

» A crisis is a terrible thing to waste. How Covid-19 changed our world: Futurist Gerd Leonhard looks back from the near Future [Gerd Leonhard Futurist Humanist Author Keynote Speaker]

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Recently, I was greatly **inspired by a post** published by my fellow German Futurist **Matthias Horx**, describing a post-corona world. In it, he says:

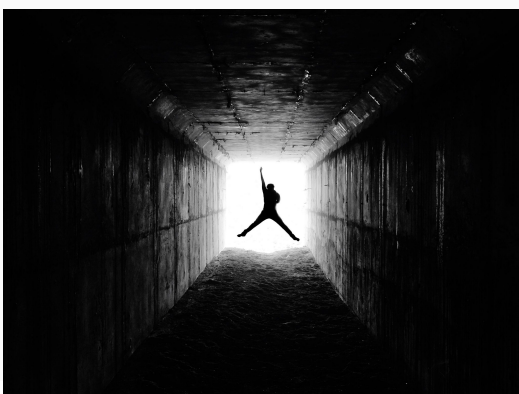
“At the moment I am often asked when Corona „will be over“ and when everything will return to normal. My answer is: never. There are historical moments when the future changes direction. We call them bifurcations. Or deep crises. These times are now. The world as we know it is dissolving. But behind it comes a new world, the formation of which we can at least imagine. For this I would like to offer you an exercise... we call it the RE-gnosis”

I often use a very similar approach that I call ‘coming back from the future’ (aka **backcasting**) – the idea of using one’s insights and intuition about what is certain to happen, in order to deal with the realities at hand, and be better equipped to create one’s preferred future (and yes, this is probably more of an art than a science).

Right after I read Matthias’s post I ran **into a powerful video** by DemocracyNow, Amy Goodman and Naomi Klein, coining the term ‘Corona Capitalism’ and featuring this well-known **Milton Friedman quote**:

“Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable”

So, in the spirit of ‘finding alternatives’, here are my observations, grouped in 3 chapters, ‘back-casting’ from late 2020.



» INTRODUCTION

» UNITED WE STAND

» BUSINESS & POLITICS ‘AS USUAL’ IS DEAD

» MAKING WAY FOR THE NEW



» Looking back from December 2020

The crisis did not end quickly. We never returned to normal. 'Business as usual' is dead.


In late 2020 it is clear that Covid-19 has caused a massive global reset, in every aspect i.e. economically, socially, politically, **environmentally** and scientifically. Indeed, the impact of this crisis can now be compared to that of the Great Depression, or even World War II. A global **recession** is in full swing, and it looks it will cut even deeper in 2021.

Global GDP growth was unimaginably negative for 2020 (preview [here](#)). The **U.S.** fared the worst, while **China** jockeyed to reposition itself for a new world order. And then, 2020 was the first year in modern history where **global CO2 emissions have declined**.

Yet despite the economic woes there is also hope, now, fuelled by the sudden realisation that this crisis is very likely to put an end to the industrial-era paradigm of 'growth at all cost' and the ill-fated doctrine of 'making any single country great-again'. In late 2020, we were finally forced (liberated?) to rethink our traditional economic logic, and question our political assumptions. After Corona (phase1), we have entered a new 'post-growth' era, and we are gearing up to rewrite the rules of capitalism. What Al Gore called '**sustainable capitalism**' in 2012 is finally on-top of the agenda, and so is what I call **the quadruple bottom-line**: People Planet Purpose and Prosperity (some of my videos on that topic are [here](#)).

We are experiencing a global shift in consciousness as a result of this crisis.

