

The Coronavirus Disease Pandemic or About the Impotence of Intellectuals

It is impressive to witness the many signs that are emerging in reaction to the Coronavirus Disease. One of these signs is the way that intellectuals have spoken up.

It is easy to verify that intellectuals worldwide, whether sought after for their opinion or participate on their own accord, flock to the communication media and social networks, to offer their opinions rapidly and frequently, regarding the meaning or the sense of Covid 19, something that is uncommon for this body, risking, in many cases, with their forecasts, the grave consequences that this –never better said– “viral event”, may bring for humanity and planet earth.

This circumstance is surely not relevant to the containment of the pandemic and the cure of the coronavirus disease. Of course, one could also doubt on the strength that his may have to influence a change of “the course of things” in our societies. However, I believe that, at least for us, who consider ourselves “intellectuals”, it is worthwhile to pay attention to this fact. The following reflection has the intention of explaining why.

Recognition and praise are definitely due to the intellectuals taking a stance as a testimony of their commitment and responsibility in the current crisis. This seems to bear witness to the fact that intellectuals today, and particularly philosophers, are making an effort to belie, with their timely participation in the current debate, the famous verdict of their colleague Hegel, who stated that philosophy, because of the task that defines it (the thinking of his time), always comes too late to say how or where reality should lead in its historical course.

Also, and I believe that this can be also recognized as a fact, that its value would not wane even in the case that it would approach and correspond to the logic of one of the more determinant structural characteristics of our current epoch. I refer, in metaphorical terms, to the “environmental pressure” towards a rapid global “presence”, that generates, for the most part, the digitalization of the social processes and communication that in the style of a new and even more rigorous “categorical imperative”, than the Kantian, strongly obliges the intellectuals to hastily make their voices heard in the opinion forums, in order to “be and remain visible”.

In this brief reflection, however, I’m not interested so much in pondering the merits that a massive participation of intellectuals in the public debate of the

crisis of Covid 19 may have, neither am I interested in stopping to judge the explanations that could evolve regarding this reality.

I am more interested in asking myself what this testimony of intellectual commitment evidences regarding its own subjects, the so-called- “scientific community”, here understood particularly as a community of social, philosophical, theological analysts. This is precisely what I wish to indicate with the title chosen, to summarize with it, that with their analysis and opinions, intellectuals “reveal” something of themselves, even if through the circumventions to their stances regarding the current pandemic, or better said, the state of *suspense* of their own thinking, in the face of the bleakness of this crisis. I will explain my impression.

Reading works that, in my opinion, could be representative of this voicing by the intellectuals of different regions of the world, in the face of the current pandemic, such as for example, the compilations of texts published with the titles “*Sopa de Wuhan*¹, *Covid 19*² or *Capitalismo y Pandemia*³ (Wuhan Soup, Covid 19, or Capitalism and Pandemic)—the three available in the social networks--, I have the impression that, with scarce exceptions, the authors’ opinions are considerations that reveal their impotence or perplexity; and that in this sense, seem to say more regarding the intellectual state in which they find themselves in their thinking, than the situation of the crisis itself and the way that it is being experienced by the people in their everyday life.

The question then, that I pointed out as a motive and justification for this reflection regarding what the statements say about the intellectuals themselves when they speak on the topic of Covid 19, would have a paradoxical answer in that this testimony of intellectual commitment is reverted towards its subjects when it “allows to reveal” the impotence that is evidenced by their own thinking with the challenge that the current pandemic of Covid 19 represents to our ways of life (or lifestyles).

I will try now to justify this impression or address it with a few observations. And, with the intention of avoiding any misunderstanding, I would like to state that I offer them as suggestions for self-critique and personal reflection regarding the intellectual state that we find ourselves in as intellectuals and not for polemic pedantic cravings of any sort. In other words, the observations that follow, do not express any yearning for an “I accuse” or “I signal”, but rather to

¹ Included in this compilation are works by Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, Jean Luc Nancy and Slavoj Žižek.

² In this compilation, we find the stances of authors such as Leonardo Boff and Byung-Chul Han, among many others.

³ This work has contributions by Emanuele Coccia, Enrique Dussel, Arundhati Roy and Fernando Savater.

invite to a collective self-critique to assist us in reconsidering the way that we “do our job”, and ask ourselves if we would do a good for the benefit of humanity to find more authentic ways of going about it.

First of all I would like to point out that my impression is based on the surprising discovery that authors that are recognized by the international scientific community as authorities and undisputed referents in their respective disciplines, upon analyzing the causes of Covid 19, and proposing alternatives for the impending situation, they do it, by repeating ideas in the core of their affirmations, that are long known. In fact, there are ideas that for a long time, are common spaces for critical thinking (and not so critical also!). They do this with a certain signification of their treatment as novelty ideas! For example, ideas such as capitalism has limits, or that the dissemination of liberal and possessive individualism has signified the ruin of the sense of community, or that we experience the crisis of a consumerist civilization that has intensified even that which was already unsustainable, such as the massive destruction of nature, or that as a consequence of this model of civilization the foundations of the equilibrium of life have been undermined; or, even as a common horizon of all of the above, the idea of a western patriarchal and narcissistic anthropocentrism as the base cause of the current crisis. Still more can be added, at an existential level, the “discovery of the idea” that the life of the human being is characterized by the vulnerability of its constituent condition as finite, and therefore, the time has come to center the order of our societies on the values of mutual care and common good.

