



Infectious Disease and Civilization in the Twenty-first Century: Invisible Calamities Attack Modernity and the Spirit of Civil Virtue Developed by the Japanese People

Yamazaki Masakazu, Playwright and Critic

Editor's note: Professor Yamazaki Masakazu passed away on August 19, 2020. This article, written in early May 2020, is published in translation here with the permission of the bereaved family and the original publisher.

Going back to a previous time in world history

The current spread of COVID-19 can be considered a “historic” event in two senses. Firstly, of course, it is an epoch-making tragedy and turning point in contemporary history, because the epidemic is likely to have a lasting influence on future civilization. Secondly, and of greater significance, the tragedy pours cold water on the hidden arrogance of modern people, and we can imagine it encouraging a return to the human civilization of the past: a time when urban civilization arose.



Prof. Yamazaki Masakazu

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The epoch that we call the “modern age” has had a number of stages—and as humanity has become aware of each stage, it has become arrogant. As industry arose and wealth was no longer determined by climate, and as infant mortality dropped and average lifespans lengthened, humanity wrongly fancied that it had entered an age different from the past. “Takeoff” to modernity became a catchword as people blindly believed that, for better or worse, they were now living in a different world.

However, the present tragic spread of epidemic disease openly laughs in the face of this arrogance. The word “epidemic” is a relatively new one. But is the phenomenon of disease being passed on and spreading any different to 1,000 years ago? In the sense of feeling a terrifying fear of what you cannot see, how is the present situation different from the medieval plagues of the West or the *okori* of Japan (a fever-like disease thought to be caused by malaria)? People believe that modernity has expanded the global space and achieved globalization, but this virus also spans the whole world, so in the sense that there is nowhere to hide, the situation is the same as in pre-modern villages.

Thinking about it further, you could say that the anxiety and fear people feel today is even more severe than in medieval times. During the medieval period, death was part of everyday life and people were equipped with a sensitivity to cope with it. Wars were fought on the streets daily. Meanwhile, punishments such as decapitation and putting heads on display were carried out in public view. Of course, many also died from famine and disease, so people had plenty of opportunity to see people dead or dying in the street. They cared for dying family members in their own homes, and with their own hands performed the acts of washing the corpse, placing it in the coffin, and burying it.

Because of this, the common people were mentally well-prepared, had strong religious beliefs, and their world-view incorporated a sense of the transience of life. Above all, the Japanese sense of impermanence is a unique sensibility. It transcends any one religious sect and illuminates the transience of our lives in this world. Japanese people have reminded themselves of this sense by composing countless poems and recording it in sayings.

Modern people, on the other hand, have long run away from death and become accustomed to averting their eyes. Handling the dead is entrusted to specialists, and recently people are choosing to make funerals simpler and simpler. In particular, following World War II Japanese people had no opportunity to see those who died in the conflict. Extolling a society of longevity, they lost the strength to directly face death. When Japanese people learn from recent news reports of domestic and overseas COVID-19 fatalities, and realize that death is not just someone else's problem, they must feel an especially profound fear.

Incidentally, while pandemics are recorded in the modern age, they are not well remembered. Notably, the disease known as the "Spanish Flu" was a huge calamity that from 1918 to the following year resulted in around 25 million deaths worldwide including 390,000 deaths in Japan. Some find it strange how this event was easily forgotten, but in my view the reason is simple: it happened right at the end of World War I. Not only had hearts become accustomed to the loss of human life, but also the end of the war created unique circumstances in which people were stimulated by something else; namely, the joy of peace. Moreover, two decades later in the twentieth century, World War II occurred, and the Spanish Flu lost its moment to be an epoch-defining event.

In this respect, COVID-19 is surely special and, as I wrote at the start of this article, there's a good chance it will leave a permanent mark as a historical turning point. This will be due, firstly, to the development of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) and world leaders' recognition of this fact, so that the danger of a third world war has been reduced. Secondly, there is no doubt that the current pandemic is tormenting many developed countries of the modern world: the United States, Europe, and also Japan.

The special nature of today's fear and anxiety

Compared to the many kinds of natural disaster, infectious disease inflicts a special kind of fear and anxiety. The fear is profound and an order of magnitude greater. Whether an earthquake or a typhoon, natural disasters are visible to the eye, but in the case of infectious disease, both pathogens and the route of infection are shrouded in darkness. It is human nature to fear the unseen enemy, while not knowing what and how much to fear multiplies that anxiety.

What's more, not knowing how long that fear will continue and being completely unable to see the future fans the flames of that unease. Of course, the damage from earthquakes and recovery can last

decades, but at least the outlook for moving from disaster to recovery can be established in the space of months. During the Spanish Flu, on the other hand, the disease attacked in three relentless waves before it finally subsided, and each time there was a renewal of fresh fear. We still do not know when the first wave of COVID-19 will finish and cannot predict how many waves will attack.

And surely for modern people the unbearable thing about this disaster is that there is nothing to “do” to counter it. Under the Japanese government’s state of emergency [first declared for seven prefectures on April 7, extended to the whole country on April 16, and lifted on May 25], the people were asked not to go outside, not go to work, and not do business. But all these are things “not” to do—the complete opposite of being asked to do something.

