

The Coronavirus Is Rewriting Our Imaginations

What felt impossible has become thinkable. The spring of 2020 is suggestive of how much, and how quickly, we can change as a civilization.

Kim Stanley Robinson

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The critic Raymond Williams once wrote that every historical period has its own “structure of feeling.” How everything seemed in the nineteen-sixties, the way the Victorians understood one another, the chivalry of the Middle Ages, the world view of Tang-dynasty China: each period, Williams thought, had a distinct way of organizing basic human emotions into an overarching cultural system. Each had its own way of experiencing being alive.

In mid-March, in a prior age, I spent a week rafting down the Grand Canyon. When I left for the trip, the United States was still beginning to grapple with the reality of the coronavirus pandemic. Italy was suffering; the N.B.A. had just suspended its season; Tom Hanks had been reported ill. When I hiked back up, on March 19th, it was into a different world. I’ve spent my life writing science-fiction novels that try to convey some of the strangeness of the future. But I was still shocked by how much had changed, and how quickly.

Schools and borders had closed; the governor of California, like governors elsewhere, had asked residents to begin staying at home. But the change that struck me seemed more abstract and internal. It was a change in the way we were looking at things, and it is still ongoing. The virus is rewriting our imaginations. What felt impossible has become thinkable. We’re getting a different sense of our place in history. We know we’re entering a new world, a new era. We seem to be learning our way into a new structure of feeling.

In many ways, we’ve been overdue for such a shift. In our feelings, we’ve been lagging behind the times in which we live. The Anthropocene, the Great Acceleration, the age of climate change—whatever you want to call it, we’ve been out of synch with the biosphere, wasting our children’s hopes for a normal life, burning our ecological capital as if it were disposable income, wrecking our one and only home in ways that soon will be beyond our descendants’ ability to repair. And yet we’ve been acting as though it were 2000, or 1990—as though the neoliberal arrangements built back then still made sense. We’ve been paralyzed, living in the world without feeling it.

Now, all of a sudden, we're acting fast as a civilization. We're trying, despite many obstacles, to flatten the curve—to avoid mass death. Doing this, we know that we're living in a moment of historic importance. We realize that what we do now, well or badly, will be remembered later on. This sense of enacting history matters. For some of us, it partly compensates for the disruption of our lives.

Actually, we've already been living in a historic moment. For the past few decades, we've been called upon to act, and have been acting in a way that will be scrutinized by our descendants. Now we feel it. The shift has to do with the concentration and intensity of what's happening. September 11th was a single day, and everyone felt the shock of it, but our daily habits didn't shift, except at airports; the President even urged us to keep shopping. This crisis is different. It's a biological threat, and it's global. Everyone has to change together to deal with it. That's really history.

It seems as though science has been mobilized to a dramatic new degree, but that impression is just another way in which we're lagging behind. There are 7.8 billion people alive on this planet—a stupendous social and technological achievement that's unnatural and unstable. It's made possible by science, which has already been saving us. Now, though, when disaster strikes, we grasp the complexity of our civilization—we feel the reality, which is that the whole system is a technical improvisation that science keeps from crashing down.

On a personal level, most of us have accepted that we live in a scientific age. If you feel sick, you go to a doctor, who is really a scientist; that scientist tests you, then sometimes tells you to take a poison so that you can heal—and you take the poison. It's on a societal level that we've been lagging. Today, in theory, everyone knows everything. We know that our accidental alteration of the atmosphere is leading us into a mass-extinction event, and that we need to move fast to dodge it. But we don't act on what we know. We don't want to change our habits. This knowing-but-not-acting is part of the old structure of feeling.

Now comes this disease that can kill anyone on the planet. It's invisible; it spreads because of the way we move and congregate. Instantly, we've changed. As a society, we're watching the statistics, following the recommendations, listening to the scientists. Do we believe in science? Go outside and you'll see the proof that we do everywhere you look. We're learning to trust our science as a society. That's another part of the new structure of feeling.

Possibly, in a few months, we'll return to some version of the old normal. But this spring won't be forgotten. When later shocks strike global civilization, we'll remember how we behaved this time, and how it worked. It's not that the coronavirus is a dress rehearsal—it's too deadly for that. But it is the first of many calamities that will likely unfold throughout this century. Now, when they come, we'll be familiar with how they feel.