Evidently the sole repetition of ideas considered as fair or as just, or the recourse to traditions that we believe that still have a guiding critical potential in our current times, are not, in themselves, a sign of impotence. On the contrary they can be a sign of humble wisdom. For that reason, the sense of impotence that this recourse has caused in me, can be explained fundamentally by the way that we use it. So then here, I would leave the issue of the valuation of the presumption of novelty on the wayside, in order to keep in mind the impression that the recourse seems to have been made to comply with the function of substituting the *effort of paying attention and remaining attentive* to what is actually emerging with this crisis brought about by Covid 19, particularly as a crisis of habits in the lifestyles, and everyday life, and the *emotional* stability of millions of persons. I have perceived, therefore with a certain *license* (a new Hegelian shrewdness of reason?) the need to not leave behind the known theories and the noise of the dispute among its representatives, at least for the time that this “state of alarm” prevails; in other words, to not risk to “*stop to think*” on what is happening without crutches or preconceived theoretical interests. To think about

a moment of crisis such as we have on hand now, I believe, requires the willingness to open one's eyes and heart, to allow to be affected by what is happening *alarmingly* around us, and within us, as persons and as "intellectuals". That is what I wish to stress with this "*stop to think*", which I understand certainly as a main duty of our "trade".

It is not easy to comply with this duty! I agree, because it requires, no doubt about it, an effort that is disconcerting to us as persons and as intellectuals. But I believe that it is an elemental mandate of intellectual honesty. To justify my opinion, I offer two reasons that are intertwined. First of all, the compliance of this duty motivates a culmination of the uncomfortable process of learning that requires a willingness towards affection in the sense of experiencing occupying the skin of those contemporaries that are suffering this crisis in their own flesh. And, secondly, because this view of the crisis from the preoccupations and the fears of others is what truly gives us a view and a base of real life, to decide whether it is opportune or not to recur to our "reserve" of theories in search of good explanations of the sense of the situation that we are confronting today; but also for the discernment of the vitality of the ideas that we wager on as approaches to the crisis, whether they come from our "reserves" or from new creations.

I mentioned that these two reasons are intertwined and that we need to see them as two moments of a same movement. I will allow myself to point out that the first one summarizes what in my opinion is truly decisive: that the intellectuals be willing to leave behind any pretentiousness as teachers or tutors, and share those spaces where life pulses, and to decide to search with others, approaches and answers to the needs that are emerging in the vital situation of the "overwhelmed creature", to say it in a biblical expression that the young Marx, expounded.

Secondly, I would like to point out an aspect that ensues from what I have just said.

The impression I get with regard to the impotence that I mention here has to do with the places where intellectuals usually go to think: Universities, research institutes, foundations, etc. In other words we speak from places that usually have a high working stability and confer economic security to their researchers and educators, that also have a broad social recognition; in addition there are places –and this is what I wish to highlight–, where the rule is to study the "problems of people", as "issues", that are certainly important, and in the face of which we take a stance, but in the end, are existentially very far away. This existential distance from the places from which we usually think about the daily life of the people, is also what, for me, explains the impotence that is

reflected, for example, in the discourses that point out the advantages that forced confinement may have for harvesting the “essential aspects” of life, and even offer advice for it. And therefore I ask, rhetorically, isn’t this advice, an unawareness of the life condition and the preoccupations of most of the persons that the pandemic of Covid 19 affect more directly: those who have contracted the disease, those that have lost their life, that have lost family members or friends, those who have lost their jobs or fear losing it? Doesn’t this advice reflect an ignorance of the emotional fragility of the “overwhelmed creature”, of the domestic violence that a situation of confinement can bring about? I believe that this is truly so. For this reason, I leave this thought with the intention of self-critique: To remedy our impotence in the face of a crisis such as what we are experiencing at this moment, we intellectuals need, without any doubt, better theoretical resources, but certainly I believe that we need to search out those places that bear witness and truth to our “trade” (Ignacio Ellacuría).

And, lastly, this third observation.

As philosophers we are fully aware of the phenomenological shift proposed by Edmund Husserl with the intention of correcting the course of a philosophy which, in his opinion, had lost the meaning of things. Therefore, his theme: “Back to the things themselves”. I bring this here, because a lot of what is being written regarding the current pandemic, it is fair to recognize, seems to echo this shift. However, what is currently being written equally shows that this shift alone is not enough. And in this sense I end with this idea: The search for new places that can remedy our frequent impotence to speak (with the weight that life brings!) about the problems that affect life and human co-existence, needs to be accompanied by a shift that turns us “back to the things themselves”, with a *return back to our contemporaries*. Because as live interlocutors, they are indispensable to understand, for example, that the “essential” for the meaning of life, can also be attained at the resting place, while taking a breath of fresh air, beside a colleague nurse that has spent hours taking care of a patient, or in sharing a cigarette with the “copain”, with whom a person cleans the train station.

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(Translated from Spanish by Barbara Sweet-Hansen)