

“We Need a Metaphysical Pandemic”

Markus Gabriel

The global order has been shaken. A virus, invisible to the eye and of yet unknown magnitude, is spreading. How many people have been infected with the coronavirus, how many people might still die and when will we have developed a vaccine—these and many other questions remain unanswered. Just like the question of how the radical action currently taken around Europe will impact our economies and democracies.

The coronavirus is not just another infectious disease but a virus pandemic. The word “pandemic” derives from the Greek words pan (all) and demos (people), and it is indeed all people who are affected by it to the same extent. Yet we seem oblivious to this truth, thinking that a reasonable answer is to restrain people within borders. Why would the virus care that the border between Germany and France has been closed? Why has Spain become some-thing to shun in our efforts to contain the virus? The answer you will get is: because health systems are national matters and each state must take care of its sick within its respective borders. While this is true, it is also the core problem. The pandemic affects all people. It shows that we are all connected by that invisible bond of being human. All people are equal before the virus. Indeed, it is only before the virus that people are once more becoming hu-mans, i.e. members of a certain animal species that happen to be good hosts for the replication of an often deadly virus.

Generally speaking, viruses are an unsolved metaphysical problem. Nobody knows whether they are alive. This is due to the fact that we are still lacking a clear definition of life. In fact, nobody knows where life really begins. Is it enough to have DNA and RNA or do we need cells with the ability to multiply autonomously? The truth is: we do not know, just like we do not know whether plants, insects or even our own livers are conscious beings. The Earth’s ecosystem might still turn out to be one giant living organism. Is the coronavirus a planetary immune response against human hubris leading to the destruction of countless creatures simply out of greed for profit?

The coronavirus is revealing the systemic weaknesses of the 21st century’s dominant ideology. These include the misbelief that we can drive human and moral progress through scientific and technological progress alone, which in turn leads us to believe that scientific experts can solve universal social problems. The coronavirus is to prove this point, plain for all to see. This will, however, turn out to be a dangerous misconception. Yes, we do need to consult virologists. It is only them who can help understand and contain the virus and save human lives. But who will listen when they tell us that every year, more than two hundred thousand children die from diarrhea caused by viruses caught from dirty water? Why does nobody care about these children? Sadly, the answer is quite simple: because these children do not live in Germany,

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Spain, France or Italy. This, of course, is not entirely true either. They live in European refugee camps, after fleeing from unjust situations that we as consumers are partly to blame for.

There is no real progress without moral progress. This is the lesson the pandemic teaches us, with racist prejudice being revealed everywhere. Trump does his best to paint the virus a Chinese problem; Boris Johnson takes the UK down a social-Darwinist path, trying to solve the problem by building up eugenic herd immunity. Many people in Germany believe their health system to be superior to its Italian counterpart, trusting that Germany will somehow do better in handling the crisis. These are dangerous stereotypes coupled with foolish prejudice.

We are all in the same boat. This is hardly news. The 21st century in itself is a pandemic, the result of globalization. All the virus does is reveal what has already been there: our need for an entirely new understanding of global awareness. Peter Sloterdijk provides us with a suitable term: instead of communism, we need communism. This means that we must vaccinate against intellectual poison dividing us into national cultures, races, age groups and classes competing with each other. Right now, Europeans are protecting their sick and elderly in an unprecedented effort of solidarity. To achieve this, we are locking in our children, closing our schools and creating a medical state of emergency. We are investing billions to boost our economies. If we continue down the same route we were pursuing before the coronavirus outbreak, we will be facing even worse crises: more dangerous viruses, impossible to prevent; a continued economic war with the USA currently fought by the European Union; the spread of racism and nationalism aimed at people who seek refuge after we provided their executioners with weapons and the scientific knowledge to build chemical weapons. And let's not forget about the climate crisis, which is worse than any virus because its result will be the gradual self-extinction of human life. The coronavirus has merely slowed this process down for a limited time. Before the coronavirus, the world order was not normal, it was lethal. Why can we not invest billions to change our mobility? Why can we not use the digital transformation to hold business meetings online instead of unnecessarily flying all over the world in private jets? When will we finally understand that compared to our misbelief that we will be able to solve all modern-world problems with science and technology, the coronavirus is actually quite harmless?

This is a call to all of us, all human beings, not just Europeans: we need a new kind of awareness. Every human being must receive ethical training to be able to fully apprehend the enormous danger that lies in blindly following science and technology. Of course, fighting the virus with all means at hand is the right strategy for now. All of a sudden, we live solidarity and experience waves of morality. This is a good development. But at the same time, we must not forget that, within a few weeks, we have transitioned from a state of populist disdain for scientific expertise to what my friend from New York is calling a "science-obeying North Korea." We must understand that the chains of infection of global capitalism, destroying our nature and dulling our national citizens' minds so that we become full-time tourists and consumers, will kill more people in the long run than any virus ever could. Why does a medical or virological finding yield solidarity while we widely ignore the philosophical conclusion that the only way out of suicidal globalization is a world order beyond an accumulation of competing national states driven by mindless and quantitative economic logic? After the virus pandemic, we will need a

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metaphysical pan-demic, a unification of all people under the all-embracing sky of which we will never be able to escape. We are, and will continue to be, part of this Earth. We are, and will continue to be, mortal and fragile. So let us become citizens of this Earth, cosmopolitans in a metaphysical pandemic. Everything else will be the end of us, and no virologist will be able to save us.

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