

## Interdisciplinary Panel on “Catastrophe and Crisis”

May 2021

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## What is the crisis from the point of view of science?

In the autumn of 2020 I attended an online lecture series organized by MIT on the COVID-19 pandemic. I heard some of the leading scientists from around the world speak about the knowledge they had accumulated concerning the virus and its interaction with the human body. I was honestly impressed by how much we already know about the (molecular) biology and the genetics of the disease. And all this deep mechanistic understanding has been accumulated in the relatively short period of time since the first appearance of this new pathogen and the recognition that we are dealing with a new and deadly infection.

However, the next day I was walking through my hometown and observed real human beings interacting with each other. I suddenly realized that all this impressive scientific knowledge is useless if it is not embedded in an understanding and appreciation of human behaviour, of societal, economic, and political structures. In addition to investigating the basic natural science underlying a biological or physical phenomenon we should give as much attention to social science and human psychology.

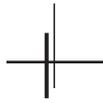
Why do people show risky behaviour patterns? Why do they ignore warnings? Why does fake news spread faster than solid knowledge based on evidence? A disease shows the vulnerabilities of social entities along the whole spectrum from the smallest possible units all the way to supranational structures. It points to their vulnerabilities on multiple levels, from the (dis)organization of health insurance, the efficiency of health care systems or lack thereof, to the structure of labour markets, working life patterns, or housing and living conditions more general. Identifying and characterizing the sequence of a viral genome is only a minor achievement compared to these questions.

The same kind of reasoning will have to be applied when we are discussing for example global warming or other large scale ecological crises. The physics of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere of our planet and the flow of energy from the sun to the earth have been studied in great detail and are largely understood. However, the various layers of individual and collective human decisions that can lead to unwanted consequences many years down the road are much more complex and are very incompletely understood.

The scientific system can only offer its contribution to the overall societal and political discourse. Scientists can model the spread of an infectious disease under different scenarios and the subsequent consequences from the number of patients in hospitals to the overall death rate. The same reasoning applies of course to modelling of the degree of global warming and its impact on weather patterns in countries and geographical regions. Based on their respective values different societies might thus come up with different measurements and

interventions. Another layer will of course be the acceptance and the implementation of such interventions on a personal basis. Individuals or subpopulations might disagree with the societal consensus and as a consequence decide to ignore recommendations, guidelines or even laws.

History teaches us that science alone will never be enough to deal with a crisis. It is a very useful tool that has shown time and again that it can help us to make impactful reality-based decisions. However, we always have to see the bigger picture and to understand how scientific knowledge is embedded in human endeavours and organizations. ■



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## Literature, Pandemic, Crisis

In the beginning of this epoch of pandemic and crisis there were reports about a sudden increase of interest for a novel that had been long forgotten: Albert Camus' *La Peste* from 1947. I read several references to this novel, also a couple of new readings. That made me go to my bookshelves to find my old copy. I believe it must have been 60 years since I read it but I still remember the strong and morally urgent impression it made. Camus aimed for an existential problematic but this time it was the lapse of the plague that was fascinating, specially the possibility that it suddenly — like in the novel — could ebb away. And moral and existential problems are of course not absent in our time of pandemic.

I turned towards another plague-writer: Daniel Defoe with *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a fictitious diary which explains, with great detail about the devastating London plague of 1665, the work was published in 1722. And then one of my favourites, *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni, published as *I promesse sposi* 1827, and reports details about the plague in Milan, in 1630. It is a magnificent novel about a young couple and their fantastic adventures and all the tests that their love has to endure. The plague comes late in the novel and it comes as a shock, suddenly the elaborate plot slows down and we read instead a detailed day-by-day

account of the development of the plague, from the first few cases in the beginning, the denial, the staggering development, the crowded hospitals, the deserted children, the stretcher-bearers, the profiteers. Manzoni found his facts in a contemporary report; he mixes it with his romance about the loving couple; they get involved but obviously they survive and the novel can continue on the other side of the plague.

The three novels have not only the plague in common but also a documentary ambition. Camus is of course writing *La Peste* as a novel but the novel is organized according to the development of the plague from the beginning to the end, sometimes day-by-day. Defoe wrote a novel in the form of a diary with documentary pretensions. And when Manzoni reaches the plague in his novel it becomes less of a romantic novel and more of a documentary, following the plague day-by-day. It seems as if the plague does not fit in with the novel; instead, the writers approach the diary.

