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Democracy in Times of COVID-19: A Habermasian Retrospective Analysis of the South Korean Response

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Abstract

COVID-19's spread varies widely between countries. We use Habermas' notions of *system* and *lifeworld* to understand how decisions regarding public health have been taken in South Korea. From what he calls the "system's" perspective, a low death toll per capita is associated with crisis management plans being crafted beforehand and the epidemic handled within the frame of regular law. However, these measures are only efficient as long as they echo properly in citizens' "lifeworld" to be implemented properly. We suggest concrete leads to rephrase Habermas' legacy, both to make it fit into the specifics of East Asian democracies and to reconsider the role of public spheres in pandemic management.

Keywords: Habermas, Lifeworld, System, South Korea, COVID-19, Democracy

Some social facts can be called total as it is impossibleto define and confine their effects (Mauss, 1966), resulting in a chain of consequences one cannotconstrain in a specific field. The same could be argued regarding pandemics and namely the COVID-19 crisis, whose ability toreshape almost overnight the entirety of social landscapeisunparalleled to this day.The coronavirus imposed a considerable strainon all political systems, yet not all of them passed the crash test with the same level of success, nor let themselves behit with the same impact.

During its first wave in 2020, most Western democracies proved themselves to be unable to slow down the virus without implementing drastic lockdowns. Even doing so, their death tolls remained dozens, if not hundreds of times higher than in South Korea and Taiwan, their East Asian counterparts.

On a different note, the new Omicron variant became dominant from late 2021, the weaknesses of China's authoritarian management jumped out at all observers. The regime found itself trapped in a constant escalation of restrictive measures, going as far as imprisoning millions in their own homes for months without any foreseeable long improvement on the horizon.

South Korea was able to avoid both pitfalls. In the pandemic's initial phase, the paramount disparity with the West consisted in these countries' capacity to bring back a never-seen-before threat into some sort of familiar territory.

Another critical point in our argument is that, for having to take an earlier and bigger blow than Taiwan or Japan, with thousands contaminated almost overnight in its fourth-largest city in February/March 2020, South Korea had no choice but to take radical measures on the spot, without the hindsight that the research would provide over the following few months. Social consensus was thus put under more considerable strain, offering in consequence an ampler sample to assess democratic resilience. A virtuous circle followed: government decisions were implemented as more efficiently as populations were endorsing them.

Therefore, this paper does not solely rely on the South Korean case for practical linguistic reasons, but also because (along with Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand) it provides a very rare instance of a pandemic management that has proved itself to be efficient on the long run, throughout the succession of variants and vaccines.It ambitions to analyze in detail the country's response, regarding both the safeguarding of public health and civil liberties.

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Theory: lifeworld and system in times of pandemic

The question we are examining here is as age-old as political reflection. Echoes can be found for instance in Machiavelli's remarks about the institution of "dictatorship" in ancient Rome (Machiavelli, 1998). If some centralization of decision is inevitable when a nation faces any sort of existential threat, then can it be made certain that the person or the select group in charge will not overstep their mark?Whether it be to rebuff a foreign invasion or to contain mass contamination,how can it be ensured that they will act upon the people's will and not simply in their name? How does one envision a delegation that is no usurpation?

The war metaphor wasfast to blossom on the lips of a great many officials all over the world, carryinga great deal of ominous innuendos.Nonetheless, it holds some grain of truth as a certain concentration of power looks somehow inescapable from the onset of a pandemic.For any proponent of democracy, the fact that one authority takes over the daily functioning of institutions poses in itself a self-evident threat to purely and simply incapacitate citizens.

Task forces always consist of small, often secretive groups, which is already sufficientto cause concern. Furthermore, by definition, they require a level of expertise that accentuates their elitist nature. They always tend to comprise very few members, and these members are appointed based on some distinct expertise that detaches them radically from the man on the street.

This may be even truer with a never-seen-before type of disease like COVID-19, whose main characteristic could be argued to be its elusiveness, given its level of transmission. Not only did its novelty deprive the research of long-term empiricism and data back then (and still does to an extent in our time and age), but its high propensity to mutate forces researchers to regard many of their conclusions as tentative.Each new layer of complexity further risks disenfranchising the average citizen, jeopardizing not only their support, but also their adherence to emergency measures.

We will try to articulate this growing gap thanks to Habermas' famous dichotomy between what he calls the "lifeworld" and the "system".

