

Is This Coronavirus the End of the End of History?

I recently finished Ross Douthat's *The Decadent Society*, a compelling argument that we live in a world that has become incapable of fundamental change.

From arts and culture (endless reboots – think Star Wars and Marvel) to political gridlock to technological stagnation (as Peter Thiel says, we wanted flying cars and got 140 characters), the world has remained shockingly same-ish since the 1970s. The international order in place since the end of World War 2 has continued with no significant signs of change, in what Francis Fukuyama once called “the end of history.”

Douthat ponders what might cause “the end of the end of history” toward the end of his new book. Could we finally break through with space travel, gene modification, or some other fundamental technological change? Will we have major religious revivals that stir the stale secular air? Will some new political ideology emerge to shake up how government is done locally and internationally? Douthat suggests it might be some combination of many scenarios, each feeding from the other. But he also argues that decadence – that fundamental lack of change – may be more resilient than we think. The inertia may continue for only God knows how long.

He may have spoken too soon. One of the more interesting things about the COVID-2019 coronavirus pandemic is how it might change the stable, comfortable routines that have existed in the US and the West largely untouched since the end of World War 2.

This does not necessarily entail good things. If large numbers of people are infected or die, or if quarantines continue long enough to kill off large sectors of private enterprise, or if governments or major corporations collapse, or if governments seize and hold major new powers over civil society, or if cities convulse with looting or martial law, or we will emerge into a different world and culture. This may seem hypothetical, but we've already seen a whole US state declare (relative) lockdown and major steps by the government to occupy voids left by the quickly evaporating economic sectors impacted by social distancing and home isolation.

Whatever happens, if trends continue, the world of the next few years will be very different from what has come before. And that is at least an interesting thing to watch.

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