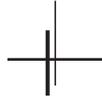
An old-fashioned diary could hardly be literary; the reason is that it has no other reader than the writer. But it is of course possible to use the diary for literary purposes. I come to think of some famous examples that seem to show that the diary comes into literary use in order to say something about a crisis — even if the crisis may be more narrowly private than a plague. When Strindberg tells the story of the crisis he calls "Inferno" he ends the text with the following declaration: "The reader believing that this book is a poem is invited to see my diary. I have been writing this day-by-day since 1895, and this story is only an extended and ordered extract."

We may read his *Inferno* as a novel but Strindberg wants us to think of it as a diary, thereby giving it an authenticity that would be lost in fiction. Another writer using the diary for literary purposes was Franz Kafka. Maybe that was because his life was a permanent crisis, documented in his extensive diary. At the same time his diary is a literary workshop: Kafka includes dreams, fantasies, literary drafts and also finished literary texts. For instance the short story *Das Urteil* (*The Judgment*) written in his diary during a night, in 1912; it was one of the very few texts that he found worth publishing. Thus, Kafka used his diary for literary purposes, even to involve himself in literature; after all he declared himself in a famous letter "to be nothing but literature, and I cannot be and do not want to be anything else."

Or take the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz: during the Second World War he found himself in exile in Argentina, a country where he did not even know the language. This existential crisis was the starting point for the Diary that he started to write in the 1950s and published in a journal about exile literature. Gombrowicz makes use of the diary in order to assert himself, even to invent himself. He includes biographical glimpses and hints about actualities, he writes extensively about French philosophy, he severely judges Polish literature, not least the literature of exile, he defends his own writing. And, above all, the diary proclaims a subject. "My only defence," he writes — defence against being misunderstood, being made invisible — "is to define myself — to describe myself all the time."

Maybe diaries belong to an older age: Net culture has taken over just as e-mails have taken over from letter-writing. Today, anyone can become a Gombrowicz, inventing and re-inventing and asserting himself or herself in a continual Facebook flow. Perhaps this means that Net culture is the appropriate medium for reporting about a crisis, a pandemic or any other crisis. Perhaps there will emerge new versions of what Defoe wrote about the plague, what Strindberg wrote of his inferno, what Gombrowicz wrote about himself. It is impossible

to know what will come. And such is the nature of crisis: its outcome is impossible to know. But we can be reasonably sure that the diary is an adequate way of making a literary document out of the crisis. ■



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## Crisis from a managerial perspective

To understand what a crisis is from the perspective of management and quality sciences, we should go back to the beginnings of this science discipline, to the times when the foundations of the theory of organization and management were formed. The industrial revolution brought not only a huge increase in production capacity, but also the increase in complexity of the organizations that these increased capacities offered. What so far was in the owner's mind and his 'papier notebook' became too complex, both quantitatively and qualitatively. These challenges were at the heart of what we now call scientific management. The first representatives of the *Industrial Engineering* approach, to mention only Frederick Taylor, Henri Gantt, Frank Gilbreth, Henry Ford, Henri Le Châtelier and Karol Adamiecki, were focused on the search for operational efficiency. Representatives of another approach the *Universalistic* one, represented by researchers such as Henri Fayol or Max Weber, were focused on searching for universal principles of organizing work. Representing both approaches, adopted the machine as a model (metaphor) of the organization. This assumption had far-reaching consequences also in the approach to what it is and how to deal with the crisis. If we assume that the organization is (should be) and behaves like a machine, we agree on certain assumptions. The organization becomes an instrument of achieving a predetermined, precisely formulated goal. The participants of the organization become only tools to achieve this goal — "a cog in the machine", the supervisor has the unilateral right to give orders to subordinates and enforce their obedience, and the key decision-making powers are located in one place — at the highest level of the organizational hierarchy.

