**How We Respond to COVID-19 Foreshadows Future Life in the Anthropocene**

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The events of the past few weeks have given us a glimpse into what the future of life in the Anthropocene might look like. The global community has been faced with a collective crisis, one that requires that we work together to address a problem that we have globally created. When the Spanish flu killed at least 20 million people between 1918 and 1920, the global population was 1.8 billion people, the primary mode of transportation was rail or ship, and the primary mode of information was the daily newspaper. The world was defined by (relatively) low density, limited movement, and slow access to limited information.

The COVID-19 crisis is hitting the world when the global population is 7.5 billion, the primary modes of transportation are airplane and auto, and information is consumed via physical and virtual portals, often instantly. The world is defined by (relatively) high density, rapid distant movement, nearly instant access to diverse information. In this brave new world, [one party in Westport Connecticut](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/coronavirus-westport-connecticut-party-zero.html) can infect hundreds, possibly thousands of people around the globe.

In COVID-19, we are facing the ultimate [prisoner’s dilemma](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prisoner-dilemma/) where our survival depends upon our collective actions and, as a result, the morality of individual actions takes on new meaning. This challenge shares many commonalities with the challenge of the Anthropocene. And how we respond as a society offers a glimpse into how society will respond to the future challenges of the Anthropocene - what we have come to colloquially call the “new normal” with increased storm severity, droughts, wildfires, and the movement of vector borne diseases. How will we respond? With denial or panic? With collective action or individual competition?

We have been studying this question through a series of [papers](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0007650318816468) and a [book](https://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/management/organisation-studies/re-engaging-sustainability-anthropocene-era-institutional-approach?format=PB#description) that offer a way to structure how we might answer these questions. We have studied multiple possible futures along a spectrum with two diametrically opposed possibilities at either end, ranging from the dystopian to the utopian. Remnants of each can be seen in how we have responded to the COVID-19 crisis, and these near futures possibilities can be seen in the climate change crisis (one of the nine [planetary boundaries](https://science.sciencemag.org/content/347/6223/1259855) of the Anthropocene, and one of four that we are crossing at our peril). How we respond to COVID-19 will reveal a lot about how we will – and can - respond to climate change and the crossing of other planetary boundaries.

On the dystopian end of the spectrum, our public and political discourse is animated by disagreement over, not only the reality of our emerging Anthropocene problems, but also the institutional structures on which that understanding is based. A diverse range of viewpoints and “facts” of varying legitimacy compete for dominance with no one actor emerging as the legitimate voice for defining the problems or solutions we face. Stasis and inaction result. This is a social reality that is dominated by those who wish to preserve their economic or political position in society as it maintains the status quo; though the status quo is untenable as crises continue to worsen. We can see some elements of this confused social order in divisions on collective awareness of the coronavirus crisis today as well as the reality of climate change that has been taking place since the late 1990s. We see people and organizations who deny the reality of the problem, ignore warnings and regulations for behavior change, and take actions focused on individual survival or even personal and monetary gain at the expense of the collective well-being. We can also see the amplification of the divisions in society through media outlets (social and traditional) like Google, Facebook, Twitter, cable news and others that label inconvenient truths and uncomfortable realities as “fake news,” de-legitimize expertise by equating it to mere opinions, challenge evidence-based reasoning and analyses that should inform thoughtful and objective debate, and hyper polarize perspectives and worldviews, such that any kind of meaningful dialogue or debate becomes fruitless, if not impossible. We have called this possible reality *Collapsing Systems*.

On the utopian end of the spectrum, we see a massive cultural shift akin to the European Enlightenment of the early 17th century, one that transformed the way we understood and related to the natural world. We have called this possible reality *Re-Enlightenment*. Prior to the Enlightenment, people in European regions were embedded in a set of “Middle Ages” institutions that shaped their view of society and nature: nature was unknowable, animated by mystical forces, and subsumed human society. But after the Enlightenment, we exalted human ability to dominate nature and ushered in the “Age of Reason,” in which the natural world came to be viewed as a machine that could be dismantled, dissected and reassembled to achieve human desires. The transition from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment was accompanied by the recasting of existing social institutions and the creation of new ones, such as the natural and medical sciences. The present transition from the Enlightenment to *Re-Enlightenment* suggests a similar recasting of our current social institutions and creation of new ones. From a Middle Ages worldview where nature determined human society, to an Enlightenment worldview where society determined nature, we now find ourselves faced with an Anthropocene worldview in which society and nature are interconnected, mutually and simultaneously determining one another.

