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Feature Article

Coronavirus and the Heterogenesis of Ends: Underpinning the Ecological and Health Catastrophe is a Political Crisis

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Abstract. The coronavirus catastrophe that we are experiencing is first of all the result of an ecological catastrophe, but its underlying fundamental cause is the political crisis that our democracies are living. The sustainable development model is a smokescreen that will lead not to making deep-going changes to the economic paradigm but to continuing with business as usual. The betrayal of the elites, both political and economic, supported by a system that is no longer democratic, has exposed the population to this type of sanitary problem. A deep transformation of our political system is urgently needed. The people must take part in a true democracy, a direct democracy, that initiates a new democratic revolution capable of countering the *sinister interests* of the elites, of the caste in power.

Keywords. Coronavirus, sustainable development, direct democracy, ecological catastrophe, health catastrophe, political crisis.

1. Is Development Sustainable?

The dystopic ecological catastrophe that we are living is preparing us for other catastrophes that are coming. Everyone on the planet knows the name of this sanitary catastrophe: coronavirus and covid-19, referring to “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)” and the disease it causes. Unfortunately, far fewer people are aware that the proximate cause of this sanitary catastrophe is ecological. And, assuming the virus is not a military product or bioweapon, its animal source will be confirmed, sooner or later. It seems likely that this will be a bat or a pangolin. By the way, in 2017 the US military had already predicted, with a certain clairvoyance, that a respiratory disease was the “enemy to fight”.

Numerous international treaties, declarations and conferences have affirmed *ad nauseam* that the erosion of biodiversity must be stopped – essentially because humanity depends on this. The Stockholm Declaration (The *United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*) affirmed back in 1972 that, “Of all things in the world, people are the most precious (§ 5).”

The Brundtland Report, the *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future* (1987) underlines, yet again, the instrumental value of biodiversity: “53. The diversity of species is necessary for the normal functioning of ecosystems and the biosphere as a whole. The genetic material in wild species contributes billions of dollars yearly to the world economy in the form of improved crop species, new drugs and medicines, and raw materials for industry. But utility aside, there are also moral, ethical, cultural, aesthetic, and purely scientific reasons for conserving wild beings.”

And the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* (UNCED, 1992) adopted the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, which affirms that: “Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development” (principle 1).

Ten years later, at the *World Summit on Sustainable Development* (WSSD, 2002), it is once again stated: “24. Human activities are having an increasing impact on the integrity of ecosystems that provide essential resources and services for human well-being and economic activities.”

In 2012, the *United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Rio+20* reaffirmed the importance of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, in particular that:

“6. We recognise that people are at the centre of sustainable development, and in this regard, we strive for a world that is just, equitable and inclusive, and we commit to work together to promote sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development and environmental protection and thereby to benefit all.”

At the *UN Sustainable Development Summit* (2015), *Transforming Our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* proposed: “9. We envisage a world ... [o]ne in which development and the application of technology are climate-sensitive, respect biodiversity and are resilient. One in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected.”

Given all this, it is hardly surprising to see that a large majority of major corporations declare that they support the sustainable development paradigm and its implementation! Yet the dreamworld of the international treaties is going against reality, which is shown not least of all by the results up to now... meagre at best. Some recent analyses consider that humanity is even creating the conditions for a “biological annihilation” (Ceballos, Ehrlich and Dirzo 2017).

Already back in the 19th century George Perkins Marsh (1801–1882), the environmentalist, enlightened catastrophist forward-thinking in his encyclopaedic work, noting the irrational behaviour of humankind and warning of a “war against nature” (1864). In short, sustainable development is a misinterpreted humanism (Ehrenfeld 1978) – anthropocentric, resourcist, and economicist (the intrusion of

economics into everything else). It is a kind of smokescreen that fails to make any substantive change in the economic model while permitting the continuation of business as usual.

Even if formally it stigmatises the erosion of biodiversity, in reality, productivism goes unquestioned. In an oxymoronic way, between “development” and “protection”, when development takes place, it annihilates the protection of biodiversity (Bergandi, 2018). Sustainable development is one clear filiation of the “conservatism” of Gifford Pinchot (1865–1946), an American forester and politician, the first head of the United States Forest Service and the 28th Governor of Pennsylvania. Pinchot along with John Muir (1838-1914) and George Perkins Marsh are the people who started the first forms of environmentalism.

In his philosophical manifesto (1910), Gifford Pinchot supported the development of natural resources, which are equated to capital that you need to increase and save, together with the prevention of waste. The third principle of this manifesto declared that all other interests were to be subordinated to the “public good”. For Pinchot, nature was nothing more than a resource to be exploited.

