COVID-19 and World Order

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Among the brilliant and flamboyant costumes they wear during Carnival in Venice, a sombre figure also stalks. It wears a white mask with dark spectacles and a long curving beak along with a black hat and gown. The “plague doctor” costume was once more than a diversion. It dates back to the middle of the 14th century when waves of the bubonic plague—the Black Death—hit the city, probably borne from further east by some of the many trading ships that had made Venice so rich. The authorities did what they could, setting up special burial grounds and quarantine stations throughout the city and eventually obliging newly arriving ships to isolate themselves for forty days on a remote island. The city also organized and paid for the plague doctors. The mask, with its spectacles and a beak stuffed with special herbs, would, it was hoped, ward off the noxious vapors suspected of carrying the disease. The great trading city of Genoa on the other side of Italy endured its own outbreak around the same time and the plague spread outwards throughout Europe, carrying off a third or more of all its inhabitants.

It was a different world of course with very different values, institutions, and science and technology. Yet the reactions of Europeans and their governments then—fear, denial, resignation, hope, blind optimism, experimentation—are not so different from ours today. Moralists and theologians blamed the pandemic on the decline
in public morality; in one of the stranger responses, wandering bands of flagellants whipped themselves raw to atone for their sins. Conspiracy theorists preferred to single out minorities, at that time Jews. Governments floundered; some virtually collapsed while others did their best to cope and to contain the disease, clearing out garbage because it produced supposedly dangerous odors, locking up the sick in their houses or forcing them out into the countryside to die there. And, as many are doing today, the rich fled the cities to their country estates while the poor remained where they were, jammed into slums and at the mercy of the disease.

There was a desperate search for prophylactics and cures just as there is today: nosegays perhaps, like the herbs in the plague doctors’ masks, might keep the evil vapors away. Pilgrims flocked to holy relics, particularly those of St. Sebastian who, it was held, protected worshippers against the plague. While there were many instances of selfishness and indifference to the suffering of others, there were also great acts of altruism, with local groups springing up to nurse the sick and bury the dead. What made the times even more difficult and troubling is that the Black Death was not the only crisis in Europe. Across the continent, conflicts—the Hundred Years’ War between England and France, for example—carried on despite the pandemic. More, the Great Schism in the Church of Rome shook public faith in the institution itself and in morality.\footnote{Shocks, as we are discovering with COVID-19, do not always come at convenient times, and when they intersect with other crises, as happened in 2020, their impact is amplified.}

Historians disagree on how much change the Black Death brought.\footnote{Governments did not fall as a result of that first great outbreak, and the Church eventually regained much of its authority, at least until its next crisis during the Reformation. Because there were fewer people to work, wages in some areas went up and workers were often somewhat better treated. It is possible that the need to deal with the repeated waves of the plague encouraged the move to stronger centralised states, but war was already doing that. The plague, if anything, reinforced a lesson Europeans already knew well—that life is uncertain and unfair, and death can come quickly. And it was going to take another five and a half centuries after those first outbreaks in the late 1340s for scientists to finally work out how the Black Death was transmitted, and it took longer still for the development of the antibiotics which could treat it.} It will be harder for us to come to terms with the prospect that we may not find a cure or treatment for COVID-19 soon. For we have got used to a world where science and technology forge ahead, eliminating what were once ordinary diseases,
prolonging life, and producing consumer goods and innovations on a scale and with a rapidity our ancestors could only dream of. We have come to expect what the British government fetishized in 2020, that science and our institutions will solve our problems and keep us safe. The impact of our pandemic may, paradoxically, be greater than that of the even more deadly Black Death precisely because we are unaccustomed to dealing with uncertainty. The COVID-19 crisis is often compared to the Spanish influenza at the end of the First World War, which may have killed as many as fifty million people around the globe. Certainly there are similarities: the virus spread quickly in a globalized world and governments varied their responses, from ignoring its spread to imposing curfews, with the result that mortality rates varied widely from place to place. Yet in other ways the reactions to the influenza were closer to those of the 14th century. Medical science did not yet have the tools to fully understand the influenza’s transmission and impact or to develop ways of treating it quickly. People at the time also lived in an uncertain world where life could be cut short at any time by a whole host of diseases which have now virtually disappeared, such as smallpox, or that can be managed and treated, such as cholera or typhoid. There is so little comment about the influenza in the memoirs and novels of the time that perhaps the millions of dead in the war had further habituated the world to sudden death.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken even strong societies. It has brought into sharp relief flaws that were already starting to emerge in our globalized world: growing social and economic inequalities, for example, or the dangerous fragility of international supply lines. And it has exacerbated existing international tensions, between the United States and China for example, as governments blame each other for the spread of the virus. Just as 14th-century Europe suffered from a convergence of different crises, so too today problems and issues that had been developing on parallel paths are increasingly intersecting. The higher death rate among ethnic and racial minorities in several countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, has heightened existing concerns and resentment over racism. Resistance to globalization or at least to this current form of it has been given new force by the rapid international spread of COVID-19. The public’s disillusionment of the past decades with their own elites and institutions has been further fueled by the incoherent and often ineffective responses of their governments.

