



# The future after a pandemic and the ethics of responsibility

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## Abstract

What happens during an emergency situation? And which ideas about the future stem from these events? The COVID-19 pandemic offers the opportunity to reflect on human actions occurring with a dimension of solidarity only in situations of emergency. We will start from Sorokin's intuition, which can be summarized in the statement: *The future of humanity is in the hands of humanity itself*. We will assume that collective damage requires collective strategies, reinforcing and renovating networks in the community. To highlight the necessary changes to turn individual and collective dynamics towards resilience, we follow with the consideration that it is necessary to rediscover the positive values of individuals. This, in turn, leads to further reflection on the problems of choice and the ethics of responsibility that permits individuals to embrace the concept of "common good", something that they experience as members of a community and that they can only pursue from the standpoint of solidarity. The latter, indeed, is what gives meaning to human action and the very development of humankind.

**Keywords** Future · Pandemic · Humanity · Ethics of responsibility · Individuals

A world free from disasters is not conceivable. However, we can imagine a world in which their negative consequences are curtailed or even avoided. To better understand the following reasoning, I must first clarify one important aspect related to the definition of "disaster". As in Perry, "the problem of 'what is a disaster' will never be solved by more fieldwork" (Perry 2007, p. 14) and since this is not the focus of this paper, specific literature can serve this aim (Rodríguez et al. 2007) and deepen the open debate on this matter. In this paper, I simply use disasters (in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic) as a pretext to reflect on the ways in which individuals deal with the consequences of such events, and I only give a few elements of discussion about this concept. The category "disasters", therefore, must be considered a virtual

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one as it encompasses not only those defined according to common sense (van Holt-hoon and Olson 1987) but also all those phenomena involving both physical effects and social definitions of human damage and social disorders (Kreps 2001). Beyond the disagreements among scholars on which events should and/or can fall into this category (Quarantelli 1998), the effects of such phenomena—on thought, behaviour, social organization, and the socio-cultural life of individuals—are the same, i.e. they disrupt the normal flow of individual and collective daily life. The chain of disasters in recent decades have shown that vulnerability (Phillips et al. 2010) is increasing for both individual and natural transformations—not least in the COVID-19 pandemic (De Marchi 2020), the case examined in this article. This makes it necessary to provide prevention and emergency response actions at local, national, and international level that promote societal resilience (Bonanno et al. 2006; Manyena 2006; Norris et al. 2008). The effects of disasters are not identical for all individuals and groups, not only because of the latter's direct or indirect involvement but also because of the types of calamities in which they are involved and how individuals and communities respond to them. Reactions to disasters depend on individual and societal ability or inability (inherent in social interactions, institutions, and cultural value systems) to resist their negative effects (social vulnerability). It is because of the characteristics of catastrophes and the different individual and collective responses that the study of disasters and their related interventions must be based on an integrated approach (Lebel et al. 2006). For these reasons, we will start from the assumption that collective damage requires collective strategies (Mangone and Zyuzev 2020). As Sorokin argued, the future of humanity and its development are in the hands of humanity itself (1958): neither law nor education, nor religion or the economy, or science can be enough for this task. It is assigned to the whole of humankind and therefore to its communities. The latter can exist only if they have specific characteristics: "A peaceful, harmonious, and creative society can exist only when its members possess at least a minimum of love, sympathy, and compassion ensuring mutual aid, co-operation, and fair treatment. Under these conditions, its members are united in one collective 'we' in which the joys and sorrows of one member are shared by others" (Sorokin 1948, p. 57). Acting on the community means operating on multiple levels (individual, family, institutional and social), and a normalization process needs reinforcing the existing networks and structures, re-establishing the previous ones, and creating new ones. But what happens in a situation of emergency? What changes occur—or must be promoted—so that individual and collective dynamics turn towards resilience?

Sociological reflection highlights that the daily experiences of individuals in emergency situations can either be perceived in their continuous unfolding or be contemplated and ruminated upon afterwards. In the first case, the occurrences are perceived as they flow within the unity of the individual experience and situation; in the second case, one reflects on them after they have been lived. In the former scenario, personal history coincides with the experience and cannot be separated from it; for disasters, there is a "before" and an "after" (Van de Eynde and Veno 1999). In the latter, instead, reflecting on past actions means that they are considered disconnected from personal (survivors of a disaster). In the case of the pandemic caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 (better known simply as coronavirus), there

was a sort of “generation gap” created by the virus. At the zenith of the world emergency (April 2020), the death toll surpassed 150,000 victims, mainly elderly (mostly over 65 years old, in Italy in the same period the 79 average was years old on). Consequently, the time variable is no longer a unitary idea and becoming aware of this means that individual actions and interactions are guided by the temporal and spatial dimension (social and historical context).

