

# AFTER ORWELL: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

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## **Abstract**

This essay investigates the different meanings of the global shock of the Covid-19 pandemic. Written during the times of the epidemic, it offers more questions than answers. Can we consider it „democratic” or is it a pandemic for the poor? What is reality and its social construction in this story, and to what extent these factors overlap? The speed, invisibility, and global reach of the current epidemic are unparalleled. We are more afraid of the danger we do not perceive directly - because it is colorless, odorless, invisible, but it can strike us at any time. Speed and breadth create a sense of inevitability. When a sequence of events arrives in a wave-like manner, the interconnection of its individual components amplifies the effect many times over. The impact of the epidemic is exacerbated by the creation of deadly focal points: it spreads fastest where people live side by side in the highest density. To what extent the prolonged isolation weakens not only our biological, but also social-immune systems? Finally, the essay also investigates how authoritarian power holders use this opportunity to grab even more power, from China to Hungary. The pandemic opened the way for a political danger: a new authoritarianism based on big data and close surveillance, which completes, or in some ways transcends, the dystopian vision of Orwell. An emerging bio-dictatorship might be the new enemy of freedom.

**Key words:** *Covid-19, inevitability, social immune system, new au-*

*thoritarianism, surveillance state, biopolitics, dystopia*

Covid-19 is the first global ‘plague’ in history leaving long-term marks and memories of quarantine, masks, gloves, curfews, mass death, economic decline, air traffic disruption, loss of physical contact between people i. e. social distancing, and systematic disinfection.

The most popular Facebook group of the epidemic era is “View from my window”, which gained one and a half million followers worldwide in three weeks. All exposes the image they see from their home, allowing us to take part in both private and global travel in cyberspace. We look out the window of our virtual apartment in Alaska, New Zealand and the Philippines. We peek through the keyhole. A further and even more intimate step is the Hungarian-initiated group called “My home office challenge”, in which everyone uploaded a picture of their desk and the scene of their work at home.

Here we no longer look from the inside out but show a corner of our apartment to the curious looks from the outside. *Entangled within National Tradition* by Géza Komoróczy, a Hungarian historian, was published almost thirty years ago. In the digital age, we go further: our interior entangles us in. The concept of *glocalization* - which combines and dissolves its global and local opposites into a single term in the sociological discourses – denotes well the concept which has become a real worldwide success during the pandemic.

After the epidemic, not the number of deaths will be decisive, but the memory of the shock. The shock that forced everyone to radically change usual behavior overnight. Part of this common experience is that the epidemic is ‘democratic’ in the sense that the virus does not pick on victims: anyone can be its target, regardless the age and physical condition. He kills few, but frightens everyone, though the members of the wealthier classes have a much better chance to defend themselves. Anyone who has a garden or stay outside in countryside surrounded with nature,

can make the life more harmonious even during quarantine. However, the majority of people only move within the walls of their apartment.

Patients, the poor, those in vulnerable jobs and the elderly are more affected by the epidemic. They are especially nurses, teachers and social workers doing still barely recognized jobs by society. All those who are already more vulnerable than average can find themselves in unbearable situations. These situations range from alcoholism to depression, mental illness and unemployment to starvation. Domestic aggression and violence may intensify, many may drop out of the education system, and the number of suicides may rise. In such changes, redistribution policy, social solidarity can be measured in the state. This is when it becomes clear what a person's life is worth to a given community.

But what makes a coronavirus- caused death different from other deaths? How many people die from circulatory and heart failure, cancer, flu, car accidents and military conflicts? How many lung patients die and how many of their reasons can be attributed to pollution? Compared to the current epidemic, even the AIDS panic experienced in the 1980s was negligible. Why do the deaths listed above bother the public less than the victims of the coronavirus? Why do some social events become trend-reversing historical milestones and others not?

Reality and its social construction overlap. The speed, invisibility, and global reach of the current epidemic are unparalleled. We are more afraid of the danger we do not perceive directly - because it is colorless, odorless, invisible, but it can strike us at any time. Speed and breadth create a sense of inevitability. When a sequence of events arrives in a wave-like manner, the interconnection of its individual components amplifies the effect many times over. People forcibly locked into their homes, face this external tsunami. The impact of the epidemic is exacerbated by the creation of deadly focal points: it spreads fastest

where people live side- by -side in the highest density.

The pandemic affects the city dwellers more than people of the 'steppes', i.e. the rural ones. This has already been the case with plague outbreaks, although they have not yet become global. The digital age is the reverse to the Middle Ages: there used to be a slogan "urban air sets you free," but now it makes you sick. The dystopian nightmare of biological warfare can come true, and public demonstrations by urban citizens can be dismantled with well-timed, centrally launched epidemics. Instead of water cannons, drones will be able to spray us. Guns are no longer needed; the Kalashnikov and the sling are placed next to each other in the museum.

