

## COVID-19: Rethinking Global Society

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# *COVID-19: Rethinking Global Society*

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## **Abstract**

Corona Virus Disease 19 (COVID-19) is an earth-shattering pandemic with implications not only for healthcare and economics, but also for society. Its dramatic spread has interrupted the advancement of global societies, leading to a breaking point through its extreme acceleration of the crisis of lifestyle and social needs, relationships and production. This is true above all in the West, given its dominant global position. COVID-19 has forced a racing world to stop and fall back on its own fragilities. However, in the aftermath of its tragic impact, the forced imposition of a radical change could offer a unique opportunity for rebirth: an occasion to develop better alternatives to face up to these insecurities. This article aims to observe and describe some of the aspects of the pandemic and investigate them through sociological theory. This could offer valuable interpretations to unravel the complexity of the pandemic and grasp its challenge for the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, social cohesion, security, challenge, nature.

## **1. Introduction**

Can a pandemic comprise a challenge for a society? Yes, it can. Corona Virus Disease 19 (COVID-19) has uncovered a number of open questions for the societies of the countries it has affected. In fact, this is an earth-shattering crisis with implications not only for healthcare and economics, but also, and no less, for present and future society (Žižek, 2020).

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This treatise was originally developed during the Italian lockdown of March and April 2020, in the first wave of the pandemic. However, some months later its arguments may be considered as even more relevant, in light above all of the longer-term consequences that can now be observed on the lives of individuals and social groups, as well as of the impact that COVID-19 has had on sociological thinking and the potential role of its theories in this context.

## **2. The pandemic's impact on sociological thinking**

Since this treatise was first drafted, numerous articles have been published, in sociology and related fields, on the pandemic and its social repercussions. These offer crucial insights to unravel this complex and traumatic phenomenon (Barber, Naepi, 2020; Bianco, 2020a, 2020b; Connel 2020; Hanafi, 2020; Lupton, 2020; Matthewman, Huppertz, 2020; Nelson, Osman, 2020; Reddy, 2020; Ward, 2020). Those articles aiming to investigate the determinants and repercussions of COVID-19 in relation to individual and social identity (Bianco, 2020; Cruwys, Stevens, 2020; Ferone, Petroccia, Pitasi, 2020; Jaspal, Nerlich, 2020; Templeton et al., 2020) and trust (Belardinelli, Gili, 2020; Imai, 2020; Llewellyn, 2020; Sibley et al., 2020;) are of particular interest here. Numerous scientific societies have offered spaces for discussions of this topic. In Italy, the Italian Sociology Association (AIS) launched an open forum that has given a voice to key questions and aspects to tackle the pandemic, both during the emergency itself and in later phases in which society will be in limbo, waiting and looking apprehensively towards the immediate future, which while undoubtedly less alarming, will be just as new and disorientating as the more acute phases of the emergency (<https://www.ais-sociologia.it/?cat=5>).

Alongside these reflections, it is worth mentioning the crucial importance of sociological intervention in applying a methodological rigour for the effective collection, organisation, reading and interpretation of pandemic data (Bratu, 2020; Dowd et al., 2020; Pulido et al., 2020). From this perspective, the theme of identity and belonging is particularly interesting. Taking this as a starting point, Italian and international sociological output can be read from two perspectives: investigation of perception, and investigation of behaviours. These approaches have touched upon various spheres, including advertising (Giorgino 2020), sport (Parnell et al., 2020; Rowe 2020), challenges for social policy (Bruni, 2020) and communication (Bikbov, Bikbov, 2020; Gemini et al., 2020; Morcellini, 2020), solidarity (Vitale, 2020), organisation of work (Kramer, Kramer, 2020), generational and family relationships (Carson et al., 2020, Stokes, Patterson 2020), systems of socialisation, such as school and education in general (Erduran, 2020; Filosa, 2020; Ozer, 2020; Usak et al., 2020), migration

