

NEW GLOBAL ALLIANCES:
INSTITUTIONS, ALIGNMENTS
AND LEGITIMACY IN THE
CONTEMPORARY WORLD

A Convoco Edition

CORINNE MICHAELA FLICK (ED.)

Convoco! Editions

Copyright © for the texts by the authors
and Convoco Foundation 2021

The rights of the named authors to be identified as the authors of this work have been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

The publisher has used its best endeavors to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Convoco Foundation
Brienner Strasse 28
D – 80333 Munich
www.convoco.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication data: a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Edited by Dr. Corinne Michaela Flick
Translated from German by Philippa Hurd
Layout and typesetting by Jill Sawyer Phipers
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

ISBN: 978-1-9163673-2-6

Previously published Convoco titles:

The Standing of Europe in the New Imperial World Order (2020)

The Multiple Futures of Capitalism (2019)

The Common Good in the 21st Century (2018)

Authority in Transformation (2017)

Power and its Paradoxes (2016)

To Do or Not To Do—Inaction as a Form of Action (2015)

Dealing with Downturns: Strategies in Uncertain Times (2014)

Collective Law-Breaking—A Threat to Liberty (2013)

Who Owns the World's Knowledge? (2012)

Can't Pay, Won't Pay? Sovereign Debt and the Challenge of Growth in Europe (2011)

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Theses	11
1. The New Geopolitical Constellation: Conflicts of Legitimacy between Institution and Action Udo Di Fabio	19
2. Legitimacy in the New World Order Stefan Koriöth	41
3. Our Global Legitimacy Crisis Maha Hosain Aziz	55
4. What is the Source of Legitimacy for NGOs and other Actors in Civil Society? Rudolf Mellinghoff	71

5. The “Social Responsibility” of Business: New Alliances between Politics and the Economy? Clemens Fuest	95	13. Europe Should Intensify its Collaboration on Digitalization Gisbert Rühl	227
6. Are International Organizations the Tragic Heroes of World Politics? Eugénia C. Heldt	119	14. How COVID-19 Challenges Global Health Policy In Conversation with Garrett Wallace Brown	243
7. Do We Need a World Government? Wolfgang Schön	139	15. COVID-19 and the Robert Koch Institute: The Framework and Essential Considerations for Combating a Pandemic in Germany Lothar H. Wieler	269
8. If You Want to Prevent a Devastating Worst-case Scenario, Anticipate It Bazon Brock	149	16. Is COVID-19 a Global Turning Point? Some Historical Perspectives Jörn Leonhard	293
9. Collaboration Strengthens the Immune System of the Global Community Stefan Oschmann	155	Contributors	317
10. The Common Good on the Move: The Pandemic as a Catalyst Timo Meynhardt	175		
11. The Return of Rapprochement in Europe Christoph G. Paulus	197		
12. A New Alliance of Democracies Sven Simon	213		

CHAPTER 16

IS COVID-19 A GLOBAL TURNING POINT? SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

JÖRN LEONHARD

Looking back from some point in the future, how will we have understood COVID-19?¹ What we are expressing here in the future perfect tense refers to the fundamental problem of what characterizes an empirical upheaval, or even an epoch-making threshold, and how historical turning points are created by the logic of hindsight, that is, by taking a retrospective view of medium- and long-term consequences. To do this, historians usually need longer experiential distances. Indeed, the term *ancien régime*, as applied to an era and

as an analytical category referring to the period before the French Revolution, was not used in 1789, but was coined by skeptical writers in the 19th century. The French writer Alexis de Tocqueville and the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt were at least of the same opinion that their own present day in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1870s still belonged to the revolutionary era that may have begun with the events of 1789, but which stretched far beyond this year and other liminal dates such as 1799 or 1815. This structural change could not be encapsulated by chronological signposts that suggested a clear separation between before and after, a clarity that the revolution as a process with many non-simultaneous ramifications managed to escape.

