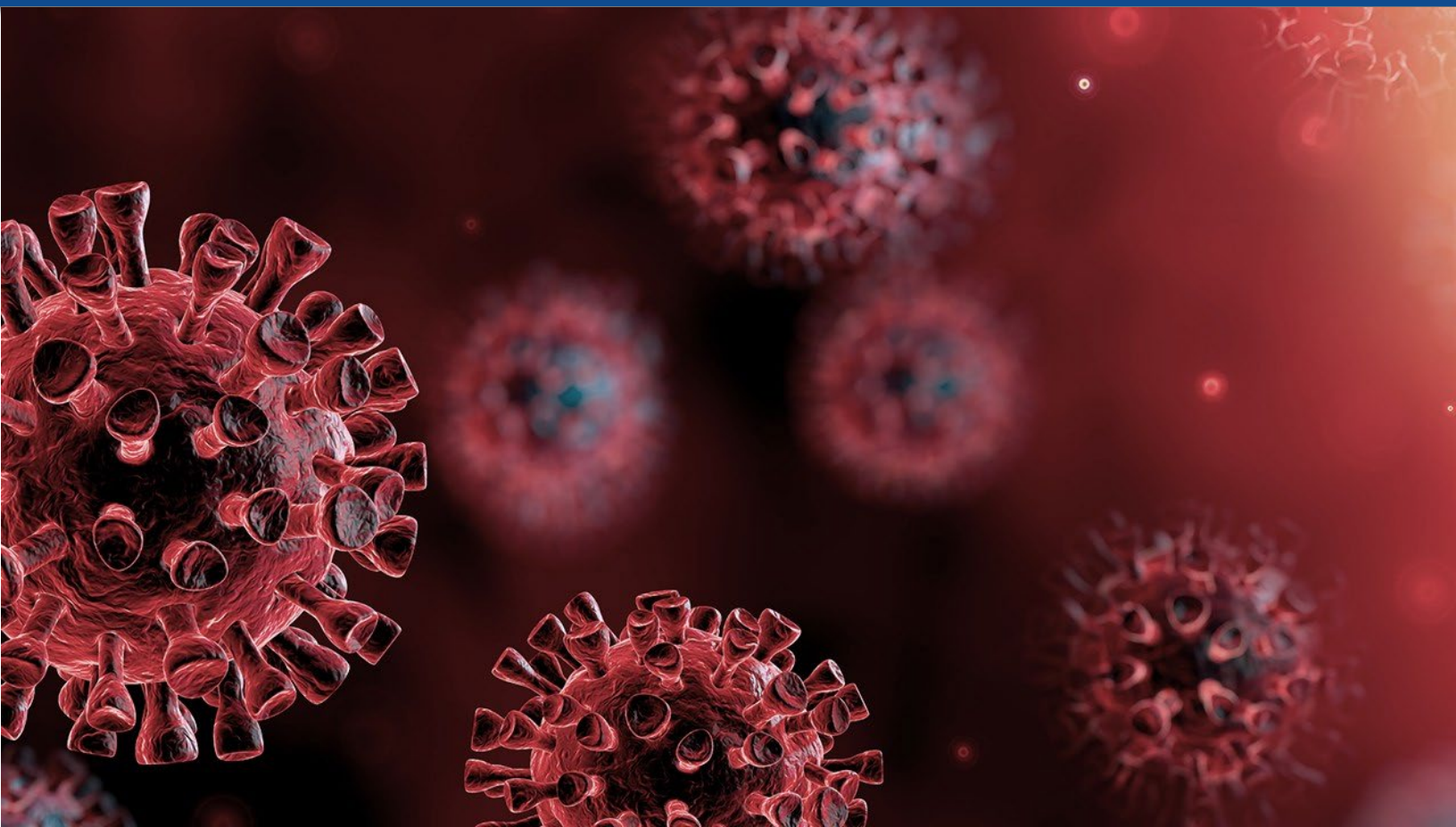


“We Will Never Again See the World That We Left Behind One Month Ago”



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TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
The Bush School
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“We Will Never Again See the World That We Left Behind One Month Ago”

By Stéphane Audoin Rouzeau

Foreword

Stéphane Audoin Rouzeau, a historian of France and the Great War, judges that we have entered into a “time of war” and an anthropological breach.

