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The COVID 19 Catalyst: How the Virus Will Change the Way Human Beings Live, Work and Nurture Future Generations

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Commentary

Jeremy Rifkin has optimistically anticipated a world and social structure in which humans might move beyond the hitherto competitive, hard edged approach to capital and economy to a more collaborative and cooperative society that no longer relies on the driving energy of raw capitalism as we have come to know it. He calls his new world a 'collaborative commons' in which humans re-think the way they live and work together to improve life for all and create a more sustainable, long-term vision for society, but is he being too idealistic? His is not a new idea to be sure, as many thinkers and innovators over time have advocated more equitable approaches to life and living, but it may be an idea for our time. Some societies have managed to create classless and collaborative living environments for their people and vastly less polarised societies than we have today.

Many attempts to re-engineer societies to ensure a more equitable distribution of opportunity and wealth have proliferated across the world; Plato's Syracuse, Indigenous Australia, Christianity in Rome, Socialism in Europe and Maoism in China, for example, so we have precedents for such change. The question for the twenty first Century is, however, more about what mechanisms might be needed to bring about more equitable outcomes for human being at a time when the opposite trend is emerging. If, as we have seen, more equal societies are happier and healthier places to be, how might we create these societies against the odds and against the additional threat of the new COVID 19 virus?

Recent events world-wide in relation to the explosion of the COVID 19 virus present a rare opportunity for us to rethink and re-design our social and economic structures without the need for a Marxist, Maoist, Cuban or Sudanese revolutions. The virus, some suggest, will lead to a transformed society and it could do so for the better, leading to the emergence of new, sustainable economies, new approaches to healthcare, teaching and nurturing our young people. It could be a catalyst for creating the Collaboratively Commons or, alternatively, it may serve to widen our current social divisions and inequities and validate the *status quo*.

Background

Writers, social commentators and visionaries have been arguing for some time now for the need to build a more compassionate, supportive and collaborative society *vis a vis* our recently evolved highly competitive and exclusive market driven community in which we currently dwell [1-5]. Public health fellows have also argued convincingly that a competitive economy polarising major winners and losers is not conducive to the creation of a healthy society while personal health and wellbeing continues to be adversely determined economically and socially even though we have the power to correct this model if we so choose [6-11]. In fact, more equal societies almost always do better [12,13], yet in South Australia, for example, it is sobering to note that disparity in wealth and opportunity has widened between 1960 and the present day [14, P 581]. Other writers point to the increasing disparity between those who control our economies and those who are controlled by them as characterised by Luce as the 'left behinds' [15] or by Harari as those who will be superseded by our modern technological advances [16].

Strategies to deal with the threat posed by the COVID 19 virus are good examples of large scale public health interventions designed to keep communities and whole countries safe and if these approaches and other compensatory strategies persist over time, they may bring about change not only in the way we look at preventative healthcare, but how our entire economy functions. New initiatives, like the National Cabinet established to coordinate COVID 19 efforts across Australia,

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may become permanent fixtures into the future as we learn to live, learn and manage our lives and economies more efficiently due to the recent changes in the game [17]. Our broad public health approach to the COVID 19 crisis may well become a model for other major social and political changes that have been sought for generations; changes to the way we work and earn our livelihoods, how we allocate our social and political capital across communities and individuals and how we value overall wellbeing in our societies [18]. Further, fallout from the effects of the virus may be the 'straw that breaks the camel's back' in relation to the challenges facing Xi Jinping today in China including combating high level corruption, balancing state owned enterprise with private enterprise, moderating the Marxist-Leninist ideology superficially underpinning the country, opening up their legal and economic systems to encourage external investment, cleaning up the environment and ensuring continuing improvements for his less well-off people. The virus, along with what Over hold terms the 'ten paradoxes' [19, p 248] of modern China's 'crisis of success', threatens to be a turning point in the meteoric rise of Chinese life and power at home and in the wider global context.

There is no lack of recent and informed commentary describing the impact of the way we live today on our emerging economies, the environment and our very existential survival [2,20-22]. Economic outcomes continue to proliferate under the current regimen that paradoxically sees China, Russia and the US all competing in the same capitalist world forum, despite their vastly different ideological positions and core belief structures. At the same time we are witnessing the unprecedented destruction of our eco-systems and our essential environment while a new generation of young people remains poised in anticipation of much needed structural change to our lives and work practices [23-26]. Similarly, community leaders argue for long-overdue changes to our economies, our social structures [27] and our energy and production systems in order to preserve earth's delicate environmental balance, but up until recently nothing appears to have registered at corporate or governmental level sufficient to drive the processes needed to ensure that we build more sustainable and environmentally friendly systems for the twenty first century [15,28-31].

In his recent book, Edward Luce describes the optimism for change derived from the bringing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989, but at the same time he questions what might be termed the Fukuyama Fallacy [32,33]; anticipating the end of history and the world wide uptake of western capitalism as a model for economic and social structures for all countries [15]. Some human beings appear to be obsessed with the idea that we are heading in a linear progression towards a better and larger life as a species, others see human history as cyclical and even circular and retrograde in nature, so it is consistent with our confused and complex life reality that some might see the recent advent of the COVID 19 virus as a portent for change; perhaps positive change. Given the confusion about where we are heading generally as a global society, the current COVID crisis notwithstanding, evidence suggests that we are moving towards becoming a society in which individual wealth is increasingly polarised and where fewer people will have control of their jobs and their capital or even access to wealth sufficient to sustain moderate living standards [2, P 133].

