



JNANADEEPA: Pune Journal of Religious Studies

PJRS P-ISSN 0972-3331

24/2 July-Dec 2020: 165-175

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.4054123

Post-Corona Facelift of the World

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Abstract: Corona virus is literally engulfing the world, making all the man-made frontiers porous. The death toll from it runs into hundreds of thousands, dwarfing all crises mankind withstood in the recent decades. When corona looms up ahead in apocalyptic proportions, billions of people worldwide can seldom entertain the luxury of hope, I think. In a season of social distancing, how effective is the sense of species among us? How would the world look like at the tail end of this crisis? The author hopes that this crisis would have so sweeping an effect on the socio-cultural scenario that it would, perhaps, turn the anthropocentric world view upside down. Certain ‘control measures’ introduced overnight by the legitimate authorities would possibly evolve into the norms of the post-corona world. However, instead of relapsing into social humanism from the lofty liberalism, one has to incorporate certain values of social humanism into the liberal *Weltanschauung*.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Liberal Humanism, Black Death, Surveillance Capitalism, Shoshana Zuboff, Benedict Anderson, Yuval Noah Harari, Jared Diamond, Mass Extinction Event.

Overture

The news about a common pheasant ambling at the Swindon magic roundabout in England or that of a monitor Lizard majestically crossing a busy traffic junction in Kerala, and that even unharmed, would, today, hardly make anyone's eyes glued to the newspaper with stupefaction as it would have had a couple of months ago. Metropolitan cities, otherwise awakened with the screeching of tyres and the honks of horns, are slithering into a catnap despite the thrilling swells of birdsongs. If it was the eternal silence of the infinite spaces that frightened Blaise Pascal,¹ contemporary cosmopolitans are frightened by the sphinxlike silence of their cities. An otherwise clamorous spring has shut its mouth up. Indeed, the 'hitherto unheard of' becomes routine and blue moon comes fortnightly, thanks to a negligibly tiny virus.

"A spectre is haunting Europe", Marx and Engels exclaimed in *The Communist Manifesto* which was published in 1848. And "All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this spectre...", they added. The spectre that haunted Europe back then was Communism; but now the world as a whole is trying its best to exorcize a much stronger spectre: covid 19. Doctors and medical practitioners armed with nothing but a few essentials have been working on war footing to exorcize this demon.

It was the Irish thinker Benedict Anderson who popularly defined Nations as "imagined communities".² The corona virus is on a killing spree as though his words are literally true in its case and that man-made boundaries and fortifications of any kind are of no use at all. And the world, as a result, has literally come to a standstill. Though a perilous pandemic of this sort is unprecedented, we should not forget that life, since its origin in this planet some 4.28 billion years ago, has witnessed several mass extinction events,³ among which some might have wiped out at least 95% of all life forms.⁴ And we have overcome all of them, even the notorious Black Death that resulted in the extermination of the one third of whole Europe's population in the

14th century. So humanity does not have any reason whatsoever to not to keep its fingers crossed and tell itself consolingly, “we shall overcome.”

Therefore what is crucial at the moment are two things namely, the fortitude that we exhibit to overcome this pandemic and the concrete steps we have to take in order to prevent the situation from worsening.

I am well aware of the inappropriateness of discussing the possibilities and challenges the post-corona world might set before us as the pandemic shows no sign of slowing down. Nevertheless the disappointment at my journey being thwarted by the pandemic halfway through Europe and the suffering of thousands of people that I witnessed firsthand is prompting me to be reflective and to be vocal about it.

The Visibility Made ‘Inside Out’

The pandemic which has its origin in the Wuhan province of China within no time has caused considerable damage to the whole world, particularly the Western Europe and the U S. We have seen how the four highly industrialized and research-oriented regions of Europe namely, Rhone-Alpes of France, Baden-Württemberg of Germany, Catalonia of Spain and Lombardy of Italy, known as the ‘four motors of Europe’ crumbling down like a pack of cards under the corona effect.

It is highly likely that the global economy is going to be damaged beyond repair if the situation worsens in these parts of Europe and the U S.

