CJ CRISTIANISME I JUSTÍCIA

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CRISTIANISME I JUSTÍCIA Edition
Roger de Llúria, 13 - 08010 Barcelona
Tel. +34 93 317 23 38 - info@fespinal.com
www.cristianismeijusticia.net/en
ISSN: 2014-6485

Editor: Santi Torres i Rocaginé
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Design and Layout: Pilar Rubio Tugas

COVID-19: BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

Joan Carrera i Carrera

SUMMARY

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1. A "STRANGE" VIRUS HAS ERUPTED INTO OUR LIVES

What once seemed far away in space (an epidemic that was happening in a remote region of China) and far away in time (now no one remembers what was called the "Spanish flue" that killed some 40-50 million people in the midst of the First World War) suddenly has become a present reality. The fact is that in the West epidemics no longer form a part of our collective memory, as happens in other parts of the planet where they suffer from them periodically, where the people know them and they fight against them, often with very slender means. Without going any further for examples, in 2019 a few newspapers made mention (in their inside pages) of an epidemic in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that caused some 6,000 deaths. And it was not any strange epidemic, but one that is as well-known as measles that can be combatted with a good vaccine.[1]

This current virus has paralyzed the West, has made us take notice of our security and has made us feel vulnerable. We thought that science would offer us a response to everything, but we have realized that it doesn't happen that way. We call for answers and quick solutions, but these require time. We have come to realize that the sense of invulnerability was, in a certain respect, all smoke and mirrors, the fruit of years and years of making our vulnerability invisible (sicknesses, fears, anxieties) and especially that of that part of the population that is rejected and placed on the margins, the castoffs of society. There were already some voices who were warning about this increasing invisibility of vulnerability, but there were stronger voices that promised a growing economy. Just get over the crisis and everything will be well. This virus has forced us to open our eyes to realities that were right beside us, with which we were living closely, but which we continued to refuse to accept.

The virus has been the fruit of a natural misfortune,[2] but there are many who point to the existence of factors that have accelerated its spread, as, for example, traveling or the great interconnections of our planet. Also, some people have mentioned climatic factors such as the increase of particulate contaminants that have abetted its transmission, or the growing loss of biodiversity. It will be necessary to wait to have studies done that would either corroborate or disprove these theories.

In addition, this unexpected and rapid eruption has found the public health systems weakened by neoliberal policies that since the 1980's not only have

1. More localized epidemics that took place above all in Africa and Asia affected an important part of the population with a significant number of deaths. For example, in China between 2003 and 2004 they counted more than 5000 cases and 349 deaths. The e-bola virus, with a higher rate of mortality, affected quite a few African countries over many years since the first cases were detected in 1976. Or the one which we have already mentioned, the epidemic of measles in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, that in 2019 caused the death of about 6000 boys and girls. According to sources from the World Health Organization (WHO).
2. In spite of this, there have appeared conspiratorial and paranoid theories that attribute its appearance to political swindles, cooked up in laboratories where they are experimenting with new biological weapons.

invested little in public health but have moved to externalizing and privatizing this responsibility. Neither has social investment been sufficient during these last few years. An example are the residences for the elderly which in the majority of cases are under private management. It would be good to analyze to what point these more political factors have influenced in the spread of the epidemic and in the elevated rate of mortality. The thing that has been confirmed is that the areas of the large cities where the persons with the highest poverty indexes reside have been also the most affected by the epidemic. It would also be necessary to add other factors into this analysis as, for example, housing, the kind of work done and the family structure.

In this urgent article we will not be concentrating on these analyses. Our intention is to present this epidemic, the response that has been generated (on the part of the political and economic class) and the consequences that are the prelude to future crises. Also, we will consider which aspects of our social and economic system it would be necessary to call into question in order to foresee and prevent new episodes like the one we are experiencing from being produced again in the not so distant future.

Many years ago, a lot of people often classified as catastrophists had announced that we find ourselves on the brink of a crisis of civilization. From ecology, from indigenous movements, from the fans of downsizing, from the anticapitalistic movements … many voices, diverse and varied, were united by the same cry: this cannot go on this way. Often, some use arguments based on fear, but many try to offer alternative lifestyles.

Nevertheless, in the last few years there have also been brought into play defensive responses on the part of the economic system and its political followers, some answers that look for everything to stay the same and which do not question the social system. In spite of the fact that shocks can generate fear, uncertainty and awaken the search for security at any price, they also offer us the opportunity to become conscious of the feet of clay on which stands our social system.

2. VALUES CALLED INTO QUESTION

Just as we have said before, this virus has shown the vulnerability of our civilization which is accustomed to putting security before taking risks. We have discovered that medicine and/or science cannot do everything. We don't control everything. Someone can exclaim "As if we didn't know that before!" Well, the truth is that in the last few decades we have seen society and politicians behave in such a way that did not take that into account. We have been living in a kind of *Matrix*, looking the other way when we saw the statistics that warned us about the level of poverty, the increasing number of suicides,[3] the growing precariousness of the work force and of the cut backs in all of the public sectors.

We have suddenly awakened to find that many of the values which we had considered as falsely secure have been placed in doubt.