Such a perception of the organization has certain consequences in terms of the logic of the organization's functioning and the approach to its design. The sum of the efficient and reliable elements (parts) of the organization will form an efficient whole. The possibility of making a mistake by the most uncertain element (part), which is a human, should be eliminated. Independent elements of the organization and informal connections between them should be eliminated. Finally the management of the organization should enable it an error-free operation, that is, minimization of "friction in the machine" by planning, ordering, coordination and control. The above-described effects of perceiving the organization as a machine are deeply rooted to this day in the minds of managers. In particular, in their perception and attitude to crises. In a 'well-oiled' machine made up of perfectly matched parts, a crisis is a 'failure'. From the perspective of the machine, there is no benefit to the failure. It is a nuisance, a problem that must be solved and 'forgotten' in order to be able to return to the normal functioning of the organization (machine). The origin of such approach to a conflict are: the fear of conflict, the need to 'put out fire' and the imperative of unanimity (often reduced to a one-dimensional perception of the world of organization) can be found in these nineteenth-century assumptions regarding the perception of an organization as a machine. Crisis is evil, crisis is lack of development.

In order to understand the results of such an approach to crisis and its impact on the organization, it is worth paying attention to the consequences of — unfortunately logically sounding verbally — of the above-mentioned assumption that *the sum of efficient and reliable elements (parts) of the organization will form an efficient whole*. Thus, if each of the participants of the organization will do their own job and improve their part of the organization, the whole organization will be well and will function efficiently. Unfortunately, the practice of the everyday functioning of organizations shows that they are not (as the precursors of management wanted) a simple sum of parts (elements) and the key to their success and efficient functioning is cooperation.

The dilemmas and shortcomings of perceiving an organization as a machine caused researchers to turn to another metaphor — organization as an organism. Representatives of the *Humanization* approach, to mention Mary Parker Follett or Elton Mayo, redirected the perception of the organization as a complex whole (system) remaining in constant relations with its "natural" environment. The dominant goal of the organization has become its survival and development. The internal balance becomes the natural and desired state of the organization. Changes in the organization — that were till now only the result of the will of the creator (organization engineer) have become either the result of adaptation to the changing requirements of the environment or a natural effect of the organization's life cycle. The basis for developing a strategy for the operation of such perceived organization has become the assessment of the environment and owned resources, conditions of market competition. In order to break the mechanistic approach to organization, the demand for flexibility in organizational structures emerged.

Changing the understanding of what an organization is has also changed the approach to the role of crisis. It is not so unequivocally evil anymore. It becoming a 'disease'. The disease can benefit the organism, we can learn lessons and immunize. However, this does not change the fundamental assumption — in order to develop, the organization (organism) must recover. It is impossible to function in a crisis (disease). So a crisis is a (lesser) evil, a crisis is an imbalance.

The legacy of the management approaches described above results in our (managers but also employees) approach to the crisis. To change this approach, to understand how the crisis can drive the development of the organization, it is worth asking yourself a few questions. Is the crisis a violation (a threat) to the unity of the organization and disrupting the perfect fit of its parts? Is the crisis a violation of the balance which is necessary for the organization to grow? These ingrained worries and sometimes even fears make it difficult to see the energy contained in the conflict. If we change the assumption that a person (employee, department, entire organization) who is in conflict with us is our enemy and has bad intentions on the assumption that such a person can see other aspects and also cares about the welfare and development of the organization — there appears a space opening up for perceiving conflict as a developmental force. As a result, the crisis becomes an opportunity for change, for improvement and for noticing new opportunities. For this to happen, we need to break down the entrenched 19<sup>th</sup> century beliefs about unity and stability as conditions for the development of the organization. Finally, we have to learn systems thinking — seeing organizations as interrelated and interacting elements. We must, as employees and managers, get out of the specific comfort zone provided by the above-mentioned assumption, the sum of efficient and reliable elements (parts) of the organization will create an efficient whole. We should no longer accept the “let’s do our thing” attitude. We must learn to look wider, see the system of mutual relations and interests of the organization, and finally learn to function in constant change and gain from the opportunities generated by the crisis. ■



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## The Crisis as a Theological Problem — the Protestant Perspective

The 21<sup>st</sup> century began with a great shock when there was the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. It was the event that marked the end of an era of freedom to travel, border crossing without barriers and control, freedom of expression on the Internet, as well as mutual trust and tolerance. Although it was a specific event, the reaction to

it was a global one, affecting *de facto* most of earth's inhabitants. Again in 2008, local events based on speculation and human pursuit of endless profit, led to a global economic crisis that affected billions of people. However, the crisis was a phenomenon that had not appeared until the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In 2018, one hundred years had passed since the end of the first global war conflict that took place in the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The years of cruelty of World War I, mass killings, nationalism and a culture of contempt put into great doubt the sense of the modernist project of faith in the continuous progress of humanity, part of which was the evangelical liberal theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and especially the movement referred to as cultural Protestantism. Faith in human moral strength, hope for a better future and love, almost self-love of the human kind — were characteristic extremes of this ideology.