A debate has started about what we did wrong and what we did right in confronting the pandemic, but it is already developing into a broader discussion of what is
wrong with our societies and what we need to do in order to cope better with the next great challenge, whether it is economic, medical, or environmental. We will need to examine and debate our own assumptions about how to prepare for sudden large-scale crises, about the proper role of government, or about how to build stable and effective domestic and international societies. As we start to take stock of the costs and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare to deal with an uncertain future, history, I suggest, can help us answer crucial questions. Most importantly, why are we repeatedly surprised by catastrophes? While there are what Nassim Taleb has called “black swan” events—rare and hard or impossible to predict—most cataclysmic events have warning signs beforehand, if only people care to notice. If we can get a better understanding of why we and, crucially, those in positions of power fail to do so, we may be able to guard against that complacency in the future. Then there is the question, once the crisis is upon us, why do some leaders and some societies cope better than others? And, then, how do we deal with the consequences and pick up the pieces? When have societies learned from catastrophes and put in place needed reforms and measures for the ones yet to come? By looking at history, we can gain a better idea of the role played in crises by values and ideas, the strengths or weaknesses of institutions, and leadership.

History can help as we raise questions and look for answers, but we must not expect clear lessons or convenient blueprints for the future. We must understand and acknowledge differences over time and in societies, whether in institutions, capabilities, or values. The United States is often compared to the Roman Empire, but the two are far apart in both time and character. American presidents may have an imperial style, but they do not sacrifice to the gods or indeed believe that they are gods themselves. And the order in which events unfold matters. The military planners and strategists going into the Second World War were influenced by their experience of the first. The French thought the defense would still be stronger than the offensive, and so they built the Maginot Line and waited to shatter German attacks. The Allied leaders who planned the post-1945 world were conscious of what had gone wrong in the 1920s and 1930s and hoped to set up institutions to avert those political and economic failures.

The study of the past offers instructive examples, showing what has worked in the face of challenges and what has not. In the financial crisis of 2008, the chair of the Federal Reserve, Ben Bernanke, and Timothy Geithner, chair of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, were helped in their decision making by their knowledge of previous crashes and depressions, particularly the Great Depression of the
1930s. Indeed, Bernanke had researched and written about the subject in his academic career. History also warns of unintended consequences and shows what the price of failure might be. The Tsarist regime in Russia went to war in 1914 assuming that the conflict would be short and hoping that a common cause might pull a badly fractured society together. The opposite happened and large numbers of Russians, including, critically, much of the military, simply withdrew their support. The first revolution, of February 1917, toppled what was a hollow shell, and the second, in October, brought the tiny Bolshevik Party into power with lasting consequences for Russia and the world. Finally, examples of similar situations—such as depressions, war, revolutions—allow us to ask what we might do ourselves. Knowing what questions to ask is the first step to getting good answers.

