

An Immodest Proposal

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In 1729, Jonathan Swift published his bitterly satiric proposal to remedy the problems created by growing poverty in an Ireland that had been under English rule for over 500 years. Swift's essay, written almost 300 years ago, sought to expose not just the injustice perpetrated on the Irish people by their English rulers and their Irish collaborators, but also to reveal how certain modes of construing the betterment of society, without questioning the power-relations at the source of its injustices, were co-responsible for the suffering produced by those injustices.

A similar mode of thinking has been revealed, in part at least, by the recent pandemic of Covid-19. In contrast to previous epidemics, this one seems to be quite selective in the way it distributes its lethal effects: it visits them particularly on the elderly and the poor. This is not necessarily true of the persons it infects, but it is overwhelmingly true of the degree of suffering it imposes. Liberal discourses tend to ignore the reality of social and economic differentiation by invoking universal categories that cause such differences to vanish from view: liberty, equality, autonomy. Similarly, in regard to epidemics and pandemics, both of which are collective as well as individual phenomena, there is the well-worn assurance that bacteria and viruses do not recognize social differentiation. But of course they do and have always done so, although to varying degrees. All epidemics and pandemics are more contagious in areas where the population density is greater. And these

areas often coincide with places inhabited by poorer persons, who cannot afford the spacious living areas reserved for the better to do. But such obviously social conditions are easily obfuscated by a term such as “pre-morbidity,” designating previously existing medical conditions that make certain persons more vulnerable to contagion and to illness of whatever kind, including Covid-19, than those without such “pre-conditions.” Similarly, those who are socially and economically privileged can more easily avoid subjecting themselves to the risk of contagion, whether in the workplace or in their access to medical attention, including not just curative but also preventive measures, which are not simply medical but which generally --- in the U.S. especially – require financial resources to acquire. “Fitness Studios,” “personal trainers,” even wholesome diets are not equally available to all classes of society. They are a privilege, not a right, as is health care more generally in the United States.

But beyond this obvious although often ignored or minimized selectivity of the current pandemic, it has one distinctive quality that might have appealed to Swift’s satiric talent: in attacking above all the poor and the elderly, it can be seen to be a kind of Malthusian force striving to rid “society” of its unproductive elements. This is especially relevant to the elderly persons “parked” in “nursing” or “old-age homes”. In French there is a good word that describes the reality of many of these institutions, even if it does so brutally: *mouroir*. It is a place people are sent to die, when there is no one willing or able to care for them in a less institutional manner. The spread of dementia, in its various forms, collected often under the name “Alzheimer” has only increased this tendency of contemporary societies to dispose of the elderly by removing them to invisible institutional settings, more or less well-equipped depending on the financial resources of those subjected to them: luxurious “medically assisted” and socially enriched living areas, requiring an initial investment of several hundreds of thousands of dollars, thereby exclude the vast majority of the elderly, who do not have access to such resources. For the masses of elderly, as for the poor or simply the less “fortunate,” arranging such a conclusion to their lives is beyond their means and their possibilities.

The *insouciance* demonstrated in many “advanced” “Western” countries – and perhaps elsewhere as well, but I am not as well informed about that – by especially younger people when asked about wearing of masks, reinforces what can only be seen as a generational divide, in which those below the age of 30 – and indeed, according to many statistics, below the age of 60 – can consider themselves if not immune to the disease, at least unlikely to suffer severe or lethal forms of it. It can even become a kind of sport, invoking the competitive ethos that is the supreme moral principle of neoliberal societies, in organizing “Covid parties” in which the person who contracts the disease first “wins” whatever money has been wagered on the outcome of the “game”. Contagion as a sporting match. The winners are all those under 30 – the losers all those over 60. In between a grey zone. As the disease spreads, so does the defiance, epitomized most recently by the motorcycle tour undertaken by Brazilian President Bolsonaro, who recently announced that he had “tested negative” after two positive tests for Covid-19, and celebrated his conquest by his triumphal motorcycle ride, presumably to the acclaim of his fans (who, according to recent polls, make up a majority of the Brazilian electorate today, July of 2020).

Underlying this generational and social divide, is the liberal idea that since everyone has been given equal opportunity, those who do not take advantage of it are guilty of their own failures. Moreover, in this particular case, the “failure” tends to relieve society of a social burden that the ethics of competitiveness see as an imposition: the need to support the poor and the elderly beyond their ability to contribute productively to society and its economy.

Swift, who advocated reducing the overpopulation of Ireland by transforming its younger generation into meat to feed the others, would have had to modify his modest proposal today. No one is proposing to eat the poor and the elderly. It is enough to dispose of them, just as society has tried to exclude them from public view by parking them in “homes” or in segregated housing “projects” where they are

free to assassinate each other in a scramble for the profits of a socially imposed “drug trade”.

Not cannibalism today – that would be too crude – simply completing the invisibility that is the goal if not the reality of the societies afflicted by this pandemic. Invisibility, and thoughtlessness about its structural injustices, are its defining “preexisting condition.” Covid-19 has only revealed this.

It has however also generated a new sensitivity toward these injustices, among the young and not so young – and that may be its lasting contribution to alleviating if not transforming the “comorbidity” that defines social relations in “advanced” neoliberal societies.

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