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COVID - FIVE YEARS ON: HAVE WE LEARNED ANYTHING FROM COVID-19?

There is nothing so absurd that some philosopher has not already said it. That's a very old quote, dating back to Ancient Rome more than 2000 year. It was said by a philosopher, Marcus Tullius Cicero. A classic case of 'it takes one to know one'.

With the danger of proving Cicero right, while at the same time compromising my reputation as a serious philosopher, during the first lockdown in March 2020 I started writing a book of philosophical reflections on the realities exposed by the emerging global health crisis. I mused over the existentialist significance of death, the essence of human nature, the beauty of old age, the threat posed by populist politicians drunk on post-truth, and the epistemic trust we owe experts. I completed the manuscript in six-months, and the book was published by Manchester University Press in June 2021. It was probably the first monograph by a philosopher on Covid-19 published anywhere in the world.

Without the benefit of hindsight, and with minimal empirical data at my disposal, the risk of making absurd, ludicrous claims was spectacularly high. I also opted for a hyperbolic, polemical title for my book: *Everything Must Change - Philosophical Lessons from Lockdown*. The title speaks to the fact that I saw the crisis as a long overdue wake-up call: the already unsustainable gap between the global poor and the global rich was widening, misery and exploitation were pervasive, and we were doing our very best to destroy the planet. Pandemics are never unrelated to issues of global social injustice.

In 2020 we couldn't be sure how it all started, and even today there is still some uncertainty as to its precise origins, but most experts agree that deforestation and Covid-19 are intricately interconnected. Furthermore, there is emerging evidence supporting a link between environmental factors and the transmission and severity of pandemics like Covid-19, including air pollution and chemical exposures.

Every individual, every family, was touched by Covid-19. The first 12 months of the pandemic were unspeakably difficult, often tragic, but the burden was not shared equally across the board. Some people suffered much more than others, typically the most vulnerable. Women giving birth in isolation without the support of loved ones; children removed from their school contexts; elderly people living the last chapters of their lives in forced solitude; children with special needs losing their routines while their parents were expected to work

remotely from their kitchen table; and of course precarious workers losing their livelihood overnight.

I was in Ireland at the time Covid-19 struck. My father passed away in Italy during the pandemic but because of flight restrictions I couldn't attend the funeral. And yet I still consider myself one of the privileged, lucky ones: I had my job, my income, my health, and a big house with a garden. Notwithstanding the general atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, I wrote my book driven by optimism. I forced myself to see the pandemic as an opportunity, an historical moment that was forcing us to stop, think, rethink, and reassess everything, not only at the personal level but at the institutional level, economically and politically, domestically and globally. Covid-19 was our chance to reel out real change, to make things better for the next generation, and the one after.

Five years later, one wonders whether any lessons were learned. As soon as vaccines became widely available all the talk was about 'going back to normal' as quickly as possible and pretend that Covid-19 never happened, as if it wasn't 'the normal' that was the underlying problem. The structural injustice, the systematic inequality that created the conditions for Covid-19 to emerge and spread, were never part of the post-Covid conversation. How quickly we forget the commitment and professionalism of low-paid hospital staff, nurses and cleaners, who kept going to work during the pandemic. In August 2020 the International Council of Nurses (ICN) reported that globally more than 230 000 healthcare workers, including 1097 nurses, had died from COVID-19, 23 of them were in Ireland.

In the final chapter of my book, I speculated about some basic lessons that all of us, citizens and politicians alike, ought to learn from the Covid-19 experience. First, we need more State and less market in our society, especially where healthcare is concerned. The public sector needs to reclaim the ground it has lost to the private sector. The neo-liberal process of privatizing the State must be halted and reversed. Covid-19 exposed the chronic limitations of the present public health system. It needs more investment, more resources. The HSE was not fit for purpose prior to Covid-19, and it is still not fit for purpose now.

Of course, the extra resources to be channeled to the public sector must come from somewhere. So, the second lesson is that we need to revisit, and revise, our current tax system, domestically and globally. The obscene wealth accumulated by billionaires during Covid-19 should be redistributed, and in

Ireland anyone earning more than €100,000 p.a. should pay more taxes. The biggest killer during Covid-19 was inequality, not the virus.

Absurd as it may sound, five years later I still stand by these lessons, although my initial optimism has gradually turned into mild despair: everything should change, everything must change, but nothing has changed.

Vittorio Bufacchi is Senior Lecturer in Political Philosophy at University College Cork, and author of *Everything Must Change: Philosophical Lessons from Lockdown* (2021) and *Why Cicero Matters* (2023).