Although it may seem a truism, it is worth repeating that the lifeworld refers simply to the world each of us lives in. It corresponds to this portion of society which codes we have learned and come to take for granted over the years. It is as necessary and invisible as the air we breathe and, just like the air again, goes unnoticed until the day it goes missing. In Habermas' terms, "the lifeworld is the intuitively present, in this sense familiar and transparent, and at the same time vast and incalculable web of presuppositions that have to be satisfied if an actual utterance is to be at all meaningful, that is, valid or invalid" (Habermas, 1987, p. 131).

As an ideal type, the system occupies the other end of the spectrum: it is all knowledge and manipulation. It encompasses activities that require some specific form of training, inaccessible by nature to the laymen whose activity it adjusts and controls from the outside, pretty much the way a clockmaker sets cogs in a machine.

Any complex form of organization tends to beget a "system" whenever it translates into distance and separation, that is, when the participants to a certain lifeworld are in no position to regulate it by themselves without an external intervention anymore. Nuclear energy, for example, belongs to the "lifeworld" of physicists as they entertain some relation of familiarity with science in general. It is not to say that quantum physics' mysteries are necessarily crystal clear to all of them, but that they are comfortable with equations, experiments, protocols, and the like.It is simply the world they live in, the language they speak.Evolvingin the same field,they can legitimately expect to understand one another at least to an extent, even before having met in person.

Most often unconsciously, experts tend to draw a line between themselves, their peers, the ones-in-the-know, and the others whose number is to grow indefinitely along with the accumulation of specific knowledge and whose sole task is to obey.Carrot-and-stick-like incentives are then to be provided to make sure that instructions are carried out faithfully.

An expert-oriented form of government therefore pushes for more and more people to be "alienated" in the strictest sense, that is somehow expelled from their own lifeworld, and for strings to be pulled from further and further away in a distant system. Processes of consensus-oriented communication between peers are not banned properly speaking, at least not in the democratic regimes that are Habermas' primary focus. It is more about these processes being simply ignored, or even better, "bypassed"to borrow the verb that he italicizes in his text (Habermas, 1987, p. 183).

Achievement of control over a certain and eventually large matter is therefore the purpose of a system. Habermas could not be more straightforward when he warns against the general phenomenon of substitution going on between the lifeworld and the system in the modern world.In his own words, no less than an actual colonization is taking place. "In the end, systemic mechanisms suppress forms of social integration even in those

areas where a consensus-dependent coordination of action cannot be replaced, that is, where the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is at stake. In these areas, the mediatization of the lifeworld assumes the form of a colonization." (Habermas, 1987, p. 196)

The key inspiration for us in his life-long meditation is that without a common ground for conventional wisdom to be informed by relevant expertise, voters find themselves unable to have a say of any significance into politics.Therefore, in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, the risk is more acute of a colonization of the lifeworld by the system, technocrats being prompter than ever to dismiss every input that would not happen to be theirs, even if the latter proves itself inefficient.

The pendulum can also swing back, with an eruption of the lifeworld against the system and the advent of Trump-like right-wing populists brushing aside all data that would not happen to fit into their narrative, going as far as to promote their own "alternative facts". Both menaces are to be feared almost equally, not only for public liberties but also for public health, as even the most elaborate planscannot come to fruition without being backed collectively by the population. Sanitary and democratic issues cannot be envisioned separately here. One has no choice to contain a virus as contagious as COVID-19,while stillsetting a clear course of action, but to work at the same time in close cooperation with the public.

Our goal is to verify empirically the nature of this relation betweenresults and trust in democratic regimes.Our line of reasoning focuses after Habermas on the articulations between the "lifeworld" of order-taking ordinary citizens and the "system" of order-givers (politicians and experts in particular). Empirically, regular delegation proceduresand counterpowershave been key in ensuring or not an accurate democratic response to the pandemic. For better or for worse, their presence or absence has sealed the fate of both public liberties and public health, inseparably in South Korea.

The connection is quite intuitive between a government's feeling accountable to the public and an early, efficient crisis management. When reliable checks and balances are missing to stop them from overstepping their mark, the executive branch can be expected to act more guardedly in preserving their attributes. This tends to make them seek out and employ scientific advice more belatedly, and to resent more harshly the intervention of democratic counterpowers as well. Habermas' analytical frame gives us the necessary hindsight to understand that a system is always as more bound to grow out of proportion as it feels legitimate to openly despise other forms of mediation, whether they pertain to other systems or the lifeworld of the man on the street.

Hypothesis 1, from the system to the lifeworld: planification of crisis management, emergency states and scientific advice

South Korea countered the COVID-19 surge within the boundaries of its regular institutions. Its crisis management resulted from a plan drafted after the MERS epidemic in 2015, regularly updated later on until the pandemic's outburst (KISTEP, 2020). As a result, decisions were taken after a patterndrawn long before the current outbreak. Mass test production was also putted on track as soon as early January, so that the country was fully equipped when becoming first to be heavily hit out of China by the end of the month.