The predicament of uncertainty that we find ourselves in is dooming. However, it is to be noted that it was when faced with staggering difficulties that human beings showed extraordinary ingenuity, courage and sense of unity.

As the world nations set out to battle this global crisis with drastic measures such as emergencies and curfews, we should be aware of the changes that these steps are going to bring about

in the very fabric of society. Even the people who have been fiercely holding on, till a few weeks ago, to the great principles of liberty and democracy are seen mutely transformed into herds of hapless Guinea pigs at the dawn of this crisis. Most people, without any resistance whatsoever, are seen submitting themselves as subjects of surveillance and isolation when asked by the State or various centers of power.

Yet, none of these steps taken by various governments are deemed as dictatorial or authoritarian. And people who normally would have vehemently protested against a law or a rule which has the slightest scent of being oppressive had the situation been different, choose to keep their mouths shut. Why?

Restraints and regulations of this kind on the fundamental rights of citizens which were unthinkable to be realized in a democracy even in the recent past are welcomed with open arms by most of the citizens. This is due to a sudden shift occurred in the *Weltanschauung* of the people.

In 2018, Shoshana Zuboff, professor at Harvard Business School, published the book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. The book explicates the way big corporations operate stealthily in democracies and how by stealing the data of citizens without their explicit consent use it to keep them under ‘subcutaneous surveillance’.⁵ She calls this process a ‘coup from above’.⁶

In the course of the last ten chapters I have argued that surveillance capitalism represents an unprecedented logic of accumulation defined by new economic imperatives whose mechanisms and effects cannot be grasped with existing models and assumptions... Surveillance capitalism’s new story begins with behavioral surplus discovered more or less readymade in the online environment, when it was realized that the “data exhaust” clogging Google’s servers could be combined with its powerful analytic capabilities to produce predictions of user behavior. Those prediction products became the basis for a preternaturally lucrative sales process that ignited new markets in future behavior.⁷

But what the world is witnessing at the moment might leave even Shoshana Zuboff a bit perplexed. The whole world, having set aside all heated debates and discussions on human rights, especially on the right to privacy, is meekly cooperating with the mass surveillance and forced isolation. It is indeed a wonder that an invisible virus is able to subvert all elevated notions of liberal humanism in the first world countries, and that too in such a rapid manner.

After the collapse of Nationalism, Colonialism, Fascism, Socialism and so on, the modern world- especially since the 1990s- is mostly shaped by the values of democracy, humanism and globalized open market. It was in the name of protecting these liberal humanist ideals that most of the wars and military occupations of the last three decades took place. Even the war on terrorism was fought under the label of protecting these ideals.

One question carries much weight in this context, that is, what is humanism? Humanism is never understood in the same way across different societies. Yuval Noah Harari who has been in the spotlight for the past few years, as perhaps the best known contemporary historian and thinker, divides Humanism into three types namely liberal humanism, social humanism and evolutionary humanism.

Liberal humanism exists in European and American societies where the rights of the individual are considered indispensable. Social humanism has taken root in countries where certain principles of socialism such as common good and social equality prevail. Here society is more important than the individual. Evolutionary humanism is popular among scientists and philosophers who dream of us, vulnerable *Homo sapiens*, metamorphosing into mighty 'Homo deus'.

But the pandemic has brought about drastic changes to this vision of the world. What we are witnessing at present is, how, amidst emergencies like this, liberal humanism is losing ground to social humanism. The pandemic has given people an opportunity to choose between privacy and survival. And people

across the globe irrespective of caste, class and race are prudently choosing survival at the cost of losing their privacy. Since we are in a battle that seems to be endless, it is highly likely that the conditioning that we are going through within the four walls of our rooms persist in us even in the post-corona world.

Some of the habits that we pick up or forced to acquire during the period of lockdown, quarantine and so on under the careful surveillance by the state can turn us into docile subjects. This docility or submissiveness can become the ‘new- normal’ in the post-corona era.

