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[Commentary] Global Governance and Sustainable Development: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This manuscript explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global governance, highlighting the significant weaknesses in both democratic and authoritarian regimes. The crisis exacerbated social inequalities and exposed the limitations of the current capitalist development model. Democratic countries faced challenges in balancing public health measures with individual freedoms, while authoritarian regimes used the crisis to consolidate power. The pandemic also intensified discrimination against minority groups and widened wealth disparities. This commentary advocates for a shift towards a sustainable development model that prioritizes social equity and environmental sustainability, addressing the ecological impact of current consumption patterns and the necessity for systemic change.

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Introduction

According to data by World Health Organization on infections and deaths of Covid-19 since the start of the pandemic on 30 December 2019 till its own maximum spread in February 2022, there have been 419 million cases and nearly 6 million deaths worldwide. The most affected areas were the European continent (170 million cases), the Americas (145 million), South and East Asia (55 million), the countries of Eastern Europe Mediterranean (21 million) and the African continent (9 million) (WHO, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic has been a stress-test for contemporary societies and the global neoliberalism order. More specifically, it has brought out the following aspects: a) put at risk the fundamental values of democratic countries, which needed to conciliate their values with the necessity to safeguard public health, while

authoritarian regimes reacted differently to face the spread of the new virus. Compared to the latter, democratic states followed a different managing to face the new infection. b) The new pandemic gave path to new forms of discrimination and stigmatization against “others”; c) the pandemic emphasized social inequalities existing in the world, and lastly d) it strikingly shed light to reflect on the current model of capitalist development.

Democratic versus authoritarian regimes

As for the first point, we focus our attention on the European countries for which we have detailed information (Siegel et al, 2022). During the pandemic, these democratic countries have been subjected to hard tensions which threatened their social cohesion. Trying to eradicate the infections, they have approved measures that have temporarily shut down their fundamental rights such as people’s freedom of movement and assembly. In Europe, the first wave occurred around February and March 2020, after that, most of EU countries approved measures which strongly limited individual freedom, while the second wave took place after the summer, between September and December 2020, followed in turn by new restrictive measures albeit less harsh than the first ones. The individual right restrictions to counter the Covid-19 first wave largely had the consent of the population. For instance, according to some opinion polls conducted in Lithuania between April and June 2020, the majority of citizens from 63% to 67% agreed with the restrictive measures approved by the government (Dobryninas, 2022); in Greece, after the first lockdown, 75% of the Greek population approved restrictions (Zarafonitou et al, 2020); 71% in Italy (Becucci, 2022); 97% out of Spanish people in Spain (Giménez-Salinas, 2022) and more than 90% for closings schools and people contact restrictions in Germany (Habermann and Zeich, 2022).

With the implementation of new limitations during the second wave, social consensus decreased in the most part of the European countries. In the same period, protests took place. The most numerous demonstrations occurred in Germany and England, while in the other European countries they had less consistency. First with the motto "no mask" after became "no vax" in 2021 at the arrival of vaccines, the protests found nourishment thanks to the economic damages caused by the measures to fight the pandemic. Between 2021 and 2022 European countries succeeded in fighting the pandemic and at the same time came back to restore constitutional freedoms. However, among 16 European countries analyzed in depth from various authors in a book published by Springer already mentioned (Siegel et al, 2022), the governments of Poland and Hungary instrumentally used the Covid-19 pandemic to declare not only a state of emergency as other EU countries did during the infection’s peak but, overall, to approve decrees that were not related at all with fighting the virus. These new laws were aimed at restricting individual freedom or giving a political advantage to parties’ coalition in power. More specifically, in autumn 2020 demonstrations raised to protest against the Polish Constitutional Court’s decision declaring as unconstitutional provisions allowing abortion in case the fetus was severely deformed or without chances to survive after birth. The Polish government repressed street demonstrations by appealing to laws against the pandemic which prohibited the right to gather in public space (Krajerwski, 2022), while Hungarian government approved some decrees which denied public funds to municipalities led by political parties at opposition at national level; decrees that penalized opposition political parties without any relation with the declaration of state of emergency (Kerezsi et al, 2022). Save for the problematic cases of Poland and Hungary - the first governed by the then prime minister

Mateusz Morawiecki (Right and Justice party) and the second by the still present Victor Orban (Fidesz) - Europe countries tried to find a reasonable balance between two opposite aims: the need to fight the pandemic and temporary restrict constitutional rights.