policies (Carlotti, 2020), tourism (Monaco, 2020), and policy decision systems (Antonelli, 2020; Monti, 2020). This impressive body of literature has focused attention on how all these systems interact and how they bridge the gaps that have emerged during the pandemic (Bavel, 2020). These crucial themes relate above all to cities: not only given the zoonotic nature of COVID-19, as we shall see below, but also given the new ways of building society - the topic of the next Italian Festival of Sociology: "*Seduazione e città globale. Rifare la società dopo il COVID-19*" [*Beguilement and global cities. Rebuilding society after COVID-19*], as well as the new way of understanding and managing health in the urban fabric (Acuto, 2020; Will, 2020). It is worth mentioning the key role in this context of research bodies such as the Health City Institute, dedicated to the promotion of health in new urban agglomerations (Lenzi, Vaccaro 2019).

Sociology is also called to answer crucial questions in relation to the state of emergency, including the social construction and management of trauma (Alexander, 2018) and its consequences for the exercising of power (Matthewman, Huppatz, 2020). Underlying this last reflection is a scenario under which excessive executive power and the normalisation of an exceptional status could become rooted, reducing public freedom (Honig 2009). In this respect, Ulrich Beck framed risk society as a new social condition, in which the state of exception becomes the new normality (Zinn, 2020). Beck suggested that we are now facing the unintentional consequences of industrial modernity and that we can no longer predict or control the threats that we ourselves created (Beck, 1986).

Similar scientific output and academic debates (strictly online) seem to be aimed at discussing an idea of the future in light of its critical points, as well as of the ability of its institutions, businesses and citizens to react to the challenges posed by COVID-19.

### **3. The social nature of the pandemic**

A pandemic like this was not only unexpected, but also completely unfamiliar. Living generations may still remember the monumental crises following catastrophic events such as the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: their easily understood symbolisms and language are often invoked today, to simplify the social roles and dynamics of the epidemic. However, these simplifications are often misleading. The conflicts of the past have little in common, whether socially or symbolically, with the current emergency.

Above all, while there is a marked social inequality (as we shall see below), there are no opposing parties: no allies or enemies. Instead, the whole world is battling against something that, for the time being, has few features: it is

invisible, it is neither human or animal, it is obscure and alien: this makes it hard to recognise as the “enemy”, in a historic psychological and social sense. The classic dynamics of opposition cannot easily be satisfied, if we think of the virus as Other.

Furthermore, this virus is universal and “democratic”: not only because it affects rich and poor alike, but above all because all those involved in any aspect - medical, psychological, economic, political or social - of fighting and treating it are potential victims, just like those already needing treatment. Those figures who should comprise the trusted heart of the community are not only, like us all, potential defenceless victims, but also inadvertent accomplices.

This is the peculiar nature of the virus: each one of us is responsible for the success of the collective treatment - at least to the extent that we are potential accessories of the virus, despite ourselves. This drives the need for a social distancing that is often guiltily confused (including conceptually) with the term social distance, which evokes, in its sociological meaning, “an individual’s unwillingness and relational closure - of variable intensity - in relation to others perceived and recognised as different on the basis of their attributability to social categories” (Cesareo, 2007: 11). The interruption of direct social relations in favour of a drastic isolation, imposed indiscriminately on each one of us, leads to the extreme situation of people falling ill and dying in solitude, and, more generally, the forced sacrifice of the gratifying, normalising and reassuring aspects of everyday life.

The specific nature of COVID-19 has led to the development of a number of strange, fast and overwhelming effects that have impacted the economic and social life of advanced societies. In both empiric research and theoretical thought, especially in relation to the management of the pandemic, it has been observed that the magnitude of the event and the speed at which it has evolved comprise one of the core issues on which the numerous structural deficiencies laid bare during the pandemic can be blamed. But while they are core, they are not the most profound. As affirmed by Franco Ferrarotti, the pandemic is not the cause but the accelerator of the process: it exposes the true face of globalisation, destroying our certainties and clarifying that the future cannot be left in the hands of technology (L’Avvenire, April 7th, 2020). The pandemic has brought the neoliberal development model to the brink of collapse (Monbiot, 2020), catalysing the lifestyle and production crisis that was already unsustainable for society and the environment. The acceleration of this crisis - and the resulting forced slowdown of a frenetic world - have been fast and brutal. In essence, the current crisis has brought the process of advancement of global society, from both an individual and a collective perspective, to an abrupt halt: the world has been forced to fall back on its own fragilities.