*Re-Enlightenment* is built on a new idea of collective awareness and collective responsibility. Where prior environmental problems are characterized as “[commons problems](https://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles_pdf/tragedy_of_the_commons.pdf),” where individuals gain the benefit of environmental harm while segments of society incur the collective harm, environmental problems in *Re-Enlightenment* reflect a collective awareness that all of society (including the individuals in it seeking gain) incurs the harm caused by aggregated individual actions (or even discrete individual actions like those that may spread the coronavirus). Such an awareness will lead to a sense of collective responsibility that moves beyond standard notions of “rational utility” and self-interest to consider instead, “[flourishing](https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=22399)” and thriving in ways that do not infringe on the possibilities for humans and other life-forms to do the same. Collective awareness and responsibility will emerge from a field of actors that is far more diverse and inclusive than our present constellation of powerful actors, those that are and may continue to define other possible futures for Anthropocene Society.

Just as we can see remnants of *Collapsing Systems* in today’s experience, we can see glimmerings of *Re-Enlightenment* in both COVID-19 and climate change. In COVID-19, we witnessed our social, political and economic institutions responding to a collective crisis. While the response from certain sectors of the federal and global government have been less than what many would wish for, other institutions at the state, local, economic, non-profit and local regimes have mobilized as a collective response. We have witnessed many selfless responses that have focused on the collective good from health care workers, scientific institutions, postal workers, corporations and religious institutions, all issuing a call for giving, shared responsibility and community relationships. On climate change, we see similar responses from state and local governments as well as from the private and non-profit sectors on efforts to go carbon neutral or even carbon negative, despite inadequate leadership from federal and global governments. And we can see calls for collective awareness and collective responsibility from [religious](https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2015/09/25/presiding-bishop-other-faith-leaders-endorse-popes-climate-change-imperative/) and civic leaders to work together to address a common problem

What will be our future in the Anthropocene? Make no mistake, there will be fundamental changes in our physical and social realities that will result from the changes we are making in the planetary ecosystem in the Anthropocene. On the economic front, the economic costs of both the COVID-19 crisis and the climate crisis will run into the trillions of US dollars. The Bank for International Settlements, an umbrella organization for the world’s central banks, warned that climate change could be one of the [largest economic dislocations in history](https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/careers-finance/sns-nyt-climate-change-financial-meltdown-20200124-vc2nijltqbf5pj7gtxqgyrytcu-story.html). Sadly, the two issues interact in the short term as climate-related actions may be delayed as the expensive efforts to repair the economy in the post-COVID era are undertaken.

But more than economic impact, the Anthropocene will usher in cultural changes that many within society will find uncomfortable and will resist; just like COVID-19, people will fear a loss of the world they once knew. They will resist the “new normal.” In the Anthropocene, [Roy Scranton](https://www.technologyreview.com/s/613343/lessons-from-a-genocide-can-prepare-humanity-for-climate-apocalypse/) warns of a collapse in culture that parallels that resulting from past genocides. He asks whether “we will be able to transition to a new way of life in the world we’ve made, one where we can no longer take many things for granted, such as: a global marketplace capable of swiftly satisfying a plethora of human desires; easy travel over vast distances; air-conditioned environments; wilderness preserved for human appreciation; better lives for our children; safety from natural disasters; and abundant clean water.” In his book [*The Uninhabitable Earth*](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/586541/the-uninhabitable-earth-by-david-wallace-wells/9780525576709/), David Wallace-Wells lays out a similarly dystopian future, but also notes that there is great uncertainty in predicting our future because it is unclear what humans will do to change that future. Philosophers like [Bruno Latour](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/543416), [Mike Hulme](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/661274), [Dipesh Chakrabarty](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/596640?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) and others have explored how this new reality may break down the age-old distinctions between nature and society, between natural history and human history, and give rise to new approaches to issues of justice: “[justice between generations, between small island-nations and the polluting countries (both past and prospective), between developed, industrialized nations (historically responsible for most emissions) and the newly industrialized ones](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/678154?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contentshttps://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/678154?seq=1).” With such new approaches comes a recalibration of Enlightenment ideas such as “[freedom, choice, morality, citizenship, difference and rights](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/608398).”

The COVID-19 crisis is a test of the extent to which we can and will change our systems to respond to what is coming in the Anthropocene. Will we develop more resilient social, technological and economic systems to usher in *Re-Enlightenment*? Or, will we maintain the status quo, deny that a “new normal” is upon us and lock into a structure of institutions that are ill-equipped to handle the problems that we are soon to face? Will we work together for the common good or will we compete for finite resources? To our minds, these are the ultimate questions that COVID-19 has presented us. Let’s hope the answers are to bring us to what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.”