3. According to the INE, in 2018 there were 3599 suicides, a 3.1% increase over the year before, out of a total of 427,721 deaths; and in Catalunya there were 522 suicides (source: IDESCAT).

2.1. The use of time

The current slump is causing us to discover the value of time. We have had to halt our activities and confine ourselves to our houses in order to begin to discover the difficulty of harmonizing the tasks associated with the home, child care, telework, etc. Who knows if from now on we can give more value to the work of many women who take care of their families while at the same time balancing that with their professional lives? Or of those others whose professional life is caring for others, at times without recognition or adequate working conditions?

Perhaps we also have discovered time for just being without doing anything and we have become bored. In some families, they have recovered the pleasure of playing together and having conversations. Perhaps in others exactly the opposite has occurred and each one has become more enclosed in their room to get connected to their social networks or to engage in constant zapping on the internet. And perhaps in others, being in the same space has not done anything more than accentuate existing relationship problems.

2.2. The value of the economy

One of the "discoveries" has been that our economic system enters into crisis if production is halted during a certain amount of time. We have accepted this

as something normal but it would be interesting to ask ourselves the following: Why have we come to this level of dependency on the chain of production and consumption? Why is it that the manufacturing firms are living so much from day to day, without even a minimal margin to maneuver in order to confront a work stoppage, and without the stoppage being immediately transferred to the workers? Many of the things proposed by the movements which have advocated downsizing have been warning about this for some time. It has proven scandalous that some politicians have suggested that it made more sense to save the economy than to save people, even though it would happen at the cost of increasing the number of deaths.[4] Some of them have talked about the post-pandemic crisis in the economic sphere, comparing it with the crisis of the post-war. We believe that there is a great difference which perhaps is not being taken into account in order to reinforce and justify certain policies for afterwards. It is not the same to equate a crisis which comes after the destruction of infrastructure, as happened in the period of the war, with a crisis like the one we are facing today where the system of production has stopped but has not been destroyed.

4. This was the attitude expressed in a speech by the Prime Minister of Great Britain in the middle of March and published by various communication media. "Boris Johnson has made a very risky bet and he is playing with his political future – and what is more important with the lives of many residents of Great Britain – with the decision not to take for the moment drastic measures against the pandemic and to concentrate his strategy on bending the coronavirus curve so that the peak of contagion will be produced within a couple of months when the institutions of public health will be more prepared to meet the crush. According to specialists, the plan responds to the government's being resigned to the fact that in the end it would not be able to do anything to stop the coronavirus, that a very considerable number of deaths (including some tens of thousands) is inevitable, and so it is better to attempt to protect the economy for those who survive. From the medical point of view, the theory is that the more people who are contaminated now, the greater the percentage of the country that will develop immunity for a potential second wave of the epidemic in the coming fall and winter." (*La Vanguardia*, 3/13/2020).

2.3. Fictitious equality

Also, we have discovered that the virus is democratic, in just the same way that environmental contamination or climate change are, that is, it affects everyone equally and it does not respect borders. But we have also discovered that although the risk can be similar, the vulnerability of each individual is not. There are factors of age, of previous medical conditions and of genetics that in a personal way make some people more vulnerable, not only for this virus, but also for many other types of infections. Thus, we discovered implied social factors when we looked at the statistics that show that the poorest areas of the cities have been the most affected, just as have the residences for the elderly. We should find the reasons such as, for example, small apartments and people crowded together. That is, the prevalence of the virus has been greater among those people who were already victims of the growing inequality that has been generated by the system in its most neoliberal version. By way of example, in Barcelona, according to data from the Department of Health, the neighborhood of Roquetes in Nou Barris is the one with the highest rate of positivity (some 533 per 100,000 inhabitants) and the area of Sant Gervasi-Galvany is the one with the lowest (77 cases per 100,000).[5] In the words of Nani Vall-Llossera (a doctor at the Center for Primary Care of Bon Pastor and a member of the Catalan Forum on Primary Care):

5. Data from the end of March published in the press prensa.

"The coronavirus is also more prevalent in neighborhoods which are more socioeconomically depressed. There is the housing factor. The quality of homes is not the same in Nou Barris or in Trinitat Vella than in other neighborhoods where the number of persons per square meter is less. There are neighborhoods in which many people are living together in each residence, at times even people who do not know each other. There are people subletting bedrooms. And this makes confinement very difficult. It is not the same thing to spend your days in an apartment of 100 square meters than to spend them in one of 60 in which eight people are living. In this environment, the virus is very happy. Then there is the work factor. What possibilities for telework exist in less qualified professions? These are the people who are concentrated in these neighborhoods and the ones who are keeping life going in these weeks: supermarket checkers, domestic workers, people who work in public transportation, cleaning personnel. Besides, in the first weeks they have gone out to work without any means of security and they continue having a scarcity of protective gear. As a consequence, these workers are more susceptible to becoming sick."[6]

6. Directa.cat, April 7, 2020.

2.4. The consequences of hyper-individualism

The pandemic has shown the importance of the public sector and the weakness of the responses of the market. The crises have shown us that there are goods, such as health, which the free market cannot protect. These crises demonstrate the necessity of recovering the public sector, given that this dimension is the one which is or ought to be within the area of participation by every citizen. We will see further on that in order for the public sector to exist, it is necessary to have the beginnings of a sense of a community to administer it and to give people a sense that it belongs to them.

