

A Chronicle of a Lost Decade Foretold

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Many on the left still cling to the hope that the COVID-19 crisis will translate into the use of state power on behalf of the powerless. But those in authority have never hesitated to harness government intervention to the preservation of oligarchy, and a pandemic alone won't change that.

ATHENS – To exorcise my worst fears about the coming decade, I chose to write a bleak chronicle of it. If, by December 2030, developments have invalidated it, I hope such dreary prognoses will have played a part by spurring us to appropriate action.

Before our pandemic-induced lockdowns, politics seemed to be a game. Political parties behaved like sports teams having good or bad days, scoring points that propelled them up a league table that, at season's end, determined who would form a government and then do next to nothing.

Then, the COVID-19 pandemic stripped away the veneer of indifference to reveal the political reality: some people do have the power to tell the rest of us what to do. Lenin's description of politics as "who does what to whom" seemed more apt than ever.

By June 2020, as lockdowns began to ease, left-wing optimism that the pandemic would revive state power on behalf of the powerless remained, leading friends to fantasize about a renaissance of the commons and a capacious definition of public goods. Margaret Thatcher, I would remind them, left the British state larger, more powerful, and more concentrated than she had found it. An authoritarian state was necessary to support markets controlled by corporations and banks. Those in authority have never hesitated to harness massive government intervention to the preservation of oligarchic power. Why should a pandemic change that?

As a result of COVID-19, the grim reaper almost claimed both the British prime minister and the Prince of Wales, and even Hollywood's nicest star. But it was the poorer and the browner that the reaper actually *did* claim. They were easy pickings.

It's not hard to understand why. Disempowerment breeds poverty, which ages people faster and, ultimately, readies them for the cull. In the shadow of falling prices, wages, and interest rates, it was never likely that the spirit of solidarity, which soothed our souls during lockdowns, would translate into the use of state power to strengthen the weak and vulnerable.

On the contrary, it was megafirms and the ultra-rich that were grateful socialism was alive and well. Fearing that the masses, condemned to the savage arena of unfettered markets amid a public-health disaster, would no longer be able to afford to buy their products, they reallocated their spending to shares, yachts, and mansions. Thanks to the freshly printed money central banks pumped into them via the usual financiers, stock markets flourished as economies collapsed. Wall Street bankers assuaged their guilt, lingering since 2008, by letting middle-class customers fight over the scraps.

Plans for the green transition, which young climate activists had put on the agenda before 2020, were given only lip service as governments buckled under towering mountains of debt.

Precautionary saving by the many reinforced the economic depression, yielding industrial-scale discontent on a browning planet.

The disconnect between the financial world and the real world, in which billions struggled, inevitably widened. And with it grew the discontent that gave rise to the political monsters I was warning my left-leaning friends about.

As in the 1930s, in the souls of many, the grapes of wrath were growing heavy for a new, bitter vintage. In place of the 1930s soapboxes from which demagogues promised to restore dignity to the disgruntled masses, Big Tech provided apps and social networks perfectly suited for the task.

Once communities surrendered to the fear of infection, human rights seemed an unaffordable luxury. Big Tech developed biometric bracelets to monitor our vital data around the clock. In cahoots with governments, they combined the output with geolocation data, fed it all into algorithms, and ensured that the population received helpful text messages informing them what to do or where to go to stop new outbreaks in their tracks.

But a system that monitors our coughs could also monitor our laughs. It could know how our blood pressure responds to the leader's speech, to the boss's pep talk, to the police announcement banning a demonstration. The KGB and Cambridge Analytica suddenly seemed Neolithic.

With state power re-legitimized by the pandemic, cynical agitators took advantage. Instead of strengthening voices calling for international cooperation, China and the United States bolstered nationalism. Elsewhere, too, nationalist leaders stoked xenophobia and offered demoralized citizens a simple trade: personal pride and national greatness in exchange for authoritarian powers to protect them from lethal viruses, cunning foreigners, and scheming dissidents.

Just as cathedrals were the Middle Ages' architectural legacy, the 2020s left us tall walls, electrified fences, and flocks of surveillance drones. The nation-state's revival made the world less open, less prosperous, and less free precisely for those who had always found it hard to travel, to make ends meet, and to speak their minds. For the oligarchs and functionaries of Big Tech, Big Pharma, and other megafirms, who got on famously with the strongmen in authority, globalization proceeded apace.

The myth of the global village gave way to an equilibrium between great-power blocs, each sporting burgeoning militaries, separate supply chains, idiosyncratic autocracies, and class divisions reinforced by new forms of nativism. The new socioeconomic cleavages threw the prevailing features of each country's politics into sharp relief. Like people who become caricatures of themselves in a crisis, whole countries focused on their collective illusions, exaggerating and cementing pre-existing prejudices.

The great strength of the new fascists during the twenties was that, unlike their political forebears, they did not even have to enter government to gain power. Liberal and social-democratic parties began to fall over one another to embrace xenophobia-lite, then authoritarianism-lite, then totalitarianism-lite.

So, here we are, at the end of the decade. Where are we?

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