Three levels of crisis, and their appropriate restriction measures, were defined by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. The Ministry of the Interior and Safety was in charge to set the level of alert and restriction among these propositions.To coordinate efforts between both ministries, the final decision was taken within a task force, the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters (CDSCHQ, 중앙재난안전대책본부),intended to implement crisis management.

Although this task force was chaired by the Prime Minister, it would be premature to infer a political takeover being enforced. It is rather the opposite in Korean institutions, as the President keeps holding the reality of executive power and is free to appoint the Prime Minister of their choice to carry out daily policies.

On the surface, the procedure resembles other semi-presidential regimes, for instance France's, but the analogy is misleading. The Korean PM's position is significantly weaker in institutions, and even in their very denomination. They are not considered to head the government or to co-appoint the members thereof, which is also the reason why they can resign individually without a cabinet reshuffle to ensue, contrary to their French counterpart.

Their official title (국무총리, 國務總理) roughly translates as "state affairs general ruler", which tends to locatethem only somehow higher than the US White House Chief of Staff for instance. Citizens that have no particular interest in politics may simply be aware of their existence without knowing them by name.

Passing the chair on from the President to the Prime Minister is thus not only meant to provide a scapegoat in case of adversity. It also sends a clear message to "depoliticize" daily crisis management and call for

consensus. Korean authorities avoided resorting to emergency legislation as much as possible. The course of institutions remained remarkably stable since the pandemic's very outbreak – which, on a side note, paved the way to the immediate popular reaction when President Yoon tried to push for imposing martial law in December 2024.Contrary to the West, the Korean population has not grown used to this sort of takeover over the last few years.

The same pattern of anticipation can be found in the organization of scientific advice informing political decisions. The Korea Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC, 질병관리본부) is a permanent structure legally charged to handle scientific advice in case of an epidemic. It was expanded considerably over the pandemic and rebranded as a government "agency" in September 2020 (KCDA, Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, 질병관리청) to emphasize its growing autonomy.

Experts and agencies have kept the upper hand on communication. KCDA's head, Dr. Jeong Eun-kyeong, always occupied the center of the stage, both physically and metaphorically.Although political decisions were institutionally taken by government and agencies, announcements of public health measures were handled by officials of the KCDA, with the government standing behind them, wearing the yellow coat of Korean Civil Defense Forces, known first to the public as the uniform of rescue teams on national disaster sites.Thisconveys the idea that professionals are in charge and implies aself-evident political undertone. In a country afflicted with countless resounding nepotism scandals and growing polarization, it aimed at suggesting that politicians had to be relegated to the background. Only their personal skills, instead of undue favors, would maintain them in the picture.

Hypothesis 2, from the lifeworld to the system: democratic control over government's decision and scientific advice

If the epidemic appears more controlled in countries where expert knowledge is leading crisis management, it does not necessarily follow that the whole power over decision-making should be delegated to a committee of experts.

Otherwise, the regime would simply cease to be a democracy.The power of such committees mustbe balanced with counterpowers to avoid drifting into a technocracy.Experts, like any other authority, can hardly be expected to amend their mistakes in the lack of some external feedback to point them out. Is democratic control of expert-induced decisions impairing efficient crisis management? Is it less present, and under which specific forms, in the countries that went through COVID-19 surges suffering less losses?

South Korea went through the pandemic while experiencing a significant amount of popular involvement. This movement can be understood by accounting forthe country's recent history, particularly over the last decade, which has fueled an important amount of distrust in the competence and probity of the political class.

Notably, the 2014 Sewol shipwreck, in which insufficient safety controls and incoherent rescue operations led to the death of about 300 high schoolers, caused a political fever that has never fully abashed since. Demonstrations were constant until the ensuing "Choi Soon-shil gate" that proved fatal to President Park in 2016-2017, when it appeared that she ruled under the thumb of an alleged shaman who received colossal bribes from the conglomerates.

In addition, the 2015 MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus, in the WHO terminology) epidemic outbreak played a more minor role than it is often believed; or rather, this outbreak itself has been understood within a bigger picture.At the time, public opinion was less appalled by the sparse number of victims itself (with a total death toll of 89) than by how opaquelythe Park administration was handlingit, refusing for instance to disclose private facilities where patients were being treated, allegedly to avoid damaging their reputation. Such practices were then considered typical of all the malpractices that needed to end in the wake of the Sewol disaster.

