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Political Decision-Making in a Pandemic

"If we winter this one out,
we can summer anywhere"

(Seamus Heaney)

Crises are moments that put many things into question – especially our decision-making procedures. These decisions can be examined in a chronological order, from the decisions that governments have to take in order to be prepared for a crisis before it takes place, to the decisions that are taken during the crisis and to those that are taken as a result of it. I pose four questions raised by critical situations: The first question is whether we were prepared for the crisis, that is, how it is decided when there is, so to speak, nothing left to decide. When crises erupt, their outcome is largely conditioned by the ways in which our democratic societies anticipate them and prepare for them. The second question is whether populist systems (or, if you prefer, the populist features of many governments) offer an appropriate decision-making structure to deal with a crisis such as the current health crisis. Third, I examine the drama that inevitably characterizes political decisions taken in the midst of a crisis that affects different parts of society unequally. And fourth, I explore the debates that we must hold on globalization which, from this point of view, are going to require that we review the level of governance that is most appropriate for each kind of risk.

Governing Crises

The 2008 financial crisis tested our systems for preventing and managing these types of situations. The Congressional Committee in the USA, which is investigating the origins of the crisis and the bailout of the banks, has revealed that almost everything that could have failed did fail. Political actors continue to protest about the slightest irritant, but the political system as a whole is incapable of identifying, foreseeing or governing crises such as the economic-financial crisis, the euro crisis, Brexit and other dynamics of European disintegration, the immigration crisis, or the tensions created by the intergenerational redistribution of a pension system that is difficult to sustain in its current form.

It is impossible to govern well if politicians do not keep their eyes open, scanning the horizon for latent or incipient problems. Among the clear short-comings of any political system are: the short-sightedness of its programmes;

its tendency to address symptoms rather than confront causes; its dependence on current voters at the expense of future generations; the inability of both representatives and those represented to deal with underlying problems; the irresistible siren call of simplifications, whether technocratic or populist. As a society, we are not especially well prepared for anticipatory governance, and the continuous parade of daily emergencies distracts us from long-term challenges. Crises are rarely predicted, and once they have taken place, we do not generally agree on how to interpret them or what we should learn from them.

Democracies need strategic management for future crises. We know that there will be crises stemming from climate change, financial capitalism, immigration, the energy supply, the aging of the population, wars and conflicts, pandemics, the sustainability of pensions. The only thing left to be determined is when and how these crises will happen and the responses that are most appropriate to counter them. A more strategic process would allow us to identify tendencies and anticipate solutions, in other words, to act before it is too late.

Improving strategic coherence in a system that is subject to the fluctuations of urgent short-term crises requires, in the first place, more and better information about the long-term impacts of our current political decisions and their alternatives, instruments that allow us to weigh the risks that we are confronting or creating, and a holistic or systemic approach. Only in this way will politics manage to move beyond a focus on repair to a focus on configuration.

In dynamic systems, we must introduce the future into our planning processes so we are not caught unawares by emerging problems that we haven't made any provisions for. When anticipating the circumstances that could be unleashed, it is not enough to rely on best practices – which are always the best practices of the past – or to rely on accumulated experience. Strategic management requires an exercise of the imagination regarding future conflicts and crises. Since we have no reason to assume that the next crisis will be similar to previous ones, extrapolation from past experiences is not sufficient.

Whether we are dealing with global financial crises, ecological disasters or problems of sustainability, politics always arrives too late, when recovery efforts are more expensive than preventive measures would have been. Governments are often not able to cope when the dynamics of unwanted events have already begun to accelerate, their ability to detect and respond to emerging events is reduced, and regulatory measures have become obsolete or less effective. Governments are then limited to managing crises after they emerge instead of focusing on the events that precipitated them. These are not challenges that are resolved with the creation of a 'crisis cabinet' which is constituted when the crisis has already taken place and which only serves to remediate part of its consequences; they are resolved by improving the ability of governments to think and act stra-

tegically in a world that is changing in a radical fashion. What is needed is the ability to change before the necessity for change becomes desperately obvious (Hamel and Välikangas 2003: 53).

