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COVID-19: THE RESPONSE OF PUBLIC ETHICS

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Introduction

In March 2020, Yuval Noah Harari stated that humankind is now facing a global crisis, from which it would not exit the same as before. The decisions taken, and that will be taken in the next months by governments will probably shape the world for years to come. They will not only shape the healthcare systems but also the economy, politics, and culture. Despite the pandemic will pass and humankind will survive, humankind and the world itself would not be the same as before the coronavirus pandemic. Future will be defined by two crucial choices. The first is between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment. The second is between nationalist isolation and global solidarity¹. In this discussion, I will attempt to contextualize the two Harari's leading questions and to argument the answers through the lens of Public Ethics. I will proceed as follow.

Firstly, I will provide a scientific overview of how the coronavirus – a zoonotic disease - appeared and thus an account of how a pathogen can jump from a non-human animal to a human. The resulting phenomenon, called “zoonosis”, had already be pointed up by David Quammen as “the word of the future” back in 2012.² As studies evidence, the interspecies viruses are increasingly frequent and eventually the unwilling consequences of human actions. In other words, spillovers happen as the possible effects of environmental damage, such as deforestation, uncontrolled urbanization, and intense land-use which has provoked loss of biodiversity and species extinction besides having led vulnerable populations in dangerous contact with wild animals. Since the researches are starting to affirm the presence of two converging crises: the environmental and sanitary crisis, eventually caused by the same actor.

After this preliminary chapter, I will move to the moral questions that the coronavirus pandemic posed to governments and the consequent decision-making process. I will firstly analyze how the philosophical strands of utilitarianism and Kantianism could serve as logical guidelines for governments to take timely decisions during the public-policy process. The former, which aims to reach the greatest good for the greatest people, result to be adjustable in time, while the latter, affirming the rightness of an

¹ Y. N. Harari, “The World after Coronavirus”, *Financial Times*, March 19, 2020.
<https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>

² D. Quammen, *Spillover – animal infections and the next future pandemic*, The Bodley Head, London 2012.

action regarding its compliance with the moral supreme principle, appears useful, and eventually preferable, in absence of data, as it enables to grasp whether an action is right or wrong without the need of further information. I will then take into consideration the libertarian perspective that, envisaging the pandemic as a cross-cutting challenge, embraces the possibility of following a different approach in the fight against the virus, less compromising personal freedoms. I will also dive into the decision-making process, evaluating the role of big data as a new asset and challenge for policymakers. Indeed, despite it is now evident that big data do support governments in improving the design of policies, forms of regulations are now urgently required, especially in the context of data sovereignty and privacy rights

Ultimately, I will consider the pandemic crisis from a global perspective: firstly, understanding which countries are dealing better and how, thus envisaging the most efficient measures, secondly, I will evidence how the fatality of “the Inequality Virus” urge a global plan. I will provide an initial framework of the whole discussion by summing up three main lessons that can be learned from the pandemic: the cruciality of sustainable policies, also as a moral imperative to value future generations, citizen empowerment to defend both the right to privacy and the right to information, the value of life and the value of death.

In conclusion, in response to Harari, as Professor Maffettone³ stated, the preferred choices must surely be empowerment and solidarity. We visibly need global principles that guarantee the prevention of future pandemics and the priority to global health, and the maintaining of democratic principle of personal freedom. Eventually, the key for a long-run solution will be the affirmation of Public Ethics that calls for empowerment and appeal to universal human rights.

³ S. Maffettone, “Esempi di impotenza umana”, *Le Formiche*, April 1, 2020.

1. The Virus

I. *The adventus of Covid-19 and life after it*

I begin writing this thesis at the end of 2020, the *annus horribilis*⁴ as defined by many. Around me, I feel a spreading sense of desolation and tiredness and strong compassion for those who lost a loved one. This year, Italy does not live a merry white Christmas; indeed, the Law Decree proclaiming the “red zone” – as an attempt to contain the virus’s spread - prohibits people from celebrating as usual. To date, Italy had 70.900 victims due to the Covid-19 disease and a total of 1.742.463 deaths have been reported worldwide.

The last cover of *Time* for the year 2020 cites “the worst year ever”, drawing the fifth red “X” of the magazine’s history, the symbol reserved for the worst foes faced by humanity. Indeed, the American weekly news magazine had previously used it to cross out the faces of those historical figures who posed the world under the threat of either dictatorship, as Adolf Hitler in 1945 and Saddam Hussein in 2003, or Terrorism, such as Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi in 2006 and Osama bin Laden in 2011. Therefore, the red “X” marks the end of a historic year. Despite there have been worst years in history, as the American film critic Stephanie Zachareck⁵ claims, most of the people alive today have seen nothing like this one. Professor Yuval Noah Harari affirms that humankind faces a global crisis “*perhaps the biggest of our generation*”⁶.

The covid-19 pandemic came for the general public unexpectedly, attacking the weakest and the most vulnerable people of society. After a cluster of mysterious pneumonia cases appeared at the end of December 2019 in Wuhan in Hubei province, the Chinese city became the world’s focus as those cases have been identified as a new coronavirus on January 8. The first death of Covid-19 (**Corona Virus Disease 2019**), a

⁴ B. Debroy, “Annus Horribilis”, *Daily Guardian*, December 31, 2020. <https://theguardian.com/annus-horribilis/>

⁵ S. Zachareck, “2020 Tested Us Beyond Measure. Where Do We Go From Here?”, *Time*, December 5, 2020. <https://time.com/5917394/2020-in-review/>

⁶ Y. N. Harari, “The World after Coronavirus”, *Financial Times*, March 19, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>

61-year-old man from Wuhan, was reported on January 11, 2020⁷. The efforts to contain the virus failed and, the disease had already spread over the country by the end of January, possibly worldwide. On 20 January, President Xi Jinping ordered resolute measures to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV). In the meantime, various cases were reported in other countries, such as Thailand, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the USA. On January 24, the first European cases were verified; three people in France were infected. On January 30, the World Health Organization announced a global emergency with cases outside of China in 18 countries and 171 deaths worldwide. On the same day, the first two cases of Covid-19 were confirmed in Italy, with two Chinese tourists at the Spallanzani Hospital of Rome. On 9 March, the government of Italy imposed a national quarantine, restricting the moving of the people. This was the milestone that unveiled the epochal proportions⁸ of the crisis, which was just about to start.

Here the blueprint enlightening the reasons behind this thesis which weaves between politics, health, and ethics; as the major pandemics have brought about epochal change, also the Covid-19 pandemic may have profound influences on the normality after it, whether the social and political consequences will exceed their direct epidemiological effects. The outbreak of this virus posed to each of us various and severe questions, as much as individually as politically. People had to rethink themselves in front of a new fateful enemy, limit their liberties and radically modify their lives, respecting never experimented confinements. Governments had to address unprecedented challenges in experimenting with models of containment and ultimately implementing national lockdowns. Moreover, the greatest struggle of Western neoliberal Countries to keep up with the spreading of the pandemic compared to other less democratic countries, such as China, displayed the advantages of a centralized style of governance in mobilizing public collective action. The following is a reflection upon the decisions taken by governments since the date and a further discussion on how present challenges will eventually improve our standards of Public Ethics.

⁷ A. Qin, J. C. Hernández, "China Reports First Death from new Virus", *New York Times*, January 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/10/world/asia/china-virus-wuhan-death.html>

⁸ S. Maffettone, *Quarto Shock: come un virus ha cambiato il mondo*, Luiss University Press, Roma 2020.

II. *Why do pandemics happen? The outbreak of Covid-19*

In 2012, David Quammen published his masterpiece “*Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*”, discussing the appearance and origins of new diseases across the world, which may eventually turn into pandemics. Here, the American science writer defines *zoonosis* as the word of the future, destined for heavy use in the 21st century.

Interestingly, when answering the question of why the viruses appear, the concept of *zoonosis* is crucial. *Zoonosis* is, indeed, an animal infection that, through a simple twist of fate, becomes transmissible to humans. The twist, which can either be a needle prick or a contact with an exotic animal, is called *spillover*.

The phenomenon of *spillover* is not an exception, but rather a common natural event that causes the outbreak of many human diseases. Around 60% of the known human diseases are *zoonosis*; these comprehend all types of influences but also AIDS, Ebola, and the bubonic plague.

The starting point for *spillover* is a pathogen, the agent causing the disease. The pathogen is a little beast that devours its prey from the inside. Under ordinary circumstances, an infectious disease caused by a pathogen is as natural as a gnu mauled by a lion. As all the predators, also the pathogens have favored preys. Nevertheless, occasionally, as a lion may kill a cow instead of a gnu, also the pathogens may choose a different target⁹. When a pathogen agent jumps from an animal to a human being, settling as an infectious agent, a spillover happens.

The strategy used by the pathogen is to nest into a *reservoir* or *tank-host*, a living organism that, without receiving any damages, unconsciously carries it. A typical example of *tank-hosts* are bats, mammals that move intensely. Another possible strategy for a pathogen is to settle into an *amplifying host*, where it can replicate rapidly and to high concentrations. The *amplifying host* may therefore serve to increase the

⁹ D. Quammen, *Spillover – animal infections and the next future pandemic*, The Bodley Head, London 2012.

spread of the infectious pathogen and may be intermediate between the *reservoir* and an unfortunate animal¹⁰.

Almost all the *zoonoses* are transmitted by six typologies of pathogen micro-organisms: viruses, bacteria, fungi, protists, prions, and worms. Among these, viruses are the most problematic ones because they rapidly evolve, they are not sensitive to antibiotics, they are often difficult to find and, they can have high mortality rates.

The common definition for a virus is a submicroscopic infectious agent able to replicate only inside the living cells of an organism. Viruses are as simple as tricky: simple in their structure, tricky in their mechanisms of replication.

Technically known as an *obligate intracellular parasite*, the key feature of a virus is its need for a host to replicate. A virus is a little inert and an inanimate particle when the host is missing and, a living agent able to replicate and cause diseases when settled into living cells. In other words, the condition under which a virus is animate or inanimate is the presence of a host organism¹¹.

Viruses have the capacity to sicken their host, cause their death and, eventually get rid of their species. Indeed, a virus particularly deadly for a species may possibly lead to its extinction. However, since a virus needs its host to replicate and evolve, the best possible solution is to sicken the host without causing its extinction. Here the interesting and subtle *modus vivendi* of a virus: the virus infects its host while guaranteeing survival for both. Moreover, since the survival of the virus is based on its transmissibility, it must find a way to easily infect other organisms in order to ensure itself a long life.

An infection occurs when a microorganism, such as a virus, enters a living organism and causes harm. If an infection happens easily or less depends on the *capsid* of the virus considered. A virus is indeed a box - *capsid* – formed by virus-coded proteins, which contains either an RNA or DNA genome. The box serves firstly to protect the genome when the infection is happening and secondly, to assure its entry into a not-

¹⁰ *ibidem*

¹¹ R. Burioni, *Virus, La Grande Sfida*, Rizzoli, Milano 2020.

infected cell. The stronger the box, the easier the infection will be. For example, the high fragility of the HIV virus's box makes the transmission possible only through extremely close encounters¹².

Once entered the cell, the virus uses different strategies to deceive the cell and make it synthesize its proteins urgently. During the replication stage, differently from cells, if an error happens, the virus does not correct it. Indeed, it is precisely this error and all the ones that happen due to the virus's sloppiness in replicating the genome, that constitutes the strength and uncertainty of viruses. Among all the mistakes made, at least one could eventually turn into an evolutive advantage and increase the transmissibility of the virus. Thereby, despite viruses do make mistakes, since nature selects the most convenient error for them, they always make the right move, and thus, they always win. The greatest victory for a virus would then result in a very high transmissibility rate which may also be translated into an epidemic.

III. *Did humans have their hand in? Reactions of the Earth systems*

*"There is a single species that is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic – us."*¹³

The World Health Organization defines coronavirus as a zoonotic disease, meaning transmitted from animals to humans, but because no animal reservoir has been found yet, it has also been classified with the label of emerging infectious disease (EID) of animal origin¹⁴. Emerging infectious diseases, which have risen significantly over time, represent a significant burden on global economies and public health and, as

¹² *ibidem*

¹³ J. Settele, S. Díaz, E. Brondizio, & P. Daszak, "COVID-19 Stimulus Measures Must Save Lives, Protect Livelihoods, and Safeguard Nature to reduce the Risk of Future Pandemics", *IPBES*, April 27, 2020. <https://ipbes.net/covid19stimulus#:~:text=There%20is%20a%20single%20species,economic%20growth%20at%20any%20cost>.

¹⁴ N. Haider, P. Rothman-Ostrow, A. Y. Osman, L. B. Arruda, L. Macfarlane-Berry, L. Elton, M. J. Thomason, D. Yeboah-Manu, R. Ansumana, N. Kapata, L. Mboera, J. Rushton, T. D. McHugh, D. L. Heymann, A. Zumla, & R. A. Kock, "COVID-19 – Zoonosis or Emerging Infectious Disease?", *Frontiers in Public Health*, November 26, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2020.596944>

flagged by the 2016 UN Environment Programme (UNEP), shall be considered as an issue of global concern¹⁵.

A study by Kate E. Jones and Nikkita G. Patel *Global Trends in emerging infectious diseases*, published by Nature in 2008, already showed that the incidence of EID events had increased since 1940 and reached a peak in the 1980s, concomitant with the HIV pandemic. Its results also suggested that EID origins were largely correlated with socio-economic, environmental, and ecological factors¹⁶.

More recent studies analyzing the EIDs' trends confirm that their frequency and economic impact are on the rise, yet the scientific understanding of the causes of disease emergence is incomplete. The majority of EIDs (and almost all recent pandemics) originate in animals, mostly wildlife, and their emergence often involves dynamic interactions among populations of wildlife, livestock, and people within rapidly changing environments¹⁷.

Since '80s, the global number of new emerging diseases and the richness of their causes have both increased substantially. Bacteria and viruses account for 70% of the 215 diseases in the scientific dataset and are the origin of almost 88% of outbreaks over time. The 65% of the identified diseases were zoonotic which combined caused around 56% of new outbreaks (in comparison to 44% of outbreaks caused by human-specific diseases). Non-vector transmitted pathogens were more frequent (74% of diseases) and provoked more outbreaks (87%) than vector transmitted pathogens¹⁸ (Figure 1).

¹⁵ United Nations Environment Programme UNEP, "Emerging zoonotic diseases and links to ecosystem health – UNEP Frontiers chapter", 2016. <https://www.unep.org/resources/emerging-zoonotic-diseases-and-links-ecosystem-health-unesp-frontiers-2016-chapter>

¹⁶ K. E. Jones, N. G. Patel, M. A. Levy, A. Storeygard, D. Balk, J. L. Gittleman, & P. Daszak, "Global Trends in emerging infectious diseases", *Nature*, 2008; 451(7181): 990–993. doi: 10.1038/nature06536

¹⁷ K. F. Smith, M. Goldberg, S. Rosenthal, L. Carlson, J. Chen, C. Chen, & S. Ramachandran, "Global rise in human infectious disease outbreaks", *The Royal Society*, December 6, 2014; 1(101): 20140950. doi: 10.1098/rsif.2014.0950

¹⁸ *ibidem*

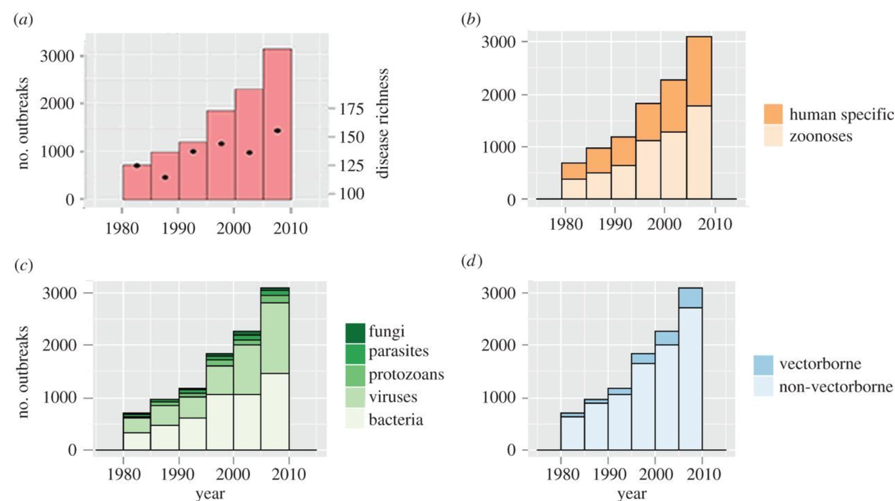


Figure 1. Total number of human infectious disease outbreaks and richness of respective causes 1980–2010. Outbreak records are plotted with respect to (a) total global outbreaks (left axis, bars) and total number of diseases causing outbreaks in each year, (b) host type, (c) pathogen taxonomy, and (d) transmission mode. SOURCE: JR Society Interface.

