catastrophic Risk and Discrowning Liberalism

As of Tuesday, Jan 28, 2020, the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) [has led to](#) respiratory illness causing over 4,500 confirmed infections and 106 deaths across the world. Most of these have been in China, with the bulk of those confined to Wuhan, Hubei province, where the outbreak originated. Though the initial response from local officials, [by their own admission](#), was unsatisfactory, since the Communist Party took charge, the response has been about as strong as can be expected. Hubei is effectively under lockdown, and [a hospital is being constructed in a matter of days](#) to keep up with an increasing number of cases. Though there have not yet been any deaths outside China, a number of cases have been confirmed across Asia, Europe and North America, and they are increasing; the number of known cases [rose by 60 percent](#) just from Jan 27 to Jan 28.

Fears, indeed, are rising that a pandemic is on hand. The American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [has issued](#) its highest level travel watch for China. The World Health Organization [has amped up](#) its assessment of the risk to “very high in China, high at the regional level and high at the global level” as of Jan 26, from the “moderate risk” at the global level it had ascribed in the days prior to that. It has not, however, declared the coronavirus outbreak an official Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

The case, though, can be made that a stronger response is called for at the international level, even if not the same as [that being taken in China](#), at least somewhat more proactive than [screenings at airports](#). There currently exists [no vaccine or cure](#) for the virus. Its basic reproductive number (R0), which indicates how many infections on average a single infection leads to, is somewhere [between 3.3 and 5.5](#), an estimate that [could be biased downward](#). Furthermore, it appears to have an ability [to transmit along a chain of at least four people](#); and it seems to be [infectious during its \(pre-symptom-displaying\) incubation phase](#), which can last from 1-14 days. One may find some comfort in the fact that there have been no deaths so far outside of China, but given its infectiousness while incubating and its R0 value, if there are any confirmed cases displaying symptoms, there are probably more cases already in waiting. Then, given that it is already spreading, and may be spreading exponentially, both within and beyond China, there could soon be too many cases for the medical institutions and infrastructures of any country to handle, including more advanced ones such as the US. Things may be getting very bad, and at the very least, given the present rate at which confirmed cases and deaths are increasing, the WHO could declare the outbreak an international public health emergency.

It is true that this coronavirus may not result in a catastrophic pandemic. This could be due to relative benignness of the virus, or because of the response from the Chinese government, which, in considerable contrast to its handling of the SARS crisis in 2003, has taken swift and drastic steps to contain the virus, though its efforts haven't been entirely successful so far. But we cannot count on viruses in the future either to be benign, or to originate in a country with capacities or a culture to act as robustly and promptly as China has.

In fact, more than not, the response of liberal institutions, global and national, to the current coronavirus outbreak has indicated their limitations in dealing with potentially catastrophic global crises such as pandemics. Given how various global catastrophic risks are intensifying, then, this event poses serious challenge to a planetary order organized around liberal institutions, mechanisms and ideology, and behooves us to more readily think about alternatives to it.

In brief, the problem is that liberalism seems unable to act in accordance with the precautionary principle. [When there is significant tail-risk involved in an event, responses should be commensurate.](#) That could be the case with this virus. So, given the risk that is at hand, drastic top-down measures should be implemented. But liberal democratic nation states neither have the organizational or material resources to orchestrate these, nor the will and philosophical perspicacity to enable them. Overall, the coronavirus bespeaks the shortcomings of the liberal order. It is as great a demonstration as we've gotten in recent years of the need for better philosophical frameworks and politico-economic mechanisms to build off of and replace the present liberal internationalist system.

Let us start to see how by examining the limitations of liberal organizational and material resources. This point is demonstrated at its simplest by considering that China has the capacity to build hospitals in days, while the very idea of such an endeavor, to be undertaken in any Western democracy, would inspire severe skepticism—if not actually horror. The US is a leader in medical technology, but it does not have the capacity to handle an influx in the tens of thousands to hospitals because of a pandemic. Neither does it have the capacity to create such capacity at the pace that may well be required with this coronavirus.

