CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AND SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

Six reflections on the Pandemic

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The Covid-19 pandemic is what the anthropologist Marcel Mauss called a “total social fact”, which affects all kinds of dimensions of our collective life, social, cultural, political, economic and, of course, health, while turning many personal lives upside down, individually or within the framework of the couple or family.

It is a challenge for knowledge for reasons linked primarily to the specifics of the virus, as each day we discover how surprising it can be, but also because it still confronts us with its unpredictability, forcing us to think about history, the tragedy of human experience, and therefore to abandon the “philosophical presentism” criticised by fine historians like François Hartog (cf. his latest book *Chronos*, Gallimard, 2020).

Temporalities

A few years ago, the sociologist Ulrich Beck distinguished and contrasted two major approaches, criticising “methodological nationalism” and advocating “methodological cosmopolitanism” (cf. his book *Cosmopolitan Vision*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006): faced with risk and catastrophe, he argued, we can no longer continue to think only in terms of the framework of the nation state; we must understand that each individual is a global player, and that our existence, in its most intimate and also local form, is actually driven, in many respects, by planetary logics. But what do we find? On the one hand, the pandemic is

worldwide, global; but, on the other, the responses to it are mainly national. Therefore, to analyse this “total social fact” the two types of reasoning distinguished by Ulrich Beck must be combined and articulated rather than set against each other.

An effort like this involves first introducing chronos, time, and raising the question of temporalities. In general, immediately or in the short-term, a set of misfortunes and dramas are unleashed by major catastrophes. They damage the economy, exacerbate violence, hint at the possibility of chaos; they also lead to riots, religious and mystical movements, the search for improbable, metasocial explanations, scapegoats, anti-Semitism, witch hunts… But in the long run, they are also the starting point for a revival of the economy, the entry into a historical phase that is no longer dark, which, as Ulrich Beck noted (in his posthumous work, *Metamorphosis*, Polity Press, 2016) could justify the concept of emancipatory catastrophism, the idea that a catastrophe can channel logics of emancipation.

But it is not enough to distinguish between the very short term and the long term. In fact, each sphere has its own temporality. The time of economics is not the time of culture, the time of ideas is not the time of politics, the time of science is not the time of industry, and so on. We must therefore accept the idea that the impact of the pandemic can and will only be appreciated in an evolutionary way over time, and taking into account the diversity of temporalities.

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These observations are based on a postulate that deserves examination: are we sure that once it has passed, the pandemic will have profoundly changed collective life? In a famous essay, *L’ancien régime et la Révolution* (first edition in 1856), Alexis de Tocqueville shows that in the end an event of considerable importance, the French Revolution, did not change the main course of French history much, which was characterised by a process of increasing centralisation. His research was based on a long and patient work in the archives, not like so many hasty essays we see these days. This thesis was refuted, particularly by Mona Ozouf, a highly respected historian (in *Composition française : retour sur une enfance bretonne*, Gallimard, 2009); and there are other arguments, some that insist on decline, decadence, deep economic and social crisis entailed by the pandemic, and others that speak of mutation, of entering a new phase of modernity, or even of anthropological rupture.

Hypothesis of a mutation

Suppose we provisionally accept the idea of a mutation. The more radical the mutation, the more delicate question becomes: what intellectual tools can we rely on to measure its scope and how can we rely on approaches, paradigms, reasoning that have been validated in the past? And even, simply, what vocabulary, what words, do we possess to imagine a metamorphosis that takes us into an unfamiliar universe?

Two responses can save us from dejection. The first is to start with what we can already perceive, and which somehow existed before the pandemic. In fact, everything related to entry into the digital age, everything that, more broadly, refers to what some sociologists (such as Anthony Giddens) called “second modernity” or “hyper-modernity ”(Alain Touraine) is likely to be developed, accentuated, strengthened under the effect of the pandemic, and there is nothing to prevent us from thinking that the new was already being developed, at least in part, before it occurred: it is up to us to be able to detect what was being sketched out or developed.

And the second response concerns the fact that the same thing happens with the shifting of ideas as with societies’ reflections about themselves: instead of waiting to be settled in a new world to reflect on this, we can also recognise that thought accompanies mutation, while inventing the ideas, paradigms, reasoning and categories that this implies.

Which comparisons?

Spontaneously, numerous observers, journalists, essayists and researchers compared the pandemic with major epidemics that have marked history: plague, cholera, Spanish flu, and, more recently, AIDS and the SARS Cov 1 that appeared in China. The contemporary pandemic is thus an episode in a series that crosses history, although we may be surprised that some other episodes are forgotten, starting with the Spanish flu of 1918-1919, as shown by Freddy Vinet (in *La grande grippe. 1918. La pire épidémie du siècle*, ed. Vendémiaire, 2018). From this perspective, epidemics are plagues that affect the planet, regardless of the type of society or historical era in which they occur.

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A rather different comparison also deserves to be examined. It consists of putting the contemporary pandemic in the context of a historical period that can be specified. This brings us back to Ulrich Beck (*Risikogesellschaft* [Risk Society], Suhrkamp, 1986), who pioneered the analysis of the society of risk and catastrophe. From his perspective, the contemporary pandemic is part of the great dramas that characterise the “second

modernity" that began in the 1970s or 1980s, specifically with the Chernobyl nuclear accident. It is a catastrophe that belongs to the same historical conjunction, which therefore includes the nuclear accident, possibly associated with a tsunami (Fukushima), volcanic eruption, earthquake, climate change, global terrorism — phenomena that may not be new but become so because of the way they are treated: they impose new ways of thinking, of positioning oneself in the world, of defining and respecting norms, of adopting approaches that have a global component.