These years of popular empowermenthave resulted in forms of direct democracy measures thatproved quicker to grow in prominence than Western-style parliamentary oversight in Korean politics (Hwang & Willis, 2020). Since 2017, the Blue House website has been hosting a national petition service for citizens to raise their concerns, with the government required to officially answer those that reached 200,000 signatures over a period of one month at the pick of the pandemic.

During its initial stages, COVID-19-related petitions were so plethoric that there even was a color code for people to spot them immediately. Many of the most widely supported were asking for more radical measures, such as "Forcefully Disband the Shincheonji Church" [where the virus initially spread in February 2020] (1.4 million signatories) or "Ban All Chinese Arrivals" (750,000 signatories), as other Asian countries managed to contain in closingtheir borders immediately (Gaudin, 2020).It is also worth noting that contrary to the West,

contact tracing has never been central in public debates; the discussion focused more on data's anonymity and being managed by an independent authority, not on the principle itself.

In the smooth configuration of these first months, one could hardly assess with precision the respective weight of parties involved. But social fabric's seams became apparent when the Korean response was put under more strain during the subsequent second and third waves in fall and winter.

Contrary to the first, both were not contained in a specific region and spread all over the country, notably in Seoul's metropolitan region, urging stricter measures more likely to undermine popular anger. This is also where the limits of scientific planning beforehand showed most self-evidently, as the main flexibility left to the governmentin the original sketch regarded how widely restrictions should be implemented.

Large-scale retail establishments would be banned from operating, but the question of small shops and supermarkets being authorized to open or not was left pending for instance. Authorities were then entitled to take strong measures, while also given the possibility to adjust them to the context.

It is not really these specific courses of action that proved poisonous to the current administration in this initial plan, but rather the fact it included numbered criteria to automatically implement each of them. Level 3 was to be enacted when the threshold of 800~1000 dailycontamination would be reached nationwide, and not in a specific region. Hencethere was a dilemmawhen this happened during the second and third waves. The government could difficultly smother the country's economy any further in a context of growing unemployment – which would have fueled popular anger no less than a new pandemic outburst at any rate. The public themselves started to fear the consequences of lockdown. But as it was unimaginable to renounce the so far fruitful plan altogether, and authoritiescould not give the impression that they were breaking their own word, a most interesting phase of informal negotiation followed.

Government and medical experts came up with an intermediary threshold of "2.5" that was sufficient to curb the second wave in August-September. When this newset showedinefficient in the heart of winter and ICU beds looked dangerously closer to saturation, another additional level was implemented, labelled "2.5 + alpha" this time, along with some temporary restrictions specific to the Seoul region (without a proper curfew, but with restaurants and bars having to close doors at 9PM for instance).

Sarcasm wasplentiful and government action approval rates sank abruptly. It remains that this sort of point-to-point navigation between political or medical authorities' and citizens' pushing for more openness and severeness maintained a vivid discussion; and that this debate has resulted in relatively consensual measures, efficient enough to avoid lockdowns and curfews. Restrictions were only lifted progressively in 2022 after intensive vaccination campaigns, after the Omicron variant reduced zero-COVID strategies to impotence. Similar decisions were made, although at various paces, in Australia, New Zealand and Taiwan.

Discussion: public spheres as key actors of crisis management in democracies

Our point here is of course not to turn politics into the alpha and omega of crisis management. Other explanations need to be considered, especially to account for the contrasted death tolls between the West and East Asia. The most apparent counterexample would be Japan, whose opacity has shown almost unparalleled amongst democracies all along the pandemic. The Abe government, just like their successor from the same ruling party, avoided implementing mass testing, out of fear that doing so would cause alarm and hinder economic activity. The choice was made to rely solely on the population's sense of hygiene and responsibility. No hold was put until 2020, December 28th (and only for three weeks) on the "Go ToTravel" campaign, a domestic tourism program whose most lasting achievement has consisted in boosting the virus' circulation throughout the country.

Despite all of this, the Japanese death toll remained far below almost anywhere in the West. A factor that exceeds this paper's scope is obviously at stake here, namely life habits – wearing masks, washing hands more frequently and not shaking them, etc.

Still, culture's weight may not be as absolute and crushing as it first seems. This can be assessed by picking relatable comparison points within the same civilizational area. If anything, Koreans are known all over Asia to be much more effusive and tactile than Japanese in daily life. Seoul can hardly be called less dense or crowded of a potential cluster than Tokyo or any major Japanese city.

Moreover, South Korea had to take a major blow in the earliest stage of the pandemic in its fourth-largest city, at a fringe evangelical cult whose members prayed holding hands and originally declined any testing. Thousands of contaminations followed almost overnight, one anonymous churchgoer becoming infamous for contaminating 166 of her peers single-handedly. The infection could have easily spun out of control at that point (Gaudin, 2020).

