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The Question Before Us

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

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The coronavirus outbreak has disrupted our lives, equanimity, and assumptions. With good reason, the policy response has centered on emergency measures to mitigate human suffering, especially mobilizing public health resources, practicing social distancing, and providing relief for workers and businesses displaced by shrunken economies. Yet, even as debate rages on the timeliness and design of these responses, we also need to stand back to consider the longer-term implications.

The pandemic is a rupture in historic time that shakes the continuity of institutions and consciousness. The discussants in this forum have been asked to share their insights, speculations, and questions on how COVID-19 might alter the shape of the global future. To organize the discussion, the specific question before the panel is, which GTI scenarios have become more plausible, and which less? (See [Taxonomy of the Future](#) for brief sketches of these scenarios.)

There is much to ponder:

Conventional Worlds

Will globalized capitalism recover after a pause, or is the neoliberal *Market Forces* scenario no longer viable? Will a more cooperative, precautionary, and regulatory *Policy Reform* world come to dominate, and will it be enough to save corporate capitalism—or avoid collapse?

Barbarization

Will the stoking of fear and xenophobia feed resurgent nationalism and authoritarianism, presaging some form of *Fortress World*? Is there a danger of rampant conflict, loss of institutional order, and chaotic descent into *Breakdown*?

Great Transition

Will the traumatic encounter with the borderless virus etch our interconnectedness, shared risk, and need for global cooperation and governance into public consciousness? Can the emergency behavioral changes—working remotely, reduced travel, social distancing—foster sustainable consumption and economic degrowth, moving us past the dominant model of development? Have new opportunities opened for mitigating climate change, protecting wild places, localizing economies, and taking action on other fronts?

Of course, the world system does not enact a single scenario; rather, it is a composite of them all. Although the mix varies across nations and over time, forces of continuity, disintegration, and transformation are at play everywhere. Latent pressure for both progressive change and authoritarian reaction can build beneath the surface, then suddenly explode on the scene, disrupting business as usual.

At transformative moments, the plot of history can jump to another theater with different characters at center stage. With its ongoing jolt to global systems, the pandemic weakens entrenched institutions and amplifies dissent: the chaotic interim between “before” and “after” becomes a cauldron for historical surprise—for better or worse.

How will the pandemic shift the *mélange* of social scenarios competing for dominance? Grappling with this question, the forum participants, quite appropriately, paint diverse pictures of how this might play out. The further issue before them, and all of us, is how to shape the outcome: How can we seize the moment to steer toward the [Great Transition](#) we all hope for and know to be possible?

About the Author



Paul Raskin is the founding president of the Tellus Institute. The overarching theme of his work has been the development of visions and strategies for a transformation to more resilient and equitable forms of social development. His research has spanned issues (energy, water, climate change, ecosystems, and sustainable development) and spatial scales (local, national, and global). He has conceived and built widely-used models for integrated scenario planning for energy (LEAP), freshwater (WEAP), and sustainability (PoleStar). Dr. Raskin has published widely, and served as a lead author for the U.S. National Academy of Science's Board on Sustainability, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the Earth Charter, and UNEP's Global Environment Outlook.

About the Publication

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