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Progressives need to imagine a better post-corona world

If progressives want to shape the post-corona world, they need to express not just what they dislike, but also what they want

In March, our lives have been abruptly turned upside down. Work, taking care of our families, leisure – a whole host of things have suddenly changed. It happened virtually overnight and no-one can tell at the moment when it is going to be over and what the long-term consequences will be.

Our attention and efforts have been focused on dealing with the pandemic and minimizing victims and suffering – although they seem to some extent inevitable. This focus is appropriate and we should not let go of it.

Besides that, however, it is also a time to reflect and, more importantly, actively shape the world we will find ourselves in after the crisis. It is probably clear to everyone now that the 'return to normal' will not be a question of simply picking up where we left off.

The good, the bad and the ugly

As we know, hard times can reveal the best as well as the worst things in us. On the one hand, we see touching surges of mutual care: after all, it is pure solidarity that makes us wear face masks and accept other restrictive measures; we do that because that's how we protect others.

We organise spontaneously to bring help where it is most needed. From our homes we send support and thanks to medical staff and rescue workers as well as people working in other necessary services such as shops and waste collection – because all of them are on the frontline.

On the other hand, we see people mindlessly insisting on the verbatim execution of absurd orders and regulations – and not only when it is part

of their jobs. Here and there, avid citizens seek self-fulfilment in the surveillance of their neighbourhoods and – based on numerous stories I have read – many of these incidents are nothing short of deliberate bullying. Also, there have been cases of profiteering and people trying to get rich quick from other people's panic, distress and hardship: for example the speculative resale of protective equipment or advertisements offering services such as 'Let us help you deal with the crisis – we will dismiss your staff for you'.

Both of these extremes manifest themselves also in the public debate. We have seen politicians, visionary entrepreneurs and activists raising topics – often with the best intentions – which were rarely heard in the past. Their voices are questioning the sustainability of our society's current paradigms, sometimes suggesting radically new approach towards social, environmental and economic issues. Suddenly, we are seeing discussions on nationalisation or other forms of putting certain sectors under state control.

There are discussions about the duty of the rich to contribute considerably more to covering the social costs of the crisis – and this discussion is not just held in a moral sense, but also asks how to actually enforce this duty. Some talk about the need to suspend debt instalments or even forgive debts completely, about a rapid transition to local supply and production chains and about the necessity of reducing consumerism.

At the same time, we witness other politicians and managers trying to take advantage of the situation and hastily pushing proposals that would usually trigger severe resistance, but which now have a good chance of being adopted. Either because they are justified as necessary to tackle the crisis situation or they simply go unnoticed as most people are concerned with other priorities these days.

There are many examples to be found in Czechia. Prime Minister Babiš and Minister of Industry and Trade Havlíček are attempting to undermine the Green Deal (the EU's plan for economic modernization and climate protection). ČEZ, a dominant electric utility controlled by the state, filed for permission to construct new nuclear blocks at the Dukovany nuclear power station and this shady application is clearly tailor-made to fit Russian technologies. And let's not forget various legislative attempts to legitimise further invasions of our privacy.

Let us therefore phrase clearly and comprehensibly what we intend to change

It can thus be said that the current social, political and economic turmoil is a jumble of seeds, some of which may result in a better world than the one before the crisis, but others

– and how.

of which might bring a significantly worse and uglier future. Which of these tendencies will prevail and determine our future depends on every single one of us.

In recent weeks, unprecedented opportunities have come up and occasional rays of hope emerged (reduced emissions and pollution, astonishing waves of solidarity, people's ability to switch to modest lives and new routines overnight for the sake of the greater good, and obvious cracks in the neoliberal narrative). Nonetheless, it would be hopelessly naïve to believe that tomorrow's world will spontaneously fall into the shape of a more just and environmentally-friendly society.

No, we cannot achieve climate protection by the means of an economic collapse that will throw even more millions of people into chronic poverty. In fact, it is the other way around – it can only be achieved through systematic efforts and a coherent strategy using major investments to progressively build a new basis for our economy and ensure a fair and just social transformation.

