

BECOME A RIVER: MANAGING COVID'S COLLECTIVE TRAUMA IN OUR GLOBAL HOUSE

*'As I walk this land of broken dreams
I have visions of so many things
But happiness is just an illusion
Filled with sadness and confusion'*

(‘What Becomes of the Brokenhearted’, released by Motown in 1966 and sang by Jimmy Ruffin)

Our global house has been filled with sadness and confusion. More than one million people have lost their lives to Covid-19 worldwide. In addition to the unexpected visitation of death, millions have to cope with unimaginable grief (- a person is considered to have been privileged, if (s)he was sent off in a dignified way with a proper funeral) as well as pain. Health injuries and scarred organs are Covid's marks on those who, once again, have been fortunate to survive the onslaught of such a deadly virus.

And there are many more millions knocked sideways by unemployment due to dismissals and redundancies, business closures and entire economic sectors at serious risk. In the United Kingdom, 10 million workers have been placed into the furlough scheme, but this is about to end and to be replaced with the job support scheme. Rising unemployment and a deep recession are looming. The young face an uncertain future or, to be more precise, a futureless future. And the older generations find it hard to cope with the loneliness of lockdowns and family separations which nibble at their self-confidence. The ongoing restrictions also pose challenges to the rights of everyone in the European Union.¹ At the same time, a large proportion of individuals are wrestling with anxiety and fear about tomorrow's bearings while in near as well as distant parts of the world hatred has created clear fault lines.

¹ *Coronavirus pandemic in the EU – Fundamental Rights Implications: With a Focus on Older People*, Fundamental Rights Agency, Bulletin 3, 1 May -31 May 2020, p. 5 et seq.

Jimmy Ruffin's opening verses, therefore, are a shared reality: happiness is just an illusion in Covid-19's reign. We are told that we need to become resilient and creative. But, paradoxically enough, creativity and innovation can only blossom in inspiring spaces. But these emerge only if we shut the whole world out which is impossible.

Creating bubbles of alternative realities in order to experience moments of peace and inspiration is both time-bounded and self-deceiving. We pretend that by rediscovering the pleasures of baking, walking, growing one's own vegetables and gardening we could find the wanted solace. But even those activities cannot shield the mind from the terror of the night. When we inhabit our minds and convince ourselves that we are secure in the parallel world of a kitchen table, a gardening plot or a woodland, the painful reality of being at risk or having lost most of our lives' work keeps coming back with vengeance in our subconscious to keep us awake.

Racing palpitations, panic attacks and sweating cannot easily fade away with a few doses of positive thinking. And it takes just the fleeting sound of an ambulance's siren to make us feel powerless, frightened and sad. We plan carefully where we will go, equipped with sanitisers and masks, knowing that the virus might be lurking even in apparently safe places. My neighbour has postponed an operation at the local NHS hospital twice: she said that she wished to 'keep herself safe'.

We are confronted with a very strange reality. The outer world constricts, threatens and fills us with sadness and unhappiness. This is a period of great upheaval with many dangers, risks, losses, restrictions and dilemmas. Pressure is piling upon pressure and any relief is painfully temporary.

But generalised states of anxiety, and fear must not lead to states of despair. Nor should they lead to states of generalised mistrust. If they do, we will be sleepwalking to the 'dark side of the moon', both personally and politically. A crucial question, then, is: what we should do? How can we continue enduring the misery generated by a life-threatening pandemic? On what can we hang our hopes so that we do not become completely numb and walking embodiments of anxiety? And how can we dream about the future when the present appears so endlessly grim?

In this short essay, I wish to address the above raised questions. I must warn the reader that I do not pretend to know the answers. Nor do I have safe, in the sense of clearly workable, prescriptions. I am also wrestling with Covid-19's veil of anxiety as well as the unnecessary evil and malevolence I have experienced despite Covid. But there are some projects which need (- 'command' might be a more accurate term) our engagement in our various capacities. I do not wish to claim that these projects are intended as anxiety transcendence remedies in order to preserve our peace and sanity. Nor are they new projects; they cannot be new projects. Fighting injustice, for instance, can never be a new project. But they acquire a new relevance and timeliness in our era.

