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The uneasy mirror of a virus

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This paper unfolds as a questioning of the Covid-19 global crisis, trying to uncover what our societies' reactions to the pandemic signify. Using Rafael Capurro's connection between the two concepts of pandemia and infodemia, the paper asserts that the Covid-19 crisis reveals a much older and deeper crisis of our democracies. It is about a gradual waning of the role humanities are playing, that eventually has thrown us into a situation in which we cannot properly deal with the amount of information flowing through our lives. The paper calls for a general reconsidering of this role as an opportunity offered by this global crisis itself.

Key-words: *pandemic, infodemic, Covid-19 crisis, role of humanities, democracy, public intellectuals.*

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed our daily lives quite a bit this year, yet we remain hopeful that relatively soon we may able to, in a manner of speaking, switch tracks and get back on course. As any manner of speaking, it resonates with something lying somewhere within our collective psyche, yet with a little attention we may find it quite a bit odd. It is a manner that speaks of a train contained by a railroad and set upon a path by it. The switching of tracks points to a divergent extension of that path that is to be avoided in order to hold on to the initial setting on a destination. We would be passengers on that train, eventually relieved that we would not reach a destination initially not desired. However, as any manner of speaking that resonates, it does so by shortcutting a thought. In other words, it resonates by hiding something as well. What it hides in this case, is exactly the assumption that the path that is to be followed is also the path that should be followed. Yet is not such an assumption something quite difficult to doubt when we use this manner of speaking in order to refer to a pandemic?

We might use another, less embellished manner of speaking, and say that we just want our normalcy back again. However, with a little bit of attention, one more

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time we find ourselves with the same question at hand. Is not this situation something that came exactly out of that normalcy?

What is certain is that the spot we find ourselves in is anything but desirable. The economies of the states that tried to contain the spreading of this new virus have been hit quite hard. This prompted the European Union for instance, to rethink its future economic strategy and draft a budget allocating 37% of its resources towards a "green transition" and 20% towards a "digital transformation" (Council of the EU, 2020). However, at the same time, the already rich owners of various businesses associated with the health industry and online commerce have become even richer. On top of these economic changes the pandemic has also brought a lifestyle change that came with a set of new problems all together. Pushed into social distancing, or perhaps worse, isolated in their homes, with the added permanent anxiety created by the threat of this virus, some people faced difficult times from a psychological point of view. The healthcare systems diverting their resources towards those suffering the effects of the virus have also found themselves pushing away people with other health issues, especially chronic patients that saw their treatments postponed or delayed.

Going back to the questions posed before, while looking at the social and economic havoc this virus has brought, we may notice something though. Besides these eventual economic hardships for some, or lifestyle changes for others, and before our hope that things will get back on track, this pandemic managed to put us in front of an uneasy mirror. Were we really on a good track before?

This uneasy mirror is also something that, apparently, was noticed by the World Economic Forum. An international organization with a fairly long history behind, interested in developing and promoting a "stakeholder capitalism," bringing together ethics and economics, is now interested through the voice of its founder, Klaus Schwab, in pushing for a "global reset" (Schwab, 2020). Markets need to be steered towards producing fairer outcomes, businesses need to become more sustainable, while the fourth industrial revolution (automation and digitalization) needs to lead to better healthcare systems and provide solutions to social problems. For them, similar to the European Union's 2020 budget draft, the Covid-19 crisis (not the virus itself, but what it has wrought) is just the tip of the iceberg. Below the waterline there seems to be a deep mountain of past hubris, that, perhaps, we have a chance now to correct. It is a commendable effort nonetheless, regardless of its actual outcomes. However, does it really manage to grasp exhaustively what is happening? Does it really see all that lies in that uneasy mirror?

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Even when picturing the good things that may come out of such a great global reset, there is still a nagging feeling that it may not be enough. Living besides solar panels while enjoying equitable income seem to be rather conditions of possibility for a good life and not exactly the cause for it. If something is made possible it does not necessarily need to happen as well. If all the global reset aims to do is to have people live more plentiful and ecologic lives, that is fine, the World Economic Forum may even have the right policy proposals. However, how are they going to better address social challenges (as Klaus Schwab's manifesto lists as a principle) if all they do is patch the wounds with market systems? As we have seen more and more in recent years (the 2018 Romanian protests against political incursions into the justice system, the 2020 protests against the banning of abortion in Poland, or, to some extent, the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, and especially its echoes in Western Europe) social wounds cannot be reduced only to a lack of plenty. If we just take racism for example, yes, removing structural racial discrimination and unfair economics are both necessary, but they will do little against the racism ingrained in the minds of people who were born and educated into it. So, there must be something missing from these attempts to peer into this uneasy mirror that the Covid-19 crisis has put in front of us.