Acting before, during and after crises is difficult because many crises do not stem from simple causalities but from complex realities. Changes take place quickly and in a multifaceted fashion. They require many interactions between diverse areas of governance, without respecting bureaucratic and jurisdictional delimitations. It is not possible to establish a moratorium and resolve each of the challenges piecemeal. Seemingly stable solutions can turn into new problems that must be resolved. All of this challenges the adaptive capabilities of our systems of government which stem from the very beginning of modern democracies, the nation state and the industrial revolution. These systems are vertical, hierarchical, segmented and mechanical.

We must prepare to govern a world in which crises appear regularly, where we live with greater instability than we have expected. We need a political system that is capable of understanding the interactions and phenomena of crises; that can tackle novelty and change, a political system able to reinvent itself on a continuous basis – that is not static and atemporal, but alive and continuously evolving. Ultimately, we need a new way of doing politics that is more receptive to the different approaches that will need to be adopted in a society that is increasingly unpredictable, and which understands these requirements as opportunities to be more democratic.

And in order to do that, we must expand the modes of government (classically reduced to hierarchy and command) to include others that are more suited to complex societies (cooperation, participation, deliberation...) and combine them with procedures for rapid learning and strategic ability. We are not simply facing the decision to change policies, much less the need for administrative reform. We are confronting the choice to reconsider and transform politics or to continue with a system designed for a world that is no more.

If we have not been able to anticipate recent crises, have we at least been able to learn from them? Everything seems to indicate that we have not learned from the financial crisis to configure a stable global financial system with appropriate institutions and regulations. We can ask similar questions about equally crucial issues in other areas, such as the reform of public administrations or the movement toward other productive models: Are we engaging in the necessary reflections and corresponding reform processes?

If we are not capable of taking advantage of crises like the current one(s) to carry out necessary reforms, the future of our forms of government does not hold great promise. To those who always prefer to wait for better times, we must tell them that the calm, when it returns, usually brings more problems.

Virus versus Populism

When it comes to people, the ones who are most affected by the coronavirus crisis are the most vulnerable among us but, from an ideological point of view, what will be most affected is populism. There are three things that populist leaders hate whose value is increased by this type of crisis: expert knowledge, institutions and the global community.

Let us begin with the first one: expert knowledge. In times of crisis, there tends to be a re-appreciation of expert knowledge. This occurred in 2008 – 2009 when the decisions of the US Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank were vitally important, even though some of their recommendations were unpopular. It is also true that the experts made mistakes, such as the lack of foresight or their obsession with austerity during the economic crisis. But, in general, expert knowledge is more highly valued at times of concern and uncertainty in which disinformation flows so easily on the social networks.

Let us consider how that necessity contrasts with the scorn that Trump has for science and how he disregarded the warnings that his advisors were offering. He even said that Covid was just a simple flu and that it could help the US economy, while at the same time he reduced the budget of the office dedicated to pandemics at the National Security Council. Or let us recall Pablo Casado, the ringwing Spanish opposition leader of the Popular Party, who accused President Pedro Sánchez of "hiding behind the science" to fight against a pandemic, as if it would have been better to leave it in the hands of a fortune-teller or a couple of astrologers.

I do not mean to imply that we must trust everything the experts say, but simply that their opinion must be taken into special consideration. Not even the specialists are all in agreement and there is leeway when it comes to political decision-making. There have been a variety of strategies, each one supported by its corresponding experts, such as the British and Dutch strategy of controlled contagion versus the European and Asian strategy of confinement. Furthermore, democracy is not a government of experts, but a popular and representative government which must articulate a variety of voices, institutions and values, one of which is knowledge – especially important in the midst of a crisis like this one. In any case, one of the lessons that we should take from this situation is that we need to exit it with a more intelligent and less ideological style of government.

The second aspect that gains importance during a moment of crisis is institutional logic. This is not a moment for great leaders who lead their people vertically, but for organization, protocols and strategies, when social services and a quality public sector are particularly valued. All of this goes hand in hand with

collective intelligence, both when it comes to the medical response as well as to the organizational and political responses. Of course, presidential communications are very important, but much more decisive is our collective capacity to govern crises, both in anticipating them and managing them. We are facing an unprecedented crisis that was very difficult to anticipate, but we are dealing with a political system that is under-prepared when it comes to strategic capacity, excessively competitive, obsessed by the short term, opportunistic and unwilling to learn. The key value of institutions is trust, but we are suffering a crisis of confidence in our institutions that we have not managed to overcome.