What shocks might be coming? Everyone knows everything. Remember when Cape Town almost ran out of water? It's very likely that there will be more water shortages. And food shortages, electricity outages, devastating storms, droughts, floods. These are easy calls. They're baked into the situation we've already created, in part by ignoring warnings that scientists have been

issuing since the nineteen-sixties. Some shocks will be local, others regional, but many will be global, because, as this crisis shows, we are interconnected as a biosphere and a civilization.

Imagine what a food scare would do. Imagine a heat wave hot enough to kill anyone not in an air-conditioned space, then imagine power failures happening during such a heat wave. (The novel I've just finished begins with this scenario, so it scares me most of all.) Imagine pandemics deadlier than the coronavirus. These events, and others like them, are easier to imagine now than they were back in January, when they were the stuff of dystopian science fiction. But science fiction is the realism of our time. The sense that we are all now stuck in a science-fiction novel that we're writing together—that's another sign of the emerging structure of feeling.

Science-fiction writers don't know anything more about the future than anyone else. Human history is too unpredictable; from this moment, we could descend into a mass-extinction event or rise into an age of general prosperity. Still, if you read science fiction, you may be a little less surprised by whatever does happen. Often, science fiction traces the ramifications of a single postulated change; readers co-create, judging the writers' plausibility and ingenuity, interrogating their theories of history. Doing this repeatedly is a kind of training. It can help you feel more oriented in the history we're making now. This radical spread of possibilities, good to bad, which creates such a profound disorientation; this tentative awareness of the emerging next stage—these are also new feelings in our time.

Memento mori: remember that you must die. Older people are sometimes better at keeping this in mind than younger people. Still, we're all prone to forgetting death. It never seems quite real until the end, and even then it's hard to believe. The reality of death is another thing we know about but don't feel.

So this epidemic brings with it a sense of panic: we're all going to die, yes, always true, but now perhaps this month! That's different. Sometimes, when hiking in the Sierra, my friends and I get caught in a lightning storm, and, completely exposed to it, we hurry over the rocky highlands, watching lightning bolts crack out of nowhere and connect nearby, thunder exploding less than a second later. That gets your attention: death, all too possible! But to have that feeling in your ordinary, daily life, at home, stretched out over weeks—that's too strange to hold on to. You partly get used to it, but not entirely. This mixture of dread and apprehension and normality is the sensation of plague on the loose. It could be part of our new structure of feeling, too.

Just as there are charismatic megafauna, there are charismatic mega-ideas. "Flatten the curve" could be one of them. Immediately, we get it. There's an infectious, deadly plague that spreads easily, and, although we can't avoid it entirely, we can try to avoid a big spike in infections, so that hospitals won't be overwhelmed and fewer people will die. It makes sense, and it's something all of us can help to do. When we do it—if we do it—it will be a civilizational achievement: a new thing that our scientific, educated, high-tech species is capable of doing. Knowing that we can act in concert when necessary is another thing that will change us.

People who study climate change talk about "the tragedy of the time horizon." The tragedy is that we don't care enough about those future people, our descendants, who will have to fix,

or just survive on, the planet we're now wrecking. We like to think that they'll be richer and smarter than we are and so able to handle their own problems in their own time. But we're creating problems that they'll be unable to solve. You can't fix extinctions, or ocean acidification, or melted permafrost, no matter how rich or smart you are. The fact that these problems will occur in the future lets us take a magical view of them. We go on exacerbating them, thinking—not that we think this, but the notion seems to underlie our thinking—that we will be dead before it gets too serious. The tragedy of the time horizon is often something we encounter, without knowing it, when we buy and sell. The market is wrong; the prices are too low. Our way of life has environmental costs that aren't included in what we pay, and those costs will be borne by our descendents. We are operating a multigenerational Ponzi scheme.

And yet: "Flatten the curve." We're now confronting a miniature version of the tragedy of the time horizon. We've decided to sacrifice over these months so that, in the future, people won't suffer as much as they would otherwise. In this case, the time horizon is so short that we are the future people. It's harder to come to grips with the fact that we're living in a long-term crisis that will not end in our lifetimes. But it's meaningful to notice that, all together, we are capable of learning to extend our care further along the time horizon. Amid the tragedy and death, this is one source of pleasure. Even though our economic system ignores reality, we can act when we have to. At the very least, we are all freaking out together. To my mind, this new sense of solidarity is one of the few reassuring things to have happened in this century. If we can find it in this crisis, to save ourselves, then maybe we can find it in the big crisis, to save our children and theirs.

