

Editorial



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## A Providential Last Warning

Vincenzo Balzani

*University of Bologna, Italy*

\*Corresponding author: [vincenzo.balzani@unibo.it](mailto:vincenzo.balzani@unibo.it)

*Rather than being afraid of the coronavirus, today we must be afraid that once the health emergency is over we will return to the situation we were in before.*

In a famous photograph, taken by NASA astronaut William Anders on December 24, 1968 during the Apollo 8 mission, you can admire the extraordinary spectacular rising of the Earth seen from the Moon. Contemplating the scene he was photographing, Anders said, *"We came all this way to explore the Moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered the Earth"*. From this and other similar photos of the Earth taken from afar you can see what our situation is: we are travelling through the infinity of the universe on a spaceship. A spaceship that can never "land" anywhere, can never dock at any port to load resources or unload waste. The resources on which the nearly eight billion passengers can count are the materials that make up the spaceship and the sunlight.



In the past few months a dangerous and highly contagious virus, Covid-19, has been circulating on the spaceship Earth. Waiting to fight it with a vaccine, we defend ourselves with the obnoxious weapon of social distancing. According to scientists, the virus passed from wild animals to humans because of one or more of the following mistakes in our relationship with Nature: exaggerated use of resources, environmental degradation, climate change, increasing consumption of animal products, exaggerated anthropization of the soil, loss of biodiversity and the search for wild food by the poorest populations. Viruses are somehow "refugees" of the environmental destruction caused by our aggressiveness. They were fine in the forests and in the bodies of some animals, we gave them the opportunity to multiply.

Many of the Western rich countries' citizens are worried about the health crisis, but they never seem to have noticed the ecological and social crisis. They are terrified by some tens of thousands of deaths caused by the virus in the world, but perhaps they do not know that about one million people die every year in China, 650,000 in the European Union and 80,000 in Italy alone because of air pollution.

Scientists have been warning for many years that we are not guarding the planet, and sociologists warn that the enormous economic and social inequalities are becoming unsustainable. The current development model, consumerism, based on disposable goods, established a culture of waste that leads to environmental degradation and extends right into people's lives. In the *Laudato si'* encyclical, a few years ago Pope Francis wrote:

*"We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental." that needs to be approached with a unified view of ecological and economic problems. And in the blessing Urbi et orbi imparted on March 27, 2020, in the ghostly deserted St. Peter's Square the pope added: "We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick."*

We are living one of the worst periods in our history, gripped by a crisis that has three intertwined aspects: ecological, social and health. But we must not lose heart: history itself teaches us that every crisis offers the opportunity for a better situation. Since the spaceship Earth is the only place where we can live, we cannot miss this opportunity. We must see in Covid-19 a providential last warning. Rather than being afraid of the virus, today we must be afraid that once the health emergency is over we will return to the unsustainable situation we were in before. We must all ensure that this does not happen.

For a change to take place in the right direction, we must first make politicians and economists understand that unlimited growth is impossible. We cannot expect planet Earth to adapt to our megalomania; we must adapt to its reality. The only goal that we may perhaps achieve, not without difficulty, is that of sustainability: that is, to live on a planet that is livable even for future generations. For this to happen, we must make a wiser use of the limited resources of the spaceship Earth and exploit as much as possible the abundant energy that comes from the Sun. We must decrease the extraction of materials from the Earth (92 billion tons per year, equal to 35 kg per day for each of the current inhabitants of the planet) and abandon the

use of fossil fuels to reduce air pollution and even more CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (37 billion tons per year), the greenhouse gas that causes climate change.

We'll have to replace the combustion engines with electric motors powered by Sun's energy. The scarcity of resources will no longer allow us to own the "machines" we use (for example, a car); we will have to be happy with shared "machines". We will have to deeply understand what we need and what we do not need. If we had thought about it before, for example, we would not have spent 14 billion in F-35s warplanes (that luckily we will never use), but we would have invested that money in health and education. More in general, we will have to replace the verb consume with the verb save. In order to reduce consumption, scientific studies show that it is not so important "acting on things", that is increasing the efficiency of the production processes and the machines we use. Rather, it is necessary to "act on people", that is, to urge them to practice lifestyles inspired by sobriety.

There is still a lot of work to do, but we are well aware of the way to achieve ecological sustainability. On the other hand, we are a long way from attaining social sustainability, that requires, first and foremost, a redistribution of wealth. There can be no social sustainability in a world where the 2.000 richest people own more than 4.6 billion people and not even in a country like Italy, where the richest 1% own as much as 70% of the population. There can be no social sustainability if, as Pope Francis wrote in his encyclical *Laudato si'*,

*"We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions, vainly showing off their supposed superiority and leaving behind them so much waste which, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet."*

We must ensure that the Covid-19 pandemic, from which we are emerging with difficulty, brings the problem of sustainability to the forefront. It will be necessary to carefully use the planet's resources and the Sun's energy and also develop science and technology in the appropriate directions. But it will be even more important to exploit our precious sources of spiritual energy: wisdom, creativity, responsibility, collaboration, friendship, sobriety and solidarity. When we have done all this, we will remember this pandemic as a salutary lesson from Nature.