In this sense, the pandemic also has shown that little can be done by a society that stresses individual values when faced with any crisis. This has led to the self-activation of many spontaneous communitarian responses offering mutual aid that thus question extreme individualism. By that term is meant an "I" that does not have a need for others and is incapable of generating a "we" that would be absolutely required to bring about social change. Although the hyper-individualism of the last few decades has gradually destroyed the fabric of association, in moments of crisis there is a tendency toward the flowering of responses in solidarity which are more communitarian. There are many examples of these responses: helping the elderly who are living alone, going shopping for the elderly who cannot leave their home, having workshops to make

masks, taking food and blankets to the people who are living in the street. The free market, which is favored in part by the countries themselves, has been stifling the social institutions, but in moments of crisis, the institutions have reacted by creating protection mechanisms, that is, innumerable communitarian elements start to reemerge at the margin of the State.

2.5. Inequality in the workplace

Also, among those who have been able to continue to work, differences in the workplace have been produced. Those that have been working in what are considered essential areas have been doing so under a lot of pressure and, at times, without all the conditions for their protection. Apart from the health care sector, which has justly been valued, there are other sectors which have been valued less and have had to face difficult working situations during the pandemic, including those people who clean, those who collect trash, those involved in distribution, etc. Would that this would have served to make visible some jobs that are mostly invisible but absolutely necessary and often badly paid! These workers have not been able to quarantine themselves and have been very exposed to the risk of contagion. Other workers doing activities that are not considered essential, have been either let go or have been affected by orders for temporary regulation of employment, with the uncertainty of definitively losing their job. And there is another sector, considered by some to be privileged, which has been able to continue with the activities by means of telework, a modality not free from its own pitfalls. That is, while telework has been presented as an opportunity to reduce layoffs, the home has ended up being converted into a space where the clear border between work time and time for rest and family life has disappeared. Business has moved to control also our most intimate space.

2.6. The excess of positivity

Our Western civilization could be characterized as being a society with an excess of positivity,[7] where we hide or take importance away from failure, the negative and including from death itself. Mothers and fathers of today try to save their children from all kinds of frustration. Even though this is done with all of the best intentions in the world, this ends up incapacitating the children from facing difficult and inevitable situations which will occur in life. Our society hides death and failure as if there only existed triumph and what is positive. But death exists. We are not omnipotent and

7. This is a concept used by the philosopher Byung-Chul Han. In many of his writings he has described the characteristics of post-modern society. For example, in *The Burnout Society* (Stanford Briefs, 2015).

neither is our science. We have been reminded of this by this pandemic which has caused hundreds of persons (some known and loved) to die alone in the intensive care units of the hospitals.

3. THE AUTHORITARIAN TEMPTATION

In this section, we do not want to evaluate the concrete actions that political entities have taken at the moment of the arrival of the pandemic. The newspapers and panel discussions are overflowing with this kind of evaluation, many times slanted by partisan positionings. Nevertheless, we would like to focus on how some of these actions call into question freedoms, basic social rights and definitely democracy itself. In other words, we will ask ourselves in this section if these freedoms and rights will be the security with which we should confront not only the present crisis, but also those that will come in the future.

3.1. The rupture of the social contract

In the countries that are considered democratic it is a given fact that there is a certain social contract, an agreement between the people and the governments which exercise political power. The citizens give legitimacy to the government in exchange for the services that it performs for them. This legitimacy materializes within a framework (the Constitution) that is periodically revalidated through elections This is what we call "representative democracy". For some time, this type of contract has been called into question by some citizens who sense that their "representatives" owe more to external economic interests than to the defense of the welfare of the citizens. The growth of inequality, fiscal cuts and corruption lead to an ever-growing disenchantment with politicians and the democratic system. The contract is fractured in such a way that it is gradually losing the necessity of legitimacy which exists as the basis for all forms of government.[8]

In the crisis that has been brought on by the pandemic, one more step upwards has been taken in this rupture of the social contract. When it would seem most necessary to have the mechanisms for solidarity inside of the countries and among them, citizens lack more confidence in power and in the authorities. This lack of confidence has several reasons. Some of the reactions that the powers in the countries have demonstrated have put us on alert., especially because they can create patterns that can be reproduced in the face of future crises tied to climate change. For example, the fact of calling out the army and the police at the beginning, does that not indicate in some way a certain fear on the part of the authorities with respect to the population which they say they are serving? The hegemony of economic power, the increase of inequalities,

8. Read the reflection of M. Castells in *Ruptura: La crisis de la democracia liberal* (*Rupture: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy*), Alianza Editorial (Madrid, 2017), pp. 15-28.

the privatization of so many public goods, do they not cause fear on the part of those in power that the population might say they have had enough and rebel in some form?

