



**MAN, THE STATE AND THE VIRUS**  
**UNDERSTANDING THE HEALTH CRISIS THROUGH THEORIES**  
**OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Theories of international relations are coherent and systematic representations of the world. As such, they can help us understand the health crisis that we have been facing in 2020. The characteristics of the processes that have triggered and continue to accompany the pandemic make it a transnational phenomenon, confirming the perspective of the same name. At all stages of this crisis, the role of the individual is central. Nevertheless, on a closer look, the individual's capacity of action is in fact rather limited. If the virus does not care about borders, it is not the case for those who carry it. Indeed, they rely on the state to solve this crisis, a state whose behavior coincides with what the realist theorists predict. The priority is thus given to the sovereign action of states, which are focused on their own interests, as they take part in a barely concealed power competition.

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## INTRODUCTION

The health crisis that we have been experiencing since the beginning of 2020 has had a great impact on the behavior of all international actors. It will undeniably have major and durable consequences around the world. Consequently, it shows the required characteristics to be analyzed by international relations theories. As coherent and systematic representations of the world, they can help us figure out this crisis.

At this stage, two questions must be distinguished: on the one hand, those theories tell us about the emergence of the health crisis? On the other hand, how can the reactions of international actors be interpreted in this particular context? These questions might be linked but they are different from an analytical stance. Furthermore, each can be asked in two different ways. The first one consists in taking a *positive* perspective: namely explaining and understanding the situation from an empirical point of view. The second one is set in a *normative* perspective: the point is not to analyze the situation as it is but rather as it should be, based on value judgments. Many authors in the field of International Relations (IR) refuse to distinguish these two angles and argue that any positive affirmation is rooted in implicit normative considerations.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, each approach mobilizes a differently oriented argumentation. It would be best, therefore, not to confuse them. We shall focus on the positive perspective.

The point here is not to review all theories of international relations.<sup>2</sup> We shall give a special importance to realism and will try to demonstrate that its obsolescence, which is perpetually announced, is rather long to confirm, the health crisis being an illustration of this thesis. We will first present transnationalism, as this approach seems best suited to understand the pandemic, as we consider the crisis as a transnational issue. Then we shall examine the realist arguments, considering here the crisis as a competition between states. Finally, we shall question the mechanical vision of the crisis. We may wonder if its main characteristics are not dependent on the perception of the actors, as constructivists would argue.

## THE CRISIS AS A TRANSNATIONAL ISSUE

In appearance, transnationalism seems to offer quite an appropriate reading of the current health crisis and so do approaches which lay claim to international political sociology. Transnationalism highlights the great interdependence between international actors, whether state or non-state, as globalization implies a loss of state control over these multiple flows. The latter may be military, political, economic and commercial, but also informational, religious, environmental, legal, symbolic and, as we are currently witnessing,

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1. This is why, for example, Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, propose an “ethics” chapter linked to each of the chapters they devote to theoretical approaches to IR.

2. For a comprehensive approach in French, see Dario Battistella and al., *Théories des relations internationales*, Paris, Presse de Sciences Po, 2019. For a clear introduction to these theories, see Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, *Théories des relations internationales*, Paris, PUF, 2010.

sanitary. The point is then to highlight the growing variety and complexity of the connections between international – or rather global – actors, such as states, international organizations, multinational firms, non-governmental organizations and even civil societies or individuals themselves.