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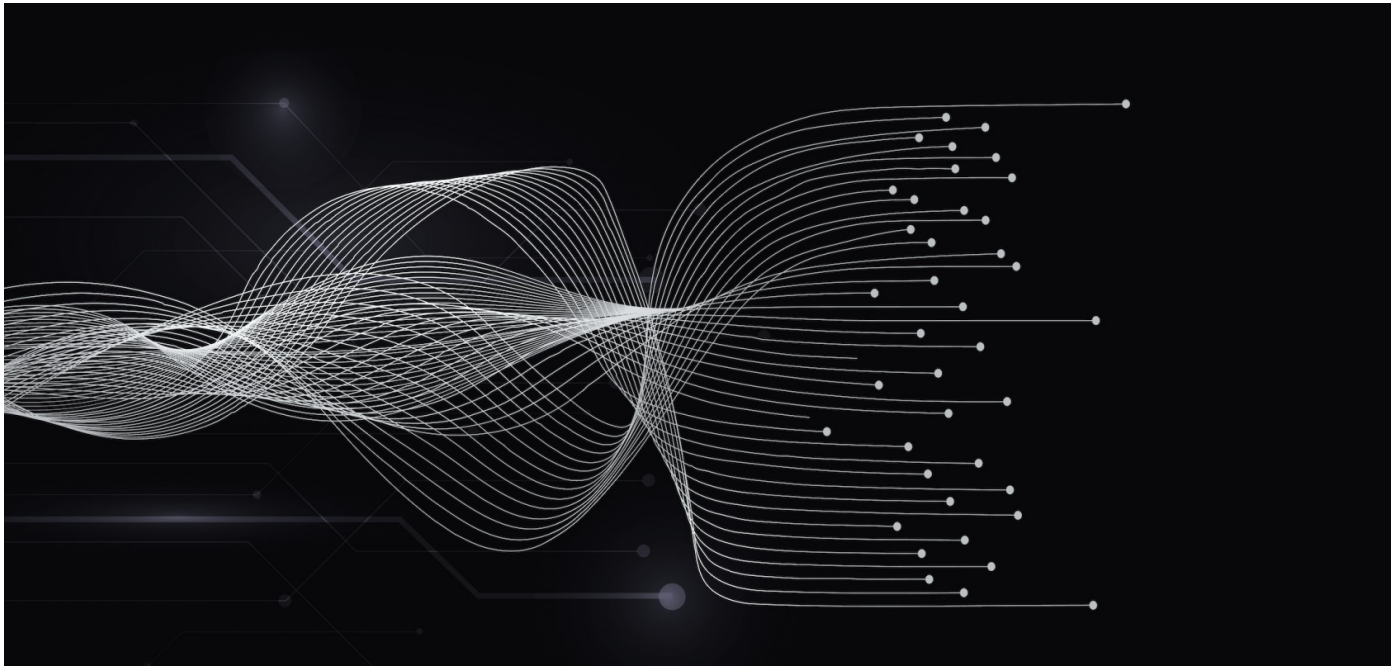
» United we stand

1) This is a test of our humanity: The corona-virus crisis brought out the best and the worst in us

Looking back, my colleague **Tim Leberecht**'s March 2020 essay in **Psychology Today** said it best:

"The coronavirus outbreak has brought all these paradoxes to the fore. It is hyper-global and hyper-local at the same time. Abstract and only one wrong touch away. Enabled by technological connectivity and transmitted through physical proximity and social **intimacy**. The virus brings out the worst and best of us... This is our test, and while there are

examples of how the virus can dehumanize us, there are also countless examples of how we can respond with the best of our humanity”



2) In 2020, scientific hyper-collaboration on a global scale became the new normal – and that’s a huge win!

Unprecedented **scientific collaboration** is one of the most positive outcomes of this crisis, and this has now become the default approach to solving global scientific challenges, going forward. This represents a hugely positive outcome, and has the potential to save million of lives, going forward. What happened in this crisis will also become a blueprint for hyper-collaboration for tackling our next big challenges: **artificial general intelligence** (AGI / ASI), geo-engineering and human genome editing (among others).

In March 2020, my colleague **Azeem Azhar** proposed that this crisis will **reinforce the importance of genomic technologies**: “We’re able to use rapid sequencing techniques to start to understand the epidemiological characteristics of this outbreak, by tracking genetic drift”. Today, this is on-top of the global agenda (more 3/2020 discussions on **CRISPRCas9 + Covid-19**)



3) Europeans finally learned how to REALLY collaborate. Is this the beginning of the 'United States of Europe'? And will self-sufficiency trump globalization?

The 2020 crisis has turbo-charged the emergence of a 'United States of Europe' more than we ever thought possible. Europeans have gotten on the same page (*adapt and survive*), EU countries work together much closer (and faster), and the EU Commission is firmly but also wisely at the helm. Many previous stumbling blocks and objections to the creation of a true **UnitedStatesofEurope** have become meaningless in the face of a global depression that demands every ounce of our attention. Brexit is no longer a topic, and Switzerland's independence is becoming a saga from a different past.

It is clear to everyone that we must collaborate or risk demise – it's our choice.