Before elaborating on them, however, I should justify this exercise. Why projects and not stillness? Notwithstanding the depressing impact of Covid-19, I think it is important to think about projects because nothing lasts for ever. Even the straightest road has a turn. We should not collapse the future into the present. We know from history that it is a matter of time before Covid-19 becomes a nightmarish fragment of our past.

Albert Camus's 'The Plague' has highlighted this insight.² Camus has given us a marvellous chronicle of the spread of bubonic plague in the town of Oran where the town gates were shut, rail travel was prohibited and all mail service was suspended. 'This was exile at home'.³ But one day, the inhabitants discovered that the plague was in retreat and the quarantine was lifted. Then, the town's people began to celebrate the imminent opening of the gate. 'The gates of the town finally opened, at dawn one fine February morning...'.⁴ This did not mean that the plague had died. Camus was convinced that plagues never die. Nor do they disappear for good: they strike and dissipate 'as unaccountably' as they had begun. The lesson learnt from their deadly path is captured by Camus' narrator: what we learn in the midst of such tribulations is that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.⁵

² First published in France in 1947. *The Plague* is published in Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2013 edition).

³ Ibid, p. 58.

⁴ Ibid, p. 225.

⁵ Ibid, p. 237.

‘But I have to tell you this’; Dr Rieux remarks. ‘This whole thing is not about heroism. It’s about decency. It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency’.⁶

Without a doubt, common decency has been displayed by so many ordinary people of all ages, backgrounds, national or ethnic origins and socio-economic status since March 2020. But we have seen quite a lot of indecency and outrageous injustice. We have also witnessed agitation and confusion. People may be seeing their worlds differently now, neighbourhoods and workplaces may be changing, everyday life may have lost its dynamism and its intense rhythms, but our redeeming values of common decency and human dignity continue to shine brightly. The greatest act of defiance to Covid’s disruption and destruction would be to make those values the foundation of our projects.

The second justification for thinking about projects is that we need to rediscover trust. When all certainties have been called into question, and confidence in those who lead is low, it is crucial that we maintain a sense of trust in institutions. This is for our sake. Institutional trust allows us to dream, to think, to bear and to change the world. For if we make the mistake to treat life as a burden, as something to be endured and not embraced with joy and excitement, and institutions as yesterday’s weakened rules, then our activism, vision and foresight are compromised. We cannot have mental independence. Moaning about our tiredness of living with Covid’s interruption, disruption and terror is not an act of defiance. Nor does it inspire positive thinking and action. Trust and hope are thus essential because they fuel insight, patience, perseverance, reimagining and action.

FOUR BRIDGES TO A POST-COVID REALITY

Having said this and thinking about the management of the lingering collective trauma in our global house, I would like to suggest four related projects. Let me call them ‘four bridges to a post-Covid reality’. These are: a) *project future*, b) *project values and human rights’ enforcement*, c) *project relate*,

⁶ Ibid, p. 125.

and d) *project change*. The reader will notice that my suggested projects do not bow to demands for growth and profitable economic expansion. Economic recovery (- without the philosophy of greed) correlates with them; it is not presupposed for them.

Project future is crucial for all; it involves the setting of priorities and institutional designs for the post-Covid world. Fighting inequality, taking serious action to tackle climate change, contemplating the pros and cons of a universal basic income, examining the possibility of instituting a solidarity tax in order to help the 16- to 26-year-olds, redesigning our cities and localities, protecting health professionals and carers, all the above, and many more, are worthwhile options. During these turbulent and hard times, we must let our experiences to Covid's multifarious scarring affirm our commitment to life, care and love and to thoughts of 'oughtness'. The latter means thoughts of what we ought to do instead of what we wish to do.

Project values and fundamental rights is the second project. More freedom, more respect for legal rules, more democracy and more equality need to take priority following the decade of the orchestrated weakening of them and temptations of autocratic rule and rights' restrictions. We need to preserve and to strengthen the inner core of constitutional democracies and to display absolute intolerance to breaches of human decency and dignity. Implementing and enforcing human rights legislation is not a new idea; it is the practical fulfilment of an old one. Humanity has gone through phases of extreme violence and terror and has grafted its laws which provide ample light in ordinary and demanding circumstances as well as in 'hard cases'. They define priorities and guide balancing exercises among competing needs and objectives.