With John Muir, Pinchot started a war against the irrationalism of woodworking industrialists, but at one point the differences between their visions of the world emerged into broad daylight. After the great earthquake of San Francisco in 1906, the city’s mayor wanted to bring in water, using the nearby resources of Yosemite National Park. John Muir stood in defence of Hetch Hetchy Valley in the National Park, but in the end Pinchot and the mayor won the battle, allowing the utilisation of part of the Park. This definitively confirmed Pinchot's dastardly pact with economic interest groups, and the separation between the two souls of the environmentalist movement. To give a more concrete idea of the divergences between the two, we can quote Pinchot’s account of an episode that clearly reveals two universes of sensibility and action, at antipodes. Pinchot tells us, during a journey with Muir and the members of a Commission whose purpose was to identify some remarkable places:

“While the others drove through the woods to a ‘scenic point’ and back again, with John Muir I spent an unforgettable day on the rim of the prodigious chasm, letting it soak in. I remember that at first we mistook for rocks the waves of the rapids in mud-laden Colorado, a mile below us. And when we came across a tarantula he wouldn’t let me kill it. He said it had as much right there as we did” (Pinchot, 1946, p. 103).

But why speak about sustainable development and the environment in a paper that is supposed to be about coronavirus and the health catastrophe we’re experiencing? Why? Because the proximate cause of this pandemic is the ecological catastrophe that we are living; because it is determined in turn by the political crisis that our democracies are undergoing – and that is the primary and fundamental cause.

2. The Coronavirus Pandemic Reveals the Political Crisis and Incompetence of our Governments?

Even fewer people are conscious that the coronavirus catastrophe results, in turn, from a political crisis that at least in the democratic countries has lasted for three or four decades and has concretised itself in the “tacit” alliance of the political and economic castes “against” the (human) populations and the other species and environments that allow humanity to survive. The objective alliance of the political and economic elites is not only draining the wealth of countries, but regardless of the political programme on display, they have “married” on the basis of liberal and neo-liberal programmes.

For the record, the neoliberal programmes propose an extreme form of liberal objectives, policies that 1) promote the market economy, 2) oppose increased public intervention in the economy; 3) support the deregulation of markets; and 4) encourage the gradual disappearance of the public sector in favour of the private sector.

These programmes started a policy of austerity, which was veiled and imposed by the European Commission along with all the multilateral organisations at many levels. Among other objectives, they targeted health care systems. Hospitals followed new laws (that put entrepreneurs in charge of constituting the stocks of protective materials) and were headed by the “cautious” figure of a so-called manager-director (a political figure: in general, someone not competent in the domain where the decision-maker works). The hospitals were not able to maintain stocks of protective materials in the event of a pandemic (masks, gloves, respirators, etc.).

In such circumstances, the negligence and incompetence of the caste governing us was dramatically revealed. Not only have they left us tragically unprepared for the onset of the virus, because of the lack of protective material that the hospitals could not constitute or reconstitute, in an effort to save money, as was demanded by the European Commission. But the governments have also used only confinement as a strategy to respond to the coronavirus attack, and systematically lied, particularly the French government, denying the clear evidence and insulting our intelligence: “Masks are useless”, they solemnly intoned, whereas Taiwan and South Korea have juggled the disease using masks, mass testing AND confinement.

In contrast to Oriental populations like in Taiwan and South Korea, the Occidentals privileged more “passive” strategies like confinement, as in Italy, Spain and France, among others. Then there’s the *laissez-faire* of the English and Americans, who initially privileged a misunderstood Darwinian principle (“survival of the fittest”), “herd immunity”, which develops when a sufficient percentage of a community become immune to an infectious disease such that it stops the disease from spreading.

The result: Boris Johnson, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, caught covid-19, and the Americans are now top of the class in terms of disease spread and mortality. But the reality of “facts” (thousands of dead), including the lack of protective equipment, led them to row back to confinement. The US has now surpassed even the Italians, who at least faced the difficulty of a population who were older than average. In contrast, Taiwan and South Korea, and to a lesser degree Germany, have chosen a more “active” strategy, doing mass “testing” of the population at large.

Not only were our governments unprepared for the pandemic’s arrival, but their cacophony of rules that changed quasi-daily showed how they have clumsily sought to hide the lack of tests, masks, gloves and other protective material. It is this lack that has largely dictated the strategies of our governments. Earlier, the masks were said to be useless, except for caregivers. Later, they became useful for everyone. The endless changes in policy seek to conceal that there is not enough protective equipment, including the masks and above all the tests. C’est la vie...

