WAITING POST-COVID-19 TIME: PEOPLE MAKE THE WORLD GO ROUND

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'*And Polo said: "The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here… seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space."*'

(Italo Calvino, 1974[1])

What makes Argia[2] different from other cities is that it is wrapped in silence. Its streets are deserted. Its houses are silent. Shops are locked and restaurants and bars are empty. A visitor arriving there one afternoon in March cannot but have the impression that something awful must have happened which led Argia's inhabitants to move out of the city in panic. Only its gardens are alive; bursting with colour in the sunlight of spring-time. But there is no one in the streets to admire them. The cherry trees have blossomed, but life is unusually still. Occasionally, the quietude is punctured by the sound of an ambulance siren. Its piercing sound concentrates the mind, chills the body and then progressively fades away. Time for a prayer. Walking in Argia is strange – this is not a city on holidays or on a generalised pause from ordinary, daily life. The metropolis resembles a necropolis: Argia is a non-trading city, its schools and colleges are shut and mortuaries spring like mushrooms in unexpected parts of the city.

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[1] Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (London: Vintage Books, 1997 [1974]), p. 148.
[2] Argia means a holiday and a pause in Greek.

Argia is really a Thanatia[3] – it smells of death and a visitor can notice piles of freshly moved earth to cover corpses in parts of it. The dead increase as days go by. No one knows how many abruptly cut lives become memories in the minds of the living relatives who are filled with grief and pain. From here, it is impossible to see. It is impossible to know the precise number. What one can discern are the white tents of mortuaries and the scaffoldings that are pulled up to prepare the city for the critically ill and the dead inhabitants. Those who arrive in Thanatia have little interest in the city; the spectre of death is evident. All they wish to do is to preserve their mental balance amidst such a death toll and to know what the future may hold for Argia-Thanatia and its inhabitants.

I imagine this is how Italo Calvino[4] would have depicted our cities under the grim grip of Covid-19. Like a fast-moving storm, this deadly virus, which mutates as it infects, has abruptly disrupted everything, destroyed lives and livelihoods and has filled families worldwide with grief. One of the ways of piercing the veil of anxiety and unspoken grief under which we are living is to think about life after Covid-19. After all, we do not wish to be told, once again, that we were unprepared for it.

What will really change in the future? Will the resumed life be different? Will we be different? Will we act differently? Dos this calamity provide space and an opportunity to mend, amend, start afresh, and to change policies, politics, economic systems, our own interpersonal relations and our relation with the natural world? Have we rediscovered ethics and renewed our commitment to human values during our imprisonment by a spreading virus which escapes control?

[3] I devised the word 'Thanatia' from 'thanatos' which means death in Greek.
[4] I have always enjoyed reading Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (London: Vintage Books, 1997). It is an original and inspirational volume!

Such a reflection has already started. Naturally, reflection when ordinary life is suspended is a risky as well as a tenuous exercise. It can be used to safeguard personal standpoints. Individuals are also tempted to project their own cherished beliefs onto genuinely uncharted territories. The truth is that such a deadly pandemic has not battered the world for a century and no one knows what changes will be triggered as a result. More importantly, even if certain changes and transformations take place, it is difficult for us to predict whether they will be lasting. Normalcy is not free of habits, regularities and dependencies.

Having said this, in what follows I would like to engage in a brief scenario-writing for post-Covid-19 life knowing that all is provisional. The future cannot be fathomed or foreseen,[5] at least for the time being. In addition, both the extent and direction of any change that may take place are unknown at this stage. Furthermore, I am aware that my sketch of a few scenarios cannot capture the whole spectrum of possible (and impossible) actualisations and, therefore, the subsequent discussion cannot but be a humble exercise.

As governments took a host of measures to protect people from coronavirus infections and to mitigate Covid-19's impact, the visibility of states-in-action and in-intervention has been appraised as the beginning of the formal abandonment of free market ideology. The long-awaited rebalancing towards (more) state (- and European Union) regulation has started.[6] Commentators would be correct to argue that the pandemic has eroded the systemic bias against regulation which has been in operation since the 1980s. Government at all levels must now be used to serve the public good. And states would have to intervene even more in the near future in order to protect, sustain and nurture human life and activities. The British National Health Service, which had been underfunded and compromised under the austerity years of the

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[5] Dora Kostakopoulou, *Institutional Constructivism in Social Sciences and Law: Frames of Mind, Patterns of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[6] Phillip Nelson and Kenneth V. Greene, *Signalling Goodness: Social Rules and Public Choice* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2003)

Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and then the Conservative rule of Mr Cameron and Mrs May, will reclaim its position as the most precious institution in the British system. A more regulatory, and thus protective, state will characterise the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century. Government would no longer be seen to be 'the problem', but, instead, it will be a, if not the, solution.