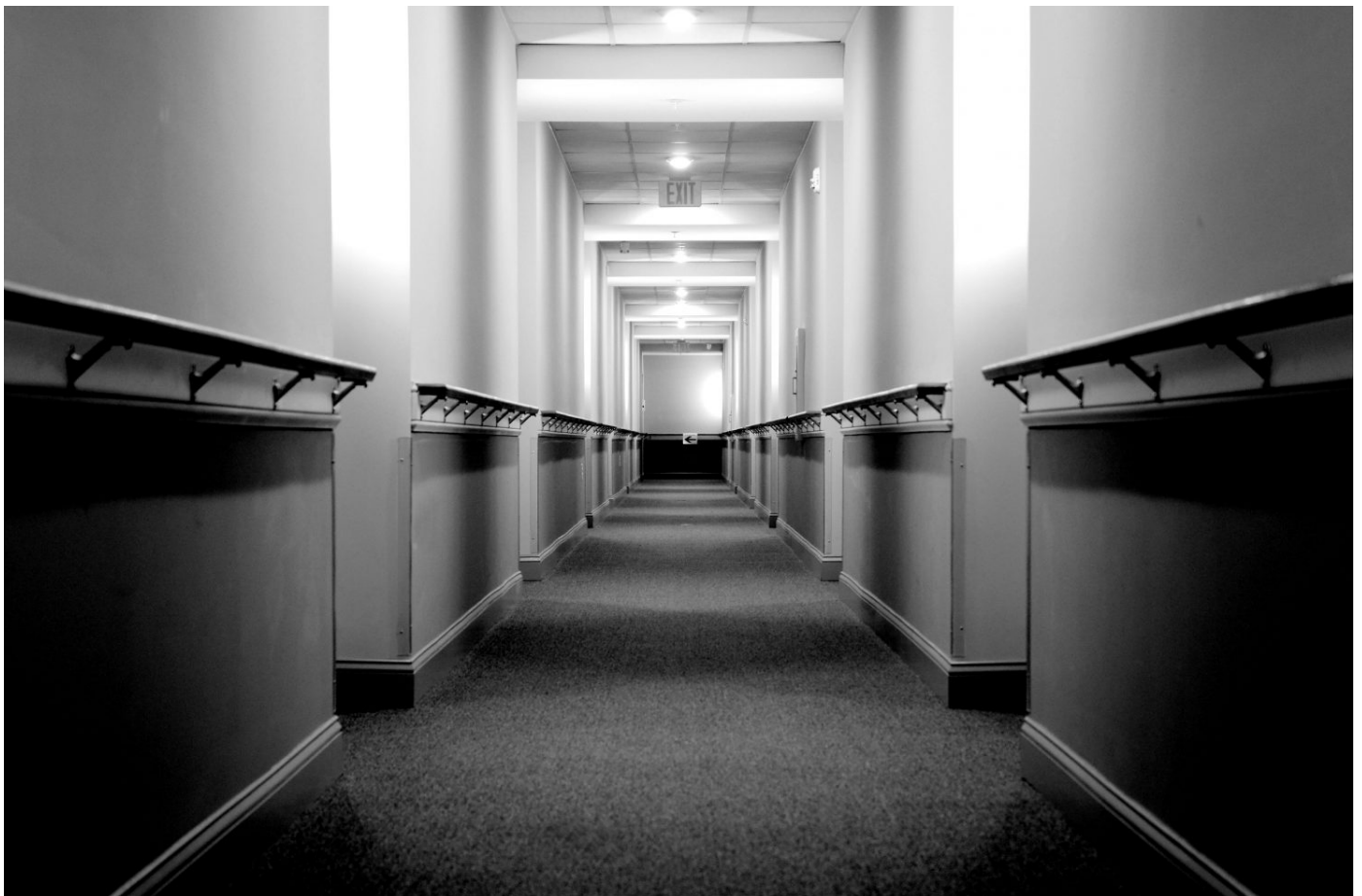
In the immediate future, Europe will hyper-collaborate like never before, as the socio-economic consequences of this crisis will dwarf those of the Great Depression. I think that Europe is well-equipped to handle them, and I also believe Europe will emerge as a global leader within the next 3 years, because of this crisis.

For some backcasting fun, read this post (via Spiegel.de, March 2020): "**A global challenge needs a global response – collaborate don't focus on distancing**" and this March 16 2020 post at **ForeignAffairs.com**: "The world faces the prospect of a profound shift: a return to natural—which is to say, self-sufficient—economy. That shift is the very opposite of globalization. While globalization entails a division of labor among disparate economies, a return to natural economy means that nations would move toward self-sufficiency"

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Note: the illustration below is meant as a parody – excuse the over-simplification – it's only meant to provoke:)





4) In 2020, loneliness, isolation and desperation have proven deadly, as well. Hell is 'no other people'.

In 2020, despite everything, we re-learned how to communicate under tough circumstances and support each other, no matter what. We discovered how to connect despite the constant 'social distancing', and we embraced each other, remotely.

On the other hand, loneliness emerged as a killer that may prove to be equally as potent as an epidemic. In March 2020 Ezra Klein at Vox called this 'the loneliness epidemic' or a 'social recession'. My favourite climate-change activist **Bill McKibben** wrote: "With the CoronaVirus, HELL IS NO OTHER PEOPLE".