Now, this is in large part out of its democratic nature, which has many undeniable positives, but which has led to a bureaucratic regime of regulation and decision-making to ensure that the government acts only for the good of the people, and doesn't hurt some to enrich others. These are worthy precautions to take in large-scale society, and ensuring representation of a full citizenry is ethically commendable.

Unfortunately, sometimes this can lead to more harm than advantage. This is particularly true in the case of exponentially acting, potentially catastrophic risks, which are becoming all the more prominent across the planet and where acting with democratic deliberation could lead to gross damage. Insofar as liberal systems are bound to stick to their ideals and accompanying mechanisms, then they may be considerably stunted in addressing intensifying global crises, such as potential pandemics like the coronavirus, and it is legitimate to ask of alternatives to liberal institutions and mechanisms of governance.

Apart from democracy, liberal governance is also marked by a commitment to individual freedom or liberty, which is as close to an implicit nominative definition of liberalism as could exist. This too is a great idea; who, after all, doesn't like to be free? Moreover, personal preference aside, a strong case can be made that a society that maximizes individual freedom

enables the best development of human capital, and ends up accomplishing the greatest things and bringing about common good of the highest order. Still, a principle of the preeminence of individual liberty can sometimes cause more damage than help in a world of increasing catastrophic crisis risk.

The core matter is of course quarantine. Isolating someone by some higher political command, whether or not they want to be isolated, is an unambiguously illiberal thing to do. It is also one of the best things a society can sometimes do for the good of both individuals and the collective. We are lucky that we aren't yet at the level of considering triage, which can be even more illiberal and anti-individualist. To ensure that we don't get there, quarantine is a superb minimal evil.

Still, it is likely that in many populations accustomed to liberal rights—especially in the United States—there will be much more resistance to limiting individuals' freedom of movement than has been seen in China. Americans don't like to be told what to do. Sadly, for your own good and the good of everyone else, sometimes you have to be told what to do, and if necessary, be forced to do it. Western governmental executive organs are very strong, as protesters who have faced riot cops in the US and [are currently facing them](#) in France have seen. Still, the norm to control, shepherd and confine populations as is being done in China just doesn't exist in the West—at least since indigenous populations were dealt with through such means in the Americas and Australasia.

Consider this line of action, as an example, to flesh out the point: In a possibly ideal world (that could yet have pandemic outbreaks), there would be the means of finding out, to two degrees of separation, everyone outside of China who may have had exposure to such a virus, and to quarantine them for two weeks until their non-infection is confirmed. For example, if someone had gone to Wuhan province, the government of the country they return to should not just isolate them; it should, in the case of such an infectious and potentially severe virus, isolate everyone they have had proximate and prolonged contact with, such as their immediate family and their close colleagues—and then do the same for colleagues of their family and the families of their colleagues.

Now, going to these extents for something like the coronavirus may be overkill. The point isn't to argue that such precise measures are needed in this case. The point is that this scenario of response likely appears somewhat dystopic from a Western, liberal standpoint regarding life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It doesn't seem like something that could happen in the West. And there lies the peril. For there could very well be a virus so deadly that such drastic precautions are needed to drastically cut back the risk of extinction. We're lucky if that turns out to not have been necessary with this coronavirus. We may not be lucky again.

The point is also in part logistical. Such drastic measures, in this ideal "dystopia," would be undertaken immediately, as soon as news of the infections in China are established, and when there are only a few cases in other nations. At this point, if the number of people in a given

country that has been to the Wuhan province in the previous few weeks is in four digits, say, and the number of people that would have to be quarantined then in five digits, then such measures are, in the larger scheme of collective life and death, feasible, modest and imperative. But once there is an outbreak, the measures required would no longer be modest, thus they may not be feasible, and hence all talk of imperativity would be moot. The window of opportunity for the containment of such pandemics—which, to repeat, could be much more lethal than the coronavirus—is very small, and if there is a risk of catastrophic proportions that is opened up by not containing it, even if limiting democracy and freedom is needed, such drastic measures of governance and control must be accepted.

