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Pandemic deepens social and political cleavages

by Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor on 22nd June 2020

The coronavirus crisis has inflamed cleavages in democratic societies which will be difficult to heal.



Peter Hall

As Richard Evans observed in his studies of cholera in Europe during the 1800s, epidemics tend to intensify the faultlines in society, and that is certainly true of this new coronavirus. The most obvious lies between the generally well-educated who can retain their jobs and work remotely, while sheltering at home, and the workers who cannot afford to do so. The latter must labour, often for relatively low wages, at cashiers' desks in grocery stores or pharmacies and drive trains or buses—and deliver the goods consumed by those at home.

To some extent, this faultline mirrors the cleavage, deepening for some time, between those with the college education which confers cosmopolitan dispositions and market power in a globalised economy and those with less education who often hold more traditional values in jobs



Rosemary Taylor

increasingly threatened by outsourcing and global competition. Members of the two groups are dying at very different rates.

In Britain, where the majority of middle-class employees have been able to work from home, as against only one in five among the working class, men in low-skilled jobs have been four times as likely to die from the virus than those in professional positions. It is one thing to feel 'left behind' and yet another to feel left behind to die. At some point, there will be a reckoning.

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Populist right

Across the advanced democracies, the pandemic is also being used to deepen a political faultline between centrist parties, whose voters generally favour a sustained lockdown to prevent virus transmission, and potential supporters of radical-right populist politicians, who are using the economic distress to urge 'liberation' from lockdowns and resumption of activity. After weeks of political agitation, 78 per cent of American Democrats support

stay-at-home orders, while only 45 per cent of Republicans do, and similar rifts are visible between centrist governments and the populist right in European nations such as Germany and Spain.

To some extent, these faultlines overlap. Populist parties are striving to become the political expression of those deprived of work by the epidemic, throwing an unsettled politics into even more turmoil.

A third faultline, between young and old, is being rendered more salient. There has always been potential for conflict between generations over social policies which favour the elderly over the young, but hitherto that has been suppressed by the intergenerational ties which bind families together. The depression issuing from the pandemic may change that, however. Economic analyses show that young people who enter a depressed labour market pay lifelong costs for the slow start to their careers.

Whether the distributive consequences of depression will generate a full-scale political split between younger and older generations is unclear. But is it any wonder that, when professors ask how they can help their graduate students, some are replying 'Retire'?

Racial faultline

The coronavirus has also exposed a racial faultline of special importance in the United States. Social epidemiologists have long known that people of colour are more at risk of suffering a variety of illnesses—such as diabetes, heart disease, and asthma—but these disparities have usually fallen below the public radar. Racial disparities associated with the coronavirus initially also escaped notice, partly because the nation was preoccupied by the threat to older people and partly because states were not releasing racial data on infections, testing and deaths.

Now that it is clear that African-Americans contract, and die from, this virus at especially high rates, the question remains as to whether these data will lead to wider recognition of the longstanding structural conditions underlying racial differences in morbidity and mortality. Will heightened awareness of the impact of police violence on black communities in recent weeks be enough to bring about a sea-change in perceptions and policies?

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Of course, this virus is also intensifying nascent conflicts at the international level. For the European Union, the pandemic has become an **existential crisis**, as southern Europeans hard-hit by the virus have asked what European solidarity means if it does not yield real financial support, while many northerners have continued to insist that the EU must not become a 'transfer union'. The recent **Franco-German initiative** to promote a rescue fund financed by joint borrowing, taken up by the European Commission, appeared to offer a route out of this impasse. But the failed European Council meeting last week **showed** this is still seen by factions in the north as too much.

On a grander scale, the epidemic is feeding tension between the US and China. Now that the virus has made it impossible for him to run for re-election as president on the strength of the economy, Donald Trump is **campaigning against China** in the hope that *ersatz* appeals to patriotism will lead Americans to rally round the flag in support of him.

That tactic is **not unknown** in politics and it has extra bite at the moment. People often want to believe that sources of contagion are **foreign**: just as some now label Covid-19 'the Chinese virus', so the English once called syphilis the 'French disease' and most other European nations blamed it on their neighbours. In the current political battles, the World Health Organization has already become an inadvertent casualty, and many more dangers lie ahead.

Prescient warning

These observations remind us to beware of letting the anxieties a terrible epidemic arouses turn social divisions into deep political antagonisms. In the midst of another great depression, the then US president Franklin Roosevelt presciently warned of a 'nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance'.

Nor can we depend on medical science alone to counteract the effects of this epidemic. No social vaccine will heal the divisions the virus has laid bare. Economic stimulus, while desperately needed, will not in itself stitch deep tears in the social fabric. We shall have to address the social inequities this epidemic has made manifest in material and symbolic terms.

That will require a dose of tolerance hospitals alone cannot deliver—as well as renewed efforts to deliver decent jobs and distribute resources more equitably than the policies of a neoliberal age have done.