Margaret Thatcher said that "there is no such thing as society," and Ronald Reagan said that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." These stupid slogans marked the turn away from the postwar period of reconstruction and underpin much of the bullshit of the past forty years.

We are individuals first, yes, just as bees are, but we exist in a larger social body. Society is not only real; it's fundamental. We can't live without it. And now we're beginning to understand that this "we" includes many other creatures and societies in our biosphere and even in ourselves. Even as an individual, you are a biome, an ecosystem, much like a forest or a swamp or a coral reef. Your skin holds inside it all kinds of unlikely coöperations, and to survive you depend on any number of interspecies operations going on within you all at once. We are societies made of societies; there are nothing but societies. This is shocking news—it demands a whole new world view. And now, when those of us who are sheltering in place venture out and see everyone in masks, sharing looks with strangers is a different thing. It's eye to eye, this knowledge that, although we are practicing social distancing as we need to, we want to be social—we not only *want* to be social, we've *got to be* social, if we are to survive. It's a new feeling, this alienation and solidarity at once. It's the reality of the social; it's seeing the tangible existence of a society of strangers, all of whom depend on one another to survive. It's as if the reality of citizenship has smacked us in the face.

As for government: it's government that listens to science and responds by taking action to save us. Stop to ponder what is now obstructing the performance of that government. Who opposes it? Right now we're hearing two statements being made. One, from the President and

his circle: we have to save money even if it costs lives. The other, from the Centers for Disease Control and similar organizations: we have to save lives even if it costs money. Which is more important, money or lives? Money, of course! says capital and its spokespersons. Really? people reply, uncertainly. Seems like that's maybe going too far? Even if it's the common wisdom? Or was.

Some people can't stay isolated and still do their jobs. If their jobs are important enough, they have to expose themselves to the disease. My younger son works in a grocery store and is now one of the front-line workers who keep civilization running.

My son is now my hero: this is a good feeling. I think the same of all the people still working now for the sake of the rest of us. If we all keep thinking this way, the new structure of feeling will be better than the one that's dominated for the past forty years.

The neoliberal structure of feeling totters. What might a post-capitalist response to this crisis include? Maybe rent and debt relief; unemployment aid for all those laid off; government hiring for contact tracing and the manufacture of necessary health equipment; the world's militaries used to support health care; the rapid construction of hospitals.

What about afterward, when this crisis recedes and the larger crisis looms? If the project of civilization—including science, economics, politics, and all the rest of it—were to bring all eight billion of us into a long-term balance with Earth's biosphere, we could do it. By contrast, when the project of civilization is to create profit—which, by definition, goes to only a few—much of what we do is actively harmful to the long-term prospects of our species. Everyone knows everything. Right now pursuing profit as the ultimate goal of all our activities will lead to a mass-extinction event. Humanity might survive, but traumatized, interrupted, angry, ashamed, sad. A science-fiction story too painful to write, too obvious. It would be better to adapt to reality.

Economics is a system for optimizing resources, and, if it were trying to calculate ways to optimize a sustainable civilization in balance with the biosphere, it could be a helpful tool. When it's used to optimize profit, however, it encourages us to live within a system of destructive falsehoods. We need a new political economy by which to make our calculations. Now, acutely, we feel that need.

It could happen, but it might not. There will be enormous pressure to forget this spring and go back to the old ways of experiencing life. And yet forgetting something this big never works. We'll remember this even if we pretend not to. History is happening now, and it will have happened. So what will we do with that?

A structure of feeling is not a free-floating thing. It's tightly coupled with its corresponding political economy. How we feel is shaped by what we value, and vice versa. Food, water, shelter, clothing, education, health care: maybe now we value these things more, along with the people whose work creates them. To survive the next century, we need to start valuing the planet more, too, since it's our only home.

It will be hard to make these values durable. Valuing the right things and wanting to keep on valuing them—maybe that's also part of our new structure of feeling. As is knowing how much

work there is to be done. But the spring of 2020 is suggestive of how much, and how quickly, we can change. It's like a bell ringing to start a race. Off we go—into a new time.

Kim Stanley Robinson is a science-fiction writer who lives in Davis, California. His next novel, "The Ministry for the Future," will be published in October.

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