



# Economy and Society

RC02 2020 QUARTER 3 NEWSLETTER

## PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

As I write this, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to take root worldwide, including in Brazil where the ISA Forum was supposed to be held last month. As you may recall, the Forum had been postponed to February 23-27, 2021. The ISA Forum's organizers are waiting until September to see how the disease and global responses develop before deciding how to proceed forward. As soon as I receive additional information, I'll post it to our weekly website and your email boxes.

RC02 was also planning two international conferences in the summer of 2021 in Hong Kong and Taiwan. These conferences were intended to be fully-funded in-person events and so both sets of organizers have chosen to push their conferences forward, most likely to the summer of 2022. The World Society Foundation, the conferences' principal funder, has in principle agreed to support this transition.

To use the vocabulary of our times with its emphasis on video conferencing and online teaching, we can no longer rely on synchronous in-person global conferences to maintain our academic community. We must look for asynchronous alternatives.

We are fortunate to have one such community-building tool. Almost two years ago, Dustin Stoltz and I initiated the [RC02.org](https://rc02.org) website which merged our previously text-based email

listserv and our PDF newsletters. You should be receiving weekly emails from RC02 with announcements for calls for papers, conferences, job positions, and other items of interest. If you haven't been receiving them, click 'sign up' at the bottom of the [RC02.org](https://rc02.org) website.

These are frankly bleak times accompanied by death, social instability, and authoritarian tendencies. Yet these crises provide a potential catalyst for community building. Last weekend I counted at least 7 Black Lives Matter street demonstrations within 3 kilometers of my Chicago apartment. Since the first protests began on May 26 in response to the police murder of George Floyd, there have been over 4,700 demonstrations geographically spread across the United States from small towns to large cities; by some measures this may be the [largest social movement](#) in U.S. history. This is a rare opportunity for the USA to not merely enact police and criminal justice reform but also social, political, and economic reparations for Black Americans to redress four centuries of exploitation and oppression.

In this spirit of solidarity and outreach in an era of social distancing and restricted travel, the board and I are developing new strategies to reach out to you and distant colleagues. One simple thing each of you can do is to share opportunities with others. When you receive an email describing an opportunity of interest to scholars in Economy and Society, please forward it to Dustin Stoltz (dss219 [at] lehigh [dot] edu) who will then post it as an announcement in

our weekly emails and archive it on the RC02.org website. Please forward your emails in French, Spanish or English (the three working languages of ISA). The more you share with colleagues, the stronger our community. The minute you spend forwarding an email could potentially alter the career trajectory of a colleague that you haven't yet met.

If you have ideas on how to promote connections within RC02, or if you have an initiative that you'd like to volunteer for, please don't hesitate to reach out to me (Aaron.Pitluck [at] IllinoisState [dot] edu).

In closing, I'd like to publicly thank one such colleague. For the past two years, Dustin Stoltz has donated his time as our secretary and newsletter editor while working in the graduate program at the University of Notre Dame. Having defended his dissertation, *The Sociology of Elite Advisors*, he'll continue in both roles in his new position as Assistant Professor at Lehigh University. Congratulations, Dustin!

Aaron Pitluck

RC02 President (2018-2022)  
Illinois State University

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## PANDEMIC OBSERVATIONS

We asked RC02 Members to write short essays on how the COVID-19 pandemic might incite lasting social change. Below are six excellent essays from seven authors covering how the pandemic relates to work, technology, politics, and history.

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### CONVIVIALITY AND COVID-19

BY Karen Foster

In his 1971 book, *Tools for Conviviality*, the philosopher Illich presented a “life style” and “political system” to counter the technology-intensive industrial model of the 1970s. This alternative society would be founded on the principle of *conviviality*, which he defined as the responsible limit of tools (and which is now the name of a [manifesto](#) penned by influential French academics). Tools, from financial markets, debt, and economic growth, to compulsory education, highways, smartphones, and medicine, have the power to help us, but they can also turn against us; moreover, as Illich theorized in 1973's *The Right to Useful Unemployment*, they have the propensity to *deny us the power to help ourselves*. Accordingly, he believed that a better society would be a convivial

society—one that gives “priority to the protection, the maximum use, and the enjoyment of the one resource that is almost equally distributed among all people: personal energy under personal control.”

