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MAGAZINE

Reading Harari during the pandemic

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It is not easy for a researcher to keep focused these days. The problem is not so much telework or the rarefaction of human contacts. The point, rather, is that it is hard to prevent the most creative part of one's mind from returning obsessively to the event that some weeks ago has changed everyone's lives.

On the other hand, a researcher is par excellence a person who has dedicated their life to studying. And what else is there more urgent to study today than the size, causes, implications, and the very meaning of the CoViD-19 epidemic?

For a philosopher, in particular, it is fascinating to look at how much energy is being directed by the world's brightest brains every day to coming to grips with the historical significance of the extreme experience that fate has reserved for us to live. Almost everything is or seems new these days and even what has a shade of familiarity stimulates reflection with an unprecedented intensity.

The questions we are asking ourselves are not all that different from those that almost everybody is asking themselves: **how is this virus so special to be able to knock out all the major nations of the world one after the other? Is modern civilization really in danger? Is science betraying us when we needed it the most? Does it make sense to jeopardize one's life or that of others to safeguard assets no less important than health such as freedom, culture or economic well-being? And, more generally, what can we do to get out of this health crisis better than we entered it?**

Using philosophical lexicon, we could describe the global conversation that is taking place these days as the most gigantic sense-making effort in human history. All together, thus, we are making a contribution to making what is happening around us more understandable.

Some, it should be pointed out, arrive more prepared than others for this appointment with history. Take for example **Yuvel Noah Harari**, the Israeli historian author of *Sapiens: from animals to gods* and *Homo Deus: a brief history of the future*, who is today probably the most popular author of great scientifically oriented narratives. **In his two bestsellers (translated into fifty languages and with twenty million copies sold worldwide) Harari has**

reconstructed the entire history of the human species, not only describing its main transitions (cognitive revolution, the invention of agriculture, the birth of empires, the scientific revolution), but also predicting their likely end, or rather obsolescence and overcoming under the pressure of new biomedical and information technologies.

Many people in every corner of the globe immediately entered into harmony with the singular mixture of urgency and detachment that is felt in Harari's writing style.On the one hand, in fact, the story that is told in his books has nothing edifying per se. Looking behind us, in fact, there is no glimpse of moral progress or particular reasons for being proud of our identity as a species. Indeed, no less important, in the events narrated an enormous weight is reserved for the anonymous historical process that leaves an insignificant space for individual destinies and human aspiration for happiness.

On the other hand, however, Harari's books are imbued with a spirit of intellectual adventure that often ends up galvanizing the reader, anxious to know what other twists the Homo sapiens epic has in store. If we have to live up to what the Israeli historian said in a recent interview with the New Yorker, his original historical view stems from a vision of the human condition strongly influenced by Buddhism: "everything changes continuously, nothing has a lasting essence, nothing really satisfies».
On March 20, 2020 Harari published an article in «Financial Times», which had a great international echo (in Italy it was translated by «Internazionale» with the title: Il mondo dopo il virus). Significantly, the Israeli historian, who in the initial chapter of Homo Deus had prematurely removed epidemics from the agenda of emergencies that keep humankind from sleeping, privileged in his speech a perspective look compared to the retrospective one used in his books. Actually, he asked himself what the long-term consequences of the ongoing crisis will be and, with a worried tone, he warned his readers first of all about the risk that the emergency measures adopted to counter the contagion could lead to indiscriminate use of surveillance techniques by states and, secondly, that global division could prevail over solidarity between nations.

But if human history is an anonymous, amoral and meaningless process and if "Homo sapiens", as we read in Homo Deus, "is only an obsolete algorithm", **what chord can Harari's well-meaning appeals to civic sense, trust in science or global solidarity touch? What resource can individuals' will ever draw from to counteract historical forces that seem to respond to systemic logics that are far more powerful than good personal intentions?**

Although in a crucial juncture of his reasoning, the Israeli historian recognizes that "in a moment of crisis, people can suddenly change their attitude", it is still hard to understand how a radical transformation of people's habits and mentality can occur, especially when the CoViD-19 epidemic has shown, if it were needed, how hard it is for people to change their lifestyle before circumstances make this change inevitable.

My impression is that even for Harari this unexpected crisis could be an opportunity to start a learning process.Maybe starting from another teaching of Buddhism. I am referring to this. In human experience there is a fundamental

distinction between what is and what appears. And this important distinction corresponds to a perhaps even more basic one between what is really important and what is not. Human wisdom, after all, consists precisely in the ability to make similar distinctions and use them in the decisive moments of existence to make the right choices. Contrary to what Harari argued in Homo Deus, these choices are not right because we decide that they are. On the contrary, in their independent truth they help us guide our lives without demanding the impossible from us, namely, that we go beyond our humanity.

It is actually in this way that we periodically rediscover the peculiar power of human fragility. And **we don't need new technologies to raise us to the status of earthly deities to treasure this lesson**.

We are fragile, but not helpless. We are not perfect, but our history can make sense independently of our intentions. Impersonal mechanisms will never get us out of trouble. Rather, we must rely on the ability to give up our immediate interests for the good that truly deserves our dedication. I think these are the main lessons we can and must learn from the global crisis we are facing today.

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