Four global health emergencies have been declared by the World Health Organization over the past decade and studies reveal that 60% of known infectious diseases and almost 75% of novel infectious diseases are zoonotic in origin. Globally, infectious diseases are responsible for 15.8% of all deaths and 43.7% of deaths in low-income countries¹⁹.

How is science explaining such a surge in the emergence of zoonotic diseases? “Are shrinking wildlife habitats, species migration, and dangerously close human-animal contact directly or indirectly responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic?”²⁰

Not all coronaviruses result in a new zoonotic disease. Without a spillover, SARS-CoV-2 would not have presented itself in the form of Covid-19²¹. Indeed, other coronaviruses are circulating in animals, but they have not infected humans yet. The fact that data show a rise in the diffusion of zoonotic diseases means that there has been a significant increase in the cases of a pathogen jumping from an animal to a human being, and thus in the number of occasions for spillovers. In other words, what

¹⁹ S. J. Salzer, R. Silver, K. Simone, & C. Barton, “Prioritizing Zoonoses for Global Health Capacity Building – Themes from One Health Zoonotic Disease Workshops in 7 Countries, 2014–2016”, *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, December 2017, 23(Suppl 1): S55–S64. doi: 10.3201/eid2313.170418

²⁰ E. Horn, “Tipping Points: The Anthropocene and Covid-19” in *Pandemics, Politics and Society*, De Gruyter, 2021.

²¹ UNEP, “Science points to causes of Covid-19”, May 27, 2020. <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/science-points-causes-covid-19>

it shall be pointed out is that something in our ecosystem has changed such as to favor viruses to leap to humans.

From 1950 onwards, the world is undergoing the biggest geodemographic revolution that human history has ever known, especially in terms of population growth. If it took more than two and a half million years for the world population to reach one billion people, an event that occurred just two hundred years ago, over the second half of the last century, it took just fifteen years to grow by a further billion²² (Figure 2).

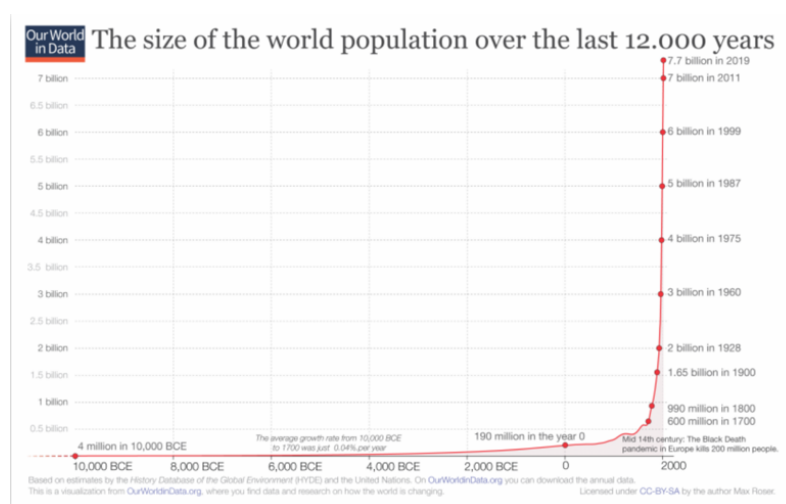


Figure 2. Total World Population, 10,000 BCE – 2100. Source: World Population over 12000 years – various source (2019), Medium Projection – UN Population Division (2019 revision). OurWorldInData/world-population-growth/

Population growth is just one of the key features representing the so-called “Great Acceleration”, the exponential increase in major socio-economic trends of humans since 1950. From total GDP to water use, from urban population to the use of motor vehicles, the whole economic activity of the human enterprise has continued and continues to grow at a rapid rate. This has ultimately been followed by numerous reactions of the Earth systems, reflected in increased temperatures, intense heat waves, and frequent natural weather disasters.

Climate change impacts are deeply evidenced by NASA Global Climate Change: the planet's average surface temperature has risen about 1.18 degrees Celsius since the late

²² A. Giordano, “Mondialisation et Révolution Géo-démographique”, *Outre-terre*, 2017/1, n 50, p-60-75. Doi: 10.3917/oute1.050.0060

19th century, glaciers are retreating almost everywhere around the world (including in the Alps, the Himalayas, Andes, Rockies, Alaska, and Africa), global sea level rose about 20 centimeters in the last century and, the acidity of surface ocean waters has increased by about 30% since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution²³.

Scientists associate the global warming trend observed since the mid-20th century to the human amplification of the "greenhouse effect", the originator of global warming that results, in turn, from the atmosphere trapping heat which radiates from Earth toward space. On Earth, human action is modifying the natural greenhouse. Indeed, over the last century, the burning of fossil fuels like coal and oil has increased the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂). *Figure 3*

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, an international group of 1,300 independent scientific experts under the advocacy of the United Nations, in its Fifth Assessment Report of 2014, concluded that there is a more than 95 percent probability that human enterprise over the past 50 years have caused climate change, which turned into warming the planet²⁴.

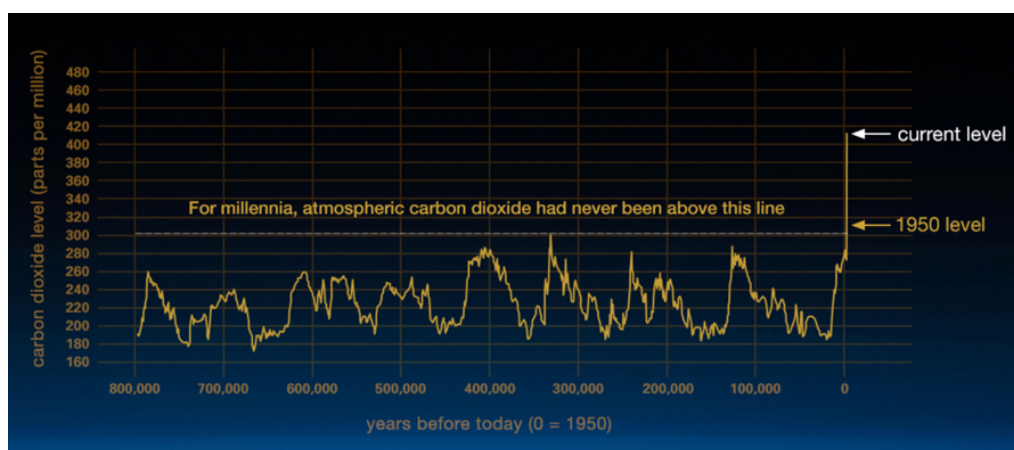


Figure 3. This graph, based on the comparison of atmospheric samples contained in ice cores and more recent direct measurements, provides evidence that atmospheric CO₂ has increased since the Industrial Revolution. (Credit: Luthi, D., et al. 2008; Etheridge, D.M., et al. 2010; Vostok ice core data/J.R. Petit et al.; NOAA Mauna Loa CO₂ record.)

²³ NASA, "Climate Change: How Do We know?", *Global Climate Change*. <https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>

²⁴ *ibidem*

Therefore, scientific evidence for warming of the climate system is unequivocal²⁵ and, as regards the cause, human activity is likely to be responsible with a probability greater than 95%, given also the fact of the exponential growth of the human enterprise and population.

Summing up the evidence that scientists have proven so far:

1. The frequency of emerging infectious diseases is increasing;
2. The climate system is warming;
3. Climate-warming trends over the past century are extremely likely due to human activities.

Specially with the surge of the Covid-19 pandemic, scientific research started to look for a possible connection between the rising cases of spillovers and the deteriorating ecosystem due to climate change. John Vidal, former *The Guardian*'s environmental editor, in a recent publication,²⁶ affirmed that researchers today increasingly think that it is actually humanity's destruction of biodiversity that creates the conditions for new diseases such as Covid-19. This view has also been embraced by a number of organizations, including the United Nations, World Health Organization, WWF International, the World Economic Forum, and UNEP, which declared that climate change is also a driver for zoonoses²⁷.

Despite the examination of the theoretical and empirical evidence of the relation between pandemic risks and environmental changes has produced mixed support, different reports are robustly exploring such a path. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Report on Biodiversity and Pandemics examines the emergence of new zoonoses correlating it with wildlife diversity, human population density, and anthropogenic environmental change.

²⁵ IPCC Fifth Report, *Summary for Policymakers*.

https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/AR5_SYR_FINAL_SPM.pdf

²⁶ J. Vidal, "Tip of the iceberg: is our destruction of nature responsible for Covid 19?", *The Guardian*, March 18, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/18/tip-of-the-iceberg-is-our-destruction-of-nature-responsible-for-covid-19-aoe>

²⁷ UN Environment Programme, "Science points to causes of COVID-19", *Ecosystems and biodiversity*, May 22, 2020. <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/science-points-causes-covid-19>

Anthropocene is, indeed, the unofficial term used to describe the most current period of Earth's history when human enterprise started to have a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems. Today's population of 7.8 billion is both the outcome of rapid medical, industrial, and agricultural progress and the origin of exacerbated land use, climate change, replacement of wildlife with livestock, and environmental degradation. The results of these accelerated changes are increasingly frequent wildlife-livestock-human interactions, especially in tropical and subtropical regions.

The increased risk of spillover is, indeed, intensified by both land-use variation and climate change, which are described as two of the five most important direct drivers of biodiversity loss. By transferring increasing numbers of people into rural regions and by perturbing wildlife population dynamics, habitat fragmentation and novel ecosystems are provoked, ultimately increasing the risks of disease transmission and the emergence of pathogens. World Health Organization identifies land-use change as a leading driver of recently emerging infectious diseases in humans (Figure 4).

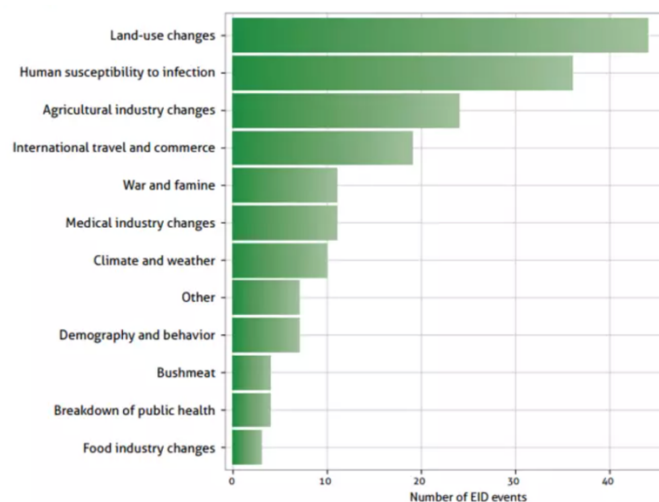


Figure 4. Drivers of emerging infectious diseases from wildlife (Loh et al., *Vector-Borne and Zoonotic Diseases*. In press). Image World Health Organization.

If Covid-19, as some columnists asked²⁸, is a symptom of the Anthropocene must be proven, however, if the picture relating the Covid-19 pandemic to human activity will

²⁸ V. B. Scherer, "Die Pandemie ist kein Überfall", *FrankfurterAllgemeine*, May 3, 2020. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wissen/geist-soziales/die-corona-pandemie-ist-kein-ueberfall-von-ausserirdischen-16744840.html>

be confirmed, humanity will brutally have to cope with the acknowledgment of being highly vulnerable to new infectious diseases and possibly pandemics.

Even considering the best possible scenario, which is governments accelerating their path towards sustainable development, not only the policies will need decades to show their effects, but to be impactful, they shall be implemented worldwide, and especially in the more exposed areas (developing Countries), which is very unlikely.

Plausibly, if the environmental burden will not diminish and preventive strategies will not be actualized, the passage of viruses from animals to humans is likely to persist in the future, and the severe scenario that we have experienced for the past year could become the ordinary of tomorrow. SARS-CoV-2 brought a strong message to humankind: “We are not as much in control as we thought.”²⁹ Epidemiologists have long warned that zoonoses occurrences could have happened, yet the overall governmental status of unpreparedness was evident.

From now onwards, I will consider, attempting a chronological approach, the main dilemmas that governments, societies, and individuals had to confront, and the ones surging to date. How countries and international organizations respond to these complex challenges may have profound lasting impacts on global health, the international economy, and the social dynamics as well. Indeed, the resolutions that are taken today, both at national and international levels, may influence not only eventual future health threats but especially how we react to them. Making the right ethical and political decisions is crucial to prevent ineluctable settings.

²⁹H. Nowotny, “In AI We Trust: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Pushes us Deeper into Digitalization” in *Pandemics, Politics and Society*. De Gruyter, 2021.

2. The Ethics of Public Policy

In the following section, I will discuss the fundamental ethical questions implied in the choices undertaken by governments and policymakers during the global pandemic and the consequent political responsibility of the state. To introduce it, I will provide a definition of Public Ethics.

Public Ethics is the discipline that allows us to go beyond the simple assumption of humans as rational beings, thus obliged to pursue their own interests, and encourages us to recognize cooperation as a possible way. Through moral obligations, it invites us to be reasonable, hence, to balance everyone's interests. Sebastiano Maffettone considers Public Ethics as the midpoint between religion and law³⁰. Indeed, Public Ethics does nothing but transferring authority from the external - God -, to the internal – human consciousness. In this sense, the Kantian principle “*Do not do to others what you do not want to be done to yourself*” easily recalls the Christian principle “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*”³¹. Differently, the law provides people a common rule and constrain them to admit the principle of respect.

I. *What is the most desirable societal outcome? Discussions on herd immunity and human dignity*

Sigmund Freud argued that some historical events shocked humankind for their upsetting potential and unpredictability. For instance, this happened when Copernicus evidenced that the Earth was not the center of the Universe or when Darwin explained the human lineage from monkeys, or when Freud himself revealed the human drives³². More recent unsettling events, which Nassim Nicholas Taleb defines as black swans, are the Internet, the Twins Towers attack in 2001, the financial crisis in 2008³³, and most probably the coronavirus pandemic. Indeed, the extent of change that the Covid-19 brought worldwide left Countries and governments unable to react with timely and

³⁰ S. Maffettone, *Quarto Shock*, Luiss University Press, Roma 2020.

³¹ Holy Bible, *New Testament*, Luke 6:13

³² S. Maffettone, *Quarto Shock*, Luiss University Press, Roma 2020.

³³ N. N. Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Random House, New York, 2007.

effective measures because of a lack of knowledge. Everything experimented so far was futile to face a new enemy.

In March 2020, while Countries around the world began to lock down workplaces, schools, and public gatherings striving to contain the rapid spread of coronavirus, the United Kingdom responded with the “herd immunity” solution. In a press conference on March 12, 2020, Boris Johnson, UK’s Prime Minister, affirmed that the United Kingdom would have adopted a different strategy from instituting quarantines and closing public spaces. The United Kingdom would no longer have tracked the contacts of every suspected case and would, indeed, have tested only the people admitted to hospitals, preferring soft advice such as avoiding school trips abroad or cruising for people over 70³⁴.