So every prediction—not the domain of the historian, in any case—is conditional on more or less plausible speculation, formulated in a state of constant uncertainty. In the midst of a still unpredictable crisis, it is tempting to think of the impact of a global pandemic as a historical turning point, but the heuristic and hermeneutic ice is and will remain thin. Nevertheless, from a historical perspective there are at least a few preliminary observations that may help to give a sense of some elements of this confusing present. In so doing, we find no historical blueprints for crisis management in the present. Historical points

of view are more likely to create a productive kind of alienation. The exploratory mode of knowledge in a crisis is not knowing better but seeing more. The following symptomatic observations by a historian are formulated with this perspective in mind.

1. THEMATIC ANALOGY: PANDEMIC AND WAR

Comparing pandemics with wars and revolutions, or at least with historical crises, suggests itself at a moment of acute threat to and a state of emergency in societies. And indeed, war metaphors dominated the initial political reactions to the COVID-19 crisis with suspicious frequency. Yet such comparisons smooth over the significant differences between a war and a pandemic, because unlike the virus, wars ultimately arise as the result of concrete political decision-making processes in human societies. The virus acquires the specific image of “enemy” only when attributed by people, an image that can extend to giving it an ethnic identity: for example in attributing supposed responsibility for the virus’s spread and infection to certain countries.

2. CHRONOLOGICAL ANALOGY: COVID-19 AND THE SPANISH FLU OF 1918–19

In current debates, reference is often made to the experience of Spanish flu at the end of World War I. But the differences between this historical event and the present are revealing.² The influenza pandemic at the end of World War I first struck Africa, Asia, the United States, and Latin America before finally reaching Europe at the end of the war. In many places the high number of victims revealed the extent to which people in the societies affected, both directly and indirectly by more than four years of war, were exhausted. Because the newspapers in neutral Spain were able to report the effects of the flu largely uncensored, the pandemic was named “Spanish flu.” Effective remedies against the disease and, above all, the pneumonia that often accompanied it, were not available. Its leading pathogen, the H1N1 virus, was not identified until the 1990s.

Equally, in the case of 1918–19, the world-historical event of the Spanish flu only became apparent in retrospect. During the time of acute crisis in 1918–19, people did not know that the pandemic ultimately claimed more victims than the war in terms of military and civilian fatalities combined. This reflected a

completely different global context by comparison with today, as people living a century ago were affected by many other upheavals on the military fronts and in their home societies, whether it was the end of the war, revolutions, or civil wars breaking out in many parts of Europe, the collapse of old empires such as the Tsarist regime, the Habsburg monarchy, and the Ottoman Empire, or the formation of new states. The postwar phase which had been anticipated again and again during the war, becoming a fervent dream of the future, now appeared both promising and threatening in its openness. Thus, the Spanish flu became the catastrophe that happened in the shadow of many parallel crises, while at the same time creating an invisible worldwide interdependency—globalized chains of infection and pathways of contamination—even before the armistice and peace conferences took place. For many people in wartime societies, the Spanish flu also evoked the soldier’s fundamental wartime experiences—the constant proximity to death and the randomness of dying.

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged at the end of 2019 did so not against the backdrop of a world war, which in 1918–19 had provided locations and epidemiological highways for spreading the disease in the form of training camps, field hospitals, and global

troop transportation. Unlike today, there was hardly any shared expertise, no international health organization, no hourly updated and available data on the spread of the disease, or even a coordinated search for a vaccine. But as in 1918, the pandemic now also reveals the mechanisms of global currents and the extent of global interdependence—hence the focus on the global mobility of information and capital as well as of tourists and economic actors. In the first waves of infection, the pandemic could even be regarded as a disease of highly mobile globalization profiteers, for whom every travel ban must have seemed like a constraint to the basic freedoms they had enjoyed for so many years. Now we have seen, in another similarity with the Spanish flu, how severely the socially disadvantaged are being affected by the pandemic. As in 1919, COVID-19 reveals its own social hierarchy of victims.

3. POST-CORONA: “TRANSLATIO IMPERII”?

What does the COVID-19 pandemic mean for today’s world order? Is it a trigger, a catalyst of processes whose origins precede the outbreak of the pandemic, or does the pandemic represent a new kind of cause for a qualitative change in today’s geopolitical constellation,

even a *translatio imperii*, i.e. the replacement of one world empire by another, or at least the prelude to a global rebalancing of power relations?

