

QUARANTINE REFLECTIONS - For a New Humanity

The Coronavirus pandemic lays bare the lies of the socio economic model
that condemns an important part of Humanity to starvation and
is destroying our natural habitat

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How many challenges are posed by the moment we are living in! How many certainties are crumbling like dust!

How many lies that the media and those who control the power tried to pass off as truth were laid bare! This would be cause for celebration, were it not for the fact that the price is a humanitarian tragedy of unimaginable scope.

I will try not to repeat what many have already said or written. But it is obvious that a pandemic of the proportions of the one that has afflicted us since the beginning of 2020 forces us to rethink old problems that from now on gain another relevance. These are theoretical and practical challenges. Of the theoretical challenges (with practical consequences, if they are taken seriously), the first, I think, is that question, as old as civilization itself, which today challenges us in all its drama: what comes first, the society or the individual? It seems to be a problem unrelated to the Herculean task of defeating our invisible enemy. But it is not. Depending on the answer, very different attitudes in strategy and behavior will be adopted to face the contagion and minimize the damage of the virus among human beings.

China's response, for example, made clear the philosophy that guides not only the government but, above all, the citizens as a whole: the collective interests take precedence over any individual interest. An example of this way of assuming the rights and duties derived from life in society was the response in Wuhan, the epicentre of the pandemic, to a call for volunteers. The tasks? To help, in the disease most affected neighbourhoods, measure the temperature of all the residents in

quarantine and support those who need to buy food. Ten thousand volunteers showed up and, in less than ten hours, community committees were created to serve those in need.

Another theoretical challenge, related to the previous one (what comes first, the society or the individual) is also old, but resurfaces with great force: what is more important in a society, freedom or equality?

The debate on this topic inflamed political circles for decades in the last century, in the framework of the ideological struggle between capitalism and socialism / communism. The argument of those who advocated that the primacy should be of freedom, as it was understood in that context (remember that the concept of freedom has changed throughout history) consisted basically in the defense of the capitalist system, free enterprise and the market. This current fundamental idea revolved around the critique of the role of the State in the Soviet model, in which "individual rights" were subject to collective logic. In contrast, those for whom equality was to be considered the most important element for life in society pointed to the fallacy of freedom in the capitalist system: by leaving the economy in the "invisible hands" of the market, capitalism could only offer, for most of society, an illusory freedom, because it only could be very limited, a freedom which, according to a humorous metaphor, is reduced to the possibility of choosing between Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola ...

And today, are these debates relevant?

Well, if the readers are following the coverage of the Coronavirus pandemic in the media, in Brazil, the US, the EU, they can agree with me that these issues come up in many debates, but only indirectly. They appear in some interventions during the round tables or in testimonies collected live, when the reporter interviews someone on the street and that citizen interprets with lucidity the challenges created by the health crisis. However, an in-depth, sincere treatment of these subjects cannot be expected in the large commercial media or in the authorities' collective interviews, with a few exceptions.

Why? Because these issues put "the finger on the wound": if the debate were opened without restrictions, it would not be possible to deny that our societies, particularly in the Western world, when governed by the neoliberal version of capitalism, are dysfunctional. If that is admitted, the next step should be to discuss the necessary changes in the model that oppresses us as a society and condemns us as a species, for the irreparable damage it is causing to our common home, planet Earth.

It would be necessary to open the debate on the absurdities of a system that does not allow banks to fail, but does tolerate that millions of human beings are condemned to poverty and hunger, spending their existence without the slightest opportunity to really be part of society. It would be impossible to postpone assuming that it is necessary to invest the priorities in the use of the resources of each

country and globally; it would be necessary to define urgent policies to overcome the terrible social inequalities within and between countries; it would be imperative to prohibit the predatory practices that are destroying the environment and to rethink human work so that it does not become a form of exploitation and discrimination but on the contrary, an instrument of our fulfillment as human beings. And, finally, it would be unavoidable to judge and condemn those responsible for all these blunders (or should we, without euphemisms, call them crimes?).

