

Utopia as the Best Way to Overcome the Corona Crisis

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The coronavirus crisis shows us Utopia is more necessary than ever. By Utopia I mean a society whose main aims will be happiness and fairness (the latter may be synonymous with social justice). A series of public policies and social values must thus be redefined. First of all we must seriously limit consumerism. It is strongly responsible for the destruction of the environment. Some serious studies recently suggested that as we humans have been raising our standard of living we have also destroyed the borders between ourselves and nature, especially the wilderness. The hypothesis that the present pandemics originated from humans eating bats in Wuhan is quite symbolic: the habitat of animals, including wild ones, would have been occupied and even devastated by man. The balance between mankind and nature has been jeopardized. Concerning food we know grains are healthier than meat, and require less water and other nutrients, but we do not change our daily fare to make it less environmentally expensive.

Obviously this way of human life cannot last. As the Earth has presently the largest human population of its history, and these billion of humans eat and consume more than ever, the planet is strongly stressed: it is possible that illnesses of various sorts constitute one of the self-defense reactions of the living organism we call our planet.

More than one thinker has said the most dangerous animal on the Earth is man. If nature attacks us it could be a counter-attack, meaning the Earth tries to save itself from human aggression. So we need to stop our war against nature. We must consider our planet as our home, not as a stock of merchandise we can dispose of at will. It is to be cherished, not to be plundered.

Actually, there is no major distinction between our behavior towards the poor and towards nature. Plentifulness is attained at the cost of both destroying the planet and despoiling the poorest humans. To be sure, we should not consider mankind as homogeneous. Since millennia it has been strongly hierarchical. The haves always got a lot from the have-nots. In the last time, be it the two centuries and a half since the democratic revolutions of the late 18th century, be it the 70 last years since World War II, however, there has been a strong movement towards equality. But this has also implied that everybody has been trying to consume as much as the rich. We should understand it is impossible. So we should commit ourselves to a serious of important changes.

First of all, we need to create a more equal society. Our initial step would be to understand that we need an equality of opportunities. Even though income differences will persist, they should not arise from inheritance but from capacity. Then we should limit the income and property differences. Whenever they become too large they imply much waste. For instance, if you have two or three secondary residences you will draw on natural and social resources much more than if you have

only a house and stay at hostels when you travel. If traffic becomes the monopoly of private cars, as it has happened in many a country, including some poor ones, urban landscape is destroyed and air pollution raises. One of the few positive points of the present pandemics is that, as people have been kept from moving out of their homes, the quality of the air has improved.

We should understand there are win-win and lose-lose strategies. To bet on huge sumptuary residences, expensive cars, luxury food means advantages will be few and for just a few, while if we devolve the streets to pedestrians, as Paris has been doing in the last years, the quality of life will improve. It is a serious mistake, worse, it is a serious lie to present material progress as either benefiting all (or most people) or even as a zero-sum game, where some will win the same as others will lose. Scientists, philosophers, artists have been showing we all benefit from the good quality of food, of air, of traffic. We should remember Rousseau, who thought that even those who at first sight seem to gain from exploitation of man by man finish losing their human, or I would add their humane, quality.

There are other steps to follow. Today it is possible to produce enough food for everyone in the world. Hunger now stems from difficulties in access to food, not from scarcity. The problem is distribution, rather than production. We should thus ensure everyone has access to food. After solving the quantity (of food) problem, we must tackle its quality problem. We have to take the necessary measures to improve food quality. Fat and sugar must be strongly reduced if we want to have healthier populations. Fortunately the last decades saw a meaningful improvement in the taste and flavor of so-called organic food. The good news is that very likely the world population is approaching a halt, so human demands on natural resources can be restrained in the course of the next century. But since life expectancy is rising it is probable that population will still grow for some time. We could expect to have from 10 to 20 billion humans living at the same time in our planet by the next century. So it is absolutely necessary to change what we draw from our planet.

This means we need a philosophical, spiritual change that will not be easy to accomplish. If we look at the political, economical crises of the last decades we see that most of them have stemmed from either scarcity or (rather?) the incapacity of governments to satisfy an ever-growing demand of products to be consumed. Consumerism has become a great value – maybe the most important one in our societies. We must stop it and reverse it. The good news is we now have the technical and economical means to do that. For instance, I said above that to own several secondary residences is not a good thing; well, both the ho(s)tel industry and apps such as Airbnb give us the means to host more people keeping the same number of rooms or buildings. An app as Uber makes it easier for many people to live without owning a car. They can employ public transport and resort only occasionally to a car they will pay for their exclusive use. But, if technical and economical means are necessary in order to change our way of life, means are never enough in order to change ends. We must work on our ends.

Ends mean, here, values, ethics, morality. We are growing accustomed to the 4 sustainability R's: rethinking, reducing, reusing, and recycling. They stem from a strong awareness that we must respect both nature and other human beings. I said above that the differences in income and property should be brought to some ethical,

acceptable limits. Everyone must be entitled to good public education and health, to access to clean water and air, to an at least moderate use of communications, including the Internet, and maybe, to sum all of it, to a universal basic income. These rights must be independent of the capacity or even the willingness of citizens to pay for them. A simple rationale for it will be: if people lose these rights or goods the social cost of such loss will be much higher than if society understands it must (and of course can) pay for them. Without clean water people get ill. Society will either pay for their treatment or let them die and lose all the investment made in their lives, sometimes for many years.

Another reason to ensure these rights or goods for all is that children should not suffer from their parents' incapacity or even unwillingness to give them the minimum for a decent life. Actually we should not link what happens to a child to what his or her parents did. We can add the fact that richer people usually require more than poor people from natural and social resources. Last but not least, several payments as those above described consist in investments, not expenses: the better the education, the health, the access to information, the ability to communicate, the greater will be the benefits for society. Bolsa Família has been able to sharply reduce illness in Brazil. In the Nordic countries long maternity-and-paternity leaves have reduced diseases (including mental ones), crime, and improved educational performance. An important discussion we should begin even before the end of the present pandemics will be how far must we go in the funding of the new welfare state we have been defining in the last paragraphs.

When I mentioned an Utopia as the best outcome for the pandemics crisis, I meant a modernized Welfare State. Of course science and technology must prioritize the fight against new pandemics. Our covenant with nature has been broken, we should repair it. But we cannot discuss either science and technology or the environment without taking into account social, human relationships. Until now I have been insisting on the ingredients for social justice. Now I should switch to what is needed for happiness. Utopia means, since Thomas More: what causes injustice causes unhappiness. What is needed to make humans happy? I would dwell on two factors. First of all, physical activity. This is not to be confounded with competitive sport. Professional sport is the domain of a rather small number of persons – in Brazil, some tens of thousands of people. Athletes often suffer from excessive physical activity, due to their need to constantly attain new records. Physical activity, on the contrary, is a universal need. Instead of some thousand people per country, it is necessary for everybody – in Brazil, more than two hundred million persons. It improves health, lowers diseases, raises pleasure.

Cultural activity is the other priority. In both cases, physical and cultural activity, we are not dealing with professionals, even though they are necessary and deserve to be admired. Instead, what is needed is to give everyone a good health and a good amount of creativity. In our society entertainment has replaced culture, and this should be discussed. Entertainment as well as sport as a spectacle both bring people to a passive attitude. On the contrary, cultural and physical activities make people more active, implying their lives will be more meaningful. One of present-day problems about happiness is that older people lose their interest in almost everything. If we emphasize their ability to cope with their bodies and minds, we may

keep them truly active, alive, awoken, for much longer stretches of time. This might make them happier. A fairer and happier society is possible, actually, it is necessary.