This involves much more than just the tragic counting of deaths, or the poverty induced by the economic and manufacturing slowdown: the role of individuals is also called into question, in their capacity as social actors belonging to a world forced to undergo both qualitative and quantitative changes, in their own ways of acting and thinking. COVID-19 pushes each one of us to a significant number of social challenges. In this respect, sociology can offer broad-ranging and highly effective paradigms of reflection. The risk reported by Beck and returned to in numerous essays (Matthewman, Huppatz, 2020; Zinn, 2020) is thus another cohesive but not exhaustive part of the current situation: there are also factors responsible for the production of vulnerability.

Weak health systems are one of these. Another cause is capitalist intensive farming, fertile ground for new pathogens. Its dependence on domestic monocultures also acts against the existence of immunity, facilitating transmission. Then there is the issue of increased urban density, which enables such diseases to spread quickly, while the migration of workers and global trade routes act as vectors carrying them far from their point of origin. Capitalist expansion into new regions also creates problems. Animals are driven from their habitat into new environments, where they may come into contact with new disease strains. Such animals may also become new sources of trade, especially in unregulated and uncontrolled agricultural markets. These contexts often coincide with the so-called “slums of the world”, the outskirts of cities, where humans and wild animals often coexist. All this increases the risk of interspecies transmission (zoonosis), the origin of the current epidemic (Wallace, 2016 in Matthewman, Huppatz, 2020).

#### **4. The ambivalent response to the pandemic: conflict versus solidarity**

This unprecedented situation could comprise a challenge: a valuable moment that should not be overlooked, but embraced, in which to reflect on how to save ourselves from the world’s drift. A first challenge concerns the impact of this virus on *trust*: both horizontally, between individuals (Goffman, 1959), and vertically, both towards abstract and symbolic systems of reference, and towards institutions (Giddens, 1990). Trust, whether personal or systemic (Luhmann, 1968), underlies social advancement, as Simmel observes, as it “gives a hypothesis certain enough to serve as a basis for practical conduct, it is intermediate between knowledge and ignorance about a man [...] Epochs, fields of interest, and individuals differ, characteristically, by the measures of knowledge and ignorance which must mix in order that the single, practical decision based on confidence arise” (1908: 299).

It is through trust that individuals reduce their perception of social complexity, freeing themselves from risk-taking (Luhmann, 2002), and in this way, they modulate the assumptions underlying their rational behaviour (Weber, 1922). The aspects descriptive of the nature of the virus combine to corrode our sense of individual and social trust. The shared condition - albeit experienced in profound, intimate solitude - of precariousness and disorientation (Bauman, 2000) feeds a *hunger for meaning* that finds no outlet in the enemy, whereas perhaps in a war it would be easier to find an “Us” in our identification with and belonging to a cause, through a search for connections and against the “Other” (Elias, Scotson, 1965; Michels, 1928).

This condition of frustration, in a climate of suspended activity and silence, and of a danger from which no one is safe, generates a state of strong personal tension that has numerous implications in relation to trust, and it becomes easier to understand how the frustration generated by the social nature of the virus finds an easy outlet in a sense of mistrust. Horizontally, this translates to associating our fellow citizens - a potential source of infection - with the image of the enemy, the necessity of which is noted above. This mechanism offers an attribution of meaning and representation of the battle that, while volatile and impromptu, contains uncertainties, by proposing a simplified and reassuring horizon (Allport, 1954), such as that of the dynamic of opposition between Us and Them (Elias, Scotson, 1965). On a vertical (systemic) plane, it turns upon national and international informational, political, and administrative expert systems, which are thus deprived of the positive effects of the public’s support and sense of connection observed in other catastrophic scenarios in which the enemy is more easily identifiable, such as war.

