

RETROSCOPE 2020

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INTRODUCTION

Dear reader,

2020 was a year in which society and the economy were hit hard. At the same time, it was also an interesting year in which many issues that had already arisen in the previous years were brought into much sharper focus. Last summer, we explored all of these issues in our scenario study “The Resilient World”, in which we reflected on the different worlds that could emerge from this crisis.

In this Retroscope, we look back on the past year and consider the current state of affairs regarding the most significant uncertainties we formulated in our study. If the corona crisis teaches us anything, it's how the world has continued to grow more complex and that this crisis alone isn't enough to change our course. We cannot, and will not, suddenly take a different view of technology or globalization. And even if we do, it won't necessarily ensure that we're able to make different choices. Nonetheless, this crisis considerably challenges our ideas and could thus lead to a significantly different world in the long-term.

Hence, the coronavirus crisis encourages us to reflect more critically on technology and the role we've assigned it in our daily lives and society. On the one hand, technology has failed to immediately combat the pandemic, yet we're also grateful to these tech companies and their products for the ways they've helped us through this period of lockdown. Moreover, the definitive end to this crisis, ushered in by several vaccines, will be a triumph of the technosciences. The question remains, however, whether from now on we will actually put our technology to use to prevent a new crisis, or, continue in the same vein and simply trust that technology will aid us again in the next crisis.

Socio-culturally speaking as well, there is a double movement. There is a deep modernist longing for grand narratives on the one hand, stemming mainly from bygone (and idealized) times. This longing also betrays a strong need for community. On the other hand, we are neither able nor willing to cease the postmodern development of the individual and the freedoms it has brought us. We've already written a few times about the dawn of metamodernism, which seeks to combine the best of both philosophies, and we are convinced that the crisis will only reinforce this development.

Since the beginning of the crisis, people have put the blame on globalization. Its non-stop global flow of people has enabled the virus to spread across the world in record time. This does not mean, however, that people around the world want to put an end to globalization. Instead, we are likely to see different kinds of globalization across regions, either with a focus on economic cooperation or political cooperation. In this Retroscope we elaborate on these issues and the lessons we draw from this crisis. While it's still too soon to tell what the world will look like post-corona, it's never too soon to try to learn from a crisis.

We hope you enjoy our reflection!



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1. Technological cycle

The corona crisis has profoundly affected the [technoscientific self-confidence](#) of modern societies. First and foremost, the crisis has taught us that our modern technology is still not able to tame nature to the full. Yet, it may also open our eyes to the fact that we have failed to make the best of our technological capabilities. So, could the coronavirus crisis indeed lead to a different perspective on technology? Will it trigger us to solve our structural problems and thus prevent another crisis?

The tech-fix illusion is nearing its end

Overnight, the world came to a standstill because of a virus, as our technological solutions only worked to a moderate extent in combating the pandemic. The strongly intertwined global network society is even identified as one of the most important causes of the rapid spread of the virus. In addition, even before the pandemic, large technology companies were under immense societal pressure, which does not appear to have abated. Many believe they are partly responsible for societal unrest, caused in part by floods of disinformation, and polarization. After another excellent year on the stock market, their innovation is perceived to mainly benefit shareholders.

The partial loss of confidence in technology and its makers does not contribute to the development of possible forms of technological prevention. For example, in the past year, we've seen how prevention often coincides with different forms of surveillance. Especially in the West, citizens tend to be wary of the use of technology because of an [expanding and monitoring government](#). Especially the collection of data by governments or private companies worries citizens. Although we acknowledge the potential advantages of a data-driven economy, when it comes down to it, we are [reluctant](#), as has also become clear with the coronavirus app. Despite high expectations and long ethical deliberations, too few citizens have turned out to be willing to install the app. In addition, due to ethical concerns, the app has been modified to such an extent that its potential contribution to containing the pandemic has become minimal.

In the public debate of the past year, technocratic ideals and civil liberties were posited as opposites, difficult to unite. This is not wholly surprising in a year when we were mainly told not to do certain things. The tension we all experienced in the first lockdown, consisting mainly of fear and a certain degree of excitement, has given way to the fragmented fatigue and frustration of the second, current lockdown. While technology (partly) enables us to continue working, shopping and enjoying ourselves, we are now harshly confronted with the limitations of the current technological solutions. As the crisis unfolded, the emphasis in speeches began to shift increasingly to human behavior. Ultimately, technology cannot be the sole answer and humans need to adapt their behavior as well, according to scientists and most government leaders. As such it seems as if [the tech-fix illusion is nearing its end](#).