In the case of disasters, the temporal dimension and in particular the idea of the “after”, the future, the life of the survivor is of considerable importance and this neither relates to the typology of disaster nor to its classification and definition. After a disaster that caused widespread destruction, as in the case of the countless victims of an epidemic, the question that everyone asks is: is there a future?

Some years ago, the anthropologist Marc Augé, published a pamphlet entitled *Où est passé l'avenir ?* (2008), in which he asked what had happened to the future, highlighting its main paradoxes. In this case, the question had no reference to disasters, trying instead to find an answer to the prevailing idea of contemporary society living on immanence. Following this construct, I start from the paradox that individuals exist in a period (a time) following their birth and preceding their death (finite and infinite). Our arrival point is the idea that, despite their finitude, individuals can still imagine a future and act—or not—accordingly even after having endured a disaster and the related grieving.

Time is a polysemic concept and is inseparable from individual actions. And yet it has long been considered an unproblematic aspect of everyday life (Adam 1995). The scientific traditions that addressed time are, on the one hand, philosophy, with the idea of the linear or circular time (individual times), and, on the other hand, the physical and natural sciences. Between these two lies the sociological research, that tried to mediate between the minuteness of the first and the magnitude of the second (Ricoeur 1991) by focusing on “social or collective time”, which is linked to all aspects of everyday life (psychological, social and cultural ones). However, a social reading of time in a global society requires the analysis of temporal cultures.

There are different social models and practices linked to time. According to philosophical tradition, there is a chronological time (Chrónos), consisting of a measurable triad that represents its quantitative aspect: past (yesterday), present (today) and future (tomorrow). In the case of disasters, this conception is reduced almost and exclusively to the present. In the short term, individuals try first and foremost to overcome the social and institutional emergency determined by the disaster as soon as possible and then to activate actions of the community aimed at re-constructing its (and their) future (Mangone 2020). Uncertainty in the biographies of individuals who have escaped a disaster leads them to avoid designing a long-term project, thus it brings to a contraction in the “duration” of their time horizons, which makes individuals to focus on the present. Kairós (time of action) consists instead in the opportunity that can happen at any given time, the so-called “right time, opportune time, time for”.

If Chrónos represents the “time of truth” and the quantitative dimension (measurability and duration), Kairós represents the qualitative dimension of time, related to the search for meaning in human action (“time of action”). The fragmentation and temporal acceleration marking contemporary society are starkly evident in the case

of disasters. It entails the need to re-determine the relationship between biographical and social times in a community whose imminence is to escape the emergency, which flattens everything out onto the present. It follows that the experience of time not only differs between individuals as well as societies in everyday activities but is further different for those who survived a disastrous event.

If one can imagine a future dimension of time by individuals who survived a disaster, these two models of temporal cultures (Chrónos and Kairós) merge. This because Chrónos refers to the present, to a “forced culture of immanence”, which in turn brings individuals back to the idea of Kairós that bound them to fate. While it is true that individual actions geared towards the future are based on instrumental rationality, they also often succumb to fatalism. Beyond common aspects such as its measurement, the experience of time (temporal cultures) in everyday life affect individuals differently because they are a symbolic mediation between society and individual subjectivity, outlining new time horizons on which to base the decisions for future projects.

Drawing our conclusions, we can state that: (a) in a social context that has faced a disaster and is still enduring its effects, the dimension of time should be reordered in its cultures (Chrónos and Kairós) in relation to the disrupted everyday social life (e.g. the many irresponsible individuals not complying with the stay-at-home orders in the case of COVID-19). The relevant aspects of a process of this magnitude mainly involve the social and individual dimensions—see Beck (1986) when he underlines the aspects of individualisation of human life. On the one hand, there is a dissolution of pre-established forms of social life and, on the other, new institutional claims, controls and constraints for individuals; (b) individuals tend—for their preservation and reproduction—to look for ways to reduce the uncertainty that flattens the dimension of time to the present, shortening the “temporal horizons”. Social relations include both relations with the other and with the institutions; the COVID-19 pandemic shows that individuals are conditioned by the perception of the situation they are facing. Beck also argues that what can be considered risky (behaviours, practices, environments, etc.) depends on “relations of definitions”. Every society, in a given era, establishes the hierarchy of risks, but the perceptions underpinning the construction of said hierarchy not always correspond to objectively measurable risks, nor they represent individual decisions. This is true because the attention of the community has shifted towards quality-of-life-related needs, due to both the influence of the mass media and the general increase in well-being (Mangone 2017). There is a shift from an approach reducing risk to mere economic aspects to one focused on the overall interactions between all relevant variables (economic, social, and cultural). Actions are deflected from rational choice and instead oriented towards solidarity-based efforts. Therefore, if these are the conditions of the individual trying to escape the emergency, the theory of rational choice does not apply to the dynamics connected to “future time”. Rather, they could embrace a model of choice closer to that of bounded rationality (Simon 1983). The bounded rationality model holds the following: (a) individual decisions do not consider the whole of human life but only limited areas of it; (b) when individuals make a choice, even a crucial one, they do not consider future scenarios but look at the present and at most to possible perspectives; (c) the very fact of seeking the solution to a problem,

causes the individual to focus on some aspects of her life rather than others; (d) most of the individual's efforts in a choice is absorbed by frantically collecting information and facts about the decision in question (problem of knowledge).