This, however, goes entirely against the liberal democratic spirit, which is why such measures will occur with much more hesitation in the liberal West. When drastic actions are conducted in the West, especially in the US, where the cult of individualism is the strongest, it may be too late. The relative nonchalance with which the medical and media establishments in the West are currently treating this affair comes in part from the inability to conceptualize their own society being one in which the requisite measures are taken. The unthinkability of postliberal governmentality enables the pretense that we can keep going as per normal. But either today or tomorrow, it will turn out we can't. Questioning the regime of liberal states and institutions in our world, then, is in order—right now.

A related topic here is that of individual versus community quarantine. [There exists considerable skepticism](#) toward the latter in public health circles, and the norm in Western societies is certainly toward individual quarantine. There may be very good reasons to do so. However, that preference itself is interwoven with the ideology and statecraft characteristic of liberalism. Deeply rooted in liberal thought are the notions of utility (and the principles of utilitarianism) and private property. Utility is measured with respect to individuals; utilitarianism at its crudest aims for the highest possible sum of individual utility. Private property as an idea and institution operates through the communion of the individual, who enjoys the right to private property, with the state, which guarantees it. These fundamental features of liberalism facilitate mechanisms and predilections of statecraft that occur in the interaction between the state and the individual, a dyad that is given ontological and functional primacy over the community. One manifestation of this, it could be contended, is the preference in public health management for practicing individual quarantine versus community quarantine.

Michel Foucault's critique of biopolitics comes in handy here. In brief, his argument is that modern or liberal institutions exercise an administrative logic driven to "ensure, sustain and multiply" bodies and their populations (*The Will to Knowledge: History of Sexuality Volume I*. 1976, p. 138). Foucault's idea is that the very concept and being of the "individual" as we understand it came to emerge in conjunction with the exercise of biopower by governments in modernity. Modern governance, by this account, treats both individuals and communities as objects of power that is exercised by institutions of the state (and, increasingly over the last century, corporations, which exist in a symbiotic relationship with the state).

While a bedridden individual may not be able to act in the manner of treatment necessary that is best for herself or himself as well as for the collective, a community could well be entrusted to take care of itself. If liberal nation-states lack the kind of top-down structures and mechanisms needed to take care of crises like the coronavirus in the way the Chinese can, they could at least transfer more power to communities. But here too liberalism and modern governance creates an ideological hurdle, as makes governance a mechanism of power, in Foucault's account, that constructs modern individual subjectivity, and removes community from the picture. (There is also obviously the fact that vital, cohesive communities that could handle such crises are rather depleted in the West. That's another story, although one where the blame could again to a significant extent go to liberalism and its associated *laissez-faire* economic governmentality.)

Another piece in all this is, of course, the centrality of the nation state. This is not a feature of liberalism *per se*; China is obviously the prime example of a nation state that exists outside the liberal order. Still, even if not as a critique of liberalism itself, it is worth asking whether the Westphalian system of nation states is sufficient to ward off global crises. Looking at the response of this system so far to the climate crisis, one could well be skeptical. The situation seems brighter, however, in the case of pandemics, where different states—liberal or not—are sharing information and resources. They know, in this case at least, that the good of each lies in the good of all.

Still, the argument could be made that we need stronger institutions of governance at the global level than exist right now. Even if a consortium of nation-states could mitigate pandemics, a single coordinating institution could do even better. Just as the mitigative activity in China improved significantly after Beijing took charge, and could orchestrate transferrals of resources spanning a greater scale, the same could well apply to the world as a whole.

Consider a matter as simple as the provision of N95 masks and eye protectors. These are basic precautionary instruments. Put simply, there should be enough of them, particularly the masks, in existence across the world to serve as defense against any airborne pandemic that could occur. Again, if it seems an extreme measure to always have so many masks on the ready, think of the precautionary principle, and the real extinction risk that pandemics will increasingly carry, because of [“the selective dominance of increasingly worse pathogens” and global connectivity](#). And talking of extinction, there should be risk-prevention measures actively undertaken through global coordination as well, for example, active research to produce vaccines to preempt such a strain and other possible strains of coronavirus that could be similarly deadly.