The fact that the pandemic has spurred a run on yeast, flour, fabric and bicycles suggests that more people (mostly those with the privilege to consider such pursuits a novelty) are spending more time satisfying their basic needs with greater independence from industrial production and markets. Forced to slow down, unable to “spend” our allocations of time as we did before, with nowhere really to drive to, many are using more of their personal energy under personal control. We have been thrust into a world where many of us are engaging in convivial practices. This is true both in the narrow sense of Ivan Illich's definition, insofar as our tools have been limited by the restrictions the pandemic has imposed on our movements, as well as

in the broader definition of conviviality in the aforementioned “Convivialist Manifesto”: living together, cooperating, interacting peacefully. That some people are snitching on each other for breaking rules, that there are fights over cans of tuna in the grocery store, that some governments are trying to prevent other governments from buying facemasks—these are the exceptions to a mostly cooperative reaction to the pandemic.

Although industrial production and consumption continue, the contraction of the global economy tells us they have slowed down dramatically; as many industrial processes grind or sputter to a halt, we are presented with the conditions to test Illich’s theory. [Working from home](#), using communication technology to stay in touch with people (rather than mainly to increase and measure our outputs), driving less, doing more basic things for ourselves, do we

find our “range of freedom” enhanced? In what ways have we been helped and harmed, during this crisis, by the complicated and vast global supply chains we’ve created because orthodox economics told us it was a good idea? Have we “inverted” our relationship to technologies, imagined broadly, so that they “work” for us rather than the other way around? What can we learn by examining how responses to the pandemic vary by class, gender, geography, and so on?

Dr. Karen Foster is Associate Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Dalhousie University, Canada, and the Canada Research Chair (Tier II) in Sustainable Rural Futures for Atlantic Canada

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## CORONA PANIC: ACCELERATOR OF A CYBERNETIC FUTURE

BY Hannes Hofbauer and Andrea Komlosy

The novel coronavirus and COVID-19 quite simply is accelerating a profound cycle shift. Looking back historically at the industrial system, cyclical crises have always helped new lead sectors, propulsion technologies and labor regimes to break through. Today, with robotics and artificial intelligence already waiting in the wings, the comprehensive digitalization of all areas of life and the introduction of self-regulating systems, a new production regime is emerging – one centered around the human being herself in her biological existence and behaviors.

The “long waves of the economy” are embedded in two other cyclical changes. In the hegemonic cycle, we are experiencing the decline of Western hegemony in the shape of the USA and the rise of countries of the Global South, which have ultimately been able free themselves from their role as extended workbenches, to become new global

centers. China is emerging as the primary candidate for hegemonic succession in the new cycle. The second change concerns the replacement of the industrial by the cybernetic principle of production. Up to now, mankind has experienced two great revolutions in the evolution: interrupting the hunter-gatherer existence, the Neolithic revolution brought about agriculture and handicrafts as humans abandoned nomadism and settled, and the industrial revolution helped the factory principle to break through with specialization in work organization and mechanization. Computerization heralded the advent of the cybernetic principle as early as the 1950s, which, with the self-regulation of communication and information-generating technologies, ushered in a new state of aggregation for humanity.

