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Sustainable Welfare, Green Social Work and the Impacts of the Corona Crisis

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Sustainable Welfare and the current Corona Crisis

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Presentation

1. Coronavirus: an ecological crisis?
2. The double bind of the ecological crisis
3. Towards a sustainable welfare
4. Conclusions

F. Hundertwasser

1. Coronavirus: an ecological crisis?

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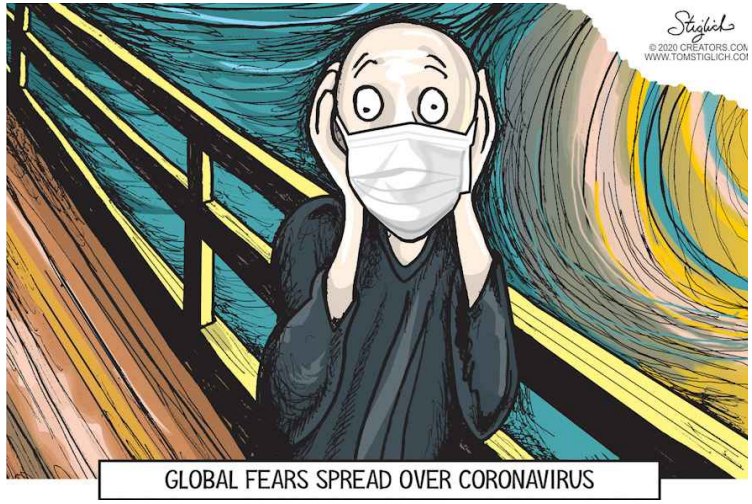
Coronavirus: an ecological crisis?

With difficulty and poor results, growing conflicts and ecological disasters, the ecological issues were beginning to come to the fore in a completely inadequate way ...

And then Coronavirus came...



Suddenly? Not really:

"Experts warned of a pandemic decades ago.
Why weren't we ready?" (National Geographic, and so many others....)

What kind of crisis is the coronavirus crisis?

Part of the debate prefers talking about war, enemy, state of exception, normality, etc.... waiting for a definitive solution

The war ? The normality ? The exception ?

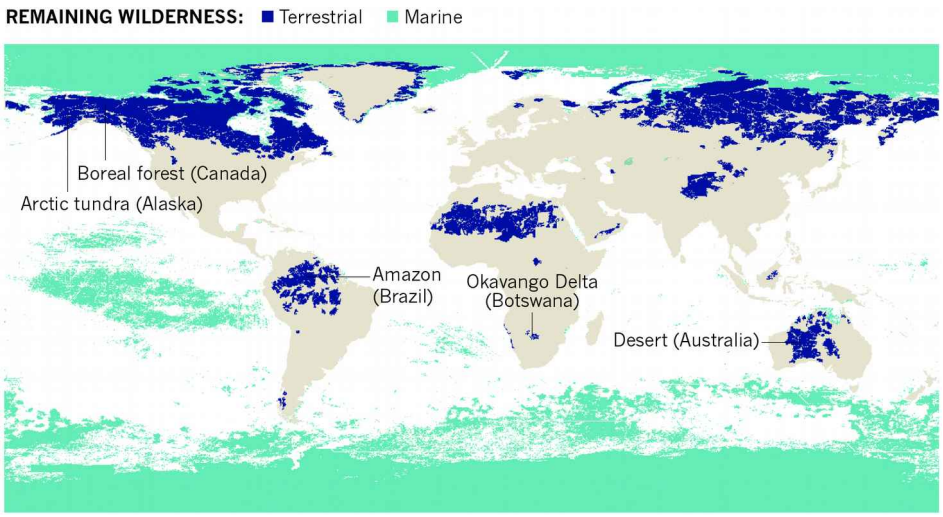
What about the ecological and socio-economic roots and dilemmas of Covid-19?

Coronavirus: an ecological crisis?