In the bounded rationality model, individuals do not project themselves in time indefinitely (the future time horizon may be longer or shorter). The everyday environment of an individual experiencing a health-related emergency situation (as in the case of COVID-19) or who survived a disaster is divided into separate and distinct problems. To apply the bounded rationality model, the individual needs to be able to focus his or her attention to the factors that deserve it from time to time. The ability to acquire knowledge on the surrounding situations and the environment is necessary both to facilitate the creation of alternatives and to estimate the possible consequences, allowing the individual to preserve the image of that part of the world involved in her decisions. The individual, then, sets her decisions (and her actions) based on that image. Her choices should not aim at her personal well-being but at that of every individual in the community.

Whatever their type or origin, disasters face humanity with a dilemma: “to continue its predatory policies of individual and tribal selfishness that lead it to its inevitable doom, or to embark upon the policies of universal solidarity that brings humanity to the aspired for heaven on the earth. It is up to every one of us which of the two roads we prefer to choose” (Sorokin 1954, p. 489).

The ethics of responsibility is neither objectivism nor hyper-subjectivism. Instead, it means looking for intersubjective and intercultural values that help the dialogue between different positions by orienting them towards the collective good. “An imperative responding to the new type of human action and addressed to the new type of agency that operates it might run thus ‘Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life’; or expressed negatively: ‘Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life’; or simply: ‘Do not compromise the conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on earth’; or, again turned positive: ‘In your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will’” (Jonas 1984, p. 11). All individuals, irrespective of their religious beliefs and political affiliation, can follow ethics of responsibility that guarantee the collective good. The real problem lies in the fact that any moral rule has its exceptions, and this determines the need to identify the dominant principle of behaviour among the conflicting ones. A new contrast thus emerges between the Kantian principle of “never to use other people merely as means to an end, but always *also* as ends”, and the utilitarian idea spurring people to always choose “actions that maximize their utility and happiness”. Weber has well interpreted this conflict (1919): a plurality of values arises in the form of dualism between the ethics of moral convictions (*Gesinnungsethik*—also called of intentions or principles), and the ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*). The former refers to absolute principles, which are adopted irrespectively of their repercussions (e.g. religious ethics); the latter, instead, to all those cases paying attention to the relation between means and ends and the ramifications of the action.

The ethics of responsibility it is a burden to individuals, together with the consequences of their actions—towards themselves and others, for good and evil.

This holds even in their professional activity, and beyond temporal and spatial proximity. In discussing the link between material interests (economy) and ideal interests and beliefs (religion), Weber refers to the Protestant Reformation by developing the idea of *Beruf* (1904–1905), a term introduced in Luther’s German translation of the Bible. The idea of *Beruf*—both “vocation” and “work” in German—expresses the central dogma of all Protestant churches. Daily work (i.e. carefully fulfilling the duties of one’s profession/vocation) is considered the only way to be acceptable to God, as the division of labour has forced every individual to work for others.

If I ignore law-related aspects, I can define the issues on the construction of a new humanity in terms of negotiation between individual freedoms and responsible freedoms. This, however, presupposes the correct application of vertical subsidiarity (between institutions) and horizontal subsidiarity (between institutions and civil society—individual and collective subjects), which preserves and strengthens the role of the institutions (which are not exempt from direct duties or responsibilities). The latter must guarantee the principles of solidarity among citizens, supporting civil society and connecting the exercise of individual and collective responsibilities and, at the same time, must adequately supervise the system, guaranteeing impartiality and completeness of the network of interventions and services in the territory (Blanchet et al. 2017). I should point out that, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, this role was markedly disregarded. Individuals had to manage the emergency on their own, while the government called for solidarity.

Beyond the lack of responsibility by the institutions (of which the reduced space of the contribution does not allow further investigation), individuals produce meaningful interactions tied to their counterparts in a context of norms, values, and meanings. After a disaster, including pandemics, the future can exist if they apply the ethics of responsibility in their actions. This configures the construction of a new humanity (or the re-construction of the existing one) in terms of negotiation between individual freedoms and responsible freedoms. In this negotiation, the incentives towards self-realization cannot be conceived outside the commitment to the other and the community (broadly understood). If I consider the individual as a *social animal*—i.e. a subject linked to her fellow human beings in a context of norms, values, and meanings and produces meaningful interactions—I can state that the “ethics of responsibility” allows individuals to recognize themselves in the concept of “common good” something that they experience as members of a community and that they can only pursue from the standpoint of solidarity. The latter is indeed what gives meaning to human action and the very development of humankind.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

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