



September 2020

Lethal Modernity

Forum contribution: [After the Pandemic: Which Future?](#)

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Whether COVID-19 will mark a fundamental change in the human condition is still an open question. The answer, of course, lies with us: What are we willing to learn, and at what depths of our lives and cultures? The deeper the learning, the more profound the change. What are the chances that we, as individuals, communities, and societies, will engage in deep learning in the face of the pandemic?

The hopeful note is that a host of conversations have already emerged. Many are being sustained—conversations that, in some way or another, challenge us to explore what we could learn if we were serious about learning from COVID-19. Some of these conversations are openly challenging us to see the virus as a gift from the universe—a gift that can be redeemed by learning deeply about ourselves, our condition, and our cultural trajectory through history. Many are becoming willing to see aspects of our Modern Techno-Industrial cultures that previously had been hidden from their eyes, hearts, and minds. Here are just three examples.

First, efficiency, the dominant god of our economics, undermines resiliency, and therefore adaptability. Understanding that the future will require greater adaptability means moving beyond what now passes as sound economics. One obvious bit of evidence is the way our super-efficient and utterly rational (by First Enlightenment standards) global supply chains can be taken down by a tiny virus. A very “efficient” system, but not a wise one.

Second, nations are still useful as organizational units, but not as an ultimate basis for identity. The virus does not distinguish between Americans, Norwegians, and Saudis. We, Moderns, have been neglecting our global citizenship and the global organizational infrastructure needed to survive.

Third, at a deeper level, some of us are learning that the way we—Modern Techno-Industrial peoples and cultures—have known and responded to reality, living and inorganic, needs to be reimagined. The idea is spreading that reality is not what we who have shaped life through the lenses of the Reformation and the First Enlightenment have taken it to be.

The deep core work of the twenty-first century is not just making our Modern world more sustainable, humane, equitable, and global. We need to accept that Modernity itself has run its course, and that we need to loosen its grip on us and our grip on it. Only when we do so can we face the utterly new challenge of nurturing the next form of human civilization into robust being.

Will we learn anything from this crisis? Almost certainly. Will the lessons range widely enough to divert our Modern selves and cultures off the trajectory to which we are now unwittingly committed? Almost certainly not. However, many more of us will emerge “after COVID” with our unconscious commitment to Modernity seriously weakened. This partial loss of faith in who and what we are will make the 2020s far more interesting and dangerous.

How, then, might things play out? All of the [six scenarios](#) are in play with serious backers and advocates. Regardless of our preferences, we will have to learn to dance the dance-of-the-six-scenarios as they become increasingly entangled.

Therefore, I expect that, writ large, the 2020s will be the “raging 20s.” The background reality will continue to be the further disintegration of Modern Techno-Industrial ways of knowing, being, and living. This will lead to further loss of faith in virtually all established forms of conventional authority, deeper anxiety, and neurotic leaders whose virtue is sworn to by anxious and equally neurotic followers. Once again, the US will show the rest of us the way ahead. In the 2020s, we will face not Samuel Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations, but the clashes of, in effect, local, regional, national, and international street gangs, some cartel-like in scope. Needless to say, neither the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals nor the targets of the Paris Agreement will be achieved.

As is the case today, the turmoil of the 2020s will be filtered through inherited ways of seeing and thinking. Cultures are path-dependent, and one of the most powerful myths of Modernity is that we, as individuals, are free of the influences of culture. It will take some years before we are ready to face the reality that every version of Modern Techno-Industrial civilization has become lethal.

Vanishingly few Modern institutions are likely to reorient around the insight that the “normalcy” sought “after COVID” was a seat on a train headed towards death. Even as the evidence intensifies that the wheels are falling off, most will not yet be ready to acknowledge that we are already past “Peak Modernity,” let alone that Modernity cannot be saved by making it more sustainable, equitable, and humane. We can expect sustainability efforts to be intensified and funds to be poured into the work, and those who value money over beauty to get far more serious, but it will not be enough.

The 2020s will see something genuinely new. Quietly and largely under the radar, some who have seen, explored, and understood the deep background dynamics of our time will find one another. They will begin to create institutional support systems premised on the insight that our deep work is to let go of the security blanket of Modernity and face the adventure of transcending our identities at every scale from personal to civilizational as we seek to nurture the next form of civilization.

Happily, as we embrace this new work, a good deal of recent work now undertaken in scientific laboratories, families, and communities can be reframed as small exemplars of an emerging way of knowing, imagining, and responding to reality. Ironically, we will come to realize that there are bits of wisdom in each of the [six scenarios](#), insights that have a place in a reframed reality.

The turmoil can be experienced as a gift.

About the Author



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Cite as Ruben Nelson, "Lethal Modernity," a contribution to the forum *After the Pandemic: Which Future?*, *Great Transition Initiative* (September 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pandemic-scenario-nelson>.

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