

## THEME 02

# Metamodernism and corona

POLITICS

META  
MODERNISMSOCIAL-CULTURAL  
CHANGE

The corona crisis is multidimensional: it's a crisis from a political, economic, social, geopolitical and humanitarian point of view. Such crises are turning points, at which enduring, deeper trends that were slowly meandering in the background, are accelerated. One of the deeper developments in our society and culture, is that of a metamodern discourse and the corona crisis particularly is a phenomenon that ties in with metamodernism.

## Our observations

- History can be understood as the sum total of coherent and meaningful narratives about the rise, development and possible future of mankind and the world around us. This means that history in this sense began with the first information and communications technologies (ICT), such as myths, clay tablets, and writing, which enabled such narratives to live on through time. Different "information regimes" co-existed for a long time, because the information costs were too high to spread knowledge and information across the world uniformly. The current [Digital Information Age](#) and its specific ICTs (e.g. the internet, smartphones, bits saved in datacenters) have led to an enormous reduction in information costs and with that, to a "hyperhistory": a convergence of different histories and mutual connectedness of formerly separate information regimes.
- That makes the coronavirus one of the first hyperhistoric phenomena, as (approximately) the whole world is focused on the virus and its consequences (exemplified by [livestreams](#) of corona hospitals being built, [real-time corona maps](#) with updates on the number of victims and infections. And because the coronavirus is a "viral phenomenon" that is really a part of this [networked and complex superorganism](#) (e.g. facilitated by [intercontinental flights](#), international value chains), being a "superbrain", this network is looking for solutions (e.g. the international medical scientific community is attempting to find a [vaccine](#), nation states have closed borders to prevent the spread of the virus).
- The work of Hanzi Freinacht, which is the pseudonym of Daniel Görtz and Emil Friis, is a "guide" to metamodern political philosophy. In his work, Freinacht criticizes current politics as lacking an exciting vision of the future and an ideal for politicians and society to work towards. In the book [The Listening Society](#), Freinacht describes a "development stage approach" of societies and political systems by looking at four variables: i) the cognitive complexity of persons (the ability to analyze information and then respond to it), ii) the symbolic code of a society (the stage of cultural development and the accompanying "value memes"), iii) the palette of subjective conditions of people (how we experience life and reality), and iv) depth (the "embodied" experience and mineralization of these experiences).
- In his second book [Nordic Ideology](#), Freinacht describes how, based on these principles, metamodern politics and society could be created. They should be founded on personal development and the spiritual growth of society, and complexity thinking should be embraced to dissect and connect the current problems in their constituent ideas (e.g. climate change, polarization, economic inequality).
- Two weeks ago, we wrote about the different [moods that characterize the corona crisis](#) and the accompanying period of (relative) isolation and quarantine. Moods are not subjective experiences or flighty emotions but intersubjective atmospheres in which reality appears to us in a certain way because of our own moody interpretation of it (e.g. when we're bored, the attic where we spend our time seems like a dull space, when we're stressed, we relate to our roommates and loved ones in a tense way). When describing these "corona moods", it's striking that they are often opposing ends of a continuum (fear and hope, stress and boredom), which shows there is a high degree of ambiguity in how we experience the corona crisis.



## Connecting the dots

Our word “crisis” is etymologically derived from the Greek word *krinein*, which can be translated as “to separate” or “to judge”. This also means that a “critical situation” is one that could culminate in different ways, giving it a high degree of uncertainty. A crisis is therefore always a moment of truth, in the sense that certain problems and contradictions escalate and require “judgment”: a decision that clarifies what is right and wrong, valuable and worthless, relevant and irrelevant, making this moment of decision deeply ethical and political. A crisis situation is thus not subject to the quantitative sequence of moments of “clock time” (*chronos*), but to qualitative time, or the moment when something becomes clear and visible that wasn’t previously there (*kairos*). That means that a crisis is always an opportune moment that we can seize to thoroughly change and reform the existing order and system. The corona crisis is such a kairotic moment for metamodernism. But what exactly is metamodernism?

Metamodernism is the cultural development phase that follows modernity and postmodernity. It criticizes both the naïveté and reductionism of modernity (with its emphasis on progress, rationality, humanism) as well as the ironic, nihilistic and restless criticism of postmodernity. By contrast, metamodernism seeks to rediscover the truth and narratives, as modernity attempted to do, but with the edge of the critical perspective of postmodernity, because humans need direction and a story to add structure and organization to their own lives, society and the world around them.

In contrast to the postmodern *parataxis* (putting words together without any meaningful correlation: *deconstruction*) and the modern *syntaxis* (the reduction and connection of words to their elementary principles: *construction*), metamodernism focuses on *metaxis*: the ongoing discussion of different ideas and positions to discover a broader pattern of development; a *reconstruction* of collective truths and our embrace of them.

Metamodernism could really take flight during the current corona crisis, because it’s a highly metamodern phenomenon in itself: it was facilitated by the possibilities of the global, digital, hyperhistoric and complex world. But our current ICTs also make it possible for the whole world to adjust to such a phenomenon: rather than a local problem (such as Ebola, which remained mainly limited to West Africa), for the first time in history, there is a phenomenon that captures the attention and interest of almost all people on Earth.