While the diseases and causes of death listed above are built into the daily lives of the modern age, there are cures for it and their occurrence can be prevented by lifestyle changes, the victim of the coronavirus is still incurable today. Summed up, these factors – simultaneity, wave-like, invisibility, globality, density, and incurability – altogether will lead to the socio-psychological effect of the coronavirus suggesting a doom.

This pandemic will have a generational effect. The slowly declining "boomers" replaced by the "coronavirus" generation. I never thought it was appropriate to name generations with letters - as Generations X, Y, Z - because the basic element of the definition of becoming a generation is a significant historical event that affects broadly equal social groups in a similar age. Such was the case, for example, in 1968 and 1989, which further divided the historical era between "boomers" and the coronavirus generation. These events, which were of global significance, convey different cultural patterns to wider sections of society, and their impact can be felt decades later.

Researchers are competing to develop a usable vaccine as soon as possible. Despite their expected success, it can still be assumed that epidemics, sweeping the continents like giant waves, will return. The concept of immunity used in peacetime is rela-

tivized and will be valid in a narrower sense, for an ever-shorter period of time. Isolation, atomization, and physical distance become social in scale.

That may not be the right answer. Prolonged isolation weakens our biological and social immune systems. Patients need to be segregated, but not everyone can be sick at the same time and not everyone can stay home. It is the job of healthy people to maintain the daily functioning of society: to work, to travel and to have fun. The life of human society can be broken not so much by the epidemic, but primarily by ourselves: it breaks down if we accept that we have fallen apart. As for social beings, this is unacceptable for us.

The Hungarian government is not the only one that failed in being prepared carefully for a crisis. What is unique, however, is that the exercise of the beautiful virtue of honesty has not even risen in government communication. Directors of the government's propaganda machine have not been equipped to deal with the spread of the coronavirus, but - as an evergreen of political propaganda - to talk about foreign migrants. The transition from campaign themes to reality did not go smoothly. The government did not blame the fraternal Chinese Communist leadership about the epidemic, but on two Iranian students staying in Hungary. The regime undermined public confidence: by postponing the tests the people felt cheated and did not believe the official data. Not only the protective equipment were deficient, but it also became clear that the system's communication was based on secrets, censorship, and lies, thereby contributing to endangering human lives. More and more people have noticed that lies could kill.

If nothing else, the regime quickly recognized the benefits of making "power policy" that could be exploited through the epidemic. With the Authorization Act, Prime Minister Orbán has granted himself an unlimited power. He, similarly as Napoleon who put the crown on his head with his own hands, Mr. Or-

bán has made all Fidesz MPs unanimously approve the state of emergency. In principle, this should last for the times of duration of the epidemic, but how long the epidemic lasts is determined by him, so his authorization is unlimited in time. Since the Romans, this is called a system of command, or dictatorship. The term “dictator” originally meant “a chief official with extraordinary powers in the Republic of Rome”.

Orbán, the embodiment of this pathologically personalized system, believed that the best way to control the epidemic was to find scapegoats. In doing so, he revealed that he was lacking not only professional respect for doctors and social workers, but also his ability to see the problem. His “System of National Cooperation” is essentially based on the pillars of inequality and anti-solidarity: for example, the concept of a ‘work-based’ society, which appears as a tax haven for ‘insider’ large investors, sets ruthless expectations of the poor. They stay left with the principle of ‘God helps those who help themselves’.

We can be confident that after the epidemic, common sense will prevail in many countries and they will return to freedom - which has not really been abandoned in their wish to do so. The importance of expertise, so critical for planning and public policy to exist, will be recognized even more than before. It will be a watershed when and which the country returns to the world of democratic functioning, and in which countries their leaders want to maintain the state of emergency for as long as possible. Since the story of Edward Snowden we know for sure that some democracies unconstitutionally collect data about their own citizens. Nevertheless, perhaps even so, we can hope that the shock of the epidemic will help the fall of populist leaders in Western countries.

As time goes on, it is increasingly likely that the lives of societies will have to be restarted from elsewhere than they used to exist before the pandemic. Decision-makers may recognize that new thinking is needed and that the crisis of each subsystem must

be approached in a unified way. An environmentally conscious lifestyle can be strengthened, progressive taxation and intergenerational communication can be emphasized. If we recognize that unilateral globalization has a devastating effect in the long run, we may be able to make reforms enabling us to live more solid, equal and better life after the crisis. Recent attempts for an alternative globalization may steer social development in a more democratic direction.