The measures taken by other governments such as in the United States and Europe are tougher. These nations have used laws to impose lockdowns on cities, or taken the drastic approach of fining those who leave the house for non-essential or non-urgent reasons. The Japanese measures are far more prudent, but ironically because of that the people are being forced to voluntarily decide to “not” do things. Yet, anyone who thinks about this choice recognizes that it is unavoidable and there is nothing that the people can do at the moment.

Right now, it is the doctors, nurses, testing specialists and other medical workers who are working, and every day the media reports on the heroic battle being waged by these experts. Meanwhile, we are aware that those known as “essential workers” are supporting the transport and logistics front lines. Ordinary citizens see that exhausting effort and self-sacrifice, and in turn become even more aware of their own lack of action.

When you think about it, modern humans have never experienced a time when doing nothing is a virtue. Needless to say, top of Max Weber’s list of capitalist virtues was to make full use of time to keep working. Japanese people, in particular, have been diligent workers since before the modern age. They have not had the concept of a religious “day of rest” and have never even dreamed it worth encouraging rest. An interesting thing about how the population acted after the state of emergency was declared was the reports that considerably more people left their homes on working weekdays than went out for leisure at the weekends.

Another thing that we mustn’t forget is how volunteering has spread in recent years. The act of “volunteering” oneself as a form of service during emergencies has become accepted and widespread. Volunteer activities increased and became established around the time of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in January 1995 and reflected a significant turning point in the social consciousness of Japanese people. During previous centuries, the social contribution activities of Japanese people were limited by family and geographical ties. The objects of ordinary people’s goodwill were people they knew by face, whether through obligation or emotional relationship. Yet, following the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, between one and two million volunteers from all over Japan came together to provide relief to disaster victims with whom they’d had absolutely no relationship to date.

For Japanese people, this was a huge turning point for moral attitudes. I consider it an awakening to a new sense of public virtue. Yet, during this disaster, the fine moral behavior that continued through the Great East Japan Earthquake [2011], the Kumamoto Earthquake [2016], and at other times is forbidden. In fact, even if the victim is a family member or neighbor, the virtuous act is now *not* to go and help. Two weeks after the state of emergency was declared, Japanese people interviewed on TV looked calm. They

simply mumbled that they were becoming “stressed” or “agitated.” Going by that, we can surmise that people are enduring profound emotions.

Additionally, if I was to add just one more comment on behalf of the enduring populace, I note how strange it is that while the government and journalists have spoken about the “battle against COVID-19” over the last few months, they have not conveyed enough information about the “offensive” side of that battle. The extent of the tough battle happening in medical facilities is well known, but emphasis is placed on it being like a losing battle, with many complaints about shortages of medical staff and equipment. There is a startling lack of information about the winning side of this battle; in other words, the discovery of effective treatments and medicines, in particular about what’s happening with the development of a vaccine.

Personally, I can only find one article to call a positive report of the battle and that is from the May 2020 edition of *The Nikkei Science* (the Japanese edition of *Scientific American*). This reported how, within one month of a new infectious disease being internationally recognized, doctors had already discovered the structure of the virus protein and its DNA sequence, enabling them to start work on producing a vaccine. It’s this kind of information that could provide sustenance to Japanese people as they keep on patiently enduring; and the media could also provide timely reports on the different stages before the vaccine is finished—a process said to take at least one or two years—as well as the kind of support needed to shorten that process.

How public spirit has improved over the last half century

I wrote that the people interviewed looked calm, but without a doubt the actions of Japanese people under the state of emergency were very sensible compared to those in some other countries. In India and the United States, resistance to restrictions on leaving home is getting stronger, and there are demonstrations and riots. Compared to that, shopping and tourist areas in Japan are deserted, and a spirit of restraint has even led to the voluntary closure of cram schools and care facilities for the elderly. This all deserves special mention. Home-working for company employees started before the state of emergency was declared, and when a reduction in working hours was also instituted, most offices became nearly empty. Corporate employees who had been accustomed to working in tightly knit organizations in harmony with their colleagues took on the tough challenge of isolation and self-management by themselves. Conversely, small businesses that had worked with proud independence to date all simultaneously complied with the recommendation to stop trading, either enduring the desperate state of not having any income, or using all their ingenuity to look for a way to form joint enterprises.

The good sense and self-restraint of the Japanese people has a long history and is even recorded in the observations of Lafcadio Hearn [1850–1904, a writer who lived in Japan from 1890 to 1904]. My view is that the public spirit quietly in action now actually developed a little later [after Hearn]. For example, in the Tokyo of the early 1960s before the Olympics took place, garbage was left strewn in the streets and waterways, giving off a foul smell. The authorities, who were then preparing for the Olympics, were stirred to action, distributing garbage cans to households and deploying garbage trucks so that the sight of refuse finally disappeared from the streets.

From my own memories, it was probably the beginning of the 1970s that saw a remarkable change in Japanese social sensibility and the fresh green shoots of new standards of beauty and morality.

