

Is This a Dress Rehearsal?

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The unforeseen coincidence between a general confinement and the period of Lent is still quite welcome for those who have been asked, out of solidarity, to do nothing and to remain at a distance from the battle front. This obligatory fast, this secular and republican Ramadan can be a good opportunity for them to reflect on what is important and what is derisory... It is as though the intervention of the virus could serve as a dress rehearsal for the next crisis, the one in which the reorientation of living conditions is going to be posed as a challenge to all of us, as will all the details of daily existence that we will have to learn to sort out carefully. I am advancing the hypothesis, as have many others, that the health crisis prepares, induces, incites us to prepare for climate change. This hypothesis still needs to be tested.

What allows the two crises to occur in succession is the sudden and painful realization that the classical definition of society – humans among themselves – makes no sense. The state of society depends at every moment on the associations between many actors, most of whom do not have human forms. This is true of microbes – as we have known since Pasteur – but also of the internet, the law, the organization of hospitals, the logistics of the state, as well as the climate. And of course, in spite of the noise surrounding a “state of war” against the virus, it is only one link in a chain where the management of stocks of masks or tests, the regulation of property rights, civic habits, gestures of solidarity, count exactly as much in defining the degree of virulence of the infectious agent. Once the entire network of which it is only one link is taken into account, the same virus does not act in the same way in Taiwan, Singapore, New York, or Paris. The pandemic is no more a “natural” phenomenon than the famines of the past or the current climate crisis. Society has long since moved beyond the narrow confines of the social sphere.

Having said that, it is not clear to me that the parallel goes much further. After all, health crises are not new, and rapid and radical state

intervention does not seem to be very innovative so far. One need only look at President Macron's enthusiasm to take on the figure of head of state that he has so pathetically lacked until now. Much better than terrorist attacks – which are, after all, only police business – pandemics awaken in leaders and those in power a kind of self-evident sense of “protection” – “we have to protect you” “you have to protect us” – that recharges the authority of the state and allows it to demand what would otherwise be met with riots.

But this state is not the state of the twenty-first century and ecological change; it is the state of the nineteenth century and so-called biopower. In the words of the late Alain Desrosières, it is the state of what is rightly called statistics: population management on a territorial grid seen from above and led by the power of experts.[1] This is exactly what we see resurrected today – with the only difference that it is replicated from one nation to the next, to the point of having become world-wide.

The originality of the present situation, it seems to me, is that by remaining trapped at home while outside there is only the extension of police powers and the din of ambulances, we are collectively playing a caricatured form of the figure of biopolitics that seems to have come straight out of a Michel Foucault lecture. Including the obliteration of the very many invisible workers forced to work anyway so that others can continue to hole up in their homes – not to mention the migrants who, by definition, cannot be secluded in any home of their own. But this caricature is precisely the caricature of a time that is no longer ours.

There is a huge gulf between the state that is able to say “I protect you from life and death,” that is to say from infection by a virus whose trace is known only to scientists and whose effects can only be understood by collecting statistics, and the state that would dare to say “I protect you from life and death, because I maintain the conditions of habitability of all the living people on whom you depend.”

Think about it. Imagine that President Macron came to announce, in a Churchillian tone, a package of measures to leave gas and oil reserves in the ground, to stop the marketing of pesticides, to abolish deep ploughing, and, with supreme audacity, to ban outdoor heaters on bar terraces. If the gas tax triggered the yellow-vests revolt, then imagine the riots that would follow such an announcement, setting the country ablaze. And yet,

the demand to protect the French people for their own good and from death is infinitely more justified in the case of the ecological crisis than in the case of the health crisis, because it affects literally everyone, not a few thousand people – and not for a time but forever.

It is clear that such a state does not exist – and maybe fortunately so. What is more worrying is that we do not see how that state would prepare the move from the one crisis to the next. In the health crisis, the administration has the very classic educational role and its authority coincides perfectly with the old national borders – the archaism of the sudden return to European borders is painful proof of this. In the case of ecological change, the relationship is reversed: it is the administration that must learn from a multiform people, on multiple scales, what will be the territories upon which people are trying to survive in many new ways as they seek to escape from globalized production. The present state would be completely incapable of dictating measures from above. If in the health crisis, it is the brave people who must relearn to wash their hands and cough into their elbows as they did in primary school, in the case of the ecological mutation, it is the state that finds itself in a learning situation.

But there is another reason why the figure of the “war against the virus” is so unjustified: in the health crisis, it may be true that humans as a whole are “fighting” against viruses – even if they have no interest in us and go their way from throat to throat killing us without meaning to.

The situation is tragically reversed in ecological change: this time, the pathogen whose terrible virulence has changed the living conditions of all the inhabitants of the planet is not the virus at all, it is humanity! But this does not apply to all humans, just those who make war on us without declaring war on us. For this war, the national state is as ill-prepared, as badly calibrated, as badly designed as possible because the battle fronts are multiple and cross each one of us. It is in this sense that the “general mobilization” against the virus does not prove in any way that we will be ready for the next one. It is not only the military that is always one war behind.

But finally, you never know; a time of Lent, whether secular or republican, can lead to spectacular conversions. For the first time in years, a billion people, stuck at home, find this forgotten luxury: time to

reflect and thereby discern that which usually and unnecessarily agitates them in all directions. Let's respect this long, painful, and unexpected fast.

[1] Alain Desrosières, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning*, trans. Camille Naish (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

26/03/2020

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