Authors following this approach will consider the pandemic as evidence of their theories' empirical relevance.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in the years to come, we might expect the authors of IR textbooks to use this crisis to illustrate the importance of transnational phenomena.<sup>4</sup> And they would have good reason to do so: the virus, which is at the origin of this crisis, has little concern for state sovereignty. More precisely, transnationalism might answer the two previously asked questions. On the one hand, what is the origin of the crisis? The initial transmission of the virus towards man allegedly happened on a street market in Wuhan.<sup>5</sup> Besides the fact that animals, sometimes coming from other continents, are being displayed there, no law enforcement and no custom controls have been able to stop the spread of the disease. The globalized world we live in implies growing connectivity between individuals that goes beyond state borders. This results in a high volatility, enhanced by James Rosenau, a main figure of transnationalism.<sup>6</sup> Characterized by their dynamism, the processes take place quickly, causing instability and uncertainty, which are sides of the globalized world that traditional IR approaches fail to consider, or at least have not theoretically integrated into their perspective. In fact, the current crisis clearly shows that the parameters enabling the anticipation of the health risk level are numerous, complex, intertwined, so as to prevent anyone from predicting it, or only roughly so.

On the other hand, we may wonder what is the reaction of international actors. Once the epidemic became a pandemic, a variety of actors stepped in, in order to limit both its range and consequences. The international authority setting the norms for these matters is the World Health Organization (WHO). This agency, which is part of the UN, has increased its visibility over this period. It provides information and issues statements on the nature of the situation, as well as recommendations for the measures to be adopted. Thank to its attributions, it has indirect leverage to put pressure on states, as it did during the SRAS episode. Moreover, it can affirm its role as an agent taking part in the coordination of international health efforts; as a matter of fact, pandemics seem to have increased its influence.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the weaknesses of multilateral initiatives are regularly pointed out, the times we are living could spur its dynamism by highlighting their necessity.<sup>8</sup>

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3. See Bertrand Badies's declarations on this subject, "[Nous dépendons d'une poignée de mains qui se donne à Wuhan.](#)" *France Inter*, March 14, 2020.

4. If compatible with pandemic situations, transnationalism is generally mobilized to report on other phenomena.

5. It is not yet completely certain that the first infection happened in that market. We lack clear information on this point, and above all we do not have a reliable alternative thesis. On this question, see Smriti Mallapaty, "[Where did COVID come from? WHO investigation begins but faces challenges.](#)" *nature.com*, November 11, 2020.

6. James Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990.

7. Stephan Elbe, "Pandemic Security," in Peter Burgess (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of New Security Studies*, Oxon, Routledge, 2010, p. 163-172.

8. This means, however, that multilateralism is first and foremost a useful concept in the context of a normative approach. For a discussion of the challenges of multilateralism today, see Gaïdz Minassian and Marc Semo, "[Le multilatéralisme à l'épreuve du coronavirus.](#)" *Le Monde*, April 24, 2020.

Non-governmental organizations also play a role, as multinational firms do, some of which even redirect their production or marketing methods in order to supply some sensitive areas with the relevant materials.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the length and severity of the crisis will depend upon a field that has no homeland, namely scientific research. Much hope is placed upon medical advances in order to tackle this disease, as well as a continuous effort often internationally financed, creating a rather substantial cooperation between researchers, laboratories and hospitals throughout the world.<sup>10</sup> Despite the nationalist tone of some political speeches willing to claim in advance scientific discoveries, the daily practice of researchers leaves no room for their own nationalist considerations.

Last but not least, the non-state major actor in this crisis is the individual. We are not here referring to the one who holds a position of responsibility within an entity, which would be itself an international actor. We are referring to the individual as such, operating alone or in concert with other actors. As a matter of fact, all other actors appeal first to the individual and to sense of responsibility. This crisis started with them, then the individual is the main victim, and lastly it will end thanks to them. Consequently, a reasoning based on a micro-sociological level of interactions between individuals shall enable us to explain this situation. It also helps us understand the personal choices of whether taking or not some precautions in order to fight the spreading of the virus.<sup>11</sup>

Note that, even under lockdown, the individual remains connected to others. The development of means of communication, whether with television, phones or mostly the internet, enables them to receive and transmit signals and information instantaneously, especially in the West, and to continue to affirm directly their status of international actor, i.e. to reinforce their capacity of influence without any mediations through states. Individuals are undoubtedly more connected than before. After a few days of lockdown, the internet traffic had risen up to 70% and the social media almost reached 60%.<sup>12</sup>