Comparing democratic and some non-democratic countries as North Korea and China we could see that the latter have followed a different pattern in their response. North Korea does not provide any information on the pandemic. WHO website lacks both figures on the number of infections and deaths, and information on whether the vaccination campaign has begun in the country. As for China, the first country from which the epidemic originated, on 20 December 2019 Zhong Nanshan, a doctor at the Wuhan hospital, launched an alert on WeChat saying that the new virus could spill over on human beings and for this reason Chinese authority accused him to spread false news and obliged him on 3 January 2020 to sign a statement in which he acknowledged his guilt. After coming back to his work at the Wuhan hospital, the doctor contracted the new virus which led to his death on 7 February 2020 (Fang Fang, 2020). What Chinese authority claims, through the chain of command from the central government to the last party bureaucrat on the periphery, is the truth by definition and nobody could put in question. Moreover, China has probably adopted effective methods to combat the pandemic, however without respecting privacy and individual rights. As we have read from some newspapers, those people at risk of being infected were confined in closed places and subjected to continuous surveillance during the quarantine (Santelli, 2020). In addition, from 30 December 2019 to February 2022, China had 164,322 infections and 5,726 deaths. These are very low values for both infections and deaths so raising strong doubts about their reliability. To give some examples, Italy in the same period had 12,323,398 infected and 152,282 deaths; Great Britain 18,499,062 infected and 160,221 deaths; Germany 13,255,989 infected and 120,992 deaths; Spain 10,778,607 infected and 97,710 deaths (WHO, 2022).

The search for a scapegoat

The spreading of the new virus caused in several countries very similar social dynamics addressing tensions on “other” and on minority social groups. This happened regardless of whether the country was democratic or authoritarian. The stigmatization process took two different targets. First, against all those that did not respect the lockdown measures. For instance, in Italy the constant calls by mass media and social networks to respect the new laws during the first lockdown showed a sharing sentiment of social cohesion to face the new danger, but at the same time this quickly turned into forms of disapproval towards all those who did not respect the new rules of behavior. On social networks, images were published depicting groups of people outside in public places for no apparent reason, describing them as transgressors and potential dangers to public health even if some of those who published these messages were themselves in public places for no apparent reason. During the period March-May 2020, the author received several messages to “stay at home” on his WhatsApp. Through conversations with neighbors, he learned about phone calls to the police to report group dinners in condominium gardens; on some occasions he witnessed heated verbal discussions in Florence between bar managers, who had illegally opened in the evening, and passers-by who photographed the group of people in front of the premises. The messages conveyed through social networks and the episodes just mentioned highlight a social prudery

towards principles of "law and order", as well as the willingness of the protagonists to act as controllers of the behavior of others. The new figure of social deviant has affected not only aware transgressors, but also those who, more simply, had no housing: the homeless using benches in gardens and public squares for shelter, migrants who landed on the Italian coasts, foreigners without stable accommodation and people too poor to afford domestic shelter (Raffa, 2020). That sense of belonging to a "community" has been converted into the construction of symbolic boundaries between in-group and out-groups, a social dynamic well known in sociological thought (Merton, 1957; Lemert, 1967; Becker, 1997; Wacquant, 2008).

Secondly, the stigmatization process took the form of hate speech. For instance, in the United States, from the beginning of the pandemic until August 2020, 2,583 events of discrimination and xenophobia against minorities occurred (Bozdağ, 2021). The main target was Asian communities present in Western countries. A phenomenon that was fueled by former US President Donald Trump who for months called the new virus Chinese flu or Kung flu (Gover et al, 2020). The invisible threat of a new virus, the stress caused by the radical change in lifestyle, together with the economic crisis have created the conditions for searching a scapegoat towards which to project one's anxiety (Elias et al, 2021).

In this regard, Amnesty International reports the discrimination occurred in various European countries towards Roma and migrants hosted in reception centers for asylum seekers. Both have been subjected to confinement and surveillance measures disproportionate to the danger of contagion in the country. In other cases, they had to undergo longer forms of confinement than the entire population. This is the case, for example, of the decisions taken by the government of Cyprus in 2020 regarding the refugee camps on the island; the same occurred for migrants gathered in refugee camps in some islands of Greece; in Serbia, the military kept migrants under close surveillance in reception centers for asylum seekers; in Bulgaria, the police authorities implemented selective forms of surveillance and confinement in some neighbors of Sofia mostly populated by Roma people (Amnesty, 2020). A proof of the need to address people's anxieties and fears towards a potential external enemy is provided by similar forms of discrimination that happened in China against African minorities. In May 2020, Guangzhou city authorities began a mandatory testing campaign against the African community, forcing those who tested positive to stay home under electronic surveillance. The climate of social aversion towards them prompted homeowners to evict African tenants and shopkeepers to bar them from entering their shops (HRW, 2020). So, while Chinese emigrants were subject to social intolerance because they were accused of spreading the infection to local population in Western countries, the same forms of intolerance occurred in China, but this time towards other minorities.

