The Covid-19 response on tight and loose societies

por **Jales Caur**

We reject wholesale references to the "spontaneity" of the movement, references which in most cases explain nothing and teach nobody.

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In the July/August 2021 issue of the famous magazine "Foreign Affairs", Michele Gelfand, Ph.D., professor of Organisational Behaviour at the University of Stanford, wrote about the different reactions of societies around the world to the Covid-19 pandemic. The base of her main argument, based on her book "Rule Makers, Rule Breakers" (2018), is that societies exposed to certain degrees of threat can better behave in tough times than societies more used to peaceful times. It is commonly observed more of this type of behaviour in Asian countries than in Western ones — due to a wide range of causes, from social structures to the weakness of neoliberalism in the region, leading to the absence of an "individual liberty" discourse (NAVARRO, 2021). But how is it the limit of good behaviour in the long term? And the costs?

This analysis will raise some important points to understand how a 2-years-old pandemic cannot be an experience of knowledge to all societies. The different processes of their formations are the key variables to understand how a particular group of people living under the same territory, time, and exposed to the same historical process are capable of acting collectively for the greater good. It will be considered such variables as the concept of freedom and its speech backed by the constructivism idea of values, and the historical process of the main Western and non-Western countries.

Threats: tight and loose societies

In general, considering all the historical events of the 20th century, we can visualise Western societies with short or even no memory of certain types of tragedy. In the first part of the century, Europe was destroyed by two wars. On the second, the United States lived with the fear of a

nuclear attack from the former Soviet Union. The experience of war, so far before, now was part of the society, for example, the case of the Vietnamese war, televised to the whole country to see their soldiers dying (HOBSBAWN, 1992).

However, episodes such as the terrorist attacks on 9/11, and the Holocaust and Nazism are quite feared by people as well as it is remembered as threatening — which it is. How to is it to measure the importance of a nuclear war and two aeroplanes bringing down a building? There is no qualified answer due to the number of different perspectives of tragedy the analysis would require. But these specific events caused certain traumas in which the trigger is extremely specific and the livingness among the people is the same.

On the other hand, Asian societies, experiencing other types of historical events, created a people in whose bond is generational and political institutions rely on their authority on these bonds. If we look at China, we see a phoenix country: from the ashes of a past of shame provoked by the British invasions, to the feeling of pride. Japan is another splendid example as the only country in which a nuclear weapon was exploded, after experiencing the horror of a nuclear bomb used in a belligerent way. Most of Southeast Asia has not only the colonial past, but also secular and authoritarian kingdoms since the end of their colonialism processes.

These regions also deal with other consequences of these processes, such as poverty and hunger — even more catalyzed now because of the climate changes and the fact that it is affecting Asia more than any other region in the world (WOETZEL et al., 2020). So, staying united since the past was the way these people found to guarantee their survival not only as an individual, but as a nation of costumes, languages, religions, and traditions. From this, Gelfand (2021) distinguishes these societies as "tight" (e.g., China, Japan, South Korea) and "loose" (e.g., United States, most western European countries, New Zealand).

3 In theory. It is important to consider that the debate is highly generalised.

These terms are fundamental to a better understanding of the necessity to comprehend historical processes. Tight societies are qualified as that because of their difficulties with disasters in general — from government, to wars, and even harsh weather conditions[3]. Loose societies are those in which the difficulties neither do not exist nor their people remind them a lot — exactly as a consequence of their absence. Other facts that can contribute with this classification is how these countries deal with certain expressions on their political life. As an explicit example, there is this whole narrative on freedom of the population, and its applicability in the United States — after Donald Trump, in which such questions dialogues with this justification (PAZ, 2020).

Freedom & Collectivist

As mentioned, the concept of freedom is something important to the West. The United States already exported this idea directly and indirectly without a concept of greater good. In countries which slavery was a basal part of their development, or it was subverted to another country, the concept of freedom was highlighted as essential from past experiences. In the mentioned case, there was this whole subversion to England in the past, having freedom as one of the most important values to nourish in a society. Due to the high impacts on decisions and actions, the individual — as long as this individual was a man, white, and owner of properties —was supposed to be free to do whatever he wanted if it did not hurt the freedom of others.

The concept of Western freedom is already problematic in its rise. Highly influenced by the French Revolution and the United States' Independence, it gained strength and was named as the first-generation rights, assuring the individual described above the right to freedom and other individual rights (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2020). It happened on account of the fact these rights were jeopardised to some extent by a greater power (kingdoms, monarchy, the Church, among others). But, again, it is noticeable the call for the liberty of individuals, not of the group as in non-Western countries.

As the political institutions of non-Western countries were forged not only by other philosophies of existence and coexistence, the intervention and colonisation had their roles in shaping how these societies acted. In the first example, we have two groups battling the exert of power over their liberty, but on the same territory, sharing the same language, costumes, habits, sometimes even religion. Now, the second example exposes not only differences among them, but interferences of two completely different perspectives and understanding of life and existence.

As history says, non-Western countries battled among them in the same proportions as Westerns. Japan, for example, has a hideous past of colonialism and invasion of other Asian nations. But the Western contact left scars more visible as a society due to these differences. Southern Asia has more traces in common with its previous Western colonisers than with Japan (SATOSHI, 2018). The approach was also different, as in the China situation with the United Kingdom and Opium in the second part of the 19th century.