From this perspective, the Covid-19 pandemic is accelerating a process of entering a new historical era; it is not just another epidemic but is part of a metamorphosis.

Digital modernity

If one dimension of this metamorphosis is indisputable, it is the one encapsulated by the adjective "digital". We have known since the 1990s, especially with the pioneering work of Manuel Castells (*La era de la información*, Alianza Editorial, 1997) how far we live under the influence of information and communication. The pandemic has strikingly confirmed and reinforced this reality. It was spectacular in the lockdown phases: virtual interpersonal communication replaced social life thanks to the internet, mobile phones or social networks; telework; education and online teaching. GAFA and other digital companies have improved their stock market value, while the livelihood of companies in other sectors has been endangered, such as in the field of aeronautics or tourism, for example.

This evolution does not only have positive aspects. First, it strengthens low value-added companies, which often use unskilled and precarious workers, as in the "platform capitalism" criticised by the economist Robert Boyer (in *Les capitalismes à l'épreuve de la pandémie*, Découverte, 2020). It opens perspectives on two kinds of drifts. Some are linked to the strengthening of the state, which can exert increasingly dictatorial social control through digital technologies, as we see in China. The others are those of large globalised companies in the sector, which accentuate their influence on collective life thanks to their digital domination and their ability to collect and use data for example. And there is nothing to prevent us from imagining the coming together of the state and digital capitalism to forge new forms of political and economic power.

Present and future of social and cultural dissent

The digital world increases inequalities, whether those of the digital divide or of large groups of people who do not work, or at least not online. Expanding the sphere of online life and reducing that of real concrete relationships reduces the chances of meetings and hinders union action in companies and organisations. More broadly, the pandemic has reinforced pre-existing social trends. And has also opened up the space for cultural change.

In fact, pre-existing inequalities have been strengthened. The marginalised, the poorest, have not only experienced even more difficult living conditions but have also not been able to depend on welfare as much as before, which has become complicated. Precarious

workers, those in the informal economy, who have been at the forefront of tackling the virus, did not benefit much from teleworking and had no choice; they had a vital need for the income that their work brings them — work that is also less abundant than in other times.

In cultural matters, it is not enough to recognise the very real difficulties and injustices concerning the performing arts, sport, artistic life, tourism, leisure, access to culture and education. Rather, we must also take into account the actors who, collectively, have been able to move and even become stronger during the pandemic, generally combining cultural affirmation and a call for democracy, justice, respect and truth. This is the case of feminist or anti-racist mobilisations, among others, which have not diminished at all. Moreover, the pandemic has stimulated a search for meaning, and for points of reference, which has found important responses in the concern for nature and mobilisation on climate change. Hence we can see the vitality, in several countries, of the political forces that defend the environment and ecology.

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The pandemic has also accentuated important ethical debates around the issue of “triage”: how to decide, and who should make the decisions, doctors or others, when two victims of the virus, a young man and an old man, are candidates at the same time for urgent resuscitation in a hospital where only one bed remains? How do we avoid competition and conflict in the way we think about intergenerational relationships, other than by anticipating hardship, and deciding how we see these relationships between seniors and younger people? Let’s put it in a sentence: the pandemic has not silenced the pre-existing cultural and democratising mobilisations, rather it has paved the way and suggested that a future could be built in which the role of the state could be more focused on culture, health or education.

Towards other policies?

A fundamental idea permeates many debates: the pandemic can only be conducive to authoritarianism and impulses, especially among other nationalists or national populists that exist around the world. This idea is reinforced when the policies implemented to fight the virus are taken into account. In fact, they often rely on exceptional measures that threaten the rule of law and democracy, even giving the executive power new prerogatives, to the detriment of the judiciary and the legislature. In addition, the unpredictability of the situation makes it more difficult to exercise power: how do we decide in such an unfamiliar context that we do not control? Mistakes, the lies of an inevitably somewhat erratic “communication”, favour calls to authority.

On the other hand, the example of China is often given to suggest that a dictatorial power

has enabled greater effectiveness in the fight against the pandemic than democratic regimes.

First of all, it should be emphasised that at the time of writing, democratic countries, particularly but not exclusively Southeast Asia, Taiwan and South Korea, have achieved good results. The analysis must therefore include dimensions other than authoritarianism: the political culture of societies where there is greater trust than in others between society and the leaders of the state; the idea that there is a better future than the present.

But let's consider, always in the present moment, the realities of the forces and regimes that while perhaps not authoritarian or extremist are at least nationalist and right-wing. In the United States, Joe Biden's electoral success over Donald Trump is probably due in part to the pandemic, which did not allow Trump to capitalise on the economic results of his policy during his presidency; in Brazil, the Jair Bolsonaro regime has also been rather weakened by its management of the pandemic; in the UK, Boris Johnson is in a delicate position due, among other things, to the political approach he adopted regarding the pandemic. And looking at what the most recent polls or election results say about national populist parties, such as Matteo Salvini's League party in Italy and Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National in France, so far neither have benefited from the pandemic.

These observations do not mean that in the long run the spectre of authoritarianism, nationalism or populism can be erased. But they invite us to avoid hasty assessments: as we have seen, the short and long term require reflections that are not necessarily coherent.

What is clear, in the end, is that neoliberal ideologies, so present until now, have been turned upside down in favour of political proposals and actions that lend greater importance to state intervention and redistribution, at least when possible; something which is more valid for richer societies. But redistribution and state aid can be targeted more at companies or certain sectors, or towards people, especially the most vulnerable or affected. They may be right-wing or left-wing; they may support endangered sectors, even old industries or agriculture, or everything that has to do with environmental concerns; and they may be aimed more at the change of historical era or the survival of what can be saved from the old models.

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