It was in the context of his critique of faith in human progress and moral strength that the Swiss evangelical theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) used the theological concept of crisis. Barth's programmatic book written in 1919, simply titled *Letter to the Romans* (originally: *Römerbrief*), contains a critique of theological liberalism and the program of dialectical theology. In this monumental work almost every page contains the word crisis, in the shadow of which, as it were, a rural pastor who was still unknown to the world, created the foundations of one of the most famous theological theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The thoughts contained in the analysis of Paul's letter to the Romans were called the *theology of crisis*. Indeed, Barth states that *revelatio dei*, or God's self-revelation, is a crisis for the world. Crisis from the Greek biblical word *krino* means passing judgment on what is belonging to haughtiness, what is human, not considering what its Creator claims against *homo sapiens*. In the noun form, the New Testament uses the word *krisis*, which means judgment, verdict, but also a trial, or even the process of reaching judgment in the light of God's Word. According to Barth's interpretation, all that is human, all our achievements, must be called into question. The theology of the crisis of the 1920s proclaims the memento: man, humanity with everything, with his plans and achievements, is subject to God's judgment, and this means nothingness, man's end and his death in the world. Barth and his theological school warn the world that the last word always belongs to God and not to us.

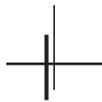
This genuine crisis affected Evangelical theology and, more broadly, all of Protestantism, especially German-speaking areas after World War II. It was pointed out that the Church had not emerged victorious from the trials of World War II. It was said not only about the powerlessness of man but also of the Creator, especially in the trend known as the theology of God's death. Not only the Church but also God has been judged by many — *krino* — as an accomplice or outright: *schuldig*, guilty! Thanks to the attitude, testimony, and thoughts of such individuals as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45), a martyr and witness to faith, that unique crisis in the history of Evangelical theology was able to be overcome and to undertake a position of faith after 1945 more horizontally than vertically. *Fides per charitatem efficax* — active faith through love, as the sixteenth-century Christian reformer, Dr. Martin Luther said, has become the proper vocation of evangelicalism in the last 70 years.

Protestant theology of the last few decades has reacted very quickly to social changes, reflecting and judging such phenomena as east-west tensions, north-south economic crisis, ecological crisis, or the climate crisis. A special place in this context is occupied by the Lutheran World Federation, an organization established in 1947 as a confessional and a theological response to the post-war crisis of values. At its founding assembly in Lund, the LWF

defined itself as an international voluntary organization of Lutheran Churches which others call the Churches of Augsburg Confession from all parts of the world. The principles and goals of the Federation were contained in the Statute which placed strong emphasis on mutual support and solidarity. The aid action provided by churches from the richer part of the world to those who suffered as a result of World War II cannot be overestimated. It needs to be highlighted that the issues of service in the world and the defence of human rights are among the priorities of the activities and theological reflection of the Lutheran community of churches. It is worth recalling that the LWF — defines itself now as a communion of the Lutheran Churches — already at its 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 2017, operating in Windhoek, Namibia, the LWF recognized that the goal of being carbon neutral by 2050 is one of the most important goals of humankind!

It was the Lutheran World Federation that was one of the first global Christian bodies which comprehensively responded to the crisis of the Coronavirus pandemic. Already at the very beginning of 2020, the Federation's authorities placed particular emphasis on liturgical and prayer activities as well as on the problem of the pandemic in theological and social work. In the LWF materials for the entire year 2020, the problem of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic certainly had the highest priority. The global issue caused by COVID-19 has been described as a theological, political and ecumenical challenge. The universal, overall human dimension of the pandemic crisis was indicated as a global object of Christian and universal care. However, much more audience and media attention was received for the prayer of Pope Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, in the empty St. Peter's Square on March 27, 2020, when in a meditative prayer for the end of the pandemic, he reflected on the essence of the disease and pointed out that the world did not wake up in the face of wars and planetary injustice.

