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The Aftermath

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A new world

If we could turn ourselves inside-out, exposing what we have on the inside, and look at ourselves from the eyes of a virus, we would discover that all men and women are vast prairies of receptors. We are animals.

Homo sapiens is the only creature in the animal kingdom with an awareness of itself and its finiteness. It runs in front of danger, as a survival instinct, sure, but not only: it also does so because it knows that by dying it will cease to exist (at least in that specific form), and that idea scares it. Which is why we have removed death. And why we developed in the West a body of knowledge and ways of doing things that literally aim at immortality.

As a veterinary doctor, I am very familiar with the laws that govern the world of animals: they are the laws of nature. Today more than ever, this seems to me like an advantageous point of view. It gives me a clear awareness of the fact that, yes, we can strategically fight against the pandemic we are experiencing, but not on a personal level. Alone, we don't amount to anything, we are impotent: because ending this situation doesn't depend on the individual, but on the entire species.

Every individual is nothing more than a specimen of a community, organized in a highly complex system. And, as such, it can get sick and even die. It could happen to me, just like it could happen to a worker in the Wuhan market, to Boris Johnson, to Tom Hanks, or to a family friend who used to visit us when I was a young girl – the first person I was close to who became a victim of SARS-CoV-2.

Nobody is omnipotent: we are all animals. We are fields of receptors: microscopic shoes for viruses to stick their little feet in.

We are experiencing a tragedy of enormous proportions. Many people are dying, too many. Many more are suffering, and their numbers will keep on growing: they are grieving the loss of their loved ones, of their jobs, of security, of certainties.

The pandemic has taken from us everything that we considered certain, indisputable, in some cases absolute. It revealed it to us for what it was: nothing more than a choice based on a partial view of things. Like a pot of boiling water, it is making the gnocchi float up to the surface. It forced us to acknowledge the disequilibrium of our relationship with nature, to rediscover our earthly dimension and its intrinsic transience. It also exposed the arbitrary way in which our society is organized, of the roles we attribute to men and women, young and elderly, rich and poor, but also of our scales of values. Loss hurts.

I think this situation, while rattling us from our roots, is teaching us something. First of all, that life is uncertain, and unusual, and that things never go as we plan. We all know this on a personal level. Moreover, as a scientist, I can't foretell what will happen in the future: it wouldn't be serious of me.

On the other hand, as a virologist who has been working for years on pandemics that originate in animals, and as a human being aware of our animality, I can try to look at the pandemic like the historical phenomenon it is and share my thoughts on the opportunities it conceals.

The black swan

It is as if this virus, this infinitesimally small ball of gelatin, had lodged itself in the crenellations of our system and blocked them, obstructing the gears and impeding them from turning. I doubt everything will start moving again the way it used to because I think that what we are experiencing is “black swan” (1): a rare, unforeseeable event with an enormous impact that can, in turn, generate unexpected and sometimes surprising ramifications.

From a global perspective, black swans are events that change the face of the world as we know it. Not always or only for the worse. A few examples include the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy of 2008, the Twin Towers attack of 2001, and the spread of the Black Death in Tuscany in the 1300s.

Let’s take the latter case in consideration.

The plague is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which originated in Central Asia. It survives in wild rodents, which carry it asymptotically. From there, it literally jumps over to rats thanks to a vector: fleas. A flea bites an infected marmot, then it bites a rat and infects it; the rat proliferates, it moves quickly and lives in close contact with humans: it prospers in streets, in canals, and in homes, which weren’t particularly clean in Late Middle Ages. And, as it thrives, so do its fleas. They bite humans and infected them too.

The plague had been around in Europe for centuries. After being gone for almost five-hundred years, it made its great comeback in the fourteenth century, due in particular to an act of bioterrorism. Kaffa was Genoa’s outpost in Crimea; during its siege, the Tartars decided to catapult the infected corpses of dead soldiers. The plague-ridden Genoese army brought the bacterium back home and, within five years, the disease spread to every country in the continent, from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia and Russia. One third of the population was exterminated. (2)

This is what happened on a larger scale. If we wanted to look closer, we could aim our magnifying glass on an Italian city: Siena. The Black Death reached it in 1348 and estimates indicate that it wiped away around two thirds of the population. Everything stopped: the new Duomo that was undergoing expansions was abandoned halfway through. The incomplete façade became an indelible memory of this tragedy. The plague was such an upheaval for Siena that it led to the barbarization of norms and social structures were overthrown. But it also opened the doors to the Renaissance: a cultural revolution that radically modified the approach to knowledge, fostering the convergence between science, technology, politics, and art.

From a physical point of view, I imagine black swans are like bursts of energy. The energy unleashes events, which in turn trigger consequences that we can deem positive or negative, or even obscene, like in the case we are currently experiencing. It almost sounds superfluous to mention the thousands of persons that we are forced to let go. Nevertheless, energy in itself isn’t good or bad: it’s just energy.

It can destroy or generate. And it often has to destroy in order to generate.

When it became clear that this virus would become a pandemic, I despaired because the world economy would end up burning billions of dollars – money that could have been invested in research. Then, I remembered the story of Amedeo Pietro Giannini. He was the founder of Bank of America Corporation, the second largest banking institution in the United States. I told myself: yes, there are people who will lose in this crisis, but there are also those who will react.

When an unusually strong earthquake almost razed San Francisco to the ground in 1906, Giannini managed to move the deposits out of the vault and was able to start issuing loans immediately. He set up a table in the middle of the street with a sign that read “Bank: open” and lent money to anyone who asked. That is when Giannini laid the foundations of his immense fortune, behaving honestly and trusting in his community’s ability to rise again.

We have to be able to see the possibility of a new path, that is what we have to do now.

I realize that I am asking a lot when I invite you to follow me in this change of perspective. But I also think that reflecting on how to channel this energy so we can turn it into something positive and productive is the best and only way to guide it. Otherwise the pandemic will be nothing more than a calamity and it won't do us any good.

SARS-CoV-2 forced us to change tracks: we were placidly traveling in a certain direction, we fell asleep, and "bam!" The switch was open, and our train moved to a different track. We didn't choose this new track, we just found it under our wheels.

But now we have a chance to go into the driver's cab and decide how to continue the journey.

Now is the time for making choices.

If we don't want to get hit, trampled over, and overwhelmed, we need to take into consideration the signs that are emerging from this historic event and rethink the world. Because that is what we are heading toward: a new world.

"Can't we rebuild?"

No, now is the time to reconsider, because every change starts with a cultural one. So, do we want to do this well or not?

Notes:

(1) Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. New York, Random House and Penguin Books, 2007.

(2) <https://www.epicentro.iss.it/peste/>