

“Ethical Markets is happy to post this latest update “The COVID-19 Pandemic—A Systemic Analysis” from our esteemed Advisory Board member, best-selling author, physicist Fritjof Capra. This complements the earlier article we co-authored “Pandemics: Lessons Looking Back from 2050”, published in March and discussed on our April 2nd webinar. Since then there is continuous new information and so we have both written updates expanding from our complementary perspectives!

Our emerging view sees the possibility that this “teachable moment“ opens up new ways of building a more sustainable future for all, as we see various versions of “Green New Deals” now an political and grassroots agendas in the USA, EU, and some 130 countries! Let’s keep networking and pushing for this positive future, envisioned in the practical, achievable UN sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030!

~Hazel Henderson, Editor“

The COVID-19 Pandemic — A Systemic Analysis

The coronavirus has resulted in massive disruptions of our daily lives, and its impacts are likely to lead to historic political and social transformations. I would like to present a systemic analysis of the COVID-19 crisis, which means an analysis that shows how the many aspects and dimensions of the crisis are all interrelated. In an essay I wrote with Hazel Henderson (<http://www.fritjofcapra.net/pandemics-lessons-looking-back-from-2050/>) we offer such a systemic analysis in the form of a positive futuristic scenario. Here I would like to just summarize the key ideas that underlie this scenario.

In my view, the coronavirus must be seen as a biological response of Gaia, our living planet, to the ecological and social emergency humanity has brought upon itself. It arose from an ecological imbalance and has dramatic consequences because of social and economic imbalances.

During the last decades of the twentieth century, humanity exceeded the Earth’s carrying capacity (the number of people the biosphere can sustain without environmental degradation). World population has grown to 7.8 billion, and the irrational obsession of our political and corporate leaders with perpetual economic and corporate growth has generated a multi-faceted existential crisis threatening humanity’s very survival.

Scientists and environmental activists have warned of the dire consequences of our unsustainable social, economic, and political systems for decades, but until now our corporate and political leaders, unable to break their intoxication with financial profits and political power, stubbornly resisted these warnings. Focusing their attention on short-term economic and political fluctuations, they disregarded the impending catastrophic long-term consequences. Now, however, our political and financial elites are forced to pay attention, as COVID-19 brought the earlier warnings into real time with death tolls around the world rising every day.

The clear-cutting of large areas of tropical rainforest by multi-national food corporations, relentlessly pursuing excessive growth and profits, as well massive intrusions into other ecosystems around the world, driven by the same motivation,

have fragmented these self-regulating systems and have fractured the web of life. One of the many consequences of these destructive actions was that viruses, which had lived in symbiosis with certain animal species, jumped from those species to others and to humans, where they were highly toxic or deadly.

In the 1960s, an obscure virus jumped from a rare species of monkeys, killed as “bush meat” in West Africa, to humans. From there it spread to the United States where it was identified as the HIV virus and caused the AIDS epidemic, killing an estimated 39 million people worldwide over four decades. Similarly, the coronavirus jumped from a species of bats to humans in China, and from there it rapidly spread around the world.

Population density is the key variable in the spread of COVID-19, and population density is often a consequence of excessive profit maximizing — whether on giant cruise ships and in other forms of mass tourism, overcrowded gatherings in huge arenas for sports and other forms of entertainment, in giant supermarkets and department stores, or in crowded living situations caused by social and economic inequality. Ecology has taught us that maximizing any single variable will invariably lead to stress and vulnerability of the system as a whole. In previous times, these vulnerable social and cultural conditions were usually concealed by the corporate media. But now the coronavirus, which does not know any social or cultural boundaries, has laid them open. Biology trumps politics and economics.

The role of social justice during a pandemic is particularly interesting. In normal times, the rich are relatively isolated from the poor. They live in their own neighborhoods, have their own schools, hospitals, restaurants, clubs, etc. The fate of the poor does not affect them greatly.

During a pandemic like COVID-19, the situation changes dramatically. Since the virus does not know any social boundaries, the fate of the poor can no longer be separated from that of the rich. Because of crowded living conditions, lack of access to clean water, and — especially in the United States — inadequate healthcare and social protection, the poor are much more susceptible to being infected. Sooner or later, they will infect also the rich because, even though the two classes are separated socially, they are not separated biologically.

