

THEME 02

Our post-corona relationship to nature

NATURE

CULTURE

HEALTH

Each crisis in our modern existence has a clear human component. Most of them are even almost fully man-made, such as the financial crisis, the migration crisis, trade wars and conflicts. But the corona virus originated in the wilderness and took modern man by surprise. The virus, however, was not what caused the pandemic. Large-scale ecological destruction by humans most likely contributed to the rapid spread and deadliness of the virus. Will this crisis change the way we relate to nature?

Our observations

- Scientists point to the [high probability](#) of the virus having spread from bats to a wild animal species before spreading to humans. This would make banning the trade of these wild animals a possible measure, but that would not contain the risk of future virus outbreaks. Trade in these wild animals is merely a link in the chain of causes of the pandemic. Scientists warn that the degradation of ecosystems and the decrease in biodiversity could increasingly lead to epidemics. These factors result in vulnerable species dying out sooner and others with a more 'live fast, die young' nature (such as [bats](#), which harbor many pathogenic viruses) experiencing uninhibited growth and spreading their pathogens to humans faster. [Deforestation](#) especially enhances the chances of this so-called "species jump".
- [One Health](#) is a concept that's being used by more and more scientists and policymakers, in which the health of people, animals and the environment are monitored integrally. In this integrated system approach, public health is not detached from the health of animals and environments. In line with this, the [EAT-Lancet report](#) appeared last year, in which for the first time, the optimal diet for the health of humans AND the environment was calculated. The bottom-line was that we should eat fewer animal-based and more plant-based foods.
- [Dutch scientists](#) are arguing against returning to "business as usual" after the corona crisis, and for preventing further ecological consequences of economic growth. They emphasize that the current economic model will lead to, according to the WHO, 4.2 million people dying annually of air pollution, that the consequences of climate change are expected to cause 250,000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050, and that further degradation of ecosystems will heighten the risk of new and more powerful virus outbreaks.
- We're far from global reaching consensus on the cause of the pandemic, even though it likely originated in wild animals but was successfully spread and made deadly by humans. A globalized and strongly urbanized world helped the virus spread so rapidly and [air pollution](#) probably made the virus even more fatal. While these causes are not confined within the borders of any one country and international cooperation is needed in this crisis, the discussion on the virus has become strongly politicized and countries are arguing about where the virus originated and who is to blame.



Connecting the dots

Crises in modern societies are often man-made. Take, for example, military conflict, financial crises, trade wars. The corona crisis on the other hand, is neither solely caused by humans nor is it a purely “natural” phenomenon like famine or the climate crisis. The possibility of a sudden and swift emergence of a new, deadly virus in our modern, globally connected lives, was a risk that was barely acknowledged by most of us. The new virus has awakened the realization that humans are a part of a complex world, in which human and non-human life are connected. Furthermore, it has raised questions about how man relates to his natural surroundings. COVID-19 is a [zoonotic](#) virus, meaning it’s transferrable from animals to humans, putting into question how we relate to other, non-human life and, more broadly, how we as humans relate to natural ecosystems. From the onset of the outbreak, the virus has not only exposed the differences and rivalries between countries but has especially shown which ideas are predominant in our consideration of the way humans relate to nature. The corona crisis has not only fueled discussion between political leaders, the pandemic has also been taken up as ammunition in the defense of several ecological stances, often in order to identify guilty parties. The pandemic is said to be a [“warning of Mother Earth”](#). These interpretations comprise largely Western and modern views on nature, dividing the world into man versus nature, the moral division of nature as harmonious and good and humans as harmony-disrupting and wicked. Supposedly, mankind, not the virus, is the disease ravaging mother Earth, as is shown by the position that mankind is the cancer of the Earth in [the second report by the Club of Rome](#). The Cartesian relationship between subject and object, between culture and nature are clearly highlighted in this. It gives humans a central role in life on Earth, and with that, the possibility to control this life. The corona crisis provides insight into the flaws of these apparent contradictions. Even before modern man, there was no harmonious natural order, the earth has always been an inhospitable place where live organisms are continuous-

ly exposed to disease, parasites and natural disasters. But modern man mostly considered himself to be separate from nature and romanticized living in harmony with it. Karen Barad’s concept of intra-action offers an escape from this way of thinking about nature, which is failing us in the corona crisis. She defines intra-action as the mutual constitution of intertwined agencies. This means we should not just understand the corona crisis in terms of a corona virus, but as a phenomenon that has arisen between human and non-human actors and the virus itself. It’s unlikely that everyone on Earth will be exposed to the virus, but it’s a given that everyone will have to deal with the corona crisis, dividing responsibility among constitutive entities. Intra-action questions the artificial boundaries that characterize our thinking and our actions (subject-object, culture-nature). In an ecological system, each part is connected to the others by countless relationships, and these relationships define life, just as social contact between humans humanizes.

Barad’s concept is also in line with the [Gaia hypothesis of James Lovelock](#), who, despite his ecological outlook, also broke with the environmental movement, due to his view that it invariably oversimplifies reality, putting all the blame on humans. He understood the earth to be a superorganism that we’re part of. This undermines micro-perspectives on the virus. The virus and its spread can be perceived as part of a complex system, just as much as humans can. Both the concept of intra-action as well as the Gaia hypothesis acknowledge humans as an integral part of a complex and dynamic system that humans cannot control but are (partly) responsible for. In this sense, this kind of thinking is reminiscent of [metamodernism](#). It foregoes the modernist subject-object opposition, nor does it succumb to post-modernist relativism. It urges us to acknowledge the complexity of life on Earth and to take responsibility for it. The current pandemic makes it necessary to embrace this type of thinking.

Implications

- **With respect to measures, quarantine is somewhat paradoxical, as it may help to isolate humans and prevent them from becoming infected, but is hardly a tenable solution in the long-term, because it negates precisely those relationships that constitute our life. To contain the risk of future large-scale outbreaks, preventative measures will also need to be taken that do justice to the complexity of systems. Involving multiple disciplines (not just virology) will help in thinking about these measures.**
- **Furthermore, [complexity thinking](#), holistic research agendas and innovations surrounding the theme “one health” will be vital in devising solutions to this crisis.**
- **Since many infectious diseases, such as Ebola and swine flu, spread through animal feed, the corona crisis will be associated with factory farming and give momentum to the transition from animal-based to plant-based protein sources. Deforestation, which is linked to the production of cattle feed (such as soy), will also face more scrutiny because of this crisis.**