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UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA AND THE FUTURE OF *HOMO SAPIENS* IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

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DEBATE
Antropoceno, utopia e distopia

When news about the first cases of Covid-19 in China started to appear in the Western media; when we started to hear about the confinement of millions of people in Wuhan and the surrounding provinces, of families locked at home, of hospitals overflowing with patients and of countless medical staff dying from a new disease, the feeling I had was that we were living through a dystopian Hollywood blockbuster. This impression deepened as the pandemic spread to other parts of Asia, to South Korea, to Japan, to the international passengers of numerous cruise ships and then to Europe and the Americas. And it became even more palpable when Italy, Spain, France, the UK, several US states, Brazil, Peru, South Africa and so many other countries closed schools, non-essential stores and other services, and ordered their populations to stay home for weeks and sometimes months on end. As friends and acquaintances quarantined after travelling or simply because they had been in touch with someone affected by the virus, as the number of infected people and of Covid-19 victims increased and as a generalized fear took hold of almost the entire world population, my sense of a dystopian *déjà vu* only increased.

It turns out I had really watched this kind of apocalyptic movie before. *Contagion*, a 2011 thriller directed by Steven Soderberg, tells the story of a pandemic that originates in Hong Kong. The inability to contain the virus through contact tracing and quarantine of those infected leads to its rapid dissemination throughout the planet. As the dead pile up and the economy collapses, widespread social unrest and violence ensue. In the film, the virus is transmitted through infected droplets that enter the human respiratory tract, as well as through contact with surfaces that had previously been touched by infected people. Sound familiar?

The vast majority of specialists in public health were well aware of the fact that a pandemic similar to Covid-19 was a likely scenario. The SARS epidemic in 2003, the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak and the MERS syndrome from 2012 all pointed in that direction. Bill Gates's TED talk from 2015 in which he warned that the world was not prepared to deal with epidemics with transmission mechanisms and symptoms similar to those of the common flu has meanwhile been widely shared. Celebrated by some for its prophetic description of what was to come, and fanning in other cases the flames of conspiracy theories convinced of an evil cabal orchestrated by the world's billionaires, Gates's TED talk reveals something simple: we were clearly not seeing the writing on the wall, or, worse still, we were ignoring it at our own risk.

Pandemics such as Covid-19 are, in this sense, similar to the crises of capitalism. Everybody knows that they periodically flare up with lesser or greater intensity. However, when they do emerge, most people act as though they are an unexpected phenomenon, something that appeared completely out of the blue. The current pandemic irrupted 12 years after the massive 2008 economic meltdown. Roughly a century ago, in 1918, the world was gripped by the so-called Spanish flu outbreak, which killed about 50 million people, 11 years before the momentous economic collapse of 1929. Marx famously wrote that history repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as farse. In this case, though, history always seems to repeat itself as tragedy, as if each of these occurrences – economic and public health crises – were something absolutely new. And yet we have a clear pattern of regularly occurring calamities. This predictability is routinely ignored by politicians and by civil society, so that nations are utterly unprepared when these events strike. Far from trying to avoid these crises, authorities act surprised and respond with reactive, instead of preventive, measures when they inevitably surface. Unable to heed the lessons of the past, we fail to carve

a path towards a desirable future. Instead, we resignedly lie waiting, only to concoct yet another half-baked response to the next emergency.

I wrote an article on Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's so-called MaddAddam trilogy shortly before the outbreak of Covid-19, which contributed to the feeling I mentioned above of living in a fictional world when news of the pandemic broke in the media. This essay, titled "Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of the Anthropocene" and published in the current issue of *Esboços, Histórias em Contextos Globais*, discusses the move from a utopian to a predominantly dystopian view of historical becoming at least from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards and considers the extinction of human beings on the planet from the prism of utopia and dystopia (VIEIRA, 2020). As Gönül Bakay (2020) rightly points out in her response to my article, literary scenarios of post-apocalyptic worlds (almost) without humans exist at least since the nineteenth century, including, for instance, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), but there has been a sharp increase in the production of this kind of dystopian fiction in the past few decades. Julio Bentivoglio (2020), also in response to my paper, identifies the presentism that permeates our societies as the reason why, given this already long history of apocalyptic visions and the multiple threats humans face, humanity is still unable to learn from past crises and strive to avoid them in the future.

In Atwood's trilogy *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013), the author portrays the final years before and the time immediately after a so-called "waterless flood" that killed almost all human beings on the planet. Before the "flood," the world was dominated by hyper-capitalism and most of humanity survived in overcrowded and extremely polluted cities, while a privileged few scientists and businesspeople lived in highly protected, well-appointed condos. Genetic manipulation had run wild and countless hybrid species proliferated. It is in this apocalyptic scenario that a rogue scientist creates a virus – the equivalent to the Biblical flood that cleansed the Earth of a fallen Creation – and embeds it in a sexual enhancement pill. Only a few humans survive the illness, together with a group of hominids, who had been genetically engineered by the same scientist to survive the virus and to thrive on a significantly warmer planet.

