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Opinion - How to Call the COVID-19 Pandemic and Why it Matters

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/04/24/opinion-how-to-call-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-why-it-matters/

ALBERTO FRIGERIO, APR 24 2020

In December 2019 a coronavirus outbreak (technically referred as covid-19) blasted off in the Chinese region of Wuhan provoking severe cases of pneumonia in those infected. Since then, the virus has spread worldwide, transmitting to over 1 million people and causing more than 70,000 casualties (data from Worldometer, early April 2020). Unfortunately, these numbers are destined to further increase because the end of the pandemic is not yet upon us. In an article published on Forbes on March 19, 2020, Benjamin. C. Halliburton defined the Covid-19 pandemic as a 'black swan' event. This conceptualization was successively repeated in several other articles and newspapers. But is the covid-19 emergency really a 'black swan'?

The concept of 'black swan' was firstly introduced by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in the book*The Black Swan: The Impact of Highly Improbable*. It is used to describe a highly improbable and hardly predictable event that, should it occur, would cause an extensive impact on society. From an economic and financial perspective, the covid-19 could be considered as a 'black swan' because the markets neither foresaw the crisis nor anticipated the resulting massive contraction of the world economy. However, from an epidemiological perspective, defining the covid-19 as a 'black swan' seems an oversimplification for, at least, two main reasons. First, a global pandemic is an uncommon, but not rare event. Before the covid-19, the last pandemic was the 2009 H1N1 or 'swine flu'. The H1N1 outbreak did not affect as many countries as the covid-19 – and, consequently, it got a smaller mediatic as well as economic impact at global level. Still, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it caused from 151,700 to 575,400 casualties. Second, the possibility that a new devastating pandemic could, sooner or later, hit the world was viewed by many as a conceivable risk.

In 2017, Bill Gates warned the world that the outbreak of a deadly airborne pathogen could kill more than 30 million people in less than a year. One year later, Jonathan D. Quick and Bronwyn Fryer claimed that a new pandemic could kill more than 300 million people worldwide. In both cases, the authors were concerned that similar scenarios might actually occur in the short-term. Moreover, the data collected by the Epidemic Preparedness Index and the Global Health Security revealed that the world was not ready for such an eventuality: in many countries, the national capacity to manage an infectious diseases outbreak was below the recommended standards and, overall, the international preparedness to face pandemics was assessed as very weak. Therefore, the covid-19 does not seem to fully pass the 'black swan' test: rather than a rare and unpredictable event, it looks more as an underestimated possibility.

Even if the Covid-19 is not really a 'black swan', as suggested by some authors, why should we care about the metaphor used to describe it? The problem is that a metaphor implicitly hints and directs towards some important presuppositions and effects. Describing the covid-19 crisis as a 'black swan' might erroneously suggest that there were no actions that could have been taken in advance in order to constrain the impact of this 'unpredictable natural calamity'. Following such logic, there is a risk that no effective actions will be taken in the post-crisis period, thus leaving the world once again unprepared in front of the next pandemic. Indeed, providing a correct conceptualization of the covid-19 pandemic is an important step to better understand the reasons behind the incapacity of the global system to anticipate this crisis, as well as a leading condition for the development of effective responsive post-crisis measures.

Some other authors rejected the idea of the covid-19 as a 'black swan' proposing, instead, the metaphor of the 'grey rhino'. The concept of 'grey rhino' was coined by Michele Wucker to describe a likely and easily foreseeable threat which is ignored until it happens and causes extensive damages. Assessing the covid-19 emergency as a 'grey rhino' seems more accurate and reasonable than defining it as a 'black swan' because it allows to avoid the 'unforeseen-calamity' approach. However, this conceptualization presents some fallacies too. Truly, as mentioned above, the risk of a new global pandemic was viewed by many as a possibility. However, it is only with hindsight that the event has been assessed as highly probable. In other terms, the outbreak of a pandemic is not exceptionally rare, but neither is it necessarily happening. Overall, the chances that an infectious disease would turn into an epidemic are relatively low, and even lower are the probabilities that an epidemic would turn into a pandemic. In addition, although a new pandemic was a conceivable future scenario, nobody really predicted the blast of the covid-19, simply because some aspects (such as, for example, the method of transmission, the contagiousness, and the mortality rate) could have hardly been anticipated. Although they might look as irrelevant details, these factors mark the difference between a catastrophic disaster and an unexpected but mostly innocuous event. Therefore, the actual manifestation of a covid-19 scenario was not as visible or obvious as conceived by the 'grey rhino' definition.