As the quickness and pertinence of reaction of many governments are being questioned, some individually initiated analysis that are available online have had a widely diffusion among the civil society. Sometimes of excellent quality, they are the proof that the individual can internationally affirm their great capacities of analysis, which they use independently from any allegiance to their state.<sup>13</sup> These are proofs of the individual's capacity

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9. See, for example, the case of the British petrochemical giant Ineos, which built a factory in Martigues and then another in Étain in about ten days to produce bottles of hydroalcoholic gel intended primarily for hospitals. Meanwhile, the sports retailer Décathlon withdrew from sale its "Easybreath" masks used for snorkeling, in order to adapt them to the needs of patients and healthcare providers.

10. "While political leaders have locked their borders, scientists have been shattering theirs, creating a global collaboration unlike any in history. Never before, researchers say, have so many experts in so many countries focused simultaneously on a single topic and with such urgency." Matt Apuzzo and David D. Kirkpatrick wrote in, "[Covid-19 Changed How the World Does Science, Together](#)," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2020.

11. Transnationalists are not entirely indifferent to more "macro" levels of analysis, although they do stress the importance of considering how the structure interacts with processes at the individual level.

12. Valentin Cimino, "[Le trafic Internet mondial en hausse de 70 % en raison du confinement](#)," *Siècle digital*, March 26, 2020.

13. For an example of analyses that are as solid as they are critical, see Philippe Lemoine's blog: <https://necplu-ribusimpar.net/fr/>.

of action, a characteristic of the “skillful individual” emphasized by James Rosenau,<sup>14</sup> as these studies often lead to realistic recommendations on the types of behaviors to adopt.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, states also have a role to play, but transnationalist authors never deny its status as an international actor. They deny its status of major and unitary actor; that is, not fragmented into several distinct internal actors. Moreover, they consider outdated the vision of a one-dimensional world consisting exclusively of the relations between all-powerful states, which would be locked like “black boxes.”

In this regard, the interest of the approaches based on the state level of analysis should be highlighted, and more specifically, those who study the factors that determine decision making on the internal stage. Such a perspective undeniably requires the gathering of elements that are difficult to obtain and to deal with rigorously at such an early stage. But this seems very promising. Can the failures in terms of intelligence during this crisis be explained by cognitive and psychological factors?<sup>16</sup> Were the decisions made by unitary and rational states or has the organization of the state played a role? The different branches of the administration have interests, cultures, and mostly their own bureaucratic routines that might explain the delays before any action, the inadequacy of the action towards the situation on site, or the lack of coordination between the different organizations within the same entity.<sup>17</sup> What if a good comprehension of this crisis about micro organizations was made through the analysis at the “micro” level?<sup>18</sup> Such an approach of foreign policy analysis assumes, just like transnationalism, that states are non-unitary actors. It claims to be an alternative to realism, a theoretic current that has long dominated the field of IR. One may wonder what it really brings to the understanding to this crisis.

## THE CRISIS AS AN ISSUE OF COMPETITION BETWEEN STATES

According to the realist approach, international politics is characterized by the absence of any regulating authority. For realists, this anarchic situation makes the unitary states become major international actors, competing against each other for security and power. But what about health? Such an issue does not affect power or security traditionally conceived. Furthermore, it implies different sorts of actors instead of just involving states. Does

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14. James Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics*.

15. On measures of social distancing, see, for example, the study by Tomas Pueyo, seen tens of millions of times, produced for the attention of decision-makers as well as individuals: “[Coronavirus: Why You Must Act Now. Politicians, Community Leaders and Business Leaders: What Should You Do and When?](#),” *Medium*, March 10, 2020. It remains to be seen whether individuals with this profile are sufficiently influential and common to form the basis of a theory of international relations that could compete with approaches based on the role of the state, a question we will address later.

16. The same thesis, applied to separate case studies, is proposed by Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011.

