

As the Great Pause dissolved into a fast-forward toward an unscripted future, we emerged into a world simultaneously vaster with possibility but also narrower and more local.

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ATHENS: Around early March, just before the Great Pause commenced, Greece's troubles accelerated. On its land border with outsized neighbor Turkey, the Greek army and police confronted thousands of migrants seeking to push in. In the Aegean, boats accustomed to carrying tourists delivered riot-police units to Turkey-facing islands to quell local opposition to the construction of more detention facilities for the daily arriving migrants.

Angry that they'd been downgraded since 2015 from high-end tourist destinations to EU containment zone, the islanders confronted the police, sending them packing back to Athens.

Turkish overflights of Greek islands and non-lethal dogfights increased as Ankara sought to establish its oil-exploration rights in the Aegean, and the Greek government negotiated with Egypt, the EU, and NATO to block Turkish

involvement in Libya. At home, the probusiness right-wing government's bureaucrats reshaped central Athens into a tourism destination, sold property that was simultaneously undervalued and overpriced to non-EU citizens in return for golden visas, and drafted legislation intended to facilitate investments by almost completely removing environmental safeguards.

This was the state of affairs frozen by COVID-19's arrival.

It quickly became apparent, even as we slept, awoke, and slumbered again during that first wave's suspended reality, that we were being eased into a new way of living. Long before our known unknowns about the virus's longevity and infection methods were answered, a peculiar subconscious certainty of an impending new normal settled in the back of our minds. It was bolstered by thousands of fragments joining into a whole: from politicians and jour-

nalists speaking of a change more permanent than temporary, to a viral Atlantic magazine headline predicting as early as February that 70 percent of the world's population was likely to contract the virus (Hamblin 2020), to a WHO warning that the new virus might never go away.

Twenty years after 9/11, as that event had already receded into the realm of history, it seemed that

Welcome to the New Localism

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we were on the threshold of an equivalent shift in our collective behavior, a traumatic mass incident upon which would pivot an ordinarily unacceptable level of government encroachment into our lives. The state of exception had laid the ground for a form of shock doctrine. At the same time, the virus had emerged as a result of deforestation and the cruel conditions of the meat-eating industry. Its spread through air-



plane travel became an index of globalization. It was truly a product of our times.

The now generally acceptable idea that contact tracing can keep us healthy has imposed a new level of societally acceptable monitoring, enabled by the intrusive technologies revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden. After decades when the dominant operating principle was that the economy is more important than human welfare, well-being is now used as a pre-

text for employment's deeper deregulation.

So what else will our new normal involve?

Tribal Behaviors, More Localism

As the virus closed in, I was on the land border with Turkey, interviewing men wielding hunting rifles and wooden sticks, who'd volunteered from across Greece to repel asylum seekers trying to cross the Evros River. Every night, they headed into the closed military zone to patrol an area illuminated by powerful tractor lights, set fire to vegetation where people could hide, and detain those who'd managed to cross the river (confiscating their clothes and belongings in some cases) before delivering them to the police or directly intimidating them into swimming back whence they'd come. These patriots were experiencing a rare moment of unity and inter-Greek solidarity as they grouped together to confront migrants whom for years they had allowed to pass through on their way to Europe, but whom they now perceived as being pawns of Athens' former Ottoman overlords, instrumentalized to violate the border and challenge Greek sovereignty.

The tribal solidarity on show on both sides of the border was an unsettling demonstration that the mainstream human reaction to modernity's growing impersonality (exemplified by the spreading technologization of daily life and employment, more austerity, and less social value) is to cluster around conceptions of identity. This already happened in the Middle East in the 2010s after what came to be known as the Arab Spring: a series of uprisings against outdated authoritarian regimes that offered their

populations an unspoken pact of low-quality, free or heavily-subsidized housing, education, basic goods, and employment in return for obedience and minimal social freedoms. The arrangement collapsed when, in a demonstration of the market's invisible hand, financial speculation and the rising Chinese middle class drove up the price of wheat and maize. The rise of one society resulted in the breakdown of less dynamic ones.

As public order disappeared, disillusioned Libyans, Egyptians, and Syrians, who saw their incipient freedom snatched away in the ensuing chaos and counterrevolutions, either turned apolitical or flocked toward more assertive identity movements, sectarian, ethnic, or imagined. ISIS was just the most notorious example of a wide gamut of new associations that appeared once debilitating censorship and state control was lifted. The discontent of those flocking to identitarian movements partially emanated from feeling the effects of a dominant economic system whose imposed, top-down rules squeeze advantage out of more monitored working conditions, slimmer margins, and more globalized logistical chains. Those unable to react against the market's decentralization rationalized the problem as one of horizontal competition among races and cultures, deepening the emergence of identitarianism, both in Europe and elsewhere. COVID-19, despite having a global and racially indiscriminate effect, has not been popularly perceived as not meriting a tribal response. Rather, nations have turned inward, closing their borders and competing with each other for medical supplies and the miracle vaccine. Perhaps critical ability is the first thing relinquished by frightened societies.