Using analogies to analyze situations and determine what policies and actions might work has to be done with care of course, and we must always guard against getting locked into just one analogy. Think of the ways in which the Munich analogy has been misused both in the initial assessments and expectations. Anthony Eden was persuaded that Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt was a dictator like Benito Mussolini or Adolf Hitler, whom Eden had dealt with in the 1930s, and that he must be confronted early on while he still was consolidating his regime and not yet militarily strong. And so Britain, in league with France and Israel, embarked on the disastrous Suez adventure. In reality Nasser was an Arab nationalist who was bent not on war and conquest but on situating Egypt at the center of the Arab world. Unlike Hitler and Mussolini he could have been managed with a combination of skilful diplomacy and containment.

In a few months many of us have gone from assuming that pandemics were only in the past to living with an unaccustomed degree of uncertainty. We still do not understand completely how COVID-19 spreads, why it affects some demographic groups more than others, or how best to contain and treat it. Although we have made considerable progress, the effective vaccine may be a long way off—or not come at all. The pandemic has shaken our faith in science, in our leaders, and in our societies.

Yet COVID-19 should not have come as such a shock. Epidemiologists and other scientific experts have been warning for years that we faced increasing risks from viruses that jump from other living creatures, such as birds or swine, to human beings. As populations increased and pressed into hitherto wild natural areas, the chances of that grew greater. More, the ease and extent of travel around the globe made it likely that new viruses would spread rapidly. There have been warnings
from past influenza pandemics: the Asian flu, 1957–8; the Hong Kong flu, 1968–9; the swine flu, 2009–10; and of course, long before those, the Spanish flu, 1917–20, which may have killed as many as fifty million people worldwide. And coronaviruses such as MERS, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, and SARS, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, gave warnings of other strains of potentially lethal disease occurring on a large scale.

There are, alas, many examples in the past of people ignoring evidence, or when that became impossible, explaining it away. Often it is a consequence of being preoccupied with other problems which seem more immediate. In January 2020 scattered reports that a strange new virus had appeared in Wuhan were overshadowed by the sharp rise in tensions between the United States and Iran or, in the United States itself, the Democratic primaries. In addition, as psychologists have pointed out, we tend to suffer from a confirmation bias. We fit what we observe into an existing system of beliefs and assumptions. That is reinforced increasingly today by media “echo chambers” which keep out contrary views. There were signs before the Wall Street Crash of 1929 that the stock market was dangerously overheating and that levels of debt were too high, but the ever-growing pool of investors wanted to believe in their chances of making great profits. Indeed, they often resented those who tried to issue warnings as only interested in keeping the wealth for themselves. In 1998 the investment firm Long-Term Capital, which prided itself on having taken risk out of finance, suddenly imploded when the capital markets did not behave as the computer models had predicted. Its failure threatened the stability of the whole American system, and it had to be salvaged and then quietly wound up when the Federal Reserve Bank of New York organized a bailout by major financial institutions. Yet for all the postmortems and recommendations for greater regulation, very little was done and the derivatives market continued to grow. The belief among those investors who were making extravagant profits thanks to increasingly arcane instruments was, as the title of Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff’s study of centuries of financial folly says, “this time is different.” As those who have written about what went wrong in 2008, including Reinhart and Rogan, Gillian Tett, Andrew Ross Sorkin, and Michael Short, have all pointed out, the warnings, from academics, government officials, and businesspeople, were simply brushed aside.\(^4\)

The First World War was a turning point in the 20th century, and its outbreak provides a vivid example of how decision making can enter a narrow tunnel and how those making the decisions fail to account for potential and unintended
consequences. Without that long and costly struggle which put the societies involved under such strain, Europe might well have been spared the violent militarized politics of the 1920s and 1930s. We can never know, but it is possible that Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire might have evolved into multinational states. Russia in 1914 had survived an earlier revolution and was moving by fits and starts towards constitutional and representative government. More, its economy and society were modernizing rapidly. The war cut short that promise and, by bringing about the destruction of the old regime, made possible the Bolshevik coup d’état of October 1917. The spread of the Bolsheviks’ revolutionary ideology and the growth of anti-democratic communist parties increasingly under the direction of Moscow, as well as the establishment of new states based on ethnicity, made European domestic and interstate politics dangerously polarized and overheated. The First World War did not lead directly to the Second but it made it possible. If they could have seen the future or even imagined a part of it, would Europe’s leaders have acted otherwise than they did in the final crisis of July 1914? That failure of imagination is a case study in why we are shocked by events that, especially in hindsight, had been threatening.  