17. The subject has been much debated since Graham Allison published his 1971 book *Essence of Decision*, which will be re-issued almost thirty years later: Graham Allison et Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision. Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, New York, Longman, 1999.

18. Among the pedagogical works on foreign policy analysis, Jean-Frédéric Morin and Jonathan Paquin are recommended, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Tool Box*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. For a presentation condensed into a book chapter, see Dario Battistella et al., *Théorie des relations internationales*, p. 381- 418.

this mean that realism is refuted? There are at least three ways to answer no to this question. Whereas some answers might be convincing, others must be examined. As a matter of fact, those answers are already being informally made, which indicates that they might turn into main arguments in future debates. One of the objectives of this research paper is to make a distinction between thorough answers and less reliable one. The answers have been listed according to their relevance.

The health crisis entails a competition at the end of which the best states prevail, thus proving the realist theory right. This first argument is not a valid one. According to Kenneth Waltz, one of the leaders the realist approach, states adapt themselves to their environment.<sup>19</sup> But not explaining how the adaptation is made undermines that assertion. Since it cannot be contradicted, this claim is thus unfit to check the validity of a theoretical proposal.<sup>20</sup>

The second argument is about epistemology, i.e. it is linked to the goals and functions of a scientific theory. According to this point of view, the health crisis does not have to be examined through a realist stance. As for many theories, realism simplifies reality to generalize about it in order to make sense of facts that are otherwise too ambiguous to mean anything. Some facts, like health related phenomena, are merely set aside and unexplained. Realists will undoubtedly be satisfied with the use of a theoretical approach which is incompatible with various phenomena as long as it is able to explain the most important ones according to them, such as the competition of power between sovereign states.

Despite its relevance in general, this second argument will be difficult to keep in this particular case. The pandemic affects almost the entire humanity directly or indirectly. It includes also states, which are dear to realists, and especially in the dimensions that they emphasize. A highly severe recession is looming.<sup>21</sup> For most realists, the economy is not vital as such.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless it is so indirectly, as the military power of a state depends upon its economy. This crisis, affecting almost every country, albeit unequally,<sup>23</sup> shall have repercussions on the balance of power. It would be better for realists to be able to explain where the change in the most important mechanism, according to them, comes from. When a phenomenon is at the same time interesting, important, and has several things to say about a given theory's field of study, one might expect this theory to be able to say something about it. And that is exactly what the third line of argument is about.

The third and last way to defend realism is to emphasize its ability to explain the different dimensions of this crisis. We shall here take up the arguments used in favor of

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19. They do so through emulation and socialization, and those who fail in this task are at risk of disappearing or becoming less influential (Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1979).

20. The environment that Waltz talks about is anarchic. Health as such is irrelevant. Moreover, the existence of a selection process is not a hypothesis in Waltz's work. It is an assumption from which he infers hypotheses that must be tested. As such, this idea is not intended to be empirically tested.

21. On the scope, risks and economic and financial challenges inherent in this crisis, see Adam Tooze, "[Why the Global Recession Could Last a Long Time](#)," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2020.

22. The greatest exception to the secondary nature of the economy among the realists is found in Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

23. The American economic growth model, based on a relatively weak welfare state and a flexible labour market, makes it particularly vulnerable to exogenous shocks, especially when they generate unemployment. For more details, see Mark Blyth "[The U.S. Economy Is Uniquely Vulnerable to the Coronavirus](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, March 30, 2020.

transnationalism, an approach which challenges the domination of realism, by underlining the fact that globalization makes it partially obsolete.

From a realist point of view, the fact that the outbreak of the pandemic is in China might be quite significant. China is an emerging power, willing to challenge the hegemony of America. To this end, it tries to increase its power through an important economic growth, which it fuels with intense domestic activity and through the multiple connections it keeps with the rest of the world. The scope of economic activities and the multiple interactions it creates are precisely among the factors of the quick propagation of the virus once it has been transmitted to humans. Indirectly, the extent of the crisis could then be the result of China's increase of power, a process which is compatible with realist theories. Without judging the value of this argument, the relevance of realism is even more efficient when it comes to explaining the reactions to the pandemic rather than its origins.