3.2. The doctrine of shock

In order to understand this reaction on the part of States, we can find inspiration in the reflection of some authors, above all, N. Klein.[9] Let's point to the fact that often shocks and jolts (economic crises, epidemics, natural and climatic disasters) generate fears and activate the mechanisms of a communitarian and cultural closing up on the part of the population (we will get by on our own). As N. Klein explains, taking advantage of these shocks, States can produce authoritarian forms of exercising power in order to conserve the privileges of a few and to control its citizens more, always doing it "for their good". Since it provokes fear, uncertainty and strong emotions among the people, a shock is fertile ground which may sprout formulas for offering security although it might be at the cost of sacrificing freedoms. In the world of today, any State can count on having a great deal of information about its citizens and it can also intervene in a rapid way when faced with catastrophes, thanks to the security forces of which it disposes.[10] Nevertheless, in the short term, what ends up being most prejudiced is democracy, given that a citizen slowly feels more alienated from any participation and the elected politicians lose their weight in front of other figures such as experts, technocrats, etc.

Also, it is necessary to be critical about one of the typical elements in responses offered up by the authorities in situations of shock: appeals to unity, everyone acting together. We can be in agreement with that if such appeals express a call to solidarity, everyone contributing to the solution without differences or privileges. But it is also necessary to recognize that with this call there is run the clear risk of moving away from all public debate necessary to formulate the responses that should be given. There comes a moment in which whoever disagrees with the more official responses is seen as making an attempt to destroy the cause. Thus begins the division between the good and the bad people and using the terminology of war against one's enemies. When there is such a strong cry for everyone to act as one, it is very easy for the one who deviates to be considered an enemy.[11] In times of crisis it is necessary to respect the fact that one continues having the right to think in a different way. History teaches us that when dissidence is placed into doubt is also when authoritarianism begins.

Moreover, in crises there are no univocal responses and no one has the deposit of all truth nor the only solution. There is even a multiplicity of voices among the experts. Neither in the crises is there a unity of interests. That is a

9. In the words of N. Klein herself in an interview: "The shock doctrine is the political strategy that consists in using crises on a grand scale in order to advance policies that systematically deepen inequalities, enriching the elites and weakening everyone else. In times of crisis, people tend to concentrate on daily requirements for survival however that means and they tend to count on those that are in power above all. In times of crisis, we divert our attention a bit, far from the real game." (Ctxt, No. 258, March, 2020). This shock doctrine is more fully explained in her book *Doctrina del shock: el ascenso del capitalism del desastre* (*The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of a Capitalism of Disaster*), 2012.

10. There is an interesting reflection done by a sociologist from the Sorbonne, Razmig Keuchegan, concerning the role of the armed forces in crisis situations such as those derived from climate change (*La naturaleza es un campo de batalla* [*Nature is a battlefield*], Clave intellectual [Madrid, 2016]), pp. 137-157.

11. It will be good to realize how the Spanish government and others, when facing the COVID-19 pandemic, have often taken advantage of a language that is more military than scientific. The use of this language is not innocent. To name the virus as an enemy, to mobilize an army, to talk about "war on the virus" –these are not innocent ways of confronting the pandemic that should be analyzed in great detail in order to uncover the values that they transmit. For example, everyone should go to war as one. In a war the enemy is the adversary and the strategy itself cannot be put into doubt (no one has responsibility for anything). Efficacy is frequently applied so that the end, winning, justifies the means. The chain of command is stressed in the form of a hierarchy. The Bush administration also used the terminology of war in its struggle against Islamic terrorism stemming from the attack on 9/11/2001.

fallacy! There continue to be many interests in play. An uncritical thought can become counterproductive and it can kill the suspicion and the control over certain interests. Let us not lose from sight that in these situations institutional democratic controls are weakened in order to make rapid and efficacious responses.

3.3. Unity and security

The Spanish government, just as the other governments around the world, has appealed for unity with slogans like "Together we will stop it." But the truth is that this slogan hides the fact that while many workers are obliged by their companies to expose themselves every day by using public transportation, others can telework. And we could talk about so many situations of inequality that this "together" can sound a little cynical.

When the state of alarm goes away, there could remain in the subconsciousness of the people a certain suspicion that when faced with crises, the democratic or participative system does not function as it should (it is slow, inefficient, generates debate). In that way, more authoritarian responses are legitimized. We have already seen this, for example, when, in the face of global terrorism, special laws have been put forward that allow for abrogating certain rights. There has been a call for unity. We have also seen how this fact has led to an authoritarian spiral. First, the enemies are the terrorists, the virus, natural disasters. Then they become one's political adversaries. Finally, the enemy is the entire population that does not submit to whatever has been ordered.

We could analyze how, since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the liberal democracies have passed laws in which security has taken preference over freedom. In the United States they continue to violate the rights of citizens only for the reason that they are Muslim. In our own house what has been called the "gag law" would not have passed the test of those who suffered and struggled against the dictatorship of Franco. We have to be conscious of the growing power that States have and that the classic mechanisms of control of the liberal democracies are slow and are subject to a crossing of wires that makes them seem bureaucratic, useless and inoperable. And this precisely in the States that are referred to as "democratic" because those in which the separation of powers is not clear and those in which the mechanisms for participation or the freedom of press have been annulled, are not on the decline. According to many students of politics, there has been produced an increase in those so-called "anocracies" or democratic forms of low intensity. Or, in other words, lite authoritarianisms. In spite of the fact that today big data is in power in the great corporations, with all of the dangers that go along with that, States can also make use of it, if it might be necessary, against their own citizens.

