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Events of Disruptive Transformation

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We have been discussing the prospects of catastrophes of our own making for decades. We have been debating risks linked to anthropogenic climate change and runaway technologies, trying to fathom even those futures that we otherwise deem unfathomable. Yet it is a known natural risk that wreaks havoc around the globe today.

Events of Surprise

Despite the fact that we saw it coming, it came as a surprise. Not COVID-19 of course, but the global pandemic that happened to be COVID-19. We knew that it would come, because scientists have been warning us regularly about it for a long time. In retrospect, it is haunting that the first report of the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (2019), set up jointly by the WHO and the World Bank Group, warned of a possible pandemic just a few months prior to the outbreak. Long before that, experts in global catastrophic risks and existential risks likewise warned of potential global pandemics (Leslie 1996; Bostrom and Cirkovic 2008). Even Bill Gates (2010; 2015) did on several platforms. Still, when it came, we were shocked and surprised. But, again, we knew that too. We perfectly knew even that it was going to come a surprise.

With respect to risks linked to runaway technologies, Vernor Vinge (1993) once said that the technological singularity (loosely speaking, the point when greater-than-human general intelligence is created) will increasingly become commonplace as we move closer and closer to it – and “yet when it finally happens it may still be a great surprise and a greater unknown.” Perhaps today’s situation connotes the same expectation and surprise. But there is a crucial difference: whereas that which lies beyond the singularity is by definition unfathomable to our limited human cognition, we can mobilize our knowledge in facing a global pandemic, even under the condition of grave uncertainty.

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Of course, the knowledge of the humanities and the social sciences does not develop cures for diseases. It attempts to develop an understanding of ourselves and the world we are living in. While we trust the sciences in

fighting viruses, we trust the humanities and the social sciences to understand, for instance, human behavior in quarantine situations or the social dynamics of crisis situations in the first place.

In coping with the current crisis, it is tremendously important that that the sciences and humanities mobilize their respective knowledges. What I can share is perhaps minor compared to the work of medicine. The many reactions claiming today that the world is not going to be same as before is precisely the societal experience of time that has kept me occupied in the last five years. I wrote a book called *History in Times of Unprecedented Change* (2019), arguing that instead of expecting change to play out over the course of a developmental historical process, we expect "unprecedented change" in the shape of sudden game-changer events that bring about wholesale transformations. What's more, when COVID-19 hit the globe, I was working on another book called *The Epochal Event* (2020) that I already sent to production. The book attempts to conceptualize the immense transformative events that we think kick off new eras as "epochal events." These events bring about "new realities," the ones after which nothing stays the same, and the ones that, most importantly, work in a more-than-human world. They are not simply events that transform our social world, but events that take place in the complex collision of the human and the natural worlds that we brought about due to our previously unimaginable technological powers.

Events of a More-than-Human World

This leads back to the current crisis. In trying to make sense of it across the humanities and the social sciences, we should not be content with reflecting only on the specific case at hand. We should attempt big picture views that recognize the larger context of human-induced changes in the Earth system, the collision of the human and the natural worlds, captured by the concept of the Anthropocene. And, as Julia Adeney Thomas (2019) warns, let's not confuse the Anthropocene with climate change. We have more than enough proof that human activity drives not only climatic conditions, but introduces changes in several Earth system indicators – ranging from shrimp aquaculture to biosphere degradation – that may lead to the abrupt transformation of the overall condition of the Earth system (Steffen et al. 2015). Not to mention the ongoing mass extinction event, the sixth extinction of species (Kolbert 2014) also driven by human activity.

Perhaps the global pandemics that natural science, risk research, Bill Gates and others warn us about, or at least a certain group of such pandemics, also belong to the larger Anthropocene context. This is especially true for pandemics that fall into the category of zoonosis, or infectious diseases that are transmitted to humans by animals. We only

need to view zoonosis within a framework of nonhuman-human entanglement (as, for instance, in Lynteris 2019, 42–76). Instead of seeing it as an external spread between different worlds and different orders of things, we can conceive of zoonosis as an internal transmission within the same world – the world we have as a result of the collision of social and natural systems.

From the deep ecology movement of the 1970s (Naess 1973) to the recent rise of environmental humanities (Heise 2016; Robin 2018), thinking in terms of human-nonhuman and social-natural entanglements is increasingly becoming a default option. Thinking further in this direction can even have the potential to bring together the natural and life sciences and the human and social sciences to a shared platform. And that's precisely what we need right now. Because the kind of research that could adequately address the collision of the human and the natural worlds must be the one that collides the knowledge formations that have previously researched those worlds separately.

Living the Event

At this point, one may ask how a theoretically oriented work on time and history – the work I typically do – can contribute to this. For one thing, a focus on temporality and historicity makes us realize that we are dealing with something unknown (Jordheim et at. 2020). Today, however, the unknown is unknown because of being unprecedented, meaning that conventional historical knowledge pointing at precedents can be only of limited use in navigating through the situation. And this is the point where a more theoretically oriented work can be invoked, even if theory is viewed with skepticism these days. Doubts may arise especially in light of the fact that theory in the human and social sciences is often accused of simply making up stuff. This is, of course, not true. Only good theories make up stuff, not all kinds of theories. And the stuff they make up are concepts through which we make sense of the world and ourselves.

Concepts capturing the nature of transformations and the nature of transformative events may be vehicles of understanding at times we experience as radically changing. Such concepts may be relevant or useful for all knowledge formations that have a "historical" character across the scholarly landscape, human and natural sciences alike. Whether the times we experience today are indeed times of "unprecedented change" (Simon 2019) and whether the current event of disruptive transformation qualifies as an "epochal event" (Simon 2020) will best be assessed only after the crisis, when we come to know the new reality that springs out of today's situation. In the midst of uncertainty, in the midst of living the event, we necessarily orient ourselves with uncertain concepts. But this is not a reason to despair. It is rather a reason to work

towards developing a better understanding of the world.

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