

## **Coronavirus: its geopolitical and societal effects in Europe**

**By Maurice Fitzpatrick**

It would be perverse to wish the coronavirus lockdown to last any longer than is required for our health and safety. Yet the near-total closure of schools and businesses begs this question: how much time is necessary for the virus to disrupt and dominate our lives for us to adopt long-term changes after it passes? The scientists do not know what effect the summer season in the Northern Hemisphere may have in counteracting the virus, nor do they know whether there will be a second wave of the virus later in 2020. If summer helps to contain the virus and if winter does not bring a resurgence and we revert to the status quo, will a valuable chance to accelerate necessary changes in how we live our lives have been missed?

It has taken two coronavirus outbreaks—SARS in 2002-3 and COVID-19 in 2019-20—for the Chinese government to ban the wet markets that sell live animals with putative medicinal benefits such as palm civets, pangolins and bats which have originally transmitted the coronaviruses to humans. And it took two world wars for European nations to resolve to cooperate and coalesce into a community of nations. With some luck and determination, after the second major recession in twelve years in the European Union, will we learn to permanently reject the doctrine of austerity and instead to redistribute society's wealth more fairly?

As writer and journalist Fintan O'Toole rightly observed on March 10th in the *Irish Times*: "The spread of coronavirus has shown us that none of us is safe unless all of us are safe. Health just became public again". Accordingly, the Irish private hospitals have been collapsed into the public hospital system. Yet a public health system is but one aspect of society that coronavirus has forced us to recognize as a benefit of the commonweal. For instance, in declaring an "economic and financial war" on the coronavirus, France simultaneously declared war on the economic and financial doctrines by which France and the European Union have lived. France's investment of \$50 billion to protect its businesses is proportionate, in population terms, to the United States' \$2 trillion stimulus package. Unlike the US, however, nations in the EU are considerably circumscribed in formulating economic policy by the EU's directive against national debt exceeding 60% of GDP. At a stroke, the French torpedoed that doctrine and other EU nations are following suit. We are now seeing the most aggressive nationalization and recapitalization of private-sector enterprises ever undertaken in Europe.

The credit ease and 'debt holiday' required to offset this mass stoppage of work and loss of earnings require forbearance that is well beyond what the central European institutions have been willing to countenance since the inception of the EU. So it is all the more remarkable that the commitment of national governments to do whatever is necessary to sustain European societies through the crisis has been matched by the commitment of central European institutions. The notoriously inflexible European Central Bank and the sclerotic European Commission have suddenly become agile in their policy-making.

This new-found radicalism at the national and pan-national levels in Europe could be a double-edged sword. If the coronavirus pandemic intensifies and lasts well into 2020, the depression that will result from it will pose a profound challenge to European integrity. The Common Market in Europe; the Schengen system of free travel across Europe's borders; the right of EU citizens to live and work in another European country; the natural infrastructural connections between, and through, European countries: all are already either suspended until further notice or hugely curtailed. Hard borders have emerged all over Europe. It is the right call, given the speed with which the pandemic has escalated, but it means that there is a deep reckoning for Europe ahead; and its citizens will have to work to maintain the admirable solidarity that has prevailed so far.

In contrast to the 2008 crash and its aftermath when the bigger western European powers imposed austerity programs on what they termed the 'PIIGS' (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Spain), governments are taking pre-emptive measures to ensure societies remain liquid. Italy—and other European countries drastically affected by coronavirus such as Spain—has led the charge in doing so. Many European countries, including Ireland, have not fully recovered from the global recession in 2008. It is true that Ireland's GDP suggests exceptionally good times, but these gains have been very unequally spread. No patience remains to undergo another long recession while an elite benefits from the 'recovery'. Coronavirus may fully reveal this fundamental shift in attitude in European societies.

In order for something better to emerge after this crisis, we need to confront the unnecessary injustice that currently prevails and to initiate an extensive conversation about what sort of society we want—something European nations can best do together. To this end, a measure that has been adopted in all but name during this crisis must be tabled as a permanent right of citizenship.

Universal Basic Income (UBI), which has been piloted in timorous small-scale experiments across the world, is now effectively being introduced at a national level in Europe. The Italian government, to take one example, has rightly perceived coronavirus as disabling Italian citizens from earning money and it has responded by scrapping household bills, taxes and mortgage repayments. This is the reverse of European governments' responses to the 2008 sub-prime crash when they—at the behest of the European Central Bank—recapitalized zombie banks from the taxpayers' coffers and let people suffer. The coronavirus has demonstrated that it is within the gift of governments to provide UBI, a safety net for the marginalized and the disemployed. It would be noble to commemorate the thousands who have died, and who will die, in this pandemic by establishing in their honour a more just society and a more authentic union for all of Europe's citizens. Introducing UBI is the way to do it.

Maurice Fitzpatrick is a political filmmaker and author from Ireland. The University of Notre Dame Press has recently republished two of his books:

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