Migration in the Time of COVID-19

Irregular migration and tourism aside, Greece isn't very globalized. Wealthy locals and religious pilgrims traveling by airplane from Milan Fashion Week and the Holy Land imported the first cases of COVID-19 in mid-March. Nevertheless,



frightened locals perceived the threat as coming from the east: as the government ordered a nationwide shutdown of restaurants and bars in the face of the spreading virus, a local woman on the migrant-loaded island of Chios (where I was researching a story on the Church's refusal to shutter its places of worship) darkly warned that "God help them [asylum-seekers] should we discover a case among them ... we'll burn them."

Fearful that Greece's austerity-strained public-health system would collapse, the government soon ordered a nationwide lockdown that restricted asylum seekers to their camps. Despite there not being a single case recorded of an asylum seeker infecting a Greek (aside from unsubstantiated rumors of an illegal brothel where migrant ladies serviced locals), migrants nevertheless became public punching bags, sometimes literally. On the dark highway headed back from Evros, a ragged, desperate figure flagged our car down. He was a badly beaten Egyptian migrant who said he'd crossed over from Turkey to Greece in the first wave, then remained hiding in the forest until his water ran out, forcing him onto the tarmac for help. Unfortunately for him, the first vehicle to stop contained police officers who confiscated his wallet, phone, and passport before battering and abandoning him on the roadside.

The Egyptian's complicated and expensive journey had begun in Upper Egypt, continued by airplane to Oman, then northern Iraq, and by foot across the snow-covered mountains into Iran and Turkey, before Turkish authorities drove him and other migrants to the Greek border to wait for President Erdogan to announce the

border's opening. As the migrant spoke, a deep cough wracked his chest, making me wonder whether he'd picked up the virus on his journey through Iran or Turkey.

The Greek government shared this concern and soon forced all new arrivals, regular and irregular alike, into a two-week quarantine. This meant little in a place like Chios's overcrowded main camp where tons of uncollected rubbish littered the ground, hundreds of young men besieged the reinforced main building staffed by a few employees, and social distancing was impossible. As both sides of the Aegean quarantined, refugee flows dropped off by over 90 percent, and the Greek government instituted an additional unofficial pandemic protection policy of pushing migrant boats back and forcing new arrivals to keep two-week quarantines on the exposed beaches or docks where they'd arrived.

Quarantined Athens as a Theatrical Stage

Anxious about the risk of catching the virus, I returned to Athens a few days before the full lockdown and shut myself at home. My apartment in downtown Athens usually vibrates with the noise of traffic and renovations, but now it was deathly still, aside from birdsong and tolling church bells traversing an achingly clear and unpolluted atmosphere. Vacant boulevards, shuttered stores, ancient touristless temples, and a central square whose grand renovation had shuddered to a halt, offered an intriguing, though depopulated, vision of what a society that had completed its carbon transition and reduced its energy imprint to a minimum might look like.

As Athenians adjusted to social distancing by congesting in supermarket aisles or huddling over their screens, I walked the streets at all times of day and night, reveling in having the city to myself, aside from some homeless, some addicts, some squads of police motorcyclists, and flocks of pigeons. The stillness felt like having been gifted a month of Sundays.

One night outside the Temple of Hephaestus, I met a cultivated man who'd rejected a conventional petit-bourgeois life to roam the streets during daytime and shut his eyes at night to the view of an illuminated Acropolis. He poker-facedly informed me that the sudden disappearance of most people had failed to affect either way his ongoing quest to find people of substance to converse with about music.

On another dusk, as I elatedly walked through a part of the city center famous for its South Asian bazaar atmosphere and stolen goods, a young man wearing an outsized mask and sitting on the steps of a decrepit neoclassical building asked me if I wanted to buy drugs. Already high from walking through the abandoned city, I declined.

All the theaters were closed, but Athens was so vacant that roaming it felt like traversing a cardboard stage set, the audiences standing on the balconies of the upper circle offering up their ova-





tions to essential workers. The unreality of the scene was augmented by the knowledge that the suspension of time would soon be over, to be followed by a curtain-raiser on a harsher climactic act. For the time being, this rather cinematic Great Pause—from our geopolitical and economic troubles, or from the impending climate disaster—had separated us from our recent daily lives and plunged us into a mass introspection of the kind that people had once embarked upon pilgrimages hoping to attain.

E-Normality

When the quarantine lifted, it wasn't hard to pin down that something had changed. Aside from a slew of new public behaviors and the feeling—while walking down a street of masked and be-gloved people—of inhabiting a horror film, few of yesterday's issues had been resolved as worrying new phenomena appeared. Legislation was passed to further flexibilize the labor market, and professional life invaded our homes and private time through teleworking's Trojan Horse. The government had worked hard during the quarantine to introduce all the e-government platforms disregarded by previous administrations, stitching a little tighter the mesh of surveillance that had begun during the 2004 Athens Olympics with the installation of street cameras. Even as digital platforms made us more accountable, the government claimed a pandem-




ic-awarded emergency prerogative to conclude a series of untransparent direct-contract awards to companies, some of them shells, thus disbursing public funds to business, political, and journalistic allies. The government's rhetoric was free market, but its practices continued to be feudal-style patronage.