The social and political struggle of the coming weeks and months will decide in what kind of world we will live in the future. And if we fail to organise effectively and promptly, we are going to face unpleasant surprises.

Threat and opportunity

It is a well-known fact that a crisis that shakes the existing scheme of things is not only a threat, but also an opportunity – and powerful corporations and autocratic politicians seem to be even more aware of that than us in the progressive movement. They have been familiar with the shock doctrine, a phenomenon described by Naomi Klein in 2007, for decades during which they have mastered it fairly well.

I see it as a failure of our movement that although we have predicted societal turbulences and crises many times, we have not really built sufficient capacities to operate in it. And now that a crisis is here, we are largely taken by surprise, unable to shift our thinking and to reorganise to control the turn of events more than we did under 'normal' circumstances.

It is understandable and human: we are at home, under lockdown, we are taking care of our folks, many of us also involved in volunteer work. However, our opponents are not hesitating. On the contrary, they are willing to grab unscrupulously whatever they can. And they are

supported by robust structures that make adaptation to new conditions easier for them.

So, as governments come up with one terrible proposal after another and probe how far they can actually go and how much society can bear, we are only able to comment on it and alert each other on social media: 'Look, they've applied the shock doctrine once again'.

Thank goodness at least for this, because in some cases even that might help. If we are loud enough, some proposals may be withdrawn or postponed, perhaps until we become less vigilant or our society more benumbed. Yet we are on the defensive – it is nothing more than a game in which they try to take over as much new ground as possible while we are withdrawing.

Looking at Hungary, for example, we can see that this change for the worse at a time of crisis can be sudden, substantial and virtually irreversible. In order to succeed, we must be alert – we must not become paralysed by the crisis. If we're not ready, we fail.

Some of us – now I am speaking about me and the older generation – have been through a defeat of this kind in the early 1990s. Idealists and dissidents dreaming of a better and just world after the 1989 revolution were quickly and rather brutally steamrollered by a bunch of pragmatists who seized the opportunity on the abruptly cleared scene to gain power and capital while sealing off alternative routes that our liberated society might have taken.

Where to start and what to build on?

One of our weak spots is the fact we can strongly articulate what we dislike and disapprove of, but we rarely manage to be similarly clear and comprehensible in expressing what we want. However, those who are able to express what they want have the best chance of convincing a significant part of society at times of chaos. While criticism is good and useful in a stable situation, at times of crisis it cannot only be somewhat unappealing, but even greatly discouraging. It does not provide solutions and the way out that people are desperately seeking.

Let us therefore phrase clearly and comprehensibly what we intend to change – and how.

We also need a realistic reflection of the fact that if society insufficiently listened to us in times of stability, it might be even less understanding

now when an acute crisis needs to be dealt with. We therefore cannot do without a broader alliance that should include the heroines and heroes of these days – doctors, paramedics, nurses, volunteers, municipal representatives and the management of various organisations providing help and public service. Yes, I know that many of us already rank among these.

Who else but communities in Africa, South-East Asia or Latin America have such extensive experience and proven ways of surviving in conditions of permanent uncertainty and scarcity?

An interesting feature of the current crisis and our response is the generational asymmetry: the coronavirus is especially dangerous for elderly people and in order to protect them, the younger ones are ready to accept radical restrictions and provide active help. We need to encourage this ethos and maintain it so that the solidarity between generations – also in the other direction, from older towards younger – can boost the vital struggle to mitigate climate change, giving the youngest generation a chance for a good life.

It is also necessary to organise actively. Of course, we are currently spending most of our time isolated at home, facing penalties and repression if we violate emergency regulations. Nevertheless, it is no exaggeration to say this is a standard situation for activists in many countries and regions all around the world. They do not have our privilege of living in democratic countries that still guarantee plenty of enforceable rights and freedoms, despite all their legitimately criticised imperfections.

In this paralysing situation, I often humbly think of our brave fellow fighters in Russia, China, Turkey, Congo or Amazonia. They show that despite hugely unfavourable conditions, it is still possible to organise, protest and take action.