This crisis of trust is characterised by its structural weight, as it develops within roots much deeper than those contingent to the pandemic: this easily emerges from a comparison of the relative social stabilities of the affected countries. It is easy to glimpse, in this drifting of trust, an acceleration of the processes of disaggregation of weak social identities. As observed by Robert Michels, the enemy is merely the product of the fragility of a group’s identity, which the group attempts to bolster by comparison with the other “by difference” (Michels, 1928). In this sense, the pandemic is a catalyst for an emerging ferality, in a existing condition of fragility and sense of social precariousness. For this reason, fear and uncertainty, for both ourselves and our loved ones, about our present and future health and financial prospects act in turn as vectors for mistrust of and stigma towards (Durkheim, 1895; Goffman, 1963) potential carriers, in a vicious circle that fogs both the individual and collective mind.

Potential carriers are identified as those who do not comply with the rules. Another effect which makes COVID-19 unique from a social perspective is that



it does not just involve a mutual mistrust caused by the spread of the virus. On a more purely macrosocial level, an ambivalence can be seen between the mistrust of institutions and the tension of suddenly having to comply with strict, formidable rules, especially for European and western societies based on a set of freedoms we take for granted. The relationship between the *rules* and the associated trust in those who impose them is a very subtle aspect that is however, central to this condition (Bauman, 2005). Social and cultural questions claim our attention and pose another delicate challenge of sociological interest on such a remarkable occasion and from a comparative perspective, in relation to both the timescales chosen by the institutions of each State for the issue and enforcement of the rules, and the public's acceptance of and compliance with such rules. One of the many knots in the great web of trust in the time of COVID-19 is, therefore, the impact that it is having on trust in political institutions and structures and the information they generate and publish. This impact is marked by an ambivalence. If, on the one hand, there is a clear need for social guidance and for reference to experts - virologists and doctors, but also politicians and political parties, on the other, the perceived inadequacy and volatility (Weber, 1919) of political, economic, health and technological systems, the cracks in and disorientation of supranational, European and global institutions, and the uncertainty that accompanies the multitude of confused voices of the public debate, all contribute yet again to the attrition of trust and the acceleration of processes that weaken national - if not western - social stability.

For a greater understanding of this perspective, the role played by social stratification, i.e. inequality, should not be overlooked when assessing the impact of COVID-19 on levels of institutional and personal trust (Blundell et al., 2020, Patel et al., 2020, Templeton et al., 2020, Wang et al., 2020).

Émile Durkheim (1897) showed that misfortune is socially patterned: the isolated, the weak, minorities and the majority poor are consistently the hardest hit by disasters (Matthewman, 2015: 20). The mortality rate is correlated with age, as the elderly are most physically affected by the coronavirus; however, in terms of social impact, the young are those most affected by lockdown. Furthermore, even if it is democratic, the pandemic does perpetrate racial distinctions. Asians are targeted and attacked for having spread the virus (Tavernise, Oppel Jr., 2020), while official statistics show marked differences in infection mortality rates between Black and White patients (Price-Haywood et al., 2020).

Trust in institutions tends to be higher in graduates and the middle and higher social classes, given their reduced socioeconomic vulnerability and contractual weakness and their greater guarantee of adequate social protection. These categories also have a slightly more critical position in relation to the

various information sources (Blundell et al., 2020). According to Ulrich Beck (1986, 2011), the reason for this is not just their different financial situation, but also the different cultural, educational, training and relational tools they have available, which reduce their fear and increase their ability to face up to a crisis. Although the new forms of risk - from terrorism to pandemics - are highly democratic, as they can affect anyone indiscriminately, the condition of some people leaves them better able to react and hence defend themselves (for example, see studies of the incidence of COVID-19 in Black populations compared to White populations and in different socioeconomic classes (van Dorn et al., 2020). In this way, the pandemic generates inequalities in relation not only to health, but also to finances and education (Costa, Schizzerotto, 2020); the latter is above all connected with the digitalization of numerous educational and information services (Beaunoyer et al., 2020).