By the end of 2020, overly stringent 'social distancing' practices have become a disaster for the elderly, and for sick or otherwise disadvantaged people, and it is now clear that during periods of forced isolation we *must* make every effort to re-connect with people that may need us, via phone, email and other digital means. We must even stand ready to provide some **carefully prepared** social emergency assistance, for example by assisting elderly neighbours with their shopping, or showing them how to order online, or fixing their wireless setup, or whatever else it may take.



5) The countries that prescribed to 'extreme capitalism' have slipped into chaos in 2020

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'Digital civil-wars' raged in the US and on Brazil during much of 2020. Woefully unprepared governments, utter lack of planning and dramatic mismanagement of healthcare funding made for an explosive mix, fuelled by social media and all kinds of digital activism.

The countries that failed to invest in their public-health infrastructure, and that offered late, little or no relief for those that ran into economic distress – mainly the U.S. and Brazil – have seen waves of deep civil unrest this year, sometimes bordering on a new breed of digitally-fuelled civil war.

Even back in 2017, **57% of Americans** did not have enough cash to cover a \$500 emergency – and this became painfully evident in 2020, where acts of desperation such as looting and a general rise in violence became a common occurrence, effectively shutting down democracy in the U.S.

Americans simply bought more guns since there weren't enough hospitals to take care of those that were infected. Alexis Madrigal wrote about this in TheAtlantic **How the CoronaVirus became the American catastrophe** in March 2020 – this turned out to be correct but also to a huge understatement. The U.S. elections have been postponed indefinitely as the security council runs the country; Donald Trump is hiding somewhere in the Caribbean.

But still, it turned out that **democracies tended to handle epidemics better than non-democracies** (for more retrospectives on China, read **The Atlantic**), and Europe is emerging as a new global leader (better late than never – see above).

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6) Politicians that have proven not to be future-ready were ousted in 2020, and populism is fading quickly.

Strong foresight skills and proven future-readiness is now mandatory for all public officials and politicians; millennials and women are taking over.

This happened in the U.S. first – Covid-19 was the nail in the coffin for Donald Trump who never again mentioned the word 're-election' after April 2020, when the USA started to spiral into chaos and social disorder due to Trump's **disastrous bungling** of the epidemic. For more retro-looking context, read TheAtlantic, from March 2020: **Zero-sum**

politics doesn't work in a pandemic and The Trump presidency is over as well as this NYT story [How Trump downplayed the Corona-Virus](#).

I believe that in 2021 we will see similar developments in the [UK](#), in Brazil, and maybe even in Iran and in Turkey.

Populism did not survive the corona-crisis (read [this prescient March 2020 Politico.com post](#)) as it is now abundantly clear that 'going back to the past' is a recipe for disaster when all the new challenges are unknown i.e. 'from the future'.

Around the world, female leaders are taking over, continuing a clear trend that already got started in 2019 – notably with [Sanna Marin](#) (Finland) and [Jacinda Ardern](#) (New Zealand). This is sure to be followed by the rise of many more powerful women such as [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) (back in March 2020, a member of U.S. House of Representatives for NY) and the former UN climate-change leader [Christiana Figueres](#) (please read her book on climate change, now!)

Btw: I have long proposed to make [future-training and foresighting mandatory](#) for all politicians and public officials. Maybe now we are finally getting somewhere?



7) We are facing a global trust-crisis. In 2020, while humans squabbled, the virus doubled. And surveillance became the new default.

Yuval Noah Harari (now, in late 2020, hosting the world's biggest online talkshow hosted on the ubiquitous Zoom.tv) published [this prescient piece on TIME.com](#) on March 15, 2020: *"In this moment of crisis, the crucial struggle takes place within humanity itself. If this epidemic results in greater disunity and mistrust among humans, it will be the virus's greatest victory. When humans squabble – viruses double. In contrast, if the epidemic results in closer global cooperation, it will be a victory not only against the coronavirus, but against all future pathogens".*

Yuval also wrote a [powerful piece in the FT](#) (probably still carefully hidden behind their stringent paywall) warning about ['Corona-Virus Dictatorship'](#). His premonition that those initially Covid-19-related extra security measures such as increased urban video surveillance, widespread mobile phone location tracking and ubiquitous face recognition could well become the new normal turned out to be true – Israel and Singapore have indeed become digital panopticons (and China is another cup of tea, altogether).