The initial counter-current UK’s plan was based on the following reasons:

1. “Behavioral fatigue”- if severe restrictions would have been implemented too early, people could have become uncooperative and less vigilant³⁵;
2. Drastic and strict measures can be successful for some months, but when they are loosened, the virus returns;
3. To avoid the second peak in the winter, UK would have focused on protecting the vulnerable groups while others would have got a mild illness and become immune.

On March 13, 2020, Patrick Vallance, the UK’s chief scientific adviser, affirmed on Sky News that probably about 60 percent of the population would have needed to be infected to achieve herd immunity,³⁶ which ultimately would have reduced transmission in the event of a winter resurgence. A few days later, after heavy criticism from the scientific realm, experts of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine better clarified the UK government’s plan, affirming that the aim was to flatten the curve of infections – like all the other Countries - and that herd immunity

³⁴ E. Yong, “The U.K.’s Coronavirus ‘Herd Immunity’ Debacle”, *The Atlantic*, March 16, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-herd-immunity-uk-boris-johnson/608065/>

³⁵ *ibidem*

³⁶ G. Parker, J. Pickard & L. Hughes, “UK’s scientific adviser defends ‘herd immunity’ strategy for coronavirus”, *Financial Times*, March 13, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/38a81588-6508-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>

would have been just a consequence. They also highlighted that the “coronavirus action plan” did not mention herd immunity at all³⁷.

Looking at governmental actions through the lens of political philosophy and ethics, what can be implicated from the UK’s initial attempt to reach herd immunity through soft measures – even if obtained as a side effect of the political plan?

The original choice of the UK’s government to seek the country’s immunity could be understood as an attempt to maximize the collective interest. An attempt which might recall the classical utilitarian perspective, according to which the greatest good should always be sought after, and the individual interest shall not be prioritized over the interest of the greatest number. Indeed, in the initial context of uncertainty, the prompt reaction of facing the virus through the strategy of herd immunity can be conceived as guided by a rationale of protecting the collective interest for at least two reasons.

Indeed, investing resources on protecting the most vulnerable, while the rest of the population would have continued to carry out their activities may have seemed like a plausible solution for the government as:

1. A second hit of the pandemic wave would have been prevented, as eventually the 60% of the population would have got in touch with the virus through a mild illness and have become immune;
2. By not shutting down all the economic activities, it would have also been prevented an economic crisis.

Therefore, despite striving to increase immunity would have caused a number of deaths, the herd immunity solution could still function as the best way to achieve the flattening of the curve and the limitation of the transmission at the lowest economic cost.

Each state has a political and ethical responsibility in relation to its population and within the international domain, and when they face complex political choices, the purpose guiding the governmental decisions is, in general, to achieve the most desirable societal outcome. When considering the UK’s initial plan and evaluating if

³⁷ E. Yong, “The U.K.’s Coronavirus ‘Herd Immunity’ Debacle”, *The Atlantic*, March 16, 2021
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-herd-immunity-uk-boris-johnson/608065/>

it might have been driven by utilitarian logic³⁸, it is crucial to further analyze which is the greatest good which needs to be achieved in the context of a global health crisis. Indeed, it is not possible to comprehend the reasons why individual interests should be subordinated to the interest of the majority if the collective good is not clear.

Clearly, the elimination of the virus appears as the most desirable good for the majority of the people and for each philosophical strand. Therefore, herd immunity was serving as a means to the end - erasing the coronavirus. Yet, the eradication of a spread and infectious virus can be achieved only through vaccination.

In a framework of absolute inexperience and in the absence of a vaccine, since herd immunity can theoretically function also as an end in itself, the greatest good, which is the objective of the political action, might have swapped, resulting in an erroneous endeavor towards herd immunity. *[With few data at their disposal, decision-makers could have reasoned upon previous experience: those who get in touch with the virus are immunized and cannot be re-infected. The more people would then have encountered the virus, the higher the general immunity and the closer eradication would have been].*

In reality, herd immunity resulted not to be interchangeable with the desirable eradication of the virus, and further, it could neither work as a means to an end because of the scale of deaths involved. *[In addition, the fact that cases of re-infected people have been confirmed as a result of the virus' mutations increased the unfeasibility of herd immunity to beat the pandemic.]*

Given the fact that the collective good – the eradication of the virus – resulted in being not achievable, the English soft measures failed, and possibly this led to the utilitarian perspective to be corrected. Indeed, the more information governments collected, the more the disease severity appeared clear. Eventually, rigid measures became the favorable approach also from a utilitarian perspective, as the algebraic cost-benefit of soft advice resulted in being too high in the effort to eradicate the virus. In other words, lockdowns and restriction of movements could now appear as the most efficient cost-

³⁸ G. Delanty, "Six political philosophies in search of a virus: critical perspectives on the coronavirus", LSE 'Europe in Question' Discussion Paper Series, May, 2020.

benefit solution in the achievement of the greatest good for the greatest amount of people.

On March 17, Boris Johnson held a press conference inside No. 10 Downing Street to reverse UK's herd immunity policy and joined the "drastic action" side. Was it then the best political decision to take in order to reach the most desirable societal outcome?

At the beginning of March 2020, States confronted themselves with the first of the major politic-ethical issues that the coronavirus pandemic would then have posed to humanity. Should entire countries be locked down in order to protect the most vulnerable lives, no matter which social and economic costs this measure would have implied?

In an interview released in April 2020 by the *Frankfurter Rundschau*³⁹, Jürgen Habermas, German leading political philosopher and professor emeritus of philosophy at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University of Frankfurt, asserted that the endeavors of the states to save every single human life must have had the categorical priority over utilitarian neglect because of the undesirable economic costs.

Here, Habermas conceived as utilitarian that political action aimed at avoiding lockdowns in order to preserve the country from the economic downsides. In this view, American President Donald Trump's delay in declaring the closure of venues and enterprises, and their quick reopening, can be recognized as a logic "weighing human life against economy"⁴⁰. On March 21, 2020, Trump declared: "We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself".⁴¹

In this sense, it appears as the ethical dilemma of policymakers became between economy and human rights, and thus utilitarian was that logic favoring economy, and Kantian the one giving absolute priority to human life. In reality, restrictions on

³⁹ M. Schwering, "Jürgen Habermas über Corona:,, So viel Wissen über unser Nichtwissen gab es noch nie", *Frankfurter Rundschau*, April 10, 2020 <https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/juergen-habermas-coronavirus-krise-covid19-interview-13642491.html>

⁴⁰ R. Rini, "When to think like a utilitarian", *The Times Literary Supplement*, March 2021. <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/when-to-think-like-utilitarian/>

⁴¹ M. Haberman & D. E. Sanger, "Trump Says Coronavirus Cure Cannot 'Be Worse than the Problem Itself'", *The New York Times*, March 23, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-restrictions.html>

freedom could be supported both by the utilitarian and the Kantian stream. As a matter of fact, the paternalist political decisions to restrict individual freedom could be seen as a prioritization of broader societal implications over individual rights⁴² as well as a centralization of human dignity during the decision-making.

Kantian is, indeed, the philosophical current that assumes the centrality of human dignity. According to Kant, dignity is an inherent worth of the human being, which founds a duty to treat individuals not as mere means but also as ends in themselves. The dignity of the human person should, thus, be posited as the normative force in determining policies. The Kantian stance differs from utilitarianism because not only does it not appeal to the common good, but it also does not conform with the maxim that the end justifies the means. In this sense, the state has an ethical obligation to save lives, not distinguishing which ones are of greater value.

In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the Kantian position would require a state not only to impose a national quarantine to limit human physical proximity but also, in the hospitals, to strive to save each individual life – no matter age, gender, or economic class -, even employing all the resources available on the oldest and weakest patient. Indeed, each human being shall have the same value, with no one having priority over the other and with no need to choose whose life is worthier. Therefore, evaluating the draconian approach preferred by several European countries, such as Italy, Spain, Germany, and France, who significantly curbed public life in order to halt the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak, such policies can be considered both as utilitarian, if saving the majority of lives is the common good to pursue, and Kantian.⁴³ Indeed, posing the population's health as the first objective of the political agenda is an endeavor to protect each individual life, which is equally dignified to be protected.

Nonetheless, how much the severe measures could actually be driven by the categorical imperative of treating humanity as an end in itself?

⁴² T.Chia & O.I.Oyeniran, "Human health versus human rights: An emerging ethical dilemma arising from coronavirus disease pandemic", *PMC – US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health*

⁴³ G. Delanty, "Six political philosophies in search of a virus: critical perspectives on the coronavirus", *LSE 'Europe in Question' Discussion Paper Series*, May, 2020.

Eventually, as stated by Onora O'Neill, the Kantian position is preferable for countries when data upon which the decisions must be taken are scarce⁴⁴. Since utilitarianism has a larger scope than Kantianism, it requires a comparison of all the available actions and then a careful analysis of which one gives the most desirable effect algebraically. This might not only be time-consuming but eventually erroneous when miscalculations happen due to a lack of information. Moreover, errors in utilitarian decision-making, might possibly imply the sacrifice of innocents. Differently, thanks to its more restricted scope, Kantian ethics offers more precision on determining whether an action is right or wrong and prevent the sacrifice of lives for a misguided collective interest. Indeed, the Kantian principle through will take a decision states as follow:

Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end.

In other words, when we want to work out whether an act proposed is right or wrong, people, according to Kant, should look at their maxims and not at how much misery or happiness the decision is likely to produce and whether it does better at increasing happiness than other available acts. If an act does not use anyone as a mere means – which means to involve people in a set of actions to which they could not in principle give their consent to – and respect everyone as a rational person, the act will be right⁴⁵. In this sense, in situations of missing data, the Kantian perspective is useful because it is usually easier to identify whether human lives are being used as mere means than to choose the best outcomes among all the possible solutions.

Concluding, in this paragraph, I attempted to evaluate governments' public policies through the lens of political philosophy, believing that the analysis of public policy involves value decisions that are closely related to the ontological and epistemological questions, and thus it is a proper concern of the philosophical realm.

⁴⁴ O. O'Neil, "A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics" in *Applied Ethics*, 16 - 21, 2017. doi:10.4324/9781315097176-3

⁴⁵ *ibidem*

II. Are we losing personal freedoms? The “society of survival”

Observing the course of facts, the majority of countries, both democratic and authoritarian, followed the stream of introducing “extraordinary” measures to tackle the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic *Figure 5*. According to BBC News, as the disease expanded globally, over 100 countries worldwide established either a full or partial lockdown by the end of March 2020, and many others advised social distancing and restriction of movement⁴⁶.

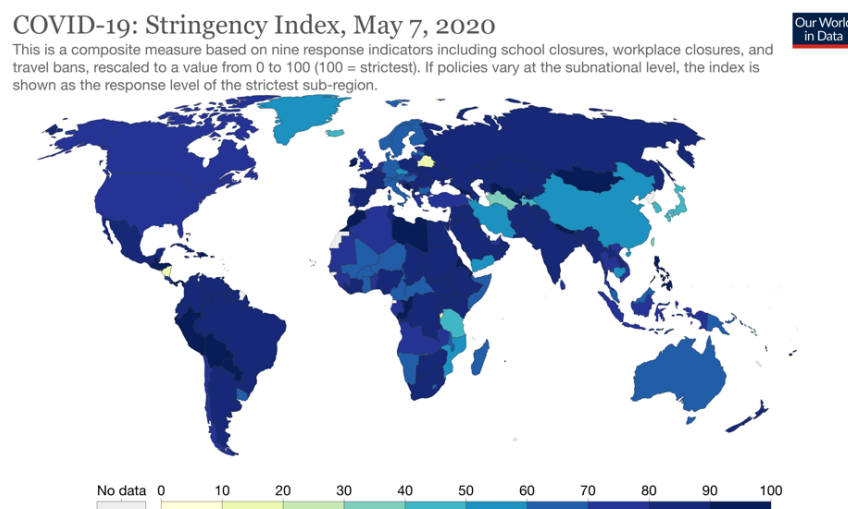


Figure 5. Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker – collection of information on several different common policy responses that governments have taken to respond to the pandemic on 20 indicators such as school closures and travel restrictions. Source: Hale, Angrist, Goldszmidt, Kira, Petherick, Phillips, Webster, Cameron-Blake, Hallas, Majumdar, and Tatlow(2021). “A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker).” Nature Human Behaviour. – Last Update April 6, 2021.

Despite the goal of the political action, whether employing a utilitarian or Kantian logic, stringent policies could have been preferred over other actions, during the decision-making process, at least for two reasons:

1. in the initial stage of the pandemic, governments could get the advantage of the tacit public acquiescence – as a matter of fact, the unpreparedness to deal with a new enemy made the severity of the measures justifiable⁴⁷;
2. policymakers, in the face of an unknown enemy, could assure their decisions by clinging upon maxims – in the case of Kantianism, if the principle behind the choice

⁴⁶ BBC News, “Coronavirus: The world in lockdown in maps and charts”, April 7, 2020.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52103747>

⁴⁷ J. Zielonka, “Who Should be in Charge of Pandemics? Scientists or Politicians?” in *Pandemics, Politics and Society*. De Gruyter, 2021.

is right, which in this view means treating humanity as an end in itself, the action that will follow must be right⁴⁸.

Actually, the tough decisions made by leaders and public health experts have been accepted by the general public, firstly, because when people face a choice between security and freedom, as Thomas Hobbes stated, they will always prefer security, whatever the cost⁴⁹. To put it in different words, if security is at risk, whatever action that aims at its protection must be pursued. Moreover, the draconian measures could possibly have been perceived not only justifiable but also right whenever society considered the effort to save the majority of lives as a right principle.

Yet, even with the inalterability of the principle, the permissive public consensus is not everlasting. After months of discontinued lockdowns, cancellations of mass gatherings, closure of borders, cease of public spaces, and curfews⁵⁰ shared concerns with the distributive justice of government measures started to emerge widely. The more time passed by, the more governmental decisions had to involve trade-offs which unevenly affected the general public. No decision happens without a cost, and the cost of avoiding deaths by reducing the chances of transmission has been warned by economists to be not only financial but also social and psychological.

Balancing between economic and health considerations resulted in being very difficult for governments because of the pressure of competing claims. As the Mayor of Bergamo, Giorgio Gori, put dramatically in April 2020 on La7 TV: “We have to choose: do we want to die from the virus or from hunger?”⁵¹ The regulations enforced worldwide whose effects seriously impacted the society, such as the restriction of personal liberties, the growing poverty, and the expanding psychological discomforts, may, indeed, raise several questions: to what extent does the right to live have

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*

⁴⁹ “Se, come ci insegna il grande Thomas Hobbes, mettiamo le persone di fronte all’alternativa secca tra sicurezza e libertà, la scelta ricadrà sempre sulla sicurezza, costi quel che costi”

S. Maffettone, “Quarto Shock, come un virus ha cambiato il mondo”. Luiss University Press, Roma 2020. Pag. 113

⁵⁰ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/download-data-response-measures-covid-19>

⁵¹ <https://www.la7.it/piazzapulita/video/gori-bergo-stiamo-navigando-al-buio-23-04-2020-321219>

overriding importance over other human rights?⁵² Have politicians, by prioritizing health, failed to think about human well-being?⁵³

Before diving deeply into these questions, it is worth highlighting the fact that the health and economic concerns are not, and shall not be, mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine growth and productivity without good public health, as well as it is difficult to think about a sound healthcare system with a diseased economy.⁵⁴

Therefore, a question comes as naturally as naively: by having nothing but full confidence in rigid measures as methods to save lives, are we missing what makes life valuable? The idea of following a different approach from the ones so far guided by severe restrictions and national lockdowns may, indeed, be a useful vehicle to address the cross-cutting challenge of people's security. As a matter of fact, these strategies added a number of issues to the health threat posed at first by the pandemic, such as they expedited domestic violence, psychological stress, as well as the rise of poverty. On the one hand, from the utilitarian perspective, as time goes by, the cost-benefit calculations upon the decided strategy employed to reach the end shall be updated, and eventually, they may lead to modifying the means to reach the end. In other words, if a new solution, improving the algebraic cost-benefit efficiency, comes out – keeping the greatest common good unchanged –, the means to the end must be changed. Indeed, according to utilitarianism, the right action to follow is the one that brings “the greatest amount of good for the greatest number”⁵⁵, being the greatest amount of good algebraically calculated among the possible pathways. Thus, if *the greatest amount of good for the greatest number* can be achieved through a different means from the one pursued so far, which further minimizes the costs (whether economic or also social), that action must be followed. Hence, utilitarianism does not exclude *a priori* the possibility to employ a different strategy for tackling the spread of the virus, granted that the latest offers a possibility to reach the greatest amount of good for the greatest number with a further minimization of the cost. Indeed, utilitarianism follows the logic

⁵² https://www.zeit.de/2020/20/grundrechte-lebensschutz-freiheit-juergen-habermas-klaus-guenther?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Freader.perlego.com%2F

⁵³ R. A. Bourne (2021). *Economics in one virus: what have we learned?*

⁵⁴ J. Zielonka, *Who Should be in Charge of Pandemics? Scientists or Politicians?*

⁵⁵ Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “The History of Utilitarianism”, September 22, 2014. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/#IdeUti>

of consequentialism, “the right action is understood entirely in terms of consequences produced”⁵⁶, as long as the new means entitles to reach the end, it is right.