Now, it will be argued, all this takes place already, either at the national scale or organized by the WHO! True. However, while an organization such as the WHO that coordinates the responses of nations to global health crises does exist, it ultimately doesn't have any power over nation states. Sovereignty ultimately still resides on the Westphalian plane.

For many, if not most people, this is how it should be. And perhaps it is. However, considering that crises such as pandemics do not care for national borders and that such crises are becoming more prominent, it is at least worth asking whether we need stronger institutions at a global scale to undertake such research, production and distribution as just described, as well as to set and enforce protocols for containment and cure when outbreaks do take place. We live in a society of [extreme global integration](#) and planetary complexity. Is it too much to even suggest that we think seriously about the benefit, if not the need, of world government?

At this point, though, another matter needs addressing. What has just been described may sound like a proposal for a world *socialist* republic. It both is and isn't. It is, in the sense that it is a proposal for a stronger global authority of governance that can coordinate production and exchange in accordance with global catastrophic risk, and that has the authority to manage and mitigate existential risk. If the top-down coordination and authority are so reminiscent of socialism, so be it.

Eliminating markets altogether, though, needn't necessarily be a part of this. Prices are great signals of information for a society as complex as ours, and markets, in which prices are created, are complex systems themselves that cannot be simply replaced by a top-down global order. However, if we live under capitalism in a society as precarious as this, it is paramount that we reinvest a certain amount of the wealth generated as a precaution against the adverse possibilities of our own technological potency and integration. From the standpoint of business this may be superfluous, irrational use of wealth. From the standpoint of existence, it is the most meaningful and rational use of wealth.

The following bears clarification, however: To the extent a socialistic implementation of policy is needed at the global level, the social superorganism that is "the left" cannot and will not be the agent of it.

The liberal order of the United States and other countries, as discussed, is dysfunctional enough at getting things done. However, if the superorganism of the left is in charge of such a project, one can only expect an even more insensible amount of proceduralism (in the name of "democracy," while the *demos* dies) and an even more absurd level of inaction until conditions of utmost purity, sensitivity and inclusivity are met (in the name of "social justice," while the worst-off members of society die). The current socialist left that is popular in the West (think Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn, etc.) may in-and-of-itself have some good ideas, but the cultural baggage that it is associated and allied with renders it at best impotent, and at worst, due to many toxic, untruthy and inegalitarian identitarian campaigns it nurtures, perverse a means for manifesting salubrious post-liberal visions. No, creating the global system of governance our crises behoove will be a project undertaken by a decidedly non-leftist superorganism. To actually solve the world's most pressing problems, we need less DSA, more CCP; in other words, a superorganism possibly transversal to the left-right binary itself.

Furthermore, to return to the prior point about empowering communities, the ideal future arrangement wouldn't just be one in which there is a coordinating and controlling institution at the global level. The wager is that right now, sovereignty is stuck at the wrong, middle scale—that of the nation. Currently, we have a global order consisting of powerful entities—nation-states and corporations—vying for their own best-case scenarios in almost all domains, and depleting the power of communities at a local level and planetary society as a collective whole. We may be better off with power dispersed between the minimal and the maximal scales, [a barbell model of investment](#), as it were, applied to sovereignty: The community or the locality as the designated site and fount of agency on the ground, overseen and supported by a global institution and system that can prevent worst-case scenarios at the highest scale, as those involving pandemics, climate crises and artificial intelligence must be addressed at.

Now, a step back. We have looked at how liberal ideology, because of its overvaluation of freedom and democracy, has predisposed much of global society toward institutions, mechanisms and norms of governance that are inadequate for responding to severe pandemics. Moreover, we've explored the possibility that the system of nation states, which overlaps with the liberal internationalist order, is also, even if not inadequate for responding to pandemics, perhaps not the best setup we could have. We have asked whether a better system would involve power residing at the minimal and maximal scales: at the community and over the whole planet.