Institutional logic requires loyalty and confidence (among the different levels of government, between the government and the opposition, between the people and the political system), which are attributes that we have in short supply. In the end, all the political actors think that this is a great opportunity to attain things that would be unattainable without a large-scale catastrophe: governments try to consolidate their hold on power, there is recentralization, political oppositions try to take power, and so on. The subconscious of political systems believes that normal institutional life does not allow for change, it benefits those who are in power and alternations in power are always due to catastrophes that have been used successfully: the economic crisis and maybe this virus could represent an opportunity to get power. Opportunistic behaviour is a clear sign of institutional weakness.

The third factor that become significant during crises is the global community. This crisis has struck at a time of anti-globalism (Brexit, Trump, trade wars, protectionism, unilateralism, a disunited Europe), a situation that is very similar to the 1930s.

However, although the crisis seemed, at the beginning, to reinforce our tendency to focus on our own self-interest, closing ourselves off along national lines, we subsequently opened up to a more cooperative response, once we rediscovered our shared destinies and the fact that no one is fully isolated and safe. We need to contain the expansion of the virus on a global level, not only within our own borders, because viruses are barely neutralized with strategies of delimitation or confinement, which only slightly manage to curb their expansion. Measures involving closing things down are only superficial, the real way to escape this situation is cooperation: cooperation in science, in politics, in the economy. There is no solution with a single chain of command or with self-interest pursued at the expense of other people's interest. Ulrich Beck (1992) warned about this after the catastrophe in Chernobyl: even though the first impulse may be protectionist, shared risks are the main uniting force in a world in which we are all equally threatened.

The Drama of Deciding

It is said that a priest came to see Thoreau on his death bed to offer him the solace of religion and evoke the other world, the afterlife. Thoreau, with a slight smile, responded: "Just one world at a time, please". Beyond the religious issue, a worrisome question often arises in life: to how many worlds do we belong? How many things do we have to keep track of at any given time? How do we reconcile all the possible perspectives of reality? We all have to keep too many plates spinning at once.

Critical moments bring us face to face with this diversity of perspectives in a tragic fashion. Those who have had to take the most important decisions to handle the coronavirus crisis could not allow themselves the luxury of occupying one single world. Instead, they had to balance various worlds with divergent values and interests: the vital need for public health but also for economic performance, the need for schooling, the importance of culture precisely at these moments. I imagine myself in their shoes, deciding in favour of some objective they consider a priority, knowing that their decision could cause serious harm to another objective. The triage carried out by doctors was preceded by the no less tragic triage carried out by politicians. Should we prioritize health over the economy? Is the right to protest more important than the still uncertain risks of contagion? Is home confinement a good decision when we know that it seriously harms schooling?

Sociologists use the term 'functional differentiation' for the process through which, as civilization advances, where there was previously a "total social fact", as Marcel Mauss (1966: 76–77) put it, there are now distinct spheres or social subsystems, each with their own logic: the economy, culture, health, law, education. Society is an incompatible set of perspectives. From the economic point of view, the world is a problem of scarcity; from the political point of view, it is something to be configured collectively. What is plausible for a consumer is different when it is observed by a voter or artist. These spheres are not harmonically integrated, and they give rise to many problems of compatibility and even to open conflicts. The most shocking case is what is happening with the environment, which improved with the economic slowdown. Another curious case: the reduction in air traffic is decreasing the amount of atmospheric data that is necessary to make forecasts which help us understand the extent of the pandemic. What is going well for some people can be devastating from other vantage points. On top of that, a plurality of perspectives also exists within each sphere; not all epidemiologists see things the same way, and this is also the case with those who work in the health care industry. Psychologists and paediatricians

have some objections to all the attention currently focused on the epidemiological perspective when it comes to confronting the crisis.