"There is a single species that is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic – us",

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)

- Biodiversity destruction
- Forced proximity between animal and human species
- Food industry and markets
- Pollution and health effects
- Urbanization



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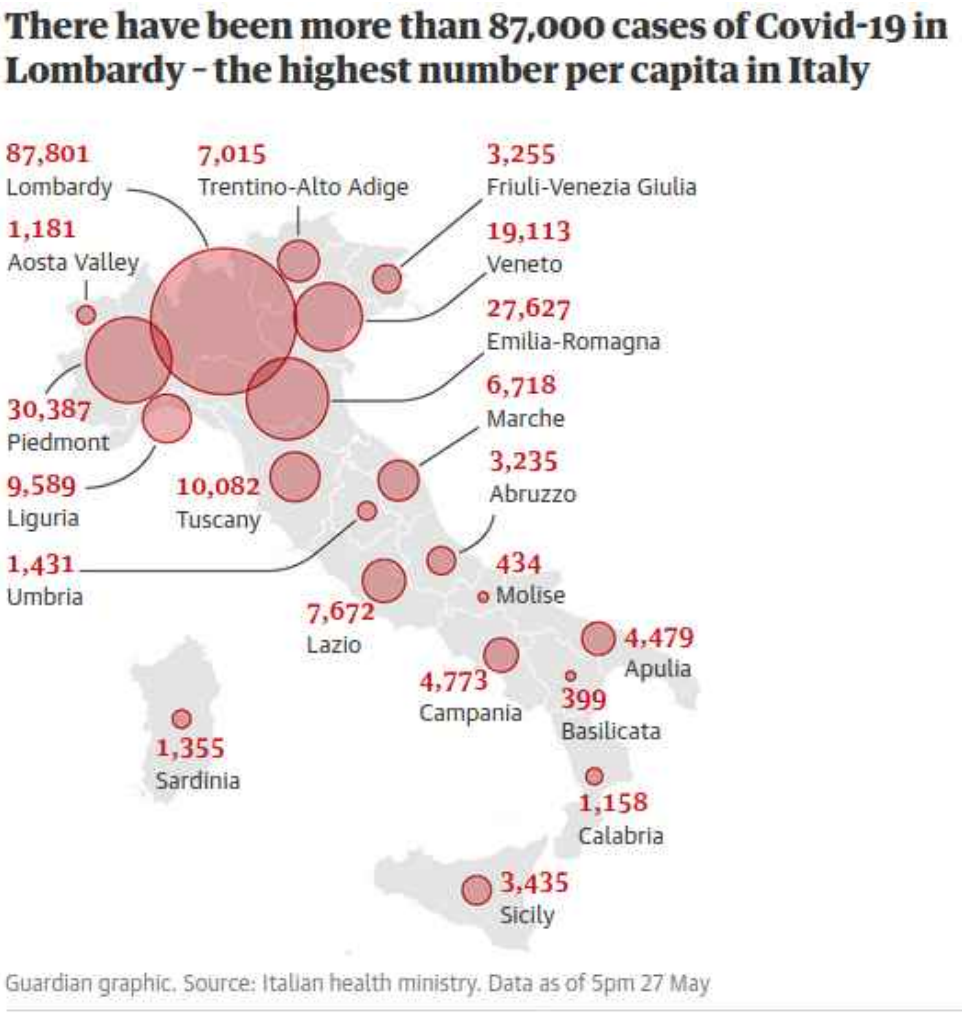
And political responses:

- Health care systems and organizations
- Fragmented policy (global / national / local)
- Primate of economism

A need for a deeper understanding

1. **Analyzing origins, spread and patterns of care and contrast of such phenomena:**

- how socio-economic and environmental factors interact?
- What difference do specific contexts and eco-systems make?
- What difference do specific welfare systems make?
- One example: the Lombardy-Region case



A need for a deeper understanding

2. Putting things into a wider perspective

- Different spatial scales (global and local)
- Different time perspectives

How we make phenomena made more or less visible
through viewpoints, modes of communication and rhetoric