But the realisation of a protective state in global recession conditions has its difficulties. Economies globally have faced a sharp downturn. The number of job losses increases at an alarming rate. Businesses, be they small or medium or large, are facing closure and consumer demand for most sectors of the economy has plummeted due to the lockdown. Economists forecast significant drops in the UK's GDP and in the Eurozone while national debt has wiped out any gains procured during the tough austerity years. More and more companies seek support from the government and economists argue that bail outs cannot be avoided since the crisis has created worse trading conditions than those that followed the financial crisis of 2008-9. So, there are real dilemmas with respect to the economic outlook of the next few months and beyond which make any hopes for an economic bounce-back questionable. In addition, public demand for services and public confidence in the provision of services by the hospitality, entertainment, travel, aviation and other sectors are bound to be low at least until a Covid-19 vaccine has been found.

We live in an unprecedented landscape and it might be wishful thinking to argue that a virus (Covid-19) can do what the working class has failed to do for centuries; namely, to destroy capitalism and inaugurate a different economic model and political system in Europe. But it can certainly highlight the need to prioritise public services and the value of social democracy. The debates about the role of the state, equality, social justice and taxation will no longer be in retreat. Hopefully, progressive forces in the UK and Europe will capitalise on this unique opportunity to redefine the notions of public interest and public service, end the prevailing

ideological hostility to an active and capacious public sector, and to put people and their well-being at the centre of politics and policies.

For there is another, quite worrying, dimension to a more regulatory and interventionist state post-Covid-19. There is always a possibility that future regulatory manifestations and a more muscular state will be used to preserve, and increase, profits for private corporations and to generate more control and surveillance on the part of governing elites. The coronavirus pandemic has consolidated the close links among technology corporations and digital companies, phone networks and governments. Notwithstanding their divergent aims and functions, the above-mentioned actors might converge on the means, that is, on the close monitoring and the conditioning of the population. Tech companies will make millions through government contracts and the commercialisation of health data. The government, on the other hand, will be able to increase its grip on the population by intruding into their lives and movement.

Interestingly, on 10 March 2020, 10 Downing Street welcomed more than 20 tech executives on the eve of Mr Johnson's decision to change the governmental Covid-19 strategy. It has been reported that representatives from Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Amazon, O2 and EE, among others, took part in those discussions which focused on possible uses of health information and mobile geolocation data. Beyond the crisis, anonymised NHS health data is envisaged to provide a path towards a 'personalised patient experience' while geolocation data can inform authorities about the movement of people, whether they follow governmental guidelines or whether they breach quarantine by engaging in non-essential travel and social contact. South Korea pioneered the latter through a government GPS-enabled app.

Without any doubt, such a scenario would realise fully Deleuze's prediction about human societies turning into societies of control and surveillance.[7] The state would no longer be interested in disciplining and punishing non-conformity and deviance. It would be more interested in conditioning and manipulating future human behaviour through constant surveillance: the surveillance of people, their families, homes and all human activities.[8] More importantly, the normalisation of incessant, intrusive, surveillance will take place smoothly, that is, without any opposition, in the name of promoting biowelfare, that is, of protecting people and preventing further deaths.

Another possibility, which is more focused on societal relations, is that life post-Covid-19 might not be regulation-averse, but it might not be markedly differently from normal (that is, pre-Covid-19) life which is now on hold. When the pandemic storm passes, like many other crises before it, we might be eager to bracket it quickly simply because it was painful enough. In our burning desire to resume our lives with all their familiar actions, reactions and drama, we may seek to forget the pandemic along with all the resolutions we made when the crisis was still unfolding similarly to what we do when the time for keeping New Year's resolutions passes and the 1st of January seems so distant in May or June.