An upheaval to the Westphalian system is a radical idea, and may not be necessary or workable. However, I must double down in making another, final case for why aspects of the ethico-political framework of liberalism must be scrutinized and surmounted.

So far the limitations of liberalism discussed here assumed that authorities and agents of liberal institutions saw a terrible threat to society, and maybe thought that drastic precautions could be necessary, but could not follow through on the precautionary principle, due to fidelity to their liberal ideals or the recalcitrance of a population that accustomed to processes following those ideals. My wager, however, is that the ideological disposition of liberalism even precludes seeing actual crises when they are there. The problem isn't just that the liberal order *struggles to* heed the precautionary principle; it's that because of its worldview, it is *anti-disposed* to thinking in terms of global catastrophic risk and the precautionary principle.

This arises from a basic and self-constituting belief of the liberal order that can be called Naive Fukuyamaism (which Fukuyama himself, of course, would not ascribe to): That the world is now one in which, ultimately, things are fine and stable, and that this stability is the essence of this world. Moderately bad things still happen, but dictatorships, plagues, territorial upheavals, great wars and catastrophe, if they exist, only do so in those faraway places called "Africa" or "the Middle East," and even there, the former is slowly getting better (which is the truth, for now) and the latter we have under control (probably a falsehood).

Liberalism isn't just a moral and political philosophy, or in other words, a normative framework. Its thrust isn't just that democracy must be followed, expanded and preached. It's also an assumption about the world, a descriptive schema, which says that things are overall fine now—because of statecraft and political economy based on the normative framework—that Tragedy, on a World-Historical scale, is a thing of the past. Believing this, liberal institutions just cannot look at risks truthfully. Hence, most fundamentally, the near-nonchalance of institutions such as the WHO and CDC, and the overall just-another-event sensibility to reporting about the virus in the Western liberal media.

But this liberal worldview is wrong. The relative lack of tragedy in the liberal world has been a historical blip. And liberal statecraft and political economy are probably unsuited for addressing upcoming tragedies—biological, ecological, computational and myriad combinations of them. There is only historically contingent accuracy, if any at all, to the idea that individuals, acting freely and having their freedoms protected by a state, suffice in doing what is best for them, and that when people act in their self-interest the emergent effect is always for the best. Laissez faire economy and dysfunctional Westphalian bureaucracies can only reign through a fantastical *weltanschauung* of their own adequacy. But reality is already starting to turn that delusion inside-out and reveal its untruth. As the fantasy is broken, we will suffer. Maybe the moment is already upon us, with the novel coronavirus.

Hopefully, though, we will also learn our lesson: To the extent we keep surviving existential risks in the long-run, it won't be *because of* the liberal internationalist order of states and laissez-faire economy in their present format; it will be, if our fate is to our favor, *despite* them—or, ideally, on account of an alternative to them. In an increasingly complex and precarious world, democracy doesn't work—yes, you can say it too!—as comprehensively as it may have in the past. And often, maintaining the primacy of individual freedom can have great negative consequences. When and to the extent this is the case, it is okay to override democracy and freedom. A relatively authoritarian order of governance, perhaps somewhat more authoritarian than the governments of liberal democracies, may be needed at the global scale to ensure and expand freedom and rights at the local scale. The liberal world order is just not equipped to coordinate complexity at the scale of twenty-first planetary reality, and we must conduct political and economic innovation to produce institutions, infrastructures and systems that can.

We are likely moving toward a post-capitalist, post-Westphalian, post-liberal world, whether we like it or not. The question is whether that will happen on terms favorable for the best society of nonhuman, posthuman and human agents. And to that end, it is apparent now, the key desideratum is that this movement to the future world-system, occur both faster and more intentionally than is transpiring of its own accord. The viruses aren't going to wait for the liberal order to wilt with grace.