Protestant Churches of all traditions: Lutheran, Reformed, United or Evangelical, especially in Europe, have done something unheard of in many years of history: they closed their churches and chapels to the faithful during the first wave of the pandemic, out of concern and responsibility for the life and health of others. This was the practical Evangelical response to the crisis of the AD 2020 pandemic. Protestant theology points directly to the limits of human power in every social crisis. Protestantism, like no other great confessional movement in Christianity, shows human sinfulness, human imperfection. The theological successor of Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon and Jean Calvin, emphasize that holiness is given to us by God only (*sola gratia et fide*), it is a pure gift; it is not given as a goal that can be achieved here on earth. God is in heaven and man is on earth — Karl Barth repeated. Humility, awareness of our own limits and the possibilities of humankind as well as mutual respect for every man and nature, should be the constant points of reference in overcoming local and global crisis. ■



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## Learning to live with Great Uncertainty

Corona rapidly became the word on everyone's lips in spring 2020. There has long been frustration at the individualism and fragmentation of the life we share. It has been many years since the hugely popular (and first ever) Swedish talk show, *Hylands Hörna*, gave people in Sweden a common narrative to talk about! Although Swedish individualism often means that we do virtually the same things anyway, albeit separately, the image of an individualistic society has become quite embedded.

And then came a paradox. A virus gave us a shared narrative that no one could avoid, while the risk of infection simultaneously isolated us from each other. A topic for discussion became whether a crisis such as this brings out the best in us in the form of us personally taking responsibility for the common good, or vice versa. Is egoism the victor? How will individuals, society, the world, emerge out of the end of a pandemic?

Most of us have not experienced a crisis in society of such scope before. We have mostly heard accounts and seen pictures and films of other people's societal crises. Nevertheless, we know that our ancestors have faced many crises and disasters that became matters of life and death, and that for hundreds of years, the Church's prayers have conveyed immense distress. We are reminded of this during Lent when we pray with the words of the litany: "From all sins, from lies and superstition ... from plague and famine, from conflicts and world wars ... from insurgence and division, from fire and peril, from a violent end and from eternal death. Protect us, gracious Lord God."

When the plague raged in Europe in the 1520s, reformer Martin Luther wrote in his open letter *Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague* about our responsibility as fellow humans in a crisis in society. The death tolls were sky-high, and rapid and coordinated crisis communication must have been practically non-existent, but the basic ideas in his letter remain relevant. Luther emphasises that we have a duty to safeguard each other as fellow human beings, for example, by listening to medical advice, not taking unnecessary risks and using common sense; in other words being judicious. He also underlines the fact that we have special responsibility to look after the most vulnerable people in society. And in everything, that we should and can live trusting in God. In this trust we are strengthened through the word of God and the sacraments, even though the pandemic creates obstacles to us celebrating the Eucharist as usual. Despite this, we can trust in a God who looks upon us with mercy in our weakness, sends the spirit of comfort and gives us strength to defy the devil, in other words, the forces that want to divide, break down and let cowardice and evil triumph over goodness.

"For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." These words from 2 Timothy (1:7) are particularly striking in a situation of collective crisis.

Times of crisis are obviously times of worry. Worry about our loved ones and our society. About developments around the world, about the economy and jobs, and about how the weakest and most vulnerable people are affected. The best thing that can happen to us is that we succeed in transforming our worry and fear into love and consideration.

Times of crisis are also times of reflection. Some people are facing greater demands on them than ever before. Many others who are used to packed schedules, at work and in their families, suddenly have gaps in their calendars. Meetings and trips are being cancelled, as are cultural and sporting events. Many people are spending more time at home. Life proceeds at a slower pace, or is perhaps even boring. Life gets quieter, or perhaps noisier. There is more scope to spend time with your partner and children, but also a higher incidence of domestic violence. Stressful in other ways. Time to ask and ponder: How do we actually want to live with each other? How do we live with and before God?

A time of crisis is also largely a time of learning. As we know, each crisis is an opportunity — even when it includes dealing with anxiety and uncertainty in a good way. The Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard wrote: “... [to learn to feel anxious] is an adventure that every human being must go through — to learn to be anxious in order that he may not perish by never having been in anxiety or by succumbing in anxiety. Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate.” If we apply this to a crisis situation: a person who has learned to live with great uncertainty has learned the ultimate. In the long run, fear is quite a bad advisor. We need a good measure of spiritual resilience in order to endure, to maintain the moral high ground and to stand by what we know in our heart of hearts is right, true and beautiful.

