

THE BLAME GAME: ASIA, DEMOCRACY AND COVID-19

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Winning the battle against the coronavirus pandemic is not a case of democracy versus dictatorship or “East versus West”, insists University of Notre Dame historian Julia Adeney Thomas. What matters are trust, equality and competence. Success in fighting this pandemic and future ones requires taking social welfare and science seriously – and that means protecting the planet's rich web of life that ultimately protects us all.



Coronavirus testing in New York: In winning the battle against the pandemic, what matters are trust, equality and competence (Credit: New York National Guard)

More than one commentator on the Covid-19 crisis has reverted to 19th-century paradigms of the “democratic” West versus the “despotic” East. While “Europeans are paying a price for living in open, affluent democracies, where people are used to free movement, easy travel and independent decision-making, and where governments worry about public opinion,” *Richard Pérez-Peña*, *international editor of The New York Times*, asserted on March 19. “But China acted with a severity and breadth that stunned the West, making unpopular moves and accepting deep economic

damage as the price of containing the disease.”

This is, of course, nonsense. South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan are "open, affluent democracies" and have handled the crisis relatively well. Some Western democracies are deploying severe measures to stop the virus, and people everywhere are homebound.

Statements such as Pérez-Peña's, however, must be taken seriously for the troubling support they lend to overt forms of xenophobia coming from the White House and other sources. Even more dangerously, they cloud our thinking about the best course of action in this and future pandemics by attacking democracy itself instead of the democracies that are failing due to corruption, distrust in government, repudiation of science, and high rates of inequality.

First, an obvious point: Asia is large – and China is only one country in it. There are democracies in Asia at least as vibrant as those in the West. Europeans and Americans are not paying the price of democracy when their states fail to cope with this pandemic. They are paying the price of failed democracies. Pérez-Peña mentions Korea and Taiwan toward the end of his article, but their forms of government go unremarked so that the global bifurcation between Western governments not “used to giving harsh orders” and the draconian East is neatly (and conveniently) maintained.



Deserted Seoul streets: South Korea is a democracy in Asia that has managed to control the coronavirus without resorting to draconian lockdowns or travel bans (Credit: Scharfsinn / Shutterstock.com)

South Korea's success in containing the virus has not relied on harsh measures. Seoul has not imposed any lockdowns or travel bans. Instead, it focused on swift action to test hundreds of thousands of people, even asymptomatic individuals, using drive-through centers, and then placing infected persons under quarantine. Authorities closely vetted inbound and outbound travelers. This rigorous regime has been effective not because of draconian enforcement, but because Korea's far-from-docile citizens largely trust their government and its scientists to act in their public interest. Also, Koreans value their good healthcare. From March 17, these statistics are

the public interest. Also, Koreans enjoy universal healthcare. From March 17, those stricken with Covid-19 or choosing to self-isolate were guaranteed a modest, temporary subsidy each month of about US\$362. So quickly did Korea gear up to face the threat that it now exports surplus testing kits despite performing the greatest number of tests in the world.

Second, to blame democracy is to misunderstand two critical reasons behind the failure of some democracies to act effectively to deal with the coronavirus crisis: distrust of government and inequality. Democracies fail when politicians and their corporate backers breed distrust. From Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump, American presidents have mastered the subversive art of turning government into the enemy while transferring its assets, and those of the nation at large, to the wealthy. At least four US senators – three Republicans (Trump's party) and one Democrat – dumped hundreds of thousands of dollars in stocks after a classified intelligence briefing on January 24 on the coronavirus outbreak. Some of them did this while assuring the public that the risk from the outbreak was minimal.

The uproar that followed the disclosure of the actions of these legislators underscored how the widening gap between rich and poor in the United States has become a major political issue. Startling new levels of inequality are undermining democracies, especially in the US where the top 10 percent of earners take home 48 percent of all domestic income. Recent books by economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton (*Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*) and Thomas Piketty (*Capital and Ideology*) leave no doubt about what is a global trend.