On the other hand, despite the rising fatality, the Kantian policies appealing to human dignity might not be enough to deal with the challenge of the pandemic because they do “not give sufficient recognition to the question of livelihood and all the other problems that lockdown presents.”⁵⁷ Dignity must come along with human security, intended as the recognition of the several dimensions related to the feelings of safeness and freedom from indignity⁵⁸. The rise of anxiety and depression among people, the neglect of patients with different diseases from Covid-19 by hospitals, as well as the widening of the learning gap between pupils from different societal backgrounds⁵⁹, are part of human security that the Kantian perspective seems to forget in its endeavor to protect the vulnerable minorities.

Coming back to the question that the prolonged times of the pandemic posed into light: are we missing to make life valuable? For how long can draconian measures function for society as a whole?

According to Article 2.2 of the German Constitution⁶⁰, the right to life is located at the top of the subsequent list of other civil rights, and it must be protected by the state. In this sense, the supreme status granted to the right of life makes it immunized from being balanced against other rights with which it might seem to be in conflict⁶¹. Logically, the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany poses all liberties after the right of life because it is only living human beings that are capable of enjoying personal freedoms.

⁵⁶ *ibidem*

⁵⁷ G. Delanty, “Six political philosophies in search of a virus: critical perspectives on the coronavirus”, *LSE ‘Europe in Question’ Discussion Paper Series*, May, 2020. (Pag. 3)

⁵⁸ GPPAC, “Human Security” <https://www.gppac.net/what-we-do/human-security#:~:text=Human%20security%20is%20a%20human,want%2C%20and%20freedom%20from%20indignity.>

⁵⁹ X. Bonal & S. González, “The impact of lockdown on the learning gap: family and schools divisions in times of crisis”, *SpringerLink. Int Rev Educ* **66**, 635–655 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-020-09860-z>

⁶⁰ “Every person shall have the right to life and physical integrity. Freedom of the person shall be inviolable. These rights may be interfered with only pursuant to a law.” Article 2.2 [personal freedoms], Basic law for the Federal Republic of Germany

⁶¹ C. Offe, “Corona Pandemic Policy: Exploratory notes on its ‘epistemic regime’” in *Pandemics, Politics and Society*, De Gruyter, 2021.

Notwithstanding, libertarians do oppose this view, as they “strongly value individual freedom”⁶². According to libertarianism, “there is nothing more sacred than the liberty of the individual.”⁶³ Indeed, even from a moderated perspective, the governmental effort to curtail the death toll does not provide a justification for the extreme restraint of personal freedoms, whether this restraint requires removing liberties previously experienced.⁶⁴ For extreme libertarians, instead, “freedom is so important that losing it is worse than death (other people’s deaths, at any rate)”⁶⁵. In other words, it would seem that, from a libertarian perspective, it is better to die than to live without freedom. However, what libertarians require, being “highly skeptical of political authority”⁶⁶, is a sort of individual voluntary agreement legitimating the state’s authority and policies. Despite this libertarian vision may sound egoistic and may not bring concrete solutions for society, it may have a point in drawing attention to the question of liberty. How much individual freedom are we willing to sacrifice under the course of this pandemic? Where shall the limits of state power be posed in its path to win the virus?

The South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han, interestingly, speaks about a “society of survival”. According to his perspective, humankind’s extreme fear of the virus reflects this society’s desire to live as long as possible. This is shown by today’s society’s employment of all the resources available to lengthen life. Indeed, the concern for living a good and valuable life has been exceeded by the hysteria for long survival. According to Han’s position, today’s highest human value is represented by health intended as “salutism”, and when it is at risk, people are willing to sacrifice everything which makes life worthy and decent. Thus, restriction of fundamental rights is accepted without resistance, for the sake of health.⁶⁷

⁶² Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Libertarianism”, January 28, 2019. (intro)
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/libertarianism/#AnaMinSta>

⁶³ G. Delanty, “Six political philosophies in search of a virus: critical perspectives on the coronavirus”, *LSE ‘Europe in Question’ Discussion Paper Series*, May, 2020. (Pag. 4)

⁶⁴ *ibidem*

⁶⁵ A. Hills, “Can I sunbathe in the park? Is now a deep moral question?”, *The Guardian*, April 10, 2020.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/10/sunbathing-park-deep-moral-questions-philosophers-coronavirus-individual>

⁶⁶ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Libertarianism”, January 28, 2019. (part 5. Anarchism and the Minimal State)
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/libertarianism/#AnaMinSta>

⁶⁷ B. C. Han, “La società del virus tra Stato di polizia e isteria della sopravvivenza”, *Avvenire*, April 7, 2020.
<https://www.avvenire.it/agora/pagine/byung-chul-han-filosofo-coronavirus-cina-corea-stato-di-polizia>

In this section, I desired to cover the other side of the coin, the disadvantages of the so far most implemented, and eventually more effective, measures to fight the spread of the virus. Indeed, I found it crucial to highlight that, during the decision-making process, governments cannot only assure their decisions by clinging upon maxims (despite right), but they also need to calculate the possible side-effects and, if no other action can be taken, at least prepare themselves to handle them properly. “Extraordinary times require extraordinary action”⁶⁸, declared Christine Lagarde with a tweet in March 2020, though the duration of their application shall be clear to the general public and limited in time. Indeed, employing unconventional patterns in the name of emergency is one way the executive establishes pre-eminence over other institutions and the society⁶⁹. This arrangement has been evident in Hungary’s pandemic response which passed legislation extending the state of emergency and granting Prime Minister Viktor Orban open-ended extra powers to the coronavirus outbreak⁷⁰. Posed to extremism, it is what Giorgio Agamben viewed as the spectrum of a permanent state of exception⁷¹,

It is not by case that the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Marija Pejčinović Burić, issued a toolkit for governments across Europe on respecting democracy, human rights and the rule of law during the COVID-19 crisis⁷². Indeed, the coronavirus pandemic posed a serious threat to democracy, which found itself under pressure in facing social, political, and legal challenges undermining its core values. The guide designed to help ensure governments that measures taken remain proportional to the crisis and limited in time is the proof that stringent actions might threaten personal freedoms, if not managed properly, and that the warning of libertarians of explicit a limit to state’s power may be founded.

To conclude, whatever the policy that a government decides to enforce, the key element determining its performance can only be trust. Indeed, contexts of crisis do call for designating discretionary power to the executive, however, this delegation can

⁶⁸ <https://twitter.com/Lagarde/status/1240414918966480896>

⁶⁹ J. White, “Emergency Europe after Covid-19” in *Pandemics, Politics and Society*. De Gruyter, 2021.

⁷⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-hungary-law/update-1-hungarys-pm-secures-open-ended-emergency-powers-to-fight-coronavirus-idUSL8N2BN3UA>

⁷¹ G. Agamben, *State of Exception*

⁷² Council of Europe, *Respecting democracy, rule of law and human rights in the framework of the COVID-19 sanitary crisis – A toolkit for member states*, Information Documents SG/Inf(2020)11, April 7, 2020.

be legitimized only if citizens have trust in their government, which is to say, they have faith that their governors know what to do⁷³.

It is the capability of governors to inform their people that can actually reinforce trust between society and the political sphere. In Harari's words, "citizen empowerment"⁷⁴ enables the general public not only to understand the government's goal and to accept the means but also to be self-motivated and more efficient in respecting the new directives, ultimately strengthening Public Ethics. Moments of crisis do request trust, but they also offer the opportunity to rebuild people's trust in authorities. Consequentially, the more the trust, the more the Public Ethic⁷⁵, a value-laden asset in ensuring people's conformity to the *extraordinary measures required by the extraordinary times*.

III. What is the role of data in the decision-making process? The risk of "Surveillance Capitalism"

*"Crisis are moments that put many things into question especially our decision-making procedure."*⁷⁶

In the previous sections of this chapter, I first analyzed how the philosophical strands of utilitarianism and Kantianism could serve as logical guidelines for governments to make timely decisions during the public-policy process. The former, which aimed to reach the greatest good for the greatest people, resulted in being adjustable in time. Indeed, being a form of consequentialism, the right action is conceived in terms of the consequences that it produces, and thus, if a more convenient solution comes up, it must be pursued. Instead, the latter, which is a deontological moral theory, affirms that the rightness of an action is not contingent on the consequences but rather with its compliance with the supreme moral principle, labelled as categorical imperative. In this sense, Kantianism appeared useful and eventually preferable in the absence of

⁷³ F. Fukuyama, "The Thing that Determines a Country's Resistance to the Coronavirus", *Atlantis*, March 30, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/thing-determines-how-well-countries-respond-coronavirus/609025/>

⁷⁴ Y.N. Harari, "The world after coronavirus", *Financial Times*, March 20, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>

⁷⁵ S. Maffettone, *Quarto Shock*, Luiss University Press, Roma 2020.

⁷⁶ D. Innerarity, "Political Decision-Making in a Pandemic" in *Pandemics, Politics and Society*. De Gruyter, 2021.

data, as it enables to grasp whether an action is right or wrong without the need for further information.

Secondly, I gave consideration to the libertarian perspective that envisaging the pandemic as a cross-cutting challenge embraces the possibility of following a different approach in the fight against the virus. Indeed, I discussed the drawbacks of the “extraordinary” measures implemented by the majority of Countries, and I started exploring whether it may have been possible to enforce different actions, less compromising personal freedoms. Here, I will dive into the area of decision-making, evaluating the role of Big Data as an asset for governments for designing public policies.

This section will be led by the following question: have governments employed all the resources and information available to evaluate all the possible solutions during the decision-making process?

The third wave of coronavirus occurred twelve months after its uprising and, despite the multitude of data available, the majority of governments maintained the endorsement of lockdowns to the detriment of personal freedom and the economy. This decision could be comprehended mainly if none of the other solutions proposed could work better. However, it could also be the case that the information at disposal was not employed correctly during the policymaking process. I will now observe this eventuality, as the Covid-19 crisis was the first global challenge where data and their great assets could have been spent.

I will proceed as follow: firstly, I will provide a definition of data and a general contextualization of the advent of digital data and big data. Then, I will regard data as a tool for decision-making, discussing both the advantages – such as evidence-based governance and the minimization of policy failures – and the drawbacks of their employment.

Data are records with the potential of being informative. Digital data appeared roughly in the 2010s, along with the debut of sensors, which W. Brian Arthur called as “the

third morphing” of our history. Sensors, indeed, compiled oceans of data that invited humankind to develop algorithms in order to make sense of them⁷⁷.

“There has never been a state, monarchy, kingdom, empire, government, or corporation in history that has had command over such granular, immediate, varied, and detailed data about subjects and objects that concern them.”⁷⁸ The term Big Data was coined, indeed, with the intention of capturing the enormous volume, velocity, and variety⁷⁹ of information that governments and corporations can now have at their disposal, marking a departure from conventional forms of data and statistical knowledge⁸⁰.

The ongoing literature suggests that big data holds vast potential for improving decision-making processes, policymaking, and services⁸¹. Actually, by providing enhanced insight into citizens’ needs and demands, big data can be employed to extract value and knowledge while limiting the chances of error in the public-policy process.

In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, big data, when implemented, offered considerable assistance to governments, demonstrating an enormous potential. For instance, being a timely tool, data favored real-time analysis and intervention, which helped decision-makers to align choices already taken and to improve future ones. As data consent to conduct controlled experiments, they are critical for the continuous improvement of political strategies⁸². Big data also grant policymakers a large amount of quantified information, which not only permits to have an increased scope of the vision but also to employ reducing-complexity processes such as commensuration. Indeed, commensuration, consisting of comparing different entities according to a common metric, translate qualities into quantities and then create relations among things that otherwise would have seemed fundamentally different. This mode of power

⁷⁷ W.B. Arthur “Where is technology taking the economy?”, *Mckinsey Quaterly*, October 5, 2017. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-analytics/our-insights/where-is-technology-taking-the-economy>

⁷⁸ E. Ruppert, E. Isin & D. Bigo “Data politics”, *Big Data & Society*, 2017. doi:10.1177/2053951717717749

⁷⁹ D. Laney, “3D Data Management: Controlling Data volume, velocity, variety”, *META Group, Stamford*, 2001. <https://blogs.gartner.com/doug-laney/files/2012/01/ad949-3D-Data-Management-Controlling-Data-Volume-Velocity-and-Variety.pdf>

⁸⁰ E. Ruppert, E. Isin & D. Bigo “Data politics”, *Big Data & Society*, 2017. doi:10.1177/2053951717717749

⁸¹ J. Studinka & A.A. Guenduez, “The Use of Big Data in the Public Policy Process- Paving the Way for Evidence-Based Governance”, *Lausanne: EGPA Conference*, 2018.

⁸² H. Varian, “Computer mediated transactions”, *American Economic Review*, 2001, 100(2), 1-10. doi:10.1257/aer.100.2.1

is a method of making data extremely valuable since, by categorizing and extracting useful information it provides a way of making sense of the world. In this view, by visualizing data, decision-makers can easily discard fruitless information, and commensurate what remains, quickly grasping and comparing differences⁸³.

Big data, thus, also pave the way for evidence-based decision-making, which represents “an effort to restructure policy processes by prioritizing data-based evidentiary decision-making criteria over less formal or more ‘intuitive’ or experiential policy assessments in order to avoid or minimize policy failures caused by a mismatch between government expectations and actual, on-the-ground conditions.” In other words, the employment of big data would offer decision-makers the opportunity for continuous improvement in policy settings and performance, based on rational evaluation and a well-informed range of options⁸⁴.

According to the South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han, the coronavirus is a system test, and it appears increasingly clear that Asia has had better control of the pandemic than Europe. In his view, the triggering point is represented by Big Data. While Europe desperately strove to express its sovereignty by closing borders, Asia recognized the enormous potential of Big Data for defending herself from the virus⁸⁵.

In Asian countries, digital surveillance has been fully exploited to contain the epidemic, a method which revealed to be extremely effective. In Taiwan, the state sent simultaneous text messages to all citizens to find people who had been in contact with someone infected or to inform concerning places and buildings where contagious people had been. In South Korea, whoever was approaching a building where an infected person had been, would have received an alarm via the Corono-app on his cellphone. China, besides implementing 200,000,000 surveillance cameras, in Wuhan set up thousands of teams of digital investigation to search for infected cases on the sole basis of technical data. Particularly in China, digital surveillance was and is

⁸³ W. N. Espeland, & M. L. Stevens, “Commensuration as a social process”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1998, 24(1), 313-343. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.313

⁸⁴ M. Howlett, M. Ramesh, & A. Perl, *Studying public policy: Policy cycles and policy subsystems* (Vol. 3) 2009. Ontario: Oxford University Press.

