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The Coronavirus as Interregnum

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The Coronavirus as Interregnum

Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado

Abstract

The coronavirus crisis is changing more aspects of the status quo than the purely economic ones commonly stated. In this article I discuss my travel experience in India during the outbreak of the pandemic, which I accompany with reflections on the identity and antagonistic effects it is provoking. A mixture of ignorance and fear in face of the invisible enemy is causing in many parts of the world the rejection of people from countries of the so-called first world: a new experience for many. The foreigner, no matter from which nationality, and even the compatriot coming from “abroad” are adopting the role of the enemy/virus within the dangerous warmonger narrative unleashed during the pandemic. There is a temporary mutation in the perceived passport value, as a paper element that underpins the way we evaluate individuals outside their borders. But the coronavirus crisis has shaken the sense identity for many not only when abroad but also when in the homeland, at a time of interregnum when the old is dead and citizens feel lost in the absence of a clear and unifying hegemonic project. For instance, the European Union has failed to exercise its supranational role and has left the solution to the crisis in the hands of local nationalism as traditional constructor of subjectivities, whereas China and the Chinese has become the preferred target of antagonism, the number one public enemy, with dangerous ramifications and implications for the post-coronavirus future.

How long will the foreigner be suspected of bringing/being a virus? Does warmongering language help combat the invisible virus, or does also the role of the enemy surreptitiously extend to foreign and even countrymen enemies? Until when will the way of travelling change? Is it the final stab of nationalism over globalization? Will this be a point of no return in constructing China as the hated enemy?

At the beginning of the crisis, when the virus had not officially left Wuhan or had only anecdotally done so transported by people who had been in that city, the problem was localized and seemed somewhat remote and foreign. Like when we see the news of a natural catastrophe

or a war in a country sited on another continent from the bubble constructed by the remotely controlled TV in our living room: the emotional distance made it difficult for us to mobilize and feel the rush of the situation. That did not happen in countries like Taiwan, which being so close to the outbreak and having previous experiences with coronavirus, soon set to work to prevent a catastrophe that at the time seemed implausible to most of the rest of the world. For a few weeks, reassured by the data showing the restrained lethality of the virus, I could never imagine that the situation would turn out to be one of world paralysis, social panic, and a change in the global status quo.

I heard the first news of the coronavirus when I was backpacking in Saudi Arabia during the Chinese New Year holidays and, from dictatorship to dictatorship, I was struck by the forcefulness of the measures taken in Wuhan: something like that could never work in Europe because our societies would never go through the hoop, I contended. From the Middle East my Taiwanese girlfriend and I moved to India, just some days before the virus made its appearance in many other countries and we began to understand that the problem was not so much the lethality of the virus as its high transmission rate and how poorly prepared we were for a health crisis of such a magnitude. Caught in this context, we decided to stop our trip in a certain place and wait there as long as necessary until the situation cleared up, which by then we thought would not take more than a month. We acted this way because, at the time, it seemed more dangerous to use public transportation, transiting through airports in Asia and embarking on international flights, than staying in a small touristy town in India. The virus could be anywhere, better not to move. In fact, by then in India there were only three imported cases in the south, while in Taiwan and Spain the number of cases and the sense of danger grew day by day. So we found a budget hotel in Pushkar and set out.

After three days I woke up with a WhatsApp message from the hotel owner, saying that the police, along with doctors, had gone to the hostels in the town warning the owners that citizens of 15 countries (including Taiwan but not Spain, although Spain already had more confirmed cases) could not be accommodated and had to be rejected upon check-in. When I read that message, it seemed to me a funny nonsense that would solve itself just having patience: this is how we solved most problems in India's organized chaos. But it was not the case, and we were expelled from that hotel without further information, not knowing what to do or where to go. So, being suspects of having the coronavirus—even though we had already been in India for

three weeks—, we were forced to leave our hotel and roam the street, use public transport to get to the local hospital (where they did not know what to do with us), then the police station, and to a nearby city (Ajmer) with a larger hospital, where we had to wait for one hour in the emergency room after the doctor there told us that he did not know how to proceed but that he would call the authorities to inquire. Finally, they moved us to an improvised “Coronavirus Isolation Ward” where another doctor gave us a poorly designed “health certificate” that allegedly would allow us to enter hotels again. He just checked our blood pressure and auscultated our lungs but did not even check our temperature. We went back to Pushkar, searched for another hostel, and continued with our plan of staying there as long as necessary. As I will explain later, that health certificate almost ended up being a condemnation rather than a solution.