The creation of great empires, the consolidation and erosion of their power, as well as the *translatio imperii* as crises of replacement all have characterized historical processes for millennia. In history, global rises and falls and the associated changes in alliances are the norm. Out of the crisis of the Roman Empire, which resulted in the division between the Eastern and Western Empires, competing imperial ideas arose in Rome and Constantinople, supplemented since the 15th century and the Muslim conquest of the Eastern Empire by the translation of the Eastern Roman Empire’s heritage to Moscow and Saint Petersburg, where the idea of a “Third Rome” developed. Sweden’s displacement as an imperial power in northeastern Europe by Peter the Great’s Russia enabled the rise of the Tsarist regime to the status of a major continental European power—this, too, was a *translatio imperii* by means of war. Ultimately, the upheavals of World Wars I and II accelerated the decline of the European system of five great powers, the Pentarchy of Great Britain, France, Russia, the Habsburg monarchy, and Prussia, whose transformation had, however, already begun at the end of the 19th century with the rise of

the United States and Japan as non-European imperial actors. Between 1917 and 1923, while the continental European empires were disintegrating, the colonial empires of Great Britain and France expanded to their maximum extent as the territorial inheritance of Germany and the Ottoman Empire was divided up. In the late 20th century, the end of the Cold War in 1989–91 presented another imperial upheaval.

The idea of imperial hegemony has always been part of the thinking about the global political system, often linked to the empires' particular aspiration to peace, whether in the form of the Pax Romana in ancient Rome, the post-1648 interpretation of the Holy Roman Empire as a pacifying buffer zone in Europe, from which no war of aggression could arise, the Pax Britannica, Americana, and Sovietica in the 19th and 20th centuries, or today China's global promise of peace, welfare, and health, a facet of Beijing's self-image intended to demonstrate imperial strength.

After global political crises and upheavals, especially after the dissolution or fall of empires, we see the characteristic juxtaposition of a desire for a structuring system on the one hand and for simultaneous multipolarity on the other. This desire links the following periods, in spite of all their differences: after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna

in 1815; after the end of the Crimean War in 1856; after the establishment of the new Italian and German nation states in 1871; the periods after the world wars ended in 1918 and 1945; but also after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1989–91, and once again our present day. Such tentative movements and orientation processes are not in themselves new, but in the COVID-19 crisis they are much more evident than before. Some of these processes originated before the outbreak of the pandemic, with the result that their contours are now more defined and their developments are accelerated. In this situation, COVID-19 acts initially more as a catalyst rather than a major disruption, as an efficiency test that intensifies the global struggle for interpretive power in our media age of smartphones, artificial intelligence, and the rise of algorithms, but also as a test of legitimacy and loyalty.

We can identify three imperial narratives. First, the conflict between the United States and China as imperial powers wielding tools that are both classical and new. This includes the territory as a zone of influence and at the same time non-territorial currencies of power such as financial capital, knowledge, and the control of platform companies. These elements reinforce certain tendencies of the so-called "New Wars"

that have been observed since the end of the Cold War, which are, above all, characterized by a de-contouring of conflicts. This occurs alongside the asymmetrical amalgamation of elements from state, civil, and religious wars, of warlordism, terror, and gang crime that prevail in the “New Wars.”

In the case of China, alongside the focus on the East China Sea, the “New Silk Road” program, and Huawei, as a globally operating technology base, have emerged, while the authoritarian and repressive character of the regime is clear in Hong Kong and in China’s way of dealing with ethnic and religious minorities. For the Chinese elite, this self-image is not at all about the “rise” of their own country, which primarily dominates in European and transatlantic perceptions, but rather about a return to China’s imperial origins in the premodern era, before the “Great Divergence” that resulted in the socio-economic dominance of Western societies after the 18th century and the European colonial powers’ humiliation of China in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Second, today’s project of European integration and the European Union can be described as a “benevolent empire” that does not wage offensive wars and which has succeeded in keeping the peace in continental Europe, historically an area of intense