Politics is precisely the attempt to articulate that diversity of perspectives. Bourdieu defined the state as "a point of view of points of view" (2012: 53) and declared that this privileged observation was no longer possible because of the difficulty of determining the common good when it comes to the entire society. The political system no longer enjoys many resources; its knowledge and authority are very limited, so it is reduced to creating confidence rather than sovereign power. Societies have to act as if they were united while knowing that they are not. There is no way to impose a single dominant criterion about what should be done. Crises open a parenthesis; they momentarily silence that diversity and provide a unified authority and unusual obedience, but they are no more than brief interruptions of the habitual discord among different perspectives of reality.

The fact that there are diverse perspectives about a single issue does not release us from the obligation to get right what is most important in every case. It allows us to realize the drama involved in decisions within environments of complexity, which is especially the case with a crisis. The demand for accountability must always keep these tensions in mind, and those who make decisions must improve decision-making procedures. Complexity is not an excuse, but a demand. Unlike Thoreau, who spent much of his life in a cabin in the woods, we have both the good fortune and the misfortune of living in various worlds at the same time.

Where and What is Decided? Alternative Globalizations

One of the unusual questions that the involuntary social experiment of the pandemic presents is whether we are entering into a period of de-globalization or whether globalization will continue as before. There is in this question some unreality, since it seems to assume that globalization is a process that can be detained and that we originally made an express determination to put it into motion. Human beings did not gather together and vote on whether to enter the Iron Age or to abandon the Renaissance. Why has this question, which seems to grant us a sovereignty we do not possess, arisen now? Probably because we are allowing ourselves to be carried away by the seduction of having a lot of control over reality since we just did something that seems to resemble deciding to stop the world: we carried out the confinement and put a halt to a large part of the econ-

omy. This was not the same as the recessions or economic crises we have *suffered*, with which we have plenty of experience, but was a halting of our habitual mobility and a hibernation of the economy that came from *decisions* we made. While we were forced to do so by a health threat, we made the decision voluntarily. The radicalism of the measures adopted to combat the pandemic may fool us with the mirage that we are capable of controlling everything, even something very close to bringing the world to a halt.

The flip side of believing there are sovereign actors is the idea that there must be guilty parties whose ineptitude or evil explains everything. We love to seek guilty parties responsible for crises, and we should moderate that impulse if what we want is to make good diagnoses (that will, without a doubt, include identifying elements of irresponsibility). Globalization is now presented to us as the wild card for all explanations. The fact that the coronavirus has expanded globally makes us think that it has something to do with globalization, but de-globalizing ourselves is not simple, nor is it clear what that might entail. In the first place, the virus does not seem to have spread primarily through business, but through tourism. Should we prohibit pilgrimages to Mecca or tourism in Florence? The idea that the virus is now sending us the bill for haphazard globalization is a half-truth. There were plagues back in the fourteenth century, and growing interdependence also has very positive aspects when it comes to fighting off these pandemics (such as scientific cooperation, the nimbleness of information or the communication of successful experiences). If the virus came from China and has had such devastating effects, it was not because of excessive globalization but because they globalized the virus but nationalized the information. We must diagnose the type of political constellation the coronavirus comes from and what interactions it obeys. Contending that it is a virus of globalization would be a simplification that does not correspond to the fact that we live in a more complex world, in which there are dimensions of our existence that have been highly globalized, others that have been less so and even some that have experienced a reduction of globalization. The heart of the question is that we should balance the risks by pooling the information, technologies and institutions that we need to confront them. The goal is a balanced globalization, which is something we can achieve, rather than de-globalization, which is completely unrealistic.

As a consequence of the shock of the pandemic, the overarching questions have returned to the political agenda, even with, I would argue, a touch of grandiloquence, as if the future of the world were in our hands in a way that does not correspond to our limitations. There is a debate between those we could call the contractionists and those we could call the expansionists; between some who

argue that this crisis makes the case for deglobalization and others who sustain that we must bolster globalization and give it the appropriate political structures.

The management of the crisis has, at first, followed a contractionist logic: the closing of borders, reserving our resources for national citizens, orders for confinement, a greater demand for protectionism toward governments, the interruption of global supply and mobility chains. At the same time, once we overcame the instinctive first reaction in favour of retreating, there were events that implied greater opening: the configuration of more unified global public opinions when discussing similar matters, advances in digitalization, telework and on-line education, demands for intervention from the European Union, a desperate race to discover a vaccine through international scientific cooperation, and a comparison of the strategies taken by different countries that situated us in a framework of best practices or global benchmarking.

