

Was Solaria Infected with Covid Type XX?



Moshe Pinchuk

© Moshe Pinchuk, 2020

The Naked Sun (1957) is the second of Isaac Asimov's Robot Series. The plot is set on the planet Solaria which is characterized by a deeply rooted, abnormal anti-social aversion of its population coming into contact with one another or even being in the presence of another. All contact and communication between people is done via "viewing"—a sophisticated 3D telecommunication system. All needs are attended to by their myriad of faithful and capable robots. Just how intense the aversion to physical proximity to another human being is on Solaria can be demonstrated by the following two episodes. Elijah Baley, an Earthman detective invited to Solaria to solve a crime, insists on conducting his interviews physically rather than by "viewing." During one of these interviews, with Anselmo Quemont, Solaria's leading sociologist, Quemont experiences a nervous breakdown on account of the physical meeting, and can only continue through "viewing" (137).¹ During a conference "viewing", Jothan Leebig, Solaria's expert roboticist, breaks down and confesses to a murder when Baley informs him that his partner, Daneel Olivaw is on his way to his premises to restrain him before he can tamper with his records (254-255). Finally, as Cantoro Klorissa, assistant fetologist points out, "To be married?

¹ I am quoting from the Bantam edition, 1991.

... It's a very traumatic process" (172). Nowadays, this "traumatic process" would have been obviated by the advent of IVF.²

Ever since reading this novel I was plagued by the question: What can cause such a change in human nature? What event transpired that has been able to transform man's nature as a social animal to one that has developed such an obsessive revulsion to having a human being in his presence? This question is briefly, and to my mind inadequately, touched upon in the novel. Baley asks Quemont, "Why is it the Solarians object to seeing one another?" The answer offered is that the size of one's estate, more than anything else, determines a man's position in society. The larger one's property the further and longer one can wander about it without meeting a neighbor. Hence, Solarians take pride in not meeting their neighbors. Since the estate is so well taken care of by robots, there is no reason for them to have to meet their neighbor. The desire not to meet led to the development of ever more perfect viewing equipment; as the equipment improved there was less and less need to see one's neighbor. A reinforcing cycle was thus set in motion (135).

² In *Foundation and Earth*, last of the Foundation Novels, Golan Trevize visits Solaria and discovers that they have genetically developed themselves into Hermaphrodites, thus obviating any need for physical contact with each other for reproduction (Bantam edition 2004, 244-245).

Was Solaria Infected with Covid Type XX?

The latter component of this explanation, that advanced telecommunication capabilities promote social distancing is becoming disturbingly relevant nowadays with the advent of the Smartphone. People are adapting to this technology and prefer to text short brief and iconic messages rather than write meaningful letters, speak by phone, or even meet face to face. When people do meet face to face there is a growing tendency to slip into phone text communication with others rather than fully focus and engage with one's immediate surroundings. Worrisome as this development may be in our world, I find it hard to imagine this evolving into such a deep rooted and intense aversion to face to face meetings as we find on Solaria. There must be an additional cause that has brought about such extreme anti-social behavior on that planet.

A society in which the influence of advanced telecommunications has been exploited to the hilt is portrayed in E.M. Forster *The Machine Stops*.³ The story is set in a world where people live alone in underground⁴ identikit homes. They can choose to “isolate” (reject all incoming messages), send messages by pneumatic post, and chat online via video interface.

³ First published in the *Oxford and Cambridge Review*, November 1909. See reviews by Chris Long (18 May 2016), “*The Machine Stops: Did EM Forster Predict the Internet Age?*,” BBC Online (<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-36289890>), and Will Gompertz (30 May 2020), “*The Machine Stops: Will Gompertz Reviews E.M. Forster’s Work*,” BBC Online, (www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-52821993) Dr. Mariano Martín Rodríguez brought this essay to my attention.

⁴ A further development of Solaria in *Foundation and Earth*, is that they have moved underground and broke off all contact with the Galaxy, determined to remain themselves at all costs. (Bantam edition 2004, 245).

Not surprisingly, “[t]he clumsy system of public gatherings had long since been abandoned,” and “[p]eople never touched one another. The custom had become obsolete.” Indeed, touching is considered barbaric. On the flight to visit her son, Vashti⁵ (the protagonist) experiences the following incident: “The attendant ... behaved barbarically, she put out her hand to steady her. ‘How dare you!’ exclaimed the passenger. ‘You forget yourself!’.” In accordance with Darwin’s Theory of Evolution, the same way domesticated fowl have lost the ability to fly from disuse of their wings,⁶ so too the human need and nature to touch has diminished from disuse in Forster’s imaginary society and might diminish in ours.

Yet, all this is a far cry from the intense revulsion from touching, meeting, or even seeing people we find on Solaria. Thus, the advent of advanced communication systems may be a necessary enabling element for the result on Solaria, but it is not a sufficient element. Recent events and circumstances on Earth may make evident what that additional cause could be, and shed light on how such a society was created on Solaria.

At the end of 2019, Earth was hit by Covid-19 a highly contagious and potentially fatal virus. As of yet, no cure or vaccine is available. Safety precautions have taught us the value and necessity of social distancing. The higher one’s risk group is, the greater the need for distancing from other humans. We interact with our peers and closest friends and family members with a constant fearful thought – are you infected?

⁵ In the *Book of Esther*, Vashti is the first wife of King Ahasuerus. I am not able to discern any apparent connection between the Biblical Vashti and Forster’s Vashti.

⁶ From Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, Penguin Classics 1985, 175-176.

Was Solaria Infected with Covid Type XX?

Are you endangering me? Dr. Hagit Ben-ziman, a prolific Israeli author and children's poet has recently commented, "[a]gain and again I count my blessings, that this epidemic endangers mostly the elderly and not our children. If this was an epidemic that chiefly affected children, like the Polio epidemic in my own childhood, the dread and anxiety would have been unbearable."⁷

Imagine Solaria being infected at an early time in its history with a much more lethal and contagious strain of Covid-19, let us call it Covid-XX. This strain being so much more contagious and lethal to all age groups would have required much more severe social distancing. Imagine further, that for years upon years no cure or vaccine was found for this strain. People would have acquired and internalized mortal dread, literally from birth, to touch others and they would avoid

contact, distancing themselves from all other humans. In time, Covid-XX may have mutated and disappeared, perhaps a cure or vaccine was found. The source of fear and aversion to human presence was forgotten, but by this time, the habit of aversion was deeply ingrained into Solarian society and culture. A memory of those days perhaps manifests itself in the "Spacers" fear and precaution they take upon contact with Earth people. (In Isaac Asimov's Robot Series, there is Earth and Earthmen versus fifty other planets, Solaria is one of them, that have been populated by Earthmen centuries before. The people of those planets are called "Spacers" and may be susceptible to Earth microorganisms.)

In short, a culture with highly sophisticated and efficient communication capabilities, exposed to a long-term Covid-XX virus could potentially lead to the creation of a Solarian type society.

⁷ See <https://www.makorishon.co.il/judaism/220605/> (Hebrew, my translation).