In the summer of 1914 Europeans were, for the most part, stunned by the speed—just over a month—with which the continent went from peace to a general war. Thousands of people who had gone on holidays as usual in July found themselves scrambling to get home as borders snapped shut and trains were diverted for troops. The long century of peace in Europe after the Napoleonic Wars had persuaded many Europeans that their civilization had moved beyond the need for nations to settle disputes by violence. And the political and military leaders, who had thought they could still use war as an instrument of policy, had been banking on a short decisive war. As a consequence, they had made no plans either to stockpile large amounts of war matériel or convert a peacetime economy into a war one, and they were surprised and appalled at how quickly mass industrial war consumed resources. Within a month the French used up half the ammunition they had on hand and German artillery had fired all the shells available by the end of six weeks. And, as the two sides settled into their trenches in the late autumn of 1914, it became clear that a war planned as one of movement was on its way to becoming a stalemate.  

The war should not have come as such a surprise. After all, the military and diplomatic establishments of the great powers had been thinking and planning for potential war since the end of the 19th century. And the first decade of the 20th century had shown that peace in Europe was resting on increasingly shaky foun-
inations. Heightened nationalisms, aided by the spread of literacy, the mass media, and the extension of the voting franchise, put governments under pressure to defend national honor and interests, if necessary, through war. And governments and lobby groups were in turn prepared to use public sentiments to promote activist foreign policies or get more funds for the military. Before 1914 an arms race gripped the major powers which further heightened tensions among them. Added to that was the influence of social Darwinism which encouraged a belief that a struggle for survival was inevitable among nations. For some Europeans war was seen as desirable, a way of demonstrating the nation's virility and determination to succeed. Any war, it was assumed, would necessarily be short because after about six months, empty treasuries and bankrupt economies would force the powers to negotiate.

European planners should not have been surprised at the nature of the war or by the inability of either side to overcome the other. They certainly had enough evidence by 1914 to make an informed guess about how a major European war might unfold. The military had closely studied recent conflicts around the world. It was increasingly clear that advances in technology had given an advantage to a well-dug-in defense. Yet evidence from wars such as the American Civil War or colonial wars was dismissed on the grounds that, as one European general put it, “Those savage encounters do not deserve the name of war.” Perhaps because they remained uneasy about the evident power the new weapons gave defenders, the military took refuge in calculations of how many attackers would be needed to overcome one defender or magical thinking about imbuing all their soldiers with a longing to sacrifice their lives.

Europeans had ample warning that a major war would be hard to control and perhaps unwinnable by either side. Their strategists and political leaders should have been able to envisage the possibility of a stalemate, for the balance of power was so evenly divided by 1914. Ivan Bloch, a highly successful entrepreneur in Russia, devoted much of the last part of his life to a massive study of war in which he argued that Europe’s own economic strength could be turned inwards to tear it apart and that any conflict was likely to produce years of deadlock rather than the weeks and months of swift battles the generals imagined. The French politician Jean Jaurès made a study of war and came to a similar conclusion. Because both were civilians and the former a Jewish businessman and the latter a socialist, they were ignored by the experts.

The road to the First World War also shows how dangerous the division of responsibilities can be. The politicians tended to leave military affairs to their
experts—much as some governments in the COVID-19 crisis have claimed to be following the science when in reality the decisions that must be made are broad political ones. In the major European powers, civilian control over the military, even in Britain and France, which had stronger traditions in that area than Germany or Austria-Hungary, was inadequate or nearly nonexistent. So the military made plans, which they did not always share with the civilian leadership, to fight offensively or only on two fronts. Too often the civilians were content to remain in the dark only to find that, as the war approached, the choices before them had been dangerously narrowed. In the final days before the First World War started, the Kaiser in Germany and the Tsar in Russia tried to limit the coming conflict by fighting on a single front only to be told by their generals that was impossible.

