THEME 02

The evolutionary impact of the crisis

CORONA   EVOLUTIONARY   CRISIS

Many ascribe revolutionary qualities to the corona crisis and think, or hope, that it will lead to entirely new ideas, rules or structures. It is, however, more realistic and useful to understand the crisis from the point of view of a continuously evolving world. In this world, the crisis is the cause of mutation, thus of new variations, and induces (temporary) changes in the selection environment. But there will be no sudden radical changes either on the variation or the selection side. This implies that changes resulting from the crisis may be significant, but not revolutionary, and that they will be restricted to matters directly related to the crisis itself and the way we respond to it.

Our observations

- From the first weeks of the corona crisis, we've been flooded with predictions and ideas about a different, and often "better" world, that would emerge from this period of misery. Of course, many thinkers mainly expounded their wishes or their own hobbyhorses, regarding themes such as sustainability, societal inequality, or our view on technology.

- Historically, we see that a(n) (economic) crisis rarely leads to a completely different world or radically different outlooks. Inasmuch as a crisis can lead to any significant change in direction, this is a slow process which builds on a motion already initiated before the crisis. In that sense, we must understand a crisis mainly as an event that could potentially, and to a certain extent, contribute to a process already underway, because more actors are supporting it or have stopped resisting it.

- Tensions between China and the U.S. are rising because of the crisis, but the crisis as such is unlikely to lead to entirely new conflicts. In Europe too, the crisis has resulted in increased tensions between North and South as well as East and West, but none of these tensions are new or solely caused by the crisis.

- Digital means are taking flight (though that will prove partly temporary as well) and in healthcare, for instance, we're seeing a considerable increase in the use of telehealth applications. After the pandemic, the immediate need for these applications will be gone, but chances are that doctors and patients will become accustomed to them and come to see their value, leading to rapid improvements in these apps and regulators and insurers taking these solutions more seriously as well (e.g. as a way to keep care affordable in the long-term).

- The corona crisis has boosted the (hoped-for) decrease in car use. Our car use, historically low at the moment, will almost certainly increase again after the crisis, and it is plausible that the effect of the crisis will ultimately amount to no more than a few percent. Even if this seems puny, such a shift would be enormous compared to the minimal reduction we've seen in the past decades. Moreover, a single percent decrease would reduce traffic congestion by three percent and the effect on traffic flows would thus be even bigger.

Connecting the dots

Each crisis entices people to succumb to wishful thinking and parading around their hobbyhorses, but ultimately, changes caused by the crisis won't be revolutionary and will be limited to matters directly related to the crisis and the challenge of tackling it. The consequences will thus be found mainly in the direct, and largely unavoidable, measures taken in response to the economic problems, changing geopolitical relations and the adoption of new technology during the lockdown. Other forms of change, purposely brought about after reflections on (the causes of) the crisis, are much more unlikely or will only gradually arise in the long-term. It's therefore best to understand the crisis from an evolutionary perspective; as an event that influences continuous processes of cultural, economic, (geo)political and technological evolution, but that is at the same time rooted in these very processes, which is why it will fail to lead to radical, revolutionary change. Evolutionary processes are characterized by a continuous dynamic of processes of mutation leading to new variations (e.g. technological innovations, new revenue models, political movements) that may or may not fit into a dynamic selection environment. This environment is made up by the conditions under which something can continue to exist, grow or die. In a societal (i.e. non-biological) context, the process of variation and selection is far from blind or random; actors expressly anticipate possible changes in the selection environment when they develop a new innovation or idea (i.e. quasi-evolution). And selection criteria only adapt when presented with the right variations (e.g. emission norms for cars follow the pace of technological innovation in the industry). This mutual adjustment between processes of mutation and selection limits the possibilities for radical change and leads to path dependence; choices made in the past reduce the number of possible choices for the future.

From this perspective, we may wonder how the corona crisis could be of influence. As stated, this influence will remain largely restricted to the direct effects of the crisis itself and the path-dependent way we're responding to it. Partly, this will be visible in new (incremental) variations in terms of new technology or new practices. But what's more important is the way it's leading to other and new selection criteria that determine which of these new (and existing) variations will be permanent or at least have more momentum temporarily. This of course applies most clearly to working from home and, very specifically, remote doctor's visits are now suddenly deemed adequate. And yet, these types of changes in the selection environment aren't radical or stand-alone; they add momentum to existing trends. On the international stage, we see that the crisis is leading to a heightening of the Chinese-American conflict and that neither country really has any other choice, they can't suddenly view the matter in a different light. After all, this conflict is part of a larger and longer-lasting hegemonic battle and the path dependence within that meta-conflict is much stronger than the corona crisis as such. The kind of large and virtuous societal change that is widely discussed and written about but that holds no direct relation to the crisis itself, is more difficult to imagine from a (quasi-)evolutionary framework. Ideas about this have, after all, been around far longer and the crisis will not directly result in new, more promising variations on these ideas, because there is no immediate reason that it should. More importantly, the selection environment for these kinds of ideas will not immediately change as a result of this crisis. Like any other crisis, the corona crisis is open to several interpretations and its nature, size and cause will remain hotly debated (politically) for a while to come. Without any clear consensus about this, different groups in society will project their own ideas and interests onto the crisis and it will fail to lead to any radical shifts in (political) ideals or convictions.

Implications

- **Lasting change as a consequence of the corona crisis will derive from a changing selection environment in which new practices (from high-technology to diplomacy) are better able to thrive. First and foremost, this selection environment, and the applied criteria, will be shaped and reshaped by the crisis in all its manifestations. Only in the longer term will our reflections on the crisis (e.g. concerning its causes) actually affect the selection environment.**
- **Even temporary changes in the selection environment (e.g. temporary lockdowns) can lead to lasting change. Various solutions (i.e. variations) are given the opportunity to be developed further, thanks to extra means, attention and goodwill, and will in time also be able to survive when temporary selection criteria don't apply (as much) anymore. For instance, the direct restrictions on working at the office will probably cease, but the ongoing development of applications for working and having meetings from home will eventually lead to working from home being considered a full equivalent to working at the office.**