If we ask ourselves how we should be a church in times of crisis, the obvious answer is as follows: precisely by being a church and performing our basic tasks — worship, teaching, diaconia and mission. The form and content of the Church’s task are connected and interact with each other. In crisis, the forms need to be changed first and most clearly, while we are keen to seek stability in the content. However, to be a church we must also think about content wisely, that is, about the theological issues raised by a crisis such as this pandemic.

When everything is running smoothly as usual in a well-ordered fashion, our spiritual resilience is not put to the test. We do not often need detailed, well-founded answers to theological questions in such circumstances. Superficiality can spread unchallenged throughout society. It becomes easy to stop regarding theology and spiritual resilience as issues of general interest. We strive for ecological, economic and social sustainability, but tend to forget spiritual sustainability. In Sweden, we have lost much of the language used for spiritual life. Virtually no one can today define what is meant by spiritual development, despite Swedish law in the form of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stating that children have the right to spiritual development. In times of need, it is not just our friendships that are put to the test, but everyone’s spiritual maturity. ■



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## Crisis from a cognitive perspective

From the perspective of cognitive science, the central question concerning crises is: What happens in our minds when we face a crisis? The brief answer is that we experience a *loss of control*. This means that we experience a lack of power: We do not know how to act to get out of the problematic situation. There are individual crises such as severe illness or poverty, but also social crises — recently, the climate crisis and the corona pandemic are prime examples. A crisis is, of course, not just a cognitive phenomenon but it is also emotional. Experiencing a loss of control leads to strong stress reactions.

In crises, people are often not able to handle the situation by themselves, so they look for other strategies. Some turn to religion, hoping that a god will act to stop the crisis. Some blame the government, claiming that it has the potential to stop the crisis, but is acting in the wrong way. Some believe in charlatans who promise quick fixes. Some support conspiracy theories (social media makes this strategy more accessible). Some avoid the problem of lack of control by denying the crisis (a recent president of the US is an example). Those who fail to find a strategy they believe can mitigate the crisis become depressed. Some few persons become creative and work to invent new ways to solve the crisis.

In early stages of a crisis, social panic reactions are common. Doing something is seen as better than doing nothing. Many people look at what others are doing, for example hoarding toilet paper, which leads to more hoarding. Such communitarian experiences are comforting and they give a false feeling of control, but they do not solve the crisis.

Not very long ago, crises were ubiquitous. We were ridden by the four horsemen of the apocalypse — death, war, famine and pestilence. Crises were parts of ordinary life. For a little more than a century, we have become spoiled, at least in the Western world. When I am ill, I go to the doctor and expect to be cured. When there is a fire in my house, I call the fire brigade. When I have no money, I expect the community to provide food and shelter for me. Being spoiled, we are disappointed when no immediate solution is available. We blame governments and other authorities for failing in the corona pandemic and the climate crisis.

Advances in medicine and technology have given us the impression that humans can control everything. Following the historian Yuval Harari, we have become *Homo Deus* — we believe we are gods who can solve all problems. In the case of the corona pandemic, this may very well be what happens. Creative people within medical technology are producing different forms of vaccines that will eventually take us out of the crisis. But when it comes to the climate crisis, the situation is bleaker. There is no unique solution to the problems and they require extensive and coordinated political maneuvers.

There are, however, not only social crises, but also individual. The individualization of modernity has generated demands on a person to 'work' with herself — to construe her own

identity, even her own ‘brand’ — by controlling her body and her mind. Technologies such as photography and social media have provided tools for exposing the constructed individual. These technologies together with the advertising industry drive up our expectations of what a successful life consists of. We expect to be omnipotent in relation to ourselves, but this is, of course, a cognitive illusion. As a consequence, when the construction fails — when one cannot exert sufficient control in relation to the ideal picture of oneself — one ends up in a personal crisis. Hence, modernity has resulted in new types of individual crises that did not exist earlier.

