

COVID-19 and the Triumph of the ‘Unconstrained Vision of Humankind’

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ALBERTO MINGARDI

Istituto Bruno Leoni

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Abstract

Genuine emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can be used by politics to foster particular policy goals. To avoid ‘wasting a crisis’ meant inflating the public budget, with no measures immediately related to healthcare or other social spending. In the European Union, this process took the form of the ‘Next Generation EU’ funds. Increasing public spending and borrowing is consistent with a ‘vision’ (in the terminology of Thomas Sowell) in which human beings can engineer their own society with a top-down approach and apparatus. While the pandemic was ultimately halted thanks to the automatic reaction of our immune systems, fostered by vaccinations, all the political emphasis was on policies requiring conscious action, such as business shutdowns. The pandemic’s legacy will endure in its emphasis on government action, the superior knowledge of experts, and inordinate public budgets. It is a triumph of what Sowell labelled the ‘unconstrained vision’ of humankind and the demise of the traditional role of economics in highlighting scarcity and trade-offs.

Introduction

During the 2008 financial crisis, Rahm Emanuel, then an advisor to US President Barack Obama and later the mayor of Chicago, famously said that an apt politician ‘never let[s] a crisis go to waste’. The catchphrase has been repeated many times since, by leaders of very different kinds. Yet perhaps we fully understood it only during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Faced with a genuine emergency, European leaders acted with resolve. Their resolutions were, however, perhaps better attuned to their own ideological mindsets than the genuine result of coping with the new situation at hand. This is hardly surprising or outrageous: while political leaders constantly claim to be pragmatic, they reason and act within a previously adopted framework of ideas.

The COVID-19 pandemic became the occasion for increasing both public spending and borrowing, in the tacit understanding that monetary policies were to be kept lax and fiscal rules were to be suspended *sine die*.³ It is telling that such new public spending was targeted not at strengthening healthcare systems but rather at projects aiming to tackle climate policy and foster digital innovation. The healthcare emergency produced an economic stimulus (more than a targeted healthcare response) that aimed at goals with which the European establishments have long been flirting.

While emergencies 'naturally' tend to see a growth in the scope of government activity,⁴ this time the crisis was consciously used to 'do more' and to end up with a stronger and bigger government. This process has been fed by the idea that unfettered use of political power and uncompromising public spending were beneficial and had very few side effects.

A crisis not to be wasted

In early 2020, the news that a new coronavirus had appeared in China mutated from a reported event to become a part of the life of all Europeans. Human societies have always struggled with parasites, and such struggles have contributed to shaping them (see McNeill, 1976). But human societies had never been as technologically advanced and prosperous as they were when they met the new coronavirus. Our advancement had consequences of very different kinds. On the one hand, science and applied research allowed us to develop instruments to cope with the new coronavirus in an impressively short time period. On the other hand, the development of faster information technology and, particularly, of social media produced a 'pandemic of information'. With this, I do not mean merely the by now familiar issue of *fake news* (some of which resulted in sanitary mismanagement and bad treatment) but also a sense of emotivity which will shape the memory of the COVID-19 pandemic and which has already shaped the policies that developed during the crisis.

The RNA virus that causes the disease called COVID-19 is SARS-CoV-2. It is only the most recent among many animal viruses that have become parasites of humans over the past millennia. In terms of lethality, SARS-CoV-2 is less dangerous than Marburg, Ebola, and two other coronaviruses in the same family (SARS and MERS). However, while these more lethal viruses that can infect humans currently fail to establish persistent transmission cycles in the host, that is,

person-to-person transmission, SARS-CoV-2 has rapidly become, and forever will be, a parasite of our species (with some animal reservoirs among other mammals). To date it has not killed anywhere near as many people as HIV (30 million) nor the 'Spanish flu' (estimates are variable but it may have caused about 50 million deaths in the early twentieth century). As far as we know now, the lethality of COVID-19 is more akin to that of the influenza pandemics of the 1950s (1957–1958) and 1960s (1968–1969), to which about one million deaths (probably an underestimate) have been attributed out of a world population of three billion.

Whatever its origin, SARS-CoV-2 is surprisingly well adapted to the demographic and social setting prevalent in most Western societies: an older population heavily concentrated in cities. Its spread is favoured by the fact that it usually causes severe or lethal infections in the older age cohort, which for the past half a century has represented a conspicuous percentage of the most advanced countries' populations, whereas it only causes relatively mild symptoms in those individuals (younger people) who transmit it more easily.

The ongoing competition between the human species and the virus is leading to some form of dynamic equilibrium, in a time frame that is not entirely predictable, even if vaccines – particularly if they are widely used – will surely be decisive.

Paradoxically, the uncertainties regarding the time required to reach an equilibrium are a consequence of the better health conditions and more advanced healthcare we enjoy in our complex societies. It is a virus, in short, that is particularly dangerous for societies that allow themselves what has historically been a great luxury: growing old.

