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**Title: COVID-19: The disease, the fears, and the possibility of an enlightened civilization**

Coronavirus Disease of 2019 or Covid-19, is a disease about which much remains to be done. Unlike previous pandemics, it has raised far-fetched and wide-ranging fears and questions. This has led to fervent re-examination of the human history and character. It has revealed deep-seated and fearful realities of our past, of our present life and of the future. It has exposed how human history has moved from one traumatic and uncorrected mistake to another amidst progressive advances. It has also shown that many people are waking up to the fact that our current way of life (or civilization, if you like) is an illusion that can be dismantled and built a fresh. More people all over the world have become dissatisfied with life as we know it. During this pandemic many have expressed the desire to move to a better civilization, and to an enlightened way of living.

### **The virus**

Covid-19 is caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus type 2 (SARS-COV-2). It is officially known to have originated from Wuhan, China, possibly from a wet (live animal) market. DNA studies have indicated that the virus could have “jumped” from a bat to humans through an intermediate host, thought to be a pangolin, although this now seems unlikely. The disease is characterized by fever, a dry cough, sneezing and some non-specific symptoms. This virus is remarkably simple, made of four proteins and one strand of RNA. One type of proteins constitutes the characteristic spikes or crowns, from which the name corona is derived. Two types of proteins are membranes binding the entire virus into shape, and the last protein surrounds the RNA.

### **The disease**

The virus enters the body through mucous membranes of the nose, mouth and eyes. It attaches itself to a protein on the cell surface called Angiotensin –Converting Enzyme 2 (ACE2), which acts as a receptor or doorway into the cells of the lungs, heart, blood vessels, kidneys, liver, stomach and intestines. The exchange of oxygen and carbon-dioxide between blood and lungs takes place through special cells called pneumocytes, which line small air sacs (alveoli) in the lungs. When pneumocytes are attacked by the virus, they rapidly multiply inside causing the cells to burst and die off. The air sacs then begin to collapse and get filled with fluid from inflammation. This hardens the lungs, which lose the elasticity to expand and contract, as should be in normal breathing. This hardening of the lungs is called pneumonia. When pneumonia sets in, the flow of oxygen from the lungs into the blood, and of CO<sub>2</sub> from the blood into the lungs, drastically reduces. This is when the patient urgently needs assisted ventilation (breathing). This breathing crisis is what is described as severe acute respiratory syndrome. Post mortem results have shown extensive micro clots of blood in multiple organs, including blood vessels. This means that there is often multiple organ failure due to clots that block blood supply to and causing the death of organs, and of the individual.

Covid-19 affects the elderly 3 to 4 times more than the young. The virus infects the young more but it is the elderly who die more. It affects men twice more than women. What is not yet clear is at what stage an asymptomatic carrier of the virus can infect others. Or whether when a person who recovers from the disease can get it again, and after how long. Or whether the disease is seasonal, and reduces in warm weather. The virus escapes from the lungs through droplets from coughing or sneezing, which leads to the contagion of others who get in contact. A person can infect 1-3 persons.

## **The policy**

Washing hands with soap destroys the virus. Combined with social distancing this can effectively reduce the chances of contagion. The mainstay of treatment is symptomatic, in form of assisted respiration. No approved drug has been found for the treatment of Covid-19. Hydroxychloroquine and related drugs have been tried, but without replicable or consistent benefits. Experimental Remdesivir and others have also been tried with disappointing results. A Madagascar concoction, whose active ingredient is thought to be artemisinin, is mired in controversy. But a good number of Africa people are ready to try it when the time comes. The mainstay of Covid-19 control has been to limit people's movement and interaction, in addition to hand hygiene, coughing and sneezing etiquette, social distancing, and for individuals to avoid touching their face. Governments have instituted quarantine and isolation of those who are suspected or already infected. Borders were closed. So were schools, places of worship, and markets. In most countries public transport was suspended. It was hoped that people would get herd immunity naturally (for those who got infected and survived) or through a vaccine, which could take several years to become available.

It had been postulated that Africa would stand a greater risk from the virus than the rest of the world. This was on the account of its poor health systems, less likelihood to wash hands frequently with soap and being more exposed to the outside world through export routes. Also, there is less likelihood for Africans to work at home as there is low internet coverage on the continent. Surprisingly, it has turned out that the virus has typically had a much lower than expected infection and death rate in Africa, thought to be due to the warm climate.

The thrust of Covid-19 public health policy has been to flatten the curve by slowing the spread of the virus, as countries await a vaccine. Containment policy was preferred by some countries where people who fall sick were managed but no lockdown measures are instituted as in Sweden. Suppression policy was through lockdowns to prevent or minimize infection. The idea was to suppress the epidemic until a vaccine is available. But prolonged suppression can lead to social unrest and has not been sustainable in the absence or delay of vaccines.

