



September 2020

Exploring Pandemic Scenarios

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

Joe Ravetz

At terrifying speed, the COVID-19 global pandemic has brought a multitude of deaths, the lockdown of half the world's population, and the decimation of its economy. But, at the same time, it has also brought a resurgence of clear skies, mutual aid, and new economic thinking.

The time is ripe to take a forward look on the massive transformations now in motion, both positive and negative, and explore practical questions about the pathways that could help us steer from one kind of outcome to another. If we start with the saying "*never let a good crisis go to waste*," our question becomes, if new systems of social-political-economic cooperation can emerge from this crisis, how can we nourish their chances in turbulent times?¹

Scenarios: Unknowns or Unknowables?

The [GTI framework](#) offers a useful lens through which to explore the possibilities now at play and to trace out the implications for each scenario of two main "what if" possibilities. First, what if the pandemic were solved through a successful combination of containment, test/trace/isolate systems, vaccines, and medical treatments? Second, what if the pandemic continues through viral mutations or medical failures, with consequent economic disruption, political and social conflict, and health system breakdowns? (A third alternative would be a messy and controversial mixture, where for instance rich communities are mainly "solved" while the poor are "ongoing").²

Conventional Worlds: The dominant direction of policy and business is to maintain the system, focusing on the market (Market Forces variant) or policy (Policy Reform variant). If the pandemic is contained, these tendencies will bounce back stronger than before; if it continues, both will be under severe stress, and likely to flip over to either Barbarization or Great Transitions.

Barbarization: The Breakdown scenario will see systems collapse whether or not the virus holds. If the pandemic persists, Fortress World could very plausibly endure through containment by physical barriers and digital surveillance in the context of growing inequality, exclusion, and social control.

Great Transitions: Under a continuing pandemic, the localized Eco-communalism variant could see a trend towards inward retreat and isolation. The New Sustainability Paradigm, which embraces global interdependence, would need to adapt to new conditions with new responses. Could this be a world of hazmat suits and protective bubbles, an economy divided into human and automated segments, or a government based on surveillance and containment by force?

In general, the dominant forces of power, wealth, and ideology will do whatever it takes to hold on to the current structures. Yet, the pressures induced by the pandemic may push the system to a tipping point towards Barbarization or a Great Transition.

Societal Transformations: By Accident or Design?

The pandemic so far has intersected with various dimensions of society in both positive and negative ways.

In the *social domain*, the pandemic response locks down all forms of direct social interaction, along with a significant amount of economic activity. It also exposes the gaps and shortfalls in public services, as well as the underlying structures of inequality and exclusion. At the same time, a resurgence of social and cultural values, organizations, and systems has been unleashed, from singing on balconies to mass volunteering in the health service.

For *technology*, the door is open ever wider for techno-corporate surveillance and financialization. As local businesses go down, and community apps and 3D printing emerge, the Big Four tech platforms (Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon) are expanding without limit. In a possible future world of distancing and “contactless community,” the same digital platforms and networks will be indispensable.

Production in the global *economic system* has suffered possibly its greatest ever shock and reduction of GDP, with untold suffering from the newly sick, unemployed, uninsured, and homeless. In parallel, there are new patterns of part-time work and working from home, a new

focus on “essential workers,” and a general questioning of materialist debt-fueled production and consumption.

For the *ecological and climate* agenda, the pandemic slowdown has brought clear skies for the first time in generations, even while climate change, species extinction, and toxic overload rage on. While international cooperation will be more difficult, it seems possible that in a post-pandemic era, a Green New Deal will gain traction, along with non-materialist lifestyles.

Political implications spread in all directions. The most obvious development is the extraordinary phenomenon of the state underwriting businesses and workers in many countries, even while large (tax-avoiding) corporations carve up multi-billion-dollar bailouts. Again, in a post-pandemic era, we look for pathways for transformation, with new political-social-economic games in play, and the potential for heightened *collective political intelligence*.

Scientific knowledge and expert practice may yet emerge as the source of trust and confidence, even in “post-truth” societies. But the massive uncertainties in basic science are now entangled with existential controversies, with the outcome unclear.³

The trillion-dollar question is how to shift from one scenario to another. We can explore this through an analysis of the types of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (while acknowledging that all can work in parallel). In some, the pandemic is defined as a set of technical problems, to be fixed by functional solutions such as improved epidemiological modelling and health care. Other approaches acknowledge that there will be no “return to normal” and expect an evolution to a new status quo by way of markets and innovation, accepting vast inequality in the interim. But this challenge calls for more than a technical fix or winner-takes-all competition—it calls for pathways that can mobilize deeper forms of “co-learning” and “co-production” between all stakeholders, i.e., the qualities of a *collective pandemic intelligence*. Some countries, such as New Zealand, are showing signs of this deeper approach, with rapid mobilization, responsive policy, and enhancement of trust and reciprocity between all parts of society.

So whether the future is one of hazmat suits and algorithmic control, or new-found communities partying in the streets, we can map out the co-evolutionary pathways. There are potentially open

doors for intelligent finance, integrated health systems, inclusive social mesh-works, synergistic eco-social-business models, deliberative-associative multi-level governance, and many more. All this calls for a new generation of methods and tools for the mapping and design of such systems, and for a process of building the shared vision and collective action, for the great transformations ahead...

Endnotes

1. This brief sketch draws on Joe Ravetz, *Deeper City: Collective Intelligence and the Synergistic Pathways from Smart to Wise* (New York: Routledge, 2020).
2. On the principle that “seeing is believing,” see the visualizations here: <https://urban3dotnet.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/gti-response-pandemic-3.0-joe-ravetz-08-05-20.pdf>.
3. Post-normal science is a useful approach to this dilemma. See David Waltner-Toews, et al., “PostNormal Pandemics: Why Covid-19 Requires A New Approach To Science,” *Discover Society*, March 27, 2020, <https://discoversociety.org/2020/03/27/post-normal-pandemics-why-covid-19-requires-a-new-approach-to-science>.

About the Author



Joe Ravetz is Co-Director of the Collaboratory for Urban Resilience & Energy at the Manchester Urban Institute, University of Manchester, where he specializes in strategic thinking for sustainable cities and regions. He serves on the editorial boards of *Foresight Journal*, *International Journal of Sustainable Development*, and *Sustainable Mediterranean Construction* and is a Principal at the non-profit SAMI Consulting. His books include *City-Region 2020: Integrated Planning for a Sustainable Environment* and *Deeper City: Collective Intelligence and the Pathways from Smart to Wise*.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Joe Ravetz, "Exploring Pandemic Scenarios," a contribution to the forum *After the Pandemic: Which Future?*, *Great Transition Initiative* (September 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pandemic-scenario-ravetz>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.