⁸⁵ B. C. Han, “La società del virus tra Stato di polizia e isteria della polizia”, *Avvenire*, April 2, 2020. <https://www.avvenire.it/agora/pagine/byung-chul-han-filosofo-coronavirus-cina-corea-stato-di-polizia>

possible because there is an unrestricted exchange of data between Internet providers and the authorities.

Nevertheless, despite the employment of big data as a support for the government during the pandemic crisis, as reported, has resulted into being effective in different Asian Countries, Europe hesitated in their full employment because of legal and ethical concerns. Indeed, if critical consciousness of digital surveillance is practically non-existent in Asia and debates on data protection are limited to liberal countries like Japan and South Korea, European individualism and attention to data protection make it impossible to use Big Data in combating the virus in the continent. Due to Confucianism, Asian states have an authoritarian mentality which makes people less recalcitrant, more obedient, and more willing to sacrifice privacy in exchange for security. Moreover, because of this cultural tradition, Asian people have even more trust in the state than in Europe. Notwithstanding that Big Data are more efficacious in combating the virus than the border closings, the digital battle is a major challenge for Europe. Again, by enforcing Big Data into the decision-making process, Europe fears the risk of trading off her core values, primarily privacy and personal freedoms.

Indeed, employing and entrusting data entangle several other aspects. To begin with, “extracting knowledge from data is not a neutral act”⁸⁶. Data are the result of an act of “seeing and recording something that was previously hidden and possibly unnamed”⁸⁷. Therefore, decision-makers must not only be aware that data shall not always be considered as reliable as reported but should also provide solutions to control who is legitimate “to make the invisible visible”⁸⁸. Secondly, much of the information reaching the general public today is mediated by platform economies, which can further undermine data’s reliability because of commercial interests or through algorithms’ design⁸⁹. In addition, the once state’s monopoly over data extraction, analysis, and accumulation is now more and more challenged by corporations⁹⁰,

⁸⁶ S. Leonelli, “Data - from objects to assets”, *Nature*, October 15, 2019. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03062-w>

⁸⁷ S. Jasanoff, “Virtual, visible, and actionable: Data assemblages and the sightlines of justice”, *Big Data & Society*, 2017. Doi: 10.1177/2053951717724477

⁸⁸ *ibidem*

⁸⁹ T. Owen, “The Case of Platform Governance”, *CIGI Papers Series, No.231*, 2019.

⁹⁰ E. Ruppert, E. Isin & D. Bigo “Data politics”, *Big Data & Society*, 2017. doi:10.1177/2053951717717749

agencies, and nonstate actors, who “become *de facto* census takers”⁹¹. As a matter of fact, from the lecture of Bourdieu, the realm of knowledge also establishes a realm of power; thus data, as a source of potential information, is of interest to those who detain or are willing to detain power. “As an increasingly necessary input for innovation, a rapidly expanding element of international trade, a vital ingredient in corporate success, and an important dimension of national security, data offers incredible advantages to all who hold it”⁹². Progressive attention is now being advanced to the abuse of data by countries and companies that seek anticompetitive advantages⁹³. Data, indeed, can serve as instruments for controlling people, besides flows of goods.

The current international institutions are, however, not equipped to manage the proliferation of data, and this lack of an internationally accepted framework governing data leaves crucial questions about data sovereignty and people’s privacy unanswered. What controls can sovereign governments impose on corporations gathering people’s data, accessing and monitoring people’s behavior? Who will ensure that governments or other actors do not misuse people’s data and violate their economic, political, and human rights?⁹⁴

As introduced, the pandemic brought to light the fragilities and the contradictions of the European democratic system. Data played a crucial role in this unveiling. Indeed, besides this crisis offered a unique field of experimentation for simulation models and algorithm-based predictions, it also provided an arena for public discussion.

The fact that the liberal system (USA and EU) is not providing coherent answers to these questions is incentivizing incorrect behaviors, as well as shuddering people’s trust in governments. As evidenced by Helga Nowotny, president of the European Research Council and Professor emerita of Social Studies of Science, at the core of the liberal critical consciousness of digital surveillance, there is the concept of trust or distrust in governments. As a matter of fact, citizens do not accept digital technologies

⁹¹ S. Jasanoff, “Virtual, visible, and actionable: Data assemblages and the sightlines of justice”, *Big Data & Society*, 2017. Doi: 10.1177/2053951717724477

⁹² M. Slaughter & D. McCormick, “Data is power”, *Foreign Affairs*, April 29, 2021.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-16/data-power-new-rules-digital-age>

⁹³ P. Hummel, M. Braun, M. Tretter & P. Dabrock, “Data sovereignty: a review”, *Big Data & Society*, 2021. doi.org:10.1177/2053951720982012

⁹⁴ M. Slaughter & D. McCormick, “Data is power”, *Foreign Affairs*, April 29, 2021.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-16/data-power-new-rules-digital-age>

when they are implemented by governments (despite safety standards approved by privacy advocacy groups and met by European Commission regulations), but they do trust giant corporations which gather any intimate aspects of their lives⁹⁵. This dichotomy of the liberal-democratic society has been accurately described by Shoshana Zuboff in *Surveillance Capitalism*⁹⁶ where she refers to an economic order in which people voluntarily give up their rights to privacy in return for the economic benefits that they crave. Indeed, also Hal Ronald Varian, Chief Economist at Google, declared that people agree to the “invasion of privacy, if they get something they want in return”⁹⁷.

Inevitably, the European response to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially if compared to the Asian one, disclosed the ethical dilemma permeating the democratic system: how to combine the effective exploitation of big data, the rule of law, and citizens’ rights to privacy. It is now evident that big data do support governments in improving the decision-making process, as they provide increased insights, opportunities to timely experimentations, methods to reduce complexity and evidence to minimize policy failures. However, despite “data generation, processing and analysis are unavoidably value-laden”⁹⁸, forms of regulations are now urgently required, especially in the context of data sovereignty and privacy rights. Indeed, precisely because of the vast value they offer to those who hold them, data governance is needed to overcome today’s decision between employing them or not to. If this happens, it would have been missed the chance of using data as potent assets.

⁹⁵ H. Nowotny, “In AI We Trust: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Pushes us Deeper into Digitalization” in *Pandemics, Politics and Society*. De Gruyter, 2021.

⁹⁶ S. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism- The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Public Affairs, New York, 2020.

⁹⁷ S. Zuboff, “Big Other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization”, *Journal of Information Technology*, 30(1):75-89. doi:10.1057/jit.2015.5, March 1, 2015. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1057/jit.2015.5>

⁹⁸ S. Leonelli, “Data - from objects to assets”, *Nature*, October 15, 2019. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03062-w>

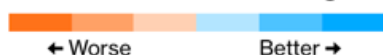
3. The Global Response

I. How are Countries handling the Covid-19 crisis? The ‘Covid Reliance Ranking’

After considering the ethical implications of governmental decisions during the coronavirus crisis, I will now attempt to provide a general global perspective of how different countries handled the pandemic to compare and evaluate the most employed and effective measures to contain the spread of the virus. I will consider the cases of Singapore, Brazil, Israel, and Chile. Furtherly, I will touch upon the Chinese case.

The decision to select Singapore and Brazil is based on the fact that the two are respectively ranked as first and last (53rd) countries for crisis management by Bloomberg’s *Covid Reliance Ranking* (dated April 26, 2021), which is the main source of the following analysis. Differently, Israel is the only country, ranked among the top 5 by Bloomberg, which has used vaccination as the main approach to beat the pandemic. Besides, Chile is a peculiar case of a country having vaccinated over a third of its population but still struggling to contain the spread of the virus. Ultimately, I decided to hint at the case of China because, despite being among the most virtuous countries and one of the biggest vaccine-manufacturer, its vaccination coverage is still under 8%. *Figure 6 and 7*

Covid Resilience Ranking



Covid Resilience Ranking legend. SOURCE: Bloomberg.

| RANK | CHANGE | ECONOMY | BLOOMBERG RESILIENCE SCORE | 1-MONTH CASES PER 100,000 | 1-MONTH FATALITY RATE | TOTAL DEATHS PER 1 MILLION | POSITIVE TEST RATE | PEOPLE COVERED BY VACCINES |
|------|--------|-------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | ▲1 | Singapore | 79.7 | 12 | 0% | 5 | 0.1% | 19.4% |
| 2 | ▼1 | New Zealand | 79.6 | 3 | 0% | 5 | 0% | 1.9% |
| 3 | – | Australia | 76.2 | 2 | 0.2% | 36 | 0.1% | 3.7% |
| 4 | ▲1 | Israel | 74.9 | 82 | 2.6% | 734 | 0.4% | 57.4% |
| 5 | ▼1 | Taiwan | 74.7 | 0 | 2.4% | 1 | 0.4% | 0.1% |
| 6 | – | South Korea | 72.7 | 35 | 0.5% | 35 | 1.8% | 2.2% |
| 7 | ▲1 | Japan | 70.9 | 80 | 0.9% | 78 | 6.2% | 1% |
| 8 | ▲3 | U.A.E. | 69.7 | 610 | 0.2% | 159 | 0.8% | 47.4% |
| 9 | ▲4 | Finland | 68.9 | 205 | 0.8% | 163 | 1.8% | 14.8% |
| 10 | ▲2 | Hong Kong | 68.2 | 4 | 1.7% | 28 | 0.1% | 8.3% |
| 11 | ▲4 | Vietnam | 67.2 | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0.1% | 0.1% |
| 12 | ▼5 | China | 67 | 0 | 0% | 3 | 0.1% | 7.7% |

Figure 6. Covid Resilience Ranking based on Covid Status by Country, 12 top Countries. SOURCE: Bloomberg.
Data updated as of April 25, 2021.

| | | | | | | | |
|--------|----------------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 43 ▲4 | Iraq | 48 | 521 | 0.5% | 378 | 17.9% | 0.4% |
| 44 ▲8 | Czech Republic | 48 | 1,146 | 2.8% | 2,701 | 1.7% | 13.1% |
| 45 ▼10 | Philippines | 44.7 | 270 | 1.2% | 152 | 20.8% | 0.6% |
| 46 ▼19 | Turkey | 43.6 | 1,745 | 0.5% | 451 | 19% | 12.7% |
| 47 ▲2 | Peru | 43.5 | 793 | 3.4% | 1,803 | 20% | 2% |
| 48 ▲5 | Mexico | 43 | 87 | 13.1% | 1,666 | 18.5% | 6.2% |
| 49 ▼8 | Iran | 42.8 | 650 | 1.3% | 823 | 21.8% | 0.4% |
| 50 ▼5 | Colombia | 41.5 | 781 | 2.1% | 1,393 | 24.2% | 4.3% |
| 51 ▼7 | Argentina | 41.4 | 1,256 | 1.1% | 1,360 | 29% | 7.8% |
| 52 ▼2 | Poland | 40.6 | 1,577 | 2.4% | 1,723 | 18.9% | 13.3% |
| 53 ▼2 | Brazil | 39.1 | 935 | 4.3% | 1,832 | — | 9.7% |

Figure 7. Covid Resilience Ranking based on Covid Status by Country, 10 worst Countries. SOURCE: Bloomberg.
Data updated as of April 25, 2021.

The city-state of Singapore has been ranked first by the *Covid Reliance Ranking*, as it managed to bring back down quickly the number of new Covid-19 cases, and, overall, it experienced a very low death rate. Indeed, after the first surge of confirmed new infections, on April 7, 2020, the Singapore government enforced numerous severe measures: a national lockdown, restrictions of social interaction and movement, mandatory masks, and closures of venues. Favored also by the geographical factors of being a small island nation, Singapore was able to administer the crisis efficiently by closing its borders soon, strategically turning the empty buildings into isolation facilities, and implementing surveillance methods, such as the use of tokens to trace the wearer's movements and the TraceTogether app (compulsory since the end 2020 to enter public spaces). Moreover, on December 14, 2020, Singapore approved the Pfizer-bioNTech coronavirus vaccine, being the first Asian country to do so. To date, it has already vaccinated a fifth of its population. Along with social tracing and a proper vaccination plan, among the factors of Singapore's successful strategy,⁹⁹ there is also the responsibility of its citizens. Strongly influenced by the Confucian tradition, Singapore's people had a strong reliance on the government and a clear willingness to give up privacy rights for security. Here, the Singaporean model seems too peculiar to

⁹⁹Raudhah Hirschmann, *COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore- statistics and facts*, Statista. April 16, 2021.
https://www.statista.com/topics/6066/coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak-in-singapore/#topicHeader__wrapper
(accessed May 8, 2021)

be re-applicable¹⁰⁰, as few other countries enjoy the possibility of pervasiveness in citizens' lives.

When the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 declared the coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic, Brazil was only a week away from announcing its first Covid-19-related death, and soon, Latin America's largest country would have drawn international interest. Indeed, Brazil became the third country for the number of Covid-19 cases and deaths, only behind the US and India. To date, Brazil results as the last country according to the *Covid Resilience Ranking*, mainly for its fragile health system and its Prime Minister's Jair Bolsonaro "go back to normality" response. The rate of hospital beds decreased over the past decade¹⁰¹, leading to over two hundred beds in less from 2010 to 2019. In the State of Rio Grande do Sul, intensive care beds were even not available¹⁰². In March 2021, 17 of the 27 Brazilian States were at more than 90% of their occupancy¹⁰³. Clearly, by putting the Brazilian Health system on the verge of collapse, the pandemic also had serious negative impacts on the economy. Indeed, after having witnessed a GDP growth for the previous three years, in 2020 the country has marked a GDP decrease of 4.5, and it is experiencing a soaring unemployment rate.¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, the major issue that Brazil is now facing is the political disputes regarding the inexistence of governmental measures. Having recorded more than 15 million Covid-19 cases, Brazil's Congress has initiated into government's crisis administration which could potentially impeach President Bolsonaro, who continues to oppose any severe measure¹⁰⁵. Among the governmental actions, the commission will investigate slow vaccine acquisition, the absence of medical equipment, and the minimization of the pandemic's asperity. As a matter of fact, Brazil is the most evident case of how Countries led by populist leaders

¹⁰⁰ Daniel Moss, *Singapore's Covid Success isn't easily applicable*. January 3, 2021.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-01-03/singapore-s-covid-success-isn-t-easily-replicated> (accessed May 8, 2021)

¹⁰¹ Ana María Ríos, *Brazil: hospital beds per thousand inhabitants 2010-2019*, Statista. March 12, 2021.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1070990/brazil-hospital-beds-penetration/> (Accessed May 8, 2021)

¹⁰² BBC, *Brazil health service in "worst crisis in its history"*. March 17, 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-56424611> (accessed May 8, 2021)

¹⁰³ Talha Burki, *No end in sight for the Brazilian COVID-19 crisis*, The Lancet. May, 2021.

DOI:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2666-5247\(21\)00095-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2666-5247(21)00095-1)

¹⁰⁴ J. G. Navarro, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Brazil – statistics&facts*, Statista. April 16, 2021.

<https://www.statista.com/topics/6168/coronavirus-covid-19-in-brazil/> (accessed May 8, 2021)

¹⁰⁵ BBC, *Covid: Brazil's Bolsonaro defiant as Congress launches inquiry*. April 27, 2021.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-56899177> (accessed May 8, 2021)

have suffered the highest price both concerning mortality rate and economic damage¹⁰⁶.

Israel is considered the vaccine pioneer, as it now approaches the goal of 60% of the population vaccinated, and it may soon reach herd immunity. Indeed, among the first five countries in the fight against the pandemic (according to Bloomberg's *Covid Reliance Ranking*), the only one which has founded its success on vaccination is Israel. After reaching the peak on January 27, 2021 (*Figure 8*), the country then saw a gradual fall in Covid-19 confirmed cases thanks to the combination of social-distancing measures and the vaccine campaign. In Israel, vaccinations started on December 19, 2020 and proceeded at such a rapid pace that the third wave has been deeply attenuated. Despite the success of the vaccination scheme, Israeli authorities are still warning people to be cautious. Only for those people fully vaccinated, life has almost come back to normality since swimming pools, concerts, and gyms are now available to enter through an app. Nonetheless, the government has been criticized for failing to vaccinate the over one hundred million Palestinians living under its military control. Indeed, despite the UN's statement on Israel's duty for equity of Covid-19 vaccine access¹⁰⁷, Palestinians have received only 5,000 doses and have been reliant on COVAX for vaccines¹⁰⁸.

