

## What we are related to

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Like any unforeseen, brutal, vital event, the coronavirus crisis is causing its share of regressions: an epidemic of hoaxes, conspiracy theories and gossip of all kinds and, of course, a relentless search for culprits – from the Chinese to globalization, from neo-liberalism to climate change, from health authorities lacking in foresight to the Machiavellian government. These are so many tactics probably intended to recover a semblance of control over what escapes us.

And what escapes us in first place is not only control over our future health but also, from now on, control over our daily life: in a few days there was taken away from us – and for a significant period – the fundamental freedom that is to be able to move as we please. Within recent memory, we had never experienced that.

However, despite foreseeable slippages (refusal to comply, strategies to circumvent the ban, nervous breakdowns), the situation is not generating – for the moment at least – either riots or mass protests: the recalcitrants remain at the individual stage (and sometimes snitches even inform the authorities about them). One can therefore wonder what makes this situation relatively bearable, in spite of everything. However, the answer to this question cannot be reduced to the existence of these two essential resources which are, technically, the ability to connect with others remotely thanks to tele-communication technologies (the intensity of these tele-links can even lead to a form of relational overwork) and, on the moral level, the feeling, after all, that we are almost equal in the face of the threat (the virus does not recognise social classes), even if it affects older people more and even if, above all, the consequences of confinement are anything but egalitarian, depending on living conditions.

For beyond maintaining links at a distance, and the relative equality of health risks, it seems to me that the main reason for this overall acceptance of containment measures lies in the fact that they intensely demand our sense of responsibility. Because we are asked – and it is right to ask us – to act as adults: that is to say, we are asked to be aware that our actions can be beneficial or harmful to others.

Let us remember: the first reaction of many of our fellow citizens was to interpret coercive measures as being intended for the protection of *their* health: whence could come a reaction of revolt and rejection, because after all, what right has the public power to rule my life? And then, being young and not sick, it doesn't concern *me*, does it? Besides, don't I have the right to take risks for myself if I want to? Fortunately, government communications have made a good point: isolating yourself is not only protecting yourself but protecting others – your loved ones, and strangers encountered on the street, and all of your fellow citizens. In other words: if you are isolated it is because you are not alone; and if you are cut off from others, it is precisely because others exist, and that they also depend on you. The same is true today not only for isolation but also for masks: if you have to wear a mask it is not so much, as we thought, to protect yourself as to protect others – and therefore also, ultimately, yourself.

And now, thanks to this crisis, it has been possible to introduce into the minds of many of our fellow citizens the idea that not everyone is the alpha and omega of their own life; that above the individual interest there is something more precious, which is called the general interest, or the common good; but that the coexistence of the two is not necessarily easy to organise when we find ourselves split between private values (our comfort, our need for relationships with our loved ones, our desire to go to the countryside, our freedom) and public values by virtue of which we justify our actions (not to aggravate the contamination, not to endanger the health of the most vulnerable, not to increase the task of the caregivers). Now isolation forces us to put our desires at a distance (after all, is it so important for me to rejoin the man I love without delay?), and to project ourselves into the future (all this will last only for a time, and it will last all the less if I submit to the instructions). Put your desires at a distance, and project yourself into the future: this is exactly what you teach children to help them become adults – that is to say, civilized.

Another step is taken, Norbert Elias would have said, in this 'civilizing process' which, for the best, has built Western societies, by educating humans to something other than the selfish satisfaction of their immediate desires and the gross expression of their bodily needs. And no doubt he would have added that with this collective awareness of the 'interdependence' on which 'the society of individuals' feeds, we are also witnessing the decline of *homo clausus*, this spontaneous illusion according to which the human being appears closed in on him- or herself, defined before and independently of others.

End of the illusion of individual omnipotence, end of the fantasy that personal freedom is the ultimate goal: locked in our homes, here we are able to meditate, finally, the meaning and importance of the concept of general interest; and to realise the imperative need to prefer, over both economic (right) and libertarian (left) liberalism, the republican conception of citizenship, which makes the common good superior to the sum of individual freedoms, and places it above

them, by connecting us not only to our loved ones and our nearest and dearest but to all our fellow citizens, even to all the inhabitants of our unhappy planet.

So here it is that after two generations fed upon the cult of the child as sovereign and of 'I have the right to dress as I want', the dream of omnipotence falls back with all its weight of corrosive illusion, and flops: there are definitely things more important, and even more exciting, than the satisfaction of individual desires. Because there are also all of us, connected to something greater than us, isolated of course but interdependent, responsible, united and – in spite of everything – proud of it.