conflict, on a permanent basis. After 1945, Europe’s integration enabled lasting peace and stability on the continent not least through the incorporation of the Federal Republic of Germany, through the integration of Greece, Spain, and Portugal after periods of authoritarianism and dictatorship in the 1970s, and finally through the gradual inclusion of the Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European states after 1989–90. However, these past successes were subsequently thrown into crisis with the break-up of Yugoslavia and the escalation of ethnic violence. Today we can see further symptoms of crisis, be it through systemic competition with external authoritarian and populist regimes or through internal crises caused by Great Britain’s exit from the Union, as well as by the controversies over the implementation of democratic and constitutional norms in Eastern European Member States. In Eastern Ukraine, Syria, and North Africa, the limits of the European Union’s effectiveness as an agent for peace are evident.

Third and finally, today we can discern trends towards the establishment of new imperial orders after the end of the Cold War and under the aegis of a new multipolarity, whether in Turkey’s neo-Ottoman policies, which are accentuated in historical, political, and religious terms in the repurposing

of the Hagia Sophia, or in Russia's alignment with its imperial past, as can be seen clearly in the celebration of May 8, 1945, and the deliberate promise to protect Russian Orthodoxy. In these contexts, imperialism not only means the politics of memory, but also acquires a very concrete dimension in territorial claims and their associated interventions, such as in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, Syria, and Libya.

Will we ultimately undergo a new *translatio imperii*, the transition from the "Imperium Americanum" to a Chinese imperial century? Whatever happens, the COVID-19 crisis has considerably exacerbated the conflict between these two imperial powers, creating a new great power rivalry. If an empire is defined by size, duration, and a normative mission, then the United States' self-image as the new Jerusalem with the aim of democratizing the world is under considerable internal and external pressure, as became apparent in the crisis-ridden escalation of Donald Trump's presidency and China's simultaneous re-focus on its own imperial past, as well as on its promise of strength, welfare, and health, a conscious reference to China's narrative proclaiming the weakness of Western democracies.

4. GLOBALIZATION, DEGLOBALIZATION, "GLOCALITY"

Already after the turning point of World War I, an interplay between globalization and deglobalization emerged, which will likely also characterize the post-COVID-19 era as a geopolitical rebalancing of powers. The 1920s and 1930s became an example of the coexistence of global cooperation and international interdependence on the one hand, with isolation and separation on the other. While the United States was able to achieve unprecedented global impact in financial and economic policy through the outcome of the world war—from the Dawes and Young Plans through the Hoover Moratorium to the mitigation of German reparations payments as a core problem of the postwar period—after the non-ratification of the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations and the failure of the internationalism personified by American President Woodrow Wilson, the US government appealed to an early version of "America First." After 1919, this movement was associated domestically with racial exclusion, which was reflected in severe racial unrest causing hundreds of deaths and a new, anti-Bolshevik bogeyman in the "Red Summer" of 1919, as well as in intensified immigration policies externally.

Historically, after profound experiences of crisis, structural globalization, typified by the revolution in communications technology such as the telegraph in the 19th century and the internet in the 20th, and sectoral anti-globalization or deglobalization, such as the rejection of the rule of law and democracy, often went hand in hand. Both trends complemented and mutually reinforced each other, for example by invoking universal tendencies to enhance individual agency and specific responses respectively, that is in the paradox of a “glocal” constellation. A particularly impressive example of this was the history of the new idea of national self-determination formulated after 1917 by US President Woodrow Wilson and the Russian Bolsheviks in contrast to the balance of powers and the tradition of secret diplomacy: self-determination became a global word for empowerment, provoking local expectations, however, in each case and reflecting the individual margins for maneuver.

This “glocal” constellation also applied to the period after the end of the Cold War. On the one hand, supra-national integration accelerated the erosion of nation states’ traditional concept of sovereignty, especially in Europe. The established nation state of the 19th century lost its importance within the European Union as a result of movements coming from two directions:

transfers of sovereignty in the context of progressive European integration and, at the same time, new kinds of regionalism, which, as in Scotland or Catalonia, sometimes escalated into independence movements.

