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The Power of Sorrow

Contribution to GTI Forum [After the Pandemic: Which Future?](#)

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Despite the scale and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, commentators have not been shy in offering all manner of confident observations about its eventual social outcomes. With respect to the United States, contentions have ranged from George Packer’s claim that the coronavirus exposes the country as a “failed state” to assertions that we stand on the threshold of a prospective “sustainability transition” (or, broader yet, a [Great Transition](#)). I have myself been guilty of flirting with the latter claim.

Getting an ultimately accurate grip on what comes next is an incredibly difficult undertaking, and we would do well to acknowledge that the future is profoundly unknowable and probably impossible to ascertain. In short, anyone who suggests otherwise—no matter how many impressive credentials are appended to his or her name—is probably just spinning a magnificent tale.

Writing in a different venue in early March, I noted that “COVID-19 is simultaneously a public health emergency and a real-time experiment in downsizing the consumer economy.” Numerous others have made much the same point, with most ecologically minded pundits noting the improvements in air quality, reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, and other environmental co-benefits of putting large parts of the global economy into an induced coma. Though it is not always fully explicit, the prevalent view among such analysts is that an extended economic recession—or worse—will trigger long-awaited systemic change. I have, though, been wondering whether this characterization misses what may eventually turn out to be the most reverberating facet of the pandemic, namely the political ramifications of sadness and bereavement.

With more than 100,000 people dead in the United States as I write this (nearly half of these fatalities attributable to the sluggishness of the public health response according to a recent Columbia University [study](#)), and another 40 million (1 in 4 workers) officially rendered unemployed, it would seem, at least statistically speaking, difficult to find anyone in the country who has not been at least indirectly touched by the pandemic.

However, we know that the coronavirus outbreak has not hit communities equally. Even on the basis of the partial epidemiological data on hand today, we know that the crisis has inflicted a higher toll on some locales while leaving others relatively unscathed. And because the extent of the tragedy has thus far mostly been experienced on a familial level, we cannot yet appreciate the collective grief that is likely to become manifest as neighbors emerge from quarantines and conduct a mutual accounting of their losses. The pain is likely to become even more acute as awareness takes hold that the human toll has been significantly amplified by a shameful combination of political contempt, unbridled corruption, and utterly inept decision-making.

There is a tendency to think about lamentation in terms of passivity and withdrawal, though that is a mistake. Historical precedent demonstrates that sorrow can be a powerful driver of social change. Mobilizations like the American and South African civil rights movements, the HIV/AIDS direct actions, the pre-1989 democracy campaigns in Eastern Europe, and the various “color” revolutions of the past two decades illustrate how private anguish can turn into political rage. What is the likelihood that the most important consequence of COVID-19 will be its role in catalyzing fervent mobilizations for justice and sustainability?

A useful source on this question is the pioneering work of sociologist Kai Erikson, who devoted several decades to artful study of communities victimized by industrial disasters and other incidents involving human-perpetuated adversity. One of his most important insights is that trauma is not only a clinical psychological state. We should not presume that the condition only visits individuals who have been subjected to overwhelming atrocities like war or rape. Trauma, he argues, can also be a communal experience, a condition that becomes woven into the organic circuitry of our common being.

Erikson focused his finely tuned ethnographic skills on communities seeking financial recompense after suffering irremediable harms. What resonates for current purposes is the indignation that exposure to randomized illness can catalyze, and he provocatively termed it a “new species of trouble.”

In addition, there is a powerful similarity between Erikson’s accounts of chemical contamination and the bungled policy response to the coronavirus outbreak: responsible parties mount a headlong rush to characterize both types of untoward events as inexplicable and entirely unexpected “natural disasters.” What could we do? How could we have known? The circumstances caught us completely by surprise.

The consequences of COVID-19, at least as far as the United States is concerned, cannot be waved away as enigmatic instances of misfortune—“acts of God.” Once we debunk the erroneous idea that there is something natural about these events, the deep-seated reflex to seek retribution becomes palpable, and as past calamities show, almost uncontrollable.

After all, adversity can be a formidable teacher. In his classic book *Everything in Its Path*, which chronicles the societal effects of a devastating dam collapse on the residents of a valley in West Virginia, Erikson quotes a respondent from the community of Buffalo Creek:

The disaster that happened to us, I believe it opened up a lot of people’s eyes. . . I believe there will be wars, and there will be a bomblike thing that will just destroy this place to pieces. Somebody, some fool, is going to blow it all to pieces. Sure as I’m sitting here and you’re sitting here, it’ll happen. . . So the flood has more or less opened up my imagination. It’s got me thinking more and more about the way of life we’re having to live, the way our kids is going to have to live, and things like that. I wasn’t thinking about those things before the flood. It just seemed like it woke up a new vision, I guess you’d call it, or what is and what used to be.

This is not an idiosyncratic comment. The literature on poisoned and broken communities is full of similar statements. Moreover, anyone who has ever visited one of these ill-fated places, sat in a courtroom listening to the heart-wrenching testimony of victims, or even watched a dramatized Hollywood depiction like *Erin Brockovich* or *A Civil Action* will recognize this emotional outpouring. In fact, the frequency of its occurrence prompts Erikson to describe it as a “syndrome.” In other words, the trauma of corporate and government malfeasance, when coupled with lies, deceit, and

self-serving blame-shifting, leads to a process of political radicalization—and this can consume both individuals and entire communities. We should not be surprised to discover in the months ahead that a biological contagion, when inserted into a dysfunctional political system that disdains science and displays limitless guile, sparks a similar reaction.

I drafted this commentary in mid-May, prior to the heinous killing of George Floyd and the swelling street protests that erupted in subsequent days. From my vantage point, the recent public response provides confirming evidence of the central contention about the tendency of collective trauma to reshape prevalent worldviews.

About the Author



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