We must change the model of civilisation. As ecocentric environmental ethics proposes (Muir, 1916; Leopold, 1949; Taylor, 1986; Callicott, 1989; Callicott, 2013; Bergandi, 2013; Bergandi and Blandin 2012), we must recognise that nature has intrinsic value; nature is not there for “our interest” or “our good”. Nature is not there as a “means” to our ends; its value depends solely on the intrinsic properties of the (natural) entity, not on our evaluation of it. These are different ways of saying that nature must be respected, just as humans are respected, simply because ... they are human (Universal Declaration of Human Rights). We must go beyond a hierarchicalistic worldview in which “persons are more valuable than things” (Geisler, 1971). Animals and even plant species must cease to be “things”, and become “persons” (Hall, 2011).

But sometimes history deals us unforeseen cards ... sometimes, the heterogenesis of ends (Vico [1744] 1948; Wundt 1886) becomes an actor in human life. That is, “an intentional action can produce unintentional consequences”. In other words, “the destroyers of nature” (of the ecosystems), that is, the productivistic model of our economy and the “uninhibited” entrepreneurs who disrupt the ecosystems and “exploit” them with ever-increasing efficiency “to reap more money”, thereby create the conditions for the “passage” of the virus, adapted to secular ecosystems, in the human species – because their original environment is being destroyed (by human economic activities).

A word that we will hear more frequently in coming years is “zoonosis”, that is, “an infectious disease caused by bacteria, viruses, or parasites that spread from non-human animals (usually vertebrates) to humans” (see Quammen, 2012, 2014). Between 60% and 75% of infectious diseases in humans originate in the bodies of other animals.

We must change our dietary model structured on meat (Badariotti, F. *et al.*, “Eviter les prochaines crises en changeant de modèle alimentaire”, *Libération*, 30 March 2020). We must stop eating meat, not only because a large majority of pandemic diseases originate in animals, i.e. because this is dangerous (zoonosis), but also for ethical reasons, to enlarge the “moral community” to the point of including non-human animals. Eating meat will then be considered as committing an act of “cannibalism”. Long ago, in 1894, Henry Stephens Salt (1851–1939) proposed an enlargement of the moral community based on the extension of the idea of “humanity” to all other animals. We are long overdue.

3. Representative Democracy Is Not Democracy

Representative democracy *cannot be considered as being a true democracy*. In Athens, the source of our democracies, democracy was direct and not indirect (Osborne, 2010). This means that all the people participate in the elaboration of the laws, and not only an elite of professional decision-makers. Paradoxically, in representative democracy, at the very moment voting arose, the sovereignty of the voter was irrevocably denied (Rousseau, [1762] 2002). In reality, our so-called democratic societies are pseudo-democracies, which act, in reality, like oligarchies. The caste in power can be predominantly political (when the decision-makers belong to the class of professional politicians) or economic (when the entrepreneurs descend into politics), or both. When the political mandate comes from the party and not from the people, we should more correctly speak of a *partitocracy*, and not of democracy, i.e. a party, an (political) elite that has taken power. The totalitarian states (for example, Russia and China) do not find themselves in a better position. Only the procedures for the selection of the elite change, but always one or another elite/caste is in power (Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1896; Mills, 2000).

Furthermore, the transnational lobbies can and must be thwarted with a system of direct democracy that increases the ecological “sense of place”, because people take greater care of the place where they live than disembodied elites that program an economic activity from the other side of the planet ever will.

Finally, we can speak of *human sinister interests*. *Sinister interests* (or perverse interests) are interests that run counter to the interests of the community (Bentham, 1815; Mill, 1865). In this case, by community is meant the entire community of humans-animals-plants. But in reality, today only a small part of humanity is responsible: the political-economic caste. In evaluating the consequences of its acts, when evaluating the human-nature relationship, these acts are ascribed to the whole of humanity, whereas a large part of the “criminal” activity (pollution, mass murder in the “concentration camps” around the globe that are the slaughterhouses, etc.) are the responsibility of the large

corporations and the politicians (men and women) who allow them to act.

So we need a direct democracy that finally allows the people to “make” history and not to suffer it. A direct democracy characterised by some new institutions and rules, for example:

- mandates must be “imperative”, in the sense that “delegates” cannot change the programme during the time in which they are elected;
- the choice of the candidate must be by “lot”, and “officials” cannot present themselves more than two (non-consecutive) times in their lifetimes;
- the function of the candidate at the election is a “service” and not a “profession”; their salary is the average salary of the population;
- blank ballots must be counted, and candidates cannot present themselves another consecutive time if the blanks constitute a majority;
- a Citizens' Initiative Referendum must allow the people to propose a law directly;
- a repealing referendum can rescind a law;
- a delegate may be recalled from their elective function if they fail to respect their mandate.

The coronavirus catastrophe confronts us with the opportunity and the necessity to start a new civilisation, a new society structured around (a utopian) democratic revolution (Bergandi, 2018, 2017). A society where the people and not some pre-selected elite are the “motor” of democracy. A society where the people are not a subject, submissive to the goodwill of an elite, but themselves actively create the conditions of development of the society.

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