On the other hand, the nation state continues to act as an important, and in many places crucial, political, legal, and emotional benchmark in times of crisis, whether in guaranteeing savings as in the financial crisis after 2008, in calling for borders to be closed during the refugee crisis in 2015, or in the expectation of government crisis management and preparations during the current COVID-19 pandemic. It is at least probable that the historical tension between different globalization processes and deglobalization will remain with us.

5. NEW NATIONALISMS AS A RESULT OF RETERRITORIALIZATION

If we examine reactions after the outbreak of the pandemic, we are reminded of the words of the Swiss writer Max Frisch, when he wrote that nature recognizes no catastrophes—only humans can recognize catastrophes, provided they survive them.³ This affects the interpretive level, whether as analysis, scenario,

prophecy, plan, or forecast. The infection has created and continues to create profound and persistent uncertainty, because the traditional instruments of crisis management are at least called into question. At the time of immediate threat, appeals to the initially nationally defined health and welfare state dominated. This is where the aforementioned dichotomy between global challenges and specific answers is particularly evident.

Beyond objectifiable facts and scientifically verified statements, the factors giving guidance for action have been subjective perceptions, including their manipulations and distortions. Therefore, the fact that the virus recognizes neither national classification nor national borders says nothing about the reaction of people whose actions are prefigured more robustly by traditional patterns of interpretation. The nation state's promise of protection as a health and hygiene state is part of this, even in the shrill version of conspiracy theories or in the attribution of blame to certain ethnically defined groups as supposed "carriers"—a reaction that sometimes echoes how supposed "enemy aliens" were treated during the world wars.

If the pattern of reactions to crises of the past, such as the financial crisis after 2008 and especially the refugee crisis of 2015, revealed a kind of nationalism with ethnic connotations, the COVID-19 crisis has instead

shown a tendency towards situational renationalization as setting out one's territory—a tendency towards reterritorialization. Borders that were suddenly closed and states' aspirations to cut off familiar ties through control and discipline, based equally on the definition of a critical state of emergency, and to define "protection," "contagion," "risk" and access to vaccinations in territorial terms, seemed like a kind of atavism in light of the permeability of many borders in Europe up until the pandemic's outbreak. Even if a complete abandonment of globalization is hardly conceivable, these experiences will give rise to different economic processes. The individual state will not rely on efficient global supply chains alone, but also on resilient logistics and the reduction of sectoral dependency through more strategic stockpiling. Faced with becoming the vulnerable link in a global supply chain, the state as a warehouse will gain importance.

In this regard, COVID-19 reinforces a kind of reterritorialized nationalism in which, as outlined above, it is no coincidence that older imperial traditions are evoked—it is just as noticeable in Chinese state propaganda about the "New Silk Road" and in China's dealings with Hong Kong and Taiwan as it is in Russia's approach to the Crimea, to Eastern Ukraine, and to Syria, as well as in Turkey, with its mixture of

politicized Islam and an emphatically anti-Western promise of strength.

6. PARADOXICAL CONSTELLATIONS AS THE IMAGE OF A FLUID PRESENT

Living with COVID-19, today's world is increasingly proving to be an agglomeration of paradoxical constellations, which is not uncommon in the case of historical crises.⁴ They provide a particular view of certain developments, achievements, and legacies that have occurred over the last few years and decades. There is some evidence that these initial paradoxes will also remain with us into the near future. This includes, first of all, the juxtaposition of knowledge and ignorance about the pandemic, of information about routes of infection, disease progression, and treatment methods being shared globally while in a state of ignorance about realistic types of medication, the long-term consequences of illness, phases of immunity, and the economic and political consequences of the pandemic.

In addition, in the context of government reactions, border closures, lockdowns, and emergency regimes, we get the feeling that our power to act is restricted and our personal freedoms severely limited,

which at the same time results in a powerful awareness of the value of these very freedoms as well as in a highly self-confident reclamation of public space, for example. While the individual's power to act was initially restricted, many citizens have, beyond conspiracy narratives and extremisms, developed a critical awareness of state institutions and elites who are banking on a simple return to the old system. In other words, in a time of crisis, citizens hold their state to a measure of efficiency that has been radicalized by insecurity, a criterion that increases their sensitivity to the restriction of individual rights.