The evolutionary history of our species cannot be understood without considering the impact that parasites, including pathogenic ones, have had on it. The COVID-19 pandemic was a Darwinian phenomenon in which 'we' as humans adapted, but SARS-CoV-2 adapted too. In our case, the adaptations are reflective and purposeful. In the case of the virus, they are casual but 'sifted' through natural selection. Yet our adaptations and those of the virus interact in a sort of dance, which can hardly call for comprehensive social reforms. The way in which we could pragmatically adapt to the pandemic would depend on the definition of the targets or values we aim to preserve,⁵ but the sort of interventions and rhetoric we have witnessed since March 2020 suggest something different. Path dependence from the way in which the preceding financial crisis was managed, as well as the precise 'vision' of the government and the intellectual establishment, shaped the response and will potentially influence our societies for many years ahead.

The pandemic spread from China and thus the initial Chinese reaction, which consisted in locking down the city of Wuhan and other cities in the region of Hubei, deeply influenced the



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Western response. In early 2020 (up to February), the risks of contagion were downplayed in the West and stock markets behaved as if a pandemic was a remote possibility. But when investors and the chattering classes became alert to the risk, a fair number of them assumed that the Chinese model for tackling the virus was the best approach.⁶

The first European country to be severely impacted was Italy, in particular the area encompassing the cities of Bergamo, Lodi, and Piacenza. In just a few days, the hospitals became overwhelmed. That led the Italian government to opt for a national lockdown. The aim was to avoid replicating the same nightmare situation in the south of the country, where the healthcare system is traditionally more fragile. Ever since that time, restrictions have been with us to different degrees, sometimes becoming stricter, sometimes more relaxed. To a certain extent this response was predictable and inevitable, as we needed to adapt to a new situation. But there was also an ideological twist.

On one level, politicians suggested that people needed to face a trade-off between ‘economics’ and ‘healthcare’. Economic activities were given classifications and some of them, considered trivial, were forced to shut down. Such activities were basically considered important merely as generators of salaries. No attention was paid to the dynamic effects of the shutdowns nor to their psychological downside. Government understood its role as a sort of insurance policy, to be used to support people’s falling income in lockdown.

On another level, the way in which we dealt with COVID-19 was an egregious case of path dependence. The last major crisis we had faced previously was that triggered by the sub-prime mortgage collapse in 2007–2008, on top of which the sovereign debt crisis in Europe developed in 2010–2011. How did we deal with those crises? Basically, through monetary policy, through quantitative easing

(that is, asset purchase programmes by the central bank). Surreptitiously, the European Central Bank removed the corset of European fiscal rules, gave some oxygen to the member states, and allowed them to make moderately expansive budget laws and to finance their enlarged deficits relatively easily.

How did we deal with the COVID-19 crisis? In a very similar way. From the outset, European elites thought that increasing public spending was the necessary condition to make lockdowns acceptable and sustain the continent’s economies.

On a deeper level, such an outcome was necessitated by the fact that we chose to impose a very strict lockdown regime. This naturally produced a need to increase indebtedness, if only to make up for the lower state revenues resulting from the lower level of private sector activity. Yet this approach was somehow strengthened by a vision which thought that a good crisis should not be allowed to go to waste. Some leaders, both in the intellectual field and in the realm of politics (an example is the Italian healthcare minister, Roberto Speranza), clearly thought that the virus had provided them with a chance to overcome ‘neoliberalism’ or to put a leash on globalisation. In a book published in October 2020, Speranza claimed that the ‘war’ on the virus was over, although the book was retired from circulation when Italy was hit by the second wave of COVID-19 and its message seemed decidedly too optimistic. In his book Speranza maintained that the pandemic showed us why we should do away with fiscal restraint, austerity, and the almighty power of international markets: the time is finally ripe for radical change (Speranza, 2020).

Visions’ and crisis

In his works in political philosophy, which perhaps have not received the attention they deserve, Thomas Sowell suggested that we focus on ‘visions’ rather than ‘theories’. A vision is ‘what we sense or feel *before* we have constructed any systematic reasoning that could be called a theory, much less deduced any specific consequences as hypotheses to be tested against evidence’. In short, ‘a vision is our sense of how the world works’ (Sowell, 2007 [1987]: 4).

Visions are postures: they are not necessarily conscious, or chosen, attitudes towards the world around us but they imply a certain tendency or predisposition to understand it in a particular way. Sowell distinguished between a 'constrained' and an 'unconstrained' vision, each of them being the likely foundation for different nuances of a social theory.