Let's remember some of the reports that come to us from China concerning the use of security cameras and other practices of control. With the social networks there is offered another form of keeping watch. It is not the classic "Big Brother" (as in the all-seeing eye of Benthem), but rather something different. People keep watch on one another. Now it would not be a State which is controlling, a Big Brother, but we control each other (everyone is both Big Brother and prisoner at the same time), and also everyone brings information to the network (each person freely giving it up), thinking it is to our advantage to do so. The information that is handed over is captured by businesses which constantly have more information to be able to direct themselves to each one of us in an individualized way. Bib Brother controlled our bodies and our actions. The new network can read our thoughts (the things we prefer, what we feel, our likes, our leisure). It can become such a controlling force that it renders unnecessary any form of repression or external coercion. It seduces us from inside ourselves. We end up being turned into submissive persons, believing that we are free. Thus, authoritarianism does not have a need to adopt the classical forms of repression. It is not necessary. It achieves submission without coercion. Some words of Professor David Murillo commenting on the idea of "psycho-politics" of Byung-Chul Han can help us here:

> "A defining feature of our era is the transformation of the individual into a being who is auto-submissive and auto-exploited, who from freedom voluntarily gives himself over to a system of political control grafted on to the colonizing logic of the marketplace."[12]

12. Murillo, D., "Psicopolítica, poder, rendició i dominació en la era neoliberal" ("*Psycho-politics, power, submission and dominance in the Neoliberal era*"), *Diálegs*, No. 69, July-September, 2015 (63).

3.4. The centralizing role of the Internet

The network of the Internet was presented at first as a decentralizing utopia which would help to build up social relationships. This has become diluted, above all, by the appearance of two phenomena that have put it into question: the so-called "fake news" and "big data".

The phenomenon of "fake news" is nothing new. For all of human history the winners and those in the majority have created their narratives of "indisputable" truth. The new thing lies in the fact that now these "truths" are scattered very rapidly around the world without the possibility of refuting them. This is also not helped by our post-modern and relativizing culture with an extreme value placed on pluralism.

"Big data" supposes a return to a dangerous centralization: the accumulation in the hands of large corporations of multiple sets of data, and through them the possibility of acquiring immense power over the population. This is a

centralization which is accented by the appearance of artificial intelligence (AI) which needs technological investment of many millions of dollars in research which would only be available to very few people.

What in the West are large corporations in more authoritarian political regimes, it is the State itself which makes use of the new technologies in order to recentralize all power, with all of the dangers that this supposes. So, in Asiatic countries this massive collection of data on the part of the State can even be well-accepted when done in the name of obedience and a show of confidence in the State that underlies the Confucian culture and tradition of those countries. It is a culture which is less jealous of individual space.

Such is the case with China which has arrived at the extreme of hyper-control of the citizen through a system of social credit that would be unimaginable in countries in the West. This allows for an exhaustive placing of values and evaluation of the social conduct of citizens in their daily life. Nevertheless, it seems that this is being extended little by little into the West where it is becoming more and more usual for politicians to use information obtained on the networks in their electoral campaigns. There is being created a world where all of us are attentive to generating virtual reality and of making invisible those realities which it is not convenient to show. It is a world which gives more importance to appearances than to real results.

Curiously, we ourselves are the ones who are creating this "big data" through our voluntary contribution when we share data on the networks or when we do not oppose the placement of security cameras everywhere. We go along letting it become part of us for our own good, for our security, to preserve our health. Let us consider for a moment what we would be told about this invasion of our private lives by a liberal of the first generation who struggled against either the absolute State of the 17th century or against the Fascism of the 20th century.

It would be something like Han points out in an article about the root of the difference in the responses to the pandemic between the Western and Eastern countries:

> "All of the infrastructure for digital surveillance has turned out to be now extremely useful in containing the epidemic. … It seems that "big data" has been more efficacious in combating the virus than the absurd closing of borders that in these times is being carried out in Europe. Nevertheless, because of the rules about protection of data it is not possible in Europe to have a digital combat of the virus comparable to what happened in Asia. The Chinese telephone and Internet providers share the sensitive data of their clients with the security services and with the ministries of health. Therefore, the State knows where I am, with whom I have met, what I do, what I look for, what I think about, what I eat, what I buy and where I go.

It is possible that in the future the State might control also body temperature, weight, the level of sugar in the blood, etc. A digital bio-politics which accompanies psycho-politics and which actively controls people."[13]

13. "La emergencia viral y el mundo de mañana. Byung-Chul Han, el filósofo surcoreano que piensa desde Berlín" (The Viral Emergency and the World of Tomorrow. Byung-Chul Han, the South Korean Philosopher who Thinks from Berlin), *El País*, March 22, 2020.