Therefore, these issues cannot be part of the agenda for open debate, because with a few important exceptions the commercial media never really was a means of information but a tool to defend the interests of the ruling classes. As a consequence, addressing the challenges of the Coronavirus pandemic the media only open the discussion of the most urgent short-term problems. They do not allow the socio-economic development model and its consequences to be put in check.

Today, the big bankers, the CEOs of the mega-holdings, the members of the 1% that exploits 99% of Humanity and most of the oligopolistic media have as the popular saying goes, "a hot potato" in their hands. A small virus managed to reveal that all the certainties of their speeches were no more than a house of cards. But we cannot expect an act of repentance or "mea-culpa" from them.

If the media do not encourage this debate, each of us can, at this moment, rethink our role in this world and critically observe the situation we have arrived at. If this was not a problem in our afflictions before, it can be today. The rigor of the measures demanded by the pandemic requires us to think about collective interests rather than individual interests. And to act accordingly.

The spontaneous manifestations of solidarity that emerged in different parts of the world, reproduced on social media, as well as the generous donation of millions of doctors, nurses, health technicians, cleaning staff, who continue to stand by infected patients in hospitals, even at the high cost of their own lives, all of this shows the transformative power that each of us has and the strength of our collective action. It also reveals, without ignoring the significant help provided by new technologies, that the responsible for giving their contribution and, ultimately, for managing to reverse the pandemic were and continue to be men and women, from the most diverse segments of society. All of them equally important, each in its own role.

If we had not already understood, today we realize, that without an organized society, we, the individuals, cannot survive. And a society in which equality is not a value to be sought, will not allow us to survive either! In a moment of crisis, as it has been dramatically demonstrated these days, we all depend on each other, and no one is safe unless he or she has the help of others.

The Coronavirus seems to be destined to "infect" us not only literally, but also metaphorically and, in this case, positively. It forces us to see ourselves as members of the same species, the human race, all equally threatened; and to see us as inhabitants of the same home, our beautiful blue planet, which has no borders, and is also threatened, but in this case, by our species ...

The pandemic also shows us that, in the absence of guidance and leadership from above (since few authorities in the world have shown themselves to be up to the challenge), society's initiatives, the product of self-organization, are multiplied. Neighbors roll up their sleeves and look for palliatives, solutions, even if they are makeshift solutions. And each one, within their limits and abilities, begins to think about the best way to serve. (This does not mean ignoring the existence of perverse cases of exploitation of the suffering of others).

If we think of the lessons learned from these weeks, as the embryo of something new, the possibilities of a change in future individual and collective behaviour are encouraging. The initiatives that are emerging show that our societies have the potential to respond to the constraints and even the madness of those who govern and those who wield real power behind them. But this learning also shows that if there is a government in tune with its people, the effectiveness of government action is enhanced because the society takes on a substantial part of the responsibility for carrying out the measures to be adopted.

And with these reflections we return to the subject of those dichotomies: society/individual and freedom/equality. Apparently they would be mutually exclusive, but with the experience of the pandemic we note that this is not the case, neither theoretically nor practically. The crisis forced us to recognize an important aspect of our existence: we, individuals with our own personality, only survive by being part of a society. On the other hand, because we are rational beings and that means enjoying free will, we need to live in freedom. But historical experience has shown that freedom in its true essence can only be achieved in societies that permanently seek the ideal of equality. The deepest sense of one can only be realized with the realization of the other. That is why these reflections matter today. Not because of their short-term effects but because of the consequences they will have in the future.

That is why it is essential to understand that this energy, the solidarity, the experiences of self-organization, the social force that is shown at this time as a response to the pandemic, cannot be dissolved with the victory over the virus. On the contrary, the "day after" will not be easy. We will have lost much, in human and material terms, after the crisis. For this reason, we will have to remain united, organized, pro-positive, looking for new ways to ensure a different future for our societies.

It has rightly been stated that tomorrow will never be like it was before this crisis. This is true. But we have to ensure that the lessons of the pandemic lead to the emergence of a better human society than the present one; a society that is more just, more loving, that cultivates altruistic values and is capable of radically changing the relationship between humans and between humans and our natural home, our beautiful planet Earth.