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Climate change and the spectre of “hydraulic civilization”

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The war against the coronavirus is not yet won, but vaccines are available now and it is only a matter of time before ample supplies will be rolled out worldwide. Even if biological foes will “revisit” us, the lessons learned from this pandemic should help us to be more resilient in the future. To this end, more has to be spent on public health, on R&D, on preparing people for dealing with similar events. Big pharma, with all their merits in developing vaccines (which, by the way, have been heavily subsidized by governments), should be less concerned about high profits and try to be better corporate citizens.

But while pandemics can be dealt with, be it at huge costs, climate change is a truly existential threat. Prehistoric beings disappeared because of calamities, but the threat posed by climate change is basically man-made! Solid scientific reports indicate that carbon emissions have to be drastically reduced, that humankind needs to achieve carbon emission neutrality in a couple of decades in order to avoid its extinction.

It is more than a pity that Club of Rome’s and Jay W. Forrester’s studies were disregarded by governments and a sort of technological optimism got the upper-hand. “The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review”, a landmark study published in October 2006, found that environmental issues and risks are the most blatant “market failure” in history, that public intervention is required to reverse a disastrous course of events.

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This is why the emphasis put by the European Union's institutions and the Biden Administration (the US re-joined the Paris Accord), and, *nota bene*, by central banks and IFIs, on tackling climate change, on “greening” economies, is a remarkable change of attitude. The response of industry, be it half-hearted sometimes, is a good omen too. We need to get a breakthrough to this end by changing our policies, by reducing carbon emission; a ubiquitous carbon tax, changing lifestyles, changing production structures (eliminating fossil fuels, be it gradually) need to occur. Redefining the GDP (Gross Domestic Product), which includes negative externalities, is also needed –as a 2009 report by Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz and Jean Paul Fitoussi asked for. As a matter of fact, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the way it is computed now, can grow while Gross Domestic Wellbeing goes down. One needs to rethink economic growth in terms of human and ecological concerns and change its logic.

How we deal with climate change conditions the future of democracy! For people need basic food and water for their survival. Thousands of years, even hundreds of years ago, the struggle to have basic food available was the paramount worry for most people. Conflicts and wars, small and big, were waged in order to secure life essentials. This is reciprocated in modern times by conflicts and wars for the control of strategic resources as levers of power and economic benefits; geopolitics boils down to it ultimately. Among such resources, oil and gas are, ironically, at the roots of our existential conundrum nowadays.

The historian Karl Wittfogel wrote that those who controlled access to water held, in ancient societies, an unassailable sway over power and talked of “hydraulic civilizations” (Oriental despotism, 1957). The public and private control on/ownership of resources is in the logic of market economies. And one could argue that it is hard to predicate a scenario of total concentration/control of such resources – as would be the case in a command/totalitarian system. But the issue at stake here is not to fight monopolies/cartels so that absolute concentration of control and abusive practices be averted. This is because climate change, unless properly tackled, could change the dynamic of social and economic relations were basic resources to become increasingly scarce and huge prices assigned to them.

Illiberal tendencies have for years now been on the rise, in democracies as well. Analogies have been made with the interwar period in Europe in the wake of the financial crisis that erupted in 2008 –due to rising income inequality, anger, the bailout of the financial industry, distrust of elites, etc. Climate change will likely augment illiberal propensities for a simple reason: action has to be taken and time is of the essence in dealing with climate change.

But a “return of the State” for the sake of dealing with climate change in a timely and effective manner is one thing, and the transformation of democratic governance into systemic authoritarian governance is another thing. This is why it is critical that governments act resolutely and timely for reversing a process that can cause a lot of suffering to people due to floods, wildfires, droughts, hurricanes, unbearable temperatures, other adverse phenomena. Action is also critical for averting *tipping points* and dangerous nonlinearities, which would cause water shortages and prices of basic food to skyrocket, and induce people to resort to all kind of means to secure them; this could cause widespread riots and conflicts, uncontrolled migration, wars.

We live, quite likely, on borrowed time when it comes to climate change. But decisive action can make the difference between salvaging democracy vs. societies repeating the experience of “hydraulic civilizations”. Capitalism has to be overhauled to make it fairer, inclusive, serve most citizens; this is the way to enlist wide support for dealing with climate change too. In the European Union, *the Green Deal*, the implementation of the *NextGenerationEU* strategy as well as measures to reduce carbon emissions should be seen from this perspective.

It is time to act firmly and collectively in order to avoid dystopian times!