According to the Russian risk research and foresight analysts Grinin and Korotayev<sup>1</sup>, the future belongs to those technologies that ensure maximum

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<sup>1</sup> Leonid and Anton Grinin, *The Cybernetic Revolution and the Forthcoming Epoch of Self-Regulating Systems* Moscow 2016

adaptability and communication capabilities, self-regulation, controllability, miniaturization, individual and situational adaptation, and economical use of resources and energy. Against the backdrop of the corona crisis, these scenarios are the very core of the response. Grinin and Korotayev speak of the MBNRIC complex (Medicine, Bio, Nano, Robo, Info, Cognitive) as the launch vehicle of cybernetic production. The shift will not only generate new products (e.g. artificial body parts, drugs, vaccines, control and monitoring devices) but also new demand for optimization (health, fitness, beauty aesthetics, genetic modeling) and tailored life support. It goes without saying that the idea of optimization opens the door to control, security and surveillance technologies that also pursue other objectives.

Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault have shown that the acceptance of such behavior does not require any state coercion whatsoever, but can creep into the body and psyche of the individual as the very promise of civilization. As a mass psychological phenomenon, Theodor Adorno and Max

Horkheimer have researched the willingness of people to adapt to authoritarian dictates – fascism being merely their text case. All of this shows us where we are headed – the decrees issued in recent months and, even more so, the new social (engineering) techniques will be retained and ingrained as the “new normal” after the crisis subsides. It may be thought of as a test phase. In effect, the rules are training people to best fulfil their role in dealing with the self-regulating and optimizing systems of the future. Corona, in its life-and-death urgency, has provided the opportunity to accelerate this transition, and virus management is already anticipating the future.

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Dr. Andrea Komlosy is historian and Professor of Social and Economic History at Vienna University, Austria

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## MEXICO, A BRIEF NARRATIVE ABOUT COVID-19

BY Miguel Ángel Vite Pérez

The COVID-19 pandemic has been caused by risks and dangers associated with globalization, whose manifestations in different countries depend on the vulnerability of their populations.<sup>2</sup> In this context, vulnerability is the risk to human existence, related to poverty, disease and old age.<sup>3</sup>

However, some effects of vulnerability can be curtailed if social protections are inherent in state welfare policies, although these have proved

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<sup>2</sup> Beck, Ulrich (1999). *World Risk Society*. United Kingdom: Polity Press.

<sup>3</sup> Castel, Robert. (2000). The roads to disaffiliation. Insecure work and vulnerable relationships. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 3: 519-535.

insufficient in the presence of a new virus that has caused millions of deaths throughout the world.

In Mexico, vulnerability in the form of risk to the existence of its inhabitants has been expressed as narratives that refer to COVID-19, in order to justify new social behaviors.

The connotations of the narratives are binary, meaning that for some the virus exists, whereas for others it does not. In this case, the Mexican health authorities have demonstrated that the virus exists, and that although it cannot be observed, it is however highly contagious. Consequently, a sanitary protocol must be followed to avoid mass contagion.

However, other groups do not accept its existence, and as a result they refuse to follow the sanitary protocol, arguing that this is a government lie to prevent people from opening their businesses or

circulating in the streets. Others blame the Mexican government for its existence. Why? Because by means of its campaigns to clean streets and squares using disinfectants, it has spread this to make the population sick, thus acting as a means of extermination.

From the point of view of the health authority, the virus was imported, meaning it was brought in by high-income social groups, who made trips abroad. It should thus be more a disease of the rich rather than the poor.

Meanwhile, the current Mexican government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has affirmed that his immunity to the virus has been due to the protection provided by his amulets and humane values.

But according to the scientific narrative, the health authority has tried to measure the impact of the

virus using a statistical curve, called the sentinel model, showing a continued rise; however, it argues that the time will come when a decline will initiate. And when the curve starts to go down; contagions will decrease.

This model only reports the number of infections, deaths, number of beds available in hospitals each day, but its information is more than 70 days late. For this reason, another narrative from scientists who disagree with this model, argues that this information is inadequate for designing an epidemiological policy.

