
Understanding, Deciding, and Learning: The Key Political Challenges in Times of Pandemic

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The main democratic challenges raised by the COVID-19 crisis can be divided into three groups, according to a time sequence: There are challenges raised before, during, and after the crisis. These different moments in time correspond to questions of understanding, deciding, and learning. The first set of questions concern whether or not we were prepared for a crisis on this scale, and whether we have been able to understand it correctly. At the heart of the crisis, what was in play was our ability to decide and to do so without damaging the values of justice and democracy. After the crisis, the most significant question is what needs to be learned, by whom, and in what way.

The Complexity of a Pandemic

At times of crisis, emergencies put the spotlight on practical people, those who organize, decide, and take on risks that might overwhelm anybody else. However, although theirs is not the most important voice in an emergency, it is important also to listen to those who have a different role, such as interpreting what is happening to us. Even at these times of health prioritization and triage, a theory of the crisis is not meaningless. We need to know and describe the nature of the crisis properly in order to take the best decisions. Let us remember that behind many erroneous decisions there was more ignorance than lack of resolution: Describing the crisis as a war, calling it a foreign virus, confusing the role of experts in a crisis, not to mention our collective lack of attention to reality when it comes to long-term latent issues. If many of our practical errors stem from theoretical failures, then we cannot consider theory as a waste of time, even at times like these.

When we begin to verify the depth of the crisis, we are confronted by questions that reference a theory of society behind the coronavirus:

Everything we have theorized until now about democracy and politics, about the relationship between public and private, the meaning of nations, and the justification for Europe or, even more importantly, about the nature of the world in which we live, requires a new interrogation. It is possible that things will not change as much as we might fear or desire, or it might be that they will change beyond anything we can imagine. In any case, the ability to know is increasingly less about learning a list of glorious achievements from the past and has to do, instead, with learning. In other words, with knowledge about and for the future. In dynamic and volatile civilizations, wisdom based on experience must inevitably begin to be complemented by processes that could be characterized as learning about the future: Prediction, prevention, anticipation, precaution . . .

One of the concerns I have had for years is that we should think in terms of systemic complexity. This requires transforming our institutions to govern complex systems and their dynamics, especially when we are confronting connected risks; in other words, when multiple things can go wrong together. At this point, it is clear that the crisis has not been addressed with this perspective in mind in all of its stages. At the beginning of the crisis, many political actors and analysts viewed the virus as something like a seasonal flu, localized in one region of a distant country, and they advised us that the only thing we needed to fear was the overreaction of panic. They saw numbers of infections and deaths that suggested an issue of limited scope, without realizing that numbers barely allow us to calculate risk in a complex system. The numbers should be understood in the context of a general system that includes the consideration of the ways an epidemic affects health care infrastructure, as well as the reverberation of those impacts. If we do not think systemically, if data points are considered independently, rates of infection and mortality may not seem alarming. Whereas, from a systemic perspective, even small numbers indicate a possible disaster. It is true that the flu kills many people every year, but that is not the comparison. The problem was what would happen if a coronavirus pandemic was added to the seasonal flu at its most critical point and the extent to which that could collapse the entire health system.

The theory of complex systems distinguishes between linear interactions and nonlinear or complex interactions. In the former, we can simply add quantities to predict their combined impact. Since we are handling predictable events that correspond to our expectations and infrastructures, we can make preventive predictions. Nonlinear dynamics, on the other hand,

are those in which one thing is not simply added to another; they generate cascade effects where small changes can lead to massive transformations. The coronavirus falls into this second category. Why?

Our health care systems have a limited capacity: They cannot treat more than a particular number of people at any one time, and specialized units (such as intensive care units (ICUs)) act as bottlenecks. An unexpected viral illness that coincides with the seasonal flu is not simply twice as tragic as the flu, but potentially catastrophic. The characteristics of the coronavirus reveal that patients need especially costly resources. What was relevant to understand the gravity of the pandemic was not its rate of infection but that, if the coronavirus overwhelmed the ICUs, there would then be more deaths from other causes – from heart attacks to traffic accidents to strokes; in other words, from everything that requires an immediate response in order to guarantee survival, but that could not be addressed as it should be if the system was overrun.

