

THE VIRUS OF AGEISM:  
CORONAVIRUS AND DISCRIMINATION OF OLDER PEOPLE

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Current figures are merciless. According to the latest official statistics, more than 358,889 have been infected in Europe by coronavirus, and 666,718 in the world. Given the scarcity of diagnostic tests, presumably there are many more. And, of all of them, the most vulnerable risk groups are the elderly and/or those with previous pathologies. Both groups make up almost all of the mortality cases, which in Europe today reach 22,068, and 31,196 in the world. As I am writing these lines, surely the total number of infected and deceased will have already increased. Despite this, the objective of this article is not to focus on the figures, to which we all have continuous access, but on people and, specifically, on age discrimination (or "ageism"), which has allowed our elders to be, once again, the most vulnerable group.

Discrimination against older people is an almost global phenomenon that has marked Western culture since time immemorial. The great heroes of the classic epics, from Ulysses to Aeneas, have been young (men). When we remember the conquests of Alexander the Great, recently recreated in Hollywood movies like *Alexander*, we imagine him young, especially since life expectancy at that time was very low (in fact, Alexander died at the age of 33). It is true that in recent times, as life expectancy has lengthened globally, movies and soap operas about older people have begun to thrive, ranging from *Cocoon*, in the 1980s, to more recent blockbusters like *Nebraska*, *Something's Gotta Give* (with Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson), or *The Kominsky Method* (starring Michael Douglas), amongst others. The fact that most of these cultural products about the elderly are comedies already speaks in itself of the superficial treatment that has been popularly given to this group. Time and time again, our elders have been stereotyped as crazy but harmless characters as well as friendly grandparents living the best moments of their lives. The images of "active" aging, that is, removed from any type of physical or mental disability, dominate in any case. In other words, being older is socially accepted and acceptable as long as one does not look so (remember the usual advertisements for aesthetic clinics promising to "beat" aging and achieve eternal youth through countless treatments and cosmetic surgery).

Despite this, the dramatic images of nursing homes that we see these last days live on television plunge us into an unwanted reality bath that undoubtedly disturbs our binary and stereotypical images of the elderly. What we are seeing daily from our homes are not healthy and happy seniors, as in the Jack Nicholson movie, but people alone and scared, victims of a disease that has often been transmitted to them by (asymptomatic) young people, many of whom protest our confinement as we turn on Netflix to watch the next episode of *The Kominsky Method*. Not to mention the abandonment they have suffered in some older people's homes, where the desertions of their staff are joined by the macabre findings in countries like Spain of some corpses of elderly people who have been dead for more than 24 hours. I am afraid that, as the Spanish epidemiologist and emergency physician Jesús Candel repeats incessantly, we still have not understood anything. The confinement to which we have been subjected for a few weeks is just a sample of the confinement and social discrimination to which our elders are accustomed, day after day. In Spain, to focus on my home country (although the data can be extrapolated, however qualified, to the rest of the planet), many of our

spaces and activities are still segregated by age. Most nightclubs and dance floors usually segregate by age; gyms reserve specific spaces and activities for "seniors"; "third-age" excursions and trips are exclusively for retirees. The same is true of day centers and residences for "older people". Some recreational activities like bingo are associated with them almost unconsciously.

In the 1960s, African-American activist Rosa Parks sat in the front of a bus, thus challenging racial segregation that relegated people of color to the back seats of public transportation. This sparked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, which, with figures like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, finally ended, at least legally, the forced separation between blacks and whites there. This segregation has not yet ended in the case of age. Despite the evident intergenerational relationships between young and old, the collective unconscious continues to establish a division between "them" and "us". Old age, as Simone de Beauvoir said in her book of the same title, symbolizes the mirror of a future in which no one wants to be reflected. All this leads to an inevitable invisibility and, at least, infantilization of the "old" (yes, what's wrong with being old?), resulting in an often condescending attitude towards them.

As if all this were not enough, they are repeatedly accused of selfishness, of monopolizing the health system, and of trying to "steal" the future of young people with their bulky pensions. They are stigmatized, in other words, as a burden on our societies. We would do well to remember that, despite their meager pensions, the elderly have represented the sole income and livelihood of many families during the worst years of the economic crisis. It happened with the financial crisis of 2008 and could happen again, if we avoid infecting them, with the recession that is undoubtedly coming after this pandemic. They also represent one of the main "supports" for the care of minors and dependents in many households. And, above all, let's not forget it, how we treat them will determine, to a large extent, how we ourselves will be treated by the younger generations. In *The Republic*, Plato already reminded us that it is in old age when the human being develops his moral virtues more fully, such as prudence and wisdom, thus proposing to delegate the government of Athens to the oldest philosophers. The gerontocracy defended by Plato, however, was necessarily related to the intellectual and moral superiority of the elderly, which, according to him, will derive directly from the very instruction in moral virtue offered to every citizen from his earliest age. In other words, young people, according to Plato, should be educated from the beginning virtuously, which necessarily includes respect for the greater experience of the elderly, who, in turn, will entrust them with the future government of the polis.

How empty these words seem today! As I write these lines, it is published on the cover of *El País*, the leading Spanish newspaper, that intensive care units, should they collapse, will give priority to patients who have more "life expectancy". Surely you can imagine who this refers to ... Although no guide explicitly mentions age as a criterion for deciding who enters intensive care and who does not, the ethical guideline of the "Spanish Society of Critical Intensive Care Medicine and Coronary Units" (SEMICYUC) specifies that, when faced with two similar patients, they should "prioritize the highest quality life expectancy". It does not take a fortune teller to understand that this suggests a more than likely euthanasia and social eugenics, destined to sacrifice our elders if necessary for the sake of the younger and healthier generations. The present moment demands, therefore, social and individual responsibility. We have been told *ad nauseam* that we must stay home since we are all potential carriers of a virus that, however, does not attack everyone

equally. Usually, intergenerational solidarity has worked from the top down, that is, from older to younger. It is time to start reversing this situation. Fighting the coronavirus necessarily involves fighting another equally widespread and aggressive, highly lethal and extremely contagious, silent and dangerous: the "virus" of ageism.