Coincidentally, there was a memorable corporate ad from Fuji Xerox Co. in 1970 that urged “From workaholic life to beautiful life.” The years that followed faithfully turned this slogan into reality.

Economic growth continued but gradually changed in nature from producing hardware to software, and there was a shift from a strong focus on mass production to emphasizing design and concept. I have written about this elsewhere, but the T-shirts that were starting to become popular around that time are a typical example. The base cost of a T-shirt’s cotton material was 100 yen, but no one complained when adding design saw that change to a retail price of 3,000 yen. Products in general quickly became more varied, “small lot production of a diverse range of products” turned into a catchword, and the positive focus on cultural design and cultural industries intensified.

People’s attention turned to making their surroundings more beautiful, and around the same time also first inclined towards making their actions more beautiful, which is an interesting coincidence. It was during the 1980s that the sight of gentlemen urinating on the streets of Ginza vanished, while drivers stopped sounding their horns in irritation at traffic jams. Not only did crime levels drop, but the habit of separating household garbage was established and it became normal to see passengers lining up on the station platform in front of train doors. The percentage of dropped and lost items that are returning is higher in Japan than any other country. The nation is remarkable in that even wallets containing cash are handed in to the police. The apex of these changes came in January 1995 [the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake] when volunteering became an established custom... a virtuous activity that is still going strong today.

The coexistence of pragmatism and a sense of transience

I don’t know whether the virtue of the Japanese people will really win out against this national crisis, nor whether we will reach its final stages unharmed. It’s not impossible that an unexpected series of “writhing around in agony” events is waiting for us, but we know that historically plagues have always come to an end at some point. What kind of world will remain after COVID-19 has passed? Well, it is our assignment to think about it

There is a prominent view that widespread transmission of plague in the fourteenth century caused structural change to Western societies and prepared the way for the end of the feudal age. A sharp population drop made it difficult to sustain the manorial system, and improvements in labor productivity opened the way for industrial modernization. Even so, it is hard to see a change on the same scale happening in the twenty-first century. We cannot foresee what effects will emerge in the far future, but the COVID-19 calamity has sharply exposed how the world currently faces other urgent issues.

Globalization is one of those, and not only is it obviously a direct cause of the epidemic’s spread, it is abundantly clear that globalization has been useless in defending against this disaster. It is states that have protected the people—and states acting unilaterally in self-defense. Putting aside for a moment the right or wrong of the behavior of states, the general public now remembers an eternal truth; namely, that while the market helps distribute wealth, it is only individual states that are of any use when redistributing wealth.

The future world’s population will probably be wary of unrestrained globalization and, in particular, critical of the challenge massive global corporations pose to states. In order to avoid a situation where huge companies choose the country where they pay taxes, and to maintain a political system in which the

will of the people extends to how companies are run, there will be expectations for renewed international cooperation efforts—and that cooperation will be vital.

And once states have escaped this current quagmire, they will have to quickly address another issue, namely the issue of fairness towards future generations and how to deal with the astronomical loans taken out against the future to enable the current emergency measures. As states work towards economic recovery, one tactic might be to try and revive high progressive tax rates to drastically reform the income tax system. This is just a suggestion, but it might also be wise to nationalize in advance sea floor resources in exclusive maritime economic zones. The waters around Japan are a treasure trove of hidden resources, including rare earths and rare metals. Surely it is worth considering the application of special high tax rates to those who mine the materials and make that an inheritance for future generations.

But, as well as these current issues, there is another that is probably even more important, and that is the belated change to the worldview of individual citizens. As I wrote at the start of this article, there is no doubt that, through experiencing this historic tragedy, everyone has realized a modern arrogance implicit within themselves—that assumption that plagues rocking societies on a global scale belonged only to old stories, and that the modern world had long ago transitioned to a completely different age. But surely people have been made to realize that this was just arrogance and only a naive belief.

History directly connects the present day with ancient and medieval ages. Over time, various changes and improvements have been attempted. Yet, no leaps forward in human values that we could call “progress of civilization” have occurred. Civilization has not once prevailed in its negotiations with nature. There have only been thousands of years of repeated temporary compromises. That situation is likely to continue and, while it will be hard for humanity to abandon its efforts to preserve civilization, it needs to abandon its superstitious faith in the progress of civilization. We mustn’t be lazy about the diligence and endurance needed to change the reality facing us; yet, we must also forget our ideology of progress and that this marks the beginning of a new age.

Perhaps future Japanese people will revive their thinking in this way as an ideology for the twenty-first century? I pray that this is what happens. But if I could expand my prayer, I would like this experience to lead to a revival of the traditional Japanese worldview and the sensitivity that views our reality as transient. This sense of transience is a healthy way for the people to think, and certainly not a sentimental nihilism. It is an aware sensitivity that employs practical wisdom and skills, yet also illuminates the transient workings of the world as mere temporary achievements that will one day return to dust.

“Even the blossoming flowers [Colors are fragrant, but they] / Will eventually scatter / Who in our world / Is unchanging?” This truth [from the well known classical poem *Iroha*] is learned by all Japanese people when studying the *kana* syllabary. I cannot help feeling that it is still shared and pondered by all.

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