

Why world leaders have a global blindset when it comes to Covid-19

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For more than two decades we have assumed, or rather hoped, that world leaders will develop a *global mindset* (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/palgrave.jibs.8400265>). The coronavirus pandemic, however, has revealed that many world leaders have actually developed a *global blindset* – a profound inability to see and understand the world from a global perspective. This global shortsightedness is especially detrimental to *global risks* – events such as the coronavirus outbreak – that have a significant negative impact on multiple countries and therefore require a decisive, globally coordinated response.



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With the human and economic costs of the delayed response now mounting, it is worth asking why the coronavirus pandemic has gone either unforeseen, denied, or downplayed. Why have so many leaders across the world been 'blind' to the potentially devastating effects of the coronavirus pandemic?



Why did President Xi Jinping of China engage in delaying tactics for six key days? Why was the British Prime minister Boris Johnson slow to recognize the risks, taking a mid-February holiday at his country home and skipping five Cobra meetings on the virus? Why did President Trump downplay the coronavirus threat with a mix of facts and false statements? Why did the Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador encourage his people to eat out at restaurants well into the pandemic? And why did the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro nullify the coronavirus risk by labelling it “a little cold”?

These leaders appear to be following each other, first walking unconcerned, then with “hesitation, alarm, stumbling, and falling”, as if they were a group of coordinated figures in Bruegel's *The Blind Leading the Blind*? Have they gone 'blind' or were they “... Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see” like the afflicted in Saramago's novel *Blindness*?

While we cannot unequivocally associate the lack of global mindset with political ideology or regime type, we can tentatively trace this global epidemic of blindness to three broad factors: the rise of nationalism; the rejection of science; and a rigged system of wealth.

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The rise of nationalism.

Nationalist mindset is common to many ‘blind’ leaders who fail to foresee and ‘see’ global risks. As it seems, it promotes the denial of both the *risk* dimension and the *global* dimension of global risks, the coronavirus outbreak included. First, the risk associated with the coronavirus outbreak was concealed and denied as Chinese leaders suppressed vital information, placing their grip on power and national image above free and accurate global flow of information.

Further, the risk was downplayed just because it had emerged overseas, as if labelling the virus ‘foreign,’ or ‘Chinese’ will make it less risky. Second, nationalist mindset has led to the rejection of a globally coordinated response. To the extent that the global dimension was recognized, it fueled international competition for resources rather than cooperation, as the recent bidding war among nations for vital medical supplies. It is clear that foreseeing and ‘seeing’ global risks is exceedingly difficult with a narrow nationalist vision.

Rejection of science.

There is already a widespread rejection, politization, and manipulation of science for political and economic purposes manifested in such debates on climate change and vaccination. This discourse has downgraded the status and validity of scientific findings and experts, providing a vocabulary with which to cast doubt, dismiss, and dispel scientific evidence. The coronavirus pandemic appears to be yet another casualty of an anti-science assault.

In China, early warnings about a “strange new virus” were rejected and suppressed. In the US, epidemiological models were met with suspicion and distrust as if they were a hoax meant to bring down Trump. Russia launched yet another misinformation

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campaign, promoting the theory that the coronavirus pandemic was propagated by American scientists. Leaders who have downplayed the coronavirus pandemic typically have a cavalier relation with truth, facts, and evidence; some are actively involved in dismantling scientific institutions and sidelining scientific evidence. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that there were blind to the potentially devastating effects projected by scientists.



Rigged system of wealth.

In an increasing number of countries, a rigged system of wealth dominates life; depending on geography and linguistic preferences, this system has been called *crony capitalism*, *kleptocracy*, and *plutocracy*, among others. While there are various explanations for “how the system works,” there is a relative broad consensus on its effects: Economic inefficiency, massive inequality, underfunding of public services, and curbed economic and social opportunities for most citizens. But above all, a rigged system breeds profound social corruption.

Why might corruption affect the (in)ability of world leaders to ‘see’? The short answer is that corruption blinds, as Moses imparts to his people shortly before his death: “You shall not

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/coronavirus-trump-scientists>)

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pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous” (Deuteronomy, 16:19).

A system characterized by widespread social injustice and corruption leads to an endemic indifference and tunnel vision. World leaders fail to ‘see’ the threat either because they are disinterested in ‘seeing’, unconcerned with what they ‘see,’ or see the world through a narrow self-interest prism, which is driven by short-term political and economic gains. Many world leaders are heavily invested in a self-congratulatory self-referential status quo that is corrupting and insulating; it makes it impossible for them to understand that their vision is obsolete in a world that has changed dramatically.

The combination of ramped nationalism, anti-science discourse, and endemic corruption have bred an epidemic of different kind: Global epidemic of blindness.

This blog is an abridged version of an article to be published in *Advances in Global Leadership* (<https://www.emerald.com/insight/publication/issn/1535-1203>)

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