If Israel is the example of a successful vaccination plan to decelerate the pandemic, the fact that vaccines have not been the common denominator for succeeding in managing the health crisis evidences that vaccines alone are not enough.

¹⁰⁶ Yascha Mounk, *How Populism Has Proven Lethal in this Pandemic*, Council of Foreign Relations. April 26, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-populism-has-proven-lethal-pandemic> (accessed May 8, 2021).

¹⁰⁷ UN News, *Israel: Ensure equal COVID-19 vaccine access to Palestinians- UN Independent Expert*. January 14, 2021. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1082152>

¹⁰⁸ Niall McCarthy, *Israel's Vaccine Rollout Curbs Covid-19 Spread*, Statista. April 13, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/chart/24608/covid-19-case-trends-in-israel/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people

Shown is the rolling 7-day average. The number of confirmed cases is lower than the number of actual cases; the main reason for that is limited testing.

Our World in Data

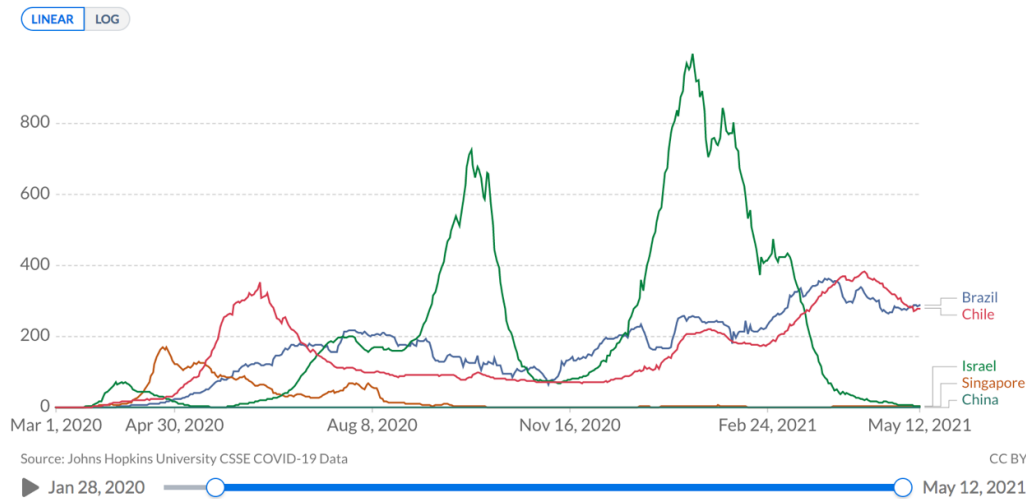


Figure 8. Israel daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people from Jan 28, 2020, to May 12, 2021. SOURCE: Our World in Data. Data updated as of May 12, 2021.

This is the case of Chile that, despite having nearly a third of the population vaccinated, is still registering a surge in new cases. On April 9, 2021, Chile amounted to its record high, 9,000 daily confirmed cases, which overpassed the peak of 7,000 during the first wave. The leap of infections, happening concomitant to a national curfew and movement regulations, is provoking a diffuse sense of frustration among the people¹⁰⁹ as the reasons to blame are unclear. On the one side, a cause can be the inattentive governmental decisions. Indeed, President Sebastián Piñera, enthusiastic for the quick vaccine rollout, could eventually have alleviated the coronavirus restraints too soon. As a matter of fact, Chile reopened its borders in November 2020 and allowed domestic traveling during the Christmas holidays, along with the reopening of all venues. On the other side, epidemiologists are focusing on the implications of careless conduct among people partially vaccinated and on the new Brazilian variant P.1. Research published by the University of Chile on April 6, also discovered that CoronaVac, the vaccine manufactured by the Chinese Sinovac Biotech and employed in 93% of the doses administered in Chile, has an immunization coverage of 56.5% after two weeks of the second dose and only a 3% after the first one¹¹⁰.

¹⁰⁹ J. Chambers, *Chile sees Covid surge despite vaccination success*, BBC. April 16, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-56731801> (accessed May 13, 2021).

¹¹⁰ Universidad de Chile, *Vacunas contra el SARS-CoV2 muestran 56,5 por ciento de efectividad en la prevención de contagios*. April 6, 2021.

Nevertheless, despite necessitating concomitant social-distancing restrictions, the key to successfully eradicate the coronavirus remains a synchronal worldwide vaccination action, which could prevent the emergence of new variants and eventually lead to herd immunity. However, several countries are struggling both in having access to vaccines and in managing the inoculations among the population. Today, also China, one of the biggest vaccine-producer worldwide, is encountering difficulties in manufacturing enough vaccines for its vast population. Indeed, according to Bloomberg's rank, China has dropped five positions, getting off the top 10 Countries fighting the pandemic. To date, the percentage of the Chinese population covered by the vaccine is below 8%. Indeed, the "Spring Seedling Action", the vaccination plan presented by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in March 2021, is encountering several production issues. According to the program, the Chinese government would have ensured an inoculation of vaccines to all its citizens, also those living abroad. However, because of its vaccine diplomacy, China is now suffering a low production capacity to satisfy both domestic and international demands¹¹¹.

What can be discerned by these examples is that, generally speaking, the enforcement of national lockdowns, mandatory masks, and restriction of movements have guaranteed a modest degree of effectiveness in containing the contagion. An equally important factor is, without any doubt, the capacity of managing an efficient vaccination scheme, which is extremely favorable in decelerating the new cases rate, but only if associated with cautious governmental guidelines. Indeed, conceiving vaccination as the exclusive approach in the fight against coronavirus might result in disappointing outcomes. It is also worth mentioning that, so far, the leading countries in handling the pandemic are either Asian, thus favored by the Confucian tradition of resilience and patience, or those being advantaged by geographical or historic-political factors. As a matter of fact, both New Zealand and Australia (respectively second and third, according to the ranking) are islands, while Israel presents the peculiar case of isolation due to political reasons rather than geographical.

¹¹¹ H. Chick, "China's global plan to vaccinate its citizens faces production problems", *South China Morning Post*, May 3, 2021. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3131933/chinas-global-plan-vaccinate-its-citizens-faces-production> (accessed May 14, 2021)

II. The Inequality Virus

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.” – Arundhati Roy¹¹²

On January 25, OXFAM released a report, labeled “The inequality Virus”, claiming that the Covid-19 crisis has the potential to increase economic inequality in almost every country at once. Published on the opening day of the World Economic Forum’s Davos Agenda, the report shows how the pandemic widened the existing social, economic, and gender-based inequalities, further expanding the gap between the wealthy and the poor people.

The coronavirus crisis has hit a world already extremely unequal, where the richest 1% have earned more than double the income of the bottom half of the global population in the last 40 years and have consumed twice as much carbon as the bottom 50% for the last quarter of a century. Thus, the pandemic has exacerbated uneven patterns already in place. If the stock market setback was short-lived, the greatest economic shock since the Great Depression will have profound, long-lasting impacts on poor people. Indeed, on the one side, the top 1,000 billionaires saw a full recovery and, eventually, an increase in their total wealth within nine months since the virus outbreak. On the other one, the crisis is expected to reverse the decline in global poverty witnessed over the past two decades. Studies suggest that the total number of people living in poverty could increase by between 200 million and 500 million in 2020, and, possibly, it will not even return to its pre-crisis level for over a decade.

Unsurprisingly, the impacts of the pandemic have hurt the poorest people hardest. The crisis deprived children in the less developed countries of almost four months of schooling, compared with six weeks for children in high-income countries¹¹³. Women’s lives have been hit disproportionately, as they make up those sectors worst

¹¹² A. Roy, “The Pandemic is a Portal”, *Financial Times*. April 3, 2021 <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca> (accessed May 4, 2021)

¹¹³ UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, “What Have We Learnt? Findings from a survey of ministries of education on national responses to COVID-19”, *UNICEF Data*, 2020. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/national-education-responses-to-covid19/>

affected by the crisis. However, it was the health realm that demonstrated the stronger disproportion, as the likelihood of dying from Covid-19 was significantly higher for poor people¹¹⁴. Indeed, analysis from several countries reveals that Covid-19 infection and mortality rates have a clear social gradient. In a number of countries, the pandemic has highlighted gross inequality in health outcomes based on race and ethnicity. For instance, in the US, Covid-19 mortality rates among Black people were found to be twice those of White people.¹¹⁵ “If their death rate had been the same as White people’ between February and December 2020, then over 16,800 Black people would have still been alive. If Latinx people’s death rate had been the same as White people’s over the same period, then more than 5,100 Latinx people would have still been alive in the US”¹¹⁶. Similarly, in Brazil, pardo and black people hospitalized for COVID-19 had a higher risk of fatality than White people.¹¹⁷ “Brazilians of Afro-descent have been 40% more likely to die of COVID19 than White Brazilians.”¹¹⁸

Although an increase in global inequality is almost certain, the extent of this increase, as well as the pace with which it will be minimized and greater equality will be attained, is upon the decisions that governments across the world will take. As an instance, if governments choose to act to reduce inequality by two percentage points annually, it would be possible to go back to pre-crisis levels of poverty within three years¹¹⁹.

The most viable action of governments in the direction of equality has been the global vaccine scheme COVAX. One of the three pillars of the Access to COVID-19 Tools

¹¹⁴ Evidence from Low and Middle-Income countries: Imperial College COVID-19 Response Team. (2020). Report 22: Equity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: an assessment of the direct and indirect impacts on disadvantaged and vulnerable populations in low- and lower middle-income countries. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/mrcgida/2020-05-12-COVID19-Report-22.pdf> ; Evidence from High-Income Countries, for example in the UK: B. Palmer. (2020). Chart of the week: Covid-19 kills people in the most deprived areas at double the rate of those in the most affluent. Nuffield Trust. <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/chart-of-the-week-covid-19-kills-the-most-deprived-atdouble-the-rate-of-affluent-people-like-other-conditions>, or in the US: C. Brown and M. Ravallion. (2020). Poverty, inequality, and COVID-19 in the US. <https://voxeu.org/article/poverty-inequality-and-covid-19-us>

¹¹⁵ “Race, Ethnicity, and Age Trends in Persons who died from COVID-19 – United States, May - August 2020”, *CDC report*, 69(42);1517–1521, October 23, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6942e1.htm>

¹¹⁶ E. Berkhout, N. Galasso, M. Lawson, P. Rivero Morales, A. Taneja, & D. Vázquez Pimentel, “The inequality virus”, *OXFAM*, January 25, 2021. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/inequality-virus>

¹¹⁷ P. Baqui et al. (2020). Ethnic and regional variations in hospital mortality from COVID-19 in Brazil: a cross-sectional observational study. *The Lancet Global Health*, Vol. 8, Issue 8. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(20\)30285-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(20)30285-0)

¹¹⁸ E. Berkhout, N. Galasso, M. Lawson, P. Rivero Morales, A. Taneja, & D. Vázquez Pimentel, “The inequality virus”, *OXFAM*, January 25, 2021. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/inequality-virus>

¹¹⁹ P. Espinoza Revollo (2021). *The Inequality Virus: Methodology note*. Oxfam.

(ACT) Accelerator launched in April 2020, it aims at providing innovative and equitable access to Covid-19 diagnostics, treatments and vaccines for every country regardless of their income¹²⁰. According to the WHO, a fairer distribution of vaccines is, indeed, the only way to mitigate the public health and economic impact of the pandemic, and COVAX provides it through a mechanism by which richer countries offset the costs of getting vaccines to the 92 poorer ones.

On February 24, 2021, Ghana has been the first country to receive the Covid-19 vaccines shipped via the COVAX Facility. Forty-two days after the first delivery, the COVAX plan had already reached over 100 economies and delivered more than 38 million doses across six continents. To date, on May 10, more than 49 million vaccine doses have been sent to 61 out of the 92 lower-income Countries, and COVAX expects to distribute at least two billion doses of vaccines by the end of 2021.¹²¹

Despite efforts to address equitable vaccine access, significant disparities remain. Indeed, high-income countries, which account for just a fifth of the global adult population (19%), have purchased more than half of global vaccine doses (54%, or 4.6 billion), resulting in discrepancies between adult population share and doses purchased for all other country income groups. Of the remaining doses, 33% have been purchased by the low-middle Income Countries, which account for 81% of the global adult population. A supplementary 13% has been purchased by COVAX. Analyzing by country income group, the greatest divergence between doses acquired and population share is for lower-middle-income countries (37% of the global population vs. 12% of acquired doses), promptly followed by upper-middle-income countries (37% vs. 18%, or 1.5 billion doses). The imbalance for low-income countries is smaller (3% vs. 7%, or 263 million doses). *Figures 9 and 10.*

¹²⁰ S. Berlkey, "Covax explained", *GAVI the vaccine alliance*, September 3, 2020. <https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/covax-explained>

¹²¹ World Health Organization, *COVAX reaches over 100 economies, 42 days after first international delivery*, April 8, 2021. <https://www.who.int/news/item/08-04-2021-covax-reaches-over-100-economies-42-days-after-first-international-delivery>

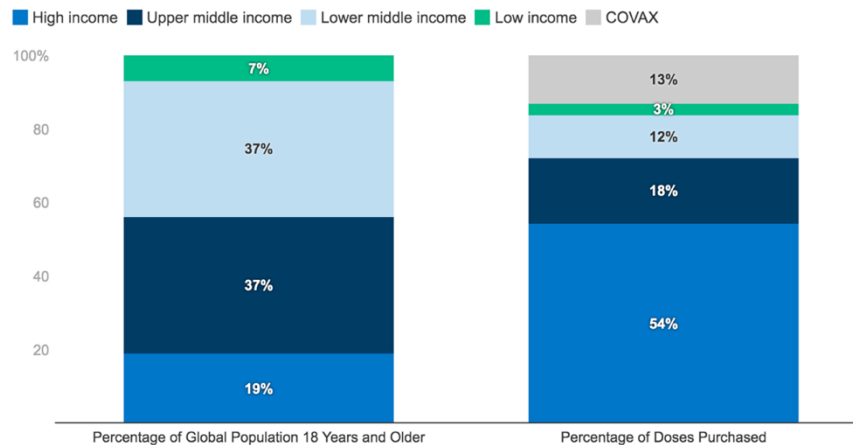


Figure 9. Vaccine Doses Purchased by Income Level Compared to Share of Global Adult Population without COVAX redistribution. SOURCE: Duke Launch and Scale Speedometer, World Bank. Data updated as of March 15, 2021.

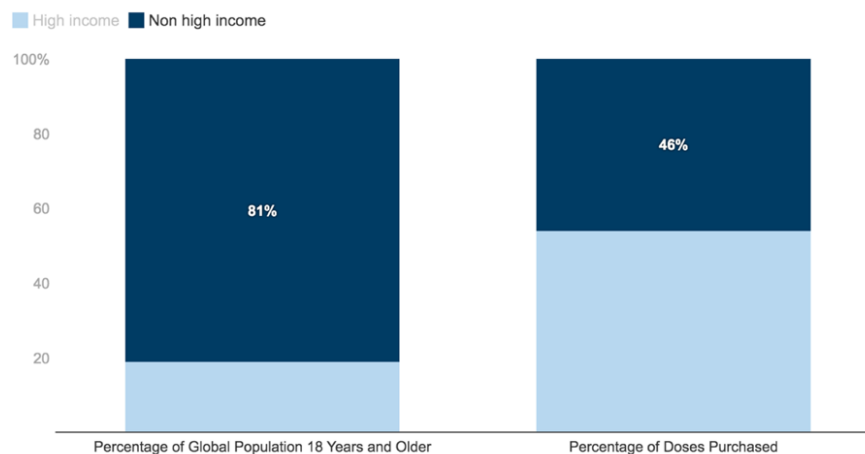


Figure 10. Vaccine Doses Purchased by Income Level Compared to Share of Global Adult Population with COVAX redistribution. SOURCE: Duke Launch and Scale Speedometer, World Bank. Data updated as of March 15, 2021.