Closing borders and implementing lockdowns restrain interactions between international actors.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the volume, variety and intensity of those interactions are at the origin of the questioning of the realist principles by the transnationalist approach. Although temporary, those measures show us that the state is able to influence the level of interdependence between international actors. Contrary to the "hyperglobalist" stance, embodied by Kenichi Ohmae and according to whom globalization sets a new era,<sup>25</sup> recent events does not go without any state control. After being put on hold, the market law will be re-established once the restrictions are lifted. Yet, many think it will be to a lesser extent.<sup>26</sup> It is most likely the "skeptics," such as Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson<sup>27</sup> who will find in recent events a way to satisfy their vision of globalization. The latter is described as a myth, and the reality it is supposed to represent being in fact made of commercial blocks that depend upon powerful states.<sup>28</sup>

International actors rely upon the states to set and control implementation of measures in order to fight the spreading of the virus. As we have seen after the September 11 attacks, after several financial crisis, and even today, it is the state that is called upon whenever a crisis occurs, and that provides security, welfare, protection and health.

As for the increase in transnational cooperation, within the scientific community for instance, it only occurs exceptionally. The emergency due to the crisis is the reason why

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24. Not all researchers who explicitly subscribe to a perspective inspired by political sociology would consider the closing of borders as an empirical fact that weakens their approach, as they are less interested in demonstrating that the border has been outdated (even if its obsolescence is sometimes claimed) than in underlining its non-fixity. They therefore study the way in which the internal and external are intermingled. They will for example critically analyze the symbolic meaning of borders and the uses that elites in particular make of them. The journal *International Political Sociology* has shown a tendency to publish articles with this orientation.

25. Kenichi Ohmae, *The Borderless World*, London, Harper Collins, 1990.

26. John Gray, "Why This Crisis Is a Turning Point in History," *NewStatesman*, April 1, 2020.

27. Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, *Globalization in Question*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996.

28. We reproduce here the now famous typology proposed by David Held et al., *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999, who will decide to position themselves in an intermediate position by claiming to be "transformationalist," i.e. considering that states play an important role, but one that globalization has transformed, just as it has transformed the nature of interactions between all international actors. Many transnationalist authors are likely to fall into this category. For a critical but nevertheless pedagogical analysis of this typology, see Bryane Michael, "Theorising the Politics of Globalisation: A Critique of Held et al.'s 'Transformationalism'," *Journal of Economic and Social Research*, 4:2, October 2011, p. 3-17.

advances are immediately shared among scientists around the world. Moreover, the fact that these exchanges take place without taking into account the traditional academic logic of appropriation of research, through the publication of scientific articles in one's name, shows that it would be wrong to consider these examples as representative of cooperation in the long term.

We have already stressed the role of international organizations with the example of the WHO. Its role of coordination is not one that occurs by leaving states aside. Since the WHO cannot compel them, it depends on the states' good will. Even its informative role is ruled by the preferences of its most powerful members.<sup>29</sup> The delay in qualifying the situation as a "pandemic" could be identified as a way for the WHO to pace its communication according to the expectations of China, which, by the way, is by no means something new.<sup>30</sup>

As for the nature of the crisis itself, one might wonder whether it corresponds to the news processes supposed to make realism obsolete. Going back to James Roseneau's attempt of theorization, we shall find five sources of change and as many factors affecting international politics with a multi-centered dimension.

There is first the transition from an industrial era to a post-industrial one, in which the microelectronic revolution has contributed to reducing distances, shortening deadlines, and increasing interdependence between actors. Although this is true, this characteristic of the contemporary world is not supposedly the most useful to explain the ongoing crisis.

