

**TIMELINE OF A CRISIS: CREATOR OF CHANGE?***Keri van Douwen*

*“They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.”<sup>1</sup>*

At the time of writing, six months have passed since the first known case of COVID-19 was identified.<sup>2</sup> The coronavirus has since spread to every corner of the globe. Citizens have been asked to stay inside, to work from home, to wear masks, to maintain distance from loved ones; to suspend ‘normal’ life until further notice. In this short essay, I demonstrate how the coronavirus crisis, and the human attitude towards it, have developed from one stage to the next. In so doing, I am able to show how crises may be driving forces of change, while simultaneously arguing that change is never guaranteed. To construct my argument, I rely on the works of Giorgio Agamben, Ulrich Beck, Michel Foucault, Bonnie Honig, and Bruno Latour.

Stage One

The beginning of a crisis is characterized by a lot of uncertainty. At this point, it is likely that not too much is yet known about the crisis, or a virus in this case. As a result, our lives become defined by risk, which Beck calls “the anticipation of a catastrophe.”<sup>3</sup> The sudden, increased (perceived) possibility of death by the coronavirus, and the uncertainty that came with it, brought many into a state of fear, leading to a “collective panic.”<sup>4</sup> Through these feelings of fear, suddenly shared by seemingly everyone, people started to feel united. At the same time, humans are inclined to take action in the face of peril.<sup>5</sup> This combination of feelings of unison and the urge to act, creates a real possibility for change.

During ‘normal’ times, there is no collective of scared individuals looking for hope to survive. This is what Agamben means when he points out that a state of exception is a possibility for change. He writes: “in extreme situations ‘force of law’ floats as an indeterminate element that can be claimed both by the state authority and by a *revolutionary organization*.”<sup>6</sup> In these situations, as accepted norms no longer apply, it becomes possible for non-state ‘authorities’ to take the stage: to point at the crisis as a justification for change. The coronavirus pandemic

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*Keri van Douwen is a researcher at the faculty of Transnational Legal Studies. She recently graduated from the LLM Law and Politics of International Security, and holds a BSc in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the John Stuart Mill College (Vrije Universiteit).*

<sup>1</sup> Warhol (1975). *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

<sup>2</sup> Bryner (2020). ‘The First Known Case of Coronavirus Traced Back to November in China.’ *Live Science*. Retrieved from: <https://www.livescience.com/first-case-coronavirus-found.html>

<sup>3</sup> Beck (2014). *Ulrich Beck: Pioneer in Cosmopolitan Sociology and Risk Society*. Springer International Publishing. p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Agamben (2020). ‘The State of Exception Provoked by an Unmotivated Emergency.’ *II Manifesto*. Retrieved from: <http://positionswebsite.org/giorgio-agamben-the-state-of-exception-provoked-by-an-unmotivated-emergency/>

<sup>5</sup> Wuthnow (2010). *Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Agamben (2005). *The State of Exception*. The University of Chicago Press. p. 38.

pushed many into a more active position with regards to the survival of our planet. They argued that now would be a good time to create a greener, more sustainable world for all, which could also limit the possibility of the appearance of new viruses.<sup>7</sup>

As decisions are to be made during crises, a break with the past becomes more likely. In fact, ‘decide’ is derived from the Latin word *decidere*, which literally translates to ‘to cut off’.<sup>8</sup> Around the world, people were preaching for a discontinuation of the current capitalist system that keeps on polluting. The system that, according to many, is responsible for the creation of the coronavirus.<sup>9</sup> They were *hoping* for a *new normal*. Hoping for a new normal, is, in other words, hope that the exception *becomes* the norm. The current ‘exception’ (or new normal) includes less air traffic, less pollution, more appreciation for workers in the health sector, and so forth.

Hence, at stage one, both feelings of fear *and* feelings of hope are at their peak. Beck explains this by pointing out that the anticipation of a catastrophe creates a cosmopolitan moment.<sup>10</sup> As the entire world is united through fear, we feel a sense of togetherness, and a wish to fix it *together*. In the Netherlands, the word ‘*samen*’ has seemingly attained the status of national anthem in a manner of a few weeks. Beck points out that global risks, such as the coronavirus, have an enlightenment function.<sup>11</sup> At this stage of the crisis, that certainly seems to be the case.