This makes the corona crisis constituent to the superorganism “Earth” or “man”, meaning that solutions to, questions and ideas about corona are in fact global “grand narratives” that transcend physical and cultural boundaries. This is not yet very visible, but it is the seed of a new form of metacognition in which different thinkers, countries, cultures present their solutions and the dialogue that results from that gives rise to new solutions. That’s why the models of [open-source](#), [open science](#), [open data](#) and [open innovation](#) match metamodernism and the corona crisis so well; because metamodernism is an institutional or political model which allows for the best ideas to surface through collective trial-and-error and a non-linear learning ability among radically different actors who nonetheless deal with the problems and questions.

Furthermore, the corona crisis also confronts us with a “harsh” reality, in which neither deconstruction and criticism, nor a naive or simple answer conceived from existing frameworks will suffice. Rather, we’re in need of an action-based perspective and systemic change to fight, if not prevent, the next pandemic. In countries that have previously had a [formative](#)

[experience](#) with such a pandemic, for instance, citizens show more willingness to accept strict limitations of social freedom.

It was a long time ago that (Western) societies and younger generations were last confronted with such a crisis, which leads to a new sensation of urgency and willingness to critically reconsider and reassess concepts such as development, progress, the purpose of the economy and growth and the importance of nature and ecology (similarly, [9/11](#) led to new ideas on the importance of national safety, the geopolitical role of the U.S. and Islam). After the first phase of abating the crisis by containing the virus, there will be a period of necessary reorientation and making choices to shape our society and economy sincerely and from a grand narrative, in a way that fits the metamodern *ethos* as now manifests itself in, for example, [new sincerity](#) literature, [post-irony](#) media or the return of [horror](#) in films and series with new esthetic tropes (such as [“the weird and the eerie”](#)). Metamodernism has also emerged as sentiment or “structure of feeling” in [art and popular culture](#), and it’s specifically such pre-theoretical modes of expression, e.g. of [Zeitgeist](#) or mood, that later translate into material and societal changes.

That brings us to the moods that go with the corona crisis and the new socio-cultural living world in which it’s taking place (e.g. the 1.5 meters society, the quarantine). A high degree of ambiguity is visible in this, that fits the complexity of both the virus as well as the world in which it’s manifesting itself. Precisely because we are unable to find middle ground, *metaxis*, we keep going back and forth between the different moods and often experience them simultaneously or in quick succession. This gives the palette of corona moods a high degree of ambiguity, from which new (variations on old) phenomena and practices arise, such as [reconnecting with nature](#) out of boredom (e.g. [gardening](#)) or stress, or a [return of religion](#) as well as [new forms of spirituality](#) out of the fear and hope of the corona crisis. The common factor in these examples is that they were all “ignited” by the corona crisis, in which people assume a hopeful, positive stance in light of the negative precarious situation of our living world.

In a wider sense, we see this type of sentiment in the [return of utopian thinking](#), which was long considered naive and ignorant by the postmodern mind. In the same way that modernists thought everything could be reduced to a simple reality based on elementary particles, and postmodernists held that everything is a perspective and there is no universal truth, metamodernists believe that reality and perspective are one. And due to the continuous oscillation between perspectives and positions, we hope to catch a glimpse of a higher truth or the [exterior reality](#) that shines through from it. This kind of idea that subject and object ultimately cannot be seen as separate, can be found in quantum models, such as in the work of Karen Barad on intra-actors and agency. The significance of such metamodern perspectives is in the fact that as soon as the metamodern method and the resulting insights are embedded in a metamodern reality, when ideality and reality coincide, a new socio-cultural transition becomes possible, which is also necessary as the idealistic foundation of the new metaphysics of societal, economic and political systems in a [Second Deep Transition](#). Politically, we’re already seeing the first signs that this – rather abstract – description of metamodernism and its principles, is being politically, institutionally and economically realized. Examples of this are the works of Hanzi Freinacht, Brent Cooper’s [Abs-Tract Organization](#), the growth of metamodern political parties in [Denmark](#) and [Sweden](#), which in turn are part of the growing meta-ideology of [green social liberalism](#) in Northwest Europe.

## Implications

- **At the moment, metamodernism is still mostly an artistic and cultural movement which lacks clout and solidity in reality. But when its principles and logic eventually spread in several forms (e.g. open-source, metamodern forms of politics and economy), it will eventually institutionalize in all layers of the socio-cultural reality. At FreedomLab, we’re therefore working on a multidimensional and layered model to understand socio-cultural transitions and phenomena, in which metamodernism plays a large role.**
- **The corona crisis is also what American philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn calls a “paradigm shift”: the moment our view of the world and the way we regard phenomena changes to such an extent that it leads to a different perception of reality in our models, ideas and insights. A crisis, a critical situation, is thus also an anomaly: a deviation that we can’t understand and control with our usual models. This means that in times of crisis, our usual ideas, models, habits, are “parenthesized”, and that we are willing to push through great changes that were previously unthinkable, which could lead to enormous growth for metamodern thinking and institutions. Metamodernism itself is part of a system in which different utopian-critical paradigms are joined, such as [post-humanism](#), [quantum ontology](#), [post-reductionist](#) and [hermeneutic philosophy](#), [deep ecological](#) and [complexity thinking](#). What these paradigms have in common, is that they are critical of the simplistic modern paradigm for understanding phenomena (i.e. humanism, Newtonian metaphysics, reductionist scientism, a rejection of the social sciences and humanities), as well as of the poverty of the postmodern perspectivism with regard to the formulation of answers. Practically speaking, it proposes a transdisciplinary method, in which phenomena are viewed from different perspectives, and the different levels of problems are sought in continuous dialogue. This ongoing oscillation makes metamodernism suited as an explanatory model for socio-cultural and political-economical questions and phenomena.**