



## **THE CORONAVIRUS: A PARASITE FOR GLOBALISATION, AN UNEXPECTED BOON FOR MEDICAL DATA COLLECTION<sup>1</sup>**

The respiratory syndrome that first appeared among fish market stall-holders in Huanan, Wuhan in January 2019 has since claimed several hundred lives. While the virus has spread rapidly, the epidemic bears no relation to the major pandemics that have continually struck the world's population throughout history. These include the Black Death which killed 30-50% of Europeans between 1347 and 1352, successive cholera epidemics in the modern era and a yellow fever outbreak that halved the population of Philadelphia in 1793. But unlike the pandemics that are currently crippling Africa, the coronavirus is now affecting people in developed countries, despite the medical support available to them. As a result, the virus has awoken our previously dormant terror of dying of an incurable disease. As long as it does not become a pandemic, the coronavirus might temporarily boost America's global position. In any case, its development is already helping to accelerate the mass gathering of medical data.

### **The coronavirus taps into our dormant fear of an unavoidable death**

The *immense fear* currently being passed from person to the next is largely self-generating. No political or financial powers benefit from a definitive cooling of China's economic furnace, which would, in the short term, unleash a wide-scale financial crisis. Our fascination for the coronavirus is mostly psychological. As advocated by Italian and French schools of thought in the late 19th century, crowd psychology is fuelled by the endless repetition of a spectacular, unexplained image. In 1895, Gustave le Bon wrote in his work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*:

“Everything that shapes the imagination of crowds presents as an arresting and very clear image unconnected from any supporting interpretation and unaccompanied by anything other than a few marvellous or mysterious facts, such as a great victory, miracle, crime or hope. Things must be presented as a monolith, with no explanation as to their genesis. Neither one hundred small crimes nor one hundred small events would affect the imagination of a crowd, yet a single large crime or event would mark it profoundly.”

Once this image has been forged, it spreads from one individual to another through simple emotional contamination. Today, it is the memory of major Asian epidemics – such as the

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bubonic plague, which originated in China, or the cholera that travelled from India in the 19th century<sup>2</sup> – that has been reactivated. The first consequence has been a collapse in holiday bookings for China, Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia. The resulting disruption has also reduced demand for oil, copper and soya in China, but increased demand for gold and coal. Our *terror* is not totally unjustified though, in that Asia produces 80% of our medicines. The global pharmaceutical industry is highly dependent on Chinese drug production<sup>3</sup>. Medicine shortages were very rare a decade or so ago, but they are becoming increasingly common. In 2018, the French National Agency for Drug Security recorded 868 supply shortages or stockouts.

### **The coronavirus scares us because it threatens the central nervous system of globalisation.**

Although our all-too-tangible fear currently outstrips the real threat posed by the virus, it could still generate three different reactions in geoeconomics. First, our fear of the virus might encourage certain Western powers to try to seal off China, the disease's epicentre and the world economy's most significant engine<sup>4</sup>. Easily swayed by even the slightest hint of trouble, financial centres are already displaying signs of anxiety. Second, the epidemic is made all the more frightening by the fact that it has piggybacked onto the existing ailments of globalisation. It is no coincidence that the coronavirus began in a market, as it thrives in global cities and transitional spaces. Wuhan is in central China, so the country has lost a key economic province. This has, in turn, led to major disruptions in the global supply chains of equipment and consumer goods. The virus is affecting significant exporter regions in Italy too, specifically Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia-Romagna. The consequences for the Italian peninsula's economy may be dire. History has recorded many instances of trade routes being paralysed by pandemics. For instance, the plague was able to spread out to all corners of the European continent because it found its way into the heart of the Christian world at the Papal Palace in Avignon. When it reached Bordeaux harbour in 1348, it was then able to spread to other port cities via newly emerging coastal trade routes. By paralysing sea-bound capitalism, pandemics attack the central nervous system of globalisation but spare mountainous areas<sup>5</sup>, sparsely populated regions<sup>6</sup> and the few towns<sup>7</sup> that are willing to protect themselves with drastic exclusionary measures<sup>8</sup>. Lastly, the virus could also trigger a financial crisis on a far larger scale. If the coronavirus became a pandemic, it could entirely redefine the current geopolitical balance. Let us not forget that the Great Plague in the 14th century led to the fall of the Byzantine Empire, held up the Spanish *Reconquista* for a century and drastically reduced Venice's maritime and commercial power. As things stand, only minor disruptions are visible on the horizon. Hong Kong, for example, a global health leader and an expert in medical forecasting, is benefiting from a sudden period of respite. It is nonetheless worth noting that crisis managers have called on armies' medical and logistical skills from the earliest weeks of the crisis. In China, the new Huoshenshan hospital was built in ten days thanks to the crisis management expertise of the Chinese army. French citizens repatriated from Wuhan have been handled by the military's own health service. Given that the French army's medical experts have world-class knowledge of tropical diseases, the careless choice

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<sup>2</sup>The cholera outbreak of 1832, for example, killed more than 500,000 people in England and 100,000 in France.

<sup>3</sup>China produces 90% of the world's penicillin.

<sup>4</sup>The development of the coronavirus in China will slow down agricultural imports over the coming months.

<sup>5</sup> The Pyrenees and Alps were left unscathed by the Black Death.

<sup>6</sup> 14th-century Russia

<sup>7</sup> Milan was one such town in 1348.

<sup>8</sup> The quarantine system currently in force in China was first developed in Ragusa in 1377.

made by decision-makers to drastically cut staff numbers despite their vital medical crisis skills can only be condemned.

### **The coronavirus will accelerate personal medical data collection**

Historically, pandemics have aided in the practice of collecting medical data about individuals as public authorities try to ensure that the sick do not spread the disease to other areas. In 1501, the French town of Carpentras invented a '*health pass*', which was handed over to travellers when they left an unaffected locality. Other towns would require them to show it when they entered the city gates. Over the past two months, the spread of the coronavirus has given rise to similar measures aiming to ensure that individuals share their medical information with public authorities. This phenomenon goes hand-in-hand with one of the defining dynamics of our era: by enabling capital, goods and people to move ever-more frequently, globalisation is fomenting ontological instability. To combat this, states and multinational businesses are now obliged to monitor individuals increasingly closely:

“At every moment of our existence, we generate information about our health, our mental state, our plans and our actions. In short, we emit data. This data is now collected, processed and finally mapped out by computers with immense storage and calculation capacities. The whole point of big data is to relieve the world of its unpredictability in an attempt to reduce the impact of chance – nothing more, nothing less.”<sup>9</sup>

In the great AI war that is currently being waged between China and the United States, it is the former who has claimed victory for data thanks to the extensive homogeneity of its population. The US and its Western allies are now trying to seize the historic opportunity this epidemic represents to catch up with their Chinese rivals. If they succeed, the advantage they secure will be considerable, as Western nations have already stolen a march on China in their mastery of algorithms. The virus is also supercharging artificial intelligence in the medical field. On 31 December 2019, Canadian start-up BlueDot proudly announced that it was the first to predict this global epidemic using its automated data processors. Because the DNA of the virus has been sequenced by Chinese scientists, a team at the University of North Carolina directed by Professor Ralph Baric has successfully modelled SARS-CoV-2. This will enable us to better understand how the virus might mutate and, in consequence, how we can beat it. Another of this epidemic's great paradoxes is that it has forced teams of competing scientists to cooperate.

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<sup>9</sup>Marc Dugain and Christophe Labbé, *L'Homme Nu*, Plon, 2016, p. 8