How does the historian of the Great War that you are view the present situation?

I feel like I have been suddenly and physically plunged back into the objects of my study, as if I were in some way experiencing something of what it must have been like to live through the Great War – for civilians of course, not for the combatants – to which we refer back so often nowadays. The most striking sentence from Emmanuel Macron’s second speech in Mulhouse was the one that was the least noticed: “They [speaking of health care workers] have rights over us.” That is word for word the same sentence that Clemenceau used when speaking about French combatants in 1917. Macron’s reference to the Great War is explicit, especially when we recall that the former director of the Centenary mission, Joseph Zimet, has come to work with the Élysée’s communication team. The same goes for “we will stand firm / hold strong.” “Standing firm” is an expression from the Great War: it was imperative for civilians to “hold up,” for the front to “hold,” and to “stand firm” for fifteen minutes longer than the adversary . . .

I find this referent of the Great War fascinating. As a historian, I cannot approve of such rhetoric, because in order for there to be war, there has to be combat and violent deaths, unless one is willing to totally water down the notion. But what strikes me as a

historian of the war is that we are indeed in a *time* of war. Usually, we scarcely pay attention to time, even though it is an extremely important variable in our social experiences. The weekend before the confinement, with the increasing perception of the gravity of the situation, it was as if time had thickened: we no longer focused on anything but one single subject, which swept away all the others. Similarly, between July 31 and August 1, 1914, *time* changed. What was inconceivable the day before became possible the day after.

What is specific to the time of war is that time becomes infinite. People do not know when it is going to end. They simply hope – it’s true today as it was during the Great War or the Occupation – that it will be over “soon.” By Christmas 1914, after the spring offensive of 1917, and so on. It is by adding together short periods of time that one in fact enters into the long term of war. If at the outset of the confinement we had been told that it would be for two months or more, it would not have been accepted in the same way. But, as it had been for the war, we were told that it was only an unpleasant moment to go through. For the Great War, it seems obvious to me that if it had been announced right away to the various members of society that it would last four and one half years and that there would be 1.4 million

deaths, they would not have acted in the same way. After the initial contraction of time, people entered into this indefinite time that made us go into a temporality “other”, without knowing when it would come to an end.

There is already talk of deconfinement: is that an illusion comparable to the one stemming from the idea that the war would soon be over?

I am fascinated by the imagery surrounding “getting out” as can be seen today in the case of deconfinement, which had already been used in the same way during the Great War. In the face of a tremendous crisis, the contemporaries of that war did not seem to imagine anything other than a closing of the temporal parenthesis. This time, people are imagining a return to normalcy and to the “time prior to the crisis.” Now I know very well that the social sciences are totally unable to predict what happens in the future, but history nevertheless teaches us that after major crises, the parenthesis is *never* closed. Certainly, there will be a “day after,” but it will not resemble the day before. I may be wrong, and I hope so, but I think we will never again see the world that we left behind one month ago.

Why conceive of such an anthropological breach when, indeed, we are not experiencing a moment of brutalisation and violence comparable to that of the Great War?

I say so frankly as a historian, in a way that may seem blunt: the magnitude of the economic and social, but also political and moral shock, seems to me to lead us toward a completely different period of time. On the political level, as a conservative I feel a

bit like a pacifist in late July 1914 who still believes in the progress of humanity, in understanding among peoples of the world, and in the good will of government. Who thinks that the various international collective bodies (Catholics, Protestants, International Socialists) will prevent the war, seen as an absurd anachronism.

Today, can we believe as before in the European Union; in the free circulation of individuals, ideas, and goods; in the continued decline of national sovereignties? In the space of one week, the Nations and their States reappeared, with the sense that the more the Nation-state is powerful, the better it fares. This was also the moment of national leaders: heads of state had been heeded less and less, it seems to me, and then suddenly we were hanging onto their every word. The seeds of the serious political crisis had already been there before Covid-19, but I fear that tomorrow, this crisis will be horrific, with potentially devastating accountabilities for the political class.