Pandemic and social inequalities

The Covid-19 pandemic increased social inequalities worldwide. As reported by a report by World Inequality Lab: "the gap between the very top of the wealth distribution and the rest of the population has widened dramatically during this pandemic. Between 2019 and 2021, the wealth of the top 0.001% grew by 14%, while average global wealth is estimated to have risen by just 1%. At the top of the top, global billionaire wealth increased by more than 50% between 2019 and 2021" (WIL, 2022: 46). In addition, a link between socio-economic status and health has been established for some time. Various reports by international organizations have highlighted that the level of education, income and more generally

economic conditions are related to the probability of getting sick and the reduction of life expectancy (OECD, 2019). This is worth for the largest share of poor people of developing countries, but also for the poorest social stratum within developed ones. For instance, a 2013 European Commission report noted that within the European Union countries: "For the most deprived fifth of men and women, the reported levels [on health problems based on a self-report survey] exceeded 20%. For long-standing illness, the comparable ranges were from around a quarter of both men and women to approximately 40%" (EC, 2013: 8; see also Maciocco, 2018).

More specifically, a correlation emerged between socio-economic status and mortality rates from the pandemic. For instance, in the United States African American and Latin population had a the significantly higher probability of being infected by the new virus compared to the white population: based on data from the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention, African Americans had 2.6 and Latinos 2.8 times more probability of infection than whites; hospitalizations was even higher: 4.7 times more for African Americans and 4.6 times more for Latinos compared to whites, while the age-standardized death rate was also significantly higher for African Americans (5.6 times) and for Latinos (4.3 times) than whites (Scott and Martin, 2021; Sabatello et al, 2021). In addition, we find also great differences among countries. As indicator we can consider the number of intensive care unit (ICU) beds at the initial phase of the pandemic in 2020. The United States had 33 ICUs per 100,000 population while in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh the ratio was 2 per 100,000 inhabitants. In Sub-Saharan African countries, the figures were even lower: in Zambia 0.6 beds per 100,000 inhabitants, Gambia 0.4 per 100,000 inhabitants and Uganda 0.1 per 100,000 inhabitants. In 43 African countries surveyed by the World Inequality Lab, the total number of intensive care beds was around 5 per million population, while in Europe there were 4,000 UCUs per million population (WIL, 2022). Similar differences can be noted regarding vaccines. In mid-February 2022, one year after the introduction of vaccines, the percentage of the population vaccinated in some poorest countries worldwide was very low. In the United States, people who have completed the vaccination cycle correspond to 63% of the population, in England to 71% and in Italy to 77%. On the contrary, almost all sub-Saharan African countries have significantly lower vaccination rates. For instance, as of February 14, 2022, 3.5% of the population of Mali has completed the vaccination cycle, 3.7% of Burkina Faso, 12.6% of Gambia, 6% of Senegal, 2,5% of Cameroon and 14.7% of Ghana (WHO, 2022).

Reflecting on the current capitalistic model

For several centuries, an economic model focused on individual profit with little regard for its social and environmental consequences has worldwide prevailed. Historically this way of thinking can be traced back to Adam Smith's powerful concept of "invisible hand". In his most known book *The Wealth of the Nations*, he claimed: "It is certainly not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our lunch, but from the fact that they look after their own interests" (Smith, 1975: 73). From the author's point of view, this statement tells us how the capitalist market works (or rather how it should work): the safeguard of one's individual interests within a competitive market generates as an aggregate effect greater efficiency and effectiveness of the economic system, thus determining greater economic development for each country. In contrast with Smith's assumption that human beings are naturally prone to barter and do

business, the capitalist system enjoyed the fundamental role of national states which created a national market and judicial institutions facilitating the capitalist system itself, as Karl Marx, Max Weber and Karl Polanyi recognized (Cavalli, 1974; Weber, 2007; Polanyi, 1974). However, from a critical perspective, Adam Smith's book published in 1776, at the dawn of the industrial revolution, did not of course take into consideration the environmental consequences of capitalism.

While the capitalist system was initially fueled thanks to the theories of XVIII and XIX century classical economists, a second relevant conceptual pillar emerged in the XX century from the work of marginalist economists. According to this new perspective, the value of any good does not really depend on the balance between supply and demand. On the contrary, it depends on the consumer's perspective in a specific situation. In this regard, the classical example is that of a very thirsty person willing to pay a large sum to quench their thirst, while their willingness to pay a high price decreases the more that need is satisfied. Following this assumption, the prize of any good corresponds to its own market value. Therefore, everything is for sale and buying regardless of the type of good in question, it be nature, air, water, national currencies or any other kind of good. This mainstream economic standpoint, together with the progressive deregulation of financial capitals - a process which began in the 1970s - led the states to include financial profits into their Gross National Product (Mazzucato, 2022). While classical economists as David Ricardo and Adam Smith considered private incomes from land rents and capital returns as unproductive, the UN System of National Accounts classifies these profits as wealth, similar to any income generated from the production of goods and services.