Technoscientific culture will prevail

Yet, there is another possibility. Taiwan and Singapore are continually cited as examples of countries where strong trust in technology has in fact paid off. [China](#) too, in addition to strict non-technological measures, has relied strongly on technological means to fight the pandemic, and successfully so. Even though these countries have different models of governance and other [cosmotronics](#) than we do in the West, they could still show us how a different, arguably more determined, perspective on technology could help to prevent new crises in the future.

Indeed, there is no reason to be shy about our technological prowess. The record-breaking development of multiple [vaccines](#) may indeed provide us with the necessary level of confidence. In the coming months, the (prosperous part of the) world will be vaccinated and we will be able to continue our old lives. Thus, the development of the vaccines will probably go down in history as the absolute turning point of the crisis and modern technoscience will profit from this success for years to come. Criticism of technology will become less vehement and technoscientific culture will prevail (again).

In the same vein, Big Tech, despite the growing [resistance](#) against their power and behavior, and our digital infrastructure, kept the economy up and running during the lockdown. This stay-at-home economy will prove to have lasting, partly positive, consequences in our daily lives in the coming years.

A new technological order

All in all, we possess all the technological ingredients to make work of a new technological order that is geared towards preventing new crises in the future. Indeed, governments have been seriously contemplating how to deal with the vulnerabilities of the international traffic of humans and goods and fragmented value chains. The current market system is too efficiently and cost-effectively organized, which makes us vulnerable to shocks such as this.

“[Resilience](#)”, “reshoring” and “redundancy” are the political and economic key words of the year. In short: we’re in the early stages of a truly thriving enlightened technocracy, aimed for the common and long-term good. As such, the corona crisis may end up putting us on the right track with respect to our perspective on technology. With the right technological changes and political determination, which have now been set in motion, crises will be more easily prevented in the future.

2. Hegemonic cycle

The past year raises questions about the fate of globalization. The president of the United States blamed China for the global COVID-19 pandemic, after attempting to sabotage economic relations between the two countries in several different ways. Meanwhile, internal relations in Europe remained high-strung, with Poland and Hungary turning against the European course increasingly often. How should these developments be understood in a wider context? Is globalization as we've known it in the past decades coming to an end, as the stagnating growth of world trade seems to indicate? Will we have stronger borders between countries or are we merely on the brink of a phase of globalization in a new form?

The strategic reorientation of the West

The era of Atlantic hegemony, the hegemonic cycle of the past five centuries, is nearing [its end](#). But it's too early to determine whether a new hegemon will rise, or, with the end of this cycle, a new order will come into existence in which no country is dominant. Before we can answer that question, the current power relations will continue to change, causing the world to move towards a new order in several domains (e.g. [finance](#), [technical standards](#), [strategic technology](#)).

In the Western world, 2020 was a moment of strategic reorientation. The United States is renouncing the [Trump model](#) of exerting strategic pressure on rivals and partners alike. The Biden administration will attempt to breathe new life into American alliances, though this will be arduous in many places because of conflicting interests. In addition, Europe broke free from its geopolitical paralysis. In the past year, the European Commission and EU member states created more momentum for the ideas of strategic autonomy and [European sovereignty](#), though it's as yet unclear how this will take shape. Both Western superpowers are thus facing a moment of strategic reorientation. Furthermore, we're in the midst of a period of "[Westlessness](#)", lacking a clear idea of the West.

Thus the economic center is shifting east, and so the complexity of globalization will only become clear when we truly understand what is currently happening in, among other countries, China and Russia.

A different path of globalization

In the West, China is often perceived as a [“challenger” of the world order](#), but in many areas, China is as supportive of international norms, rules and treaties as Western countries are, if not more so. Meanwhile, in the past year we saw investments in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative project decline. Not because China is weakening, or other countries are less willing to cooperate with China, but precisely because China is becoming a mature global power. The country now more strategically and responsibly considers foreign investment, as the U.S., Europe and Japan have done for decades. During the coronavirus crisis too, the stability of the Chinese global power has become apparent. In fact, the rapid recovery of the Chinese economy soon turned out to be a vital driving force of the global economy. In addition, in 2020 China was the largest economy to sign the RCEP trade deal of 15 countries, the biggest trade deal in the world. While the Western world is skeptical about accelerated integration with the global economy, Eastern countries actually embrace further economic globalization.

