

# Coronavirus, Resilience and the Limits of Rationalist Universalism

Written by Igor Merheim-Eyre

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## Coronavirus, Resilience and the Limits of Rationalist Universalism

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IGOR MERHEIM-EYRE, APR 21 2020

The novel coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the realities of humanity: our strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices. In the words of Pope Francis, 'the storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives'. Humans are, after all, all too human. So does this mean that our societies lack resilience to weather the current storm, or are we looking for resilience in the wrong places? And how can democratic societies strengthen their resilience to be able to face internal and external challenges? In the recent years, the term resilience has become popular among academics as well as policy-makers. Resilience came to be associated with most spheres, from the strength of our institutions, our support for third countries, to how our societies are able to cope in various stress scenarios.

As COVID-19 spread from China to other parts of the world, David Chandler, one of the foremost brains behind the proliferating resilience literature, announced the end of resilience. According to Chandler, if resilience is about distributing responsibilities and responsiveness, and the ability of local communities to solve their own problems, then COVID-19 has exposed that people are in fact 'dangerously irrational and weak, vulnerable and in need of protection, both from others and from themselves'. 'Keep Calm and Carry on', Chandler notes regretfully, is no longer possible. Instead, human weaknesses exposed the need to restrict and to regulate. The belief in fostering resilience from below has turned to hubris.

My dear friends Elena Korosteleva and Irina Petrova, on the other hand, responded by arguing that resilience is in fact alive and well – but rather that the neo-liberal framing of resilience is dead. In particular, this goes for the dogmas of the modernisation theory, which for over half a century has dominated our thinking about progress and how it can be achieved. According to Korosteleva and Petrova, we must 're-learn the well-forgotten art of self-governance', which the neo-liberal frames have limited. As governments are increasingly struggling to cope with pandemic, we're witnessing the re-birth of resilience of as a human effort and self-organisation, even as states are reverting to restricting and regulating our lives. Korosteleva and Petrova praise the 'incredible resourcefulness and grit of "the person", both as individuals and as communities', who took resilience 'underground' by means of adapting their daily lives or routines, or public sector adapting their manufacturing to help in addressing the crisis. This is, as they conclude, resilience 'premised on humanity, grit and a collective belief in a better tomorrow'.

The criticism of the modernisation theory which with its dogmatic and deterministic approach and blind belief in globalisation came to resemble Marxist dialectics, is indeed justified. After all, the determinism in both cases has similar philosophical roots. It has come to dominate, with little critical insight and little space for deviance, our thinking not only of how to support the resilience of developing countries, but also of the direction (if at all it has one) of history itself. In many ways, it is similar to the hyper-liberalism that has come to dominate Western political discourse, and purge our democratic societies of other world views. Chandler, too, notes correctly that humans have not fully lived up to expectations during the pandemic; the panic-shopping without care for others, the indifference to 'social-distancing' rules or other measures which bring discomfort to our daily lives and routines. Within Western democracies, it seems, we have learnt to live comfortable lives, with limited individual and social responsibility, drunk

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on materialism and the benefits of the post-Cold War dividend.

Yet, there are three fundamental issues with the arguments put forward in both articles, that I'd like to touch upon and, if possible, put forward proposals on how to move forward in the world after the pandemic, both within Western democracies, and in our relations to the outside world. Firstly, while seeking to depart from the rationalist straitjacket, Chandler and Korosteleva and Petrova fall right back into it: Chandler shifts from the Cartesian belief that humans are rational and capable of self-governance to the opposite extreme, while Korosteleva and Petrova reinforce the Cartesian subject. In their over-reliance on what Michael Oakeshott (1962: 12) called 'technical knowledge', susceptible to rules, (universalist) dogmas and perfectionism, they fail to appreciate the complexities (and, indeed, contradictions) of human nature and our motives – complexities which, all too often are beyond our understanding and which, indeed, the straitjacket of rationalism refuses to acknowledge. Moreover, it also leads them to a search for universalism and idealism which, when not checked by 'practical knowledge' can at times lead for the house (as in Chandler's case) to come crashing down: 'there is no place in his [rationalist's] scheme for a "best in the circumstances", only a place for "the best"' because the function of reason is precisely to surmount circumstances'.

Secondly, the mobilisation of individuals and civil society (which Korosteleva and Petrova rightly laud) as limits to state capacities have become all too visible, is not down to some universalist frameworks or belief in a better tomorrow. It is, as Roger Scruton noted in his *Green Philosophy* (2012: 210), *Oikophilia* – the love of one's home. The family, as Scruton reminds us elsewhere (*How to be a conservative*; 2015: 142) remains the 'primary image of home' even if new forms of association arise, and despite all the pressures of the modern world. The love and pride towards one's country or national culture are another dimension of *Oikophilia*, let alone states' natural need to protect their ontological security in addition to physical security, which are all too often dismissed by *Oikophobes* (namely, post-structuralists and other 'critical' schools of thought) as nativism, or exclusivist forms of politics.