One example: the case of TBC

The example: climate change

2. The double bind of the ecological crisis

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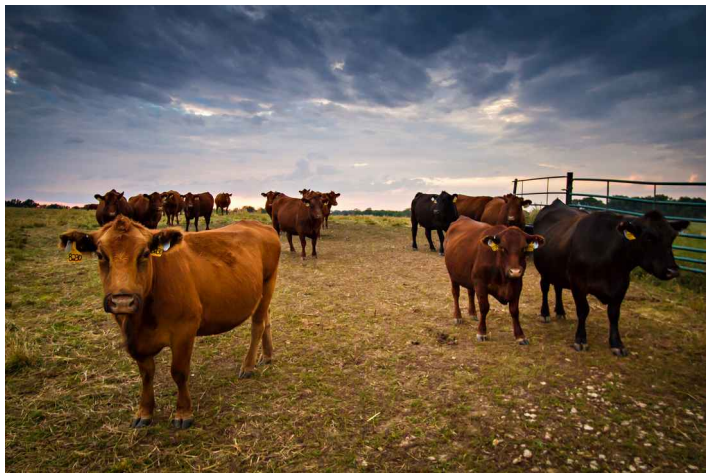
2. The double bind of the ecological crisis

How long have we been warned about climate change and its effects?

‘ 50, ‘60, ‘70, ‘80, ‘90, …. ?

Reflecting some difference

- between the visibility of the coronovirus and the one of ecological crisis (climate change, etc.)?
- between our ways of understanding these phenomena?
- between our way/ability to react both them?



What kind of crisis is climate change?

There are strategies

- Doing nothing (wait and see)
- Adaptation
- Conservation
- Mitigation
- Geo-engineering and technological innovation

Portorico 2017,
Hurricane Maria.
One year later

What about the
ecological, socio-economic and political dilemmas of climate change?

The double bind of the ecological crisis

1. Political dilemmas ("Climate change is essentially political", Ruser 2018)

- Need for translation and understanding:
- Trade-offs and conflicts and approaches to deal with them.
- No purely technical and/or economistic solutions:
- Top-down and/or bottom-up strategies
- Democratic or undemocratic decision-making

2. Socio-economic dilemmas (ecological paradox of welfare systems)

I. Criticisms: depends on growth, fuels growth, does not reduce inequalities.

- Productivism
- National and short-term vision
- Sometimes brings exclusion / inequality
- Unsustainable
- Paradoxical effects of care systems (inequality and medical nemesis / I. Illich)

II. Positive visions: essential to reconcile environmental and economic challenges

- Social justice → environmental justice.
- Reducing inequalities that hinder environmental policies.
- Containing effects of environmental disasters.
- Developing skills for supporting mitigation strategies and eco-transitions.

3. Ecological dilemma: Lewis Carroll's 'bread-and-butterfly'

The fanciful dilemma of in Lewis Carroll's bread-and-butterfly in the story of Alice in Wonderland was that it had wings made of thin slices of bread and butter and a head made of a lump of sugar. When Alice asks what the creature lives on, the reply comes back: *'weak tea with cream in it/ Obviously if the creature ate its food, it would die; so an optimistic Alice asks what would happen if it cannot find any food. She receives the same answer: 'it dies/*

The point of Lewis Carroll's fable, **Bateson repeated, was that bread-and-butterflies became extinct, not for any material reason** – because their heads were made of sugar, or because they could not find food - but because of the impossibility of contradictory adaptation.

*'The answer is that **they became extinct because they were caught in a dilemma, and the world is made up that way**, and it is not made the linear single-purpose way [of materialist causality]. And so on ad infinitum'* (Gregory Bateson, I978c: 54; Sacred 1991: 211).

(In P. Harries-Jones, 1995)

3. Towards a sustainable welfare?

(dealing with the double bind of ecological crisis)

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What can we learn from the coronavirus crisis?

- "Discovering" values and needs kept on the margins
- Overturning the value of work and jobs
- Inequalities in the crisis, inequalities emerging from the crisis
- Environmental effects of lockdown measures
- It is possible to do something extraordinary
- It is possible to do it in different ways (imposition / trust / accompaniment …)
- It is possible to do things differently
- …

- **What about the welfare systems?**

Some points in the sustainable welfare debate

1. Eco-social investments to combine climate & social policies:

- Social Investment welfare state? (e.g. Nordic countries)
- Life course, flexicurity, human capital development
- Productivism risks and ecological paradoxes …

2. Retrenchment and/or post-growth strategies?

- Pros, cons, differences of retrenchment and de-growth
- Distinguish between 'less' and 'different' (what is negentropic?)
- Methodological complexities (degrowth by design)

3. Local and bottom-up approaches?

- Social work - social policy nexus
- Combining differences and inequalities
- Bottom-up and Top-down, and different scale strategies
- Methodological complexities and different kinds of investments

Towards a sustainable welfare?