To further quote Yuval, March 21, 2020: "The coronavirus epidemic is thus a major test of citizenship. In the days ahead,

each one of us should choose to trust scientific data and healthcare experts over unfounded conspiracy theories and self-serving politicians. If we fail to make the right choice, we might find ourselves signing away our most precious freedoms, thinking that this is the only way to safeguard our health“

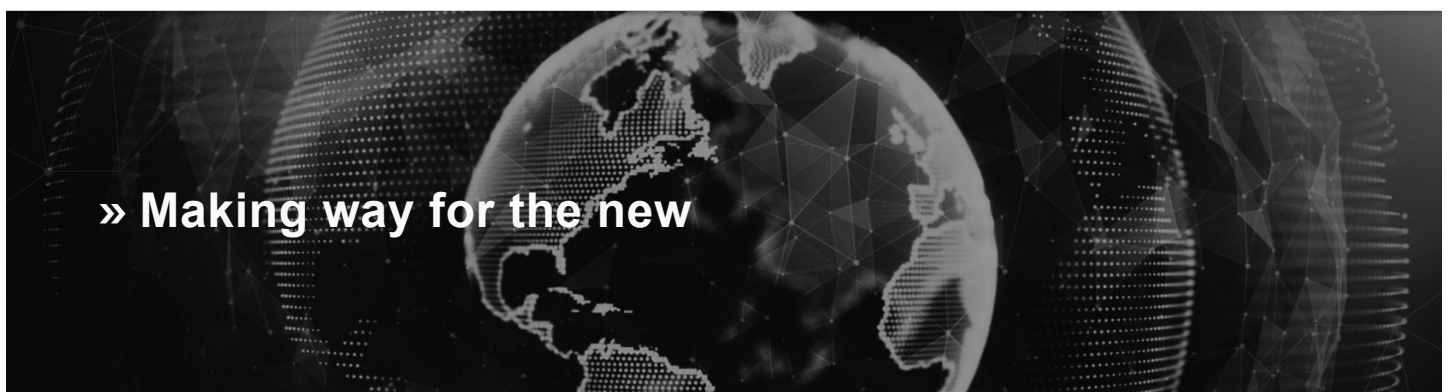


8) This crisis has seriously accelerated the ‘End of Oil’. The dismantling of the fossil fuel industry is now inevitable.

For the first time in modern history we were able to **see** what happens when we actually burn less fossil fuels – and that really made us think. Due to the global meltdown of airlines, tourism and many of the other CO2 heavy industries, fuel demand **dropped like a rock in 2020**. In late 2020, many oil, gas and coal companies have become bona-fide burning platforms and investors are bailing as fast they can.

Divestment from fossil fuels was already at an all-time high before this crisis. Now, the world’s money is starting to flow towards sustainable / impact investing, and to ESG-driven funds. By 2025, investing in fossil fuels will become akin to a criminal act (thanks, **Bernie, 2019**). Altogether a good and much needed development!

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9) In 2020, we dramatically changed our views on how, when and where we need to travel

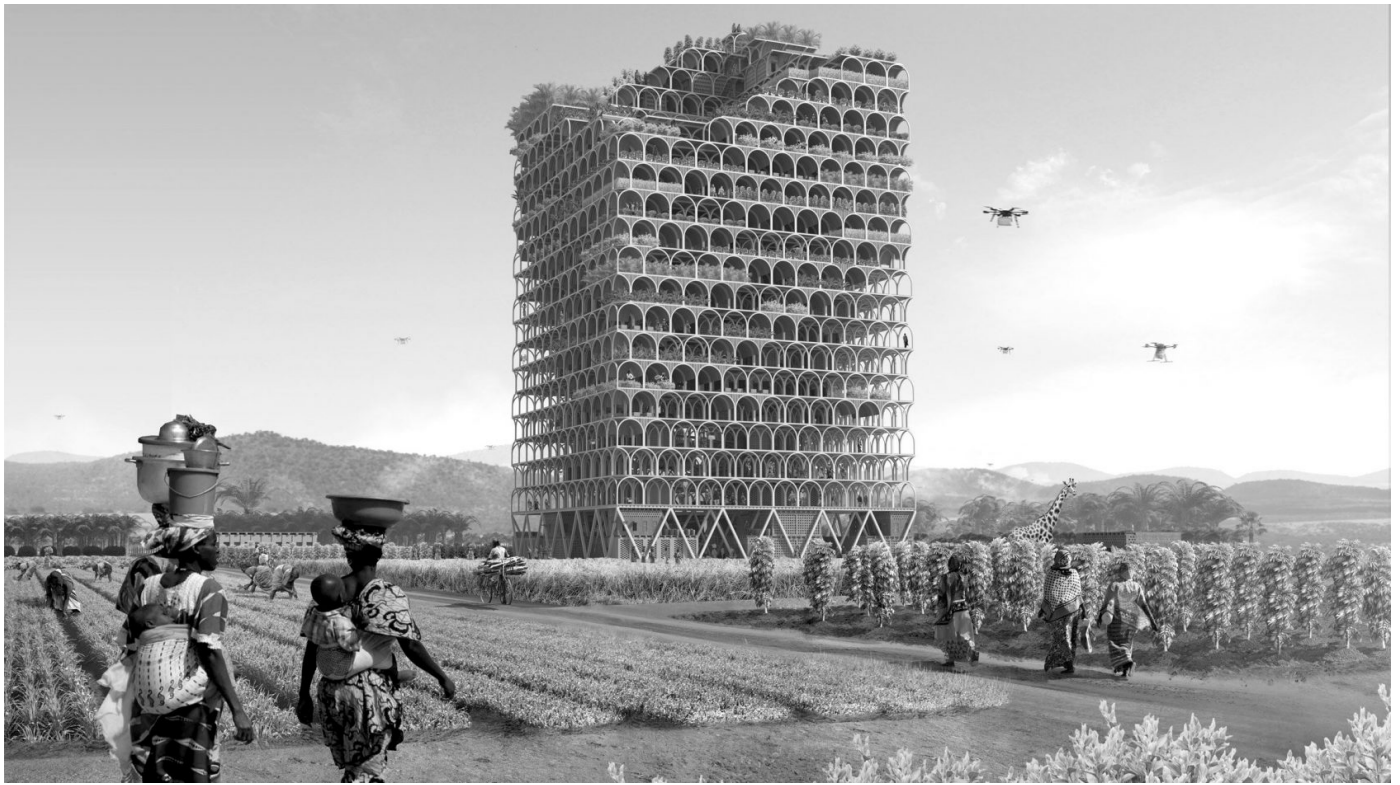
...and the airline industry is forced to pivot faster than any other industry before.