Finally, like Antje Jackelén does in her contribution, I would like to emphasize that a crisis is an opportunity for learning. We must learn that we cannot control everything — we are not Homo Deus — so we must learn to live with the uncertainties of the world. In brief, we must be prepared to be unprepared. ■



Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov, *Horsemen of the Apocalypse* 1878,  
Museum of the History of Religions in St. Petersburg  
Illustration for the voice of Peter Gärdenfors, public domain.



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## Crisis and Catastrophe in the Anthropocene

The notions of ‘catastrophe’ and ‘crisis’ share a similar temporal structure: they both point to a sudden change, a decisive event condensed in a moment of time. One hard lesson that the increasingly ubiquitous notion of the Anthropocene (which has, since the millennium, migrated from geology and the earth sciences to the humanities and social sciences as well as to the arts and popular culture) teaches us is that bad news does not always arrive suddenly. Pointing to the irrevocable impact that human life — or, more properly, human life energized by fossil fuels and the drive of capitalist accumulation — has had on the ecological and chemical make-up of the planet, the notion of the Anthropocene underlines that planetary catastrophe *has already happened*: future global warming and biodiversity loss are already locked into the earth system, and only magical thinking allows us to believe that the climate changed chickens will not come home to roost. That magical thinking most spectacularly manifests itself in a belief in convenient technofixes (geoengineering! Carbon air capture! Solar radiation management!) or, if you are Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos, in fantasies of cosmic colonization. But it also pervades most of our everyday lives: we know our current ways of life are environmentally unsustainable, we know our ideals of the good life cannot be copy-and-pasted to the world our children will inhabit, and yet most of us more or less continue to live our lives: there may be more guilt, more token compensations (recycling! Carbon offsetting!), but there is rarely radical change.

The mode of crisis and catastrophe particular to the Anthropocene consists of conflicting temporalities: the catastrophe is slow and ongoing (literary scholar Rob Nixon has coined the massively popular term “slow violence” to name environmental degradation’s prolonged and sustained destruction of ecosystems and human life worlds); it mostly hides underground and only intermittently surfaces (in our newsfeeds, in overheating summers, in the accusing looks of our children); it at times inspires a sudden sense of urgency that is, however, quickly submerged in the need to return to the unremitting demands of everyday life. Conflicting temporalities, in the Anthropocene, require different modalities of denial, denegation, and false consciousness to go on with the business of living. Zooming out from our individual lives, we can see that this vicious circle (conflict, coping, continuation *in spite of everything*) perpetuates the eroding force of planetary crisis and slow-motion-but-accelerating catastrophe.

Over the last couple of years, the Anthropocene has increasingly shifted from being a speculative science fiction scenario to an adequate description of the eroded and immiserated lives lived by increasingly large disenfranchised groups. In an uncomfortable temporal twist, these groups (climate refugees, farmers in the Global South, Indigenous populations suffering the toxic violence of increasingly feral and desperate fossil fuel extraction) now no

longer remind privileged metropolitan audiences of a premodern past; instead, their experiences foretell an Anthropocene future in which modern stabilities will have been eroded beyond repair. The African American fantasy author N.K. Jemisin, whose *Broken Earth* trilogy is the most impressive literary engagement with the diminishment of everyday Anthropocene life I am aware of, captures the ordinariness of crisis in terms of apocalypse: for her, apocalypse is not a singular future event, as human history is "full of apocalypses, quiet ones in many cases, but just as devastating to its people ... It is the apocalypse again and again and again." One source of resilience, then, in the face of the end of the world, is the awareness that many populations have already survived the end of their world, and done so repeatedly. What the Anthropocene shows is that crisis and catastrophe are ongoing conditions — at once a past cataclysm, a recurrent event, and an imminent future. ■



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## Pandemic crises

The economy is cyclical: a period of growth is followed by a downturn, then growth again, and then a downturn again — periods of prosperity and downturn alternate. Sometimes the downturns are deeper, in which case we have a recession. In extreme cases, economic crises occur — usually triggered by some event (or longer term cumulative consequences) in the financial sector. This crisis-initiating event is commonly referred to as a black swan — it is so rare that it is not expected to occur, but when it does occur — usually with widespread consequences — upon reflection, one has to admit that it should have been taken into account. In the case of pandemics, one speaks of a 'green swan', emphasising that pandemics and environmental hazards (especially climate hazards) have much in common and that both crises are linked to increasing human interference in the systems of our planet.