In addition to that, however, we must also bring to bear a more anthropological analysis of a moral crisis comparable to the one that occurred after each of the two world wars. The First World War was a heavy blow to the idea of progress that had been consubstantial with the French Republic. Paul Valéry’s famous words, “We civilizations now know that we are mortal,” speaks profoundly to the collapse of the belief in a better world, a collapse without which we cannot understand the development of totalitarian regimes over the course of the 1920s and 30s. The Second World War constituted a second anthropological shock, not so much by the realization (which came about much

later) that European Jews had been exterminated, as by the explosion of the atomic bomb, opening up the possibility for human societies to destroy themselves.

To my mind, our societies today are experiencing a major anthropological shock. They have done everything to banish death from the horizons of expectation, they had increasingly been basing themselves on the power of digital technology and the promises of artificial intelligence. But now we find ourselves reminded that we are fundamentally animal creatures, and of the “biological foundation of our humanity,” as the anthropologist Françoise Héritier put it. We remain *homo sapiens* belonging to the animal realm, vulnerable to diseases that we fight against in ways that are rustic in light of our supposed technological powers: staying at home, without medication or vaccination . . . Is that very different from what was happening in Marseille during the plague of 1720?

This astounding reminder of our biological substratum is coupled with another, that of the importance of the supply chain, which proved to be deficient in medications, masks, and testing, but which remained functional for food: without that, there would rapidly be a deterioration of society and mass death. It was a lesson in humility, and there will perhaps ultimately be good things that come out of it, but beforehand, we are going to have to face our denials.

Just as the Great War had been predicted, the possibility of a great pandemic had been foreseen. For example, the 2008 Defense White Paper was already listing pandemics among the threats to be considered. But as it

had been for the war, there is always a cognitive dissonance separating the event imagined and the event that takes place. The latter never corresponds to what has been foreseen. That rendered us incapable of taking advantage of the capacities for planning ahead that we thought we had.

Even if as a researcher, I find that this interminable generalized confinement constitutes a social experiment of the greatest interest, I fear therefore that would must be prepared for a very difficult time in coming out of the state of war.

There is the question of whether the aftermath will prove to be either more difficult or full of hope: what does the answer depend on?

That will doubtless depend on the modes of the “victory.” I think there will be a victory, for the virus is bound to die out, just as that of the Spanish flu of 1918 – 1919 did. But will the virus disappear “naturally” or will it be vanquished by our technical and organizational capacities? And what will be the price of this victory? If the cost is heavy, I fear then that the aftershock will be horrific. There is moreover the fact that certain regions of the world may feel that they defeated the disease, whereas other will suffer defeats: I am thinking of the poorest countries in particular.

During the First World War in France, people really did not imagine the postwar world. It was imperative to win, to close the parenthesis, and then “Germany would pay.” During the Second World War, things were different, since the construction of the postwar society began well before the fighting was over.

This time, we are having the hardest time conceiving what it will be like “afterward,” even if we try, because we know that we will not be rid of this kind of pandemic, even once the crisis is over. We will dread the next one. Now let us recall that Covid-19 has up until now had a low mortality rate compared to the Spanish Flu, SARS or Ebola. But let’s imagine that instead of hitting the elderly particularly hard, it afflicted children most of all? Our societies would already be suffering major breakdowns.

In the end, I am struck by how pervasive the tragic dimension of social life proves to be as it catches up with us today, as it had never since 1945 caught up with us in Europe until now. It is impossible to know how societies and their various protagonists are going to respond to this confrontation with the dark side of life. They may in any case adapt to it in one way or another better than we might think, but the opposite might be true.

I am still stunned, from an anthropological standpoint, by the acceptance of the ways in which those dying from Covid-19 in nursing homes were cared for, without much protestation, apparently. The obligation to accompany the dying, then the dead, indeed constitutes a fundamental characteristic of all human societies. However, it was decided that some persons would die without the presence and support of their loved ones, and this absence was also partially in effect at the time of their burial, which was reduced to a minimum. For me, that was a major anthropological transgression that occurred almost “by itself.” Whereas if they had proposed such a thing to us two months ago, we would have vigorously protested, labeling such practices as inhuman and unacceptable.