But in the absence of or delayed vaccine, populations of locked down countries have remained vulnerable as they have no immunity. Preventive policies have included 1) case isolation at home, 2) voluntary home quarantine, 3) isolation of entire neighborhoods 4) social distancing for those over 65 years, 5) social distancing for all, 6) closure of all public institutions, 7) suspension of public and private vehicles, and 8) night curfew. The testing policies include a) all those with pneumonia or flu-like symptoms, b) representative samples of the population, c) high risk populations, as in Uganda, d) asymptomatic populations, as in South Korea, and e) testing the entire population, as in New Zealand.

Negative "side-effects" of these policies have been that low risk individuals (the young and active) have not been isolated, thus potentially actively propagating the virus. Isolated people require food, medicine, water, power and other utilities, and in many cases these are not accessible or affordable to them. Online services of food and medicine supply have become clogged and overwhelmed. Non-covid patients have been crowded out of intensive care units. The stigma surrounding hospitals and staff treating Covid patients have driven away other patients from hospitals, mainly women and children. In Uganda, for example, the lockdown has typically

led to empty hospitals around the country. This has been partly due to restricted movement of people under lockdown, but also because of stigma surrounding hospitals treating Covid patients. A special effort of public education in Arua district in Uganda has enabled patients to trickle back the main hospital.

## **The economics**

It is now generally agreed that a major global recession is coming (Surico P and Galeotti A 2020). There has been a dramatic decline in the stock-markets, airline industry, tourism, hospitality, and oil and gas markets. The value of gold has plummeted. Life opportunities have become even more unequal. Highly skilled and salaried workers can work at home, while the others cannot. Those who cannot work at home stand a risk of being exposed to the virus. Universities and businesses are fast turning into remote working and operation. Zoom has suddenly become the most popular conferencing. Home schooling and internet education are increasing by the day. There is disruption of the global supply chain. Labour supply, vital for domestic work and agriculture, has plummeted. Small businesses that depend on cash flow have closed. Mortgages and rents are now not paid because there is no cash.

Governments are shifting gear to respond to this new situation. As a policy, some governments are asking households to delay mortgage and rent payments. They are asking employers to continue paying workers even in quarantine. Governments are providing cash to businesses to continue to operate. They are supporting the financial systems so as not to collapse. More than before, progressive governments are spending more in the health sector, including investing in infrastructure, equipment and additional staff. They are providing tax relief, tax cuts and tax holidays, and other incentives to businesses. Governments are cutting down interest rates. These policies are likely to be coordinated globally, massively and urgently.

## **The fears**

The Coronavirus pandemic has generated a storm in the social media. Much of the information is misinformation or propaganda. But most of this is related to or generated by fear. Propaganda has been defined by Google as “selected public information designed to achieve a political or social objective”. The selected information may be facts, half-truths or deliberately wrong information. Misinformation on the other hand is providing wrong information often out of bias or ignorance. “Truth” has been defined as “being in accord with fact or reality, or fidelity to an original or standard, or authenticity”. “Facts” referred to here are usually scientifically determined, but can also be strong beliefs regarded as unquestionable, such as religious beliefs. But some scientific facts are relative or transient as they remain open to be challenged by further research. It is difficult to immediately know what is fake and what is true. It is often better to remain open minded than to remain adamantly supportive of official or mainstream “facts”. Official or mainstream “truths” have sometimes been discredited or have remained controversial.

The social media crowd-shout can be nailed down to eight dominant narratives, which mainstream scientists or public officials summarily dismiss as fake. First, that there is a new pandemic is a lie. It is claimed that this is the usual seasonal flu which kills Europeans and Americans every year. Second, that it is a scheme by China to consolidate itself back at home in the face of rising democratic activism for independence in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Third, it is a scheme by China to overturn the growing US economy under President Donald Trump, and to ascend as a global super power. In particular, it is said to be related to the introduction of 5G technology, which China has developed and is anxious to control globally. Fourth, the origin of the virus has had conflicting narratives. That it could have originated from a Wuhan wet market has been dismissed by many social media authors as Chinese propaganda. Some say the virus was deliberately “created” in a lab and released both in China and the rest of the world by China. Fifth, others say it was accidentally introduced to humans, but the plan to destroy human life is there. Some believe and echo the Chinese narrative that the virus originated in US and was brought to China under a joint collaborative arrangement between China and the US to develop a bio-

weapon.