There are numerous physical contacts between the rich and their personal assistants, drivers, delivery services, cleaning and maintenance staff, etc. Through these physical contacts the virus propagates and infects people regardless of their social class. During a pandemic, therefore, social justice is no longer a political issue of left versus right; it becomes an issue of life and death. To prevent the spread of pandemics — now and in the future — it will be essential to improve the living conditions of the poor. More generally, ethical behavior — behavior for the common good — becomes an issue of life and death during a pandemic, because a pandemic like COVID-19 can only be overcome by collective, cooperative actions.

Similar considerations apply to world population growth. Demographers have long known that the most effective means of curbing population growth are educating girls and enhancing the role and status of women around the world — ensuring their access to economic and political power and safeguarding their reproductive

rights. Once again we see that social justice goes hand in hand with ecological balance

When the pandemic spread around the world in March 2020, one country after another went into lockdown with only essential businesses remaining open and most people confined to their homes. As a consequence, transportation of people and goods was radically reduced, supply chains were disrupted, businesses closed, the stock market collapsed, and unemployment soared. The exponentially growing pandemic has gone hand in hand with an exponentially growing worldwide economic crisis.

Both of these crises have led to widespread tragic consequences for individuals and communities around the world. However, from a planetary ecological perspective there have also been many positive consequences. As automobile traffic and industrial activities decreased dramatically, the pollution of major cities around the world suddenly disappeared, and we are once again enjoying clear skies and clean air. On the beaches of Brazil, critically endangered sea turtles are now hatching in a stress-free environment, undisturbed by tourists.

As giant cruise ships no longer enter the Venetian lagoon and other tourists stay at home, the canals in Venice have become so clear that fish can be seen again. In India, residents of Punjab are now able to enjoy a stunning view of the tops of the Himalayas, 200 km away, which they have not seen for 30 years. Moreover, the coronavirus has already been more effective in reducing CO₂ emissions and slowing down climate breakdown than all the world's policy initiatives combined.

This does not mean that we want to continue in the current situation. But the world's COVID-19 response has shown us what is possible when people realize that their lives are at stake — individually during the pandemic and for civilization as a whole in the climate emergency. We know now that the world is able to respond with urgency and coherence once the political will has been aroused.

With COVID-19, Gaia has presented us with valuable, life-saving lessons. The question is: will humanity heed these lessons? Will we shift from undifferentiated, extractive economic growth to regenerative, qualitative growth? Will we replace fossil fuels with renewable forms of energy for all our energy needs?

Will we stop excessive mass tourism and instead revitalize local communities? Will we replace our centralized, energy-intensive system of industrial agriculture with organic, community-oriented and regenerative farming? Will we plant billions of trees to draw down CO₂ from the atmosphere and restore the world's ecosystems, so that viruses dangerous to humans are confined again to other animal species where they do no harm? We have the knowledge and the technologies to embark on all these initiatives. Will we have the political will?

"The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind," to quote Bob Dylan. However, what we are seeing already is that corresponding social policies, which were unthinkable just a couple of months ago, are now being discussed seriously in various countries.

For example, Denmark plans to pay 75% of the salaries lost by employees in private companies to help them through the crisis. The UK, similarly, plans to cover 80% of salaries. In the United States, the idea of a universal basic income, long considered to be a fringe idea, is now discussed even by Republican politicians. Spain is nationalizing its private hospitals. California is leasing hotels to shelter homeless people during the pandemic. The Green New Deal, already endorsed previously by some Democratic presidential candidates in the US, is now being discussed in the mainstream as a program of economic recovery.

If we can catalyze global leadership to continue such social policies, and if we can add to them policies that respect and cooperate with nature's inherent ability to sustain life, we may not only overcome the COVID-19 pandemic but also succeed in stabilizing world population and the climate, nurturing local communities, and restoring the Earth's ecosystems.

We may see CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere return to the safe level of 350 parts per million; and we may see climate catastrophes become rare, as they have been in previous centuries. Looking back on 2020, future historians may conclude that, even though COVID-19 had widespread tragic consequences for countless individuals and communities, in the long run it may have saved humanity and large parts of the planetary community of life from extinction.