

# Human nature in the corona virus crisis

The global health crisis is a true revealer of human nature and its contradictions. By partially blocking fundamental aspects of ordinary social life, such as work, human contact, transport, leisure, it throws a different light on many of the ideas, beliefs and practices on which the established order is based. This creates a “void” where reflexes, “natural” human impulses, come more easily to the surface, free of the many shackles and ideological masks behind which they live more or less repressed or disguised.

This crisis has many unique characteristics compared to all the pandemics of the past. The simultaneous paralysis of essential sectors of world production is by no means the least. But for the question which interests us I would like to underline its simultaneously planetary and “wired”, character. Despite the control and limits imposed by national states, despite the great inequalities that persist between countries, the vast majority of the world’s population is connected to the rest of the humans by new information and communication technologies. More than 5 billion people owned a phone in 2017, including 3.3 billion a smartphone. (1) This gives a new dimension to the understanding of what human nature can be.

I do not pretend to deduce here everything that follows from this reality. But it is a new dimension that should never be overlooked.

“The general mood is solidarity” headlined a French newspaper on April 11. The first observation that everyone has made is the explosion of gestures of solidarity, mutual aid wherever the pandemic has raged.

There are many examples and their forms are constantly developing. The dedication and selflessness of health workers has become a model for human behavior. Everywhere, there were numerous initiatives, spontaneous and then self-organized, to thank them, encourage them and support them materially (solidarity funds on the internet). In the most disadvantaged neighborhoods we see a development of voluntary, self-organized actions to come to the aid of the poorest populations who find themselves overnight with no income and with children whom the closure of schools sometimes deprives of their only real meal of the day. This is sometimes done in cooperation with local authorities, but also sometimes in open struggle against them, as was the case when a Mac Donald’s restaurant in Marseille was transformed by its employees and volunteers into a free food distribution platform for the poorest areas of the city.

Many editorialists and other commentators have noted that, contrary to the dominant thought at the heart of neoliberalism (“man is a wolf for man”), the human being carries within him powerful impulses, instincts of empathy and solidarity towards his fellows. Human nature has become a common subject of reflection and discussion, among other things, because reality has brought to light this primordial characteristic of the human being. Our brains are wired to find pleasure in helping others. A characteristic which is constantly thwarted by the logic of a society which favors and rewards rapacity

and ‘each man for himself’, but which carries within itself the means to shatter the foundations of this inhuman society.

But human nature, as we know, is not limited to its altruistic tendencies. The reality of the coronavirus crisis also reminded us of the less positive, self-destructive aspects of our species. A species of which the French biologist Jacques Testart could say: “Because man most of all, is this beast that is capable of annihilating its own life and that of all the others, without even having chosen it.” (2)

To illustrate this reality, I will take, among others, four “negative” behaviors that manifested themselves particularly during this crisis. Behaviors that we share in varying degrees with many animals, in particular with our most intelligent simian cousins: everyone for himself, the tendency to live in a hierarchical manner, xenophobia and the use of the scapegoat mechanisms.

### **Everyone for himself**

In situations of scarcity, or threat of scarcity, when one is convinced that there will not be enough for everyone, individuals may tend to act only in function of their own interest at the expense of everyone else. At the start of the confinement, when many sought to build up food supplies in anticipation of possible future shortages, there were arguments in supermarkets over a last packet of pasta or roll of toilet paper. However, this has remained relatively marginal for the moment, because the shortage has been limited. Such behavior would be self-destructive if it were to become widespread in the event of a more severe shortage.

### **Hierarchical behaviors**

These are the tendencies to voluntarily accept the authority of an “alpha” male and his allies, or of a dominant female and her relatives in the case of bonobos, or of the state and the managers of the system in our case. But they include also the tendency among the most powerful to resort to all means to maintain their authority. All of this has manifested itself powerfully in the current crisis.

In disaster situations that shake society, be it a “natural” calamity, such as an earthquake or one of human origin such as the explosion of a nuclear power plant, individuals spontaneously tend to seek help from the state and to submit to its authority. This apparatus, at the top of the social hierarchy, supposedly representing the interests of the community, is the only one that has the material, human and organizational means to confront the situation.

In the present case, in general, the populations quickly submitted to the emergency measures imposed by the states. Governments everywhere took the opportunity to multiply measures to control the population, to suppress the few individual freedoms that remain. All the more so since the pandemic has arrived on a planet where massive social struggles were developing: Chile, Lebanon, Hong Kong, Iraq, Algeria, ... France.

The Chinese regime, whose bureaucratic totalitarianism is partly at the origin of the initial expansion of the pandemic (repression for weeks of the first whistleblowers in Wuhan), seeks to present itself as a model, vaunting the authoritarianism and rigor with which it managed Covid 19. The measures to control the population have been extended and intensified to unprecedented degrees, in particular by

the generalization of facial recognition systems and automatically applied sanctions in the event of breach of state rules .

Another example is President Duterte in the Philippines who authorizes his police forces to shoot people who would pose too much resistance to the containment measures. Or that of Viktor Orban in Hungary who took the opportunity to grant himself exceptional powers for an indefinite time.

