

The Weight of Life

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In a rush to minimise the recession following Covid-19, some hold their economies dearer than the saving of lives. But prosperity isn't the indefinite depletion of bodies and resources. It is through the satisfaction of basic needs that we will restore the dignity of all. What follows is a detailed reflection by Achille Mbembe on what the global pandemic means for the future of societies in Africa.

Covid-19 has confirmed certain intuitions that have been raised many times, although always ignored, over the course of the last half-century. The first concerns the status and position of the human species within the vastness of the universe. We are not the only inhabitants of Earth, nor are we set above other beings. We are crisscrossed by fundamental interactions with microbes and viruses and all sorts of vegetal, mineral and organic forces. More accurately, we are partly composed of these other beings. But they also decompose and recompose us. They make and unmake us, starting with our bodies, our environments and our ways of living.

The pandemic has revealed not just the complexity and fragility of the structure and content of human civilisations, but the vulnerability of life itself, in all its anarchy and diversity. This fundamental vulnerability is the very essence of humanity. But it is shared, to varying degrees, by every creature on this planet – a planet that powerful forces threaten to render inhospitable, if not uninhabitable, to the majority of living things.

A planetary chain

But the pandemic has also laid bare the disorder, violence and injustice that structure the world. Despite scattered progress, the “perpetual peace” that Immanuel Kant hoped for remains a mirage for most people. Now as ever, the sovereignty and independence of countless nations are ultimately protected and guaranteed by war, or rather, the possibility of disproportionate spilling of blood. This is what is known euphemistically as the “balance of powers”. The establishment of an international system of solidarity with a power structure that transcends national sovereignties is still a long way off. At the same time, the idea of a return to autarchic empires is nothing more than a fantasy.

Meanwhile, a whole constellation of forces that are as much physical or natural as they are organic or mechanical – including technology, the media and the financial markets – are busy weaving a lattice of fractures between every part of the world.

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A planetary chain that ignores (and paradoxically relies on) state borders and has no relation to official cartographies is currently gaining shape and strength. Made up of intertwinings and interdependences, it is not the same as “globalisation”, at least in the sense of the term since the fall of the Soviet Union. It is rather an exploded whole: networks, flows and circuits that constantly dissolve and re-form at varying speeds and on multiple scales. This whole emerges out of many different entanglements, not least between inhabited areas and wildernesses and their respective boundaries. The weave of the world is composed of numerous extremities and a multitude of large and small nuclei. Nothing is outside it. Everything serves, at one point or another, as a relay in the rapid circulation of all types of flow.

Of course, not everything moves to the same rhythm. But planetary existence in all its manifestations (terrestrial, marine, aerial, orbital, fibreoptic) is now ruled by motion and speed. It is not just capital flows that move. Humans, animals, pathogens and objects are also mobile, as are all sorts of goods, data and information. Raw materials are extracted in one place and refined in another. Components are assembled into goods somewhere else again.

As discontinuous as they seem, the pathways things follow are often the same, moving from the crudest tangibility to the most ethereal abstraction. We are witnessing the gradual development of planetary complexes that operate at various scales and across networks that are more or less spatially fragmented.

The right to a future

The most serious problem is global warming caused by humanity’s emission of greenhouse gases. These are the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane, not to mention the ultrafine dust, toxic emissions, invisible substances, tiny granules and all sorts of particulate matter. Soon there will be more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than oxygen. In Africa specifically, the greatest concern is the depletion of fish stocks, the degradation of mangrove swamps, the increasing levels of nitrate pollution and the deterioration of coastal zones. It is also the sell off of forests, the excessive use of agrochemicals, human encroachment onto natural land, the loss of rare species – in short, the destruction of the biosphere.

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None of this is the result of chance. On the contrary, it is the inevitable outcome of the extraction and squandering of the earth’s resources, a paradigm that can be maintained only by the constant and uninterrupted combustion of fossil fuels in a planetwide technological and industrial network. Humanity will not survive if we continue to rely on the continuous consumption of vast quantities of energy that must be sourced from ever deeper inside the bowels of the earth.

The current state of the earth means that events like Covid-19 are likely to happen again in the relatively near future. Thanks to the industrialisation of meat markets, the intensification of relationships between humans and other species, the expansion of monoculture and the climate catastrophe, we are facing the imminent risk of new pandemics. Because any of these could ultimately result in our demise, each will provoke intense fear accompanied by bursts of irrationality. The question of the right to exist, the right to breathe and the right to a future will become even more pressing.

