



Comfortably Numb in the Midst of the Corona Crisis

European View
2020, Vol. 19(1) 103–107
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DOI: 10.1177/1781685820919615
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

The coronavirus has taken the West by surprise. It has called into question basic assumptions about globalisation, how our society is organised, how safe we actually are and to what extent we control the world around us. The virus arrived when we were without the proper conceptual framework to deal with a new type of virus, and we could not have imagined how much of a social challenge it would represent. The novelty of the situation has made most of us feel strangely confused, numb and calm, and in many cases has left us not knowing what to do with ourselves. This satirical review seeks to put some distance and detachment between us and the situation and give us an outside perspective of what the corona crisis can teach us, both at the individual and social levels. Before the situation becomes the 'new normal', we should take the time to extract some lessons from this mess.

Keywords

COVID-19, Coronavirus, Quarantine, Confinement, Globalisation, EU

Introduction

We are living in a time of reason and progress, or so we are told. The concepts of wealth, access to basic public services, living with a full and warm belly, and (relative) safety from unpredictable violent events are all things we take for granted. So much so that we do not think about these issues on a daily basis. This widespread safety and security has made us very proud, self-assured and self-satisfied. Although there had been some difficult times in the last few years, still the common conviction among the middle class and the higher-middle class urban elites had been that we have democracy, wealth, a market economy, economic growth and progress, at least in the developed world, and that all of

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these would continue. The self-satisfaction of the population of the developed world had reached sky-high levels. Then suddenly, somewhere, someone decided to cook some bat soup, and the whole world immediately went . . . yes, you know the word. There is an old adage that a butterfly flapping its wings in a garden has the potential to cause a terrible storm on the other side of the world. Can undercooked bat soup cause unfathomable disruption 8,000 km away? Globalisation, in this instance, has truly backfired. This is a troubling experience, as Western Europeans are accustomed to safety and relative economic and political stability. The coronavirus epidemic has therefore confronted many of us with the idea that perhaps we take our safety for granted.

Where are we, actually?

If there is any certainty about anything right now, it is that the so-called developed world is looking extremely stupid in the face of the challenge that the coronavirus poses. We could have predicted that a pandemic would break out sooner or later, and that under the existing economic arrangements most of our public health services would prove to be extremely underfinanced and unprepared for such a challenge. That much was pretty obvious. What best sums up this situation and the sentiment in society is a meme that went viral a few weeks after the outbreak began in Europe. It shows a middle-aged woman who looks like she works in bio-medical research: ‘You want vaccines from me? You’re paying me 1,800 euros a month for bio-medical research and yet you pay Ronaldo and Messi millions. Go ask them for vaccines!’

Right now, as we sit separately in our own homes to write this, we feel numb and calm in a silly way. At the same time, this is one of the rare moments in our lives when we agree that we could not say exactly what we feel because the situation is so new for us and everyone around us. The most recent plague, the Spanish flu, was so deadly that it killed more people in Europe than the First World War. This coronavirus may not be as deadly, but it is extremely contagious, and therefore poses a new challenge to what we think of when we talk about public health and pandemics. The nature of the danger is different, and this difference is especially obvious in terms of its effect on our lifestyles. To most people, catching the coronavirus means a few days of coughing and a mild fever. How then, can it also deprive us of some of our most treasured forms of entertainment, such as the Euro 2020 football tournament? Have our cultural staples really been taken from us by a simple germ? And that is to say nothing of confinement! Where are millennials, among the least at risk from the outbreak, meant to go to take pictures of their avocado toast? Make it at home and divide the cost by four? Preposterous!

It was a truly delicious irony that the Belgian government’s confinement measures, aimed at slowing the propagation of the virus and resulting in a near-total ban on venturing outside one’s home, would see their implementation coincide with the first real day of spring in Brussels, with clear blue skies and the thermometer showing a hefty 17°C. The following week of confinement went by relatively smoothly, but as the sun beamed down on us through our windows, so did a truly existential question that few of us were prepared to answer: what to do with all this new-found time? And is there

anything that we can do about the crisis, on an individual level, except obey the government's ordinances?