China, as written by Henry Kissinger (2012), did not want to be expansionist as the rest of the world. They believed they were chosen, and they were the closest human beings to their idea of salvation, exerting, hence, this feeling of superiority. It was the opposite of the English men that arrived in the region — wanting to trade, leading them to addict an entire nation on opium. The war and the unequal treaties led China to a collective shame and misery, creating, then, this collective sentiment

nourished by the socialism practised as a response to the injustice. It is important to notice that this feeling of shame survived until nowadays, when it was used as a fuel to change and to recreate the feeling of pride among the Chinese (SHAMBAUGH, 2013).

The same has happened to other nations in Asia, such as Japan and the nuclear bombs on World War II, and South Korea, not only with the Japanese invasion the hurt they provoke on the society by humiliating the people and sexually harassing women, but also with the constant tension with North Korea. In South Korea's case, the collective sentiment is stronger because of the imminent menace they live in since the Korean War has never ended on legal terms. These cases are provoked culturally by external threats, but there are cases of collectiveness forged by openly dictatorial governments, as in the case of Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, and Indonesia — with different notes in the reason of their methodology analyse not only the freedom of speech or being able to vote, as classified by the Freedom House (2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d).

In summary, there are lower grades of collective in Western societies due to the high value the individual has in these societies. Therefore, tight societies, as written by Gelfand (2018) can better face the threat because of their occurrence and the fact that they were built to face them. Otherwise, loose societies do not have the same experience attributed by their past of fewer diversities than the other — highlighting the fact that these countries usually are the adversities of those that now have a tighter society. Is it safe to state that tight societies responded better to the pandemic after two years than loose societies?

Threat reflex on Covid-19

The last disease with a pandemic status was H1N1 in 2009, but it was not as dangerous as Covid-19 as the advanced studies on flu viruses. When the pandemic was declared, the world faced a shut down, turning all the processes remote to avoid escalating, even more, the number of deaths caused by the first contact with this class of coronavirus, also pre-existing conditions, and even the lack of knowledge on treatment and shortage of medical supplies. International cooperation? It was not accomplished as expected. The seek for medical equipment, such as face masks and ventilators, provoked episodes of deviations in developed countries — such as the episode of Brazil and the United States back in 2020 (CAUR, 2020).

The societies were sorely evaluated as the sanitary protocol indicated the obligation of face masks, social isolation, and later the mass vaccination to stop the spread of the virus. There were societies in which such policies were strictly followed with the support of the government. It happened due to the impact of the pandemic on the national and international economy. And, of course, well-known tight societies had a better experience dealing with the pandemic. As an

example, South Korea exerted an excellent tight society with dwindling numbers of cases and deaths in the first year of the pandemic and a robust system of locating and quarantining people with the virus. This was also a result of previous experiences with SARS and MERS, other coronavirus diseases that left a legacy protocol of operation in these cases (ROSSI et al. 2022). Another example is China, the epicentre of SARS in the early 2000s.

Thailand is another example of its high dependence on tourism. The government was capable of holding as well as they could for an unstable country so the cases and deaths in Thailand were not as high as experienced in Italy, for example. Vietnam is another successful case of dealing with the virus as a tight society — as another example of an authoritarian government (WILLOUGHBY, 2021). However, to affirm that tight societies will deal better with the context of the Covid-19 pandemic is not completely true. Against the odds, Japan's reaction to the pandemic was not as expected, leading them to a higher number of cases due to the population's non-compliance to the protocols.

But the other way also has happened. Even when compared with the situation in Europe and the United States, New Zealand and Australia had one of the best results against the pandemic. On the other hand, Brazil, considered internationally as a well-behaved country on health matters, had one of the worst answers to the pandemic (GELFAND, 2021). The different results on Western and pro-West societies raises the debate about the health of each democracy if considered the strength of some narratives about the virus in the West. From the suspicion of a biological weapon from China to the conspiracy against the "big pharma," this narrative gained body and voice in the West by populist leaders, jeopardising the fight of entire societies against the disease, leading to higher numbers of deaths (HUGHES et al., 2022).

4 Which is important to differ from fake news. Fake news, as self-explained, are false information, sometimes spread with no intentions of harm. Misinformation is the active spread of false information to generate profits or undermine someone.

And this response is a good indicator of how human irrationality can gain power over processes in challenging times. As stated by the constructivism theory, the world is built by ideas and values, in which we had the opportunity to visualise the historical process presented here (WENDT, 1999). However, there is no guarantee that the same response will happen at every difficult or threatening exposition. The age of the Internet has demonstrated it in the last decade with the rising of fake news, misinformation[4], and radical political groups.

In the end, the scope of analysis proposed by Michele Gelfand (2018) provides instruments to explain why country a does better than country b. However, it is important to value the volatility of societies and ideas, which can lead to other paths and approaches towards difficulties — not only the pandemic, as analysed in this text, but also conflicts and other threats. The reflection of institutions on the people and vice-versa is also a great indicator of response, as in the case of New Zealand.

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