The second factor is about the place of new issues. Health crisis have had a central role in history. Realists will not omit to mention that Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, a work of reference for many of them, focuses on the plague epidemic that decimated Athens in the fifth century BC. The way the current crisis affects us depends on our living conditions, which have improved. But what is at stake is not new.

We shall deal with the last three factors at once, as they are intertwined: namely the states' loss of power in solving problems, the decentralization of international politics leading to an increase of sub-systems, and the of individuals with improved capacities for analysis and action.<sup>31</sup> This last factor is indeed the most important, as Roseneau points out. Other factors depend upon it more than the opposite. The assertion of this individual, which is possible thanks to a better education level and powerful technological tools, implies that the state authority is questioned. The individual's bond of allegiance to their state becomes less strong and exclusive, which weakens the latter's authority and capacity for action.

Since the beginning of the crisis, nevertheless, the allegiance of individuals to their state does not seem to be affected. More, it has prevailed over alternative allegiances. Individuals are the first to ask their central government for action. In France, each public statement

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29. In addition to being criticized for being under the thumb of powerful states, the WHO is also, and perhaps most importantly, criticized for the links it has with private actors such as the big pharmaceutical companies. While this may well contribute to the erosion of its credibility, realists cannot use this as an argument to their credit. As non-state actors, these private actors and the partnerships in which they participate are not, for realists, supposed to be key elements of international politics.

30. Alice Ekman, "[La route de la soie sanitaire](#)," *Le Grand Continent*, April 2, 2020.

31. In fact, the five factors are connected as they all rely to one degree or another on individual abilities. But the first two depend on them more indirectly, which allows us to enunciate them separately.

made by political leaders is scrutinized with great interest, and the one from the President of the Republic on March 16, 2020 was watched by over 35 million viewers, setting an all-time record in terms of audience rating.<sup>32</sup> Of course, much criticism was addressed about the crisis management. But it concerns more the political representatives in place rather than the state as an institution. The fact that public measures are seen as legitimate, even though they come from criticized governments, show to what extent the state authority is preserved.

Whether in the spread of the virus or in the measures to tackle it, each crucial step of the health crisis seems linked to the individual's behavior. But which one is it? Is it the Roseneau's "skillful individual" who made business in unhealthy conditions in Wuhan by trading, at a high price, protected species for medical and aphrodisiac virtues they do not have? Or maybe is it the individual who was convinced they would recover from Covid-19 by drinking hot herbal tea?<sup>33</sup> Finally, the individual, whose thinking and behavior are considered to be sensible and that plays a major role in the ending of the crisis is a responsible and physically citizen, who follows the instructions that they are given, and often imposed upon them, by public authorities.<sup>34</sup> This health crisis, by its complexity and dynamics, has many similarities with the "turbulences" that shake international politics, as highlighted by transnationalists. But it might not be for the reasons put forward by the latter that the crisis shows those characteristics. The individuals' capacities are not being questioned here, nor the fact that they have increased. But they are not the ones that are being called upon at the moment.

International actors' behavior towards this crisis, as the realists might put it, confirms the importance of the competition between states willing to defend their own interests. International cooperation, even among partner countries, takes the toll of initiatives led by the individual states less inclined to worry about their neighbors' well being.<sup>35</sup> It is yet too early to be sure but we can imagine that the current health issues will be tackled through the competition of rival power between America and China. Indeed US President Trump talked about the "Chinese virus." On the opposite, the Chinese regime tries to impose a favorable describing it as the benevolent leader the United States would not be.<sup>36</sup> But this equally reveals the non-mechanical feature of this crisis, the meaning of which varies according to the perceptions of the different actors.

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32. A record that will be broken on the evening of April 13, also on the occasion of a presidential address on the pandemic.

33. Having long believed that the Covid-19 was nothing more than a rather vigorous flu, the author of this paper does not frankly distinguish himself by his faculties of discernment, contrary to what he claims quite frequently, and to what he might unfortunately continue to claim.