In this centralization of data and in its gathering one can appreciate certain aspects that can have a positive value. The responses that the Asiatic countries (China, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore) have made, both the more authoritarian ones and the more democratic ones, have been more effective than those of the majority of the Western nations with liberal democracies. In this response, what has proven to be key is the gathering of data and a greater control, acceptance and discipline on the part of the population in the face of the measures imposed by the government. But who knows if in certain situations the control and centralization are not as effective? We think about, rather, the fact that at the beginning of the pandemic in China control and centralization were used precisely to persecute the first doctors who, like Li Wenliang on December 30, 2019, began to sound the alarm about the appearance of the epidemic. It has to be said that not even the Western governments have been characterized by great transparency of information, neither in this crisis nor in others like that of 2008.

3.5. A great and powerful monster

The Western nation state, invented by absolute monarchies and passed through the democratic sieve of political liberalism, today can become converted into a much larger monster than the Leviathan of Thomas Hobbes. And not because it has to develop into something coercive, but rather by the voluntary acceptance on the part of a majority of the population or by the silence of the rest. Let us remember some words by Bourdieu: "There is no ideology more effective than that which doesn't require words and only asks for a silence of complicity."[14] It is necessary to be attentive to how the State, taking advantage of the emotional shock of the pandemic and alleging the defense of the health of its citizens, can show its more authoritarian side, above all when it has felt itself to be wounded for some time past.

14. P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 188.

In sum, this State, through fear, can go along promoting a return to authoritarianism tacitly assented to and avoiding the politicization of the populace. It seems that we are returning to a new "There is no alternative" based on the control of the population by various different means. One of these can be telework in as much as it is a factor of individualization and physical isolation of persons and would do nothing more than aggravate the already existing processes of individualization. Certainly, the pandemic has generated sponta-

neous networks of mutual aid, but what ends up being the predominant force is social distancing, not allowing for certain kinds of demonstrations, and face masks as a metaphor for a lack of communication.

In this whole context, economic power does not stop gaining influence to the extent that the population is mobilized and becomes less politicized. It seems like what is being proposed is a change from "capitalism", but with the same elites maintaining economic power, a new system that keeps in mind climate change and where the control of the population will be greater, taking advantage of possible new crises which are based on the scarcity of certain resources and the extreme climate of some regions. This will mean an authoritarianism under the form of a formal democracy in some countries and openly authoritarian and dictatorial in others. It will be a friendly and paternalistic authoritarianism based on what Byung-Chul Han calls "psycho-politics" that will function very well, thanks to the fear of the population. An authoritarianism where the state of exception will be a state of normality.

4. THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

4.1. Hope and pessimism

In the middle of a crisis like the one that we are living now, at times we are revisited by hope and we imagine that we open our eyes and we put an effort behind systematic change. But at other times we also fall into a pessimism that is hardly transformational and more likely to be paralyzing. If we recall the most recent crisis, that of 2008, Europe and the United States suffered from an increase in unemployment, from the loss of investments and hopelessness. The causes of the crisis were identified. A crisis which was above all one of a financial character was attributed to a lack of global regulation of the flow of capital and of the new financial tools (derivatives, financial havens, etc.) The upstanding citizen suffered from it and possibly did not understand the causes, but was mobilized to do something. Now, years later, it seems that very little has been done to slow down the economic labyrinth of what has been called "financialization of the economy". When there was a certain betterment of the economy, the people demobilized and the system returned to make many of its victims invisible. The monster was wounded but the States preferred to help it, for example, by rescuing private banks with public money, practices that are hardly considered liberal.

Now let's fall back into old habits and we can again ask ourselves questions like the following: Will the crisis of the pandemic be a turning toward authoritarianism or rather a turn toward making real changes? Will the States in their policies give priority to their populations as a whole or only avoid the suffering of some few, those with more power to influence them? Will there be a return to prioritizing the rescue of a financial system or will the banks be forced to save the small businesses of the productive economy who are the ones who have been the most affected and that in practice are those that often create more employment?

Perhaps we will have to revert to the lessons of the great crisis which began in 1929 and which in one way or another was prolonged until the end of the Second World War. After this war, there was produced the most socially minded mutation of capitalism with the creation in Europe and the United States of different forms of the welfare State. Now, the climate crisis has an even greater scope since it questions our system of production at its roots. The system is on the defensive which explains the authoritarian and populist turn that we have commented on. One part of this system is conscious of what it

will be necessary to change, but wants to secure the control of this change in order to preserve the power of the elites themselves (concrete persons, but also investment funds, great corporations, etc.).