But before, I will talk about the anecdote when arriving at the police office. As soon as I entered, the officer who saw me arrive did not ask me what I needed or how he could help me. No. The first thing he did, before even uttering a greeting, was to ask me why I was not wearing a mask. It shocked me because nobody around us was wearing one, including him, so why should I wear it? At that moment my morning suspicion was confirmed: for the authorities we were nothing more than a danger. We were the virus. Our first-world money and my white face ceased to be a wild card, a safe-conduct that opened doors and provided a favourable treatment: it did not prevent me from being expelled from the hotel, nor did it compensate for the sense of danger that my presence suddenly caused. This was a paradigm shift on my own perceived identity. The reason seemed to be that the previous day 14 Italians had been detected positive in New Delhi, as did another Italian in Jaipur two days before that, after being all them travelling in the region where we were by then, Rajasthan. Measures against foreigners were progressively enacted in this and other regions of the country.

I told the police officer that I did not wear a mask because there was no reason why I would need it more than he did, since I had no symptoms of the coronavirus and had been in India for three weeks, while the incubation period was said to be only two. Naive enough, I thought that reasoning about the scientific consensus regarding the virus would make him see reason. When they saw my Taiwanese girlfriend arrive, the fear was even greater. They literally kicked us out of the officers’ room. “Taiwan problem, virus, very dangerous”, said that officer in poor English. “But we have not been to Taiwan in the last three months! What is dangerous, Taiwan or the

Taiwanese passport?” I replied. All these questions were translated to the officer by some people around us, from a safe distance, none of them daring to get close. Again, reasoning was useless; the officer pushed us to go to Jaipur, a city about five hours from there, where we would have to travel by public transport mixed with dozens of local travellers that could be infected if we really were that dangerous. It obviously was not an issue about preventing the spread of the virus, it was just ignorance from the higher authorities and fear of not following suit by the public workers. Rather than kicking us out of the hotels and get us moving, they should have asked us to please not move from the room and send a doctor to check our state of health. They just did not want us there. Ignorance and fear were a bad combination. And since the virus could not be seen with the naked eye but foreigners did, we became the problem. Interestingly, in India the majority of positive cases to date were Indians who had returned from abroad, while at Indian airports and train and bus stations 99% of the passengers were Indians (as foreigners were prohibited from travelling to the country since weeks before and many had already returned to their countries of origin). Nonetheless, foreigners were the only ones clearly identifiable as elements of risk.

The following day we began to experience some adults yelling “corona!” when they saw us pass, together with a few people mentioning “coronavirus” whenever we walked near them. The first time it happened, surprised, I faced the shopkeeper who shouted “corona!” from the entrance of a souvenir shop in Pushkar. What a way to bite the hand that feeds you, I thought. Very upset, I tried to make him see the inadequacy of his yelling “corona!” when he saw my girlfriend pass in front of his store. He poorly defended himself up affirming that he had yelled it out to the shopkeeper in the nearby store, but taking me for a jerk instead of apologizing did not help quell my anger. The people who passed by the street, mostly locals, stopped to listen to my recriminations against the shopkeeper, until a passer-by intervened: “but do you have the coronavirus or not?”, he asked. “Of course not!” I replied, incredulous at such an inappropriate question. “Then, if you don’t have the virus, there is no reason to get angry if people shout “corona” at you!” He stated without blinking an eye. Call me naïve, but I was expecting people to support us and his intervention felt to me as a cold jar of water. We just left there starting to feel more scared than angry.

