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Reflections on the Plague

The following reflections are not about the epidemic, but what we can understand from people's reactions to it. It is a question, that is, of reflecting on the ease with which an entire society has acquiesced to feeling itself plague-stricken, to isolating itself at home, and to suspending its normal conditions of life, its relationships of work, friendship, love, and even its religious and political convictions. Why were there no protests and opposition, as is usually the case in these situations? The hypothesis I would like to suggest is that somehow, albeit unconsciously, the plague was already there; that, evidently, people's conditions of life had become such that a sudden sign was enough for them to appear for what they were – that is, intolerable, like a plague precisely. And this, in a sense, is the only positive fact that can be drawn from the present situation: it is possible that, later on, people may begin to wonder whether the way they have been living was just.

No less important to think about is the need for religion that the situation renders apparent. A clue to this is the terminology borrowed from the eschatological vocabulary that obsessively uses the word "apocalypse" to describe the phenomenon—particularly in the American press—and often explicitly evokes the end of the world. It is as if the religious need, which the Church is no longer able to satisfy, was gropingly looking for another place to settle, and finding it in what has now become the religion of our time: science. Like any religion, science can produce superstition and fear or, in any case, be used to spread them. Never before have we witnessed the spectacle, so typical of religions in times of crisis, of such different and contradictory opinions and prescriptions, ranging from the minority heretical position (even represented by prestigious scientists) of those who deny the seriousness of the phenomenon to the dominant orthodox discourse that affirms it and, however, often radically diverges as to how to deal with it. And, as always in these cases, some experts or self-styled experts manage to secure the monarch's favor, who, as in the times of the religious disputes that divided Christianity, decides to side, according to his own interests, with one current or another, and proceeds to impose his measures.

Another thing that gives pause for thought is the evident collapse of all common conviction and faith. It would seem that people no longer believe in anything other than a bare biological existence, which must be saved at any cost. But the fear of losing one's life can only serve as the foundation of tyranny, of the monstrous Leviathan with his unsheathed sword.

That is why—once the emergency, the plague, is declared over, if it is—I do not believe that, at least for those who have maintained a minimum of lucidity, it will be possible to return to life as it was before. And this is perhaps the most desperate thing today—even if, as has been said, "hope is given only to those who no longer hope."

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*Translated from the Italian by **Gianmaria Senia***