Rafael Capurro, in a paper written with Coetzee Bester at the International Conference on Access to Information in Time of Crisis – the UNESCO Information for All Programme Priorities and the Covid-19 Pandemic (online, August 26-28, 2020), proposed a connection between two seemingly unrelated concepts: pandemia and infodemia. It is an interesting connection, and, moreover, it can be one that may set us in the right questioning mind in order to untangle this issue. However, how can something as concrete as an infectious disease be related to something rather as abstract as the spread of information? It is actually quite simple. "There is a correlation between the harm viruses can do and digital misinformation and incorrect information and disinformation or deliberate misleading information" (Capurro, 2020).

The fact that the virus that causes the Covid-19 disease also produces asymptomatic patients is not unique to it, but it definitely is something that factored heavily in the manner of its spreading. Capurro talks about its concealing and un-concealing nature, which is something that reflects in the end in our interpretation of it. On the one hand it may conceal itself in us, while on the other hand it may conceal itself in the passing on between bodies. That is simply the way in which this virus is. On top of that however, we are also dealing with a play of concealment and un-concealment arising out of our societies' way of dealing with

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this virus. We may have situations like that of Dr. Li Wenliang from China, the coronavirus whistleblower that the Chinese authorities were trying to silence (and eventually sadly fell to the disease himself), or the struggles (both political and medical) happening in Europe or the United States around the number and possibilities of viable testing methods, which (due to both their insufficient number, but also due to them being connected to the number of patients actually displaying symptoms and the accuracy of the related epidemiological investigations) always ended up concealing a significant population number that carried the disease yet never officially.

There is a third meaning level in this play, one that has to do with the context attached to the conditions necessary for this virus to spread on such a scale: a globalized world with an intense movement of people between countries and continents. Of course, this is not the first pandemic in history, but due to the specificity of this virus and the breadth of its spread we can only really compare it with the so called 1918 Spanish Flu (Covid-19 is no Black Death). We cannot say that a hundred years ago we were dealing with a globalized world, however, there was a world-wide event that was intensely moving people about: the Great War. We can probably extract something out of this similarity, but, regardless, we remain with these specific contextual conditions of possibility for the Covid-19 pandemic.

In a globalized world people do not just intensely move between countries and continents. Knowledge, discourses, ideas, stances, and political issues move with them too: information. They leave traces as well. Tourists leave wealth behind, but also garbage. We only need to look at places like the Greek islands, with their plumbing systems bursting at the seams the more they advance into the season, yet hard pressed to zone even more land for new resorts, or we can look at Venice sinking under the weight of massive cruise ships, yet hard pressed to find alternatives to that kind of income. And yes, people also leave viruses behind, or catch some for their further travels.

The pandemic marched alongside an infodemic from its very beginning. A gossip geyser, a raging mudslide, or, as Capurro calls it, an informational tsunami washed over us as the virus was surfing it. However, this is not a difference between presupposed unreliable internet sources and presupposed reliable established media truths. In our digital globalized world that difference is long gone. The sheer amount of unstoppable and constantly moving information, coupled with its direct effects on our information feeding habits, which relegated much of the former established media right in the middle of the digital torrent, made sure it stayed gone. The infodemic supported the spread of the virus,

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mirroring its play of concealment and un-concealment. Facts hidden among non-facts, and interpretations spinning around localized and immediate interests (I can recall here Donald Trump's insistence that by lowering the number of tests, the United States' coronavirus landscape may end up looking better, or a Romanian politician like Victor Ponta criticizing the government in Spring for their social distancing regulations, to then criticize them again, in Autumn, for not doing enough to stop the spread) have definitely facilitated, to some measure, the pandemic's development. Does that mean that our main problem all this time was in fact a mishandling of information? Far from it.