Of course there were those, including political leaders such as Jaurès or Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, who worried about growing tensions and careless talk about how a good war would clear the air, but an important psychological barrier had been crossed and war had become thinkable. In the years before 1914 a series of crises—the annexation of the Ottoman territory by Austria-Hungary in 1908, the Italian seizure of Libya from the Ottoman Empire in 1911, and the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913—brought talk of war and threatening moves such as military mobilizations. The powers muddled through but each crisis left both lingering resentments and a fatal complacency, similar to the one at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, that all such challenges could be successfully dealt with. The brinkmanship served further to weaken what was already a fragile European order and increased the temptation for preventive wars. As mutual suspicions grew, what was intended as deterrence on one side was read in other capitals as a threat. In 1914, Russia’s decision to mobilize some forces as “a precaution” was read in Berlin as preparation for an attack, and the high command pressured the government to order the German armies into action before it was too late.

In the final days before a general war, Europe’s leaders let it down. The British government and the media were not paying attention to the confrontation developing in the Balkans after the assassination of the Archduke because of the Irish question that was threatening to tear apart British society, while the French were focused on the sensational trial of the wife of a leading politician who had shot a critic of her husband. In Berlin the Kaiser recklessly promised his “blank check” of support to Austria-Hungary as it moved to destroy Serbia and his government meekly backed him up. When they realized that they were about to unleash a general war, the Kaiser and his cousin Tsar Nicholas II of Russia both hesitated to sign the fatal mobilization orders, yet both gave way to their own military.
How then can societies and their governments avoid being taken by surprise and prepare themselves better to make decisions when great events occur? When we look at previous crises and the COVID-19 pandemic, certain tendencies stand out that must be guarded against. Complacency: the faith that we have muddled through before, avoiding a war or finding a cure, and we can do so again. Tunnel vision: those in positions of power and authority fall into the trap of speaking and listening only to those who reinforce what they already believe, and competing viewpoints are belittled or ignored and awkward pieces of evidence explained away. And finally, an unwillingness to learn from experience: the temptation after a crisis has been dealt with to relax and go back to business as usual, yet that is precisely the moment society should be resolving to do better and to set in place insurance, whether that be better banking regulations or stockpiles of crucial medical goods.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, democratic states, especially those with a history of moderate politics where parties tend to seek the middle ground, were able to successfully appeal to their citizens to think of a common good without needing coercion. In Germany, South Korea, and New Zealand, which were among the more successful countries in managing the pandemic, governments did not have to order people to wear masks or do social distancing. As the two world wars demonstrated, patriotism or ideologies of other sorts bring people together. Accepting sacrifices and mobilizing resources, especially in a long struggle, cannot be imposed merely by fiat. Soviet citizens in the Second World War had little choice over their leaders, but they trusted them as Russians had not in the First World War. Soviet men and women volunteered to fight the German invaders, organized partisan groups behind the lines, and endured long years of hardship. They did so, it is clear, not for communism but for Mother Russia, and official propaganda came to reflect that. Britain was able to maintain its war effort because its citizens agreed on the common cause of surviving and defeating the Axis powers. Labour politicians joined a Conservative government led by Winston Churchill. In France, by contrast, the divisions over what sort of society France should be, over values such as religion, and over whether Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia was the greatest enemy had already threatened to tear the country apart in the 1930s. When the war came, neither French society nor its leaders were united in their values or goals and that contributed to the defeat and capitulation of 1940.7

Success in coping also depends on existing institutions, which include effective governing bodies and civil services, well-resourced education and research, and
strong industrial and economic organizations. Britain endured and prevailed in two world wars, in part, because it mobilized its economy and society more efficiently and thoroughly than its enemies. The government persuaded unions and employers, on the whole successfully, to work together to sink their differences for the war effort, and it persuaded the public to accept a high degree of control over their lives. Russia held together for a surprising length of time in the First World War thanks largely to the patriotism of its people, but by 1917 its institutions, never strong to begin with, were buckling under the strain. Soldiers at the front were so short of equipment that they had to share rifles and could only fire a handful of bullets a day. The railways were clogged and chaotic and the cities were slowly starving because crops could not be brought in from the country. The Tsar’s government was incapable of providing leadership, and rumors of corruption, even treason, undermined its few remaining shreds of authority.