The first days of March we heard people call us “corona” once or twice a day. After a week we had to put up with it once or twice every five minutes, including children who were already imitating the behaviour of adults. That verbal violence that identified us as suspicious viruses

added to all the people who covered their mouths and noses when they saw us nearby, women who ran away when we entered the alley where they were, or groups of young people who asked us about our nationality and then made comments where the word “coronavirus” would invariably be present. After two weeks we were already thinking twice about going outside and we were afraid of how the situation in India could evolve if the pandemic finally broke out there. On one occasion I decided to face a group of young men, who greeted us with the cry of “coronavirus!” when they saw us in the distance: while one of them tried to calm the situation and apologized saying that we were his guests, another of them responded in a violent way that we better get away from his city and his country, right away, while the rest of the youngsters around him remained silent. There was a fascinating level of complacency with those who disqualified foreigners, especially considering that we were in popular destinations where tourist income was essential to the local economy. After two weeks we decided to buy the first cheap flight that we found, for the following week, and return to Taiwan because in Spain the situation was already running wild.

However, three days before our first flight, to Delhi, we experienced a tension escalation of such magnitude that it led us to change it for the very following morning. We were in a hotel to which we had been admitted with the health certificate we had obtained two weeks before in Ajmer. In such certificate, at the top it was written “shift to isolation / for coronavirus screening” and, under that title, there were a multitude of medical notes including our data on blood pressure, negative in cough, negative in fever (although they never tested it), and a brief conclusion of the analysis as a “N” surrounded by a circle which I, not being a doctor, understood as “negative” in coronavirus. However, ignorance and fear once again, caused the hotel owner to look exclusively at the phrase “shift to isolation / for coronavirus ...” and ignore everything else. Therefore, he concluded that we were positive for coronavirus against all logic. What is more, he, and the ones who followed, did not consider that even in the case we had been positive two weeks before in Ajmer and put into isolation, if now we were there is because we should have cured. But no, they believed we were still positive right then, and so they treated us. That opened new questions: how long does the stigma of having coronavirus last for those who suffered it? Will people treat me differently when I return to Taiwan, even after passing my quarantine, if they suspect that I may have had coronavirus abroad? The hotelier called the police officer, who went to the hotel and from a meter away checked our health certificate and told us that we had to go to the local hospital, stating that we were positive in

coronavirus. “Are you a doctor to understand what that document says?” I uttered incredulously. But complaining or reasoning was absolutely useless. We dressed up and took the essentials to go into the unknown, certainly worried about what would happen that night.

Our fears were not unfounded. Upon arrival at the hospital we were greeted from two metres away by a doctor with an unwelcoming expression on his face. As my Taiwanese girlfriend sat outside, I was invited to sit in a wooden chair in a corner of the doctor’s office. There I sensed how the doctor was discussing on the phone with someone about the nationality of my girlfriend: “China, Taiwan”, he insisted a couple of times. I interrupted to tell him that it was not China, that it was Taiwan and that these were two different countries, knowing that for them having a person of Chinese nationality in their town was little less than having a horseman of the Apocalypse as a guest to the table. Of course, my clarification was useless. “Republic of China, China”, the doctor repeated over the phone. “Republic of China is Taiwan, and People’s Republic of China, is China, different countries”, I insisted, not because I had any interest in discussing with that man about diplomatic affairs, but because I understood that, at that time, having a passport from one state or another could mean the difference between spending the night in quarantine in that creepy hospital or going back to safety. Again, we were dealing with ignorance and fear, so small details like being Chinese or not could mean a world. Actually, had they used the logic, they would have deducted that the problem was Spain, where the cases were skyrocketing, and not my companion from Taiwan, an exemplary country in handling the crisis. The doctor asked if I had a fever, cough, or muscle pain, I answered to everything and he asked me to sit outside again. Two German men in their sixties had arrived there looking for a health certificate as well, entered the office and left three minutes later with their signed medical certificate, back to their hotel.