Doomed Boomers and Defiant Millennials

The uncontrollable spreading of the pandemic in the Western Europe is mainly because of its reluctance to change its perspective from liberal humanism to social humanism. The lapse in doing so has been suicidal for them. What happened in Italy, for instance, will show us why. As Italy was struggling to contain the outbreak of the virus, Nicola Zingaretti, the leader of Italy’s Democratic party, irresponsibly moved around the Northern regions of Italy exhorting people to not to get tensed about the outbreak and to carry on with their day to day activities.⁸ Be it *Campari* or *Aperol*, his choice and enjoyment of an *aperitivo* with the youth turned his stomach indeed open to covid-19! As a result, he got ill and was the cause of further spreading of the pandemic.

People who were born soon after the beginning of the Second World War that is from the early 1940s to the mid-1960s are called the Baby boomers. Those who were born between 1965 and 1980 are called the MTV generation (or generation X). And those who were born between the early 1980s and the beginning of the third millennium are called as the millennials.

The outbreak of the pandemic has resulted in a cultural war of some sort between the boomers and the millennials. The millennials, being quite frustrated with the way the boomers had been handling the crisis, were, until quite recently, out on the

streets, savoring the ‘magic of malt’ gushing out of the bottle of Mexican Corona beer and partying hard with their friends. The millennials, by doing so, are getting infected by the virus and are silently transmitting the disease to the boomers in whose case the infection can be fatal. But the millennials do not seem to care. Younger generations are even using catchphrases such as “boomer remover” to refer to the pandemic. The failure of the political leadership in Europe to make the millennials realize that there are times when one has to uphold Social Humanism over Liberal Humanism has to take the blame for making the situation worse.

Panta Rhei

‘Everything changes’ (*panta rhei*), is a phenomenally influential proverb associated with the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. The pandemic has brought about drastic changes in the way people have been perceiving religion. People have learned in the hard way that “Holy water is not a sanitizer and Prayer is not a vaccine “as Mattia Ferraresi opined in his article titled “God vs. Corona Virus” in the *New York Times*.⁹

Rituals were developed by human beings so that they could serve as vehicles to transport us from the ordinary mundane concerns of day-to-day life to the realm of the transcendental. It is unfortunate that over the years, some of the rituals and practices, particularly those which are concerning religions, have become an end in themselves. The outbreak of the pandemic and the lockdown that followed it gave most people an opportunity to rethink the relevance of religious rituals that they had been blindly following for many years.

Some religious leaders who had been steadfast in preserving the purity of their religions’ rituals and practices before the outbreak were seen bowing down to the invisible virus and were seen giving more space for the individual to practice the religion or faith in whichever manner that suited him/her. This ‘wind of change’ that the pandemic has brought in is likely to stay here.

The Onus

Life in the time of corona, according to Harari,¹⁰ urges us to make two choices. One is between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment. When humankind shows enough maturity to give priority for social humanism over liberal humanism at necessary situations one can say that citizen empowerment has attained its goal.

The other choice is between National isolation and Global solidarity. Till 2016, leaders across the globe had been, at least, paying lip service to the dream of global solidarity.¹¹ However, two major events the world witnessed in 2016 were absolutely unprecedented and busted the dream of global unity, namely, the election of Donald Trump as the president of the U. S. A and the referendum which resulted in Brexit. In both the cases fabricated truths took precedence over objective truths; and this prompted the Oxford dictionary to select the word ‘Post- truth’ as the word of 2016 which is defined as ‘Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’. The strong waves of extreme- nationalism have been visiting the shores of many a nation since then. And Xenophobia was spreading faster than even the corona virus.

The outbreak of corona is a global crisis. Until and unless all world nations come together and work for the eradication of the pandemic nothing significant can be achieved. Global cooperation in terms of sharing of financial, scientific, and technological resources is a must to save humankind from this crisis.

So it is likely that the countries that championed the cause of global solidarity and acted responsibly towards achieving it during this global crisis are going to play major leadership roles in the post-corona world.

Epilogue

Contagion (2011), directed by Steven Soderbergh, has become a must watch movie during these days. The movie at a gripping pace narrates the outbreak of a dangerous virus and the effort from a few individuals to curb its spread. The movie ends on a positive note as they are successful in containing the outbreak. Let's hope that as we overcame the crisis on the 'reel' we might overcome the crisis 'in real' as well.

