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Covid-19 pandemic

“The health emergency could possibly end up having total control over our lives“

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"As for the way out of the pandemic, I think all the premises exist, on a global scale, for better or for worse. There may be a turn to the left capable of radically challenging the model of society that has emerged over the past forty years; but there may also be, as I said, a new xenophobic and authoritarian wave: a permanent 'state of emergency' which is linked to increased social inequalities, where despair drives a search for scapegoats."

What is the situation in New York state, in the United States, where you are now?

The governor of New York state has reacted quite strongly, and we are homebound. Several states have taken the same decision, but there is a great heterogeneity of approaches. A federal state can be an extraordinary tool but can also become a source of paralysis. Trump contradicts himself every day and is occasionally disowned by public health officials. He started by calling the coronavirus the “Chinese virus”, with very xenophobic connotations. Then he said that the United States had the best hospital system in the world and that everything was fine. Now he says that the next two weeks will be very painful. If there is one country that is weakened by the pandemic due to the lack of a public health structure, it is the United States. It is a very vulnerable country, where there is a real risk of an extremely rapid and extensive spread of the virus. Tens of millions of people have no social security or have only very weak and ineffective social security. New York, one of the richest cities in the world, with the most advanced research centres in the medical sciences, is in desperate need of masks and ventilators, with makeshift military hospitals in Central Park.

You have ties in Italy. How do you perceive what is happening on the peninsula?

I am very worried because a part of my family is in the north of Italy, in an area where the spread is very strong. I also have a lot of friends in Milan. I hope that in the rest of Europe, lessons will be learned from what happened in Italy. Obviously, the country is paying a very high price, as in France, for decades of cutting healthcare spending, with fewer beds available than there were twenty years ago. But the country generally reacted rather well, with a rather impressive surge of solidarity. And in the middle of the disaster, there is good news: for three weeks, Salvini has disappeared from the screens! (laughs)

Is xenophobic discourse taking advantage of the crisis?

The xenophobic discourse that began to emerge at the start of the crisis - in Italy as in the United States - and which claimed that migrants brought the virus, has been swept away. Public opinion quickly understood that we are facing a global pandemic, and that the response must be global. In the media, we see that Chinese and Cuban doctors are welcomed as heroes. Xenophobic discourse has so far been stopped, even if the temptation to politically exploit this epidemic was strong. I'm not sure that in the long run this will hold.

Politically, what could be the effects of this crisis?

My impression is that this global pandemic has revealed nothing new. It has only pushed to the climax a series of trends which are before our eyes, and which have already been described in recent years. For example, the fact that the boundaries between the biological and the political are becoming increasingly blurred. It is the triumph of biopower theorized by Foucault, that is to say a state which assumes the management of our lives in the biological, physical sense of the term. A “pastoral” state at this time of health emergency, which we all feel the need for, but

which could possibly end up having total control over our lives.

Likewise, all the work on political ecology has explained to us for years that the ecosystems within which civilizations have succeeded each other are no longer able to self-regulate, and that we will face a multiplication of crises and of pandemics. Finally, the virus only amplifies the inequalities that are the basis of the neoliberal economy. We are not on an equal footing in the face of the virus: there is a segment of society that is far more vulnerable, as much because of the weaknesses of public health systems as, above all, because of mass unemployment and the precariousness that the crisis is creating. All this is a source of concern, even if at the same time, there is a need for the commons, for solidarity, for living in society, for communicating with others. This counter trend is of course a source of hope.

In the course of the crisis, faced with the testimony of medical staff denouncing the demise of the public hospital over the years, a wind of opposition to neoliberal reforms seems to have risen. Can it be beneficial to political change?

I hope everyone understands after this global crisis that a hospital cannot function as a profitable business and that a viable public health system is vital for humanity. This diffuse awareness will be a lever, a fulcrum to organize future political action in forms that are yet to be invented – inasmuch as we cannot go onto the streets. However, twenty years ago, after 11 September 2001, New York’s reaction was similar. A lot of firefighters, a category of poor workers, died trying to save people. This spontaneous reaction lasted two weeks, then a chauvinist wave paved the way for a war, and a new cycle of xenophobia and racism. I think then that we should entertain neither a cosmic pessimism, nor a naïve optimism.

Besides, from what I read in the French press, the emergency measures taken by Macron go in the direction of widening inequalities. The state of emergency, for him, is not about demanding exceptional taxes from those who can pay them to face the crisis, it is about removing paid holidays in the name of the sacred union and the national effort. So far, the social dimension of the emergency plan decided by Trump is much more consistent than that of the measures taken by Macron.

What do you think of the management of the crisis by the public authorities in France?