We need to re-affirm, defend and strengthen those values in Covid's aftermath for these are the guideposts for dignified living and good socio-political governance in the future. They provide a clear direction and help frame a democratic humanist project for the globe. If we fail to champion those values, we will be sleepwalking into an uncertain future which right-wing extremism and elite authoritarianism might seek to mould in accordance with their own objectives and ideas and to structure it in their favour. And although right-wing extremism pontificates its appeal to people(s), in reality the

executioners of its ideas tend to regard and treat human beings as objects or means or as statistical items apt to categorisation.

Notably, the enviroing conditions conspire to create a fertile ground for right-wing extremism. Covid-led hardship and discontent, high unemployment, rising national debts, sectors of the economy under severe stress, stagnated investment in the UK and the possibility of a no Brexit trade agreement, deep recession fears, post-truth politics, all could be exploited by demagogues willing to traffic in people's fear and grievances in order to attack democracy and freedoms. Adorno's recently published in English lecture at the University of Vienna in 1967⁷ sheds much light onto what he calls 'pathic nationalism'⁸ and the conditions that lead to 'far-right turns'.⁹

If we turn from the political to the social and personal, then *project relate* or *project connect* is also a priority. Physical distancing and lockdowns have made us crave for friendships, love and connections as we had to crawl away from one another. True, the time has not come to celebrate our liberation from Covid's grip. We have lived for months hearing mostly news and statistics about the pandemic. We do what we can to nurture human connections digitally and to bide our time. But there is always the risk of allowing fear and impulsive reactions to take control when stubborn patience, courage and stoicism are needed. Anxiety tends to drive persons into irrational fears. But it can also drive us to an irrational denial of dangers in front of us. We need to train our minds to overcome anxiety: we discern our frailty, our smallness and contradictions, but we also have the ability to rise above them, to humanise further ourselves and to grow our inner core.

We have to be like a river, flowing in a hard landscape. In this way, we could overcome hurt and fear in order to be free for living and for caring for the loved ones and for others. Mutual aid networks and organisations born during the pandemic show the importance of care and compassion. We will not

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Activism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).

⁸ Ibid, page 5.

⁹ Ibid, page 15. Adorno observes: 'Now, ladies and gentlemen, I repeat that I am aware that right-wing extremism is not a psychological and ideological problem but a very real and political one. Yet the factually wrong, untrue nature of its own substance forces it to operate with ideological means, which in this case take the form of propagandist means. And that is why, aside from the political struggle by purely political means, one must confront it on its very own turf. But we must not fight lies with lies, we must not try to be just as clever as it is, but we must counteract it with the full force of reason, with the genuinely unideological truth.'; pp. 39-40.

always be within the strangling encirclement of circumstances beyond our control. When Covid-free life returns, seeking relations and connections will emerge as the balanced merging of our experiences under Covid's reign, of what we learnt and what we need as human beings.

The final targeted approach is *project change*. Looking ahead, we must capitalise on the lessons learnt during the pandemic and the changes it has accelerated. Striving to keep our lives on track goes hand in hand with a clear plan of effecting changes in the status quo, tackling structures of power and hierarchy, racism, inequality and violence in our societies. Post-Covid-19, we need to nurture and preserve life and this includes opposing cultures of systemic as well as non-systemic injustice and disregard for certain individuals, groups and minorities. The Black Lives Matter movement has attested the ripening of a clear sense of direction in many areas of our socio-political lives and of action. The rethinking of consumption patterns, unsustainable growth and a blind faith in the capacity of markets to deliver has also been accelerated as a result of the pandemic.

In the light of the foregoing, it may be concluded that we do not have to be fatigued, depressed and recessive in the difficult phase we are now experiencing. Let us be like a river: adaptive, guarded and in motion while the storm lasts, but, at the same time, resolute in planning, and orchestrating, change. In this way, we will not feel alienated, can project ourselves into the future and can, hopefully, determine not only what we will become free from, but also what we will become free for.

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