

## Back to reality Reflections around the COVID-19 crisis

by [Materne Maetz](#)

This quote of Jacques Lacan has become very fashionable, these days: “Reality is when it hits<sup>1</sup>.”

Allow me to echo it as these are times when the world hits reality, and it hurts.

We have had a « pleasant » appetiser with the climate crisis that reminded us that, contrarily to what many seemed to believe in line with the Judeo-Christian, that humanity is not here to “*rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground*” (Genesis 1:26).

In any case, it is far from being in a position to do this.



Until these last weeks, the wall of reality against which we were banging our heads remained rather “pleasant”, fleecy and padded as required, because for most of us, particularly the more privileged, the climate crisis is too far away to change our ways of considering reality and our priorities. With all the resources available to the wealthy, they

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<sup>1</sup> Le réel, c’est quand on se cogne.

can easily protect themselves from excessive heat, escape to places safe from floods, obtain necessary if not superfluous food in case of food shortages, even acute. Nothing to worry about, therefore, despite scientific evidence that should convince us to act for the climate today in order to be able to cope with challenges of the future (and above all reduce the severity of crises to come).

With COVID-19, the wall changed. It became rough and we skin our heads as soon as we touch it. No more protection, or so little, as the virus makes no distinction between the rich and the poor - although the former may be somewhat less vulnerable than the latter, spend the lockdown period in more comfortable conditions and have access and may have access to more sophisticated health services. It hits leaders and celebrities as well as common folk. The fact is that, today, there is no reliable remedy against the virus. There is respiratory assistance to relieve the sick, for sure, but in reality for now, we can only defend ourselves by our own means, our body's resources. And these resources depend on the harsh reality of our health status (a result of our way of living) and our genetic power that cannot be as yet changed to help anyone to resist better.

Money is therefore not of much use to escape from the current crisis that is well present now and does not project the future in terms of decades or even years, but measures it in days and weeks. COVID-19 does not care about the number of zeros in the amount of money found on the bank account of whom it infects!

The content of reactions by authorities to a crisis that demonstrates every day a greater level of urgency and danger is quite emblematic:

- To limit the propagation of the virus, the first step is to close down schools then to protect people by stopping most production units and by deciding home confinement and interruption of a large array of economic activities. Some are however maintained: all those related to food, to health, energy and, to a lesser extent, transport. Oh? Does this mean that we suddenly realised that food is different from other commodities, that it is more important - vital - than phones, cosmetics, cars and clothes?
- Then, finally, the economic gospel and its totems that seemed to be as inviolable as untouchable are thrown over board: in a flash, money stops being the ultimate objective ("become a billionaire" an ideal suggested by a political leader that illustrated exaggerated individualism) and it loses its inherent value to keep only utility as a tool that allows acting on reality to protect what truly matters: to eat, to treat, heat, and preserve production capacities. What happened to the dogmas that saturated the public debate for years (public spending and deficit, competitiveness...)? Idols suddenly lie in a corner, shattered, ready to be covered by dust, as, the world being as it is, you cannot feed on money and money is of no direct use to produce anything if not anxiety or hubris (recent headlines are filled with examples).

Individualism suddenly has to give room to thinking collectively and money is back to being what it should never have stopped to be: a means to help society operate, a means to smoothen processes, a way to save in order to safeguard a minimum level of security. 300 billion here, 750 billion there, are freed without delay... too bad for the 3% budget deficit rule and for debt, as we start to wonder: how real is debt when compared to the risk of seeing tens (or hundreds) of thousands of dead in the days and weeks to come?

Yes, it is indeed reality against which we are banging our heads, and we understand, every day better, that we had fire sold it for the illusion of money, an illusion that has become increasingly ethereal, moving away from reality when evolving from traditional cauris and

coins to bills whose practical usefulness cannot be challenged, and finally developing into the immaterial and virtual scriptural money and cryptocurrencies that, over time, have become their own “raison d’être”, a new deity that rules the world according to a logic that has no more relation - or so little - with the real economy that is now often reduced to the status of tool (what a turn around in purpose!); these new forms of money that allow, nowadays, an amazing accumulation of wealth in the hands of a tiny minority of people.

As says one of the characters of the novel I intend to publish soon (I am at the stage of final proofreading), who holds a role similar to that of the chorus in a classical tragedy: “*We are living in exciting times*,” potentially historic, that may make us realise what really matters. They might say, later, much later, that we were in a period that sustainably changed the course of History. Or may be not.

Or maybe not, as we are prompt to forget our new awareness once the storm has left. Just read some of the speeches made by political leaders during the financial crisis, little more than ten years ago, speeches that were probably honest when they were made, but that never translated into action.

The COVID-19 crisis, the climate crisis, and more broadly the environmental crisis are opportunities to understand that money is not an end but a tool, which means that it cannot remain as the ultimate objective of our lives, as it has (almost) become. Our goals are more varied, multidimensional, and they cannot be reduced to one aspect, to one numeraire, to money.

As says another character of my novel: “*Is there anything more stupid than to want to express in dollars the value of human life? Of a year of life lost? Of more or less education? Who can say what is the real cost of polluted water, of degraded land, of a once and for all extinct species, of the violence borne by a farmer whose plot was grabbed and of the suffering experienced by an exploited garment factory worker?*”

If we want to draw enduring lessons from this health crisis and use them to face more effectively the climate and environmental crises, we will need to develop new tools that will allow evaluating our actions more holistically with respect to multiple objectives, that will take into account for deciding not just money and the economic dimension, but also all other “important” dimensions of reality on which we want to act and achieve something.

In the case of a sustainable and climate-friendly agriculture, we have already seen that multiple aspects need to be considered [\[read\]](#) for which valid indicators will have to be selected. It is by comparing the results obtained for various alternative options that we will be able to determine which one is preferable. For this, there are several more or less sophisticated multicriteria decision-making methods, whether mathematical or graphical, that can facilitate negotiation and a more democratic and collective and less technocratic decision-making process [\[read\]](#).

As long as we are happy to forget promises made on what relates to a kind of illusion, we are likely to have to face serious and may be painful consequences. But if we choose to neglect promises that relate to what is part of the most tangible reality (food, health, environment), implications will not just be pain or even anger, they will lead to tragedy and will become a matter of life and death. And by then it will be too late for money to be of any use.

And if we get to the point where we hit there, the pain will be excruciating.

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Selection of past articles on [hungerexplained.org](https://hungerexplained.org) related to the topic:

- [The dangers of a “partial” impact analysis: the example of a study on the impact of a 100% conversion to organic farming in England and Wales](#), 2019.
- [Policies for a transition towards more sustainable and climate-friendly food systems](#), 2018.

Further reading (in French) :

- Maetz, M., Deus ex machina, Octuor tome 4, novel (to be published in the near future).