



Covid-19 Crisis effects on democracy

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Public health = Personal Responsibility

- During the pandemic the incompetence of the state and the system to provide good public health to everybody in order to deal the pandemic successfully, was reversed and the burden for the successfulness of the state to deal with the pandemic was transferred as a personal responsibility to the citizens
- This focus acted as a disorientation to the inequalities and failures of the system.

The pandemic as a human rights Problem

- The pandemic was dealt by framing it as a human rights problem
- The *humanrightsation* of the problem dominated public discourse in a way that impeded other more meaningful political discussions about the economy and the relations of production.
- The 'porousness' of human rights allowed their instrumentalization and thus, human rights became the excuse for the violent repression of other human rights, such as the right to protest, when in the name of the right to health the police beat protesters.
- The static approach of human rights not only concentrates on the symptom rather than the disease, but in the process of taking for granted the current economic configuration it runs the danger of strengthening and legitimating the disease. Even when human rights vocabulary is used in good faith, it is unable to critique the ideological project of liberalism that naturalises capitalism and hinders the imagination of another world. In fact, human rights' focus on the symptom can produce the illusion that the problem itself is solved, while it just grows bigger in the background.

Problematics to the *humanrightsation* of the pandemic

- Through the *humanrightsation* of the problem, the conversation stayed away from the economic roots that conditioned the response to the pandemic and merely treated the symptom instead of the disease. At the same time, human rights' blindness to the existing inequalities, due to the construction of a generalised legal subject that is supposed to enjoy equality, serves as an ideological mechanism for the concealment of the exploitative relationships of the society.
- For example let us take the obligatory 14 days quarantine of a suspected Covid-19 case and that the court of the Republic of Cyprus rules that does not violate the right to liberty (Article 11 of the Constitution) or the right to freedom of movement (Article 13 of the Constitution). This is a legal precedent that guides in a general manner the legality of a certain measure. With the abstract construction of the citizen, there is no discussion of the different realities that each person faces by this measure, and all measures enforced during the pandemic. There might not be a violation of the right to liberty and the right to freedom of movement of a middle-class Greek-Cypriot that leaves in a 3-bedroom apartment with their 4 persons family, but what about a working-class Greek-Cypriot or a working-class migrant? Especially in the case of working-class migrants, that, due to their precarious economic condition, are forced to live in overcrowded households, a measure such as that of a 14 days quarantine would not only fail the proportionality test, which is necessary to assess the legality of the restriction of a human right, but such restriction could have proved unattainable by their material reality itself (for instance, in the case of three persons living in a studio). Now, it becomes evident that human rights attempt to create a generalised juridical person strips the actual person of their real and particular social experience. Thus, the abstractly equal subject of human rights is nothing, but a myth and the professed equality of human rights exists only in the state of a doomed to be broken promise.

Humanrightsation = Disorientation

- All people have the same rights, but not all people face the same problems. Issues of class, gender, or race and in general the normalised inequality found in 'civil society' make some people more equal than others and this was made more evident during the pandemic.
- For example, let us take the case of vaccination: it is evident that the right to life that was protected, inter alia, through vaccination during the Covid-19 pandemic, was not equal across the globe -as the ICCPR promised- when '[m]ore than 700 million vaccine doses have been administered globally, but over 87% have gone to high income or upper middle-income countries, while low-income countries have received just 0.2%.'
- Human rights discourse presupposes a static problem and restricts its interest on the treatment of a particular symptom. For instance, when a curfew is in place one can invoke the right to freedom of movement and challenge this restriction. However, even if a Court rules that the curfew is unconstitutional the dangers of the pandemic and the need for other measures remain. On the contrary, in a political conversation about the economy there can be discussion about the level of preparedness of the public health system. Were the public hospitals of the Republic of Cyprus well-staffed and well-equipped? They were not. This lack of preparedness is the result of neoliberal policies that favour the weakening and privatisation of all public sectors, including public health, in effect making health just another commodity to be subject to the rules of laissez-faire.

Conclusion

- Due to the nature of the Cypriot society, which is another class society, the approach conveyed by the state towards the people was experienced differently according to the social characteristics of each person.
- Since the public and democratic debate was focused on the human rights, even when this was used in good faith, society was unable to critique the roots of the problems
- This political dialogue in the case of Cyprus, due to the lack of a truly representative system, could have started with the active involvement of the parliament in the process of deciding the measures against the pandemic. Of course, this is not a suggestion without downsides. However, contrary to the humanrightsation of the pandemic, it is consonant with fundamental democratic principles and brings to the forefront the political nature of the question. After all, when making the pandemic a human rights problem, one runs the risk of making human rights a pandemic.