### Stage Two

In the next phase of a crisis, as we have seen with the coronavirus, decisions are made to mitigate risks, most likely in a top-down manner. As such, the ‘new normal’ becomes more tangible, and individuals are asked to change their behaviour. At this point, people might start to wonder: “what will we lose if we win?”<sup>12</sup> That is, what do we lose if we attain a greener, more sustainable normal, rather than going back to the old, polluting normal? What does this mean for my life, and my behaviour with which I am comfortable, and have been for years? I know that flying hurts the environment, but I am sad when I think of missed holidays in faraway lands. For some, this ‘new normal’ is easier to accept than for others. In different parts of the world, groups of people have demonstrated in the streets against the measures taken by their governments.<sup>13</sup> They consider their own freedom to be most important, prevailing over all kinds of other considerations, such as people’s health and well-being.

These developments, both the emergency measures and people’s responses to them, neatly fit into the writings on political power by Foucault. He distinguishes between three types of power, of which disciplinary power and biopower are most relevant to the coronavirus pandemic. Foucault illustrates disciplinary power with the handling of an infectious disease: he

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<sup>7</sup> Dixon-Declève et al. (2020). ‘Could COVID-19 Give Rise to a Greener Global Future?’ *World Economic Forum*. Retrieved from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/a-green-reboot-after-the-pandemic>.

<sup>8</sup> Dictionary.com, see: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/decide>.

<sup>9</sup> Leven and Overwijk (2020). ‘We Created This Beast. The Political Ecology of COVID-19.’ *Eurozine*. Retrieved from: <https://www.eurozine.com/we-created-this-beast/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Supra* note 3, p. 80.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>12</sup> Honig (2009). *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*. Princeton University Press. p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Ward (2020). ‘Anti-Lockdown Protests Aren’t Just an American Thing. They’re a Global Phenomenon.’ *Vox*. Retrieved from: <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/20/21263919/anti-lockdown-protests-coronavirus-germany-brazil-uk-chile>.

argues that the regulations offer a system of complete control. “Those who move risk their lives: contagion or punishment.”<sup>14</sup> According to Foucault, disciplinary power attempts to capture all individual behaviour, through all kinds of institutions, not limited to the army or police. He considered the plague to offer “the utopia of the perfectly governed city.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Foucault sees ‘biopower’ as not necessarily repressive, even though it can be. This kind of power creates control over the population so that its citizens can live healthy lives.<sup>16</sup>

Whether one considers the current measures as a display of disciplinary power or biopower, might explain the diverse response they have attracted. Those who consider their own freedom (to do, think etc.) as the greatest good in life tend to mistrust governments that take ‘far-reaching’ measures, viewing them as “disciplinary machines.”<sup>17</sup> In the United States, armed protestors stormed a state capitol building, demanding the end of the lockdown, all in the name of freedom.<sup>18</sup> Others have less trouble wearing face masks.

The current pandemic does a good job illustrating how people view political power along different lines. Those who consider the coronavirus measures as a justified display of biopower might be more likely to adhere to the rules closely, whereas those who view the measures as an extension of their governments’ disciplinary power tend to distrust and disregard the rules.

### Stage Three

At this stage, the catastrophe has struck, at least to some extent, although not necessarily to the extent as was predicted in the first stage. There is more certainty: more knowledge has been produced about, in this case, the virus.<sup>19</sup> In other words, feelings of being ‘at risk’ tend to go down – the state of collective panic starts to fade. The catastrophe has struck, yet we are still alive. People are starting to wonder whether their heightened feelings of fear were realistic or even necessary. At this point, it is suddenly less strange to talk about a return to the old normal, which many seem to eagerly want, and increasingly demand. Hope for an absolute break with the past has made space for hope that ‘something’ will stick, even if it is only the realization that we should all enjoy some time alone now and then.

This third stage offers a moment of reflection: do we update our ideas about our past (behaviour), now knowing what came of it? Do we reinvent our capitalist world system in light of the coronavirus? By asking these questions, we risk losing our identity. Latour argues that only those whose own comfort is guaranteed, are willing to take such a risk.<sup>20</sup> This unwillingness, however, creates an insoluble contradiction: we want change, but we do not want *to* change. We know that

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault (2008). ‘Panopticism’ from ‘Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison.’ *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, 2(1), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Sarasin (2020). ‘Mit Foucault die Pandemie Verstehen.’ *Geschichte der Gegenwart*. Retrieved from: <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/mit-foucault-die-pandemie-verstehen/>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Almsy and Riess (2020). ‘Protestors Pour into Michigan State Capitol Calling for End of State of Emergency.’ *CNN*. Retrieved from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/30/us/michigan-stay-at-home-protest/index.html>.