The fact that both positions seem to be right, depending on the examples that are employed and the perspective from which things are observed, tells us a great deal about the nature of globalization: it is inevitable, it is our destiny, but it is also ambivalent and even contradictory, with movements that are contradictory, even if the final result is an increase in interconnection. Talking about globalization means also mentioning its opposite, it is like the shadow that accompanies us. There are times when, in order to allow globalists to be right again, we must move backwards in a way that might be interpreted as agreeing with those who are in favour of stopping progress. All we need is a quick glance at the history of globalization to verify that it has always oscillated between expansion and contraction.

There is a case in the current debate that is invoked as an example of the success of de-globalization. The economic slowdown has had immediate beneficial effects on the quality of the air, rivers and seas – for the obvious reasons of closed industries and decreased mobility. It is true that the orders for confinement, the hibernation of many economic activities and the decrease in international business because of the pandemic have resulted in a reduction in pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, but it would be a mistake to think that this contraction reduces the risks of climate change beyond the immediate horizon. The emissions will return once activity returns, and if the pandemic provokes a serious economic crisis, a lot of money and political attention will be withdrawn from the fight against the climate crisis. The situation could even be aggravated because the attention being paid to the immediate dangers of the pandemic would distract us from the more latent and long-term threats to the climate. We should also consider that businesses might be less able to invest in the transition toward sustainable projects: lower prices for crude oil will make electric cars more expensive (as is suggested by Tesla's falling stock prices); sup-

ply chains for certain renewable energies, that are very dependent on production in China, could be interrupted; the generalized fear about health and financial risks will receive all our attention, while concerns about climate change will move to the back burner. In any case, the fact that the climate is improving during the pandemic because people are dying and less work is taking place does not seem to be the best way to resolve the problems of the climate crisis. We should find solutions that allow us to juggle all the goods that are in play (life, the economy, the planet), beyond the sacrificial promise that, by slowing the world, the problems associated with movement will necessarily be fixed.

My conclusion to this debate is that globalization is not going to come to an end because we decide it should or because governments make that decree. However, there are a series of decisions we can make that will encourage or slow globalization. This will be like repairing a ship while out at sea. We cannot employ a large parenthesis or an intentional interruption of history, so we find ourselves forced to reflect while we are in movement. A quarantine is an elimination of contacts for a specific period of time, but the concept of 'de-globalization' points toward discontinuing relationships we have established, or at least changing the way they been configured, since we have been talking about this phenomenon. We would have to distinguish between the relationships we should limit, those that should be modified and the ones that it does not seem reasonable to give up.

This collective reflection will not make us think about using an emergency brake to stop the world but it will allow us to consider resizing it. The big debate focuses on resizing the decision-making environments based on the nature of the risks that threaten us. We must redefine the appropriate tiers of management and production: local, national, international, supranational, transnational, global. The primary thing that this health crisis has revealed is the fragility of open globalization, both when it comes to the mobility that led to the spread of the pandemic as well as certain difficulties when we needed to stock up on masks or respirators and we verified our enormous dependence on the supply of basic goods and services (items whose production we had delocalized and which did not seem to have a special value added or more relevance for security than sophisticated military equipment). Our first reaction is to place more value on regional markets, interrupt global supply chains, return to classic protectionism and the local scale; but we have also begun again to value the cosmopolitanism of the scientific community, the strengthening of global public opinion and the advantages of digitalization precisely because we do not want these things to stop. Nervous globalization must be followed by sustainable 'glocalization'.

The coronavirus is not going to bring a halt to globalization (if that idea even makes any sense). The question is to determine what the best type of organiza-

tion is to rebalance a world that was already showing many imbalances the pandemic has merely highlighted. Even if it were possible, the return to closed worlds would not help provide the global world with better governance; instead, this would leave it without the influence of institutions and actors that can balance its uncontrolled dynamic. We will need to distinguish beneficial or inevitable interdependence from the types of dependence that entail serious threats to security. Instead of oscillating between discipline and disorder, retreat and acceleration, what this globalization needs is more and better regulation. Before and after the pandemic, it continues to be true that the public good demands global institutions, global cooperation and global solutions.

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