The Corona crisis is different from other crises in several respects. Firstly, its origin was not a factor related to the financial sector, but a threat of a biological nature. Secondly, economic crises tend to be local or to affect only a few linked economies. This time, the

virus spread worldwide, sparing no region — the pandemic affected all corners of the globe. Thirdly, as a rule, economic crises do not affect the entire economy, but only part of the sectors affected (directly or indirectly) by the factors that triggered them. The Corona-crisis hit almost all industries, paralyzing entire supply chains.

At the same time, there were supply shocks (operational stoppages due to suspension of operations of selected industries as a preventive measure or absence of employees or lack of resources for production) and demand shocks (reduced mobility, reduced demand for certain goods and services, postponement of purchase decisions, deterioration of consumer sentiment). This, as well as unfavourable price trends, has direct macroeconomic (among other things, it fuels inflation) and microeconomic consequences (it causes financial problems for households, leads businesses to deteriorate financially, and, in extreme cases, to bankruptcy). The loss of income by businesses and households causes difficulties in repaying loans, which — on a massive scale — can lead to a banking crisis. This, in turn, causes a drop in the availability of credit (which reduces investment and creates liquidity problems for businesses). Extensive state intervention is therefore necessary. During the pandemic, it has been on an enormous scale, involving both fiscal measures (e.g. reduction of the tax burden, direct financial support for businesses and individuals experiencing negative economic effects, especially in restricted industries) and monetary measures (e.g. increase in money supply, changes in interest rates, liquidity support for banks); a number of prudential standards for banks have also been eased, so that they are able to continue to perform their functions.

There was no global consensus on the optimal policy in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some countries applied many restrictions in an attempt to limit the spread of the disease as much as possible (with extensive macro- and microeconomic consequences), while others had few limits and relied more on self-restraint and voluntary distancing (with less negative economic impact). Faced with a new disease and a pandemic of a magnitude not seen in a long time, there was no reliable knowledge and experience to apply solutions that would constitute an optimal response to maximise the reduction of the consequences on both the health and the quality of life of people. State authorities were faced with a difficult dilemma: deciding whether to place more importance on people's health and life (by introducing significant restrictions on mobility and activity) or on their quality of life (by not introducing extensive restrictions and thus not causing such extensive economic consequences). Epidemiological and macroeconomic models have even been developed to estimate the scale of the medical and economic crisis depending on the restrictions applied and, on this basis, to decide on crisis management tools and the scale of their use.

Both the severity of the pandemic itself and the different responses of countries (restrictions introduced and fiscal and monetary policies) were different, and therefore the impact on the economy varied from country to country. Taken together, however, it can be said that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a crisis on an enormous scale — a global, widespread crisis with serious consequences for people, economic actors, societies, countries.

A pandemic is a major shock to individuals, to companies, but also to entire industries — to society and to the economy. Its consequences — both social and economic — will be severe not only in the short term but also extensive in the long term. In the past, epidemics ("black death," "Spanish flu") have had long-lasting social effects, leading to a decline in public confidence, with significant economic consequences — reducing economic growth for many

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decades. A pandemic is expected to have widespread consequences in virtually all spheres of life, and even to change the world, forcing changes in socio-economic policy. Crises usually provide an impetus for reflection and change, and in this sense, there is a seed of hope.

It is worth noting that the pandemic crisis stimulates a change in attitudes, also inspires people to take more responsibility, and influence the world according to their own capacities — globally or locally. It is postulated that reconstruction plans should be fairer, more inclusive, linked with the implementation of sustainable development goals: poverty reduction, reduction of imbalances, more responsible consumption, care for the environment. There is no shortage of opinions that liberal capitalism has been discredited and the time has come for stakeholder capitalism, for more sustainable and responsible business. A pandemic will change many people’s habits and re-evaluate many priorities. Certainly, many of the changes initiated by it will remain or will be the beginning of a process of further transformation or will accelerate development in some areas. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of fears that the pandemic will exacerbate inequalities and lead to even greater selfishness and self-centredness, strengthen economic protectionism and reduce international solidarity and cooperation. How the world emerges from the coronacrisis depends on each and every one of us — on the choices we make as consumers, workers, professionals, businesses, citizens and politicians. ■