Structural inequalities and identity processes are fundamental to understand the response to the pandemic. Identity processes can be used to promote support in the community, in order to encourage lawful behaviour, ensure collective safety and increase compliance with guidelines. However, the inability of institutions and governments to tackle inequalities based on identity - whether economic, social, generational, geographic or racial - and to take account of structural inequalities can not only alienate vulnerable groups from a willingness to comply with the rules, but also lead to the creation of new groups hostile to government authorities, united by their abandonment at such a critical time (Templeton et al., 2020)

On the other side of the coin, as observed by George Monbiot, COVID-19 has triggered the mobilisation of communities united by a common cause. "The shift is even more interesting than it first appears", writes Monbiot: "Power has migrated not just from private money to the state, but from both market and state to another place altogether: the commons. All over the world, communities have mobilised where governments have failed." In Hyderabad (India, young volunteers provide aid packages for the city's most vulnerable occasional workers, while in Wuhan (China), volunteer drivers ferried essential health workers between their homes and hospitals. Meanwhile, in Latvia, programmers organised a hackathon to design the lightest face shield components that could be produced with a 3D printer (Monbiot, 2020). These events can be explained by reflecting on the fact that disasters are essentially social phenomena: the more public and shared their threats and experiences, the more social solidarity they create, laying the foundations for both physical and emotive support. We are essentially social beings, produced by our culture and our collective labour. We are, to an extent unknown in all other species, altruistic. In contrast to neoliberal thinking, Rebecca Solnit (2009: 305) concludes that we are resilient and generous, committed to doing things

differently, eager for a sense of human connection and purpose. From disaster, a strange social energy thus emerges. Providing assistance of any kind gives a new purpose to life: a reason to live, namely “being there” for others. Furthermore, collective action is encouraged when the structures of power prove fragile. The awareness that official help is rarely adequate, efficient or effective gives an impetus to civil society.

There is one last aspect representing an interesting social challenge: the relationship with the *present time*. The significance of this pandemic, which distinguishes it from other epidemics and catastrophes of the past, lies in the fact that it is unfolding in a profoundly changed world - a global (and globalised) world. The new scenario cannot be explored without considering its context, namely the present time: global society is a novice in the management of a global pandemic emergency. From the perspective of faith in progress, there should have been high expectations that our current society would be able to manage such a crisis. And yet we see today that on the contrary, the virus found a precious ally in our global society, which facilitated its rapid spread without having available equally fast and effective methods and strategies for its containment.

Here too, the result is a profound shaking of our sense of trust, this time in relation to the dowses, methods and governance of advanced societies that only yesterday we took for granted, despite their numerous economic, ecological and social deficiencies. Once again, its systems and models are placed in question - but also the speed of its change: previously always considered a winning weapon and valuable achievement, in light of current facts it now takes on the appearance of a modern positivist illusion.

## **5. The sociological perspective as a key to the interpretation and possibility of overcoming the crisis in the sense of progression**

How should current society meet the proposed challenges? Today, it has shown itself to be toothless when faced with a virus that requires a dual, counterposed effort: while the pandemic has necessitated a slowdown in individual and collective productive and social life, exposing the weakness of societies forced into this rapid mutation, at the same time management of its health, economic and social implications requires flexibility and prompt action. This latter should not be understood as a volatile, ethereal exercise of style, but rather as a capacity of adaptation founded on solid political, economic and social bases, on a sense of community and dedication to a cause, and on the reconversion capacity of systems in front of which western democracies have been revealed as deeply inadequate and inconsistent.