Back in the year 2019, I hopped on some 300+ flights to give **keynotes** all over the world. No matter how hard I pushed and tried to incentivise them, I just couldn't get my clients (or their agencies) interested in remote appearances. How the world has changed – I have not given a single keynote in front of a live audience this year, yet.

Now, every company, every brand, every organisation and every government has dramatically stepped up their remote-working activities, including meetings, trainings, conferences and events – and this is only the beginning of a totally new era of remote-everything (see below). Even after some of lock-downs were lifted in the fall of 2020, starting with China, people kept meeting virtually – Zooming has become the new Youtube (maybe futurists will become 'zoomlebrities' soon:) **Digital meeting and conferencing** is now the new streaming media, with several very promising IPOs of webinar platforms coming in 2021. It's a Zoom-GoToMeeting-Crowdcast++ world now.

Airplane manufacturers are in serious trouble but have quickly dedicated most of their resources to fast-tracking R&D on carbon-neutral airplanes – because people will eventually start flying again:) After the corona-crisis peaked in July 2020, everyone in the airline and tourism business had to face yet another wave of disruption: **mandatory carbon taxes** for every single flight ticket purchased, and for every means of transportation that isn't carbon-neutral. Cruise-lines (remember them?) and shipping companies are in dire straits, scrambling to switch to other sources of fuel. *Have a look at my cool new **carbon tax GIF**.

For those that still can't or don't want to fly, in the future, airports are busy adding virtual travel and **holographic teleportation** options. Soon, I will be able to go to the 'airport' and step into a \$2 Million holographic studio to give 3 talks in 3 different parts of the world, all in a single day. Nice.



10) Our agricultural ecosystem is rebooting to support self-sufficiency while the very fabric of the food industry is under scrutiny

Due to curfews, lock-downs and supply chain breakdowns, our shopping and consumption habits were totally uprooted in 2020, and food is where it hit us the hardest. Many of us started to wonder if we really needed some of that food we used to love but couldn't get anymore, in the first place (such as **meat**), and our eating habits changed forever. In the aftermath of the first Covid-19 wave we are now seeing seismic shifts in the food and agricultural industries, starting with the increasingly intense debates on food and energy **self-sufficiency**. In late 2020, we are a lot more locally-driven when we make choices about food. In 2021 we will see a steep rise in vegetarianism, and a carbon tax on meat will come in 2022. Restaurants? That's a story for another post (**stay tuned**)

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11) The way we work will never be the same: remote everything is here!

In 2020, remote and virtual working became a real option for many of us. Finally, no matter what business you're in and where you are based (*note the caveat below), working from home, remotely, virtually, digitally... has become completely acceptable as well as technically feasible for almost everyone. A whole new 'remote working' industry is unfolding (see this [NYT story](#) from March 2020), and new technologies like holograms and mixed reality applications are being rolled out quickly. Even SecondLife is rumoured to make a comeback!