The expression “flatten the curve” is an example of systemic thought. The lockdown and distancing that were decreed by the authorities are not due to the risk that each of us runs individually but instead serve to avoid a massive contagion that would overwhelm the hospitals. In order to identify and understand this type of measure, we must think systemically. The indecisiveness of the first moments of the crisis reveals, instead, that our dominant thought tends to be linear, and the way we describe our institutions (warning, management, medical attention, logistics, communication, and so on) is still indebted to a very simple way of thinking that struggles to respond to complex phenomena.

Lessons are never certain, and some are never learned. There will be various types of practical lessons, but also theoretical ones. Among them, I dare to point out that complex thinking is one of the most important for us not to miss. The coronavirus crisis is one example of an event that cannot be understood or even managed without complex thought, but there are many others that require us to engage in a new way of thinking about reality.

Our world is characterized by there being, in addition to gradual or predictable changes, ever greater numbers of what are called discontinuous, sudden, or nonanticipated changes, and these events may modify societies in a catastrophic fashion. A pandemic is a typical example of this type of event. The difficulty with predicting these outbreaks is not only about when they are going to take place but even about their nature. We neither know exactly when and if they will happen nor what is going to happen (or, once it happens, what is going to change afterward). This

territory is unfamiliar for us, even for those who are tasked with managing it, experts and politicians. For that reason, decisions to confront the crisis feel somewhat improvised and experimental. Errors are common, especially when the nature of the problem has not been well identified. Most of the practical errors stem from a lack of knowledge, either because there has not been enough relevant effort to develop such knowledge (the creation of expert knowledge, collective deliberation, prediction and strategy), or because the very nature of these phenomena place them outside the scope of our knowledge.

The final question that unsettles me is the extent to which human beings learn from crises. Paul Nizan said that “when we fall, it’s not always downward,” to note that we can fall up. In other words, we can be ruined by success or be unhappy in prosperity. We can turn the sentence on its head and affirm that human beings do not necessarily learn from failures. Falling is not always followed by rising. Crises only teach those who are prepared to learn, and I am afraid that our societies – despite the repeated warnings we have received from the history of this twenty-first century, so peppered by diverse crises (terrorism, climate change, economic crisis, European disintegration) – have revealed our lack of motivation to understand the teachings of each of these crises and to act consequentially by undertaking the necessary institutional building. I do not mean to suggest that the teachings of history are unequivocal as if there were a type of signs of the times to which we need only surrender. Human learning takes place in confusing environments amid social pluralism, through institutions that channel the controversies in which we live, from science to the political institutions. The big question that should concern us is whether that “intelligence of democracy” (Lindblom)¹ that was capable of giving an answer to the conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will appear when we try to address the global risks of the twenty-first century.

Democracy in Times of Pandemic

We say that this health crisis will put many things to the test and that some of them will never be what they once were, including democracy. An intense debate has already arisen between those who think that this crisis will be a wake-up call that will knock down capitalism and those

¹ Charles Edward Lindblom, *The Intelligence of Democracy: Decision Making Through Mutual Adjustment* (New York: The Free Press, 1965).

who predict a system of control that will consolidate the authoritarian tendencies inscribed in what we call illiberal democracies. The state of emergency has led to the adoption of exceptional measures that can establish dangerous precedents or consolidate preexisting authoritarian turns. This is more likely in a context where limiting liberties is more likely to be accepted by frightened populations. There are already “corona-dictatorships,” such as Hungary, that are taking advantage of this emergency to accentuate its illiberal profiles.

At the same time, the long list of collective failures reaped by our democracies make the promise of effectiveness at the cost of democratic formalities especially tempting. Democracy, which has survived many challenges and changes in format, now finds itself at an unprecedented crossroads. The survival of democracy is conditioned on it being able to act effectively in the current contexts of complexity, juggling the expectations of effectiveness with the requirements of legitimacy.

The debate between philosophers and social scientists about democracy after the coronavirus has had epic, prophetic, and melancholic tones; the only thing it has not had is modesty. There are those who announce a new wave of authoritarianism, such as Giorgio Agamben² or Naomi Klein,³ those who exalt Chinese efficiency and present it as a seductive model (Byung-Chul Han),⁴ or those who warn us about the totalitarian surveillance of biometric monitoring (Yuval Harari).⁵ We also cannot forget Slavoj Žižek,⁶ who promises, once again, that this will be the (definitive) downfall of capitalism. In spite of the maximalist tone and the minimal scientific basis of their predictions, all of these thinkers present us with at least three problems that reappear regularly in democracy: The problem of exception, of effectiveness, and of social change.

