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# What Will Life Be Like After the Pandemic?



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**Having exposed society’s dysfunction, the COVID-19 crisis invites us to rethink our future.**

Albert Camus’ novel *The Plague* starts with rats dying, followed by a tsunami of human deaths. The town’s leaders are reluctant to acknowledge the epidemic at first but are soon forced to take the situation seriously. With martial law imposed, no one is allowed to enter or leave the city. Being unable to communicate with or see loved ones weighs heavily on everyone – for some, more than the threat of death itself. Law and order quickly break down. As the plague continues to ravage the town, funerals turn into rush jobs, with no ceremony or emotion. The first “serum”, a kind of vaccine, turns out to be a failure. Eventually, a better version allows the quarantine to be lifted.

Doesn’t this story sound familiar? A very similar scenario is playing itself out right now. Camus was trying to describe how human beings respond to and live with a completely absurd death sentence – death being part of the cycle of life. Perhaps was he also trying to show how little it takes for a society to fall apart?

In 1947 (the publication date of Camus' novel), we got a strong reminder of the unpredictability of life, as well as concern for how humanity was evolving. But attention wasn't paid. The 2011 movie *Contagion*, directed by Steven Soderberg, provided a more modern warning about the precariousness of the human condition. Many of its scenes hit very close to home. The movie tracks the arrival of a fictional virus that ends up killing millions of people worldwide. The outbreak sends officials from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organisation scrambling to figure out the origins of the virus, how it spreads and how to find a cure. And just like our current crisis, it takes much teetering before anyone realises the gravity of the situation. The film includes the economic struggles of ordinary people.

### **Will we learn from COVID-19?**

The interesting question now is what the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic is going to look like. When the crisis subsides, will we go back to normal? Will we even want to? Or does COVID-19 provide us with an important learning experience?

Hopefully, a cure to coronavirus will be found. But whatever happens, we should keep in mind that the threat of infectious disease is not going away. Pandemics are not the mere imaginary product of a few artistic types. Frankly speaking, we are at a dramatic inflection point.

Our response to this pandemic will have an enormous effect on the future of humankind. More than anything, the coronavirus has highlighted existing political, economic and social dysfunctions. It has also shown the crisis of leadership. It is an invitation to make radical changes to the economy, our social behaviour and the role of government in our lives.

I would like to suggest two scenarios for our future: a rather pessimistic one and a more optimistic one. We could see parts of these scenarios overlap.

### **A pessimistic scenario**

In crisis situations, most people tend to regress to a state of greater dependency. It usually results in a cry for the kind of leadership that can soothe collective fears and anxieties. It may explain a paradoxical phenomenon: Even highly incompetent leaders may rise in popularity at such times. Indeed, is the leadership of the most powerful countries in the world

up to the present challenge? Can they be trusted? Unfortunately, too many of our leaders have proven to be quite ineffective. And with populations in a state of psychological regression, they may get away with it.

When the going gets tough, societies tend to withdraw instead of reaching out. Our sense of helplessness increases the appeal of national identity politics, with a move back to the nation-state. We can expect identity politics to become even stronger. In fact, this scenario is already happening, if we consider the way various countries are trying to acquire badly needed items to conquer the pandemic.

Sadly, this pessimistic scenario plays neatly into an agenda of totalitarian control – a fact that isn't lost on autocratic leaders. For them, the pandemic is a convenient excuse to channel people's growing sense of helplessness into autocracy. Populations may become more willing to hand over control to governments. As a rule, when we are frightened, we are more willing to cut down on civil liberties. Even when leaders pretend to be democratic, under the right conditions, the inner autocrat may emerge. There is also the potential for a search for scapegoats. After all, nothing unites a population better than an outside threat. Thus, apart from regressive processes, paranoid reactions can also come to the fore.

The infrastructure, technology and legislative framework for types of martial law have long existed. We must consider how these exceptional measures could easily become permanent. I am referring to such things as the abdication of personal liberty (even extrajudicial, indefinite detentions), censorship of the press and the internet (supposedly to combat disinformation), the denial of freedom of assembly, the tracking of everyone's movements at any time and restrictions on travel. It may even include giving the state greater control over our bodies (as reflected in compulsory vaccination and other medical treatments).

Furthermore, this pessimistic scenario may involve reducing people's sense of community through various social changes: pre-eminence of e-commerce (no more shopping in brick-and-mortar shops), the fading out of office space, a focus on online learning and play, as well as the remote viewing of sports and entertainment. The idea of **Gemeinschaft** – a society based on close social ties – may become a relic of the past.

Many of these developments were already underway, but the arrival of COVID-19 has greatly accelerated their acceptance and could render them

permanent. We need to ask ourselves: How much of our lives and civil liberties do we want to sacrifice at the altar of a sense of greater security? Do we want to live in a world where human beings can rarely congregate? If social distancing becomes the norm, can we put up with the likely increase in isolation-induced depression, paranoid reactions, drug abuse and suicides?

### **An optimistic scenario**

Crises do not necessarily only bring the forces of regression and paranoia to the fore; they can also create greater solidarity. As we have seen many times over, when people unite, miracles can happen.

We are now on the cusp of many critical decisions. The pandemic should encourage us to reflect on the power of our collective will.

Despite the enormous number of jobs lost, could the pandemic be an opportunity to direct our energies to other kinds of activities? What parts of the economy would we like to restore, and what parts could we do without? Given the increasing concern about our planet and the disastrous effects of global warming, do we really need all this commuting, all this air travel?

From an evolutionary point of view, health comes from community. Human life doesn't thrive in isolation. Being part of a community is important for our mental health. As it is, we are already living in much more distant ways than has ever been the case. Should we continue on this path? The pandemic could give us an opportunity to restore lost connections and create more interrelated, cooperative societies. The coordinated efforts of scientists all over the globe to find a cure for the coronavirus suggest such cooperation is possible.

The present pandemic could spur us to tackle issues that we have always been quite aware of but have preferred to ignore. It could be our chance to do something about the rise of dysfunctional leaders; to decrease socio-economic inequities; to really fight addictions; and to take measures to avert ecological collapse. First, we need to accept the reality of living in an interconnected world. We must develop a more "glocal" outlook, one in which we think globally and act locally.

Above all, the coronavirus crisis opens the door for us to create more compassionate societies - the kinds of societies that acknowledge how we are all connected and that our planet should be managed for the generations to come. Chief Seattle once said, "Humankind has not woven the web of

life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.”

### Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/what-will-life-be-after-pandemic>

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### About the series

#### Covid-19

Covid-19 is no longer a global health emergency but its impact on public health, the global economy and the future of work cannot be overstated. INSEAD's thought leaders — both faculty and their close collaborators in the practitioner and entrepreneurship communities — give their informed perspectives that could help us not just weather the crisis but emerge from it stronger than ever.