<sup>19</sup> For example, research has been able to shed light on how COVID-19 spreads, it has now been established that 1 out of every 5 people who gets COVID-19 becomes seriously ill and develops difficulty breathing, and those with underlying medical problems are at a higher risk of developing serious illness. See: World Health Organization.

<sup>20</sup> Latour (2018). *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Polity. p. 11.

we need to change our behaviour if we want to save our planet, and ourselves, but we do not want to lose our identity, which is a combination of all those behaviours.

The result of wanting change but not *changing*, is an understanding of time as the unfolding of a linear process. As if progress is created by mere *introspection* of the past. Honig argues that this is not the case: changes do not occur because the timing was right, or because they logically followed from what came before.<sup>21</sup> The idea that humanity has only one direction is reflected in Beck's conception of the cosmopolitan moment. He argues that it has become common knowledge that the problems of modernity require consensus "between parties, nations, religions, friend and foe, and that this is the precondition of survival."<sup>22</sup> Yet, as Latour points out: "Shifting from a local to a global viewpoint ought to mean *multiplying* viewpoints, registering a greater number of varieties, taking into account a larger number of beings, cultures, phenomena, organisms and people."<sup>23</sup> What Beck calls 'globalization', Latour considers "to mean that a *single vision*, entirely provincial, proposed by a few individuals, representing a very small number of interests, limited to a few measuring instruments, to a few standards and protocols, has been imposed on everyone and spread everywhere."<sup>24</sup>

Many have considered the coronavirus pandemic as an international problem, in need of an international solution. Yet others have argued that globalization lies at the root of the issue, and should therefore be abandoned. Perhaps both points hold true. Most importantly, however, globalization is not an a priori truth, or the only step 'forwards'. Even if global risks destabilize the existing order and are therefore "a vital step towards the construction of new institutions,"<sup>25</sup> there are countless directions into which the world might move, as we are currently witnessing. Political, social and economic systems do not 'progress' the way a clock ticks from one second to the next. If we want change, we cannot merely point to the past or gaze at the future, waiting for the world's natural direction to catch up with the time we live in. We ought to focus on the present and *change*.

Perhaps, at this moment in the pandemic, hope should no longer be part of the equation. Hope reflects the idea that things will change because they might. To achieve change however, one does not need to hope, one needs to change.

### The End

In the final stage, the crisis has come to an end. Perhaps we never think of it again, or merely with feelings of regret when we occasionally realize how the coronavirus generated a loss of years of economic progress. Or we look back in ten or twenty years and point to the year 2020 as a transformation of time: as if the coronavirus changed the world.

Reflecting on the events of September 11, 2001, Peter Carey writes: "Time is broken."<sup>26</sup> But in the end, it was not the crashing of planes into the World Trade Center that broke with the past, thereby creating a new world; it was the reaction to it that did. The United States acted quickly and decisively, starting a global war, unlimited in time and space, in a matter of days.

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<sup>21</sup> *Supra* note 12.

<sup>22</sup> *Supra* note 3, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> *Supra* note 20, p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Supra* note 3, p. 89.

<sup>26</sup> Carey (2001). 'We Close Our Eyes and Say a Prayer, Although I Do Not Know Who I Am Praying To. There Is No God.' *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4262775,00.html>.

Despite the argument that the global war on terror is nothing more than a return of the past, “a re-run of the Cold War,”<sup>27</sup> a decision was made to go to war. And with a decision, a break is established, and something new created.<sup>28</sup> If the reaction to the coronavirus crisis would create a return of the past, by moving away from the quest of globalization for example, or putting a stop to unrestrained polluting, it does not mean we are moving backwards: it merely means we are changing our course. But for that, we must decide.

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<sup>27</sup> Campbell (2001). ‘Time is Broken: The Return of the Past in the Reponse to September 11’. *Theory & Event*, 5(4).

<sup>28</sup> Etymologically, the English prefix *de-* has multiple meanings: apart, against *and* fully. In *decide*, these opposite meanings converge: “in cutting apart, it opens up because time-space emerges.” Thus, to decide is: to cut apart, to go against, *and* to come into being. See: Kenneth Maly, *Heidegger’s Possibility: Language, Emergence, Being*, p. 61.