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## COVID-19 AND THE WORLD OF WORK IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES SOUTH OF THE SAHARA

BY Ulrike Schuerkens

The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated its global reach in 2020 and is now affecting not only workers in the Northern countries but millions of unprotected and vulnerable workers in the informal economy and in precarious jobs that are hard-hit sectors in the world.<sup>4</sup> Workers have rather seldom access to health services and social protection and are exposed to economic risks. Policy responses need to be implemented so that they provide immediate relief to workers and enterprises as the employment impacts of COVID-19 are far-reaching and unprecedented. However, fiscal space for economic

stimulation is restricted in African countries where sectors most at risk are transport, storage and communication; accommodation; real estate; retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles. These sectors are labour intensive and employ large groups of often low-paid and low-skilled workers that are laid-off and support reduction in working hours. Shopkeepers, clerks and workers in related jobs are concerned. The accommodation and food services sectors are also largely affected as restaurants and bars are closed so that activities cannot continue. Women are most often concerned in this sector. The agri-business sector has also been hard hit as factories close and global supply chains are stopped. Cancelled orders are suppressing demand in key industries such as fishery, fruit and vegetables that can no longer be exported to European markets because of the closure of international air connections. The transport industry is heavily affected around the world, such as airline crews; others such as people working as delivery workers may continue to respond to the demand for online

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<sup>4</sup> International Labour Organization (2020) *World Employment and Social Outlook – Trends 2020*. Executive summary; ILO Monitor: *COVID-19 and the world of work*. Second edition. 7 April 2020.



retail. The food sector and agriculture are impacted due to border closures and containment measures. Employment is at a lower risk in Africa because of higher shares of informality with lower social protection levels. These informal workers have no income replacement if they stop working in case of sickness. Street vendors, food servers, construction workers, transport workers and domestic workers are directly concerned by the lockdown measures. These workers have often decided to return to rural areas without a possibility to continue informal and precarious jobs in urban centres that are locked down.

Policy measures are thus urgently needed that include social dialogue to best serve those in need. Enterprises, jobs and incomes have to be supported. The economy and employment have to be stimulated. Cash transfers and food supply have to

be offered. Formal workers have to be supported so that they don't fall again into informality. International organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the European Union have activated solidarity transfers on a credit or assistance basis in order to assist African countries in this unprecedented crisis.

However, the current outlook is characterized by high uncertainty regarding the duration of the shock to economies and the long-term impacts on businesses and labour markets. Monitoring and updating of policy measures are thus crucial in African countries South of the Sahara.

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## CATALYSIS, ACCELERATION, AND ADAPTION

BY Vincenzo Giorgino

In general, the pandemic displayed the fragility of both market and state organisational structures, since neither the former, nor the latter succeeded in effectively protecting the population from physical, social, existential and economic suffering. And both knew that a pandemic was on the way: people did not.

I don't think there is anyone who can predict what will happen next year and perhaps not next October with reduced margins of error. However, from the tracks on the ground, namely the effects of the COVID-19, considering how it has been and is managed, not what it is as a virus from a biological point of view, seems to assume two key properties: catalysis and acceleration.

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### COVID-19 as a catalyst of human attention

In this function, it catalyzes the social attention to life protection with continuity. This is not a foregone conclusion: the climate emergency does not enjoy such status. Attention is a scarce resource in the contemporary network society.

### COVID-19 as an accelerator of technological innovation

Technological innovation is accelerated by the pressure exercised by the virus's spread as a menace to humankind. All this is part of a bigger picture, that of a *society grounded on emergencies of any kind*: financial (since 2007-8 and still kicking), climatic and health-related.

Public investments in healthcare are expected through indebtedment, which will burden the next generation's shoulders. With a recession knocking at the door, certain types of companies and jobs could disappear forever. Investments boosting the economy could accelerate the technological

innovation and related unemployment caused by labour-replacing automation.

A strong alliance between governments and giant platform companies on Big Data management for surveillance and healthcare is already in action and the emergency legitimates less transparent contract negotiations.