Although 20 percent of Greece's GDP depends on tourism, few tourists are likely, as long as the air industry struggles to recuperate. This isn't without a silver lining for the majority of Greeks for whom renting in central Athens had become mathematically impossible, prepandemic (Andreas-Bakas 2019): the complete absence of tourists returned us to the comforting reality of that economic-crisis-era cliché, before real estate began inflating: the price of everything has collapsed, including rents.

Unlike in Spain, where planning for the introduction of a universal basic income (UBI) is advanced, the Greek government hasn't even considered it. UBI is problematic because, while on the one hand it can stabilize a collapsing labor force it also fixes that labor force in place, reducing the subject's mobility and cementing fundamental structural injustices that internet-based distribution networks typically accentuate without restoring to workers any of the profits their labor funnels into the value chain. Similarly, the distancing involved in the pandemic response furthered the process of diluting communities and capitalizing society by substituting what used to be communal exchanges, personal neighborhood connections, and a sense of local belonging with paid services. Some who worried they might be asymptomatic carriers decided to commit fragile parents they could no longer visit regularly to old persons' homes, products were delivered by fleets of motorcyclists (or drones), and the police attacked gatherings of people in public spaces (see Athanasiadis 2020).

One of the first stories to grip Greeks emerging into the new normal was the drama of an attractive woman whose jealousy



over her boyfriend having friended another attractive woman on Facebook drove her to attack and disfigure the other woman with acid. In a sign of the times, a surgical mask completed her wig-and-sunglasses disguise. But aside from demonstrating how fear of the invisible virus now fuels other illegal activities, compelling media narratives such as this one were also handy distractions against further popular inquiry (or anger) into the extent to which the establishment reactions to the pandemic were obscuring the global economic crisis's true causes. It seems that it hasn't been in the public interest to understand that the greater cause of the 2020 crash is the uninterrupted financialization of the global economy in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. Or to begin unpacking how stock exchanges could be posting gains amid the worst U.S. unemployment statistics ever recorded.

As more detailed mortality figures have emerged, there has been growing suspicion that COVID-19 isn't so much more lethal than conventional coronaviruses and that the panic-driven quarantine was much ado about nothing. In Greece, by the time the quarantine was lifted, less than two hundred persons had died, and herd-immunity was at 2–4 percent, meaning that negligible progress had been made in fighting the virus during the Great Pause. But the government's feel-good narrative about how Greeks, by staying at home

and ordering takeout, had performed a Thermopylae-level collective feat that washed away the austerity years' shame while reversing negative Western impressions about the country, was a form of public healing. Never mind that other Mediterranean countries could boast equivalent or better pandemic records; the mere act of investing time and money in highlighting this modest short-term success fostered a narrative that reactivated Greece's precious tourism season (and foreign currency streams) even as it reimported the virus.

The full quarantine was useful in demonstrating that where there's a will there's a way of urgently reducing our energy imprints and carbon emissions. It also reminded us that the current media drumbeat, focused exclusively on individuals reducing their energy imprints rather than industry or the military making reductions, is unacceptable, not least because they are the greatest polluters. It seems silly to ban cooking with natural gas when fighter jets burn thousands of gallons of gas per training fight, and how military bases are electrified remains entirely opaque. Ultimately, the quarantine proved that, if we care about not further reducing our lives into standardized, monitored sizes friendly to acceptable modes of economic activity, the measurement of our happiness must be disconnected from the annual increase in national GDP.

Meanwhile, the threat of logistical chains being paralyzed by a second wave is spurring a reshaping of production cycles toward the more regional, threatening the U.S. dollar's global dominance and, apparently, foretelling the end of unfettered capitalism (Foroohar 2020; Bhat-



tacharya and Dale 2020; Rozsa 2020). A shift toward industrial multilateralism could be channeled toward injecting renewed meaning into our locales and cultures and reducing isolated and consumer-driven living. The internet would remain, like a digital airport connecting us to far-flung social and professional locales, but without the high energy imprint.

Real airports would still exist, but discouraging trivial travel would propel heretofore ignored distances and localized relationships to the fore, allowing them to regain an edge over virtual ones predicated on long-distance travel. Harsher travel conditions and less superficial scene shifts—Reykjavík yesterday, Rome today, Rio tomorrow—would open our eyes to the extraordinary local variety we've willfully bypassed in

our manic competition to be faster, richer, and more camera friendly. It would also spur regional revivals, blocked so far by a model whereby educational, financial, and cultural global hubs have sucked up local talent.

Our new world can contain fewer tourists, “investor” profiteers, and narcissists piggybacking on locales as backdrops for constructed identities, with more individuals rooting themselves somewhere, learning the language and culture and contributing rather than extracting. This evolution is a necessity for our battered planet, not a utopia.

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