Sustainable welfare: "towards the satisfaction of human needs within ecological limits, from the intergenerational and global perspective"

Ecological social policy: address social issues and risks while acknowledging "the ecological embeddedness of societies and the implications this has for the use of natural resources"

Meanings and implications in terms of:

- which social risks, needs, rights and goals
- operation, organization, participation
- scale and time
- funding and resources

Towards a sustainable welfare?

Work and housing

- More or less work? More or less qualified? Distributed how?
- Which / how many households for whom?
- Compensation, prevention and/or transformation?
- Which policy instruments for transition?

Organization of production, reproduction, redistribution

- Environmental and social as well as economic indicators, interests and goals
- Integration between technological and eco-social innovation
- Theory and practice of value

Conclusions

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Dealing with our obsolete ideas and previous levels of consciousness and learning

What is the nature of the problem we seek to address?

"The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think"

(Gregory Bateson)

Conclusions

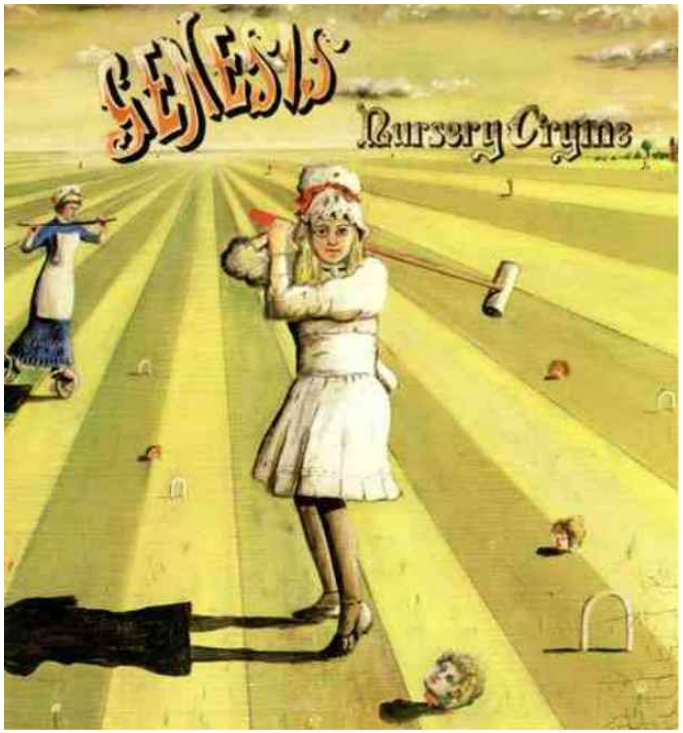
Some examples:

- The more the better? (Gregory Bateson)
  Maximisation or Economics of Flexibility?
- Which unit of survival:
  organism vs. organism + environment = co-evolution
- Fictitious commodities (land, work, money)
  and economic fallacy (Karl Polanyi)
- Body, mind, environment (Antonio Damasio)
  and ideas and approaches to wellbeing
- …

3 main points:

- Overcoming the anthropocentric vision: ecological understanding
- Dealing with organizational and trans-contextual processes (nature included)
- Learning methods for ecological transition

vs.



Conclusions

- **Excluded or marginalized the understanding of the living from social systems...**
- Designed a **deeply anti-ecological socio-economic organization** around short-term advantages, consuming flexibility for adaptation

Sustainable transitions:

→ **No simple**, linear solutions, no easy way out

→ **Need to change** even if we don't know exactly how to do it yet

→ **Looking out of the box** of our ideas/experience
- possibility to experiment
- experiences we can learn from

Friedensreich Hundertwasser:
"The Straight Line is Godless"

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