Moreover, technologies need our digital and cognitive skills: they are embedded in our life skills as the ground on which they could flourish or perish. This crisis is a transformation into something else that we do not know but we can influence, depending on our mindsets.

### Adaptation and the commoning

A strategy of adaptation is more realistic than a sustainability-based policy, but its recognition could fail for the shared illusion “to go back to normal”. Said this, the context is open to intellectual innovation also in social sciences, and the detached observer must give way to the social co-designer, a skill that is not for most academic sociologists. At

the same time, the monodisciplinary gaze will lose ground.

In this context, the capacity of communities to self-organise and to canalize their energies and attention to protect life is crucial. An outstanding example for that is the production of facemasks and other PPEs via 3D printing to respond to the unmet demand. These “Open Communities” can provide these equipments and tests with sufficient tempestivity to stem the spread of the virus if they rely on distributed ledger technologies. For an early stage example see the protocol [Social Shield Shaper](#).

If this opportunity is missed, it could, on the contrary, pave the way for an alliance between platform companies and the state to restore security and administer at high costs a tranquiliser pill for the bewildered.

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## THE COVID-19 REVOLUTION?

BY Uwe Christian Plachetka

Andrea Komlosy presented a foresight study on the COVID-19 pandemics as a game changer<sup>5</sup> in June 2020 employing the model of dominant production principles.<sup>6</sup>

Can investigations on the impact of 14<sup>th</sup> century Black Death pandemics on Europe<sup>7</sup> including the

Chinese Zhèng Hé – expeditions (1405-33) and Western renaissance scientists’ efforts to replace the abandoned Silk Road by the so-called “Maritime Silk Road” improve such foresight studies?

The “flagship person” of my now stalled project<sup>8</sup> on World System information networks<sup>9</sup> is the Austrian Renaissance astronomer Georg Purbachius (*Georg Aunpeckh von Peuerbach*, 1423 –1461) for his discovery of the magnetic deviation of the nautical

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<sup>5</sup> Hofbauer, Hannes – Komlosy Andrea (2020) [in German] „Corona-Krise: Anschlag für eine kybernetische Wende“ *Telepolis*, March 20, URL: <https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Corona-Krise-Anschlag-fuer-eine-kybernetische-Wende-4723168.html?seite=all>

<sup>6</sup> Pages 46-82 in Grinin, Leonid (2012) *Macrobistory and Globalization*, Volgograd: Unchitel

<sup>7</sup> Pages 184-203 in Frankopan, Peter. (2015) *The Silk Roads*. London-Oxford &c: Bloomsbury; Wickham, Chr. (2016) *Medieval Europe*, New Haven – London: Yale Univ. Press

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<sup>8</sup> Plachetka, Uwe Chr. (2020) [in German] „Die Eroberung Amerikas als Folge der Pest im 14. Jahrhundert?“ *Der KonaK* 98: 4-16, Vienna

<sup>9</sup> Plachetka, Uwe Chr. (2018) „Energy, resilience and the Chinese World-System” URL:

<https://www.rc02.org/newsletter/2018/8/28/energy-resilience-and-the-chinese-world-system>

compass,<sup>10</sup> then 10° towards Northeast.<sup>11</sup> Purbachius' generation of Renaissance scientists were promoted by rulers due to then emerging state-administration: The Black Death fostered a cash-money economy, reducing feudal elite's rent-funded agency. Settling ecclesiastical schisms by diplomacy was another 15<sup>th</sup> century novelty, as were charted "World"-Maps<sup>12</sup>: Toscanelli's 1474 plan to sail westward to China,<sup>13</sup> may have emerged at the ecclesiastical council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-45) furnishing Fra Mauro with information for his landmark "World" Map<sup>14</sup> drawn ca. 1457, the year Purbachius discovered the compass deviation. Astronomic instruments for deep sea navigation became imperative, triggering the supremacy of knowledge by instruments over socially embedded knowledge.

