

A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

THE GLOBAL NORTH-SOUTH FRAMEWORK FAILS TO EXPLAIN COVID-19, BUT WHY?

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Back in March of this year, when the gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic had just begun to set in, I participated in a roundtable discussion at my campus's Institute for Ethics in Public Life. My job was to offer historical perspective by discussing the 1918 influenza pandemic. At the forum, I asked a question of a Chinese colleague, who had voluntarily undergone self-quarantine following her recent return to the United States from her home country. She had spent much of her talk discussing measures that she had recently witnessed being taken in China, including community-level efforts at voluntary self-quarantining and wearing masks. She made it clear that such efforts in China had occurred earlier, and with far more uniformity and vigor, than they had in the United States. I asked her whether this might have had anything to do with the more centralized and authoritarian regime governing China. Her response, to my surprise, was a resounding no. Rather, she contended, Chinese citizens were simply far more receptive to recommended public health measures that might offer positive outcomes for the population at large. She further extrapolated that since US citizens, even reasonably skeptical and worldly ones, primarily hear negative things about Chinese government and society, it stood to reason that I might assume that individual behaviors would reflect government imposition.

I walked away unconvinced. But since then, I have struggled to pinpoint exactly which factors have determined why certain countries have suffered extreme hardship during the pandemic, while others have not. The analytical framework of Global North-South studies would typically explain a phenomenon like the coronavirus pandemic, if not explicitly then at least implicitly, as a function of the dynamics of the system that created the Global

North-South divide to begin with. Thus, the logic would follow that countries on the losing side of that divide—that is, those in the Global South—would suffer most, due to the familiar litany of problems plaguing them: unresponsive and corrupt governments, insufficient medical resources, economies suffering high levels of inequality and poverty, and so forth. Yet the pattern has been far more erratic. At the beginning of June, five highly developed countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Spain—which together constitute about 7.5 percent of the world’s population, had approximately two-thirds of the world’s coronavirus deaths. Then, in a matter of weeks, cases in Latin America surged. This has been especially true of Brazil, which has become the world’s second-most-afflicted nation. The country’s president, Jair Bolsonaro, spent much of the first half of 2020 dismissing and mocking the seriousness of the coronavirus, only to be diagnosed with it in early July. Meanwhile, Mexico, led by the leftist populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador, whose public statements on coronavirus contain roughly equal measures of dismissal and superstition, has also seen an explosion of cases. Beyond the Americas, various other countries—among them India, Iran, Sweden, and Russia—have seen recent spikes.

What can explain these patterns (or, rather, the apparent lack of them)? Professors Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky, both professors at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, argue in their book, *How Democracies Die*, that countries with “illiberal populist leaders,” particularly those with right-wing tendencies, have tended to suffer most.¹ The explanation holds up to a point. It certainly works to explain the United States under Donald Trump or Brazil under Bolsonaro, but it fails to account for the alarming number of cases in the liberal democracies of France, Italy, or Spain (I am regarding the Brexitera United Kingdom under Prime Minister Boris Johnson as falling somewhere in-between). If we accept that the globally connected, densely populated, and highly urbanized democracies of western Europe are inherently more susceptible, how would we explain the comparatively low numbers coming from Germany—Europe’s geographic and economic center—which exhibits all of those aforementioned features in spades? The “illiberal populism” thesis also falls short of explaining the lack of social distancing and other regulatory measures in Sweden, a country that is usually prized for its orientation toward social democracy, commitment to state-run healthcare, and overall concern with collective well-being. Simply put, no single variable, whether level of economic

development, style of government, or otherwise, fully explains why some countries have done better than others at convincing their populations to adopt preventive measures, or why the rate of infection and death is so inconsistent.

The course of coronavirus up to now—and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that by the time this journal issue goes to press, any number of things might happen—has led me back to that initial conversation with my colleague from China. If the effects of the pandemic seem to follow no clear pattern at the macrostructural level, then perhaps she was right after all that the individual behaviors of citizens are in fact the key determinants. Granted, those behaviors must have at least something to do with socioeconomic factors. The ability to practice social distancing or to self-quarantine properly, for example, might come down to whether one can afford to do so. But some other force, one that has led certain populations to act irrationally in the face of the pandemic, must also be at work. At least in the United States, the combination of a general lack of trust in government, along with a political culture that exalts individual freedom without balancing that ideal against the equally noble pursuit of collective good, has led to a disturbing set of images: crowded parks, beaches, lakes, bars, restaurants, and Trump rallies, which have in turn led to overcrowded hospitals.

By the time this issue goes to press in the late part of the year, we will most likely be in the throes of a second wave of COVID-19. It could look entirely unlike what we are seeing now, though I suspect will look no better, regardless of what form it might take. Your task, readers, is to persuade everyone you can reach, whether it's your students or family or friends, to be both rational and compassionate in the face of this pandemic, and to sacrifice just a little so that those most at risk do not sacrifice everything. Rationality and compassion and the willingness to sacrifice are not political traits, and therefore they belong to no politician or party. Rather, they are human traits, and therefore we must tap into our common humanity to save ourselves from this existential threat.

NOTE

1. David Leonhardt and Lauren Leatherby, "Where the Virus is Growing Most: Countries with 'Illiberal Populist' Leaders," *New York Times*, June 5, 2020, Section A, p. 6.