The end of our imprisonment by things beyond our control could thus be followed by the return of familiar ideological clashes, social divisions, the Brexit poisonous discourse, animosity and human rights' abuses. After all, these are the things that give the illusion of mastery and control and provide (momentary) satisfaction in disordered bodies, be they personal or collective. Who really knows? Populist nationalists might call for deglobalisation even though the pandemic has increased both global flows of information and connectivity at all levels extensively. We

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[7] Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October 59* (Winter 1992), pp. 3-7.
[8] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2019). Compare Michel Foucault, *Power*, Vol. 3 of *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James Faubion (New York: New Press, 2000).

might see the creation of new 'risk groups' and hierarchies, the branding of migrants and others as 'infected outsiders' and a real threat, and seek increased protection behind walls of isolation of all sorts and continued physical distancing. Ideology might return pointedly and nationalist narratives about dangerous outsiders, insiders and enemies of the people might find opportunistic uses in the public arena.

Evidently, this not the time for ideology and hatred. After all, ideology and political grand plans are always at the mercy of contingency. Events and developments occur unexpectedly thereby showing the futility of perceptions of mastery, control and certainty. Covid-19 has also made it very clear that it is neither ideology, nor the market, nor the governing elites that 'make the world go round'. People do so. When the people are not there, everything is still, empty and malfunctioning.

Ideologies need people and audiences, markets depend on people and transactions by people, and governments are inactive and ineffective shells without people. On a personal level, individuals cannot live without the care, love and cooperation they receive from people, be they close or distant. Across the globe, everybody has praised the extraordinary work, commitment, kindness, compassion, perseverance and self-sacrifice of frontline staff during this crisis. Beyond expediency and ideology, health care professionals and support staff make visible the humanistic values that really matter in life though their tireless work day after day while, on the other hand, governments have been visibly struggling to cope with the onslaught of so many things beyond their direct control.

In the post-Covid-19 future which does not yet exist, we may wish to remember the above fact, namely, that, people make the world go round, and decide to change things – to change the way we think, the way we act and the way in which we perceive the others. Humbled by our common vulnerability, a generalised re-learning of the values of care, empathy and kindness

towards other human beings, which feminist thought and feminist ethics have always highlighted, might take place. Care generating sources, instead of hate breeding foci, might also spread. By abandoning all sorts of pseudo-values and irrelevancies, this future just might be a future for us not merely as users, consumers and owners but also as doers, creators and correctors of all the things done wrongly in the past.

Lock-down, anxiety and grief may be the only reality at present, but this reality is also a timely opportunity for reflection on the self, the other, and the world. It is a door of perception.[9] We have a chance to rethink, to work together, to appreciate simple things and, more importantly, to imagine. Interestingly, physical distancing and increased, virtual connectivity are integral aspects of the same reality of living in the shadow of Covid-19. We are thus presented with both the space and the opportunity to re-humanise ourselves, starting anew and figuring out things about ourselves, others and the world we had forgotten in the private bubbles we had constructed.

So the unprecedented calamity might also be a break-through. The beginning of a new people-centred socio-political and economic paradigm which celebrates the sanctity of human life and personality, facilitates the empowerment of persons-in-relations and balances transactions with all the other dimensions of life. Critics might observe, here, that my suggestion for an Ordine Nuovo (a new order) and/or for new orderings is pure wishful thinking. I am not sure about the merits of such a criticism. In this crisis, we are seeing the worst and the best of humanity as well as the importance of promoting the right conditions for living and co-living across the globe. Scientists all over the world are sharing data and are working to find a vaccine. Deliveries of protective equipment for health care professionals arrive in countries from other parts of the world and companies are differentiating their production lines in order to meet new

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[9] I borrow this from Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (London: Vintage, 2004 [1954 and 1956])

demands. All this is interdependence in action; the recognition of health as a global public good and the importance of global protective efforts, more sharing of information and of solidarity. I suppose no nationalist populist government would deny a Covid-19 vaccine to its population on the basis that it originated in foreign lands.

Creative altruism could thus be the main ingredient of a more humanist post-Covid-19 world. Hopefully, the pain and grief surrounding the death of so many people around the globe will give rise to an epoch-making transformation.[10] It must do so. The generalised awareness of human frailty and vulnerability should not quickly exhaust itself in empty gestures, rights' regressions, isolation and biosurveillance, but it should reinforce the fact that respecting, and caring for, others are life-sustaining and life-enriching. It should increase calls for a more humanist world – a world that cares for persons, values equal human dignity, regards institutions and their officials as public servants and not public masters, and promotes all those conditions that make life liveable for all.

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[10] This is influenced by Husserl. On his work and thinking, see Paul Ricoeur, *Husserl: An Analysis of his Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967).