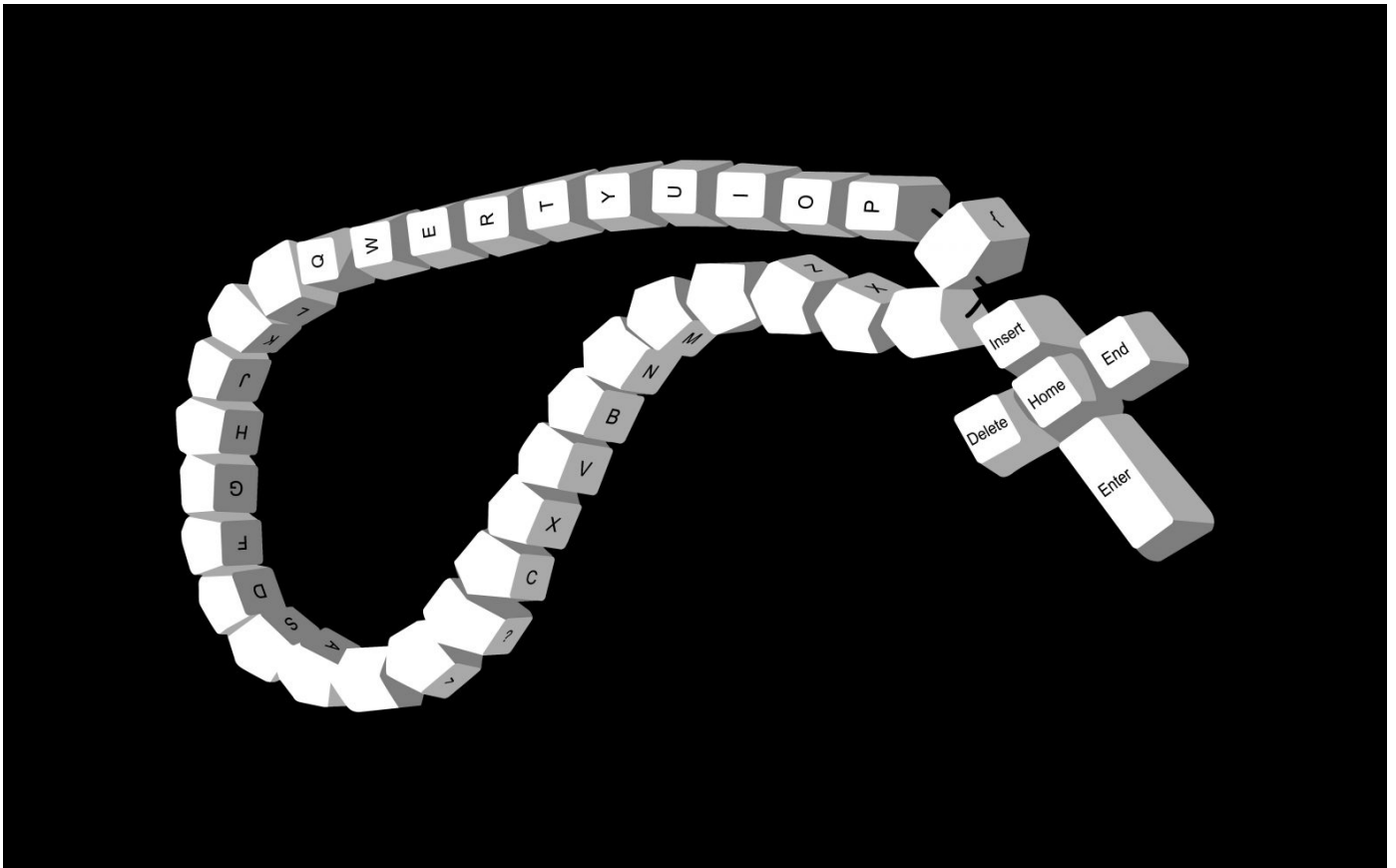
Zoom has become the new Youtube, and this is only the beginning as this rising tide will certainly float all boats. *Yes, we continue to struggle with significant 'digital divide' issues as fast internet access is still not available everywhere, and good mics, cameras and software are still way too expensive. But due to the 2020 crisis the global 5G roll-out is now going into warp-drive, with waves of new investments coming in, and governments clearing the hurdles even faster. 7 Billion people will be connected at high speed in 2026!

In 2020, digital conferencing became as normal as WhatsApp. Once everyone learned how to do it, **there was no stopping it.**

Real-life human contact and face-to-face interaction was never and will never be *replaceable* by virtual meetings – au contraire, during the 2020 crisis we realised how important personal and social interaction is. As we suffered through the tough period of 'social distancing' during those 3 terrible months in the spring of 2020, many of us started to crave for actual human contact more than anything else. Yet we adapted because since we simply couldn't go, and now meeting, talking, collaborating, learning and **conferencing remotely** is the new normal.

My job is finally moving online, as well. Read more [here](#), and see what it looks like, [here](#), and join me for these experiments.

