

<https://discoversociety.org/2020/04/10/varieties-of-ignorance-in-the-viral-condition/>

## **Variety of Ignorance in the Viral Condition**

*Paola Rebughini, professor of sociology, Department of Social and Political Studies, University of Milan*

While we are confined at home, out the window we can observe nature living its own life without us. While the overdose of our geographical mobility is freezing, we envy the freedom of no-human living beings. In few weeks animals and plants have colonized the spaces that humans were obliged to leave, and with a strange concern we marvel in front of the nature's capacity to regain its space. Life 'out there' ignores the worldwide exacerbation of inequalities triggered by the virus (access to health resources, nutrition and living conditions, guarantee or not guarantee jobs, digital divide, to name but a few), the dramatic impact of neoliberal politics on public health systems, or the discomfort generated by the lack of face to face relationships.

In the general bewilderment of this viral condition, we are confronted to the multiple faces of our ignorance; scientific ignorance, certainly, ignorance generated into a social model still based on the modern idea of the nation-state, ignorance of our anthropocentric illusion. Such different ways of being ignorant are somehow connected.

As Ulrich Beck already noticed, we are supposed to live in a knowledge-based society, but there is always a moment when we discover to live in a 'ignorance-based society'. Ignorance is related to uncertainty and to risk, to the management of the 'unknown', but at the same time it is itself an implicit product of modern scientific knowledge, whose characteristic is to be always in progress. We have produced a lot of knowledge about the coronaviruses, but we have become aware of the wide amount of ignorance (and unpreparedness) in front of the rise of new forms of virus spillover.

In an epistemological perspective, more than a dark space of inaction, ignorance is a point of departure, as we can see from the attitudes of virologists and epidemiologists involved in the discover of the unknown land of SARS-CoV-2 habits. For all the others - confined at home to give science the time to dispel such ignorance - the communicative management of the unknown is highly problematic. Especially nation-states, confronted with the distress of health-system and economic emergency, have an urgent need to manage the sudden overload of complexity and uncertainty in which the national systems have been involved.

The expert-knowledge occupies the media, and different standpoints of expert-knowledge confront themselves offering different explanations or alleged solutions. The management of ignorance is object of talk-shows, columnists' debates, public duels of scientists or polemics between science prescriptions and economic interests. Ignorance, as the hidden side of political kitchen, becomes an evident political stake. Some crucial elements such as the calculation of the number of infected people and victims, the rules about the strep tests and detection of antibodies, or the efficaciousness' evaluation of masks and bodies' distance, are at the intersection of politic strategy and scientific knowledge, where ignorance can be hidden or declared according to the situation, or the political opportunity.

Nevertheless, the old manipulative strategies of political communication are probably not the deep core of the problem. Our ignorance is not only a matter of knowledge, information and political opportunism, but it is also related to the incapacity to recognize the chain of connections of meanings with material and symbolic events. Indeed, our interpretative frame of this emergency continues to be that of modernity, where each nation-state imagine itself as a community capable to self-regulate resources and risks, such as health and economic crisis, through investments, statistics, surveys, behavioural prescriptions, panoptical apps, and normative decisions, effective only on a given territory. While the interconnections of globalization are widely recognized, the main recipe continues to be that of a national defensive apparatus, where biopolitical reactions at the nation scale – based on the connections among health, politics, territory and demography - are confronted to necropolitical consequences on the planetary scale. While the speed of the virus crosses over boundaries with instant global effects, the attention remains focused on the national intertwinements of medicine and politics, with a medicalization of politics and a politicization of medicine. Yet, even though someone is using the state of exception to erode already weakened democratic rights, more than efficacious biopolitical controls, such efforts appear as the laboured attempts to face the damages of downsized public health systems.

Still, after weeks dedicated almost exclusively to the counting of victims or to the political evaluation of governments decisions, some reflections about the intertwinement of Covid-19 and environmental crisis arose. Ignorance is no longer simply related to the shortcomings of scientific knowledge in front of a new pathogen, but also to our selective ignorance in avoiding the recognition of the role of our well-being and progress' social models among the causes of the virus occurrence.

Slowly but surely, the reframing of this health crisis into a wider and epochal framework of environmental collapse is becoming clearer, along with the limits of national remedies, completely unarmed in front of the complex planetary connections of human and no-human agencies. Hence, while commenting the current situation, scholars, novelists and journalists started to confess to feel themselves as the 'true viruses'. This is not related to the recognition to be a potential infectious agent, rather it is the acknowledgment of the necessity to overcome an exclusive anthropocentric interpretative standpoint to give sense to our current viral condition. Our exposure to the virus reminds us that we were ignoring our belonging to the natural system. While on the one hand the critique of anthropocentrism probably represents just a novel version of modern nihilism, on the other hand, it firmly questions modern, western, idea of freedom, originally based on the separation between us and 'the rest', where 'the rest' is all that can be at the disposal of some categories of privileged humans.

Hence, the trial of the viral condition is more than a scientific, social and political undertaking. It lifts the 'veil of ignorance' about the material and moral consequences of specific ways of living. Behind the veil, we have been living 'as if' we did not know, as if our position was neutral. Now a virus contaminating almost all the material and symbolic tools of a too reductive idea of freedom opens a moment of *kairos* to take into account the consequences of our opportunist ignorance.

When we look out of the window we realize that the virus - as other events that are calamitous only from a human perspective – expresses its 'agency' in an environment that we persist to ignored as a 'life in itself'; a reality in turn ignorant and indifferent in front our need to consider it as a material, aesthetic or moral resource for human action. As Gramsci noticed, lifting this veil of ignorance

produces - every time we do it with or without scientific tools - the emotional shock of our radical contingency. Making a good use of this shock, and of the multiple levels of ignorance disclosed by this virus, would be another step in the never-ending process of revision of all the contradictions we have condensed in the idea of 'modernity'.