The inequity is even higher when looking at the share of who could be vaccinated. While enough vaccine doses have been acquired to cover more than 80% of the adult population, high-income countries hold enough doses to vaccinate more than twice their populations (245%), albeit low-middle income countries can only cover one-third¹²². *Figure 11*

¹²² A. Rouw et al., "Global COVID-19 Vaccine Access: Snapshot of inequality", KFF, March 17, 2021. <https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/global-covid-19-vaccine-access-snapshot-of-inequality/> (accessed May 10, 2021)

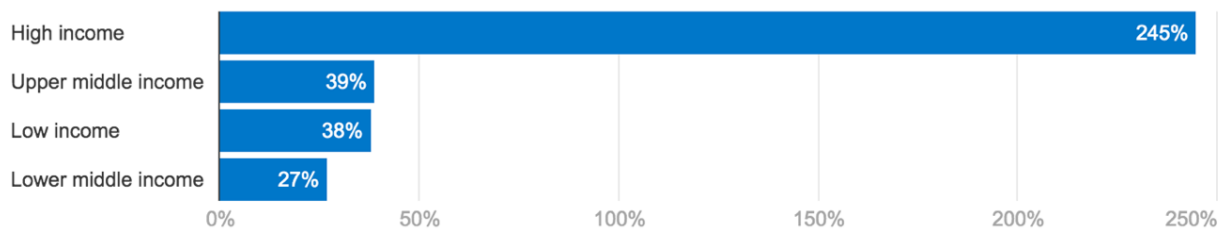


Figure 11. Percentage of Adult Population Able to be Vaccinated with Purchased Doses by Income Level without COVAX redistribution. SOURCE: Duke Launch and Scale Speedometer, World Bank. Data updated as of March 15, 2021.

The prioritization of the domestic needs of rich countries in an outlay of the LMICs is undermining the purpose of the COVAX scheme, besides exacerbating inequality. This attitude of “vaccine nationalism” although shows initial protection from the virus and a slow-down in people’s vulnerability, is indeed very limited and short-sighted.¹²³ If only those countries that bought up the majority of the supplies of the vaccine vaccinated, it would mean that the virus would continue to spread in other non-vaccinated countries, keeping on with mutations. As a matter of fact, the more people the virus infects, the more likely it is that further mutations will occur. Eventually, an “escape” mutation will surface, allowing the virus to evade the immune response set out by vaccinations. This last new mutation is then likely to evolve into the dominant strain, setting off a whole new set of infections in those vaccinated against only the old variants.¹²⁴

It is therefore evident how global challenges require global responses. As the coronavirus pandemic is affecting countries worldwide, the action to put an end to this threat must be global and unite. Vaccine nationalism is, however, an emblematic illustration of countries’ reaction to worldwide issues: the harsher the crisis, the higher states’ propensity toward national isolation. Sebastiano Maffettone explains this tendency with three reasons:

1. Culture – different states belong to different cultures, that might also reflect different principles of justice;

¹²³ Y. Serhan, “Vaccine Nationalism Is Doomed to Fail”, *The Atlantic*, December 8, 2020. 2021<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/12/vaccine-nationalism-doomed-fail/617323/> (accessed May 11, 2021)

¹²⁴ A. Khan, “What is “vaccine nationalism” and why is it so harmful”, *Aljazeera*, February 7, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/2/7/what-is-vaccine-nationalism-and-why-is-it-so-harmful> (accessed May 11, 2021)

2. Economy – citizens are not willing to pay for costs happening outside their state's borders;
3. Institutions – justice requires institutions, and global justice, in turn, requires global institutions.

This last analysis triggers several further issues.¹²⁵ Indeed, the political theory of international relations can be separated into two leading branches: the “statist” and the “non-relational”, having two contrasting interpretations regarding the feasibility of global institutions.

The first, the modern tradition going from Hobbes to Kant, assumes the centrality of the nation-state and affirms that there is no justice beyond it. In other words, it is the set of state's institutions – *basic structure*¹²⁶ - which enable the possibility of justice. Being the State sovereign, thus the owner of power monopoly within its confines, it can ensure compliance with the law through its institutions. Outside the State, the international arena, where power is the common currency and self-interest the dominant motivation, is but anarchic. In this view, the “Jungle Law” commands international politics. Liberal-democratic theorists, such as Kant, who sought to base a civilized pacific model for international relations through the progressive establishment of international institutions¹²⁷, do not conceive international justice similar to justice intra-state. Indeed, since justice implies coercive obligations of a legal nature, it cannot reign beyond the state, the unique coercive entity.

The second tradition labelled as “non-relational”, base obligations not in a shared global institutional structure but rather in natural human duties. In this sense, global justice entangles moral duties that we owe to other humans. Maffettone links this view to the idea of universal justice, according to which extraordinary moments require actions defending human dignity despite the existence of a common basic international structure. This theory is extremely helpful as it guides our self-knowledge as humans, thus our ethical self-knowledge. In other words, without fundamental rights corresponding to a higher universal duty, it would be impossible to conceive ourselves as humans¹²⁸.

¹²⁵ S. Maffettone, *Quarto Shock*, Luiss University Press, Roma 2020.

¹²⁶ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Belknap Press, Cambridge 1971.

¹²⁷ I. Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, 1795. London: S. Sonnenschein, 1903.

¹²⁸ S. Maffettone, *Quarto Shock*, Luiss University Press, Roma 2020.

When Harari unladed the discussion showing the governmental choice between national isolation and global solidarity¹²⁹, the solution could only be settled by the affirmation of global cooperation. However, in this pandemic context, a global plan would not have been just a matter of human moral duties, but also a matter of national interest¹³⁰. Here, it seems as the two divergent political theories encounter themselves in the same point of virus eradication, both a moral duty and a self-interest.

III. *What have we learned? Lessons from the pandemic*

2020 is conceived by many “the year that changed the world”¹³¹. It is indeed plausible that the year 2020 will mark history, and the decisions we undertake in these months will shape its direction. Here I will attempt to discern from the overall discussion three valuable lessons for the near future.

Chapter I was dedicated to the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2, a zoonotic virus that appeared through a spillover in November 2019. Following the recent scientific researches considering coronavirus as a direct consequence of human action, I touched upon the fact that the pandemic crisis is eventually strictly connected with the climate crisis, as both possible resulting from the current global financial and economic system. Scholars are, indeed, warning that the uncontrolled deforestation, the intense land-use, the infrastructure development along with the exploitation of wild species and the fragmentation of habitats, create the “perfect storm” for spillovers, making the likelihood of future pandemics extremely high¹³².

In this sense, if pandemics are also caused by human enterprise, they are not simply inevitable natural catastrophes but rather a sort of artificial catastrophes that do raise questions of responsibility and justice. Taken for valid that climate change is also

¹²⁹ Y. N. Harari, “The World after Coronavirus”, *Financial Times*, March 19, 2020.

<https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75> (accessed May 11, 2021)

¹³⁰ Y. N. Harari, “Lessons from a year of Covid”, *Financial Times*, February 26, 2021.

<https://www.ft.com/content/f1b30f2c-84aa-4595-84f2-7816796d6841> (access May 11, 2021)

¹³¹ J. Wilson, & D. Evanson, “COVID-19: Lessons from the year that changed the world”, *Imperial College London*.
<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/stories/covid-lessons/>

¹³² J. Settele, S. Díaz, E. Brondizio, & P. Daszak, “COVID-19 Stimulus Measures Must Save Lives, Protect Livelihoods, and Safeguard Nature to reduce the Risk of Future Pandemics”, *IPBES*, April 27, 2020.

<https://ipbes.net/covid19stimulus#:~:text=There%20is%20a%20single%20species,economic%20growth%20at%20any%20cost.>

impacting human infectious diseases, it is urgent to establish a political perspective of action. Here is, however, essential to highlight that, when choosing to turn the curse of events and invest toward a green transition, the decision-making process does not only entail questions of economic costs, but rather of ethical and moral values¹³³.

The very crucial aspect when dealing with climate and pandemic issues is that the greater extent of victims correlated is not born yet (future pandemic will appear more frequently and will kill more people¹³⁴), and this alerts of a new kind of responsibility, different from the one of common sense.

Governments have moral obligations not only to value the earth system and preserve it for future generations – in accordance with the general definition of sustainability – but also to value future generations' lives and prevent the eventuality of future, severer pandemics. In other words, governments must be aware that the actions taken today will directly impact people's life in the future and, because it is morally wrong to harm innocents, countries must prevent innocent future people from facing a higher degree of fatality by invigorating and enforcing environmental regulations now. Therefore, in order to comprehend and justify such policies, we must appeal to the value of those individual lives of the future who actually will benefit from the regulations applied today¹³⁵.

In Chapter II, I dived deep into policymaking, firstly attempting to explain some governmental choices through the philosophical theories of Utilitarianism and Kantianism, and then passing to the relevant question on where to pose the limit of the executive in the restraint and control of people's liberties. Indeed, from the questions raised by the libertarian perspective, I moved to the recent debate of how to employ big data in the decision-making process, and what kind of data shall and shall not be gathered. Although the extreme potential of data as a sharable asset for governments during the pandemic, the very use of them raises several issues, including privacy.

According to UN, privacy is a universal human right, but interpretations of its meaning can vary sharply depending also on the Country's culture. I took the case of

¹³³ G. Pellegrino, "Etica del Cambiamento Climatico" in *Manuale di Etica Ambientale*, Le lettere, Firenze, 2012.

¹³⁴ J. Settele, S. Díaz, E. Brondizio, & P. Daszak, "COVID-19 Stimulus Measures Must Save Lives, Protect Livelihoods, and Safeguard Nature to reduce the Risk of Future Pandemics", *IPBES*, April 27, 2020. <https://ipbes.net/covid19stimulus#:~:text=There%20is%20a%20single%20species,economic%20growth%20at%20any%20cost.>

¹³⁵ G. Pellegrino, "Etica del Cambiamento Climatico" in *Manuale di Etica Ambientale*, (pp. 107-141), Le Lettere, Firenze 2012.

Confucianism to explain the high propensity of Asian people to trust their government and sacrifice their privacy for security. Such a kind of society adhering to collectivists values can actually lead to more effective outcomes than the liberal-democratic view, as it may facilitate data collection in crisis contexts. However, regarding privacy as a mere western ideal can have a more subtle impact by allowing authoritarian governments to ignore or even undermine it.

There are two crucial aspects to underline here. To begin with, data extraction is often intrusive. Entailing a one-way process where neither states nor corporations ask for consent¹³⁶ undermines individual privacy. Moreover, since data ownership is a source of power conferring a monopoly of information, who holds data may also determine what information can be available. For instance, the great Firewall of China, which has already largely blocked off China's 1.4 billion people from the rest of the world, is seen by other authoritarian governments as a model to emulate.

From these two points, it can be appreciated that Harari's proposal of citizen empowerment¹³⁷ do not just aim at protecting individual rights to privacy but especially individual right to information.

In Chapter III, I provided a general outline of the implications that the pandemic had worldwide. Initially, through the Bloomberg's *Covid Reliance Ranking*, I evaluated the different measures enforced by countries and their effectiveness. Then, I delineated a condition of substantial inequality between high-income and low-income countries, especially in the health system, as warned in the OXFAM Report "The Inequality Virus".

Despite having always been a background theme, I have not mentioned death up to now. Yet, the pandemic involves death, and it led the taboo to fade¹³⁸. The efficiency of countries' regulations was based upon their fatality toll, and the strongest inequity among nations was viable in the likelihood of dying from Covid-19. The fact that massive death caused by a single virus became the biggest threat for humanity makes it worth reflecting on death, considering the eventuality of having learned valuable

¹³⁶ S. Zuboff, "Big Other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization", *Journal of Information Technology*, 30(1):75-89. doi:10.1057/jit.2015.5, March 1, 2015.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1057/jit.2015.5>

¹³⁷ Y. N. Harari, "The World after Coronavirus", *Financial Times*, March 19, 2020.
<https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>

¹³⁸ "Covid-19 is helping wealthy countries talk about death", *The Economist*, October 8, 2020.
<https://www.economist.com/international/2020/10/08/covid-19-is-helping-wealthy-countries-talk-about-death>

lessons. Will the high fatality show the limits of humankind? Will it make society more moderate, cautious, and human in confront with present and future generations?¹³⁹

Religion and classical philosophy had always beheld the immortality of the soul. Plato, for instance, considered the nature of the soul and the question of immortality crucial for the understanding of ethics¹⁴⁰. It is notable his dialogue *Phaedo*, where Cebes and Simias visit Socrates, waiting for his execution. Expecting him to be afraid, they actually find him serene. For Socrates and Plato as well, death represents just but the separation of the soul from the body, labelled as “prison”, and the passage towards immortality¹⁴¹. Differently, the modern philosophy of Enlightenment, rejected the traditional idea of death and developed a “promethean”¹⁴² conception of man, which ignored the moral significance of death. This view, which aimed at winning death in the name of progress and civilization, actually resulted in a painful life in fear of death. There is another perspective of death, embraced by Sebastiano Maffettone, which depends on the value of life and finds its sense in a collective *post-mortem* experience. The pandemic, as an apocalyptic scenario, abruptly brought death closer to each individual and provoked a strong feeling of anxiety for the eventuality of the whole human species being at risk. Indeed, it made vivid the worst case of human community disappearing, an event that would weaken the value and the sense of life as commonly thought. Indeed, since people give value to their individual lives in relation to a common referential tradition, the possibility of human heritage suddenly fading would erase the very sense of life. What shall then be the sense of believing in justice and fighting for ideals if there would not be continuity after-death? What value shall life have if there is no human community after us? The fact that individuals give sense to their life in relation to other people affirms a human interest for the *post-mortem*, which transcends personal relations¹⁴³. It is a collective *post-mortem* experience that becomes a condition to the possibility of giving sense to our individual life. Thus, if the collective would be necessary for giving sense to the existence of the single, and

¹³⁹ N. Kokosalakis, “Reflections on Death in Philosophical/Existential Context”, *SpringerLink*, April 27, 2020.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-020-00503-5>

¹⁴⁰ *ibidem*

¹⁴¹ *ibidem*

¹⁴² N. Kokosalakis, “Reflections on Death in Philosophical/Existential Context”, *SpringerLink*, April 27, 2020 (p. 407).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-020-00503-5>

¹⁴³ S. Maffettone, *Quarto Shock*, Luiss University Press, Roma 2020.

if the single would have impersonal desires after death, then there would be a common, shared horizon of values below individual dimensions.¹⁴⁴

Once aware of death as the moment where the existence of human community is necessary for the survival of the individual, individualism is overcome by a higher and more benevolent interest, upon which Public Ethics is based. It is Public Ethics that helps individuals disclose to be social animals and appreciate reasonableness – giving weight to other interests and “possessing a strong respect for others”¹⁴⁵ – as rational.

¹⁴⁴ “Perché al fondo di tutte le dimensioni individuali ci sarebbe un orizzonte di valore comune e condiviso” (p. 143) S. Maffettone, *Quarto Shock*, Luiss University Press, Roma 2020.

¹⁴⁵ S. Maffettone, “Political Liberalism: Reasonableness and democratic practice”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*. 2004;30(5-6):541-577. doi:10.1177/0191453704045754

Conclusion

Just a few months ago, it would have been unthinkable to see the entire world stop because of a virus. Humankind was fiery and sure that science and technology had let any natural phenomenon bending to human knowledge. Nonetheless, it was awakened by the hasty truth to be limited in the control of events.