The economic crisis that accompanies the health crisis will have devastating effects. It does not strike all social classes in the same way. Some estimates predict that the number of deaths caused by the misery of the economic crisis will exceed the number of deaths due to the pandemic, especially in the poorest countries. The attacks on the living conditions of the population will go beyond the pandemic itself, because the economic crisis is not the product of the pandemic alone. Long before this, the warning signs of a new major recession, more serious and destructive than that of 2008, were accumulating. Governments will try to blame the coronavirus for what is in fact a new convulsion caused by the contradictions and absurdities of the system they manage and defend. But it is unlikely that this will be enough to limit the social mobilizations that the economic disaster will provoke. The social combativeness that rumbled before the pandemic will likely resume, breaking with the tendencies to voluntary submission which the health needs imposed.

### **Xenophobia**

Understood as the rejection of the foreigner and everything that comes from abroad, it has manifested itself in various forms, the most obvious being nationalism. This is based on the belief that other nations are less important or enemies. “My country first”.

The management of the global crisis has been and remains constantly hampered by the inability of the various states to cooperate, prisoners as they are of the defense of their own interests to the detriment of others. The examples are spectacular, such as the withdrawal of the first world power from the World Health Organization or the total inability of the European Union to make its 27 member-states act in concert.

The American and Chinese governments rival each other in reciprocal xenophobic nationalist speeches and use them for their war indoctrination.

On another level, we have seen in some countries a xenophobia towards people from China or of Chinese origin. In Paris, some Chinese people carried a sign saying “I am not a virus”.

All this seems all the more absurd as humanity today has, as we said at the beginning of this text, extraordinary means without precedent, for information, communication and cooperation on a planetary scale.

### **The scapegoat mechanism**

It often goes hand in hand with xenophobia but it has its own specificities.

It is a practice which consists in diverting a latent hostility in a group towards someone, something or a group of people. This can allow three processes at the same time:

- provide a target for the release of existing hostility;
- create or maintain group unity by enabling its members to act, to hate, to punish together;

- divert the responsibility for a damaging situation towards a “scapegoat” in order to hide the real culprits.

In this case, the virus has played this role wonderfully. Governments continue to blame it for what is actually the product of the logic of capitalism, of greed and the irrational incompetence of its leaders.

The human being is a social animal, but he is also an individual whose particular interest is not necessarily identical or compatible with that of other individuals, even if these are members of the same group. His whole existence is confronted with the management of the possible contradiction between the individual and the community. The coherence of any human organization depends on its capacity to manage this contradiction and neutralize its explosive capacity.

This contradiction also exists in other social animals, in particular in chimpanzees and bonobos which are quite intelligent animals and possess a great diversity of individual personalities.

The management of this contradiction explains a large number of individual and collective behaviors of these species.

Unlike the tendency of every man for himself, hierarchy, xenophobia and the scapegoat mechanism are all three primitive, rudimentary, instinctive means to preserve the unity and efficiency of the group at all costs. But it is group unity at the expense of all other groups.

Nazi propaganda knew perfectly well how to address these primitive impulses to unite the population behind its state. “Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer” was a xenophobic discourse by asserting the absolute priority of “our people”. It was also the ultimate expression of the worship of the hierarchy. People greeted each other saying: “Heil Hitler!”, “Hail our alpha monkey!”

Anti-Semitism completed the trilogy by providing a scapegoat, responsible for all ills.

**It is in the period following the end of confinements that the upheavals in the expressions of human nature will be most decisive. The situation will probably be very difficult. We will then see what has remained as the dominant lessons from the current global catastrophe.**

Three lessons seem essential for a positive outcome.

During the pandemic many denounced the absurdity of having prioritized the “economy” at the expense of health, as all governments have done for more than thirty years, gutting the health systems in the name of “economic” profitability. In fact it is the absurdity of the capitalist system which conditions everything to the profitability of capital at the expense of the most basic human needs. This is a first lesson: there will be no real solution without breaking with the deadly logic of capitalism.

A second relates to the global dimension of the problems and therefore to the global dimension of the solutions. It is the understanding that for humans “the unity of the group” is the unity of the whole of

humanity, with all its differences but with the consciousness of being a GLOBAL social animal, a consciousness that no other animal can possess.

Finally, last but not least, there is the certainty that, contrary to what the ideology of a system based on selfishness and greed repeats, we are capable of empathy, sympathy, active and self-organized solidarity towards our fellows. This is written in our genes. The multiple and various forms of concretization of this state of mind during the current crisis have remained confined, forced by the circumstances, to limited scales. We must imagine what could be done if with these same convictions we seized all the levers of economic and social life, if the 99% of the world population (of which the Occupy movement spoke in the USA in 2011) managed to snatch from the 1% who governs and benefits from the established order, the control of the means of production, transport, communication, organization, etc. We will then not only be able to effectively deal with the new viral attacks that are bound to occur, but also and above all to stop the course which leads us in an accelerated way to an irreversible ecological disaster. We will finally be able to build a world which for the first time will make human happiness the goal, the compass of our social life.

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May 3, 2020

## Notes

1. <https://www.clubic.com/pro/actualite-850479-smartphones-monde-repartition-inegale.html>
2. “Qu’est-ce que l’homme ?”, <http://jacques.testart.free.fr/index.php?post/texte889>

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