*Oikophobes* heap scorn on this very natural sense of humans to love one's home and think locally, and seek people's 'emancipation' towards lifeless universalist frameworks, be it through the EU, the UN or some other socialist or liberal-international project. In the same way, *Oikophobes* refuse to acknowledge the importance of the local, 'defining their political vision in terms of universal values that have been purged of all reference to the particular attachments of real historical communities' (Scruton; 2012: 24). It is, despite all these pressures, *Oikophilia* that mobilises individuals (but also states), when feeling physically or ontologically insecure as a result of raptures such as the COVID-19 pandemic, to look towards the local. This is not to defend scenes, such as the initially slow response by other EU Member States towards the tragic growth of mortalities in Italy, but rather to note that individuals, families, communities or indeed states' primary instinct is the protection of one's home – although that is not to say that they are not (or shouldn't be) capable of solidarity and empathy towards those beyond. On the contrary, the recognition of the love of one's home (rather than some abstract universal brotherhood), ought to also be a rallying point to feel empathy and support those whose own loved home is endangered, whether by the pandemic, authoritarian regimes or other impersonal technology of power that seeks to crush *Oikophilia*.

Thirdly, to say that people took resilience 'underground' ignores the primary role of civil society and civil associations in democracies. In authoritarian states, people do indeed take resilience 'underground', because civil society and civil associations are their enemies – note, for example, the underground universities, churches, alternative culture and other means of 'underground' associations that have sprung up in communist countries, or the role the 'kitchen', as Svetlana Alexievich shows in her books, in the Soviet Union as the only place of free discussion in the face of an oppressive regime.

In democracies, civil society and civil associations form the bedrock. The state's role is merely as a mechanism through which the civil society can protect itself from external and internal insecurities, but it cannot function without the duties and responsibility of the individual. In this sense, resilience of democratic societies cannot go 'underground' because, unlike in top-down forms of government which breed docile and irresponsible individuals, individuals look to themselves and, by way of association, look to others rather than simply expect entitlements or be simply taken care of by the state. One can, therefore, assume that civil society and civil associations can conduct themselves as such specifically *because* they are democracies. The huge surge of volunteering in the NHS, or the creation of a whole industry of ordinary people sewing home-made face masks for free distribution in their local

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communities in the Czech Republic and Slovakia is hardly a case of withdrawal or of going 'underground'. It is also this what Margaret Thatcher had on her mind when she stated that there's no such thing as society:

It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbour and life is a reciprocal business and people have got entitlements too much in mind without the obligations, because there is no such thing as entitlement unless someone has first met an obligation.

If, as David Hume argued, a nation was a collection of individuals, then the whole cannot function without the duties and responsibilities of the individual. In this respect, in democracies (unlike in authoritarian regimes), actions of civil society and civil associations are an inherent part of its function rather than a state of exception or something that happens 'underground'. Instead, therefore, what ought to concern our state of inquiry is not why parts of civil society responded by acts of charity or volunteering but why, burdened by increasingly regulatory power of the state that stifles individual responsibility, not more people come to the fore. The question then remains, what can we learn from the current situation so that we can strengthen our resilience in the face of (inevitable) future challenges? There are, I would argue, basic principles we ought to re-learn.

Firstly, as Edmund Burke saw in the Jacobite excesses of the French Revolution, good things are easily destroyed, but not easily created. This means leaving behind the *Oikophobia* of post-structuralist and other 'critical' approaches that seek to deconstruct our societies without the ability to construct anything new. It is time we find renewed appreciation for freedom, law, civility, public spirit, the security of property and family life, among other things (Scruton; 2015), and that we do not simply employ 'technical knowledge', but do so in conjunction with 'practical knowledge', and the respect for traditions upon which our society is built. This means defending our traditions, our values, and all that is good in our society, not because we believe in abstract universalism, but because they are inherent part of who we are, they represent *our* home, and what we cherish.

Secondly, there is a need to cultivate a sense of responsibility and public duty, rather than simply rely on top-down state regulation. To this end, there's an urgent need to revert to an understanding of 'the good life' that is not about satisfying interests of the individual, or bowing to her/his materialistic wants, but it is more about the preservation of the social order and institutions, and the love of our home, which have emerged and organically evolved over time, and through which our identity flows. It is in the need to safeguard the social order, the institutions and our home out that our sense of responsibility and public duty come to fore. As RUSI's Elisabeth Braw noted, one reason why our levels of resilience have been mixed during this pandemic is the lack of preparedness; not simply by lacking materials, but through the lack of responsibility and basic skill that arises by (among other things) training in the fundamentals of preparedness and emergency response through schemes such as a voluntary national service.

