



A return to normality would be the worst defeat

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The Covid-19 crisis is like a magnifying mirror, reflecting some of the defining characteristics of our societies in a particularly harsh light. It has a biomedical dimension: the emergence of a new virus, its rapid spread in the human population, the challenges of treating it, and the search for an effective vaccine. But biomedical factors alone cannot explain the extent of this catastrophe. The pandemic also has a social and political dimension, and it has highlighted the glaring issue of social inequalities: most particularly, those of class and gender.

It is still too early to carry out a full appraisal of the situation, but what we know so far already tells us a lot. Among the people who have fallen ill with Covid-19 and died of it, the overwhelming proportion come from the most disadvantaged social groups. In Brazil, according to a study published in August 2020, the fatality rate of the virus was twice as high in the poor districts of Rio de Janeiro as it was in the rest of the city, even though a lower proportion of elderly people live there. In different ways, social inequalities in health have increased all around the world. They obey complex dynamics involving the interaction between working conditions, forms of employment, income, accommodation, access to healthcare, social security cover, and pre-existing comorbidity conditions partly attributable to occupational and environmental exposure. And social inequalities are no less glaring in other areas where the consequences of the

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Covid-19 crisis have been felt: job losses, descent into poverty, the aggravation of other health problems, and the impact on education systems. This is a landscape in which social inequalities seem to single out victims for the virus, and in turn its impact exacerbates these inequalities. In a sense, this crisis tells us that the threat is by no means an external one. The enemy of the human species is not a virus. The enemy is among us, in societies where material and scientific resources have never been so plentiful, and yet apparently also so vulnerable.

There are losers then, evidently, but there are also winners. A report published by Oxfam in September 2020 shows that wealth distribution has become even more unequal than it was before the Covid-19 crisis. The report highlights the increased profits of a number of multinational

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companies: just between mid-March and the end of May, the world's 25 richest billionaires saw their wealth grow by 255 billion dollars. The subordination of political institutions to the interests of these winners is one of the factors that prevented a faster, more efficient response to the virus.

Class inequalities are interlinked with gender inequalities. Since the start of the crisis, women have been at the forefront of catering for vital needs, in both paid and unpaid work. A whole, ill-defined occupational domain, sometimes referred to as "care", is very largely populated by women, and particularly women from working-class backgrounds. Capitalism systematically devalues these activities compared with the production of material goods. They are lower paid, they are tied to particular locations, and the skills they require are often regarded as a natural propensity, mainly gender-based but sometimes also according to ethnicity. This results in low wages or unpaid work, trivialisation of work-related hazards, and forms of employment that are often insecure and informal. The austerity policies pursued for over 30 years have had a particularly crippling effect on essential common goods such as public health. With Covid-19, beyond care work it is the multitude of "menial" jobs that have proved to be as irreplaceable as they are devalued: public transport, street cleansing, food production and distribution, cleaning, and so on.

The obsession with cost-cutting in essential activities goes hand in hand with the concentration of wealth amongst the privileged classes. Strict limits have been placed on increases in public spending on healthcare, education and culture, while air transport and e-commerce have seen a boom.

This crisis, which is far from being just about health, prompts the fundamental question: what should our world look like post-Covid-19? It is something that every human being has probably been wondering throughout this crisis. There is a whole range of issues to be considered: both very personal, as a result of the experience of distressing situations, and very communal, because the crisis has confirmed the extent to which we are social animals, completely undermined by isolation. Our individual life plans make sense only in a society that can accommodate them. The post-Covid-19 question has not yet been settled. For leaders, the answer appears to be self-evident: a return to normality with a few adaptations. But this is not the case for everybody. In the spring of 2020, finding themselves in situations of unprecedented difficulty, nurses displayed large signs on the façades of hospitals which read: "Today caring for patients, tomorrow out on the streets." This appeal resonates in every language. If it is heard widely enough, it becomes the key to another possible response: mass mobilisation for a society built on egalitarian foundations. ●

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