Autocratic regimes are boasting about their successes in dealing with this pandemic, although one can never be sure if we are not dealing yet again, with an information infection, or, perhaps better said, a propagandistic sparring. At the same time it seems that Western-style democracies are struggling to convince (even now) some of their citizens that the pandemic actually exists. However, the Covid-19 deniers are statistically a minority, even if they are a vocal (as we have seen in Germany or Romania, where they openly protested) and sometimes a violent one (as we have seen in France, Belgium, or United States, with individuals involved in violent acts against people asking them to follow the new regulations). Of course, there is no question of autocracies versus democracies here, especially on a propaganda and disinformation ridden field, like the one offered by the polemics surrounding this pandemic. The issue is not the suppression of the conditions of possibility for this infodemic by smothering the information pathways. In fact, just as much of the established media have been relegated to the middle of the digital torrent, so are we actually dwelling in it now, as well. To suppress this would mean to smother the very meaning making structures giving shape to our existence (however, the issue of this dwelling is a discussion for another time).

Going back to our initial questioning we can see now a new path to answer it, as Capurro's connected concepts proved indeed useful. The actual question, the uneasy mirror of Covid-19, looks at democracies, and at one of their most essential components: the informed citizenship. A true democracy does not coerce its citizens, but it governs through their accord. In order to give their accord and not just relinquish it, therefore in order to be citizens, its people need to have access to information, and access to the skills required to process that information. For example, if we take the United States Constitution's First Amendment, one that has been an essential building block of their society for more than two centuries, we see that it is not just about a right to free speech, but that it explicitly lists beside it and the freedom of exercising belief, also the freedom of the press, and that of

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peaceful assembly and petitioning of the government. Free speech without free press is not much, and both of them are placed in a framework designed to humble the governmental institution, to continuously draw it back to the people that it is supposed to represent (or re-present, we may underline in this way the etymological meaning of democracy), rather than rule.

So then, what do we do, when a vocal misinformed minority refuses to observe rules that are supposed to protect everyone? The answer of principle is: nothing, insofar as there are no established laws dealing with this kind of refusal. However, the protection of everyone, and its urgency revealed exactly by the Covid-19 pandemic, seems to change some things. The urgency of this protection comes to be seen as something vital for the existence of the respective democratic society itself. This urgency then, offers itself to the political to be used as a ground for enacting policies suggested by the specialists. But this is where things start to break. In principle, it is fine: as long as we are dealing with an actual political body speaking with the voices of the various bodies of the democratic polis, we can listen to specialist opinion, ponder upon advantages and disadvantages, and decide on a course of action. However, the Covid-19 deniers are throwing us here in a Catch-22 situation. At a first glance, this Catch-22 is easy to spot: their misinformed actions may lead to the collapse of the very society that harbors them, yet that society cannot enforce universal rules, without their accord, without drastically altering itself. Normally, the interplay between minorities and majorities, the inherent factionalism of any democracy, would work itself out, if the democratic system is set up correctly. The urgency of the general health crisis though, prevents that. The solution to this is, obviously, temporary enactments justified by the immediacy of the crisis. Yet this is exactly what many public intellectuals today are cautioning about, from Agamben to even Capurro, that some of these enactments may become more than temporary, or that they will end solving the health crisis while eating away at the very fabric of our societies. It may or it may not be fruitless to engage in such cautionary or immediate solution seeking meditations, although one could argue that now this is rather inevitable. Instead, if we take a step back, re-evaluating what we see, we may be able to realize that the Catch-22 situation actually runs much deeper than we thought.

I mentioned earlier that the Covid-19 crisis places an uneasy mirror in front of us. It is uneasy because it shows an image of us that we might not really like, or that we may not even recognize. As such, we can realize that the Covid-19 crisis with everything that it entails is not such a singular event after all, or that it is singular only insofar as its global span (not just as a pandemic, but as an infodemic

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too) has rendered it into a moment of un-concealment that we can use in order to peer into our very existence.

The infodemic upon which the coronavirus surfs is not anything unique. If anything, it is just an instance of the continuously combining and recombining streams of information viruses, parasitic discourses, and misinterpreting hyper-growths running through the digital torrent in which we are now dwelling. To continue with the bio-metaphors, I can say that it is the latest instance of such clots clogging our informational circulatory systems.

There is a connection between these pandemic woes and other troubling trends that we have witnessed over the past decade or so. Before Covid-19 we had Brexit and the 2016 elections in United States, both influenced by social media manipulations, as they surfaced in the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Besides such manufactured consent we also witnessed the rise of populist and extremist political forces (Hungary, Poland, France, and perhaps even more troubling, due to historic traumas, Italy and Germany), that seemingly are showing us democracies ready and willing to deny themselves through their very functioning. Even now, we are witnessing another round of elections in the United States, turning into a veritable circus selling tickets for a grand gossip geyser show.