As the experience of Russia in the First World War shows, leadership counts too. The countries that have done well in the 2020 pandemic tend to be those with leaders who are both responsive to their publics and are not afraid to make difficult decisions. Angela Merkel in Germany and Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand had the benefit of leading strong and cohesive societies before the pandemic, and their decisions and style have only enhanced that fact rather than undermined it. Both have addressed their peoples bluntly and have not attempted to minimize the severity of the crisis or the challenges in managing it. Nor have they been afraid to make decisions. By contrast, the British government has sent out a series of conflicting messages and irritated the public by telling transparent untruths about, for example, the availability of testing. In the United States, the federal government has been largely absent in managing the crises and, when it has intervened, has often issued dangerous or misleading advice. Leadership there has devolved largely to the state and municipal level with understandably mixed results. In more authoritarian societies, the response, as so often has been the case, has depended too much on the leader. Brazil’s president Jair Bolsonaro made light of the threat of COVID-19—a “mere case of the sniffles,” he said—and quarrelled with his own bureaucrats, the medical establishment, and state governors. In Russia, President Vladimir Putin denied the existence of cases for far too long even as he secluded himself in a special hygienic bunker. China has been more successful, but that may be less a consequence of Xi Jinping’s leadership—after all, he largely absent himself in the early stages of the pandemic—and more on the size and strength of the Communist Party and a society which values cohesiveness and conformity to social norms.
Good leaders also have a willingness to draw on advice and support from whatever quarter. Just as President Abraham Lincoln had assembled a cabinet full of talented individuals, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the 1930s brought into government Republicans, businesspeople, university professors, and, in the case of Frances Perkins in the Department of Labor, a strong social activist. During the Second World War the governments of both the United States and Canada had the “dollar-a-year men,” successful businessmen who volunteered their services. In Britain Winston Churchill pioneered the use of scientific advisors, and the famous code-breaking center at Bletchley Park raided the universities for their most talented students. It is said that when Churchill paid a visit to Bletchley he remarked to the director that, while he had urged that no stone be unturned to find the brightest minds, he had not expected to be taken literally. In addition, leaders such as Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Churchill can be firm in purpose and confident of the rightness of their long-term goals but still willing to listen to contradictory views. Indeed, that helped them to think through their decisions. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy assembled an Executive Committee, ExComm, of his most important officials and advisers and had them thrash out the merits and demerits of possible responses to the Soviet provocations.

In that crisis Kennedy also showed that he had learned from the failure of the Bay of Pigs the year before not to believe everything the military told him or the assurances they gave. That brings me to the last issue I wish to raise. How can individuals or groups of individuals such as nations best learn from major crises? That we can and must learn seems obvious. In the past century democratic governments have fallen into the habit of setting up official inquiries to probe what went wrong and to offer recommendations. After both world wars a number of governments commissioned official histories whose purpose was not merely to create a record of events but to analyze and probe what had worked and what had not. How much governments heed such conclusions is another matter. The American military and many in the foreign policy establishment concluded after the United States’ failure in Vietnam that it should never again fight a counterinsurgency war. So, strategies and tactics that had been learned through painful experience were not studied at military colleges and the best book on counterinsurgency was allowed to go out of print. With the invasion of Afghanistan and then the invasion and occupation of Iraq at the start of this century, many of those lessons had to be relearned. As a counterexample, certain young army officers, among them Charles de Gaulle and Heinz Guderian, learned from their experiences in the First World War to respect the offensive potential of the tank, and they
were able put their ideas into practice in their own armies. The British post-1945 Labour government and other European governments took in the lessons of the 1930s, when the Great Depression caused massive economic misery and opened up dangerous rifts in society. The welfare state and similar social-democratic measures across Europe were the result and have contributed greatly to Europe’s well-being and stability.