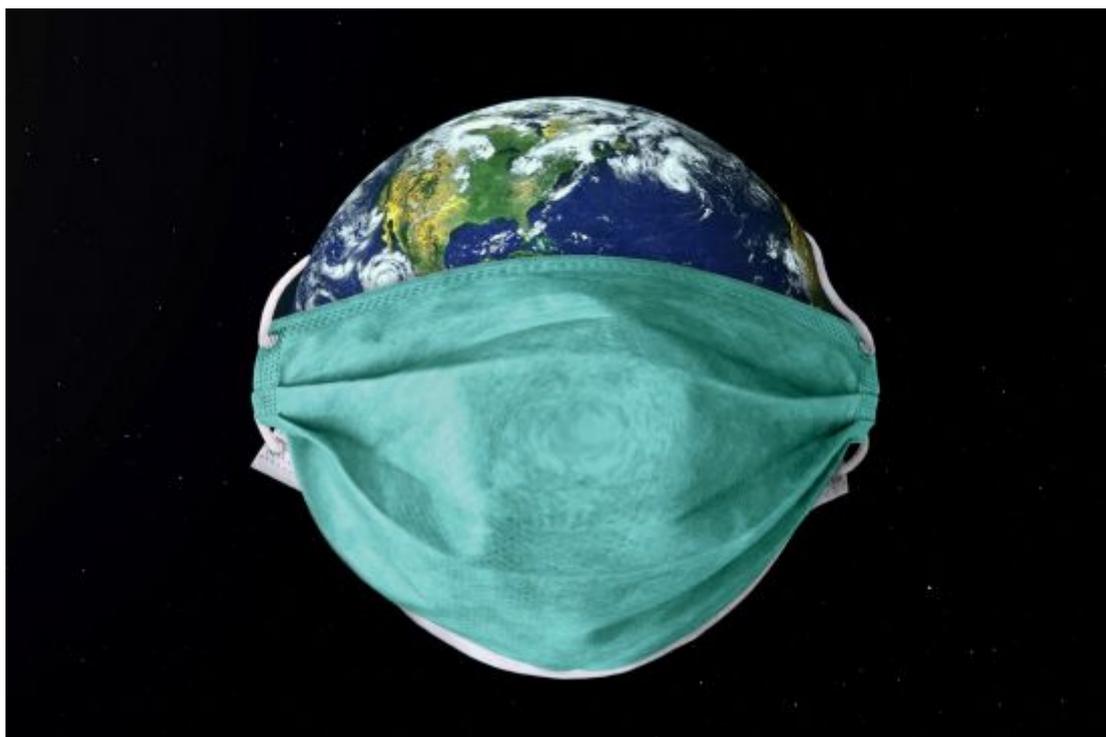
South Korea also faces the challenge of income inequality, as the movie *Parasite* made clear, but its Gini coefficient – a statistical measure of distribution of income or wealth where 0 represents perfect equality and 1 would signify that just one person accounts for all income or consumption – stands at 0.35. Compare that with the US at 0.49.

Consider Sweden – Gini coefficient 0.25 – a country where trust in the government has not been eroded by decades of attacks by its own political leaders. By March 17, it had carried out 1,412.8 tests per million residents, far ahead of the UK (Gini 0.32) at 749.1 per million and the US at 125.4 per million. Meanwhile, Norway (Gini 0.27) has acted swiftly to institute home quarantine and isolation regulations.

Again, it is not democracy that is the problem but democracies riven with inequality and distrust. Economic injustice breeds hopelessness and polarization, and the hopeless either do not bother to vote or vote their anger. Countries suffering the greatest inequality are in sub-Saharan Africa where the disease has yet to strike. The dangers there are great indeed.

Third, this pandemic is not the first and sadly not the last that we will confront. Since 1960, at least 335 new diseases have emerged, according to research by University College London ecologist Kate Jones and her team. Chikungunya fever, dengue, encephalitis, hantavirus infection, Lyme disease, malaria, Rift Valley fever, West Nile virus, SARS, MERS and Zika are all either new or

spreading to new places. As habitat destruction, invasive species, pollution, population growth, and overhunting escalate to destroy the web of life, humans create the conditions for new viruses and diseases such as Covid-19. This is a link that cannot be ignored. New pathogens released by melting permafrost will also soon cause problems. The increasing ineffectiveness of antibiotics is disarming doctors and nurses engaged in the fight against infectious disease. We need to learn from this pandemic to face future ones.



Success in fighting future pandemics means protecting the planet's rich web of life (Credit: Syaibatul Hamdi from Pixabay)

The lessons we take from this moment will shape our future ability to cope. More environmental challenges including more epidemics are not likely or even highly probable; they are inevitable. Even were we to adopt the measures agreed to at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris to bring down carbon dioxide emissions and even were we to cease immediately our predations on forests and oceans and set aside half the planet for other species, the disturbances we have already caused will trouble generations to come. This is the supreme challenge for civilization. Peddling simplistic worldviews that divide East and West and blaming democracy for failures to confront resolutely a global threat such as the coronavirus pandemic obscure the stark realities that we face today and endanger the future of the planet.

Further reading:

[Haines, Andy; and Ebi, Kristie; edited by Caren G Solomon. \(January 17, 2019\) "The Imperative for Climate Action to Protect Health", *The New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 380, pp 263-273, Massachusetts Medical Society, Waltham, MA, USA.](#)

[Khan, Ali S; with Patrick, William. \(2016\) *The Next Pandemic: On the Front Lines Against*](#)

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Quammen, David. (2013) *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, W W Norton & Company, New York, NY, USA.

Thomas, Julia Adeney. (January 10, 2019) "Why the 'Anthropocene' is not 'Climate Change' and Why it Matters", *AsiaGlobal Online*, Asia Global Institute, The University of Hong Kong.

Vidal, John. (March 18, 2020) "'Tip of the iceberg': is our destruction of nature responsible for Covid-19?", *The Guardian*, London, UK.

Wilson, Edward O. (2016) *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life*, W W Norton & Company, New York, NY, USA.

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