What is or is not 'constrained', in these different frameworks, is the nature and hence the possibilities of human beings. In the constrained vision, 'the moral limitations of man in general' are 'treated as inherent facts of life, the basic constraint ... The fundamental moral and social challenge was to make the best of the possibilities which existed within that constraint, rather than dissipate energies in an attempt to change human nature' (Sowell, 2007 [1987]: 12). In this framework, society and cooperation are not the outcome of the design of a great planner but rather the result of a myriad of interactions into which women and men enter in pursuance of their own goals and not in order to produce a superior social good.

The 'unconstrained vision', on the contrary, assumes that 'man's understanding and disposition were capable of intentionally creating social benefits' (Sowell, 2007 [1987]: 15). The reference to understanding suggests to us that the constrained vision assumes not only the moral but also the cognitive limitations of individuals, whereas the unconstrained visions imply that our cognitive limitations can be overcome too.

Sowell considers Adam Smith to be the champion of the constrained vision and William Godwin to be the patron saint of the unconstrained one. But more than their intellectual ancestry, what matters in the context of our discussion is a fundamental attitude which comes with each vision or mindset. For the unconstrained vision, problems in society call for solutions which can be planned and executed by benevolent social actors, if only they are endowed with enough power to cope with the challenge. For the constrained vision, definitive solutions to social problems are rare occurrences. Those who hold the constrained vision dear tend to think in terms of *trade-offs* rather than solutions.

Sowell writes:

The great evils of the world – war, poverty, and crime, for example – are seen in completely different terms by those with the constrained and the unconstrained visions. If human options are not inherently constrained, then the presence of such repugnant and disastrous phenomena virtually cries out for explanation – and for solutions. But if the limitations and passions of man himself are at the heart of these painful phenomena, then what requires explanation are the ways in which they have been avoided or minimized. (Sowell, 2007 [1987]: 24)

The idea that 'solutions' to social problems can be manufactured justifies and requires substantial political power. The 'unconstrained vision' tends to imply an unconstrained vision of government: a limited understanding of its enterprise will, by definition, suggest that only *some* problems are within the province of government. But if human beings can be improved and their options enhanced if only the right set of policies is conceived, that translates into a need to unleash the power which may operate to that effect.

The 'unconstrained vision' is, in some version, the prevalent one within our ruling classes. It was epitomised, in the context of COVID-19, by the many who reasoned and acted similarly to the Italian healthcare minister Speranza. In another work, Sowell refers to the 'vision of the anointed': a large chunk of the intellectual class thinks it owns the necessary instruments to save the world from itself, a recurrent need in history. The anointed, explains Sowell, seem to assume '(1) that they have more knowledge than the average member of the benighted and (2) that this is the relevant comparison'.

On the contrary,

The real comparison, however, is not between the knowledge possessed by the average member of the educated elite versus the average member of the general public but rather the *total* knowledge brought to bear through social processes (the competition of the marketplace, social sorting, etc.) involving millions of people, versus the secondhand knowledge of generalities possessed by a smaller elite group. (Sowell, 1995: 114)

Sowell insists that this elitist thinking is predicated upon the substitution of the knowledge produced via bottom-up processes with top-down decision-making. In a sense, this very substitution requires an increase in the power of government institutions. Therefore, the absence of the sort of knowledge which is generated through networks and markets needs to be compensated for by the sort of all-powerfulness which can bend reality to fit a plan. These elites craft their claim to power in terms of a legitimacy founded on their knowledge, but they actually need that power to be able to mould a society which they do not necessarily attempt to comprehend.

In *The Vision of the Anointed*, Sowell classifies 'crisis' among the buzzwords of the 'vocabulary of the anointed' (Sowell, 1995: 183). All sorts of situations are classified as 'crises', regardless of their actual characteristics. The vocabulary of 'crises' per se calls for *solutions*, which can only come from the top.

Understanding the COVID-19 crisis as a Darwinian struggle, as I suggested earlier, would have called for a trial-and-error method, with no pretence of offering a 'solution'. It was instead understood as a crisis which governments could solve and – not by chance – was from the very beginning interpreted as an



occurrence akin to war. See, for example, an article by Mario Draghi in the *Financial Times* that supported the approach adopted by most European governments and which contributed to shaping the European Union's future 'Recovery Fund':

The coronavirus pandemic is a human tragedy of potentially biblical proportions. Many today are living in fear of their lives or mourning their loved ones. The actions being taken by governments to prevent our health systems from being overwhelmed are brave and necessary. They must be supported. (Draghi, 2020)

Notice the use of the war metaphor. The war metaphor had great success in the pandemic and proved rhetorically effective from government viewpoints, as far as stressing the uniqueness of the situation and hence the need for an extraordinary response. But it was ultimately misleading: SARS-CoV-2 was not an army, no foreign general was in charge, no plans to invade were prepared. The virus, in short, lacked purposeful action.

