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A Chapter in an Ongoing Crisis

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

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There will be no “post-COVID” world simply because we are all now in a global disease pool. We always have been, of course, but we did not fully realize this because our common anthropocentrism blinded us to the fallacy of our underlying belief in hominid exceptionalism.

Somehow—we told ourselves—we would be exempted from the destruction of one ecosystem after another around the world. We would remain—we thought—“exceptions” to the system-wide degradation of habitats and the extinction of all other life-forms. We were, after all, an “intelligent” species, an “inventive” species, and for that reason a “privileged” species above all others in our capacity to foresee and plan with scientific insight and technical skills. Surely, these capacities would save us and our civilization.

Well, perhaps not. This comfortable and widely shared narrative is now seen to be what it was all along: a grand illusion. As biologists have long pointed out, in evolutionary terms, intelligence may not prove to be “adaptive.” It is no guarantee of survival, especially when our capacity for intelligence is deployed to kill ever greater numbers of our own species and fundamentally destroy the key elements of our species-wide life-support systems (topsoil, biodiversity, potable water supplies, sustainable agriculture, etc.)

As we learn more about COVID-19, it appears that it will not go away. It may well settle into a pattern of behaving like a “seasonal flu,” but largely because it will migrate between the Southern and Northern Hemisphere as the seasons change. In addition, there are a range of coronaviruses to which humans are exposed, each of which can mutate and thereby change its virulence in reference to the human populations in the future. For this reason, there is not likely to

be a post-coronavirus period in human history from now onward. We will have to adjust in radically new ways, shifting our understanding about ourselves, our behavior, and our assumptions about our role from that of a “dominant species” to that of a “participant species” in a complex ecosystem.

This is not a trivial matter. The reason is that although we *know* this is necessary, *we do not believe it*. Our knowledge systems are far out of sync with our operative belief systems. This is frequently the case in human history—especially under conditions of radical systemic transformation. Belief systems drive our behavior—not, generally speaking, our knowledge systems. We will need to transform some of our core beliefs if we expect to change our behavior in ways that can help us survive beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

For this reason, the relative probabilities of the three different [scenarios](#) that Paul Raskin has outlined so well for us (that of Conventional Worlds, Barbarization, and Great Transitions) remain unpredictable and essentially unknowable. It is, of course, possible to see trends developing rapidly in each of these separate scenarios and even to work to actualize one or the other. Nevertheless, much that will effectively determine what will happen lies beyond our ability to control or foresee things.

The problem is compounded by the abrupt restructuring of information flows in this COVID-19 moment. In fact, the understanding of our current and future conditions and chances for changing our thought and behavior are being transformed as well by the ways educational systems are being transformed in the midst of the crisis. While it is clear that public leadership can play a crucial role in shifting the public sensibilities in one direction or another, it remains the case that *what the public has come to know about its circumstance* and *what it has been led to believe* about its alternatives for action will, in large measure, determine how it behaves under stress.

In any event, all indications are that stress on large numbers of people is likely to increase in the coming weeks, months, and years. While the “COVID-19 crisis” might subside in terms of a greater availability of public health facilities to cope with any surge in new cases, this does not mean that the coronavirus has gone away. On the contrary. Both it and many other viruses like it have “jumped” from wildlife populations to human communities in what has been described as a “spillover” process. This is likely to become ever more prevalent in our climate-changed world.

At the same time, we are being warned by scientists that the sea level is rising at rates several times faster than they thought was the case only a few years ago. Coastal populations are at risk of individual storms, and over time, the rising seas will cause them to migrate in search of fresh water, food, and shelter as their homes and fields become increasingly inundated. This will be happening roughly simultaneously along all coastal areas of Asia, Africa, and North and South America, with slight local variations and occasional extreme weather events.

Under these circumstances, the conditions for the emergence of “novel” diseases and the resurgence of known air-, water-, and vector-borne diseases (malaria, Zika, Dengue Fever, Ebola, etc.) will be greatly enhanced as vulnerable populations are increasingly on the move.

All of these circumstances should make it clear to political leaders and citizens around the world that our situation is now very precarious. We live in a world we did not create, cannot control, and must not further destroy. Yet much of the public discourse about “recovering from COVID” fails to understand the limitations of our capacity to act judiciously or reflect upon how much we need to learn to behave in a *new manner* to survive. Indeed, to listen to the words of many global economic and political leaders, it would seem apparent that we are in danger of trying to “stimulate” the very kind of economic expansion of consumerism and unrestrained human growth that has served as the root cause of the COVID-19 “spillover” and pandemic crisis in the first place.

We all now need to learn quickly to redirect human behavior to restore stable and sustainable ecosystems that can function on solar energy, not fossilized solar energy. No population can outlive its life-support system. We will be no exception. The thrust of our future planning must be crystal clear to us all—even if the details remain to be worked out with careful step-by-step designs. We need to subordinate human behavior to live within the rules of a sustainably functioning ecosystem.

In effect, as COVID-19 has underscored, we all need to learn how to “shelter in place” on the only life-supporting planet in the known universe. We evolved here. We belong here. But we will not be tolerated for very much longer here if we do not behave within its system-wide constraints. There is no “Planet B.” We only have one Earth. We only get one chance.

About the Author



Tim Weiskel is the founder of Cambridge Climate Research Associates and Transition Studies, an online video blog devoted to assisting organizations and individuals in understanding the transitions that must now be undertaken to enable the human community to move to a post-carbon world. Prior to that, he taught anthropology and history at Williams College, Yale University, and Harvard University. His principal field work was among the Baule peoples of the central Ivory Coast, focusing on the ecology of colonialism and post-colonial agriculture. A social anthropologist and historian by training, he received a BA from Yale University and a PhD from Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar.

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