Ultimately, the above-mentioned juxtaposition of globalization and deglobalization is also part of the paradox of the present: in addition to globalism as an epidemiological prerequisite for the spread of viruses and the global dimension of the challenge, there are specific responses, reinforced in Germany by its federal and municipal constitution and its new emphasis on the principle of subsidiarity. Primarily, the juxtaposition of global and local responses to the COVID-19 pandemic means that comparisons are being permanently drawn, thus creating a latent form of competition between successful and unsuccessful virus containment in different municipalities,

districts, federal states, European states, and countries throughout the world.

7. A TEST OF LEGITIMACY WHEN DRAWING GLOBAL COMPARISONS

Against this backdrop, we cannot make a simple causal connection between the experience of a crisis and trends towards authoritarianism, a connection that was often made in the early phase of the crisis, frequently in analogy with the period after World War I. But the COVID-19 crisis is not happening under conditions created by politics; it is not an easy fit for dictatorships. Rather, it seems that incremental disenchantment with authoritarian regimes and neo-imperial claims intensifies if the latter do not meet societies' expectations of efficiency and undermine the problem-solving skills that are required. This is exactly where globalism, operating on the basis of available and shareable knowledge, data, and news, intensifies the comparisons.

We could cite other paradoxes: for example, the simultaneities of absence and presence, growth and contraction, experiences that are shared while at the

same time societies are domestically polarized, rational focus alongside a high degree of emotion.

So where have we arrived? Identifying a turning point involves pinning down the pluperfect tense. However, the COVID-19 pandemic does not yet have a definable *ancien régime*. Nevertheless, the multitude of paradoxes we have outlined increases the likelihood of a world in upheaval, between transition and transformation, not created through a hiatus like a revolution in a single moment, but incrementally through the gradual unfolding and ever longer duration of the crisis. One thing is that we perceive a lot of familiar things in what is supposedly new: we can now identify the crises of the European Union or the Sino-American imperial tension more precisely through the problem of the pandemic. But at the same time, we can today no longer be as certain as we were a year ago that something completely new isn't emerging from beneath the surface of the supposedly familiar, the apparently repetitive, the prefigured present, breaking through the hermeneutical framework of the narrative of continuity.

When in January 2020 journalists at *Der Spiegel* magazine commissioned a short text to mark the beginning of the new decade, the German playwright and essayist Botho Strauß wrote:

Among the many visions of the future predicted for the 20th century almost none of the great global transformations appears: no contraceptive pills, no aging of the West European population, no German reunification, no digital revolution. The most important things came along unexpectedly. The future, what is to come, is only rarely the fulfillment of what has long been looming or longed for. The historiography of induction is now a questionable methodology. We should just try to write the history of emergences and inconsistencies. We should distinguish the disruptive from the evolving, discover that event in history that happens without advance notice or preparation. The emergentist—who will have absolutely nothing more to do with continuity—will no longer describe the future as such [...]⁵

Notes

1. Cf. Jörn Leonhard, "Post-Corona: Über historische Zäsurbildung unter den Bedingungen der Unsicherheit" in Bernd Kortmann and Günther G. Schulze (eds.), *Jenseits von Corona. Unsere Welt nach der Pandemie – Perspektiven aus der Wissenschaft* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020), pp. 197–203.
2. Jörn Leonhard, *Der überforderte Frieden. Versailles und die Welt 1918–1923*, 2nd. edn. (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2019), pp. 11–15.
3. Max Frisch, *Man in the Holocene*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (Dallas, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009), p. 79.

4. Lothar Gorris and Ivan Krastev, "Wir sehen, was wir vorher nicht sehen konnten," *Spiegel-Gespräch in Der Spiegel* 27, June 27, 2020, p. 120.
5. Botho Strauß, "Das Wichtigste kam unvorhergesehen" in *Der Spiegel* 1, December 28, 2019, p. 114.