

New perspectives for a new reality: Lessons from the ‘Plague Year’

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Another plague year would . . . bring us to see with differing eyes than those which we looked on things with before.

(Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 1722)¹

As we confront the global crisis induced by COVID-19, we must be willing to recognize that the old ways of thinking have failed us, and that new stories are needed to account for our new reality. What better time than now to look again at the facts, to see them with new eyes, and to invent new ways of reckoning with them? What better time to interrogate the assumptions that scientists and economists make about their studies and to forge new links between disciplines that are usually kept separate?

Homo oeconomicus (see Table 1), as an amoral individualist, took the lead in the 1980s with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan at the head, respectively, of the UK and US governments. Thatcher, the ‘Iron Lady’, claimed that there was no such thing as society. On the contrary, living in a symbiotic environment, the citizens of open civil society can produce concrete benefits for all. They are economic and social actors whose cooperative actions can relieve public concerns about the increasing human, social and economic costs from recurring disease, the deterioration of the human habitat, and other extreme events and developments.

The common good takes care of human beings and of nature. The treatment is empathy, whose bearer is *Homo empathicus*. *Homo empathicus* foretells the birth of communities whose members can put themselves ‘inside the heads’ of one another and who will respond sympathetically and with understanding to the natural environment.

When humanity is attacked by a crisis which prohibits a return to the habits and behaviours of the past, its accumulated capital suffers a strong tremor and faces the danger of crumbling into ruin. One of its values, however – social capital – may counter that imminent risk. Social capital, which consists of trust, respect and the creation of harmonious relationships, will continue to grow, even in a situation of profound economic and social trauma, provided that the empathy factor comes into play.

Volunteer corps, charitable organizations, civil service and various social networks can assist people not to revert to the status quo ante and, rather, can guide them towards an unknown future. If physical proximity in time and space is reduced because of the triggering event, empathy combined with digital technology can yield a different kind of proximity and social togetherness. The gauntlet that COVID-19 has thrown at the feet of society may have the effect of opening the door to opportunities to strengthen existing social networks and to design new ones, thanks to the empathy–digital combination.

Disagreements that blossom into hostility and the elimination of doubt are cumulonimbus clouds that announce the coming of a social storm. What sweeps them away is the ability to understand and share the feelings, sensations and emotions of others. The trust that comes from empathy forms cirrus clouds indicating the presence of pleasant and constructive social interaction. At the time of the Persian philosopher Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), merchants with their trades were deemed to be bearers of trust and happiness. The Industrial Revolution brought to the fore the image of the arrogant individual in explicit and obsessive pursuit of the accumulation of personal wealth, detached from thoughts for humanity in general and bringing psychological and emotional damage. Charles Dickens, in *A Christmas Carol*, published in 1843, offers us a vivid portrayal of the misanthrope, the greedy and miserly Ebenezer Scrooge, who learns empathy when he is forced to rethink his lifestyle and reconsider his values, a process initiated by the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley. Scrooge tells Marley’s ghost that he, Marley, was ‘always a good man of business’:

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Table 1. Human species modelled on the commonly used term *Homo sapiens*.

<i>Homo civis et socialis</i> . Actively participates in the life of the community and is concerned about economic and social inequalities. Inclined to altruism and spontaneous sociability.
<i>Homo communicator</i> . Operates in cyberspace for the unification of the forces of atoms (machines) with the forces of bits (information).
<i>Homo empathicus</i> . Understands the thoughts and feelings of others and responds sympathetically to nature.
<i>Homo faber</i> . Focuses why things are done and how they may be transformed.
<i>Homo innovatus</i> . Thrives in an open innovation culture.
<i>Homo laborans</i> . Questions how mutations happen.
<i>Homo ludens</i> . Seeks and harvests ideas that precede numbers and graphics and finds work more enriching as its playful quality increases.
<i>Homo narrans</i> . The storytelling human.
<i>Homo oeconomicus</i> . The selfish individualist whose exclusive motivation is self-interest, striving to maximize his or her utility.
<i>Homo romanticus</i> . Gives weight to incommensurable values such as passions, dreams and paranoia.
<i>Homo sentiens</i> . Possesses imaginative anticipation and an emotional predisposition to appreciate subjective experiences; determined to act extraordinarily in an unpredictable future.

‘Business!’ cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. ‘Man-kind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!’ (Dickens, 1984: 34)

We can trace back the values and attitudes that Dickens depicts in Scrooge and Marley to the time of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776 – they were unintentionally triggered by the strength of the idea that everyone would benefit from entrepreneurs who, working in their own interests, strove for increasing profit and gain. Such an objective, it was thought, would bring more employment, more and new products and services, a higher entrepreneurial birth rate, and additional resources for scientific research. So why has all the entrepreneurial endeavour not ignited a generative process of wealth and prosperity so widespread as to grant economic dignity to all? On the contrary, in the unravelling of successive industrial revolutions, humanity has had to face waves of worsening inequalities and a widening of social strata and social precarity (Azmanova, 2020). The other side of the excess of selfishness (‘I win, you lose’) has been a deficit in the ability to perceive the world outside of one’s *Hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden laden with exquisite and exclusive fruits (personal interests). In other words, the entrepreneurial intelligence that was objectively intended to solve problems and provoke opportunities has lacked the subjective consciousness that, as Smith wrote in his 1759 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, makes us interest ourselves ‘in the fortune of others’:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. (Smith, 1853: 3)

The idea of altruistic egoism (‘I’m helping other people win so I can win too’) has not been taking root.

To break down the high wall that secludes that enclosed garden from the outside world we need *Homo empathicus*, the producer of ideas that can prevail over forces directed to the preservation of the past. The adoption and practice of empathy encourage a climate of cooperation that allows everyone to tap into the portfolio of original ideas. The more discoveries are originated in public institutions, the more open will be the communities that spawned them. In the production of new products and services that result from inventions, a multitude of companies will take over from monopolies and oligopolies (Stiglitz et al., 2020). Critical events, such as those we are experiencing with increasing intensity and severe disruption, cannot be erased by limited and delayed access (real barriers raised by prohibitive prices) to innovative remedies that save lives and nature.

As understanding grows in the fields of evolutionary biology, neuro-cognitive science and child development (an understanding that reveals the biological predisposition of humans to empathy), *Homo empathicus* moves towards centre-stage, heralding the birth of communities founded on mutual understanding and on active sympathy with the natural world.

As the curtain rises on tomorrow, a vast plain comes into view, pockmarked with numerous holes of ignorance (among them those created by COVID-19) and interrupted by hills of knowledge. Reason alone, with its wells of specialized knowledge, can do little to map and explore those holes. There is need for transdisciplinary action – that which promotes encounters between and the integration of different knowledge maps, giving rise to innovative solutions that are hybrid in nature and are not attributable to a single body of knowledge. Passion, imagination and irrationality are prerequisites for this work. The Enlightenment, which emphasized the empire of reason, did not neglect them. Those who explore have the personality of the fox depicted by the philosopher and explorer of ideas Isaiah Berlin (1953), who developed into a parable a saying initially attributed to the Ancient Greek poet Archilochus:

‘The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing’. The ‘Plague Year’ calls into play versatile characters. Their knowledge is multiple and multi-faceted – the kind of knowledge associated with an ability to climb high, see further and then leap forward.

Note

1. See Defoe (1966: 188).

References

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