Thirdly, as Korosteleva and Petrova also rightly point out, there's a need to keep watch on the power and actions of the state. This is important not only in these extraordinary times, when the state holds extraordinary levels of power, but also beyond the current emergency. There's an acute need for civil society and civil associations to remain suspicious of top-down interference which quashes initiative, creativity, responsibility and a sense of duty, and to rely less on purpose-driven professional NGOs to keep the powers of the state in check. In this sense, civil society and civil associations must defend our traditions, values and freedom against universalism (of which hyper-liberalism and post-structuralism and other 'critical' approaches are grotesque forms), but also against the corrosiveness of authoritarian regimes.

This means that, given the impact of the domestic on the international and vice versa, if *Oikophilia* is important to the strengthening of our resilience domestically, it must also guide our conduct of international relations – not least because of our empathy towards those whose own homes are being crushed by authoritarian regimes and other impersonal technologies of power. To that end, it is important to acknowledge that China is both legally and morally responsible for the current pandemic. While the proponents of the modernisation theory have been blindly expecting the modernisation of China as a result of complex inter-dependence and modernisation stemming from globalisation, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has instead used the time to build an Orwellian state that, just in the recent years, introduced mass surveillance, engaged in forced organ harvesting from prisoners, destroyed thousands of churches and sent over one million Uyghur Muslims to concentration camps. As Cardinal Bo rightly argues, 'it is the

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oppression, the lies and corruption of the CCP that are responsible' for the pandemic; CCP silenced whistle-blowers who warned against the pandemic, its apparatchiks (no doubt to please the bosses) downplayed the official statistics and the regime leaders and media peddled lies about the spread of the virus.

This opens fundamental questions about how Western democracies ought to engage with authoritarian states in the post-COVID-19 world, be it China, Russia, Iran or others. True, unlike Iran, neither Russia nor China are seeking to advance an alternative model of governance. Nevertheless, they are spreading their corrosive influence across Western democracies, not to mention developing countries (such as those of the EU's Eastern Partnership) where Western development programmes have for years been seeking to foster resilience, and will continue to do so while the West does not act and tolerates this corrosive influence and its attempts to crush bottom-up resilience.

The point isn't to engage in Rusophobia or Sinophobia. The remarkable cultures of countries such as Russia and China, nor its peoples, cannot be held in spite. There is, however, a need to realise that partnerships, or experiments to find cooperative world order through a 'shared normal' (to use a post-structuralist term) is simply not viable; top-down authoritarian regimes, be it the Kremlin or the CCP, which see civil society and civil associations as its enemy, cannot be our partners; regimes which quash civil society and civil associations seek to weaken resilience rather than to foster it. We must, instead, engage in what the Czechoslovak dissident-philosopher Jan Patočka called the 'solidarity of the shaken' – to be prepared to say 'no', and to stand up to such brute regimes with the sheer force of our humanity.

For this reason, it is simply not possible to compromise and find a 'shared normal' with authoritarian regimes – or to continue engaging in double standards as we have admittedly been doing for too long. Such process would not result in common understanding, but it would result in the corrosion of fundamental values which such regimes abhor; in this respect, we must not forget that though values (such as the right of all humans to be born free and equal in dignity and rights) are subjective in the way they are embodied in various societies, they are in fact objective in the sense of applying to all humans.

Therefore, if we are serious about strengthening our own resilience, and fostering those of our neighbours, instead of attempting to build cooperative world orders with authoritarian regimes, we must, as I argued elsewhere, engage in dialogue (if and where there's willingness on both sides to solve issues) but not be afraid to acknowledge the limits of globalisation and to loosen our dependencies. This means keeping Huawei out of our 5G networks as much as checking the corrosive spread of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by strengthening partnerships with other democracies and supporting initiatives such as the Blue Dot Network that provide an alternative to the BRI, and engage in the re-shoring of industry. It also means maintaining pressure on the Kremlin over its aggressive behaviour in the post-Soviet space, its role in supporting Assad's butchering in Syria, and continued information warfare against Western democracies.

To do so, however, requires not only leadership but for Western democracies to harness the strength of *Oikophilia* to strengthen our resilience in the face of future challenges. As Scruton notes, we're 'home-building creatures' (2015: 119) and, indeed, after this pandemic will need to start re-building our homes, as well as the international system. As Pope Francis pointed out in his extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* moment of prayer, 'the storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules'. The re-building following the pandemic, which also lays bare the complexities of human nature, will not be easy. It will require not only the building of our resilience and a continued fight for what we hold dear but also, to once again borrow from Michael Oakeshott, to move simply beyond 'technical knowledge', its rules and abstract idealism and also employ 'practical knowledge' to recognise the limits of rationalist universalism.

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