To begin with, the whole society realized the limits of the current economic and financial system, whose relentless logic for progress and profit has led to irreversible impacts on the Earth System. The population growth, along with the increase of industrial activities, deforestation, urbanization, the boost in transportation, and the intense land-use have changed the natural greenhouses and raised the planet's carbon dioxide levels. If the consequences of such uncontrolled human enterprises leading to climate change were acknowledged, besides already viable, humanity remained astounded by the magnitude of the coronavirus pandemic, eventually connected to the unrestrained human activity. Facing the effects of inappropriate behavior that lasted for years, drove to the extinction of species and loss of habitats, brought governments to confront with a new kind of ethical responsibility. The political decisions to mitigate the effects of the climate crisis and to prevent future pandemics will be guided by moral duties in confront with present and future generations. Indeed, in order to establish a reaction to the pandemic upon sustainable development, governments would need to improve the capacity of self-regulation. In other words, deciding to self-impose a green transaction means to follow the path of Public Ethics, that of self-control and a sense of limit.

Public Ethics, by embracing the idea of value as an organic unit, would then result as the alternative direction to the measures enforced straightforwardly to limit the spread of the pandemic. Especially in the west, citizens have never experienced a limitation of liberties so forceful and prolonged in time. Policies such as lockdowns, curfews, social-distancing, and restriction of movement appeared to governments as the more direct and efficient actions to curb the escalation of the curve. Nonetheless, Public Ethics do propose something different from the imposition of regulation: it preserve freedom by calling for collective responsibility, in its turn enabled by individual moralities of self-regulation and of a sense of human belonging. In this way, Public

Ethics, on the one hand, protects society from the cross-cutting challenges of the crisis, offering a possibility of combining together economic and rational choices with ethical obligations. On the other hand, it also defends democracy from the risk of authoritarianism and intrusive surveillance by appealing to citizen empowerment. However, citizens must not only be informed but they must also have trust in their governments. Indeed, Public Ethics flourishes in trust.

So far, Public Ethics allowed to answer Harari's initial question by affirming citizen empowerment over totalitarian surveillance, but it can also be the tool for asserting global solidarity. Indeed, extraordinary contexts such as that of the coronavirus pandemic call for duties that go beyond national boundaries. They appeal to a sort of universal justice. In other words, if someone is dying next to me, I have the duty to do something to try to save him, despite not having any relation with him but just appealing to universal duties. Likewise, governments do have the duty to work out a global plan that supports and protects those poorer countries struggling for their people. Public Ethics, being rooted in these fundamental human duties, would lose significance without them. Indeed, without fundamental rights corresponding to a higher universal duty, it would be impossible to conceive ourselves ethically as humans.

Being as compelling as utopic, Public Ethics may represent a new guidance for the fragile liberal-democratic system, severely affected by populism, authoritarianism, and the crisis of values. Besides being a possible pathway, Public Ethics also represents a tenacious challenge for society, as it requires collective and individual changings aiming at giving more responsibility to people. In the end, the directions of Public Ethics are similar to that of Harari's – citizen empowerment and global solidarity – as they both confer importance to informing people and emphasize the urgency for a global plan. On the one side, an informed citizen can comprehend government's directives and have trust in them, and, on the other, solidarity is the duty based on universal human rights. However, the path to achieving them differs. The path of Public Ethics is made by models and lessons, by trust, and by respect for others. The very magnitude of coronavirus sits in our bewilderment for our limits and in the simultaneous realization that we possibly embark upon this path.

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ABSTRACT

Già a marzo 2020 lo storico Yuval Noah Harari scriveva in un articolo sul Financial Times che le scelte dei governi per fronteggiare la pandemia non avrebbero avuto solo effetti limitati al periodo della crisi, ma avrebbero altresì determinato un impatto di lungo termine per le nostre società. In ragione di tale considerazione è possibile desumere l'urgenza di analizzare le misure messe in atto e il loro eventuale fondamento etico.

Solo attraverso un'attenta considerazione delle questioni affrontate dai governi e delle relative risposte è possibile delineare una prospettiva per il futuro delle nostre società civili. Da tale pensiero prende l'abbrivio questa tesi.

Ciò che si può indubbiamente assumere è l'esistenza di un cambiamento che già ha riguardato le vite dei cittadini, ma che continuerà a esplicitare i suoi effetti negli anni a venire. La vera questione, allora, non è circa l'*an* del cambiamento, ma verso quale direzione porterà l'intervento della Politica e quale sarà il ruolo dei singoli cittadini. È qui che si rileva il compito imprescindibile dell'Etica Pubblica, in quanto rafforza le decisioni responsabili degli individui. Il fine dell'elaborato è proprio quello di applicare l'Etica Pubblica ad un tentativo di soluzione delle questioni che la pandemia ha posto all'umanità.

Prima di analizzare le sfide sociali e politiche, però, è bene comprendere l'origine della pandemia di coronavirus. La malattia di Covid-19 compare per la prima volta tra novembre e dicembre del 2019 e viene ricondotta ad un ceppo di coronavirus mai identificato prima nell'uomo; sarà prontamente denominato come Sars-CoV-2. In poche settimane il virus si diffonde in decine di paesi, provocando centinaia di morti. Il 30 gennaio 2020 la World Health Organization (WHO) dichiara la pandemia globale.

Secondo analisi scientifiche, la natura della malattia è quella di una zoonosi, ossia trasmessa dagli animali all'uomo. In tal senso, la ricerca ha potuto stabilire che all'origine della pandemia ci sia il fenomeno dello *spillover*, che corrisponde ad un salto interspecifico di un agente patogeno. In questo caso si tratta di un virus, il più difficile da controllare e il più pericoloso tra i diversi agenti patogeni. Sebbene un virus

sia inerte in mancanza di un ospite, la sua semplicità biologica fornisce ad esso uno schiacciante vantaggio evolutivo: negli errori durante le innumerevoli repliche di RNA all'interno di una cellula può nascere una variante potenzialmente più pericolosa.

L'effetto *spillover* non è certo un evento eccezionale, basti pensare che il 60% delle nostre influenze ha tale origine. Tuttavia, è opportuno segnalare che a partire dagli anni Ottanta si è registrata una crescita importante di fenomeni di *spillover*. Le cause, però, non sono naturali, ma riconducibili al cambiamento climatico: come dimostrato da numerosi studi, il repentino modificarsi dell'ambiente ha favorito e accresciuto la possibilità di salti interspecifici di patogeni.

Tale cambiamento vede l'azione umana tra i fattori di maggior rilievo. Il modello di sviluppo non sostenibile, orientato ai principi del guadagno e della crescita sproporzionata, ha spesso trascurato l'impatto reale delle scelte umane sull'ambiente, dando vita a fenomeni come l'aumento delle temperature, lo scioglimento dei ghiacciai e l'innalzamento del livello del mare. Tuttavia, sebbene questi effetti si stessero già manifestando in maniera crescente negli ultimi anni, erano invece sottostimate le conseguenze sulla salute dell'uomo. Il rapido aumento della popolazione terrestre in aggiunta al riscaldamento globale già in atto e al sistema di sfruttamento delle risorse umane, ha generato una perdita sostanziale della biodiversità, portando ad un pericoloso avvicinamento tra la specie umana e quella animale selvatica, specialmente nei paesi in via di sviluppo. Tali circostanze creano l'ambiente ideale perché si verifichi un fenomeno di *spillover*.

L'ammissione di una responsabilità dell'uomo nel causare le condizioni per favorire lo scoppio della pandemia impone una seria riflessione. In particolare, è necessaria una risposta sollecita e di ampio respiro da parte della Politica sicuramente per le decisioni del passato, ma anche e soprattutto per l'impegno futuro.

Sebbene i governi siano spesso vincolati a mandati di pochi anni e a esigenze elettorali, è a loro che spetta il compito di immaginare proposte e soluzioni di lunga durata. Simili azioni raramente hanno un riscontro in termini di consenso, ma dimostrano la capacità della Politica di saper avere una visione. Non prendere una posizione oggi causerà maggiori danni ai cittadini di domani, più che a quelli del presente. È tale consapevolezza a dover guidare gli esecutivi in un tentativo di conciliare vedute diverse e di immaginare la ripresa dalla crisi pandemica. Se dovesse continuare a

persistere un modello di sviluppo fallace, nuove pandemie, anche più dure, saranno inevitabili. Solo delle decisioni collettive in una direzione di transizione ecologica e di sviluppo sostenibile possono permettere prospettive differenti e affermare l'inestimabile valore da attribuire alle generazioni future. Ad esse bisogna non solo garantire il diritto di vivere in un ecosistema preservato, ma soprattutto di non alterare le loro condizioni di salute.

Prima ancora delle scelte per il periodo post-pandemico, le domande più difficili per gli esecutivi sono state quelle relative alle misure restrittive. La Cina, la prima nazione colpita su grande scala dalla pandemia, ha dato una risposta forte: un severo lockdown e libertà personali estremamente limitate. Tali misure hanno visto il favore della popolazione, disposta a sacrificare la propria autonomia a favore della salute collettiva, da subito intesa come bene superiore; tale consapevolezza è pienamente in linea con il carattere collettivista della nazione orientale.

In Occidente, invece, il virus ha sollevato sfide notevoli e di difficile interpretazione, soprattutto in merito alle libertà personali. Le misure restrittive come il lockdown difficilmente si sposano con i valori liberaldemocratici e, in ragione di tale difficoltà, le risposte iniziali dei diversi paesi sono state differenziate. Gran Bretagna e Usa hanno adottato un approccio di *laissez-faire*, mentre Spagna e Italia hanno preso misure decisamente più stringenti, chiudendo i confini e limitando la libertà di movimento.

Sulla base delle riflessioni del sociologo Gerard Delanty, è possibile accostare le misure dei governi occidentali alle maggiori teorie della filosofia politica.

La scelta del governo guidato da Boris Johnson, Primo Ministro inglese, di provare a raggiungere l'immunità di gregge appariva supportata dall'utilitarismo: non imporre misure draconiane era la scelta migliore per il bene collettivo, in linea con un'analisi costi-benefici che contrapponeva le chiusure e le conseguenze economiche.

Al contrario, le misure restrittive e severe del governo italiano possono trovare fondamento su una visione deontologica come quella di Immanuel Kant: chiudere un intero paese per prevenire le morti – prevalentemente – della popolazione più anziana e vulnerabile è un chiaro tentativo di attribuire valore ad ogni singolo cittadino e alla sua vita. In tal senso, assecondando la posizione kantiana, non si può trattare la vita umana come mezzo, ma sempre come fine.

Il prolungarsi della crisi pandemica e i successivi sviluppi hanno poi smussato gli angoli di entrambe le visioni. La mentalità utilitaristica che aveva guidato le scelte del governo britannico garantiva un elevato grado di elasticità, permettendo di modificare le misure secondo il mutare della situazione. A fronte di un elevato numero di morti, anche un ragionamento di tipo utilitaristico arriva a porre la vita delle persone come obiettivo primario. Diversamente, nell'adottare principi deontologici si viene meno a ogni sorta di analisi costi-benefici, trascurando le conseguenze collaterali delle chiusure, in primis di carattere economico e psicologico.

Alle misure per contrastare il contagio si aggiungono le questioni trasversali che la pandemia ha inevitabilmente sollevato. Di rilievo è la posizione del libertarismo, che pone l'autonomia dell'individuo dallo Stato come valore fondamentale. Nonostante tale posizione possa risultare estrema e in situazioni di crisi i cittadini preferiscano la sicurezza alla libertà, è pur vero che un eccessivo accentramento di potere può portare ad uno stato *legibus solutus*. È proprio al rischio di derive autoritarie che risponde la posizione del libertarismo. Le risposte emergenziali contro la pandemia hanno rafforzato certi regimi autoritari e hanno indebolito i vincoli istituzionali di altri paesi.

La pandemia è stata il primo vero banco di prova dei governi per l'utilizzo e l'analisi dei dati nella definizione delle *public policies*. In molti dei paesi sviluppati c'è stato un tentativo di implementare strumenti di *contact tracing* grazie alle potenzialità del digitale. I risultati non sono stati omogenei: se in Occidente il diritto alla privacy e l'autonomia dei cittadini hanno rappresentato un ostacolo all'utilizzo di strumenti simili, in Oriente l'utilizzo è stato facilitato anche dalla cultura e dalle credenze riconducibili al confucianesimo, portando a esiti sicuramente migliori. Secondo una prima analisi di Byung-Chul Han, la pandemia – da considerarsi come sfida sistemica - ha visto una netta vittoria dell'Oriente sull'Occidente nell'utilizzo di strumenti tecnologici. Tuttavia, è anche bene evidenziare che l'atteggiamento cauto di molti governi occidentali è motivato dalla consapevolezza che l'analisi dei dati non sia un atto meramente neutrale, ma coinvolga principi di carattere etico e morale.

Seguendo il ragionamento di Harari, è possibile affermare che l'Occidente anche in un contesto pandemico difenda a spada tratta la responsabilizzazione dei cittadini anziché una sorveglianza totalitaria. In un contesto di crisi hanno la meglio quei governi capaci

di suscitare e mantenere la fiducia dei cittadini. Si tratta proprio di quella fiducia che permette il fiorire dell'etica pubblica e della trasparenza di informazione, che, in definitiva, danno esito ad una responsabilizzazione dei cittadini. L'etica pubblica, come sostenuto da Sebastiano Maffettone, ha a valle il diritto e a monte la religione. L'etica pubblica, nascendo nella considerazione e nella valorizzazione degli altri, rappresenta un atteggiamento autoimposto di darsi un senso del limite nel rispetto degli altri individui. Da tale assunto deriva un'altra considerazione importante che Harari aveva già menzionato tra le due scelte urgenti per la nostra società. Difatti, se in una dimensione individuale di etica pubblica si guarda all'altro per porre un senso a se stessi, allora in un contesto globale anche i governi dovrebbero considerarsi reciprocamente e autoregolarsi. Non è certo un compito facile, ma sfide globali come quelle imposte dalla pandemia richiedono risposte e misure altrettanto globali. Di conseguenza, l'unica soluzione idonea è quella di definire un piano politico universale non altruistico ma ragionato.

Finora la politica internazionale è stata guidata da un principio di interesse e di potere, secondo il principio hobbesiano della guerra di tutti contro tutti, che segue la legge della giungla. La pandemia ha, però, dimostrato come perseguire un interesse proprio possa corrispondere a scelte che assicurano il bene di tutti; il vero obiettivo che ogni stato dovrebbe perseguire è quello di debellare il virus in ogni angolo del pianeta, e non solo all'interno dei confini nazionali. In vista di ciò, l'opzione di una vaccinazione di massa solo del proprio paese non è sufficiente né adeguata: permettere al virus di circolare nei paesi in cui, per mancanza di risorse, è inattuabile una vaccinazione di massa comporterebbe il rischio di nuove mutazioni potenzialmente non coperte dai vaccini finora a disposizione. Ecco allora che lo sforzo dei paesi più ricchi di sostenere anche i meno sviluppati nel piano di immunizzazione risulta necessario non solo per giusti principi umanitari, ma anche per un motivo di interesse nazionale: salvaguardare la salute della propria popolazione.

Di nuovo, l'etica pubblica si erge come via plausibile per rispondere all'interrogativo iniziale posto da Harari. Essendo fondata sui diritti umani fondamentali, senza i quali verrebbe meno la concezione etica di noi stessi, essa afferma con convinzione un piano politico globale. In linea con i suoi insegnamenti, i governi hanno il dovere di

sviluppare un piano globale di solidarietà e supporto ai paesi più poveri, assicurando i diritti umani fondamentali.

Quale allora l'insegnamento dalla pandemia di Covid-19? Le domande sono molte, alcune urgenti e di difficile interpretazione, ma la garanzia di trasparenza di informazione da parte dei governi e una conseguente responsabilizzazione dei cittadini favoriscono soluzioni in linea con i principi liberaldemocratici. Assicurare la capacità dei singoli di rispetto degli altri e di sapersi dare un limite sono le condizioni preliminari per l'*empowerment* a tutela della libertà individuale e garanzia fondamentale di una visione di lungo termine per la ripresa.