



## Fragile, limited, human

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Life gives you surprises, life gives you surprises, oh God.  
Evil fisherman, a bad hook you threw,  
instead of a sardine you caught a shark.  
Life gives you surprises, life gives you surprises, oh God.  
Eight million stories has the city of New York.

(Rubén Blades, 1978, ‘Pedro Navaja’)

As Rubén Blades sang, life is full of surprises. Some are experienced individually, others have a social dimension that overflows one’s own will. In the last year, 2020, with the spread of the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, we have suffered a surprise with unusual effects and planetary scope. Routines that seemed immovable have been broken. Events of proven worldwide impact, such as the Tokyo Olympic Games, have had to be postponed. Or our own IV ISA Forum of Sociology, scheduled for July 2020, has had to be moved to February 2021, changing to a virtual format. And something similar has happened with personal projects and plans. The world’s agendas are filled with cancellations and changes.

The virus found in Wuhan has swept away socially established inertias. And it has forced us individually and collectively to adapt to the uncertainty produced by the unknown. As long as we are unable to manage the disease and death that this pandemic brings, we will be in a paradoxical period of quarantine ‘without borders’. This management moves between the ideal of eradication and the reduction of its effects. For as long as we are human, we remain mortal. The virus confronts us with personal fragility but also with the fragility of ‘the human’. It highlights the finite condition of what we are. And this leads us to place our personal and collective awareness before the great limit, rediscovering that death is always there, something that is obvious and trivial, but does not have the same perception, nor life expectancy depending on the circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the perspective of such a plague is not the same for all. As with other issues that seem obvious – human rights, peace, freedom, social justice, democracy. . . – it is not homogeneously distributed. We know that economic, political and technological differences have also caused the pandemic to have unequally devastating effects.

Perhaps for this very reason, it is all the more important to recover old words that renew their meaning in our present time. One of them is the metaphor of ‘Spaceship Earth’ proposed in 1966 by Kenneth E Boulding. That contribution laid the foundations for an ecological economy that took into account the limits of the planetary system. This

same metaphor serves us today to think that in this same spaceship we have to introduce mechanisms of mutual care if we want to be human in a globalized planet crossed by information and communication technologies (ICT), because those same ICTs that promise wonders can lead us to solve everyday problems, but can also bring other accidents and shadows. They threaten us with the perversions of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). That is why we need to strengthen the social sciences and their critique of the boundary conditions and of the horizons that are promised to us.

For example, merely describing the ribonucleic acid chain and its corresponding ribonucleotides that will allow us to know the keys to the virus will not solve the essential problems known to all. There are social and political problems that demand detailed sociological analyses, capable of unravelling their intrinsic complexity by establishing interdisciplinary links. We have reached a point where as humans we are able to design technologies for gestational surrogacy, creating a transnational procreative practice, as can be read in this issue. But we have left aside the insistence on transforming utopias into eutopias (Marcuello-Servós, 2005), that is, on reaching those possible, attainable and viable places that are born from the social imagination as ways of making better what can be better, all this knowing that we want to tame time and its hold on us, that we aspire to tame life as it escapes us, that we think we know more than ever before, but we are still overwhelmed by ignorance in this globalized and hyper-technological world, that we are subjugated and we let ourselves be subjugated, that we are subjugated with siren songs, with stories of all colours, with omniscient aspirations, with fantasies about being in control, when it is obvious that we are not. We still have a lot to learn before overcoming the pandemic and an unreachable infinity regarding our essential condition. We are mortal. We run out, like the years with each terrestrial cycle.

We are in this world with no memory of how we got here, much less why, and let us say nothing about beyond the end. We can only gamble and live. Thus we are left with only room to decide how to read one's own life. We have to deal with the undecidable because we lack sufficient information to answer, even to simple questions such as who I am, what I have to do, and what is my path. With each passing year, we add details where we revise what we were and are, and project onto the following days the plans of what we want to do. We always have the opportunity to overcome inertia and bend the curve of fatigue. For, even though everything ends up tiring and no one is able to fully explain the why of things, it is always possible to live in the present, to dream the future by looking at the past, and to learn and discover what we do not see when that is taken for granted. As Bernard Scott (2021) noted, adding two more points to his *Laws of Observation and Action*: '4. There is always error. 5. There is always the unexpected'.

Here and now, the challenge is to make a better world than the one our elders left us, making real what Facundo Cabral sang: 'Blessed is he who knows that to share a pain is to divide it and to share a joy is to multiply it'. I conclude by repeating some words of Debora Hammond (2003: 275): 'a plea for dialogue – as Boulding would say, a willingness to see the other fellow's point of view – as well as a tempering of polarizing discourse and at least a tentative consideration of the possibility for truly inclusive and cooperative synthesis – the unity in diversity to which Bertalanffy so often appealed'.

## Note

1. Taking into account the figures provided by the World Health Organization, the world average life expectancy at birth is 73 years. With Sierra Leone (43) at one extreme and Japan (84) at the other. The data are available at: <http://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/topics/indicator-groups/indicator-group-details/GHO/life-expectancy-and-healthy-life-expectancy>, accessed January 2021.

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