As alternative, I suggest that we should use the metaphor of the 'bee in the car' to describe the covid-19 emergency: an uncommon, but conceivable event whose consequences remain largely unpredictable until the event itself actually takes place. Three aspects make this metaphor particularly valuable.

Many drivers realize that there is a concrete risk that a bee might enter inside their cars by keeping the windows open while driving. However, this risk does not change their habit to drive with an open window for two reasons: first, the probability that a bee would fly in the car is considered rather low; second, even if such an event would happen, many people believe they will be able to handle it without serious consequences. Therefore, the risk is real, but its likelihood is low, and the perceived capacity to successfully face it is considered to be very high. This leads to the idea that there is no necessity to be scared about the bee or to take preventive actions. An exception might be represented by those who physically suffered from a similar experience in the past or who are allergic to bee stinging. They might show a greater willingness to take more resolute actions, as long as there are enough resources to invest on this problem. A similar reasoning seems valid for the covid-19 crisis. The risk of a new pandemic was perceived by many global leaders as a too remote possibility to cause concerns. Likewise, in many developed countries, the common perception was that their healthcare systems were developed enough to successfully face any kind of emergency. Unfortunately, data show that most of the countries in the world have been caught unprepared by the covid-19 outbreak. Only in a few cases – like Singapore and South Korea – the national healthcare systems proved to be quite efficient in facing the emergency (plausibly, thanks to the investments made to further improving their healthcare systems post SARS and MERS).

There is another important analogy to consider. Many drivers do not conceive the chain of potential consequences associated with such an event. In other terms, if a small bee enters in the vehicle of another car, why should I be concerned? Here, the problem is twofold. On one side, the challenge is to deal with a phenomenon that provokes uncertain consequences. In the best-case scenario, the bee could fly away or it could sting the driver causing pain, but without producing much damage. In the worst-case scenario, however, it could cause a deadly allergy to the driver or it could distract her/him, indirectly provoking a massive car crash. It is evident now that because the same event might produce multiple scenarios – each of them characterized by a diverse scale of danger – this could be an obstacle in the process of foreseeing it as a future threat. On the other side, using a selfish approach, there is a common perception that, even if the event would happen in another car, the road is large enough for us to side-step any negative consequences, or an emergency in another car is not necessarily an impediment for my trip or a source of peril for myself.

On the whole, these figurative examples illustrate well the global reaction to the covid-19 outbreak. When the virus firstly appeared in Wuhan, there were no indications about the global consequences it could have produced (in fact, more than two months passed before the crisis was declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization). Moreover, the problem seemed mostly confined to China and its neighbouring countries, and no prompt actions were taken in the rest of the world. Even when the virus started to spread in Europe, the scenario did not really change: some countries mocked the harsh situation that was unravelling in Italy, while others minimized the risks associated

with the virus. As a result, in a mix of unawareness, ignorance and overconfidence, many states postponed the decision to take those highly restrictive measures that could have contained the virus from spreading worldwide.

Finally, referring to the covid-19 as a 'bee in the car' might be useful for enhancing future responsiveness. Although technology (e.g. air-conditioning systems that allow us to comfortably move around in our cars with closed windows during summer months) has reduced the likelihood of driving with a buzzing bee flying around you, the risk has not been erased completely. Being aware about the problem and having developed a functional system of reaction (e.g. don't panic, stay calm and keep looking at the road) might minimize the damages most of the time. The same is true for the risk of a pandemic: despite the outstanding results achieved in the medical sector, it is only wishful thinking to believe that the threat of pandemics could be completely removed soon. However, it is possible to constrain the spread of infectious diseases and reduce their impact on society by globally coordinating a clear, transparent, and effective system of response (perhaps based on the seven essential interventions identified by Jonathan D. Quick and Bronwyn Fryer in *The End of Epidemics: The Looming Threat to Humanity and How to Stop It*).

Concluding, the global crisis we are going through these days was generated neither by a rare 'black swan' nor by an obvious and well visible 'grey rhino'. Instead, it was a simple 'bee in a car' that caused this disaster. We should not forget about it when the crisis is going to be over.

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