In the 17th century the prolonged miseries of the Thirty Years’ War, when the powers meddled in each other’s internal affairs, finally persuaded European leaders to accept the principle of sovereignty which was enshrined in the peace settlement of Westphalia. In the next century the European powers clung to the notion of a balance of power in a zero-sum game despite the high costs, but the French Revolution and the rise to power of a hegemonic France under Napoleon made them think again. As Paul Schroeder has argued, the statesmen who met at Vienna in 1814 and 1815 had the goal not of a balance but an “equilibrium,” based on a respect for laws and borders and aimed at creating stability. During the Second World War, the leaders of the Grand Alliance took note of the failures of the Paris Peace Conference at the end of the First World War and the more recent ones of the 1930s, when appeasement and a lack of support for the League of Nations only emboldened the dictators who were bent on revising the international order. This time the United States not only took the lead in building new institutions of which the centerpiece was the United Nations but Roosevelt ensured that the United States would become a member. At the same time, Allied leaders, with the experience of the Great Depression and the collapse of world trade as nations scrambled to erect tariff barriers, came together, again under the leadership of the United States, to create the Bretton Woods institutions of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to keep the world’s economy stable and encourage the spread of trade, investment, and prosperity. In Western Europe, forward-looking leaders, mindful of the corrosive national rivalries of the 1930s that had led to the outbreak of war in 1939, laid the foundations of the European Union. In the postwar years the United States took on the responsibilities of being a superpower and both encouraged European states to cooperate with each other and aided recovery directly through the Marshall Plan. The trouble is that memories fade and lessons lose their force as those who learned them firsthand depart from the scene. Perhaps the COVID-19 crisis will remind us yet again of the benefits of international cooperation.

While it is too soon to draw firm conclusions or formulate lessons, some things are already becoming clear. COVID-19 has brought to prominence the failings in
our societies, such as growing social and economic inequality, the dangerous lack of medical provision in certain countries, and the downsides of globalization, such as long and easily disrupted supply lines. On a more positive note, a major crisis can also bring changes and advances that in normal times were not thought possible. Producing penicillin on a large scale was not economically feasible in the 1930s. In the Second World War, Allied governments deemed it essential for their troops and so worked with major drug companies to produce it on a large scale. The response to COVID-19 has shown, contrary to what has been assumed in conservative circles, that governments can intervene to considerable effect in society and can spend on a large scale without going bankrupt. We now have a renewed appreciation of the power of government to take and, where necessary, enforce measures for the good of society. We have also seen that governments can trust their citizens, their judgment, and their resilience, more than they sometimes do. In the 1930s successive British governments and their advisers took for granted that the first experience of aerial bombing would so demoralize the British public that they would be overcome with panic, behave irrationally, and as a result, society would collapse. As the experience of the war showed, the British were able to endure repeated bombing attacks and, if anything, British society grew stronger in the face of a shared threat. In early March 2020, as the number of infections was mounting, the British government hesitated to impose a lockdown because it feared people would not understand or obey it. In fact, large numbers of the British were already going into self-isolation.

The war metaphor may be overdone, but dealing with a major challenge such as COVID-19 demands increased authority and arbitrary measures which in more ordinary times we would shrink from. And, as in a war, social values and assumptions can shift. In the past, women were not held to be capable of doing certain jobs; total war and the need for their labor exploded that belief. Today, as the former governor of the Bank of England Mark Carney has argued, we may be starting to detach value from price and think of other measures.

Let us hope that he and others are right and that some good will come from the pandemic. Let us try and follow the examples of those societies that study and learn from their mistakes. And let us guard against the sort of tunnel thinking and complacency which leaves us unwilling or unable to contemplate and prepare for great shocks. Key to that will be accepting that we are entering a period of great uncertainty. The post-1945 and post-1989 arrangements are falling apart and a new world order has yet to emerge; the economy faces a long struggle to recover; it is almost certain that COVID-19 will be followed by other pandemics; and climate
change, the greatest challenge of all to humanity, is speeding up. As in major wars, we are going to need to see the problems and possible solutions properly explored and debated and the necessary resources made available. We should harness the knowledge of the scientific experts but also those whose work it is to understand how societies function—among them, behavioral psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, political philosophers, and, yes, historians too.

NOTES