The right to exist

The right to exist will be increasingly inseparable from its opposite, the hunt for carriers of infectious germs – in other words, the identification of who to sacrifice for the sake of everyone else’s survival. The great danger is that these apparently health-based decisions will end up jeopardising the lives of undesirables. This risk is inherent both in the novel economic forms now emerging, and in the techniques of government made possible by the pandemic.

Necessary as they are, the technologies deployed during the crisis do not in themselves eliminate the danger. On the contrary, it would be easy to invoke health reasons to justify their use against any human being deemed to be a biological risk. Many sovereign functions properly performed by state agencies are already being outsourced, particularly to giant corporations and technology companies in sectors like artificial intelligence, quantum science, hypersonic speed and technologies for localisation, capture and tracing.

This raises numerous questions with no satisfying answers, at least for the moment. If reality can now only be described or represented using numbers and abstract codes, and if codes and numbers seem increasingly to be taking on the dimensions of a cosmogony, how can we ensure that the logic behind the counting and weighing of lives does not become a logic of elimination and erasure?

In this era of unbounded calculation, are we dealing with absolute certainties, or probabilities and hence wagers? What does immunity mean if measuring the risk is the same thing as quantifying the chance? How can we recognise the signs of a state turning against its own population instead of “protecting society”?

At first sight, the corona lockdown was about saving lives and avoiding anyone being sacrificed unnecessarily. In reality, however, there was always going to be a price to pay, both as a whole and at the individual level. Economic activity may have slowed overall, but countless sweatshops are still operating. Warehouses, data centres, industrial farms, meat processing plants and other apparatuses of digital capitalism have all remained open.

Many people have lost their jobs, their livelihoods, even their lives. The public treasury has been depleted. A recession has been declared. International debts have been incurred and our children’s future has been mortgaged. In the world’s poorest areas, the lack of insurance or assistance during temporary or sustained periods of poverty and deprivation is a structuring element of the daily struggle to survive.

The right to breathe

Even in normal times, equality before death is a myth. The right to exist is meaningless unless it is accompanied by its corollary, the right to subsist. Food can only be acquired by leaving the house and, often, travelling long distances at increasingly great expense (unreliable transport, interminable journeys on foot, all sorts of permits and authorisations). The hunt for food is an endless cycle of walking, hustling, haggling, bargaining, moving on, using all means possible, even illegal ones.

The ability to move freely and travel around is a prerequisite for access to food and provisions. So is the ability to plug into networks of social solidarity, to accumulate allegiances and affiliations, to convert temporary arrangements into the resources required for permanence. Physical encounters, gatherings of people in close proximity, direct contact with other humans, even overcrowding – without these the daily battle to survive would be lost before it began. It is won not in isolation but by people coming together.

In these circumstances, forced immobility is not just a form of punishment. It is also a way to expose a significant proportion of the population to enormous danger. The poorest members of society, who have no safety net and nobody to take care of them, can now no longer even take care of themselves. Under lockdown, the most vulnerable people are confronted by a still more dramatic choice: obey the instruction to stay at home, respect the

law and starve to death; or defy the law, go outside and risk catching the disease.

The market calculus

Although the choice once lockdown is lifted is no longer between the virus and starvation, the dilemma is no less acute. From the standpoint of market forces, the economy must be restarted, even if it means some loss of life. The calculus is as follows: only a tiny percentage of the total population will die as a result of the pandemic; those people, who are mainly unemployed or unemployable, would have been hit sooner or later anyway, killed by the virus or other comorbidity factors. Trying to keep them alive at any cost is not just expensive. The price of their survival will be the loss of many more lives. Economic ruin would lead to societal breakdown; the cost is therefore unacceptable. On that basis, they should be allowed to die immediately.

From a market perspective, the right to exist and the right to subsist are entirely dependent on financial speculation and so fluctuation. Just like food, a living must be earned, and nobody can earn one by being idle. One way to earn a living is to work for a salary. In practical terms, the right to life is reserved for those who obtain it through a salary, a job or work. The fact remains, however, that many people simply cannot find paid employment. Their bread and butter must be cobbled together under conditions of hazard and uncertainty.