Let us begin with the first of these problems, the one that presents democracy with the logic of exception. This issue has been, for a long

² Giorgio Agamben, “The State of Exception Provoked by an Unmotivated Emergency,” *Positions Politics* (February 26, 2020), <http://positionswebsite.org/giorgio-agamben-the-state-of-exception-provoked-by-an-unmotivated-emergency/>.

³ Naomi Klein, “Coronavirus Is the Perfect Disaster for ‘Disaster Capitalism,’” *Donestech* (March 18, 2020), <https://donestech.net/noticia/coronavirus-perfect-disaster-disaster-capitalism>.

⁴ Byung-Chul Han, “Asia is Working with Data and Masks,” *Reading the China Dream* (n. d.), www.readingthechinadream.com/byung-chul-han-coronavirus.html.

⁵ Yuval Noah Harari, “The World After Coronavirus,” *Financial Times* (March 20, 2020), www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York and London: OR Books, 2020).

time, Giorgio Agamben's preferred topic. He is now talking about "the invention of an epidemic" as an excuse to establish a state of exception.⁷ It must be very difficult to survive the success of a metaphor and resist the temptation to apply it to any situation. Contradicting the evidence that if a state of exception is proclaimed at this point it is because there was not one earlier, Agamben maintains that "the epidemic clearly shows that the state of exception has become the normal condition for democracy." Thus, because of this "virocracy," we could finally realize that the logic of exception is the very logic of democracy . . . without exception.

Much would be gained in lucidity if there was a little more study of comparative politics, even at the expense of the impact of some theories. It would be possible to verify that the constitutions of democratic countries allow exceptions at the same time as they limit exceptions to specific topics and specific timeframes. If someone receives exceptional power, it is because that person does not have it before or after that moment. Another philosopher who sometimes prefers a brilliant metaphor to a good argument, Peter Sloterdijk, prophesies "the subjugation of a medical-collectivist dictatorship," in such a way that "the Western system will reveal itself to be as authoritarian as the Chinese system."⁸ Neither Agamben nor Sloterdijk seems to have realized that the emergencies decreed by the European governments are conditioned on the fight against COVID-19, limited in time, and do not establish new crimes, three conditions lacking from the exceptionalism decreed by the government of Hungary. I compare, therefore I think.

States of exception do not suspend democracy or its deliberative and polemic dimension. Pluralism continues intact and normal social disagreement continues to exist, even if its expression is conditioned to facilitate the main objective of the health emergency. Any limitation on freedom is always regrettable and can only be justified as a temporary measure. Carl Schmitt, whom everyone now seems to have canonized, was a decisionist, but few people realize that understanding politics as a decision implies recognizing that it is exercised in a context of contingency, without overwhelming reasons, not even amid the emergencies of exception. Contingency means that decisions are debatable even if the

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, "The Invention of an Epidemic," *The European Journal of Psychoanalysis* (February 26, 2020), www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/.

⁸ Josef Joffe, "Die Corona-Krise offenbart auch eine Krise der Meinungsmacher: Ihnen fällt nicht allzu viel Kluges ein," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (April 11, 2020), www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/die-corona-krise-ist-auch-eine-krise-der-intellektuellen-ld.1551336?reduced=true.

conditions that implicitly regulate the way of governing and the way of being in opposition have been modified.

Any measure presented as if there were no alternative and as if it was scientifically unquestionable would be unacceptable. Virologists have powerful arguments, of course, but when politicians take decisions upon the basis of their advice, they are making politics. It is a particular exercise of politics, needless to say, but that does not preclude it from having that element of contingency that also characterizes politics in exceptional circumstances.