As for we, thirty minutes later we still had not received any explanation of what we were waiting for. It was already nine o’clock at night when I stood up and asked the doctor what the problem was. The doctor, about five meters away, shouted that the health certificate we were carrying stated that we had tested positive for coronavirus, manifestly angry. He asked me (although it sounded more as an accusation) how long we had been in isolation. I replied that 30 minutes until the doctor came and completed the certificate he had in his hands, stating that we had given a negative after screening. He did not believe me, nor could I believe that he, a doctor, fell into the same obvious mistakes of extreme ignorance as the hotelier and the police

officer. He said we were waiting for a “medical team” to arrive, and turned around. A few minutes later, a worker from our hotel who was accompanying us asked me for our room key. Why? Because the police were going to take our things from there and they were going to seal the room. What impotence we felt! “You cannot touch my things, you have no right and should wait until we return”, I demanded. An hour or more passed until the doctor, perhaps tired of waiting for a “medical team” that never came, asked my girlfriend the same questions about whether she had had a fever, cough, and so on. She answered “no” to everything, he then asked if she was sure and, after all, he wrote “no, no, no” on a paper, signed it, and let us go. We went back to the hotel and waited about another hour for the police to return to unseal the hotel (they sealed the whole hotel) and to recover our luggage from inside the room. Around 15 people arrived, among them two members from the government’s board of tourism apologizing for the misunderstanding and informing us that anyway we had to find another hotel for the night. Despite the bad news, they were the first ones to treat us with certain dignity that night. We arrived at a new hotel after midnight, not being able to eat anything since lunch. We were angry and hungry but, above all, happy that we had a bed to spend the night in a safe place. The first thing we did was to change our flight to Delhi for a few hours later that very same morning, and then buy a new flight to Taiwan for the following day. We were lucky because after that day flying became an impossible mission and India was lockdown for, at least, three weeks by now.

To top off our odyssey, on the day of our flight to Taiwan I felt that I had a 1% chance of getting aboard, as I did not carry my Taiwanese residence permit with me, and the country had banned the arrival of non-resident foreigners three days before. At least, we thought, my girlfriend could escape the country for sure, and that felt as an enormous improvement. We called the Taiwan office in New Delhi and, after consulting with the authorities, they called us back several hours later claiming that they could not do anything to help me. An administrative of my university in Taiwan also double-checked with the Taiwan immigration office about my situation and received the same refusal as a response: without a physical residence permit it was not possible to travel. I only had a digital copy that, just to make things more complex, included the number of my old passport which I had renewed on my recent visit to Spain. So, I stood at the Delhi airport, with the city on lockdown, with no hope of being allowed to board my flight. Fortunately, we had purchased the last two seats of the last direct flight to Taiwan that would be available for a long time, and with “China” Airlines, paradoxically a Taiwanese

company. If there was a possibility that they would let me board without the proper documents, I contended, it was with a national airline and a direct flight (if I had to stop in another country they would never let me get on the plane without the required documentation for my destination). The airline's chief operating officer was a very correct Taiwanese man who sent images of my documentation via an online messaging app directly to Taiwan's immigration officials. Two hours later, after a good number of questions and against all odds, I was allowed to fly. Until I set foot in Taiwan, I could not believe that bureaucrats could be so humane when it comes to relaxing rules, even more when we were in the midst of a global pandemic and I was a foreign national. The news that came days after from foreigners who were stuck in India were terrible: assaults on the street, expelled or rejected from hotels, difficulties finding food...

This is the story of an adventure that, beyond anecdotes, gives rise to questioning in what sense our societies are changing. How long will the foreigner be suspected of bringing a virus? Until now, in most societies only foreigners with certain ethnic traits suspected of coming from poorer countries than the country in question were looked down upon. However, post-coronavirus racism has turned the tables and the undesirables have also become people with good purchasing power who until now travelled the world as they pleased: Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese, Spanish, Italian... or any other citizen who could easily be confused with the stereotype of these ethnic characteristics, whatever the nationality of their passport. Thus, many Indians confessed to me, afflicted, that being from areas of northern India they had suffered the same harassment and identification with the virus because of their East Asian features.