In 2020, Russia stayed in the background, but it's precisely this that shows Russia is notably changing its course. It's becoming a geo-economic power that leans less on military capacity than we think and is creating more influence with strategic economic policy. The Eurasian Economic Union is an important Russian initiative to strengthen economic ties with Eastern countries, so that Russia gains a stronger position than the West in respect to Europe. Russia's biggest ambition is to create “technology transfer” – to import high-grade technology from Europe, Japan and South Korea to revive its own economy. With its new, remarkable course, Russia is laying the groundwork for this strategic move.

Thus, the complexity of globalization will become apparent in the coming years. The first responses to the coronavirus crisis, containing phrases such as “reshoring” and “the end of globalization”, seem to have been based on false hope. There has not been a fundamental reappraisal of efficiency in value chains either. Globalization will continue, but [in a different way](#). There will be different types of globalization, as there are different elements to the world order. Many non-Western countries still embrace economic globalization, while Western countries, under the influence of certain political groups, are becoming more skeptical. Because of these dynamics, political globalization, in the form of multilateralism and the protection of human rights, is becoming more difficult – rising countries such as China are less active in this area. Furthermore, new domains of globalization are emerging, such as the digital domain, where countries will be in direct opposition to each other with different digital models, projects and strategies, such as the Chinese New IP inter-

net protocols, the Russian Runet and the European [internet](#) and data strategy and the GAIA-X platform. All of these projects gained momentum in 2020 and will take shape in the coming years. Hence, in 2020, two major implications of the new complexity of globalization became clear.

Strong borders

First, there are stronger borders between the superpowers. The alliance between the U.S. and Europe is no longer a given. The stakes are getting higher because of the rise of other Eurasian countries and the cooperation between Western superpowers will become more opportunistic. The conflict between the U.S. and China will outlast Trump. 2020 also saw India and China butt heads with military clashes in the border region and mutual economic sanctions. The borders between superpowers are becoming harder in these times of hegemonic shift.

A European model

Second, an opportunity is arising for a new model of globalization, in which Europe could play an important role. Efficient value chains will remain the driving force of economic growth and most developing countries will stay amenable to the model of economic globalization.

Precisely in this world, where the conflict between the U.S. and China is threatening the current model of globalization, an opportunity is arising for Europe to break new ground. With regulation, digital models and multilateral strategy, Europe may come to lead the world increasingly often in its own way, a way that would allow for a new phase of globalization.

3. Socio-cultural cycle

Prior to this crisis, several contrasts in societies were becoming starker: between left and right, young and old, progressive and conservative, city and countryside, rich and poor, center and periphery, culture and nature. Individualization of citizens and countries is often identified as the cause of this development, but during the coronavirus crisis, collectivist initiatives among countries and citizens have also come into existence. Will this collectivist development persist or will the coronavirus crisis in fact accelerate individualization in the end, if cooperation proves too arduous?

Time to decide

In order to answer this question, we must first better understand the term "[coronavirus crisis](#)". The word "crisis" is etymologically derived from the Greek *krinein*, which means to distinguish or decide. This makes a period of crisis a moment of truth: a decisive moment when we're obliged to make judgments on what's really important and what isn't, what's right and what's wrong. A crisis always forces us to make a political and ethical choice to transform the current situation into a better and brighter future. At the same time, the coronavirus crisis is not a clear-cut phenomenon as it pertains to themes such as [ecological degradation](#), our ideas on [sickness and health](#) and the fact that Wuhan changed from a small village to a city of millions in the course of a few decades and China has become integrated in international economic, political and tourist flows. In other words, the coronavirus crisis is a highly [complex phenomenon](#), with different "aspects of crisis" that require us to make political and ethical choices for the future. If we follow this dialectic now, what will arise in the sociocultural domain?