This is mainly possible thanks to the resilience and inventiveness they show in circumventing the orders of their regimes and finding space and a voice, even if in virtual form. This certainly brings higher risks and demands more self-sacrifice than we are currently accustomed to – but haven't we simply grown too indolent?

Foundations of a more resilient society

Just as we should learn from activists and movements in oppressive regimes, the time has come for our society to learn from the experience of countries that we used to call the Third World.

Who else but communities in Africa, South-East Asia or Latin America have such extensive experience and proven ways of surviving in conditions of permanent uncertainty and scarcity? And more than that – beyond survival, they also manage to enjoy life and retain their humanity.

Some of their key principles for dealing with such situations are solidarity, collaboration and the ability to accept the fact that nothing is guaranteed – neither safety nor prosperity – and to find contentment and do good despite all of that.

Let's be aware that the crisis induced by the coronavirus is but a minor test compared to what awaits us as a consequence of climate change. The occurrence of a viral pandemic is a problem that is not only predictable (indeed, it had been predicted by epidemiologists for years), but – despite all the present challenges – also something relatively simple to resolve. It can be managed, with the help of several fairly straightforward measures and technical, mostly medical solutions.

True, these measures may have unfavourable side effects, for example economic and social ones, which raise dilemmas and cause disturbances potentially more serious than the viral pandemic itself. However, we can be sure that even these restrictions are temporary.

On the contrary, disturbances caused by unfolding climate change will be much more complex, far-reaching and permanent (measured by our lifespans). Dramatic changes in the landscape, shortages of water, disrupted food supplies, increasingly frequent weather extremes, spread of (once 'exotic') diseases, geopolitical conflicts and forced migration (much more extensive than that connected with the war in Syria) will strain our institutions so heavily it makes the current Covid-19 pandemic look like a children's game compared to a real war.

It is certainly not enough to simply stick to doing what we were doing before the crisis.

If we take this experience as a stress test, we can see just how unprepared we are for the challenges awaiting our civilization in the following years and decades. And we can realise how much work there is to be done.

We can see that key structures of our state are mostly run by incompetent figures who can hardly secure smooth running of public services in standard situations, let alone cope with unexpected events. Now in the time of crisis, we can observe the extent to which we allowed opportunist and corrupt politicians to paralyse and eat away our state from the inside. And it is a horrifying sight.

The functioning of official institutions' operation is patchy and incapable of taking care of those in need. The system of services, production and supplies we depend on have been made extremely fragile as a result of privatisation and optimisation driven by short-term profits and the free-market 'efficiencies'. Now we are surprised to find out that our 'advanced society' has a shortage of basic equipment and the state lacks usable reserves. There is also a lack of skilled staff. Workers are chronically overloaded even in standard conditions, and with even greater burdens, it becomes impossible for them to handle the strain, no matter how hard they work and sacrifice themselves.

Many families and households that had been hovering just above the edge of poverty immediately found themselves struggling to survive – and the state does not even know how to help them. That is, if it actually wants to help at all.

Unless we do something about this, we can bet that once the next and larger crisis strikes, our state will let us down. That's why we need to try and change this before it is too late.

The upcoming re-start of economic activity and financial injections planned by the government for the recovery of the economy need to focus on investments that will allow us to build a resistant and robust society at the first place. We have to use these unprecedented resources to buy and build institutions and infrastructures prepared for the much bigger strains and shocks, which are to be expected in the following years and decades. This is probably our last chance to flip the switch and set the direction towards a sustainable civilization.

However, as I mentioned, unpreparedness can also be seen in our own ranks. It is certainly not enough to simply stick to doing what we were doing before the crisis. It might have been appropriate back then, but it is not sufficient anymore. We need to find new ways of making extended efforts and getting organised.

While I was writing this article, the Financial Times published an essay by Arundhati Roy with an ending on which I could not possibly improve:

'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. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.'

This article is an amended version of the Czech original published on Deník Referendum.



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