34. This conclusion cannot be over-generalized, nor does it apply to all stages of the current crisis, as we have seen with the example of the individual analyses of the health situation.

35. Several examples of selfish behavior of this type are identified by Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, "[Will the Coronavirus End Globalization as We Know It?](#)" *Foreign Affairs*, March 16, 2020.

36. In this respect, the pandemic might be less a turning point in world history than an accelerator of existing trends. On this point, see Richard Haas, "[The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather Than Reshape It](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, April 7, 2020.

## THE CRISIS IS WHAT THE ACTORS MAKE OF IT

What if this health crisis was only revealing what we make it say? What if the fact that this situation is considered as a “crisis” was only revealing a political interest, allowing some actors to impose their agenda to others?

This questions the objective attribute of social reality. Constructivism as a theoretical approach in IR was developed around that premise. The fact that international actors evolve in an anarchic environment does not tell us what these actors’ interests and actions will be. How states perceive themselves, perceive others, and are perceived by others, in other words identity issues in an inter-subjective perspective, will determine the actors’ interests, and then their behavior. Such a plastic nature of reality might justify the importance one gives to discourse, thus setting the normative framework of international politics. It is in the light of this process that discursive efforts have been made by Washington and Beijing, which describe the crisis in a way that suits their respective expectations.

Constructivists’ propositions are, of course, not meant to be applied to all the objects concerned by the health crisis. The virus, for instance, does not care about the way we perceive it, and we will not protect ourselves from it by considering it one of us. It is not a social construct, nor is the disease it provokes or the deaths it causes. Its spread, even though it is not indifferent to social interactions, technically depends on material processes only, and not upon individuals’ perception. Whatever may be said about them, “pigs can’t fly,” said constructivist Alexander Wendt,<sup>37</sup> thereby admitting that reality keeps a core of objective properties. Those raw facts exist independently from any human convention, as opposed to social facts.

Nevertheless, raw facts only explain a few aspects of international politics. Their importance often depends on their interpretation, which is made according to the social environment in which facts happen. In the final analysis, social facts might be able to clarify the reasons why those raw facts appear as well as why different actors react to them the way they do.

This rather general perspective might lead the way to variations limited to more specific issues. What if security issues, so dear to the realists, were not specifically about security, but only became so when perceived as such? This reasoning, based upon the performative effect of speeches, can be applied to those made about the ongoing crisis. It is this argument that the concept of “securization” tries to describe. The Copenhagen School, represented by Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver,<sup>38</sup> to whom we owe the orientation of the scientific debates in that sense, exposes the following mechanism: political elites turn an issue into security terms, although it is never intrinsically about security, in order to legitimate the measures taken to deal with the problem at stake notably through procedures that are not considered normal ones. The “martial” rhetoric used by the French president and the fighting atmosphere against threats to national security that it created

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37. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 56 and 58.

38. Barry Buzan et al., *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1998.

could be interpreted in these terms: by invoking “war,” the health crisis is the subject of a “security” speech aiming at widening the possible range of actions of the political elites whenever they use this crisis.

Saying that an issue is about security is not enough to get the public’s support.<sup>39</sup> Taking the multiple types of audience into consideration when listening to the “security” speeches in an inter-subjective outlook enables us to put into perspective the conditions of success of the speeches.<sup>40</sup>

In the unsettled times we live in, the public’s tendency to listen to speeches from the executive increases. That is what Ronald Krebs explains, as books on IR strategic narratives develop more and more.<sup>41</sup> But not all speeches work. Those which bring meaning to sums of elements that had been confusing at first, thanks to a coherent storytelling, are those which have better chances at imposing themselves as the dominant narrative. The chief of the executive has here a unique advantage since, as we have seen, their position gives them the chance to be heard. In other words, if they provide a coherent speech quickly, they will have high chances to get the masses’ approval. The measures to be chosen will even be easier to justify this way.