4.2. A change for survival

No one doubts, then, that the pandemic which we are suffering can be an opportunity that excites us to reconsider our common home in order to make it more habitable and to rethink our system of production and consumption, that is to say, to question the values of our economic system. As I have already commented in two Notebooks for *Cristianisme i Justicia* that I have recently written, one about the papal encyclical *Laudato si'*[15] and the other about *Downsizing*,[16] climate change is a thorn that has been nailed into the heart of the socioeconomic system and which calls for profound transformations. We are seeing that the old paradigm does not offer adequate responses. Even a neoliberal politician expressed himself in this way in dealing with the root of the COVID-19 crisis:

> Tomorrow we will have time to draw out the lessons, to question ourselves about the model for development that our world has applied for decades and which has revealed its failings. We will have to question the weaknesses of our democracy. … But one thing that this pandemic has revealed is that free health care, without conditions based on income, profession or our state of comfort, is neither a cost nor a burden, but rather a precious good, an indispensable advantage. … This type of goods and services has to be outside of the laws of the marketplace.[17]

And also the reflection of the journalist and philosopher J. Ramoneda:

> COVID-19 should be able to open up an era of ecological respect and the recovery of the notion of limits. The alternative would be confinement, the restriction of liberties, the myth of the efficacy of authoritarianism. As Jean-Luc Nancy has indicated, we are facing a viral exception that is biological, but also cultural and informational. At its root, confinement is a metaphor for this reality.[18]

This is to say, the time has come for us to think again of the model of production as an advance, one more step of consciousness that humanity has reached. It is a change needed in order to survive, so that there might be a future for ollowing generations. It is a change that has to pass through a period of uncertainty, through a period of suffering, of comings and goings, the fruit of fear and the resistance to change on the part of those who exercise economic

15. Joan Carrera (2019), *Vivir con menos para vivir mejor. (Living with Less in order to Live Better)* Cristianisme i Justicia (Barcelona, 2019), Cuaderno No 214.

16. Joan Carrera and Llorenç Puig (2017), *Toward An Integral Ecology,* Barcelona: Cristianisme i Justícia, Booklets No 165.

17. Article in *El Pais* of March 12, 2020 commenting on a speech to the nation by E. Macron.

18. "La vulnerabilitat i la consciència dels nostres límits" (Vulnerability and Consciousness of Our Limits), *Ara*, March 22, 2020.

and political power. During this interregnum which has been referred to by A. Gramsci, where the old order is not able to be sustained and the new one is only intuited, something is in the process of gestation but has not yet been born. [19] These intermediate periods can be times of profound selfishness or they can be times when the consciousness of uncertainty and fragility increase solidarity so that the weakest, those who find themselves in the limbo of the system, might also be taken into account and not thrown away. The planet has resources available and the economy and technology can place themselves at the service of all Earth's inhabitants during this period of transition.

Perhaps it is necessary to state that the pandemic of today and the ecological crisis that we are suffering on a small scale are a prelude, an announcement of a sickness that is much worse. As J. Richmann [sic] often says: "Climate change is the symptom, but the sickness is capitalism."[20] Or when Klein titles his last book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus the Climate*. We should rethink deeply our system of production from the point of view of values that guarantee the future of humankind. What have been called "green solutions" or proposals for sustainability are neither possible nor sufficient and they offer only a short delay of the catastrophe.

We believe that in order for this intermediate period in which we are living not to end up being turned into an authoritarian period, we need the following:

19. "The crisis consists exactly in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this intermediate period the most varied morbid phenomena come to pass." A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere, "Ondata di materialism" e "crisi di autorita"*, Volume I, Notebook 3, p. 311 (1930).

20. This is a phrase which is often repeated in his lectures and interviews, for example in: Jorge Riechman: "El cambio climático es el síntoma pero la enfermedad es el capitalismo", on kaosenlared.net, March 19, 2020.

To wake up and pay attention

Let us bring ourselves to consciousness of the new opiates that put us to sleep and which take away our indignation for anything that might happen. In our hyper-accelerated world of today, where everything happens at great velocity, we ought to emphasize a fundamental attitude which includes interrupting, stopping, hitting the pause button. We need to slow down in order to become aware of the noise which often does not allow us to think, that occupies us and preoccupies us, noise that pushes us to respond immediately and which doesn't allow us to think in depth of possible new responses. Let's be attentive to how the new technologies favor this type of immediate responses which often are simple because of the fact that they are not well thought out in the face of very complex problems.

A pause is not something passive, but rather highly productive since it allows us to put space between us and what is happening and happening to us. It allows us to imagine possible responses different from the hegemonic ones of the present system. A pause would allow for doubt and human vacillation (and other synonyms with different nuances: perplexity, uncertainty, indecision, wavering, skepticism, insecurity, incredulity, sizing up). A pause would also

permit inquiries in depth, not only a superficial, emotional or noisy inquiry, but rather an inquiry that is transformative energy. Things don't have to be the way they are. They could and should take on a different form. A transformative inquiry would make us flee from inevitability, from the "there is nothing that can be done" (from the neoliberal mantra TINA) and from the "you can't change anything".

A pause permits us to look beyond the cardboard decorations into the depth of things. That would make us open our eyes to the causes that are behind the evil that many persons are suffering, the causes that remain invisible in order not to perturb our superficial tranquility. In the end, a pause would allow for surprise (its synonyms bring different nuances: admiration, embellishment, strangeness, confusion, stupefaction).

At its root, a pause permits doubt when facing everything that we have normalized, all that we have accepted as a given without question, and the hegemonic axioms that have been imposed on us and which condition everything that happens. Many religious traditions gather up this same idea expressed in the word "contemplation", which we should not consider to be an isolated action, but rather as a form of life. It is a contemplative life based on silence, on quieting down the external and internal noise that do not allow for critical thinking about reality. It is a silence that permits action which is not as part of a group, not repetitive, but which has something creative, of the new. It is a radically transformative action.