There are different arguments about how to confront this crisis, particularly regarding the balance to be made between the health emergency and the economic costs resulting from the measures necessary to address that emergency. Being in a state of emergency does not mean renouncing the exercise of reason and depriving oneself of the benefits of composed and trustworthy deliberation, and neither does it require the relinquishing of political pluralism, as the necessary coordination between institutions does not imply submission to that which is decreed by a single chain of command. Democracy, even at times of alarm, needs contradiction and demands justification. Pluralism is not only a normative demand but also a principle of rationality: A democracy owes its critics as much as it owes those who govern. If a context of minimal trust is generated, distributed knowledge and decentralized power are not an impediment for taking decisions but are procedures to minimizing errors. Emergency situations do not suspend pluralism but only its competitive dimension. It would be an error if the urgencies of the moment would lead us to give away pluralism and checks and balance. At moments like this, anyone who confuses having control with being right may always be tempted to forget that distinction. Another reason to constantly remember it.

Democracies were not created for states of exception but for normality. A democratic society would not support even the mere suspicion that rights will not return. This explains – and to a certain extent excuses – the reticence of governments to adopt drastic measures at the beginning of crises. Citizens are reluctant to accept limitations on their liberties when the seriousness of the situation is not obvious.

The decisive question is how long the justification for the exceptional measures lasts. A constitutional democracy institutionalizes distrust toward any extension of the prerogatives of power; we know from historical memory that governments tend to be irresistibly tempted to hold onto it. It is always easier to concede new powers to those who are

responsible for our security than to take them back. The experience of the struggle against terrorism has taught us much in this regard. The very history of the word “quarantine” reveals in its origins an example of that type of extension of power. When the plague was spreading through Europe in 1348, the authorities in Venice closed the city port to ships coming from infected areas, and they forced travelers into thirty days of isolation . . . which they then extended to forty (*quaranta* in Italian). One of the characteristics of democracies is that they handle any delegation of power carefully and condition any granting of exceptional power to a plan, objectives, and a timeframe to return to normality.

The second problem of democracies seems to be their effectiveness at resolving urgent problems, when time and authority are dramatically limited resources. Compared with our slow pace when it comes to taking decisions, the weakness of our social control, and our reluctance to invade the privacy of people, totalitarian systems seem better equipped for that type of situation. And given that turmoil and crises are going to be the new normal, the temptation to bypass or reduce democratic “formalisms” and rights becomes very powerful.

This relation between authority and effectiveness is at the heart of both the seduction and the fear of China. I find Fukuyama’s judgment⁹ more accurate than Harari’s or Han’s: Democratic governments are often plagued by inefficiencies, but it is not true that these issues stem from having to respect the popular will and legal procedures. Neither is it the case that autocracies are a model of efficiency.

We must keep in mind that debate on this topic is affected by a battle to define reputations amid a gigantic manipulation of information. The authority of the Chinese government is not a model for anything. Other countries and localities have realized lockdowns without sacrificing democratic values. In China, radical isolation, enforced through repression and censorship, was ruthless. It may be the case that the West was slow to realize the cruelty that was taking place in the enclosed space of Wuhan and, in general, to know the true data about the pandemic in China.

This is the true heart of the question: The relationship between power and information. Authoritarian regimes have a problem with information in both directions, toward the outside and toward the inside. The first of these is obvious, and we are all paying the price for it. It would have been

⁹ “Francis Fukuyama on Coronavirus and the Crisis of Trust,” *Financial Times*, podcast (April 16, 2020), www.ft.com/content/a42ba47c-2433-410f-8c5d-1753d4728570.

better if they had supplied true information at the beginning rather than masks later on. At some point, we will have to activate the limited global procedures to bring demands regarding the causes and extension of the pandemic.

Their second problem with information is internal, and reveals that repressing information is not a sign of strength but a foreshadowing of future weakness. The authoritarianism of the regime, the absence of freedom of expression, and obstacles to the circulation of information create the conditions to ensure that mistakes will be made when it comes to managing the crisis. It also ensures that less will be learned and, as consequence, new crises will be more likely. Inherent dysfunctions in the Chinese Leninist system impede the efficient circulation of information among local administrative bodies and the central government. The controls that the central government imposed on local administrations mean that the only information reaching Beijing is either good news or well-disguised bad news. This is why the measures against the epidemic have been chaotic and counterproductive, especially when the police in Wuhan preferred to arrest and repress doctors who had issued alerts rather than listening to warnings and guarding against the epidemic risk.