How long will the foreigner be a suspect? For how long will the way of travelling change? Let's imagine that the coronavirus has come to stay for at least a couple of years, with successive outbreaks here and there, until a vaccine is validated and applied globally. It would be no surprise that mandatory two-week quarantines upon arrival in a new country become the norm. Who is going to plan a trip in that context? Moreover, it would not be surprising that many withdrawn from travelling due to the risk of being stranded in a distant country in the event of an outbreak while they are abroad. International flights will be reinstated, of that there is no doubt, but the fear of the foreign and of being away from home has been indelibly recorded for many. The same security paranoia that was experienced in airports after 9/11 will now be experienced after Covid-19, and explosive material detectors will be exchanged for

thermometers, whereas police dogs will be substituted by doctors in white coats, masks and surgical gloves. And even if someone dares to travel once, will they do it again after they felt that being the foreigner one is suspected not of carrying a virus but of being the virus itself?

The warmongering language used by the institutions to “fight” the virus, together with the fear in face of an invisible enemy that we cannot identify with the naked eye or point out on the street, is leading to an association between foreigners and viruses. It has even reached a point in which citizens fear and reject fellow citizens from highly affected regions of the same country or from abroad. In Spain, for instance, there has been an unofficial campaign on social media against people from Madrid allegedly moving to other parts of the country, treating them as viruses independently of whether they were infected or not. The judiciary even had to act against rumours accusing certain families of having travelled to other cities when they had actually remained in Madrid. It is logical to think that in the face of antagonistic discourses that place “us” against the invisible enemy, a visceral need emerges to identify that enemy in a material way, to make it more real, more tangible: more human. In our personal travel anecdote, we also experienced that: my Taiwanese girlfriend received several messages on social media from other Taiwanese furiously requesting her not to return to the homeland, so she would not bring the dangerous virus with her. The discourses blaming other nations, particularly China, are also creating a legitimizing basis for racism against the citizens of that country. As if that was not in itself regrettable enough, generalized ignorance leads to equating every person with oriental features to this “Chinese enemy”. It may be something that might surprise many in East Asia, but in Europe practically no one is able to differentiate between a Japanese, a Korean, a Chinese or a Vietnamese. They all often go, unfortunately, into the same sack.

The virus will die sooner or later but the irresponsible bellicose language against China and the Chinese will endure much longer, threatening to become a source of socio-political instability and institutional racism. The struggle for the narrative in the post-coronavirus world between China and the United States exemplifies this new paradigm, with the notorious motto of the “Chinese virus”, the claims of China hiding the real number of victims after the US overcame those numbers, or the repeated accusations of China not informing the rest of the world about how serious the virus was (despite they had confined a 11 million people city as early as January 23rd, while all media described the situation of apocalypse China was living). As do the ubiquitous criticisms and suspicions with which China’s health aid is received by many

countries. If China helps, it always helps badly; if China doesn't help, it is because they are irresponsible after the chaos "they" have "created"; if it helps well and for free, it does so only to gain geopolitical power and for mere self-interest; if it helps well and obtains money from it, it is evil because on top of having spread the "Chinese virus" all over the planet now they want to do business with it. I have read news in serious media arguing each of these criticisms. In this interregnum, China has become the scapegoat for many: no matter what it does, it will always be accused and blamed. Besides our personal opinion regarding the Chinese regime, it deserves to be mentioned the amount of conspiracies and invective relying on biased or directly false information that are circulating against China, the Chinese government and the Chinese people. It seems rather that in the face of a post-globalization scenario in which China is placing itself in the best starting point, the seed of hatred already existing against the Chinese has finished hatching. I think there are many reasons to criticize China, but the way it is currently being done threatens to create racial antagonisms that will only fan the flames of violent nationalism (fascism?) on all sides.