In his opening to a 2005 essay, Bauman affirms that in recent decades, especially in Europe and the United States, “the strong propensity to fear and maniacal obsession with security have made the most spectacular of careers” (Bauman, 2005: 3); and yet, paraphrasing some of his conclusions in relation to identity (Bauman, 2003), security (in opposition to fear) becomes first a promise, then a commitment, and finally a priority, to the extent that it becomes consolidated as a question to be faced up to - in other words, when it is perceived as a problem. And in fact, in contrast with Castel’s evidence on the supremacy of our societies in terms of security, “the spoilt, mollycoddled “we” feels insecure, threatened and frightened, more inclined to panic and more interested in anything to do with tranquillity and security than the members of most of the societies known to us” (Bauman, 2005: 3). In other words, returning this time to one of Castel’s intuitions, Bauman finds that modern insecurity derives not from a *loss* of security, but from the creation of a world “organised on the basis of a constant, exhausting search for protection and security” (Castel, 2003: 6 in Bauman, 2005: 5). However, contrary to this contorted, albeit normalised logic, nature is by definition a bearer of insecurity, disorder and indiscipline (Freud, 1930; Sennett, 1970), and its denial generates a frightened, weak and overexposed Us. Essentially, insecurity is merely a product of the cognitive distortion that brings individuals to believe that total security is actually possible. Returning to Freud (1930), Bauman remembers that even if we tend to accept a fear dictated by our physical finiteness and mortal nature - even in some way making a virtue of it, by channelling our energies into managing it from a mortal “point of view” - the suffering connected with finiteness on a social level is different. In this case:

“If the really available protection and the benefits we enjoy stop short of the ideal, if the relationships are still not to our liking, if the regulations are not what they should (and as we believe, could) be, more often than not we assume hostile machinations, plots, conspiracy, a criminal intent, an enemy at the gate or under the bed” (2005: 4).

So if the virus and its physical consequences are still conceivable and admissible in themselves, the same cannot be said for the fact of not being able to control them, or - even worse - of having to give something up to try to stem them, without having some certainty as to the outcome in return. In this way, the non-guarantee of total security is transferred into a mechanism of mistrust that needs someone (or something) to blame - a tangible obstacle to achievement of the coveted security.

From Castel’s perspective, a sense of inadequacy is the consequence of the faith in individualism - the successor to faith in a sense of community - which is now flourishing in the modern countries of Europe and, in general, the western world. The social state (the child of the modern state) has prioritised

the pursuit of protection rather than redistribution of resources. From a premodern sense of fraternity, where the shared absence of social resources led to collectivisation of the sense of protection, we have passed, in the modern age, first to a solidarity based on compromises and mutual interests, and then, in advanced modernity, to a progressive loss of social protection. This has bolstered an individualism that breaks both human and social ties, forming a society that is ever more insecure, less supportive and more dominated by fear of the Other as a threat to the weak solidarity that remains and to the illusion that there exists a security that must be tended and protected (Castel, 2003; Elias, Scotson, 1965; Michels, 1928). In this context, sociological thinking offers a further perspective for effective investigation, returning to the meaning of social cohesion (Berger, 1998; Boudon, 1984, 1990).

Cohesion, in contrast with integration, has an extrinsic nature. It has been defined as a unit of action that recurs occasionally, when the mechanisms of collective reactions to major events are observed (Ceri, 2008: 137). While with integration the values of reference coincide with a shared cultural horizon and have a durable regulating function, social cohesion is characterised by the presence of impromptu values that act as fleeting substitutes for a true group identity. Bauman's liquid societies lack integration and compulsively follow occasions of social cohesion, however transient and precarious (Berger, Luckmann, 1966; Berger, 1999; Touraine, 1997).