I think that the French reaction is hampered by the centralist and authoritarian political system of the Fifth Republic. We need a New Deal; but French political institutions are the most impervious to changes in society and Emmanuel Macron is “genetically” neoliberal. We cannot expect a turn towards a solidarity-based economy, a plan to nationalize public services that have been privatized, to revive the public health system and so on. The situation will therefore be frozen for another two years, even if it is very unpopular. It would take a social leap, but its forms are to be reinvented. There are social codes and a political anthropology that make collective action involve physical contact between people, a public space that is not entirely reified. Networks and the media, even the ones doing the best job of providing information and thinking at the moment, were designed as a tool for democracy, not as a substitute for civil society. How can we organize a breakthrough of this kind without having the possibility of meeting? All of this has to be done at a distance, and it involves transformations that are not that simple to implement. Perhaps a threshold will be crossed, and a new way of practising public life and politics will emerge.

Is collective action made more difficult by the “contactless” society which is developing?

Yes. If we detach ourselves from the contingent to think of this crisis in a broader perspective, by trying to detect historical trends, this pandemic risks reaching the extreme limits of liberalism: the society shaped and transformed by the pandemic makes us isolated monads. The model of society that emerges is not based on common life, but on

interaction between isolated individuals, with the idea that the common good would only be the final result of these interactions, that is to say the final outcome of individual selfishness. It's the idea of freedom that someone like Hayek defends. In the post-crisis, we can anticipate that distance education will develop, as well as distance work, and that will have considerable implications, both on our sociability and on our perception of time. This articulation of biopower and authoritarian liberalism opens a rather frightening scenario.

Do you fear the grip of the digital giants on our behaviour, in this new framework that is taking shape?

Certainly, and this is not a discovery. It reminds me of Razmig Keucheyan's book "Nature is a battlefield". He showed how the military, industrial and financial powers think long term and plan strategies to deal with an ecological disaster. Capitalism will survive any crisis; it will not die a natural death! I do not believe in the theses of its collapse because of its internal contradictions. It can adapt, we see it before our eyes, even if it involves adjustments.

Is this part of what you call the “triumph of biopolitics”?

Yes. What I mean by that is that the biopolitical functions of the state will develop. Once this crisis has been overcome, it will be a question of installing long-term measures aimed at preventing new crises. Measures adopted as exceptional thus risk becoming permanent. The state which, from a justified concern for public health, becomes a state which rules our lives, is what we can call the affirmation of a biopolitical paradigm. Power becomes biopower, and if politics becomes “immune” politics, designed to protect everyone from others, then it will become much more difficult to produce the “common”, our lives will be affected as a whole.

Some people point to the relevance of the quote from Rosa Luxembour: “Socialism or barbarism”. Do you still hope that positive lessons can be drawn from the current pandemic?

From a general historical perspective, I think that this diagnosis remains more valid than ever. But this slogan dates from 1914 and we cannot be content to repeat it indefinitely. After Rosa Luxembour, we had the experience of a century in which socialism itself was transformed into one of the faces of barbarism! However, from a historical point of view, this is the alternative in front of us. How will it translate politically? Difficult to predict. As for the way out of the pandemic, I think all the premises exist, on a global scale, for better or for worse. There may be a turn to the left capable of radically challenging the model of society that has emerged over the past forty years; but there may also be, as I said, a new xenophobic and authoritarian wave: a permanent “state of emergency” which is linked to increased social inequalities, where despair drives a search for scapegoats.

As an observer of American political life, did Bernie Sanders embody hope for the left for you?

Certainly, but unfortunately the coronavirus coincides exactly with the weakening of hope that had arisen around him. He remains very popular, he was able to create a movement behind his candidacy and this movement remains. But he failed before an absolute mediocrity like Joe Biden, before whom even Hillary Clinton appeared as a political giant. He failed for various reasons that are now being discussed, in particular his inability to capture the African American vote, despite the Black Lives Matter movement and the fact that many very popular African American personalities supported him. He mobilized a movement of young people who do not vote! (laughs) The discussion now is whether we can make a difference by going through the electoral process and the Democratic Party primaries. What is certain is that in the United States a new left has been born, which may experience setbacks, but which goes beyond the campaign of Bernie Sanders. Imagine the impact that the candidacy of Alexandra Ocasio-Cortés could have in four years! For ten years there has been an extraordinary ebullience in the United States. But this left cannot succeed if it is not articulated in social, political and cultural movements outside the institutions.

How do you imagine the world after this? What do you hope for?

Everyone has understood that the problems in front of us have no national solutions. We must move towards global action. Alas, the European Union has proven once again that it is useless: it is not even able to produce and distribute masks to countries that lack them. Italy and Spain buy them from China; Macron announces that France will be self-sufficient towards the end of the year. On the other hand, the German, Dutch and Austrian finance ministers exclude any “tax gift” to the Mediterranean countries; we are on the way to a new Greek crisis on a much larger scale. The New Deal was born out of a shock comparable to the one we are experiencing, but for now, everything indicates that our leaders are going in a completely different direction.

*Source: Translation by **International Viewpoint** from original French transcript supplied by Traverso of the interview published in [Les Inrocks](#) (France).*

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