Globalization had been mortally wounded since 2008. Its detractors ranged from the nationalists clamouring against supranational institutions that limited national sovereignty, to populists claiming against the elites of the neoliberal system that hindered the redistribution of wealth and the equality between citizens. The European Union, without going any further, is in check as much or more as it was after the financial crisis and the so-called rescue of Greece. On this occasion, with tens of thousands of deaths, the rich European countries continue to take advantage of moments of crisis (i.e. they enjoy the flight of foreign currency from the countries of Southern Europe and a lower interest rate in public debt while it grows in Southern countries). But this time the public opinion of the societies less favoured can turn upside down. It cannot be understood that the rich countries of the Union, the ones most benefited in times of prosperity by the way the system is designed, hide and avoid all solidarity when the body count increases. The previous imposition of austerity scenarios and the blame on Southern member states for a disadvantage that is more structural than cultural did already fuel certain "Eurospecticism", but now that we are not talking about economy but about survival, things can go one step further. Blocking essential medical products at the national level within the common market was an evident sign that what exists now is only a temporary collaboration as long as the rich countries feel it benefits them. I shall repeat: it is not a Union but a temporary collaboration. Some in the United Kingdom felt it was not beneficial enough and decided to

self-isolate in good will, exemplifying this underlying reality. The Union, to be a real one, must be also financial and tackle risks and crises as one. This would require what Étienne Balibar already mentioned as a new “European citizenship”, which seems to be “impossible to realize” but nonetheless remains “absolutely necessary”. The coronavirus was a great opportunity, as times of “war”, moments when national identities have historically crystallised through the union of the community against a common enemy, showing solidarity, acting as united demos. I am afraid the European Union lost the best opportunity to construct a common sense of identity that it will ever have; and without it, the necessary solidarity cannot exist to maintain the viability of the European project. The main problem of the European Union after the coronavirus crisis, hence, will be one of identity construction at all levels.

Facing the virus has required interrupting not only the factories that impelled neoliberalism but also the free movement of citizens across borders. Confinement, as well as the health system’s organisation, has been primarily organized on a national scale. This, together with the lack of rapid coordination and aid by the institutions of the European Union, has created the feeling that national states are alone in defending their citizens, at the same time that national identity was strengthened by the antagonistic logic of fighting a war against the external enemy (i.e. the Chinese virus). Similarly as it happened during the recent financial crisis, the massive loss of employment, mistrust in the capitalist system, disappointment by the traditional parties most citizens had always relied on, or the negative feelings towards an uncertain future, are all factors that shake the identity of individuals in our societies. For this reason, after this crisis, I contend that we will once again experience a wave of identity reconstruction in several axis, with nationalism and populism struggling for hegemony.

The virus, in short, has affected our brains and hearts as viciously as our lungs. It has been proved that prolonged quarantines cause detrimental and long-lasting effects on people’s mental health. We will have to face the effects that a massive social quarantine—with generalized social depression, fear of an enemy invisible and perceived as foreign, and pessimism towards a dreary future—can inflict in the identity of our societies. Empathy with foreigners has decreased to disheartening levels (what happened to all those Syrians who were waiting at the Greek border just before this crisis?), while solidarity between nations has been unsatisfactory to say the least. We are heading towards a Gramscian interregnum, where globalisation has died (at least in its social conceptualisation, although economically will last

longer despite the foreseeable return of industries to the national level) and we are heading towards a new unknown destination. For now, in the fight for hegemony, nationalism starts with the best cards to build the shared social identity that drives its transformative project. It can do so in different ways. A positive one would be the rediscovery of well-understood national sovereignty, legitimizing the social-state and the role of democracy, aimed at greater investment in the public sphere, in strengthening the national welfare system as opposed to a privatizing neoliberalism focused only on the opinion of “the markets”. Likewise, the widespread feeling that the political and economic elites of the neoliberal system have failed us may open a window of opportunity for a constructive populist logic to have something to say. A healthy combination of populism and nationalism would be the best alternative to emerge stronger from this period of uncertainty.