**Richard Tempest**

**The World After Covid: Prospects, Dangers, Temptations**

From the Justinianic Plague (541-549 AD) to the Spanish Flu (1918), pandemics have caused upheaval on the vastest of scales. History teaches that if there is one thing we can be certain of, it is that the post-Covid world will be a very different place. This course will examine the likely outcomes of the Covid-19 emergency at home and abroad. Our two primary lines of inquiry will be the geopolitical and geocultural, with a focus on how the global changes already under way, and those that are yet to come, will impact Americans’ private and public lives.

**Week One**

The origins of Covid: a neuralgic topic in a world prone to conspiratorial thinking. Vaccination rates across the globe and what these tell us about the post-Covid prospects of the countries in question. China’s epidemiological success and propaganda failure. The mystery of Wuhan. Why the pandemic was *not* a black swan event. America’s Covid score card: a comparison with other nations.

**Week Two**

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s nodal theory of history and how it can help us evaluate the impact of global Covid. A comparison between the responses to the pandemic in the PRC and Taiwan — and New Zealand. Japan and South-East Asia battle the coronavirus. Once a hyperpower, but now, no longer: the relative decline of the United States on a planetary scale. China vs. the United States: a rivalry that will shape the twenty-first century. The two superpowers’ global and regional allies and adversaries. Kaiser Wilhelm II and President Xi Jinping: What’s the connection? The Chinese leader in the context of communist party, Chinese national, and global politics. How manufactured personality cults, which can be remarkably effective, differ from true charismatic leadership. The impact of Covid on the emerging China-Russia alliance.

**Week Three**

The September 17 Russian parliamentary election as an indicator of future political developments. A look at Vladimir Putin’s twenty years in office and how the Russian president’s record in office can help us evaluate his performance as a national leader in difficult Covid times. The impact of Covid on Russia’s domestic situation and foreign policy agenda. Putin in the bunker. Russia’s presidential succession begins. Professor Solovei pontificates, his online audience gapes. Alexei Navalny: Is Putin’s chief domestic opponent a man of destiny? The Biden administration’s policy toward Russia: a comparison with its management of the US-China relationship.

**Week Four**

Vaccine diplomacy and its side effects: China and Russia reach out to South America and Africa. Covid and President Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative. China’s leader may not be a charismatic, but he possesses a thousand-yard stare. Xi’s towering vision of a China bestriding the seven continents, as well as the Moon and Mars. But will this dream endure? Why the West in general, and the United States in particular, have fallen behind China and even Russia in the medical diplomacy stakes.

**Week Five**

Pope Francis and his struggles. Two charismatic activists, Greta Thunberg and Jessica Byrd, show how grassroots organizing and media outreach can mobilize young people fighting for change. In the NGO sector, and generally in the case of national / international social campaigns and mass movements, charismatic leadership counts for a very great deal. Social movements in the post-Covid world. The impact of the coronavirus on the struggle against climate change. Covid and wokeness. The immense human tragedy of the pandemic, and how it will be memorialized.

**Week Six**

The promise and peril of automation. The poetics of universal basic income. Flying taxis and driverless cars — and *car*less drivers. And *care*less drivers! Elon Musk and his trans-planetary utopia; and his controversial statements about Covid. Musk disses the victorious Taliban: “Do they even know about the Delta variant?” The pandemic as a factor in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Belarus. “It is a little bit medieval eating bats”: Paul McCartney on the origins of Covid. Other celebrities, from Mariah Carey to the Rolling Stones, speak out. What their words tell us — not about them, or their cultural productions, or even the disease — but about *ourselves*.

**Week Seven**

Donald Trump’s election defeat: The beginning of a retreat from global populism? or just one more discontinuity in Solzhenitsyn’s nodally structured world-historical process? “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A Stately pleasure-dome decree” — Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) of Saudi Arabia and his fantastical city of Neom — “…Two vast and trunkless legs of stone / Stand in the desert… Near them, on the sand / Half sunk a shattered visage lies…” MBS and Peter the Great; and the Meiji Restoration; and Ataturk. How governing charismatic populists of the left and right, from Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Mexico) to Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines) to Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil) to Nayib Bukele (San Salvador), have coped, or failed to cope, with Covid; and will their performance in this regard affect their political longevity?

**Week Eight**

Covid has changed, and will continue to change, the textures of daily life and work. The new Roaring Twenties will happen, but maybe not until 2024. “Plagues are not new to our species — they’re just new to us” (Dr. Nicholas Christakis). *Antifragile* by Nassim Taleb (whom you can follow on Twitter), *Extremism* by J.M. Berger, and *The Delusions of Crowds* by William J. Bernstein offer insights into the why, how, and when of Covid’s impact on our culture and behaviors.

**Recommended Readings:**

J.M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018)

William J. Bernstein, *The Delusions of Crowds: Why People Go Mad In Groups* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2021)

Michael Butter & Peter Knight (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Routledge, 2020)

Nassim Taleb, *Black Swan*, 2nd edn. (New York: Random House, 2010)

Nassim Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain From Disorder* (New York, Random House, 2014)

Adam Tooze, *Shutdown: How Covid Shook the World’s Economy* (New York: Viking, 2021)