The relative weight of cultural and political factors can furthermore be considered more of an "academic" question, in the somehow depreciative sense of the term, as there is no such thing as a magical reshuffling of all social interactions overnight.Not only policies do make a measurable difference (as widely evidenced by comparisons between South Korea and Japan, Ireland and the UK, Canada and the US, etc.), butto put it bluntly, they are the only leverage left to action in emergency. A similar argument could be made about global warming and environmental turmoil in general: one does not need to wait for knowing exactly how much of the phenomenon is due to natural and man-made causes in order to call for political action. It suffices to attest its existence beyond reasonable doubt, and to establish the dangers it carries along.

The rest may remain beyond our reach, but precisely: the limited scope of what remains within makes damage control only more urgent.Parallelscould fairly be drawn even further, as authoritarian responses may gain popularity in the next decades to face climate emergency. They already are, in fact, with Chinese government's trumpeting their determination to achieve carbon neutrality in a few decades. Should these plans come to fruition while most democracies would concurrentlykeep failing their populations the way they have with the COVID-19, the horizon of human emancipation could only darken beyond any foreseeable future.

From a more theoretical point of view, in line with such long-term perspectives,our research is of nature to confirm and, at the same time, add an interesting footnote to Habermas' reflection. Our arguments fit intohis analytical frame,even with its various ranges as he perfected it over decades.

They echo with his latest warnings against EU democratic institutions having become a "bridge almost devoid of traffic" (Habermas, 2013), populations oscillating between passive consent and overt hostility. Our conclusions, regardless of how tentative they are at this stage, only radicalize the necessity that he emphasized of a proper articulation between the lifeworld and the system. The general unease he was diagnosing at the time of his Theory of Communicative Action stemmed from the modern man getting estranged from his own life, but back then, if there was one claim to bring up against the system, it was precisely to function all too well, all too smoothly, allowing no significant play between its mechanisms.

Thegeneral atmosphere of mismanagement in most Western democracies throughout the pandemicbrought the threat that he pointed to the next level. Lives have been lost by tens and hundreds of thousands, millions have slipped into poverty, public debt reached span out of control in many countries; but no less crucial in a Habermasian perspective is this acute feeling of helplessness that may remain as one of the most lasting and toxic legacies of this crisis. There is no paradox, rather a logical necessity, in regulations becoming more and more severe as they keep failing.

Up to this point, we have been following Habermas' theory quite faithfully. From the question of public opinion, one passes almost imperceptibly to the existence of a "public sphere," that is a space where citizens can discuss openly their common concerns as a society, whose formation he studied in his early works (Habermas, 2015). This "public sphere," "Öffentlichkeit" in the German original, is derived from *offen*, "open". Habermas devoted long erudite developments to demonstrating this "openness", this specific form of disagreement and civility, to be more of a prerequisite than a consequence of democracy.

This is, however, where we would like to suggest a minor dissent and a possible bifurcation. The bourgeois genealogy that Habermas traced back in Europe remains accurate on its continent of origin.

As we saw however, events in South Korea took much more of a popular and emotional turn, more spectacular as well, fueled with sarcasm and sorrow on social networks. Demonstrations have been the founding event; the whole dynamic has been impelled from below. As of now, it has not translated into clear institutional devices, and in particular, the parliament has not at all taken the upper hand over the presidency.

On a negative tone, South Korea is still lacking a "public sphere" for articulate debates to take place between opposite stances, also in part because the conservative party is the heir of the dictatorship, plagued with corruption and unfit for peaceful disagreements. This also accounts for the very personal style of grievances in Korean politics, as they often stem very directly from emotional explosions – eminently in the wake of the Sewol.The population has been no less able so far to hold politicians accountable directly, which is finally consistent with Machiavelli's remarks we cited above, when he argued that riots are a survival condition for all republics.

There is a tendency, widespread in today's political science, to chastise common wisdom indiscriminately under the guise of "populism," a term that seldomly goes without menacing insinuations. It is meant to suggest some irrational impulses the upper classes are considered immune to, while these would be almost inevitably found in the uneducated class and inflamed by demagogues. Some eminent authors are even keen to elevate these somber instincts into making them democracy's archenemy in our age (Levitsky &Ziblatt, 2019).

Our approach tends to point in a less one-sided direction. In our South Korean case at least, popular pressure has proved instrumental in ensuring a more transparent, more efficient response to the pandemic.We attempted to show how crucial this point has been all along the pandemic in our opinion, and we hope this frame to be useful for later comparisons.

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