The conceptual problem of dealing with the virus

One of the problematic issues with the outbreak is that people do not know what attitude they should take towards it. The coronavirus caught us without a proper social model that we can use to confront it. We lack a proper persona to wear to face the virus. A persona is a 'mask' that we wear depending on the social context in which we find ourselves and on what is expected from us in a given situation, but that also varies depending on what we expect from ourselves in that situation. Right now we are in the process of working out which social attitude or social mask we should put on to confront the virus. Until we decide on a suitable persona to adopt, we will continue to feel confused, sit at home and try to live as though nothing has happened. We feel calm and numb, but also cross with ourselves for being caught off-guard by a situation that no one anticipated.

The coronavirus is an impersonal force, reminding us of our own mortality. We 'civilised' people of the developed world do not like to be reminded of our mortality. We do not like to be reminded of our limitations. And so the virus has come and we have been left looking like a guy caught with his trousers down and a red face. We are surprised about our mortality, limitations and dependency on other people. Still, the whole world is numb and calm. Impersonal, unconscious fear can be felt under the surface, but the problem is that we cannot see the enemy and, therefore, it is extremely hard to take a concrete stance towards it. French President Emmanuel Macron and US President Donald Trump have both declared that we are at war. But where exactly is the enemy? 'War' is a term used to speak about human affairs, used to describe a conflict with other humans. The state in which we find ourselves right now is so unique that we seem to be short of the proper words and concepts to describe it. That is why we feel so calm, numb and stupid. We do not have a suitable persona to wear or concepts to describe what is happening.

According to philosopher of mind and language Ruth G. Millikan (1984), language is a biological tool of communication, developed through practice. We give something a name based on its effect on us and the name given to the concept denotes this particular effect on us. This denotation is the proper function of the concept. If the name does not properly denote the effect of the concept on us, meaning that the concept's name and practice do not match, this means that the concept is false and simply does not work. This is the case with our conception of 'virus' prior to the arrival of this coronavirus. That is why we have all this confusion with this new situation and within ourselves. The coronavirus scares us, but at the same time it is something so new to us that we do not have proper concepts to draw on, meaning that we do not know exactly how to react. We do not know what the appropriate level of being scared is in this situation, or even what the proper reaction is, because the circumstance is so new. Therefore, we sit numbly and calmly, waiting to see how the situation will develop, and feel cross with ourselves, as we do not know what the proper attitude towards the new situation, the newly evolved

concept of a virus, should be. This state of dumbly sitting and watching will last for a while until we work out our internal attitude towards the virus and the situation it has created—then we can work out the persona, the outward appearance, that is best suited to deal with the new situation. Once the concept has been worked out and we have adjusted to the new situation, everything will become normal once again. It will just be a ‘new normal’. It may even be a new normal for a different-looking world. But we will get used to it, whatever shape it takes. But before that happens, let us at least draw some lessons from this situation.

Conclusion

If anything positive can come out of the coronavirus outbreak, it is a clear lesson of humility in the face of how stupid, and sometimes helpless, we look when confronting it. We can see now how dependent we really are on each other. Not only on others around us and on our closest political community within the boundaries of our nation-states, but also on a proper, coordinated effort by the EU and the international community. We can also now see how interconnected we are and how the economy works at the most rudimentary level. Now it is the most basic functions, carried out by the least well-remunerated labourers, that are keeping us alive. That is what the coronavirus has made us see and appreciate. This experience is part of the new conception of the virus.

The idea that our safety, indeed our survival, might be compromised, has brought out the worst in many individuals. Greed, not fairness or decorum, has become the motivator for large swathes of society. The *Financial Times* (2020) reported that panic stockpiling at the onset of the crisis has led to there being £1 billion of unconsumed food in UK homes. There have been heart-breaking scenes of senior citizens wandering the aisles of supermarkets, seemingly dazed and confused at the absence of all the alimentary staples that they have come to expect and depend on.

At the same time, the crisis has highlighted the humanity within all of us. Supermarkets quickly wised up and created special time slots for the elderly to shop, in order to minimise their potential exposure to the virus. Medical workers have been universally acclaimed for their efforts, and every evening at 8.00 pm, without exception, people across Western Europe have come to their windows to applaud them. This experience will also shape our collective imagination when we next have to deal with a similar challenge.

Therefore, first of all, the coronavirus pandemic offers a lesson of humility. But it also offers a less obvious opportunity. For it gives us the chance to reflect and see that—perhaps as a result of this unfortunate, bat-soup virus—we should slow down a bit and hear what nature is trying to say to us: ‘Listen, humans. You thought that you were the masters of the Earth, that you could control everything. You cannot, so hold your horses and keep calm.’

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