The word quarantine has its origin from the practice of isolating ships that were suspected of carrying contagious disease for a period of forty (*quaranta*) days at the ports of Europe in the 14th century. The word is related to an instance of the Bible as well. Jesus spent forty days in a desert fasting and being tempted by the devil only to come back to the world much stronger. Let the period of quarantine inspire us to become better versions of ourselves and to work wholeheartedly for the betterment of humanity.

Jared Diamond, in his popular book *Guns, Germs and Steel*, published in 1997, explains how Eurasian and North African civilizations over the centuries took control of the whole world. He observes that it was possible because of superior weapons (guns); diseases, that Eurasians carried around but were immune to, which wiped out at times a large number of local population (germs); and better transportation facilities (steel).¹² But now we are confronted with a pandemic which knows no boundaries and does not distinguish between different races or ethnic groups. It has cast its shadow on everyone. We simply can not afford to have blame games anymore.

We need not look *For whom the bell tolls*, as Hemingway's novel's title suggests or as John Donne urged his readers in the 17th century. It is not for America. Nor it is for Europe, Asia or Africa. The bell tolls for the entire humankind. Not as a harbinger of doom but as a herald of rebirth.

Notes

1. "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me." Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 206.
2. Anderson defines nation as an imagined political community that is limited and sovereign in nature. Cfr. Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (Revised and extended. ed.)*, Verso. London, 1991, pp. 6–7.
3. Within the 4.28 billion years' total span, life on earth has endured at least five mass extinction events. These mass extinction events or biotic crises, starting with the Ordovician–Silurian extinction events that took place 450–440 million years ago and ending up with the K-T Extinction event happened 66 million years ago, have swept away zillions of life forms from this planet forever. Scientists opine that we are currently undergoing the 7th mass extinction event (known as Holocene extinction) that is still more menacing than its forerunners because of its accelerated rate due to human activity.
4. In a 13.8 billion years old universe and a 4.5 billion years old earth, Homo Sapiens- the modern Man-literally meaning wise man- can claim only an age of 300,000 to 200,000 years.
5. Zuboff warns us of how information about us could be used for data analysis and prediction that could be, in turn, utilized for market interests.
6. The term surveillance capitalism is defined by Zuboff in various ways at the very outset of the text. "A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction and sales; 2. A parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification; 3. A rogue mutation of capitalism marked by concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power unprecedented in human history; 4. The foundational framework of a surveillance economy, 5. As significant a threat to human nature in the twenty-first century as industrial capitalism was to the natural world in the nineteenth and twentieth; 6. The origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance over society and presents startling challenges to market democracy; 7. A movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty; 8. An expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as a coup from above: an overthrow of the people's sovereignty." Cfr Shoshana ZUBOFF, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, The Fight for a Human Future at the new Frontier of Power*, Public Affairs, NY, 2019, p. 3.
7. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, p. 214.
8. Cfr. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/a-warning-to-europe-italy-struggle-to-convince-citizens-of-coronavirus-crisis>

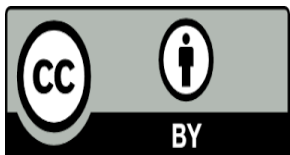
& https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/02/27/news/coronavirus_zingaretti_contro_il_pánico-249718891/

9. Ferraresi, Mattia. "Opinion | God vs. Coronavirus." *The New York Times*, March 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/opinion/coronavirus-church-religion.html>.
10. On 20th March 2020, Harari published an article on the threats of corona virus and the possibilities of a new world order. <https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>
11. One of the most evident examples of America's global commitment is seen in former president John F. Kennedy. On 20th January 1961, in his inaugural speech, Kennedy exhorted thus; "Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?... And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man. Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you." The global concern that America entertained throughout the second half of the 20th century, from the cold war period down to the expensive peace-keeping missions across the entire globe is self-evident in another speech of Kennedy, made on 26th June 1963, too. "Two thousand years ago, the proudest boast was *civis romanus sum* ["I am a Roman citizen"]. Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is "*Ich bin ein Berliner*!"... All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words "*Ich bin ein Berliner*!"
12. Cfr. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Vintage, London, 2000.

No of Words: 3483.

Article Received: Apr 2, 2020

Article Accepted: May 7, 2020



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