Related: Watch my new film **How The Future Works** (released in early 2020 i.e. before the corona crisis 🤖)



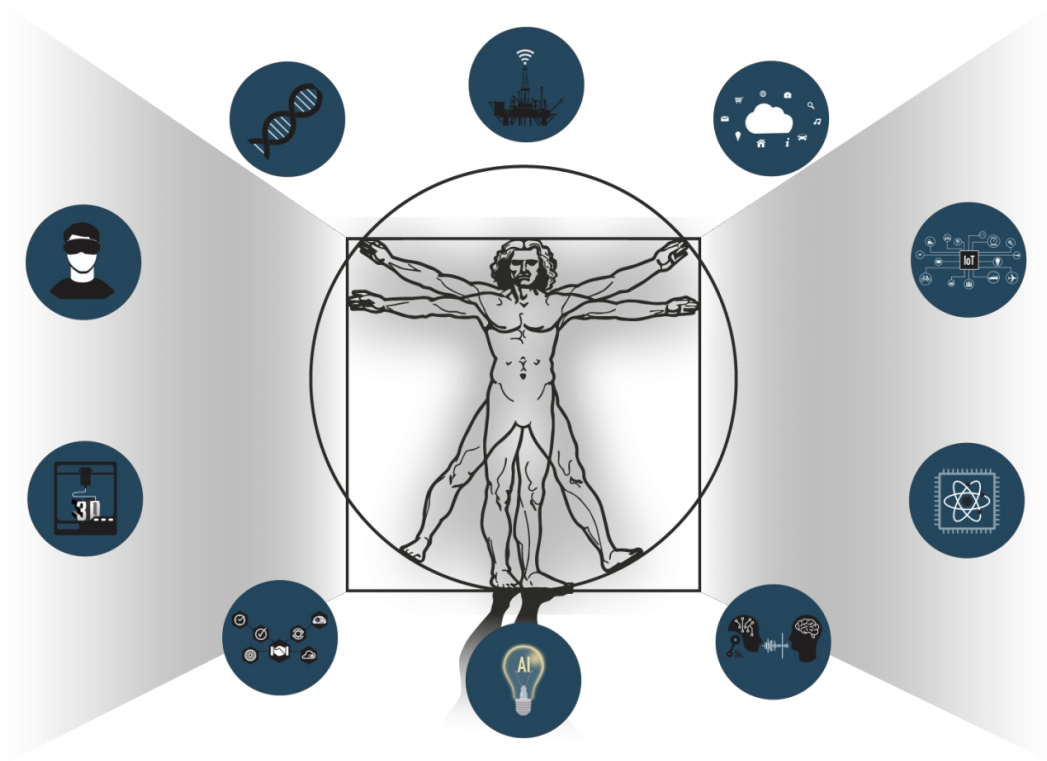
12) In 2020, Technology / ICT companies, the global digital platforms and many eCommerce leaders have become even more powerful – regulation is a certainty.

The one clear winner of this crisis was (and still is) technology and the entire ICT (information, communication and technology) business, as well as eCommerce and digital media, of course. Everyone, everywhere is now doing EVERYTHING ONLINE, from ordering food to taking yoga classes. Piers Fawkes forecasted this way back in March 2020: [What New Ideas will the Crisis bring to the Mainstream?](#)

The downside is that technology has truly become the new religion (read my [2019 Forbes piece](#) on why I think that's an issue), and 'being connected' is now [the new drug of choice](#). The debate on Digital Ethics (see my video playlist on this topic, [here](#)) that was kicked off in 2019 and way before that in my book [Technology vs. Humanity](#), is certain to become as important as the discussion of climate change.

Technology regulation has once again moved to the top of the agenda for 2021. We will see real action on [a slew of](#) various re-humanisation efforts, with the goal of making sure that human (and planetary i.e. ecological) benefits result from all technological progress, and that negative externalities are included in every business design. We are entering a [new renaissance](#).

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The 'Neoluvian Man'

» This crisis is an opportunity. Don't miss it.
Reinvent. Adapt. Communicate. Collaborate. Live.

More good reads and resources (constantly updated on my new [PostCoronaFuture](#) page)

While in lock-down mode quarantine, please consider reading my book [Technology vs. Humanity](#)

Azeem Azhar: [Corona Virus on the Latin Bridge](#)

[Great video by Naomi Klein](#): "Coronavirus Capitalism", Naomi Klein's Case for Transformative Change Amid Coronavirus Pandemic

[Corona virus recession looms. \(NYT\)](#) [New McKinsey report: beyond coronavirus](#)

[Corona is a game-changer for mental healthcare \(MIT Tech Review\)](#)

[We live in Zoom now \(NYT\)](#)