Editorial

Raul Caruso* and Arzu Kibris

Introduction to the special issue ‘Reflections on the post COVID-19 World’

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On December 31, 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission of China reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia in the Hubei province. It was then on January 12, 2020 when the Chinese government publicly shared the genetic sequence of COVID-19 that we first made acquaintance of the microscopic villain of the horror movie that 2020 was to become. And just like it usually is in those movies, not many paid attention to this first stage appearance of the villain, which only made things worse, so much so that on March 11, 2020, deeply concerned by the alarming levels of spread and severity, the World Health Organization characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic. It has been almost six months since then, half a year in which the coronavirus cost more than 800 thousand people their lives and hundreds of millions their livelihoods. We are now mourning the loss of our loved ones as well as the loss of that certainty that we used to have about the ways of our lives. The pandemic has made it painfully clear that those institutions that we had designated to protect and maintain that certainty were unprepared for the task. Oscillating between too lax or too harsh measures whose footing in scientific information is disputable, and undecided or vague about their priorities, governments and state institutions of even the richest and the most powerful countries have failed to effectively manage and curb the pandemic and protect the wellbeing and social welfare of their citizens. Consequently, the pandemic still remains largely unpredictable in terms of spread, life cycle and consequences. Even though it is the one thing that everyone has been talking about in the past six months, we still have a myriad of unanswered questions, and most importantly, we are still very uncertain and apprehensive of the shape of things to come.

This special issue has been motivated exactly by this state of things which can only be resolved by scientific information that can help us understand and learn

***Corresponding author: Raul Caruso**, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy; and CESPIC, Catholic University ‘Our Lady of Good Counsel’, Tirana, Albania,
E-mail: raul.caruso@unicatt.it

Arzu Kibris, University of Warwick, Coventry, England

from what we have experienced and guide us in developing informed expectations for the future. This is a challenging task as it requires considering and combining the many different impacts of the pandemic on our lives. This pandemic is first and foremost a public health crisis, but it is also an economic, political and social shock. Hence, to have a better sense, we need to acknowledge the complexity of the matter and scrutinize all its different impacts on our lives. In this issue, we aim to contribute to this effort from the perspective of peace science and discuss the potential reverberations of the COVID-19 pandemic on peace and its drivers.

In his famous bestseller *'The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined'* Steven Pinker (2011) has highlighted that after a millennial reduction in violence humankind was living the most peaceful period in the history. In light of the pandemic, should we now devalue his arguments? In fact, the bigger question behind any reflection on COVID-19 is whether the process of human betterment we have been experiencing for centuries is to be halted or even reversed by the shock unleashed on the system. This question is by no means easy to answer and requires the identification of possible mechanisms that can get triggered by the pandemic. Thucydides, for example, warns us from centuries away about one that lies in the human nature. In the second book of the *History of The Peloponnesian War*, he describes in detail the impact of the great plague that struck Athens during the Peloponnesian war and highlights the declining capacity of institutions in limiting misconduct and opportunistic behaviors. He writes *"The disease brought the beginning of great lawlessness ... no fear of god or the law of man restrained them for no man expected to live long enough to be tried and punished."* [(Thucydides 1920) quoted in (Morgan 1994)]. Luckily, our social order has so far proved resistant to the strains of the pandemic, and as such it may sound too far-fetched to compare it to the plague, nonetheless, identifying all possible future scenarios and their consequences on societal development and life is a necessary and important task for social scientists. This special issue is intended to be a step in fulfilling that task by conducting scholarly analyses of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic from a political economy perspective specifically focusing on peace, security, democracy and social welfare. In particular, the special issue has been designed as a collection of solicited papers of authors who mostly belong to the wide peace science community in the world. To this end, we have asked acclaimed peace science scholars to share their views on what has happened, what we can expect about the post-COVID world, and how our best plan of action should be shaped. The outcome is a collection of non-technical pieces giving us a multifaceted interpretation of COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on societies and politics. We are sure it will be welcome by a wide readership.

We start with an excellent big picture approach by Brauer and McDougal who argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is global public bad that resulted from the

damage we humans inflicted on nature through our extensive economic growth model of modern times that fetishizes GDP and its exponential growth at the expense of ever declining resources and ever accumulating waste stocks. Sandler then discusses the collective action challenges that this global public bad poses. Murshed adds to this discussion by identifying the most important and difficult of those challenges, namely, harnessing the positive dimensions of the powerful capitalist system to lower inequality and to build a new world of liberal democracy. Bove and Di Leo tap into their expertise on analyzing public opinion responses to adverse shocks to provide clues in terms of whether public opinion may facilitate or hamper the resolution of such collective action problems. Coyne and Yatsyshina on the other hand look into state responses to the pandemic and force us to think how governments' willingness to employ police powers can be reconciled with the ideals of liberal democracy. Carlson and Dacey point out the need to revitalize international organizations as another collective action problem that we face even though they don't harbor much hope for such revitalization. Confirming their pessimism, Dorussen looks into the potential impact of the pandemic on UN peacekeeping operations and predicts a contraction in UN resources resulting in fewer and smaller interventions and a decline in the effectiveness of the international response to crises. Concentrating on another major international organization Kollias and Zouboulakis explore the possible effects of the COVID-19 economic fallout on the already strained cohesion within the European Union. Skaperdas joins the call for the revival and strengthening of international organizations and argues that the urgency of the matter has become even more pressing with the COVID-19 pandemic accelerating global power shifts and the decline in US hegemony. Theoretically and empirically, such power transitions are associated with an increased likelihood of military conflict. Bapat looks into one such likelihood and critically analyzes the possibility that the spread of COVID-19 in the US will increase the likelihood of a power transition and large scale conflict between the US and China. While the pandemic might be raising the risk of international conflict for the US by revealing its weaknesses, Bilmes issues a very timely and important warning that military spending alone will not ensure American national security.

We then shift the focus of our scholarly lenses from international to internal conflict. In a very well-structured piece Rohner outlines the main channels through which the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to higher conflict risks. Polo then presents an empirical analyses of the most recent data on conflict events to demonstrate that despite the initial optimism about the pandemic fostering cooperation, violence and conflict have continued to ravage the world and COVID-19 appears to have changed little in the existing patterns. Censolo and Morelli enlarge the scope from internal armed conflict to social stability and predict a significant reduction in

protests and uprisings during the pandemic followed by a sharp increase in social instability in its aftermath. Relatedly, Anderton directs our attention to what he calls the “other virus” which is the pandemic-related violence against civilians motivated by fear, greed and xenophobia. Aptly summing all this discussion under the concept of human security, Haer and Demarest trace the coronavirus in Africa to decipher how it may damage human security in the continent through economic decline, rising poverty, authoritarianism, urban violence and social inequality. Hartley then takes us out of Africa to the UK and analyzes the impacts of the pandemic on the British economy. Finally, Chowdhury adopts a microlevel perspective on human security and employing a behavioral approach presents a non-technical assessment of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on individual conflict behavior in the post-pandemic era.

We close the special issue with a critical assessment by Douglas, Scherer and Gartzke of the enormous amount of COVID-related data that we are being bombarded with since the beginning of the pandemic. The authors enumerate the challenges producers and consumers of COVID-19 knowledge face in measurement, inference, and interpretation, and advise a healthy caution of and respect for how little we actually know about the history of this pandemic. We hope this special issue helps us in alleviating that informational deficiency.

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