All said, the current development model depletes natural resources without giving the planet the time it needs to regenerate them. In this regard, we report some data from the Global Footprint Network (2022), a network made up of universities and non-profit organizations, that measures the ecological footprint, that is the relationship between consumed resources and available ones for each state. According to the Global Footprint Website, 149 countries are in the red column, while 49 are in the green one. The red column represents an excessive consumption of resources (food, consumer goods, transportation, services and CO₂ production) which exceeds the amount of natural resources (land, water and other available natural resources) a nation can sustainably produce, while the green column has the opposite meaning. The first country on the red list for excessive consumption of natural resources is Singapore, characterized by a consumption to availability ratio of -10,300% of its natural availability. This indicates that this country is using 103 times more resources than its natural environment can provide; the first European country which appears is Luxemburg with a value of -955%, Italy has a value of -350%, while the last country on the list is Honduras with a value of 0%. In the green list, where most countries belong to the African continent, the first with a positive ratio between consumed and available resources is French Guiana with a value of 3,950%, that means that it consuming almost 40 times less than its natural resources. In the green list, there are also some European countries: Finland (113%), Latvia (39%), Estonia (36%) and Norway (24%), while the last country on the virtuous list is Mali with a value of 1%.

Amidst the increasing consumption of the planet, the Covid-19 pandemic can be considered as a stark warning from the nature and urges us to reflect on new ways of coexistence between humans and the natural environment. However, this was not the first warning. In fact, the last few decades have been marked by the arrival of many new epidemics. Without recalling the Spanish flu that strongly hit the population worldwide between 1918 and 1919,¹ nor referring to HIV deaths of the past century,² since the beginning of the new millennium various epidemics have occurred. In 2002, SARS appeared

in the Chinese province of Guangdong and then spread to Hong Kong and later to Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand and Canada through commercial flights. In 2003, when the WHO declared the epidemic extinct, there were over 8,000 cases of contagion and 774 deaths in the world. In 2009, it was the turn of swine flu which involved various countries and killed a number of people between 120,000 and 200,000. In 2014, Ebola epidemic arose in Guinea and then spread to the neighboring African countries of Sierra Leone and Gambia causing very heavy human and economic costs for the countries involved. In 2015, the Zika epidemic exploded in Brazil, a virus already discovered in Uganda in 1917 which was initially considered unlikely to spread from the tropical zone of Africa to the big cities of South America, Caribbean and the southern United States (Honigsbaum, 2020; Quanmen, 2012; Arias-Maldonado, 2020).

Viruses have always accompanied the existence of mankind. However, the short span of time that has characterized the new forms of contagion in the last two decades has been significantly facilitated by the process of transformation of the environment. The deforestation of woods and the continuous transformation from natural to human environment have increasingly put the population in contact with a variety of pathogens. In addition, the current Covid-19 great spread is related to the increase of interconnected and interdependent world. New viruses spread very easily over long distances from their areas of origin in a matter of hours, due to commercial and tourist contacts worldwide.

As conclusion, it is worth pointing out that the most virtuous countries in the green list according to the Global Network Footprint criteria belong to the category of developing countries, while the countries in the red list are included in the so-called developed ones. Indeed, the latter which mostly located in the Western world area represent, according to the current criteria adopted by UN human development index (Gross National Product per capita, degree of education and life expectancy) the most appealing and richest area of the world. Countries in the red band have development indices, according to current standards, far superior to those in the green band. At the same time, they are those that determine the planet's inability to regenerate the resources that they consume, so much so that 2019 is the year, according to the Global Footprint Network, that marks the ecological deficit on a global scale, i.e. planet earth is no longer able to regenerate the resources consumed by the world population. So, we could rhetorically ask ourselves how long this system of capitalist development can last; a system marked by growing social inequality worldwide and the intensive exploitation of natural resources, leading to the irreparable detriment of the planet and all of humanity.

Footnotes

¹ The new "Spanish" flu was so named because Spain, at that time, was the only country that did not censor data on the number of citizens involved in the infection. The virus originated within large military camps of men destined to fight in the First World War spreading quickly on a global scale and causing the death of about 50 million people (Honigsbaum, 2022).

² In 1982 the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with the acronym AIDS identified a new autoimmune disease that emerged in the homosexual community of Los Angeles (Honigsbaum 2022). According to the Joint UN Program on AIDS, from the moment of its official recognition until 2000, HIV has infected 36 million, causing 21.8 million

deaths (Parker, 2002).

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