The similarities between Atwood's works of fiction and current events are striking: a deadly virus breaks out in the midst of growing socio-economic inequality and environmental degradation. The links between these novels and the present highlight the fact that the economic and public health crises cyclically plaguing our societies and disturbing their normal functioning – and we would do well to ask ourselves what "normality" is when we are always at the risk of another crisis, always on the brink of collapse; imminent crises are the new normal and, therefore, the state of exception becomes the rule, as Giorgio Agamben has rightly pointed out; from crisis to crisis, we live in permanent fear and anxiety becomes the defining trait of our existence – come about in the context of yet another crisis, namely, the environmental crisis. Environmental degradation has been intensifying at least since the Industrial Revolution with the large-scale use of fossil fuels and it proceeded at a fast pace with the rapid growth of the world's population made possible by breakthroughs in medicine and by the green revolution in agriculture. Human population was about 500 million in the seventeenth century and we now have almost 8 billion people on the planet. Between the 1970s and today the world population has more than doubled and consumption skyrocketed, a situation that has significantly worsened environmental problems.

It is well-known that the contamination of the air, of the soils, of waterways and of the oceans as a result of massive industrialization, and the use of increasingly large parts of the Earth's surface to meet human food and consumption needs have had a devastating impact of the planet. Global warming, ocean acidification, the rampant destruction of rainforests and the sixth mass extinction of non-human living beings are all proof of the fact that we are undergoing an unprecedented crisis in the life of our species. Just like other animals and plants that expand beyond the carrying capacity of their ecosystems and thus compromise their own survival, *Homo sapiens* risks rendering the Earth uninhabitable for human beings, not to mention all the other forms of existence irreparably damaged by human action.

To sum up, we are currently in the grips of a public health crisis that came in the wake of the 2008 economic and social crises. Both of these interrupted while another, long-duration crisis has been unfolding, i.e., the environmental crisis. What are the points where these three crises converge? In Western Medieval times, people believed that society and individual human beings reflected what was going on in nature and that the microcosm mirrored the macrocosm. If we follow this line of thinking, we realize that the planet is increasingly sick (environmental crisis), that our social and political body – the Hobbesian Leviathan – is sick (with the cyclical crises of capitalism) and that people are sick (with the cyclical onset of pandemics such as Covid-19). In her response to my article on utopia and dystopia, Ana Carolina Lins Peliz (2020) considers the Anthropocene as a possible theoretical framework for thinking about *Homo sapiens'* current situation: humanity is both the cause *and* the victim of these overlapping crises. How can we think about the future when we are in this predicament? And what can these crises teach us about the possibility of a future for our species?

First, one should note that these crises are not simply taking place concurrently. Rather, they feed off and intensify one another. For example, Covid-19 has affected lower-income people much more aggressively than middle and high-income social groups, since the former often need to work outside their homes and therefore do not have the luxury of remaining in lockdown. Furthermore, lack of access to quality healthcare has exacerbated the effects of the disease in underprivileged communities. The economic impact of the pandemic also disproportionately fell upon poorer segments of the population, on minorities, those working in the informal economy or those without job security. In short, the public health crisis is worsened by economic vulnerability and, in turn, exacerbates already existing social and economic inequalities.

Some of the causes of the environmental crisis have contributed to the onset of the pandemic. For instance, the mass production of animals – that is to say, the logic of capitalism applied to the production of meat and other animal products – is one of the possible sources of the virus, which may have passed onto humans from domestic animals contaminated in animal farms. Forest destruction and the encroachment of people and of domestic animals onto the natural habitats of wild animals is also often identified as a cause of the frequent pandemics plaguing humans. And the congregation of large numbers of human beings in crowded, sprawling megalopolises such as Wuhan, Paris, Madrid and New York, all epicentres of Covid-19, has greatly contributed to the rapid spread of the disease. In other words, the environmental and the public health crises are tightly linked.

Covid-19 is clearly not a natural revenge against human destruction of the biosphere or, worse still, a divine punishment for human hubris, as some extremist religious groups would have us believe. *Homo sapiens* has suffered from pandemics

at least since the development of agricultural societies that required the establishment of sizeable human communities in one location, first in villages and then in cities. Let us recall, for example, the Black Death that killed millions of people in Eurasia in the fourteenth century. But, while pandemics have been part of human history for millennia, the combination of global environmental disaster, capitalist economic meltdowns and public health emergencies is a sign of our times. What kind of a future can we hope for when the present appears to be so bleak?

The etymology of the word “crisis” goes back to Ancient Greek and it was already then linked to a context of disease. It meant a turning point in an illness, a change that indicated either a path towards recovery or death. The word derived from a verb that meant “to separate, decide or judge.” If we take this etymology into consideration, we realize that *Homo sapiens* is truly in a moment of crisis: we, humans, are at a turning point in our history as a species, having the possibility to self-destruct. Whether the disappearance of humankind should be understood as a utopian or dystopian development is an issue open to debate, as Zoltán Boldizsár Simon (2020) argues in his response to my essay published in *Esboços*. Be that as it may, Covid-19 made it very clear that a basic common denominator unites humanity: we are all members of the same species and, therefore, we are all vulnerable to the same pathogens, as well as to economic privation, pollution, climate change, and so on. In this time of crisis, we need to judge or evaluate our situation and make a collective decision about the future.