Yet the use of the war metaphor was conducive to preaching a purposeful change of behaviour. Governments, particularly in the first phase of the pandemic, wanted *people* to respond to the virus by changing their lifestyles. The management of the emergency required a personal involvement and a change of behaviour comparable to rationing during wartime. But success in the pandemic came only when vaccines entered the picture, which means when we stopped *consciously* fighting a war and allowed the automatic response of our immune system to take care of us.

The multiplication of the anointed and the triumph of the unconstrained vision

Sowell explains that the 'vision of the anointed' is commonly shared by the most educated few, and legitimates their claim to rule over the unsophisticated many. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, their attitudes were not different from those of the many.

The educated few can rightly claim to have a deep knowledge of their respective field of expertise, but as a rule this knowledge was unsuited to face the particular threat represented by an emerging virus. The biases of the few were unbridled in this new circumstance, particularly the idea that action should be organised and planned top-down. The many felt more or less the same. No matter how sceptical of expertise 'populist' political parties may have been in the past, virtually everybody trusted a top-down response to be sensible and effective.

With the exception of a handful of fringe intellectuals, the whole of the political and intellectual establishment shared an 'unconstrained' vision. This 'unconstrained' vision was

not, interestingly, predicated on bold confidence in medical expertise and scientific progress. Yes, global research and 'Big Pharma' ultimately came to the rescue. But what the unconstrained vision trusted was governmental responses aiming at curbing the virus *before* vaccine deployment.

There are two elements to this, one cultural and one financial, and they are intertwined.

The anointed are, according to Sowell, self-congratulating. Their cement is self-righteousness. The pandemic produced mass self-righteousness: mass self-righteousness, shared not only by that population subset typically styled as 'elites', but virtually everyone who aligned with it and followed certain prescriptions, was gratified with feeling 'on the side of science', as they themselves would say. Social media not only amplified the *influence* of such thoughts but made the self-righteous attitude behind them viral. The anointed are a minority no more.

The 'unconstrained' vision found weak opposition and spread its roots more widely than ever. From the very beginning, the discourse on the pandemic has been filled with moralistic undertones. During the first lockdown, to give only one example, the mayor of Milan urged joggers to stay at home (by law, they were supposed to jog only in the vicinity of their domicile anyway) because 'while you jog and are happy, you have a hundred in the window looking at you and getting angry because they feel confined' (see, among others, Tg-Com24, 2020). Joggers were the first to be scapegoated in the pandemic. Younger people came next, as curfews made it impossible for them to enjoy dining out in the evening. Public health measures were argued to be sacrifices that were needed to prove virtue and exorcise the virus in each case.

This moralist rhetoric reinforced both the sense of a crisis and the narrative of the necessity of ever-growing interventions to cope with it. The way in which, according to the sociologist John Robb, we are 'being mentally rewired by the technologies of social networking' (Robb, 2018) suggests that widespread moral outrage could be a more effective lever for interventionism than ever. Certain policies dear to the 'anointed', to use Sowell's language, were stopped in the past because they coincided with a reduction of freedom of choice on the part of consumers at large. But what if consumers endorse some modernised version of Sabbatarianism, for example, in order to participate in the 'fight for climate justice'? What if people, as political actors, become the first to demand allegiance to elite thinking, thereby sabotaging bottom-up devices such as markets for creating and disseminating information?

The other element is financial. What is now 'unconstrained' is public finance, which is considered the source of solutions to all the potential problems we may face. During the pandemic, the sort of top-down policies we refer to, being based on widespread shutdowns of the economy, clearly

necessitated support to small businesses and other categories that lost substantial chunks of their income. But we have gone way beyond that. The pandemic emergency allowed for unprecedented growth of public spending in peacetime, most of which was not healthcare related. The so-called Next Generation EU plan was predicated upon fostering changes that a market economy will not accomplish by itself, or not at that pace. It made use of the vocabulary of the crisis (the current, pandemic one, and the future, climate one) to foster a veritable palingenesis of society and change the way in which factors of production are autonomously associated with economic actors.

In this context, fiscal responsibility or even responsibility towards future generations, in the sense of public debts, are simply out of the picture. They quickly became words of no use in politics, clearly anachronistic in the context of an unprecedented crisis which needed to be met with unprecedented means. Economics used to be 'the science of the postmagical age' as it kept 'telling us that we cannot do it, that magic will not help' (McCloskey, 1992: 40). But nowadays in a sense we are back to the magical age, and the old economist's appeal to the need to cope with scarce resources is a thing of the past. The lesson of the pandemic is that challenges should be met by a determined faith in governments' and experts' ability, supported by whatever resources may be needed – supplied by government, if possible by government borrowing.

The nuances of economic thinking are gone and the thinking of the chattering classes appears, at least to this author, surprisingly homogeneous. The new emergency represented by the war in Ukraine will test the constellation of ideas and proposals that emerged from COVID-19. So far, the impression is that self-congratulatory make-believe is a revolutionary force, destined not to be swayed.

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