As a matter of fact, including health measures into the field of security is not new. Quite relevant in this matter is the notion of human security, which also includes economic, ecologic, and even personal, community and environmental dimensions.<sup>42</sup> The point is thus to decentralize security issues from the states towards the individuals. Most of the time, it is also about integrating a normative dimension to the analysis, a task that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

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39. According to a Kantar-Onepoint survey (barometer of April 2020) carried out for *Le Figaro*, less than half of the French people questioned said they trust the President to manage the coronavirus crisis (47%). Another way of interpreting this result involves putting it into perspective with previous surveys from the same barometer. In this case, those conducted between the end of February and the beginning of March 2020, i.e. in “normal circumstances,” and therefore before the securitization of the health issue, indicate that the respondents’ confidence in the person of the president was even lower (28%). Some will insist on the additional support shown for the President (rather substantial, since it is of nineteen points) undoubtedly generated by the crisis and the speeches that constitute it, while others will consider it quite low given these are times of crisis, which tend to generate high level of support. In any case, it remains very subject to partisan preferences (La République en marche: 95%; Parti socialiste: 50%; Rassemblement national: 18%). Moreover, the French politician whose attitude is judged to be the most positive in the context of this crisis is by far the Minister of Health Olivier Véran. We do not know what the reasons for this favorable opinion are, but if it were linked to the didactic effort he made, which has been quite widely praised, this would indicate interesting lines of research as to the virtues, in the eyes of public opinion, of transparent and pedagogical explanation compared to proclaiming a state of affairs without justification.

40. Thierry Balzacq proposes to integrate the role of the audience in scientific debates on security (“The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:2, June 2005, p. 171-201).

41. Ronald Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

42. Dario Battistella et al., *Théories des relations internationales*, p. 586-587.

## CONCLUSION

The characteristics of the processes that provoked and continue to accompany the Covid-19 pandemic on a planetary scale make it a transnational phenomenon, namely: the huge amount of various and quick connections, the major role played by non-state actors in general, and the key role played by individuals in particular. This could assert transnational theories of international relations. Such a vision would undermine the dominant approach, i.e. realism, which does not systematically consider transnational phenomena when explaining international politics.

Nevertheless, realism is resourceful. Although the virus does not care about borders, the same cannot be said about those who carry it. They do not rely on trans-governmental or inter-governmental mechanisms to solve this crisis, but rather rely on the state, and more specifically on their state. Their political allegiance to their state is not only obvious, it tends also to be exclusive. Those individuals are sometimes critical about their government's policies. But being critical while considering public measures as legitimate proves that the state authority is not scattering. Even if the origin of the crisis is not coming from the state, its consequences are dealt by the state, and they might even strengthen it. Moreover, as some realists might put it, the crisis shows or rather confirms above all that states think about themselves, especially in the perspective of a struggle for or about power.

Should we nevertheless consider international politics so competitive an arena that what a state wins, the other must lose? Is it relevant to talk about a zero-sum game when a biological reality, not a political one, summons humanity to be united? When dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, what is good for a state is, most of the time, good for others, namely to stop contamination, to find solutions, to contain the spread of the virus, and to cure sick people.

Yet to get to this conclusion would tend to forget that, even now when the attention is drawn on the crisis, the world is not limited to the fight against Covid-19. The fact that the pandemic per se does not imply a zero-sum game, does not exclude it from happening in an environment which is a zero-sum game. In a world full of enemies, the bad luck of some fit the brief of others. The death toll due to the Covid-19 is less at stake here than the economic recession, that will diminish the power of some states compared to the power of other states less affected by that. Priority is thus given to the sovereign action states which focus on their own interests, undeniably keeping the competition. Over sixty years after the publication of *Man, the State and War* by Kenneth Waltz, his approach, which consists in giving the analytical priority to constraints coming from the anarchic structure of the international system, and which shape the impact of others factors, still seems appropriate.

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