The best antidote against manipulation and disinformation is critical thinking. So what happened with this essential feature in the citizens of Western-style democracies? Are the inherent physical loneliness and narcissism nurturing aspects of the ever present social media to blame? Have we grown too distant to each other to feel any kind of social empathy, has democratic solidarity dissolved? Has citizenship itself, as an idea, changed in the last decade? The answer is yes, it did, slowly but surely.

Already at the end of the 1960s Heidegger was cautioning against the path that our techno-science horizon of understanding is funneling us through. Noticing the end of philosophy in both its usefulness and moral high-ground, he was urging and preparing the coming of a new type of thinkers through which we would redeem ourselves from the dead end towards which we, so furiously, marched. It is worth quoting here his 1969 interview with Richard Wisser for the German television channel 3sat:

> This thinking is in substance much simpler than philosophy, but in execution, far more difficult. And it requires a new care for language, not an invention of new terms, as I once thought, but a retreat into the primordial content of our own continuously dying grasp of language. (Heidegger, 1969)

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The fact that we are having these discussions now should probably be enough to tell us that this new type of thinkers are either far and few between, or that they are simply not here. In 2006, continuing Heidegger's work, we find Gianni Vattimo updating these warnings to his then contemporaneity. In "The End of Philosophy in the Age of Democracy" he warns:

> …the specifically democratic problem of our era remains that of preventing that the authority of the erstwhile king-philosopher be substituted by the uncontrolled power of modern day technicians in different sectors of contemporary social life. (Vattimo, 2006)

When publishing this, Vattimo was only a couple of years away from the global financial crisis that brought about a mini-apocalypse for humanities departments throughout Western universities. What was by then a slow and steady process of delegitimizing, defunding, and contracting humanities, suddenly became intensified. The crisis passed, but the legitimizing problems remained, and all these warnings eventually fell on deaf ears. Leaving aside vestiges of discourses long passed, the relegation of thinking to the realm of "modern day technicians" with its inevitable corollary in the increasing incapacity of more and more members of our societies to properly make use of interpretation, has brought us to the point when we can talk about the idea of democratic citizenship becoming its own pastiche. No longer an informed and active polity, but rather atomized ephemeral active crowds formed, or sculpted, by the hazard of an unarticulated flow of words.

In this light, we can recast now the Catch-22 situation described above, in order to see the depths at which it runs. The problem is that we are not dealing (let us say) anymore with an actual political body speaking with the voices of the various bodies of the democratic polis. The specialists are still there, because, as societies, we have continued to nurture them even more so as humanities were waning. However, there does not seem to be much left that would really pay attention to their output. Perhaps this is where that uneasiness of certain public intellectuals stems from (I gave Agamben as an example). It is a gut reaction of distrust, while sensing deep down, which is to say without giving it expression, the fact that where we should find that check on the modern day technicians, there are now only replicants of disarticulated discourses and opportunistic torrent surfers.

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This is the image of our times that the Covid-19 crisis has placed in front of us. There were signs of this aplenty even before this crisis, but all of them proved to be either too localized, too anchored in specificities, or too abstract, too close to idealist enthusiasms to really have a chance of constituting themselves into such a moment of un-concealment. The unified and global breadth of what the Covid-19 crisis has uncovered gives it this chance, and perhaps this is its good thing after all. Instead of venting our anger at the image shown by its uneasy mirror, we should recognize the chance it offers us. Maybe not exactly a reset button, but rather an essential tweak: that in order to last in this brave new world we have built, our democracies need to recognize the work of humanities as an essential and inalienable right. To bring back the First Amendment example, yes, freedom of speech is not much without a free press, and yes, both of them are not much without the ability to understand and pass on that understanding, which is not something that we are endowed with naturally. The work of humanities is, in the end, to teach us how to approach, handle, and pass on information, but also to train us into the very skill that keeps us together as a society, meaning social empathy. Without this work, we will not last in the shape we would like to last right now.

Perhaps nothing will come out of this crisis. The panic will subside, the virus will lose its fangs, and we will get ready to forget it yet again. But it is a reckoning nonetheless, one that will certainly be followed by more if it will be ignored.

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