Sixth, that the coronavirus was introduced by China with the collusion of some scientists in US to use it as a scarecrow to create fear so as to make it easy to have everyone accept to be vaccinated. The vaccine agenda is said to be linked to a microchip to be inserted under the skin. The chip is to be used by an elite group of billionaires and powerful politicians to control populations by manipulating the human mind electronically. The vaccine agenda is also said to be linked to a global population control program, which especially targets Africans. It is claimed poison will be injected into humans to reduce the global population. Seventh, religious people believe it is a sign of biblical end times, characterized by the mark of the beast, which they say is the microchip. Finally, Africans believe this pandemic was designed to decimate their population and take over their land and wealth. They cite the repeated warnings given by the West that Africans would be affected in millions, and without reliable health systems, they would die in droves. This has not happened. But the fear looms strong.

What underlies all these narratives is fear arising from our history and our present experience. It has been a history of violence and injustice meted by one dominant group against other humans (Harari Y N 2011). The violence and injustice has changed only in name and form, but has remained the same in character. From slavery, colonialism, apartheid and racism to an unjust and unequal global economic system that we have today. A recent video that has gone viral of a white policeman in Minneapolis USA who suffocated a black man (George Floyd) by savagely pressing down his neck on the ground with his knee, dramatically shows how real and unchanged the racist terror is. The escalation of far-right politics associated with racism in Europe, USA, and Brazil with conservative and inward looking political leaders at the helm, has made the situation a lot worse.

## **The anger**

Many Africans are angry about the current shameful global narrative about the continent and its people. Africa is depicted as a continent of conflict, corruption, diseases and dependency. Indeed studies show that Africa is still largely disconnected from the global economy (Bright J and Hruby A, 2015). Its share of the world GDP and world trade are less than 3% respectively. The sub-Saharan foreign direct investment abroad is less than 1% and its broadband subscription is less than 3%. Africa faces critical challenges of lack of basic infrastructure and diversified economy. The trade within and among African nations is less than 12% due to border restrictions, lack of railways, poor roads, perceived risks and insecurity, and lack of a mechanism to coordinate financing across the continent. There is inadequate energy and energy use. Only 3% of households have a computer and 1% have access to internet. Only twenty five percent of Africans have bank accounts.

The failure to create jobs for the youth has become the single most explosive contemporary issue. It is most potent issue making the youth restless which is a source of violence and insecurity. A well-known form of today's insecurity is terrorism. Joblessness has driven the youth into mass migration. In desperation, they have left in droves for Europe, America, and other parts of the world. They prefer to die on seas and in slavery than remain in poverty in Africa.

While African leaders can be blamed for poor leadership, bad governance and corruption, they are not the main problem. The main problem is that the global economic system was created to exclude and exploit Africa. The roots are historical but the exclusion and exploitation continue today. This is the crux of the matter. So if anything comes along to disrupt the current global system in which only one dominant group enjoys good life and others are destined to suffering, it will be welcome. That the European and American economies have been brought to their knees has brought a smile on the lips of many Africans. What remains is a process of overhauling the entire global economic system. Covid-19 provides a stepping stone to a "new normal". Many people in Africa hope that the new normal will bring about a fair global economic system built on the values

of equality and mutual respect.

## **Enlightened society**

The Covid-19 pandemic has perhaps been the single most forceful factor that has brought into sharp focus our flawed social and economic systems. Systems created and sustained by a vicious and selfish mindset, creating a world view of the civilized versus savages, the known world versus the dark work world, the colony versus the empire, the developed versus the undeveloped, high income countries versus low income countries, and of billionaires versus ordinary people. It has been described as a mindset of ego, completely dysfunctional and exhibiting total madness (Tolle E 2011). A mindset that causes humans to kill other humans wantonly, and to destroy the environment and nature mindlessly. It is a mindset that makes a person to cater only for himself, for his family, and for people who look, think and pray like himself. A mindset of greed, insatiable ambition, desires and competition leading to a totally flawed economic system (Pilling D 2018, Collier P 2019, Stigliz J 2019, Shutt H 1998).

The pandemic has brought the whole world together to think of a better way for the future. Mankind has to go to the drawing board and ask hard questions. Who are we and what is the nature of our planet and universe? How can we all live together peacefully? How did we get to where we are now? Existing myths created by faulty mindsets should be questioned and discarded. The myths of development, of race and of nations. The myth that humans are separate from each other and from the rest of creation. The myth that the physical world is all there is. Yet there are physical and non-physical dimensions of reality. We should promote the mindset of love, trust, equality, solidarity, dignity, sustainability, collaboration, complementation, simplicity and human fulfillment. This will enable us to create a world that works for everyone, an enlightened society.

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