It is a matter, then, of thinking about the possibility of the future in the context of the multiple crises we face. During the Covid-induced lockdown, it became clear that radical changes in the current way of life are well within our reach: traffic almost stopped; flights were grounded; people stayed home with their families or roommates; there was a drastic decrease in air and water pollution – think of the famous images of shoals of fish roaming through the usually murky canals of the Venice lagoon –, and so on. This does not mean that all transformations brought about by the pandemic were positive. The inability to socialize with friends and with some family members left many struggling with loneliness and other psychological problems. And confinement at home led to a sharp increase in violence against those who are more vulnerable (women, girls, children, the elderly), who were permanently sharing a space with their aggressors. These and other examples show that Covid-19 was certainly not beneficial. What was positive about the crisis was that it opened up a whole horizon of possibilities. It showed us that another world is possible, a notion that has been the hallmark of utopian thought even since Thomas More coined the word “utopia” in his homonymous book more than five hundred years ago.

The Covid-19 outbreak unveiled utopian possibilities at a time that has been predominantly marked by dystopia. From roughly the middle of the nineteenth century, and especially in the last few decades, a dystopian outlook has been the decisive feature of our times. The devastation wrought by colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism, the oppression caused by authoritarian political regimes, growing economic inequalities, the environmental, economic and public health crises mentioned above, and the very real possibility of *Homo sapiens*’ demise have all contributed to our dystopian zeitgeist. We are far from the optimism of the Enlightenment, according to which technical, social and political progress would go hand in hand. Dystopia tells us that there is no alternative to the status quo, that a better future is impossible or, to put it differently, that there is no future for the future. Dystopias are therefore profoundly reactionary: if there is no way to change our world, we need to resign to our fate and accept it. Dystopian thought

spells the end of the famous “principle of hope” that, according to Ernst Block, is the basis for utopia.

The various crises we face enable our return to utopia. To be sure, this notion of utopia does not entail a well-defined blueprint for a better future, a plan that we need to follow through at all costs. Rather, utopia is here understood as the possibility of a future that would not simply be a repetition of present, of a future that would not be more of the same, that is to say, a future as such.¹ Perhaps we should not even call such a future a utopia, given the ideological baggage of the word. We could simply call it future, *tout court*. In the final paragraphs of this article, I would like to sketch some of the possibilities inherent in this thinking of the future that the crises have triggered.

As a guide to my reflection, I will go back to Atwood’s view that her MaddAddam trilogy is not science fiction. The author prefers to use the term “speculative fiction,” arguing that her narratives invent “nothing we haven’t already invented or started to invent” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 322). Instead, they expand upon a “what if” question: “What if we continue down the road we’re already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who’s got the will to stop us?” (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 323). The novels are therefore a thought-experiment that nudges us out of complacency and leads us to ask: what if a deadly virus were to hit human beings? What if we drastically changed our way of living? What if we were forced to halt our destructive relationship to the natural world? Atwood’s novels are but one among a plethora of possible responses to these questions.

The Covid-19 pandemic, in conjunction with the cyclical socio-economic crises of capitalism and the *longue durée* environmental crisis, invites us to follow Atwood’s lead and undertake a thought-experiment akin to the one she suggests in her novels. I will finish this essay with ten proposals for the future, ten “what if” questions or utopian ideas to counter the crises that feed the dystopian mood of the present. These propositions are utopian only in the sense that are different from present-day reality, but they are completely feasible in the here and now. The first five are broader notions, while the last ones are more concrete suggestions that open up a possible future for *Homo sapiens*:

1. What if ecology—the logic or logos of our home, which is the Earth—overrode economy, understood as the capitalist, for-profit ordering of bodies and matter on the planet?
2. What if we placed technology at the service of living beings, human and non-human, and not at the service of the economy?
3. What if we reframed the current arithmetical notion of economic and populational growth, based upon expansion and increase, and considered growth as an unfolding of promises inherent in humans and non-humans, including the growth of well-being, of creativity, and so on?
4. What if we abandoned the imperialistic logic of expansion that already devastated vast regions of the globe and now promotes the colonization of Mars and other planets as a solution to the environmental crisis?
5. What if we learned to share the Earth and live in a balanced relationship with other beings?

¹ I am drawing here on Jacques Derrida’s distinction throughout his work between the French “future” as a repetition of a the present and “avenir” that stands for an open-ended, unpredictable future of possibilities.

6. What if we stopped the mass production of animals to be exterminated for human consumption?

7. What if our societies adequately funded public services, including healthcare and social security, and supported the transition to renewable energies, instead of bolstering banks, large companies and of subsidizing the fossil fuel industry?

8. What if we changed the way we live and work, so that people would not spend hours in traffic and more than half of their days in an office, with their homes empty?

9. What if we had gender parity both at work and in housework and more support for family planning?

10. What if we better distributed wealth in our societies and drastically reduced working hours, so that each person could spend more time at leisure and with their loved ones?

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NOTES

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