Covid-19 has thus exposed various types of human and social degradation and economic subjection. In the age of digital capitalism, there is no guarantee that labour power offered for sale will be bought. Work still has a market value. But there is less and less paid employment to go around.

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This is particularly true where the virus is affecting societies that were already vulnerable, in the process of disintegration, or suffering under the yoke of tyranny. In these parts of the world, government by neglect and omission is the rule. They are the site of the most brutal experiments (including medical ones) at the intersection of life and non-life. The market economy in such areas is oriented around expenditure, wastage and disposal. In this context, sacrifice does not necessarily mean gratuitous murder. Deep down, there is nothing sacred about it. It is not intended to win the favour of some divinity. It requires people to present themselves for counting, tallies to be performed, measurements to be made and lives to be weighed, with those deemed not to count discarded.

These policies of disposal seem to be part of the normal order of things, so self-evident as to need no further thought. The question now is when the decision will be taken.

When will we decide that such a sacrifice is socially unacceptable? When will we come back to the idea that it is life that is invaluable, and thus fundamentally beyond the reach of any form of measurement? Life cannot be counted or weighed. It is, simply, incalculable.

What is to be done?

At this point, we must pause, open our eyes, allow ourselves to feel shaken, and then take a step back. Tomorrow cannot simply be a repetition of yesterday. What Africa needs is a 'great transition'.

We must strike at the root of the social, political and economic system of extraction and predation. Prosperity does not mean the indefinite depletion of human bodies and material resources. It is about the quality of social ties, about

restraint and simplicity. What we need is deceleration and withdrawal. We must work together to re-localise the economy through small-scale actions. For it is through the satisfaction of basic needs that we will restore the dignity of all. Rehabilitating localness means supporting the sorts of place-based resilience that Africa is already brimming with.

We must move away from a relationship with the state that is based exclusively on extraction and predation, and instead, imagine a relationship that is productive and socially beneficial.

Especially since the nineteenth century, Africa has developed hybrid forms of organisation in production and trade. This is a strength, not a weakness. The continent has largely escaped total domination by capital and the state, two powerful modern forms for which it has been a constant thorn in the side. We must turn to communities and their institutions, to their memories and knowledge, to their collective intelligence. In particular, we must learn how they used to, and still do, distribute the resources needed for human self-reproduction.

Alongside official society, with its internal hierarchies, there have always been *peer societies*. In these spaces of the commons and “in-common”, resources are managed participatively through open, contributory systems that go far beyond taxation. These peer societies are governed by the dual principle of mutuality and social negotiation. Welfare benefit associations are just one example. The “informal economy” demonstrates that many social agents feel driven to create something that can be directly useful to other contributors. They make a living by producing added value for the market. Beyond exchange, it is the development of these productive communities that should be encouraged.

The great transition

Africa must, of its own volition, begin a “great transition”. The goal of this transition will be to create the conditions for social reinforcement and investment. The balance between the market and the state, and between the state and society, needs to be adjusted in order to foster mutualisation. For a very long time, the state has been dominated by predators who use their power within the bureaucracy to maximise their personal gain. As it stands, the state invests almost nothing to maintain or strengthen the generative capacities of communities.

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We must move away from a relationship with the state that is based exclusively on extraction and predation, and instead, imagine a relationship that is productive and socially beneficial. The scales must be tipped in favour of the productive classes of society, rather than the bureaucracy and – formal or informal – armed forces. New technologies have unlocked the ability to communicate via the digital medium. As long as digital media are used to develop critical faculties, to increase the capacity for self-organisation, and the capacity to create and redistribute value, this ability can be leveraged for the benefit of the productive class and the detriment of rent-seekers.

Reinventing sovereignty

Finally, it will not be enough to reinvent the economy. We must also reimagine democracy. Governing does not

just mean providing social security against crises and risks of all kinds. It also means ensuring that interactions between all living things in our environments are as harmonious as possible. This must be the foundation on which we establish a new social contract, one that includes all the non-human inhabitants of the planet, as individuals and as species.

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against crises and risks of all kinds.*

The very idea of sovereignty must be reinvented. In the future, the ultimate sovereign authority must be the ecosystem itself. This was the case in precolonial African societies, where human rule involved constant care that the ecosystem remained in equilibrium. Truly human societies were those that knew how to embrace all other environments and species.

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