

Interview from the Series "Science in an Emergency."

It Doesn't Work Through the Web!

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Let me first declare that this form of communication [the online interview – editor's note] is unfamiliar to me, to put it mildly. But I accepted the invitation of Sofia University's Cultural Centre, which sent out a set of topics, and I will lay out a few thoughts on some of them.

I will not comment on the question of whether the phenomenon triggered by the coronavirus is primarily a health and medical one – or much more political, economic, financial, social, etc. Not because I have no opinion. However, I'd like to put a different emphasis – that the virus has laid bare and made visible a great crisis, which I would define as a crisis of the anthropological, a crisis of the human.

Humans have made easy work of regarding themselves as a piece of living flesh. First and foremost, if not entirely. Suppose we talk about ideals – a bit of immortal living flesh. The easy waiving of freedoms, of rights, of what makes the human being human, is obvious. A fear that masquerades as a concrete fear, but is rather academic – the fear of one's helplessness.

This situation is the consequence of something we must appreciate as a historical grace: a long, 75-year peace, and growing prosperity. This, in turn, leads to a loss of social and historical immunity. The immortality I mentioned is only thought of as a corporeal one. My great colleague Kent Emery wrote to me on Easter: "You know, a large part of the US population is convinced that the soul dies along with the body." I replied: "You know, part of the Bulgarian population is not certain it has a soul." This is the crisis I am talking about here.

When you are in such a crisis mode, and, I repeat, within a relatively high level of prosperity, you are pivoting to the idea of "and so on," or "more of the same." This is interlaced with a progressivist scientific superstition, as Karl Jaspers calls it, a superstitious belief in science, which is anyway going to do away with all our issues, and put to rest all our hardships. And it will do it faster and better than nature. In fact, I just articulated the definition of magic: like nature, but quicker and better.

It is only natural for this superstition to overspill as a mighty trust in fortune-tellers and sorcerers, in great leaders, fitness instructors and all sundry figures of this kind. All this is taking place through the media and social networks. Society began to be supervised through the media – in a horizontal way. In this kind of situation, it makes sense that all sorts of slick shamans and smart asses have gained a lot of ground.

By the way, the media promotion of science is a relatively new phenomenon. At least in the German press, scientific discovery was first covered in a newspaper in 1895. This was Röntgen's discovery or the so-called X-rays. Curiously, the name of the discoverer was not mentioned in that short report. The first big-time scientist – besides, a researcher in the natural sciences – to gain popularity through the media, as is well known, was Albert Einstein.

And what happened now? The current scare, a scare of something, of a pandemic that we should not deny, of a global health threat that shows a complete disregard for wealth, education or social status, but instead shoots blindly, has brought to the fore the real experts, a bunch of dedicated scientists. Because the term 'emergency science' is being bandied about here – there is no such thing. Emergency science is a political tool. It sets off in situations like the current one, but I would not call it science in the proper sense.

The importance of medical specialists, of expert physicists, expert biologists, expert chemists, etc. is growing in times like these while they are seeking salvation, so to speak, from this infection. Again – these are the body experts, the organic system experts. But I'll try to put it this way: God forbid that people in my area of expertise start gaining media ground! Because the implication would be that we are not in the middle of, but rather in the aftermath of a particularly severe anthropological crisis, in the wake of an anthropological collapse.

The twentieth century saw three such periods: the aftermath of WW1, the aftermath of WW2, with outstanding persistence during the first four or five years, and (to a lesser extent) - the period from the late 1960s through the early 1970s. Remarkably, the changes of the late 1980s failed to trigger such a quake – and to lend such a high profile to people in my area of expertise.

Of course, the place of real science is not in the media at all. It is in the specialized institutions, in the specialized scientific dialogue. Dialogue among specialists, those few, always a few. In every science, there is a small group, a few dozen people in the world, that could be defined this way.

And now let's say something about universities against the backdrop of this situation. Historians are well aware that the universities established at the end of the 12th and throughout the 13th century were swept away by the plague epidemic in the middle of the 14th century, from which they never managed to recover. It was a systemic collapse. Indeed, universities have trudged on through the centuries, losing an increasing amount of what we could call their identity and purpose.

It so happened that during the early 19th-century, in 1809, new views on education came to the fore. That took place in Prussia, in Berlin. The initiator of this reform, but far from being its only engine, was Wilhelm von Humboldt. We celebrate Humboldt as the founder of Humboldt University, and rightly so, but that's not the end-all of his education reform. Humboldt unfolded a plan for the three levels of education - primary school, secondary school and, finally, tertiary education. At each of these levels, with the appropriate intensity, the criteria are: teaching, always hand-in-hand with research, freedom of research, personal exchange of ideas among researchers and between researchers and their trainees. This is what academic forums are about: we write our papers to meet face to face and discuss the latest issues facing our sciences. This applies to every science, not just to ours.

Never mind the standard teacher-student work. For a talented student working with a specific instructor or mentor, this instructor is also a counsellor, a confessor, the one that gives courage. This is a very personal job, and it is not done on social networks and the web. When I talk about all this, I must say that it is really about top-class science, about highly qualified researchers and teachers. Prominent universities with household names are significant not because they have that many square meters per student and a computer and a half per capita, but because they boast extremely competent faculty, powerful in both thought and character. I think this is a grave deficit in our education system, and we are well-advised to commit some thinking to it. On top of that, we should add the interaction, the synergy, the productive competition, if you will, among talented students.

This whole process is not done online. The illusion that we can teach and develop science with the means of modern media is a clear signal of the crisis today's university education is going through, of its failure foretold. The way things are going will make us dream of a new Humboldt. And be hopeful he doesn't emerge centuries away from now.

I wish you good health, intensive spirituality, and a cheerful spirit!