In *Le suicide*, Émile Durkheim discusses this aspect in relation to war:

Les autres États furent moins sensibles au gain de gloire et de puissance qui résulta de la guerre et, une fois la grande angoisse nationale passée, les passions sociales rentrèrent dans le repos les grandes commotions sociales comme les grandes guerres populaires avivent les sentiments collectifs, stimulent l'esprit de parti comme le patriotisme, la foi politique comme la foi nationale et, concentrant les activités vers un même but. déterminent, au moins pour un temps, une intégration plus forte de la société. Ce n'est pas à la crise qu'est due la salutaire influence dont nous venons d'établir l'existence, mais aux luttes dont cette crise est la cause. Comme elles obligent les hommes à se rapprocher pour faire face au danger commun, l'individu pense moins à soi et davantage à la chose commune. On comprend, d'ailleurs, que cette intégration puisse n'être pas purement momentanée, mais survive parfois aux causes qui l'ont immédiatement suscitée, surtout quand elle est intense (Durkheim, 1897: 222-223).

According to Durkheim, the emerging cohesion is not due to the crisis itself, but to the battles that follow. These battles not only force people to group together to face a common danger, but in doing so, they shift their thinking from an individual level to the common cause. For Durkheim, this condition need not be short-lived: it could survive the events that brought it into being.

And yet the reasons underlying this cohesion are not secondary. Durkheim, in his study of suicide, noted that excessive individualism not only promotes suicidogenic causes, but is itself one such cause.

Non seulement il débarrasse d'un obstacle utilement gênant le penchant qui pousse les hommes à se tuer, mais il crée ce penchant de toutes pièces et donne ainsi naissance à un suicide spécial qu'il marque de son empreinte. C'est ce qu'il importe de bien comprendre, car c'est cela qui fait la nature propre du type de suicide qui vient d'être distingué et c'est par là que se justifie le nom que nous lui avons donné. (Durkheim, 1897: 224-225)

What is it about individualism that explains this effect? Durkheim observes that the very psychological constitution of humans means that we cannot live without a connection to a greater something, which enables us, through it, to conquer death, to outlive ourselves. Life is tolerable only if a reason, a purpose can be perceived in it. The individual alone is not enough, because we are limited not only in space, but also in time. When we cannot perceive goals outside ourselves, we cannot escape the idea that our efforts are completely in vain, and this generates a terrifying frustration. In such conditions, we as individuals cannot find the courage to live, to act and to fight, to believe in something, because when faced with the pain generated by our efforts, outside our individual self, there is nothing. Essentially, the state of individualism contradicts human nature, and is thus too precarious to have any chance of enduring. (Durkheim, 1897: 224-225).

Par conséquent, la seule façon de remédier au mal, est de rendre aux groupes sociaux assez de consistance pour qu'ils tiennent plus fermement l'individu et que lui-même tienne à eux. Il faut qu'il se sente davantage solidaire d'un être collectif qui l'ait précédé dans le temps, qui lui survive et qui le déborde de tous les côtés. A cette condition, il cessera de chercher en soi-même l'unique objectif de sa conduite et, comprenant qu'il est l'instrument d'une fin qui le dépasse, il s'apercevra qu'il sert à quelque chose. La vie reprendra un sens à ses yeux parce qu'elle retrouvera son but et son orientation naturels. (Durkheim, 1897: 429)

According to Durkheim, the only salvation for individuals is to feel more a part of an *être collectif* that existed before them and will outlive them, that fills them and expands them, that makes them, in a way, immortal, and at the same time, connected and belonging. Individuals will thus tend to stop looking inside themselves for the only purpose for their existence, will understand that they are a tool for an end that will outlive them, and will feel useful for something bigger than themselves, enabling their life to regain meaning because they will have found their natural direction.

Durkheim does not guarantee the long-term stability of this social cohesion if it is not sustained by a stable integration. This leads us back to Robert Michels'

reflections on patriotism in times of war (1928), which offer a bitter-sweet impression of the stability of the sense of belonging generated in similar situations. Furthermore, the sociology of prejudice (Allport, 1954; Brown, 1995) shows that in the presence of collective entities perceived as strangers, group cohesion is strengthened, although such a reaction is more a symptom of the group's fragility than its stability. This conclusion was also reached by Norbert Elias in his configurational analysis of the *established-outsiders* relational model (1965).

