

The Desire to Return to the Routine After the Pandemic? A Case Against

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May 11 marked two months since WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. Many of us long for a return to the routine. Here we argue against this longing.

It is not easy to speak about this virus from a universal point of view since it is not easy to find a common denominator. Take the contributors of this article: we are all Iranians and have been friends for over a decade, but our differences are startling. The writer, a sessional lecturer, has been receiving his cheque every two weeks since the lockdown began in Montreal on March 16. He hopes that his contract will be renewed in autumn. The second [1], who is attempting to write her dissertation, has a university loan. Little as it is, and though it must be paid back with interest in the future, for the time being it keeps the wolf from the door. As residents of Canada (an ally of the United States in wars and exploitation) they both benefit from the privilege of living in this country.

The last two are physicians [2] living in Tehran with their child. Living near the bottom of the pyramid of the distribution of power and wealth in the world, they smell acrid disinfectants every single day. Challenged by multiple economic, identity, and political crises, exacerbated by strangling sanctions against the people of this country, they try collectively to find solutions to the immediate problem: to get fewer infected, and fewer deaths. They also share the result of this engagement with others through their writing. Compared with others in this country, they receive a fairly good salary as researchers-physicians.

As can be seen, even for the contributors of these lines, it is difficult to find common ground, let alone to concretely share the worries of so many others. How can we grasp the worries of a homeless woman in Montreal who before the pandemic used to live by collecting and selling empty bottles and cans, and with the lockdown finds that there are no containers to be collected and nowhere to bring them to sell for a few cents? Or with the Mexican women confined with their abusers? Or with millions in the world, including a taxi driver in Nairobi, who says that he will more likely die of starvation before he is directly affected by this virus? [3] There are, then, many dimensions to this pandemic.

While the tangle of the events is difficult to think about let alone to unravel, we can probably share some of our common reflections and take the situation as an opportunity to recalibrate and reconfigure our values.

Like all tragic situations, however, there are some who gain wealth out of the current situation – and a lot of it. Billionaires in the U.S. have seen their wealth increase by over \$406 billion in the past month, despite the ongoing economic effects of the pandemic. [4] Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos has increased his fortune by \$24bn (£19bn) during the coronavirus pandemic [5]. More closely related to the virus, two companies, Cantor BioConnect in California and Advy Chemical in India, have asked for up to \$50,000 for less than a quarter-teaspoon of blood from patients recovered from

Covid-19! [6]. During the same period, around 30 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits, [7] and more than three million Canadians applied for jobless benefits and emergency income aid from the federal government. [8]

But didn't we too share the illusion that everything was just fine with the existing routine and that sustainable development is the ultimate solution? Was not all this the very illusion of economic growth as an essential constituent of the routine? Are not all these crises (economic, environmental, and now Covid-19) just the symptoms of a basic problem in the existing system? If we are unarmed against this virus, one reason is that this paradigm of growth was based on different priorities: producing more arms than food, or sending more shuttles into space, rather than conserving the environment as much as possible - and all during the dominance of the routine.

But if this is so, why do we bother, both the ones who plan and direct the routine and the rest of us who are so accustomed to it? After all, it is estimated that there are more than one million different viruses in the wild. Why should we worry about this particular one? They care because without a return to the routine, and soon, many of them lose the ground - perhaps forever. The cycle of production, distribution, exchange and consumption of commodities, services, and information is the vicious cycle of the routine that cannot be halted. But why do we bother? Two reasons come to mind. First, this virus is asymptomatic: a hidden micro-enemy that may grow in our body long before we realize it. Second, death is not our only worry, but also the social and psychological impacts of this situation. We find our ordinary pleasures denied: cancelled trips, tours, concerts and flights are just a few examples. It is almost guaranteed that we will develop some degree of agoraphobia. Forced to move back at a personal distance of two metres, we will also become somewhat sociophobic. Hence, we are also worried about our mental, or rather emotional health. Moreover, we miss the routine. We miss consumption, and some of us miss overconsumption: our outdoor clothes and shoes are less worn out. Hence, we tend to forget that not only do we, with our labour, produce and reproduce the routine as the active components of this mega-machine (and somewhat unprecedented product of it such as the current situation), but we also do that with our unthinking consumption.

Sooner or later, a vaccine against this virus will be found. But will it be produced enough and distributed equally even to the people who can't afford it? Why should it, under the dominance of the routine system that we have been living under? Let us remind ourselves that under the same routine, one million children die every year in India alone of diarrhea, malnutrition and other health issues [9]. You may say that there are no vaccines for these problems. What about pneumonia? 2.56 million people died from pneumonia in 2017 alone, and almost a third of all victims were children younger than five! In fact, it is the leading cause of death for children under five [10]. Why should the dominant system reproducing the routine materially care about them materially or emotionally?

This is not limited to the system though. It is also related to us. We repeat: for those of us who do not starve before being infected and who have a relatively comfortable life, the present crisis is an opportunity to reconsider the alienation we have unconsciously accepted and the way we are reproduced as the ones who recreate the routine. It also gives us a chance to reconsider the priorities dominant under the system.

It is known among painters that when you sketch an object, you need to step back a distance equivalent to about three times the size of the object you are drawing. Unless you do this, you simply won't be able to see what you are sketching. Similarly, the pandemic provides us with the distance needed to see the routine without the familiarity that has prevented us from seeing its filth.

It is also well known that a frog put into a water with a slowly rising temperature tends not to feel the change, even to the point of boiling to death [11]. We were in that water - many of us die. The pandemic gave the ones who don't die the needed shock, the opportunity to notice the gradual

destructive changes.

In our wish to return to the routine, we tend to forget that the current situation is the result of the inefficient strategy adopted during the same routine. Some draw an analogy between this pandemic and a war. This analogy is only partly true. The real lethal enemy is to be sought not in the pandemic itself but in our persistent incompetence, created by the routine of which this pandemic is just a manifestation.

The shock resulting from this situation and the distance imposed on us may make us realize the existence of that big enemy, the routine together with the strategy and orientation indoctrinated by it. It is our turn to consider adopting a different strategy and to introduce a novel orientation to avoid going back to the same routine we had before - to avoid being like the frog that will stay in water until it boils.

Source:

<http://londonprogressivejournal.com/article/view/3118/the-desire-to-return-to-the-routine-after-the-pandemic-a-case-against>

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Footnotes

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[3] <https://www.oxfam.org/en/how-coronavirus-pandemic-exploits-worst-aspects-extreme-inequality>

[4] <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/01/us-billionaires-boost-wealth-by-406-billion-as-markets-rebound.html>

[5] <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/coronavirus-amazon-boss-jeff-bezos-increases-wealth-by-24-billion-103030918.html>

[6] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/world/coronavirus-news.html>

[7] <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/01/us-billionaires-boost-wealth-by-406-billion-as-markets-rebound.html>

[8] <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-more-than-three-million-apply-for-covid-19-job-benefits-as-virus/>

[9] <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

[10] <https://ourworldindata.org/pneumonia>

[11] <https://www.sciencealert.com/human-beings-are-susceptible-to-boiling-frog-phenomenon-climate-scientists-warn>