When I talk about the free flow of information, I am not referring to the mere flow of data (which the regime could compensate with the totalitarian monitorization of its systems of data collection and intelligent processing) but to the type of quality information that gives us real insight into a country's situation so that we can make accurate decisions. This is information that is only generated in places – such as consolidated democracies – where two fundamental values are respected: Tolerance for criticism and trust. A regime can have all the information that big data can provide and still have bad information. If there's no scrutiny of such information and no trust from those that can provide information, you will never obtain good information. We should remember that the Chinese authorities adopted spectacular measures only when the political regime's structural dysfunctions became a true threat to its own survival. As Marta Peirano has reminded us, totalitarian efficiency, if such a thing exists, never has the protection of the citizens as an objective but the survival of the regime.¹⁰

¹⁰ Marta Peirano, "El coronavirus ha sido la tormenta perfecta para el control social," *Publico* (June 8, 2020), www.publico.es/entrevistas/marta-peirano-coronavirus-control-social-nuevas-tecnologias-aplicaciones-manifestaciones-derechos.html.

Democratic systems would distance us from the temptation of totalitarianism in the name of efficiency if we placed a higher value on the results without compromising the procedures. Efficiency is not a value that is on the upswing in our democracies, especially on the left, if we compare it with the prestige of values such as equality or participation. As long as we are still failing on so many issues, we should not be surprised that a large part of society is beginning to believe that these failures are caused by democratic formalities that we could do without. Instead, they should be viewing them as the reason behind many of our successes and why our errors are not even larger.

Democracies have a third serious challenge, regarding the intentional production of social transformations, whether they are called reforms or transitions. We live in democracies where little changes. It is this that explains why, when a catastrophe arrives, those who were least hopeful about the possibility of changing society through ordinary political will end up being the most hopeful that nature will put things right.

Now that there is no longer reform or revolution, all bets focus on something akin to an unexpected transformational change, a catastrophe, an accident of history in the form of a health or environmental crisis, that would fortunately turn us in the right direction. It is no longer only a question of hope disconnected from any sense of reality, but a curious expectation about the way we will move toward the new desired situation – the great transformational dream that failure will mechanically produce its opposite. It is a sacrificial vision of political history that has nothing to do with how change happens and should happen in democracies. In a democracy, change is simultaneously conflictive and agreed upon, between gradual and brusque, but always within the parameters of the intentionality of the actors. Those who encourage us to look at these natural, sudden events as the true moments of political change seem to be telling the natural history of plagues and not history as led by human beings.

Catastrophes provide evidence of the damage, but not of the cure. The idea that sacrifice leads to emancipation is as incredible as insisting that this commotion is going to benefit those who most need it. This expectation contains at least two assumptions that are difficult to believe: That negative events necessarily produce positive results, and that this new positivity is going to be evenly distributed. Ruins do not necessarily bring about the new order, and change can be for the worse. Times of crisis can lead to certain forms of destabilization that represent an opportunity for authoritarianisms and illiberal populisms.

Our social and political reality has very little to do with the type of changes from other time periods, the time of classic revolutions, the collapse of regimes or civilizations, uprisings, or coups. Liberal democracies are political spaces in which the expectations for change are balanced – at times, poorly balanced – by the resistance to change and where the will for transformation is channeled in an incremental fashion. There is no “natural” event that is going to save us from the work of transformation. This is not an argument against change, because there is nothing less transformative than the nostalgia for something completely other.

If the slow democratic learning process has taught us anything, it is that we should not exonerate ourselves from the guarantees and limitations that democracy has imposed to resist changes that can be for the worse. And the most important part of it, even at exceptional times, is to protect pluralism. This regards both measures taken to overcome the crisis and the transition we should undergo afterward. Of course, there are some ways out of this crisis that seem more reasonable than others, and even some decisions that verge on the indisputable. But we should not forget that there is a plurality of opinions about what is desirable and that the only way to decide which direction is best for the emphatic change that is being proclaimed everywhere is democratic debate. Even when something collapses it is not always clear what should be replaced, and democratic debate should be put into motion whenever there is something that is not fully clear. No one should be excluded from that debate, not even the conservative skeptics, if nothing else because there are certain things that should be maintained, and there is an optimism that results from assuring people that most things will continue on as they have been.

Karl Marx’s argument that “Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve”¹¹ has often been monopolized by those who confuse humanity with a concrete “us” (a group, some experts, a political party, an ideology), which is put forward as particularly capable of resolving those problems. If there is any solution to this, it will be resolved by humanity as a whole, not by those who want to flaunt the privilege of representing them.

