# Healthcare and Politics on board of Spaceship Earth

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As someone who has fallen sick and just recovered from COVID-19, the topic is currently very much on my mind and in my lungs. Sars-CoV-2 probably caught me during a campus visit at a new academic institution in Russia, where I had contact with people from around the world. As suddenly borders closed and flights were cancelled, I found myself unable to return to South Africa, where I hold a postdoctoral fellowship. Germany was the only country I was still able to 'return to', with one of the last available flight connections through Belarus. During my travel I started feeling sick. I quickly realised a scary pre-condition of my circumstance, namely the lack of health insurance in Germany. A prescription from a GP was required in order to access a coronavirus test in at a recently opened special municipal facility. The first questions at both the doctor's office and then the special testing facilities were about my medical cover. "How is it possible for someone to be uninsured?" A repeatedly asked question which reflects a general unawareness about those who fall through the cracks of the semi-privatised German system, in which insurance is obligatory but not universally guaranteed. Before being tested, I had to sign documents to commit to the payment of an unspecified amount (the total of which later turned out to be 150€, a significant sum for a precariously employed academic with a salary in a now rapidly devaluing currency). Afterwards, while lying feverish in bed enclosed in self-quarantine in one of the wealthiest countries on the planet, I had to worry both about my life and about economic debt which potential hospitalisation could incur.

My story is shared with other uninsured people around the globe. I had the privilege of renting a small flat to self-quarantine and of receiving support from my family. Millions of people do not have such luxuries. Access to quality healthcare should be guaranteed globally and considered a basic human right, rather than a marketable service.[1] Otherwise, "[t]he lack of readily available, appropriate healthcare creates an environment as clearly conducive to illness as many identifiable pathogens or carcinogens" (d'Oronzio 2001, 285). Even in Germany, where the system works comparatively well, there are cases of people whose access is limited or who might be reluctant to seek medical help fearing economic consequences. The situation in other countries, such as Namiba, Paraguay, South Africa or the USA, is much worse. It is not only out of empathy for the uninsured, but out of concern for everyone, that we should strive towards a free guaranteed universal healthcare system. As the current pandemic has clearly exposed, the lack of access to free healthcare for some provokes risks to everyone (reasons, strategies and obstacles towards achieving such an ambitious goal are numerous - see Prince 2020).

Beyond individual states implementing own systems based on citizenship, is inherently limited as the world becomes even more connected, the even bigger challenge lies in imagining guaranteed free healthcare on a global scale. The coronavirus pandemic is yet another, comparatively more immediate symptom of the same condition – namely the inadequacy of our global nation-state based political system and of our current international organisations in responding to planetary-scale problems, such as global warming, tax evasion, or growing inequality

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[1]    "The right to health is one of a set of internationally agreed human rights standards, and is inseparable or 'indivisible' from these other rights. This means achieving the right to health is both central to, and dependent upon, the realisation of other human rights, to food, housing, work, education, information, and participation." World Health Organization. 29 December 2017. 'Human rights and health', https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/human-rights-and-health (accessed 07/04/20)

(see Dasgupta 2018). Nation-state interests often do not converge with that of humanity as a whole (they often do not converge with interests of their citizens neither). How to develop adequate global political tools and implement socio-economic alternatives to the current toxic neoliberal capitalism, is a truly challenging question. In this text I focus on one specific aspect, which I believe is a necessary step towards such an ambitious, almost utopic horizon.

As a scholar of identity, I believe that one of the first steps for the formation of global political tools is to reinforce identities which recognise our shared predicament, as opposed to segregationist nationalism and other forms of 'groupism'. A democratic shift towards truly global political thinking would require popular support. Because, much of politics is based on social identities, rather than the cogency of policy proposals (see Mason 2018), it is important to reinforce adequate identity formations. Socio-scientific scholarship could help reinforcing the importance of global cosmopolitan identities.

Philosophy and social sciences have studied how different identities are formed, developed and socially perpetuated for a long time. For our purpose I mention a few crucial ideas. It is important to mention that nations and national identities (often broadly defined as 'nationalism') are historically a rather new phenomena, often traced back to the French Revolution, where an idea of belonging to a state and citizenship was actualised. This view is contrary to many national myths, which often claim nationality to be 'primordial' and see it as a natural or biological phenomena of division between 'peoples'. Rather than primordial, social scientists understand nationalism as an imagined community – imagined meaning that most people will never meet other members of their nation. Nationalism is seen as a socio-historically constructed phenomena, which is kept alive by politics, bureaucracy, myths, historiography, symbols (such as flags, money, anthems, sports, etcetera), unified schooling and military (for an introduction to theories of nationalism see Billig 1995).

Scholars studying different identities, not only nationalism, argued for similar constructivist understanding. Famously De Beauvoir wrote "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (2010 [1949]). Similarly Butler (2006) described gender as 'performative', meaning that one is a gender because one performs it, rather than the other way around. The same holds for national, ethnic, racial, 'cultural', and other social identities, all of which are a social constructions which are kept alive by our belief, imagination and performance. Such identities are also not ubiquitously relevant. People manage their multiple identities in diverse relations to each other (see Roccas and Brewer 2002) and attribute them different and changing contextual meanings and importance. Moreover, not only social identities, but also our very sense of self, the feeling of individual persistence and continuity in time, is constructed through imagination and through creating stories about ourselves (see Kurzwelly 2019).

My argument here is that as society and as political actors we should benefit from a deeper understanding of how identities work and why identitarian thinking is so alluring. It seems increasingly important now that we see a strong re-emergence of nationalisms and populist identity politics around the world. On the one hand, our knowledge of identity theories should be used firstly to argue against mistaken notions of identities which are commonly used for exclusionary politics. Exclusionary groupist politics, in which a 'nation' or some other identitarian unit is prioritised over everyone else, jeopardizes our common cosmopolitan and ecological wellbeing. On the other hand, the indeterminateness and fluidity of all identities opens the possibilities of *social plasticity* – it points towards the fact that our beliefs and and forms of being are not fixed and can be

moulded, as they have been numerous times throughout history. Recognising the mechanisms behind identities, could be used to creatively reinforce our universal human identity.[2] Politicians, activists, and all citizens, should expand their artistic imagination to allow challenging and experimenting with identities – something social scientists and artists are well positioned to initiate.

An active recognition of us all being astronauts on board of the Spaceship Earth (see Fuller 2008) in need to stop drifting helplessly and agree on a collective course, could provide the necessary ground for popular support of effective global political structures. I propose to use our analyses of how nationality, gender, race and ethnicity are socially constructed in order to creatively shape new global identitarian constructs in service of universal human rights, and a more just and equal world. Of course, this is wishful, even utopian thinking, but perhaps precisely now are the times to dream up creative alternatives to the status quo.

> "The right to dream was not included among the thirty human rights that the United Nations proclaimed at the end of 1948. However, if it were not for dreaming, and for the water it provides to drink, the other rights would have died of thirst."[3]

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[2]  "When it comes to the compass of our concern and compassion, humanity as a whole is not too broad a horizon. We live with seven billion fellow humans on a small, warming planet. The cosmopolitan impulse that draws on our common humanity, is no longer a luxury, it has become a necessity" (2016).

[3]  "El derecho de soñar no figura entre los treinta derechos humanos que las Naciones Unidas proclamaron a fines de 1948. Pero si no fuera por él, y por las aguas que da de beber, los demás derechos se morirían de sed", Eduardo Galeano, https://elpais.com/diario/1996/12/26/opinion/851554801_850215.html (accessed 08/04/20).