First, the issues we're faced with now are not easy-to-solve "puzzles" but [wicked problems](#). The question how long bars should stay closed so that enough hospital beds will be available for covid patients, suggests a conflict

between healthcare and the economy, but ultimately makes us realize how deeply healthcare and the economy are intertwined. Another wicked problem is the question how many civil liberties we're prepared to sacrifice to restore our society to health.

Because of the uncertainty and complexity of the issues, it's no wonder that countries with a [capable institutional structure](#) have done relatively well in this crisis. The same structural problems that are at the root of the pandemic will cause more of these complex issues in the future. The first example that comes to mind is of course the climate crisis, of which the coronavirus crisis has just been a small preview. Similar to the coronavirus pandemic, it's not easy to tell whether the climate crisis is a fully man-made or natural phenomenon, and solutions to it require a new understanding of humankind and our [relationship to nature](#). Another issue is the rise of "[uncontrollable technology](#)", including synthetic biology and AI, the outcomes of which aren't fully predictable by humans, and which will eventually fundamentally change our ideas of life and being human. In the same way that the coronavirus – the smallest lifeform to shut down human superorganisms such as our healthcare and education system – has forced us to reconsider our relationship to our fellow humans and society.

The coronavirus crisis has made many of us aware of the fact that, as humans, we're embedded in wider social, technological and ecological structures, and that we depend on other people and countries. And yet, it's unclear whether this insight will inspire a more collectivist attitude in citizens and bring countries [closer together](#), as the failure of joint efforts could in fact lead to further individualization. For example, [economic inequality](#) translates to medical inequality and the debate on [ethnic inequality and racism](#) has reached boiling point during this crisis. Both themes are high on the agendas of policy-makers; during the [U.S. presidential elections](#), for example, or in discussions on the future of the [financial system](#). In addition, younger and older generations are [affected](#) differently by the economic and health crisis, and as such, [respond to and reflect on it](#) differently as well. There is also no consensus as yet about the [future of work](#) after the coronavirus crisis. Neither is there an answer to the questions whether virtual practices are a desirable and viable substitute for physical and social interaction, and whether coronavirus-related mental problems (e.g. loneliness, anxiety) require more, or less technologization of our living worlds. In fact, even our collective faith in established institutes and structures of [knowledge and truth](#) is under severe pressure.

The “moods” of metamodernism

In other words, in the past year, we saw a high degree of ambivalence around sociocultural issues and possible solutions, with which we are confronted by different aspects of the coronavirus crisis. But what does this mean for us, our society and the wider sociocultural developments following the corona-

virus crisis? In any case, the coronavirus crisis shows us a specific palette of “[moods](#)”. These moods bring aspects of reality to light which, in ordinary times, would have remained obscured from theoretical, abstract thought. Specific moods thus lead to new ways of relating to the world, pertaining to globalization and sustainability (stress versus hope), political initiatives (insecurity versus confusion), spirituality (boredom versus fear).

These moods aren't purely subjective, not “all in our heads”, but are in fact intersubjective: they arise when we relate to and interact with the world and other people around us. The fact that (almost) all of us act like a “superorganism” that is focused on a single phenomenon and acts accordingly (e.g. developing a vaccine, staying in quarantine) also makes the coronavirus crisis a [metamodern concept](#). And with the adoption of the metamodern perspective, new sociocultural transitions are made possible. We no longer revert to modern objectivism and naiveté, but neither do we succumb to postmodern pessimism or irony. In other words, the metamodern coronavirus crisis could thus form the idealistic foundation for the new metarules of new societal, economic and political systems.

So from the subjective mind (moods), we are now arriving at the objective mind and reality (metamodernism) of the corona crisis. We've known for over a hundred years that God is dead, but we're still living with the nihilistic base mood in which there are no grand narratives anymore. The coronavirus crisis confronts us with a harsh reality from which we can no longer escape: that we are mortal, finite beings, that sickness and death are a part of life. Like [Trumpism](#), which should also be understood as a complex and metamodern phenomenon, the coronavirus crisis has created an enormous “memeplex”. This is a new, metamodern way of dealing with such phenomena. [Memes](#) and other forms of culture help us to find meaning, ethics, politics, a relationship between the community and the individual. There's a reason the coronavirus crisis is seized upon by artists and scientists, politicians and conspiracy theorists alike to reflect further on this theme and incorporate it in art, culture and a new [structure of feeling](#).



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