As described above for inequality, the patriotic mobilisation in western countries and societies that followed catastrophic events such as those cited had in the past, and is having now, a significant impact on cohesion, as described by Durkheim (for example, the solidarity of doctors, respect for the rules, affective investment through social media channels - including spontaneous virtual communities - and a renewed discovery of national sentiment). However, this has not contributed to social integration, which pertains to a set of relationships and social dynamics that is more characterised by relative levels of stability and that is rooted in the social solidity of a population and that, for all the reasons described above, does not currently form part of the western model. This is inevitably being reconverted, including thanks to COVID-19, in mechanisms of exclusion, between both citizens and social categories: commuters, runners, internal migrants returning to their home town in the south from their job in the north; and between social groups - the Chinese, immigrants and illegal immigrants who, by definition, are culturally and legally beyond any mechanism of comprehension, control and, consequently, security and now encounter even more hostility due to the risk of a wave of infections from returning travellers.

While the structural complexity and cultural diversity of a society lead to the independence of cohesion, integration and order, high levels of cultural homogeneity lead to the convergence of order, integration and cohesion (Ceri, 2008). Community finds fertile ground in this second type of society, whereas complex, culturally diverse societies are unlikely to be cohesive in a structural (i.e. enduring and stable) sense, unless they are totalitarian: in this case the cohesion loses its precariousness and is stabilised by force, cancelling out any sense of belonging other than the official one.

In light of the complexity of the dynamics generated with the pandemic, two questions arise from a social aspect. First, what can be expected from the future? And second, could this event represent an opportunity, beyond the disaster that we are witnessing? The effects of the pandemic on our lifestyles are as intense as they are generalised. Returning to an affirmation dear to Castel, and later to Bauman, individuals come to terms with their finite nature more easily on a medical level than on the level of social adaptation.

A variable of this equation that is probably too often forgotten (even in less uncertain times) is the role of nature and its relationship with the lifestyle that predominates today but that - both individually and collectively - is ever more often dysfunctional. This challenge, recalling what Durkheim affirms with reference to a cause “beyond oneself”, could offer a perspective - undoubtedly uncomfortable and “laborious” in troubled times like these, but nonetheless unique and valuable.

COVID-19 is a violent reminder of what has happened since time immemorial in the interaction between humans and nature: where humans leave space, nature reappropriates it, taking over from the discordant human intrusion and restoring the natural course of the newly available area from where it left off. This discordant intrusion in the ecosystem has now revealed yet another weakness, as it enabled the virus, of animal origin, to circulate and spread in humans, without any available defence. This situation and its consequences oblige us to meet a challenge we can no longer put off: to rethink and harmonise our social behaviour in relation to nature.

It has been said that the conditions leading up to this pandemic already revealed numerous omissions that left us unprepared to manage an emergency like this. These conditions include an attitude of irrational exploitation of natural resources, lacking any counterbalances or consideration of the context in which they were carried out. Today, in contrast, we live paralysed, waiting, fearing a death which we blame on that very nature that, until yesterday, we ignored. It is evident that neither of these two models is sustainable. However, in this time of limbo, we can observe an individual and collective ability to survive with a more simple lifestyle, whose energies are turned towards the truly primary needs it is deprived of, such as physical contact and contact with nature.

Beyond the agitation and collective frustration, the duration of the pandemic forces us to listen and think. It is a kind of rediscovery: not just in rethinking our priorities, but also of our individual will to return to the “simply human”. COVID-19 should be remembered not just because it has exposed the limits of our social, security, geopolitical, technology and production model, but also because it is driving a return to contact with a more “healthy” human and social dimension of individuals.

Perhaps reaching rock bottom was necessary to obtain this chance, to embrace a unique challenge: to return to what is important and from which it is worth restarting, in a rediscovered harmony with the natural world and with our neighbours, with fewer demands, fewer desires and few, but real, common human needs.



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