Re-politicization

As we have already indicated, a pause would lead to the fact that citizens would become re-politicized, that they would be mobilized against any advancement of authoritarianism. The reinvolvement in the political sphere in a positive way will be the best way to put the brakes on an authoritarianism that advances by taking advantage of our fears.

Rethinking the economic model

Creativity is necessary in order to rethink a model of production that includes equality and respect for the environment. It would mean a rethinking of the model of production along the lines of what has been proposed by the movements advocating downsizing and those concerned with ecology so that all of humankind can survive and not just a privileged minority.

Based on which values?

It will be necessary to think and socialize ourselves starting from some new values which we might accept as a guide for the necessary changes. Perhaps it might be imperative to reread the values which have been proposed by ecological ethics and from the movements advocating downsizing.[21] And if we want the changes to be effective, it is necessary to begin activating deliberative processes that are steeped in the mechanisms of democracy. The method of deliberation will be key in order for the transformations which would be proposed to be accepted. Let us bear in mind that life styles should be modified in order to recover values that have fallen into disuse like austerity and the redistribution of resources. The deliberation supposes a re-politization in the sense of forcing us to leave our individualism in order to generate dynamic communities. The deliberation should be a method that helps to rebuild a democracy based on a common project which, in turn, accepts pluralism but which proposes a minimum set of necessary common values. If we do not develop this kind of democracy, we will end up falling into a dictatorship of experts, that is, a dictatorship which presents itself as neutral, but which frequently hides very concrete ideological options and interests.

21. We again make reference to Notebooks 202 and 214 of *Cristianisme i Justicia* which are cited above where the ecological values of *Laudato si'* are mentioned as well as the values of the movements that propose to downsize and grow in a different form.

Recover what belongs to the public, as a community

We understand as community or communitarianism all that has the capability of creating social relationships, which forces people to come out of themselves, which creates relationships of affection, of mutual care, of people paying attention to one another. This communitarian framework should break up the exaggerated individualism of today's societies. In philosophical terms, human autonomy will be understood more as a relational autonomy. We are, we exist, thanks to *others*, that is to say, we are not beings who are independent one from another, but rather interdependent. We should have communitarian forms with an ideal of happiness that is more relational and less based on having and possessing things.

Within our current parameters of understanding the economy, this type of suggestion would mean necessarily a downsizing since its forms of production will be different. Goods will be more durable; they will be recycled and they will be shared. Different communitarian formulas will arise on the local level, but also will be structured on one that is supralocal. They will include communities of solidarity, interdependence and perhaps also shared goods. Maybe it will end up being difficult to imagine humankind in that way. The imagery of capitalism and the structure of modern States has been very strong for many

decades. But the truth is that this type of different and more communitarian societies existed already in the past. If it is not possible to build these alternatives, the defensive capitalism that we have and will have will become more savage and will require political forms that are more authoritarian and repressive in order to maintain itself. There will appear new dystopian frameworks along with wars to obtain key resources, worlds of robots in the service of a humankind that is enclosed in habitable bubbles, genetic engineering applied to some human beings while searching for a species that is more resistant to the adversity of the environment, and a search for new planets to inhabit. All of these routes have in common that they are routes to be taken by a few people, leaving behind the rest to the tempestuous forces of a hostile environment.

The problem with any solution or communitarian resistance is that it requires a slow process of social conversion in which individuals gradually see and live out several different sets of values and they experience them as being positive. This sort of framework has nothing to do with certain Utopian solutions that are revolutionary and disruptive and which, in the final analysis, have ended up being shipwrecked or being assimilated into the system.

Many of these alternative economic forms already exist on a small scale and in a way that is almost embryonic (consumer cooperatives, bartering of services, ecological consumption, ethical banking, etc.). These various forms foster the development of personal relationships beyond the market or at its margins. All of them reflect more of a communitarian culture than one that is based on contracts like the one that we have had until now.

It ought to be recognized that such an alternative runs up against one that is capitalistic that has figured out how to connect with our most primitive instincts of possession, of fear of losing what we already have, of creating ourselves only by using our own strengths, of being afraid of anyone who is different along with a normal dose of ethnocentrism. All of these instincts will continue calling out for our attention. For that reason, education will be so important, an apprenticeship in a new set of values that push these tendencies away and that allow for the building of communities. In the language of Christianity, it will be necessary to initiate many processes of reconciliation, even of forgiveness, when these communitarian bonds become frayed or are broken. These mechanisms, many of which are truly religious in their origins, will be basic in order for the communitarian frameworks to be able to survive the tension.

And we ought to decide for ourselves

In this shake-up which has been brought on by a sickness, perhaps we have discovered that the opportune time (the Greek *kairos*),[22] the time for leaving

22. In the Greek sense of *kairos* as the appropriate moment, as an opportunity, as an inspiration.

behind fear and for building the future, is nearer than we had imagined. Our sons and daughters deserve it above all because they deserve to have a future.

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