Learning from the Crisis

A large biological crisis in the age of AI amid debates about transhumanism forces us to try to protect our corporeal condition. Ecological

¹¹ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), Preface.

reflection has already taught us that we cannot understand each other without any type of inclusion in a natural context. This crisis places even more emphasis on our common fragility and the limits to our self-sufficiency; it reveals our dependence both on other human beings and regarding the nonhuman world.

The problem is that we have made ourselves more vulnerable to global risks without developing the corresponding protection procedures. Things that protected us (distance, the intervention of the state, predicting the future, classical defense procedures) have been weakened for different reasons and now barely afford us sufficient protection. The organizations that seem to return (like the state) no longer effectively protect us, and the ones to which we could appeal (such as the EU) do not sufficiently protect us from these risks because they were not designed for it.

It is within this context that we need to think about new measures for protection. For the moment, the EU's weak ability to respond to such crises and the states' inability to collectively coordinate a continental response have favored withdrawal to the national borders. The closing of borders would have been unnecessary had there been a coordinated response to the crisis. But additionally, the lockdown cannot be a permanent solution: It generates distrust, paralyzes the economy, and will affect us personally and socially. The question is how to protect people when the old instruments have lost much of their effectiveness. How do we do it without compromising liberties? Without simply offering placebos? And how to do it at a time when authoritarianism is gaining adherents?

In the face of these challenges, we should begin by recognizing that we do not know what to do in a crisis with these characteristics. In fact, we do not even know how to describe it. It feels like those who are going to learn the least from this crisis are the ones who already think they understand everything.

I do not mean to suggest that we have not learned anything from previous crises. Today something like the invasion of Iraq would be unthinkable. There continue to be advances, even if they are insufficient, in our policies against climate change. Europe is now better prepared to face and address asymmetric economic shocks. The Basel Accords have given us greater financial stability than we had at the end of the Bretton Woods system. But the happy determinism with which some claim that crises are opportunities is contradicted by the fact that the learning processes we undertake are unbearably slow and certainly insufficient.

And our analysis is not carried out with the profundity required by the seriousness and depth of the societal problems exposed by this century's crises. What is most revealing, in this regard, is that these crises continue to surprise us. The present works like a gigantic distraction – we focus obsessive attention on that which is immediate, the centrality of the competitive element in our democracies, our scant capacity for strategy and prediction. It may end up being easier to find a vaccine than to learn from a crisis like this one.

The self-help books repeat that we should not waste a good crisis, which are moments of opportunity. All the rhetoric of European integration has been understood as a succession of responses to its continual crises. In fact, paradoxically, the success of European integration seems to be constructed on the foundations of crises. These, however, are moments of change for the same reasons that they can be moments of preservation or regression. Our choice to move forward or backward or stay in place is not taught by any book but depends on the decisions we make.

How can we explain the fact that, even though the climate crisis is more serious than the coronavirus pandemic, it is the latter that makes us modify our conduct more extensively, that we accept the lockdown better than the modification of our consumption to halt climate change, that states more easily and quickly come to an agreement regarding a virus than in the rounds of negotiations about the climate crisis? The answer has to do with the fact that one crisis feels hypothetical and distant to us, while the other is immediate. The more distant, in time or space, we feel the consequences of changing or not our behavior will be, the less likely we are to modify it. This different reaction tells us a lot about the type of society we have constructed, a society that functions on the basis of incentives and pressures, that pays attention to that which is urgent, that which makes noise and is more visible, but does not pay attention to changes that are latent and silent, even though they can be much more decisive than the immediate dangers. The pandemic crisis threatens older people more than the young, while the climate crisis puts young people more at risk; this is another reason that explains the greater reaction in an older society, where defending the interests of the young has less electoral benefits than paying attention to the interests of those who are older.

Nothing assures us that this crisis will lead to a learning process. One world could come to an end, and we could continue to think of it with the categories from another time and treat it as if nothing had changed. The human species owes its survival to an intelligence that is adaptive,

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compatible with the fact that, in many aspects, we continue to cling instinctively to what has worked until now. In that case, we could wander about like zombies amid serious warnings that we would continue not to take seriously enough. It will be as if humans' natural situation was distraction, and as if society were the place where that enormous collective distraction is carried out.

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