In contrast, there is the other possibility in which authoritarian regimes consciously break away from liberal democracies. In these countries, the democracy-like worn now, will fall off and the restrictive rules, still considered temporary at the time of the epidemic, may persist. The culture of hypocrisy may be pushed into the background, and these systems may move to a pseudo-collectivist, command-and-control system based on the direct observation of citizens. Collectivism can be “fictional” in the sense that it does not have to be in a common space, in physical proximity to each other, or marched to state command. It is enough for individuals in the online world to follow blindly the leader’s instructions, even in isolation from each other. When tools replace the goals, citizens’ behavior becomes machine-like, ritualistic.

Seventy years ago, Hannah Arendt thought that propaganda and terror were the two most important tools of a totalitarian dictatorship. Fifty years ago, Juan Linz believed that the most important feature of authoritarian dictatorships was depoliticization and the maintenance of traditional mentalities.

Foucault’s theory of the transformation of supervision and punishment rises to another level. In the past, punishment was public, its execution was a “carnival,” and its purpose was deterrence therefore performed in public spaces in front of everyone’s eyes. Later, it all moved to closed institutions, state prisons, i.e. institutions we are not willing to know anything about. After that, the emphasis gradually shifted from punishment to

prevention: i.e. to a positive state regulation of behavior, internalization of regulations, and following of the general routine of the social system. The main goal of punishment was no longer to punish the deviant offender, but to positively reinforce the behavior of the conformist majority and to codify their pattern of life. Regulation of behavior has already been addressed primarily at the workplaces and schools. Even in the new situation caused by the coronavirus epidemic, there is a motive to follow the orders, but the state no longer aims to lock anyone in prisons and hospitals that are already costly to maintain. It is easier to instruct everyone to stay home for their own sake. Room captivity is a new form of prison privatization.

Now, for the authoritarian systems of digital age, propaganda and the atomization of society seem to be paramount. At the artificially produced high- noise level, the free discourses aimed at learning about the situation disappear. The real danger is big data authoritarianism, in which observers are left with no chance of observing who is watching them.

The state can classify its citizens according to whether they consider themselves behaving well or badly. This process has already begun in China. But the guardian-protective state is also increasingly curious about our thoughts. Thousands of trolls manipulate the information from which our thoughts sprout. Members of the Orwellian Thought Police may not yet know what is going on in our heads, but it is becoming increasingly possible to explore this, based on our voluntarily released data. Because what Facebook asks us as first: What's on your mind? As the surveillance state - sooner or later - becomes the enemy of the citizens, a society that secretly defends itself against the sanctioning power of 'thought crime' may also emerge. Defense against state-performed 'mind reading' will be the only chance to preserve human dignity. If we do not have strong, alternative ideals, our daily actions will be guided by fear, hiding, and self-censorship.



But the state can not only trace our behavior and thoughts but can also classify us according to our state of health: on this basis, some will be more valuable than others. Health status is always determined by an individual's physical vitality, so a bonus can only be given to obedient citizens who improve their loyalty rates through making sports or other physical activity. The state-sponsored fitness culture – the Darwinian culture of survival of the fittest – is built on a cult of strength and flexibility that looks especially good near stadiums and power centers. In this culture, the concept of 'critical thinking' makes no difference at all and is even undesirable. A new tool of repression may be biopolitics, in which not only do our health and diseases become public, but also the legal system based on them may openly discriminate us. If, upon biometric signals, the state perceives someone to be ill, they can forbid such person not only to travel but also to exercise public affairs, or install a tracker on them, or even instruct them to stay home. What shall we do if the system pushes us to a dilemma in which we should choose between freedom and health?

As democratic herd immunity is slowly emerging against the bio-dictatorship introduced to protect our health, the regime may initially find volunteer supporters easily. Where the political loyalty is main aspect, there the experts find a risky future for them. In difficult times, the professional expectation risen to them would be to make a step out of the dominant paradigm and a way to take an innovative approach to solving problems. But do you dare to do it?

The epidemic will not change human nature, but the man-made institutions can be used not only to restrict freedom but also to protect it. In Eastern Europe, people with the concept of social segregation confuse the concept of social distancing. For many zealous mobs, a state-frozen society is the end of history. By this, they mean their own victory and liberal democracy is over. They do not think that "fearful is a seductive power of goodness"

and the observed might eventually become observers.

Although dependence is always mutual, you had better bear in mind that “though ships bob on the surface / and oceans run beneath us / it is the water rules.”