

Manifesto for a Former Future

Leonardo Caffo

Back in 2017, I published *Fragile Umanità* (Fragile Humanity, Einaudi), where I argued that humanity was bringing the world close to collapse. Our ecological nest, our "regular" life would crumble away due to a pandemic, an environmental disaster, or thoughtless management of resources. *Homo Sapiens* is fragile in two ways: (1) conceptual – we do not know what "humanity" really is, where such a concept begins and ends, or which is the best model for human beings to live their lives (how, for example, will Covid-19 affect a remote tribe like the Yanomami in Brazil?); (2) objective – we do not know when humanity will give up thinking of progress as the continuous pushing of its own limits and planetary resources.

Having neglected our condition of fragility, the majority of us now find ourselves fighting against a virus, a battle that will be lost if we act only against the effects (the virus) rather than the causes (the conditions making the virus proliferate). Society could perhaps survive by finding a vaccine within a few months, or by radically changing the rules of sociality with periodic quarantines; or it could definitively collapse. Surviving or collapsing are two very similar movements to the current state. Should our systems survive now, they will collapse later, following the next pandemic or ecological crisis; should they collapse now, we will immediately be able to experiment with a new paradigm of coexistence between *Homo Sapiens* and the planet.

Following the mantra of "progress," considered as a given until now, has been a fatal mistake for the human species. Progressive philosophies and technologies championing a goal of immortality, turning the planet into a web of technologies, urbanizing the world by increasing CO₂ emissions, have definitively destabilized *Homo Sapiens*' life on the planet. In these times, there is a recurrent wish to return to the "normal world," as if the life we lived before Covid-19 was really normal. Social disintegration, poverty, animal exploitation, environmental destruction, increasing damage to the planet and nature: these can only seem "normal" to a bunch of western individuals convinced that the last fifty years of welfare were the norm, when instead they were an aberration based on the suffering of others through wars, famines, exploitation of underdeveloped countries, the brutal erasure of diversity.

Rampant globalization and new technologies have inflicted irreparable damage on reality, causing –

and we have numerous names to describe this state of affairs, from Anthropocene to Capitalocene – a very long period of painful adjustment. We are at the dawn of it.

We have all contributed, one way or another, to reducing all living organisms to objects to be consumed. Animals and biodiversity have become food, science has made them testers for drugs and vaccines, nature has been used as an external material, yet we are surprised today by the fact that eating a wild bat could have blown up our ordinary lives. Our collapsing world, which by collapsing is providing us with the awareness that the world will not end, but that this type of world inevitably will, has resulted from the failure to invest in universal health, mandatory ecology, the end of animal exploitation, the end of nation-state fanaticism, and local citizenship. Today we are united against what we should have saved: nature.

Obviously, should the general system collapse immediately the consequences will be extremely painful: none of us is ready to change our lives and this could lead to a sort of natural selection. A new species of humans, as I stated in *Fragile Umanità* (Einaudi), could appear in the world. But it should nevertheless be clear that – as the most radical philosophies have suggested for decades – should the system try to grow again after Covid-19, boasting new periods of economic happiness to the detriment of ecology, the final destination will not be the pain of many but the end of all. It is at this crossroads, for which institutional policy is completely unprepared, that we find ourselves today.

The point is not when this will happen – whether in ten months or ten years – but being able to fight against the collective ignorance perpetrating the narrative of the end of quarantine, of the joyful reconstruction.

We all know that should the internet shut down due to the current overload, the definitive collapse of sociality would lead to an unimaginable revolution. Instead of mimicking our ordinary lives with Instagram conferences or Facebook and TikTok parties, we should immediately educate the population about the extraordinary: the countryside instead of the city, nature instead of technology, a short yet worthy life rather than a long unworthy one; the end of time consumption and the beginning of life investment.

Closed in our homes (and even this touches on a problem related to the class inequality that we have ignored in the name of the false myth of collective wealth), each of us knows that nothing will be as before. We are terrified by the change, but it is equally true that we have never felt so alive as in

this moment. It is a time to think, to read, to write, to love, but also to be depressed: to understand that what we called normal life actually leads us to tragedy.

There is no point in identifying whose fault it is, because it is a common guilt; what matters now is to try to handle fragility by understanding that the former world no longer exists. In the easy society from which we are now being excluded, we used to make minimum effort to get food, water, fun, travel. Now, a world is being born where everyone is responsible for their lives. Will we be less? It's possible. Will we live less? This is also possible. So immortality was a false myth? Of course it was. Thus, do we have to consider many pastimes as having come to an end in favour of achieving the real objective? I'm afraid so. In the coming days and months, the situation may even worsen should science not find an immediate cure: confinement to home will generate frustration, domestic violence, self-harm, alienation, and personality disorders. All that we have hidden away in the hope that it could save us from making commitments, now returns to hunt us. We need to be strong, to work to make the abovementioned world happen with the awareness that we do not shape reality; rather, reality shapes us.

These thoughts simplify a rationale that philosophers and intellectuals have championed for years: against technological enthusiasm, against the idea of an increasingly bright future. Today, humanity, fragile as never before, can enter a new evolutionary phase without ethnic groups or nations, without divisions or selfishness. Did we have a world of comfort and certainties? Of course, but it was also a world full of wars, violence, killings, massacres of biodiversity ... certainly not the "normal world" to which we should hope to return.

Habit has been preferred to freedom. We will rise again, of course, but not to get back on crowded trains to work twenty hours a day, because that world, fortunately, will collapse today or tomorrow. We naively thought we had immense power over nature, a power that was actually self-destruction. How many other models for living in the world exist? Do not be dogmatic and smile – these thoughts are only an abstract of a far wider discourse. The future of Homo Sapiens is way more similar to his distant past than to the ideologies that have fed into our pseudo-certainties.

I could be wrong. Maybe it will not be Covid-19, but Covid-25, that will give us this "chance": but there's not much time to think and prepare. Let's get started straight away.