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NEUTRALITY AS A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

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Neutrality as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

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The implications of coronavirus are not merely related to health and economic issues, but rather, they are mainly ethical and political in nature. In the last 20 years, the economic benefits of being a close partner to China have been clear, and, on the other hand, the ethical and political costs have been vague. We have acknowledged the important economic benefits and we have ignored the evident institutional threats. Coronavirus has radically changed that relationship. Now, economic benefits are being diluted and the cost is not only concrete, but also growing. This cost goes beyond material losses because it is, literally, the possibility of getting sick. This crisis prompts us to ponder what type of relationship we have established with China. Particularly, it makes us question how and why we fell into the neutrality trap.

We have constructed a false concept: the best way to protect our interests is to establish the best possible relationship with everybody. From that standpoint, people have devised all sorts of arguments and excuses to be neutral. Thus, we have looked for examples of misery in the United States, Sweden, or New Zealand and, obviously, we have found them. Then, we have consistently made the mistake of comparing processes and systems that are ethically incompatible.

The world has remained neutral during the expansion of the authoritarian Chinese capitalism; that neutrality is even more regrettable in those countries that we call the West. Especially in Europe and Latin America, the equidistant strategy has been the preferred policy to draw benefits from the Chinese market and the regime's resources while we have disregarded instances of daily repression. Therefore, we can compare two precise areas: On the one hand, the increasing trade and ensuing economic prosperity; and on the other hand, the state of individual rights. Conflating and striking a balance between these separate areas is part of the neutrality trap. And even though this is, obviously, not new in political history, it has this new component that has clashed with the pandemic. We have placed on the balance these two areas that cannot be compared: increasing trade and its impact on prosperity, and increasing repression and its impact on rights.

It is important to highlight this argument: until the emergence of the pandemic, the problem was, on the one hand, concrete economic successes by trading with China, and, on the other hand, how vague the moral and political cost of this growing relationship was. The coronavirus has turned the vague cost into a patent cost. That is, trading with China had, until now, a concrete economic benefit and a vague cost to individual rights. But, now we know that that concrete economic benefit has been diluted whereas that vague cost of freedoms has become patent since the human cost is evident. If we had not been neutral, we could have predicted this outcome. The unpredictability component of this crisis is partly due to the irresponsible practice of, first, weighing up the pros and cons of both areas and, then, choosing the trade benefits over the evident benefits (trade and human rights) of prioritizing the validity of freedoms.

What would have been the reaction of the intelligentsia and academics if coronavirus had originated in the United States and Donald Trump and his administration had behaved in the same

way that the Chinese regime and its leader Xi Jinping have behaved? Perhaps, as of today, in April 2020, would we be talking about anything else besides the incompetence and dishonesty of the government of the United States? No. If what took place in Wuhan-Hubei (China) in November 2019 had taken place, for instance, in Dallas, Texas (US), today we would be talking about the American capitalism as a source of global decline and about the Trump administration as the only party morally responsible for the global collapse.

Then, since neither the United States nor Trump is the guilty party who has tried to cover up this global tragedy, the following narrative has emerged in well-known political and intellectual circles: There is a shared responsibility between Xi Jinping and Donald Trump. For instance, in the Australian version of the influential show “60 minutes,” the expert of newly emerging diseases, Laurie Garrett, was asked “How squarely do you put the blame at the feet of that regime?” To which she answered: “I’m arguing that this entire pandemic rests at the feet of two people: Xi Jinping and Donald Trump. The two most powerful men on Earth of the two most powerful and wealthy nations on Earth, both of whom sought in their own ways to downplay the significance of the emergence of the COVID 19, and really both of them, I think, are to blame for allowing this to unfold in this horrible form.”

In other words, according to the expert, neither has live up to the circumstances. This is one of the ways that “neutrality as a self-fulfilling prophecy” manifests itself. In this example, we can see how repressive and criminal exertions of power are fallaciously compared with the alleged administrative inefficiencies of the government of the United States.

How can we bring about the end of neutrality? How can we modify this conduct? First, we could attempt to answer the following question: Will China provide compensation to the world? How? It will be hard, probably impossible, to have a scenario where China agrees on the payment of direct damages to the main victims. However, it is possible that the rest of the world decides not to pay, at least partially, the installments of debts, some usurious, they owe China. This process should have different stages, starting with reparations to the poorest and smallest countries. One of the first decisions of the future Venezuelan democracy, once it regains its rule of law, could be to stop payment on the opaque loans negotiated by the Chavez’s regime and Maduro’s dictatorship.

We now have the opportunity to reflect on the need to put an end to the neutrality doctrine. We are not and cannot be neutral about the comparison between the mistakes of Xi and those of Trump. Neutrality has become a self-fulfilling prophecy and this is a breaking point that forces us to rethink the equation of the last decades. Two especially relevant facts converge here: first, the manipulation by the Chinese regime; and second, the acceptance of this manipulation by most countries. We have assumed that we have to accept as a given that the Chinese regime is repressive instead of perceiving its behavior as something that must be tackled and modified. It is almost a new cultural manifestation of the recent West.