I am not any more indignant than others. I am simply saying that in the face of peril, in a very short time, the thresholds of tolerance were modified at an impressive speed, at a pace that people had experienced during the wars. That seems to indicate that something very profound was playing itself out at the time in the body of society.

The volume that you co-edited with Christophe Prochasson in 2008, titled *Sortir de la Grande Guerre* (“Coming out of the Great War,” Tallandier), showed in particular that coming out of the war did not take on the same meaning in every country. Do you think that in a world confronted with the coronavirus, coming out of confinement will be very different from one country to another?

We are not in the same type of event. In 1918, there were victors and the vanquished, some nations were humiliated while others were triumphant. But the various ways of handling the crisis can lead to a dissociation whose contours we can already see appearing on the horizon. Between countries that will pull through it fairly well, like Germany, perhaps, and those that will have been hit hard, like Italy. Between countries that will have organized their response by suppressing civil liberties, such as Hungary, and those that will have attempted to maintain them at least partially.

Can we also imagine changes of professional status according to highly unequal levels of exposure to the crisis?

Emmanuel Macron’s use of Georges Clemenceau’s words was debatable, but it did say something true: the caregivers are going to emerge from it a bit like the French sol-

diers in 1918 – 1919. Their aura will be particularly prominent, since their losses will be a tangible proof of their sacrifice. Sacrifice by definition is what renders sacred. We can therefore very well imagine that certain professions that were quite exposed will be sacralized, while many others (academic positions, for example?) will be devalued. In terms of symbolic capital, as Bourdieu would have put it, the various social statuses will find themselves modified. Speaking of my field, the social sciences, it may be that entire areas will be devalued while others emerge, with a new hierarchy of centers of interest and priorities. It is unfortunately hardly possible to provide examples, since the social sciences are totally lacking in the ability to predict the future, even in their own domain!

Can one determine how long it will take to emerge from a crisis or from a war?

I don't think so. The notion of a postwar period suggested a date determining the division between a before and an after: the armistice of November 11, for example, or the June 1919 Treaty of Versailles. But the notion of “coming out of war” is richer, suggesting in fact a gradual shift. Ultimately, one can never completely get out of the events of war . . . Some emerge from it, others don't. We can hypothesize that French society and British society, for example, never completely emerged out of the mass death of the First World War. The notion of coming out of war suggests a direction, not a segment of time with a beginning and an end. Will it not be the same with a “coming

out of the pandemic,” whose effects and duration cannot be known?

Did people from the very beginning attempt to find out who was responsible for the Great War the way they are looking for who was responsible for the pandemic today?

Not really. Given the “Union sacrée” (sacred unity), taking stock of the mistakes made was put off until later. This time, one very much senses that this will be done, but it is generally agreed that now, in the midst of the ongoing crisis, is not the time to conduct such an assessment. But the “Union sacrée,” as French President Poincaré called it on August 4, 1914, is only a suspension of political fighting. It does not amount to saying that there is not more conflict, but that each player has an interest in forgoing it momentarily, all while intending to reap benefits later.

From that standpoint, the current accusations do not, it seems to me, amount to anything compared to what is going to follow. When we come out of this pandemic, political fighting has a good chance of being more merciless than ever, especially since there will be no lack of imprudent declarations and untimely decisions to fuel the machine. Let us incidentally recall that in France these “Unions sacrées” generally wind up benefiting those on the right, even on the extreme right. It is this second eventuality that I very much dread for our country.

Stéphane Audoin Rouzeau

Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau is a French historian. He is also a director of study at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (the EHESS, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales) and president of the International Center for Research at the Historial de la Grande Guerre (Museum of the Great War) in Péronne. He has published numerous works devoted to the First World War, the historical anthropology of combat, and the violence of war. His most recent book, *Une Initiation – Rwanda* (1994 – 2016), was published by Les Éditions du Seuil.

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Mark Welsh, Dean and Holder of the Edward & Howard Kruse Endowed Chair

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Andrew S. Natsios, Director and E. Richard Schendel Distinguished Professor of the Practice

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— Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, USAF (Ret.)