According to Komlosy's foresight rationale, opposition to a now emerging computer "cyberarchy" parallels the 15 and 16<sup>th</sup> century feudal elite's opposition to then emerging administrative elites and their hegemonic discourse e.g. in lawsuits: Economic system change is the pivot of both cases, but, as Fraser<sup>15</sup> knows, highlighting conflicts over cultural hegemony is a controversial issue *per se*.

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<sup>10</sup> Pages 138-9 in Samhaber, Friedrich [in German] (2000) *Die Zeitzüher. Georg von Peuerbach und das helle Mittelalter*, Raab: Wambacher

<sup>11</sup> Page 31 in Zinner, Ernst (1968) [in German] *Leben und Wirken des Joh[ann] Müller von Königsberg, genannt Regiomontanus*, 2nd Edition, Osnabrück: Zeller; Zinner, Ernst transl. Brown E. (1990) *Regiomontanus. His Life and Work* (Studies in the history and Philosophy of Mathematics 1) Amsterdam: Elsevir

<sup>12</sup> Bennett Durand, Dana (1952) - *The Vienna-Klosterneuburg Map Corpus of the fifteenth century. A study in the transition from medieval to modern science*. Leiden: Brill

<sup>13</sup> Altolaquirre y Duvale, Angel (1908) *Cristobal Colón y Pablo del Pozzo Toscanelli. Estudio crítico*, Madrid

<sup>14</sup> O'Doherty, Marianne (2011) „Frau Mauro's World Map" *Wasafari* 26 (2): 30-36

<sup>15</sup> Fraser, Nancy. (2017) "Progressive Neoliberalism versus Reactionary Populism: A Choice that Feminists Should Refuse" *NORA* 24 (4):281-4



### WISELIFELAB

BY Vincenzo Giorgino

*WiseLifeLab* is an action-research group established at the end of 2019 at the University of Torino by Vincenzo Giorgino, with Sowelu Avanzo (economic sociologist) and Giulio Peraldo (financial analyst). It applies a transdisciplinary approach at co-designing networked ecosystems. The integration of various disciplines, methods and technologies is ensured by a generative embodied orientation to recognize and cultivate life skills. The latter are the foundation of human intelligence and the pillar on which just and wise ecosystems can be built in a society of emergencies.

The opportunity opened by the Internet of Values is enabling society to design new systems of provisioning and of valuing human contribution which allow to overcome the labour-income nexus, that is currently being challenged by automation. The society we envision is capable of employing such tools to pursue self-organisation and commoning grounded on secular wisdom. Various projects are currently being developed related to the valorisation of personal data for communities and the design of glocal system of interaction and transaction based on distributed ledger technologies (DLTs). At conceptual level, the relational work approach (Zelizer) to economic interactions is extended to include mindfulness, a human skill oriented to cultivate attention and compassion.

In this respect, WiseLifeLab has been involved in diverse research-action activities related to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as: a contribution to the [CO3](#) project aimed at orienting this European funded program towards an effective response to the Covid-19 crisis; the submission of two projects to the [EUVersusVirus](#) Hackathon; and the collaboration with the Department of Molecular Biology of the University of Torino and the Politecnico of Torino for a transdisciplinary project to deal with social, economic and health-related issues due to the pandemic crisis.

The projects submitted at the hackathon aimed at the application of DLT-based tools to empower and protect communities, regarded as self-organizing and living ecosystems. In particular, [CO3 Crowdfunding as Wise Commoning](#) envisioned a system for financing and managing projects at a community level, whereas the project [A Peer to Peer Solution for Health Insurance](#), awarded with the third prize of its section, concerned the design of a disintermediated system for Covid-19 insurance and protection of communities.

Currently, we are mainly focused on the ongoing development of these and other initiatives for the risk mitigation and management of the post-lockdown Covid-19 pandemic.

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