'Whether you are training to be an airline pilot, a retail assistant, a lawyer or a financial trader, labour saving technology is whittling down your numbers-in some cases drastically so. In 2000, financial services employed 150,000 people in New York. By 2013 that had

dropped to 100,000. Over the same period, Wall Street's profits had soared. Up to 70 percent of all equity trades are now executed by algorithms' [15,p 54].

Almost as Harari predicts, the rapid changes brought about by recent technological developments, along with the advent of the virus, will see many people displaced from traditional jobs and an increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of those who control the means of production flowing from modern capital and its attendant technological innovations.

A Catalyst for Social and Economic Change

Out of the blue, it seems, like many other essentially inexplicable evolutionary leaps in earth's past [1,34,35], a new and prescient factor is emerging that may steer us collectively to a more humanistic vision of how we might live as a world community in the future. Faced with a global pandemic that threatens the lives of millions of people along with having the potential to disrupt our lives from international markets to the way we interact and work, reactions to this worldwide threat appear to be making people think differently about their lives and prospects, at least in the short term. There are signs that humans might be considering each other in more compassionate ways in view of our common, ubiquitous plight, the recent illogical aggressiveness around the acquisition of toilet paper and other so-called essential supermarket items notwithstanding.

'Susan Wolf suggests that recognition of our shared fate might elevate the care for others to newfound heights, but even so, she concurs that our vision of a future populated by humans is essential to the value we ascribe to our undertakings' [36,37, p 320].

Whilst such a hopeful vision in which humans confront life threatening yet common experiences may be emerging, history suggests that even in the Garden of Eden or in the naturalistic splendour of Australian Aboriginal life, conflict and the disruption of human society remains an ongoing phenomenon [38-40].

While we wait to see just how 'human' and empathetic this current crisis might make us over time, there are other factors poised to force lasting change upon our societies, economies and lifestyles. For example, the shut-down of normal daily business life has meant that those who are able to do so are working from home, on-line, many of whom may never go back to normal office-based work in a fulltime way; perhaps only visiting the office occasionally as need be. Communication is *via* mobile phone, email, social media and video link applications such as MS Teams, Zoom and Skype. It remains to be seen just how efficient this work regimen becomes over time, but in principle, it has now been shown that it is possible to do many things this way as has been the case for some time now although the move out of the central office enclave has been resisted by management due to the HR implications and the possibility that people working from home might not work efficiently or effectively enough. At this complex time in our history, the catalyst in the process of change, the COVID 19 virus, may simply be forcing change a little more rapidly and decisively than otherwise would have been the case; a major consequence of which might be that people may never return *en masse* to the draconian work culture that we have come to know as normal in recent generations.

In this context of social upheaval and change, office blocks could remain permanently vacant or under utilised as managers realise the benefits of not having to maintain costly central bricks and mortar

premises for all their staff.

A consequence of this would be a collapse of the inner-city rental and property markets, leaving once valuable assets rotting away as they become valueless and with investors unable to sell land in inner city regions; a return, ironically as we advance, to the situation of the early settlement of Adelaide [14,41]. The changes may also hasten movement towards unstable, outsourced employment that will see the cost of doing business shifted to a home-based part time or casual workforce, reducing workers' incomes and entitlements in the process.

Demand for transport systems; busses, trains and taxis, would also be reduced as the volume of workers needing to travel daily into and out of the city for work reduces. Physical shopping as we have known it will move on-line for most purchases, further reducing the need for large shopping precincts and associated car parking arrangement, freeing up massive areas of land for inner city vegetation and reducing the concentration of pollutants in inner city areas. Instead of people driving all over town to find the things they need for daily life (coffee machine gaskets, deck chairs, shoes, clothes and even vehicle servicing) new delivery industries are springing up using express food and product delivery systems around the world while our recently expanded broadband facilities grow increasingly central to doing business *via* integrated IT systems, voice, video, internet and email.

Not only will people be working differently from now on, many may not work at all in this rapidly emerging new world, changing forever the nexus between the means of production and personal identity [42]. The compensative payment systems initiated in Australia to keep our economy and consumer markets alive during the COVID 19 crisis models a social wage system and a return to Keynesian economics that could deliver support to those who do not and may not ever work again [43-45]. These trends represent a new distribution of wealth that, with our rapidly evolving sustainable energy systems, acknowledges that the wealth generated by machines, automation technologies and information technologies will be sufficient to ensure improved standards of nutrition, health and lifestyle for all human beings, as Keynes predicted [44], many of whom will no longer need to spend their lives working in outmoded, dangerous and socially constraining forms of indenture simply to secure their means of subsistence [2,3]. People will be able to choose a social wage option rather than a lifetime of unproductive, futile labour and, as a result, work or the lack of it along with the implicit threat of unemployment and poverty associated with historical wage systems as a means of social control will become obsolete [46,47].

Should the current social catalyst work its magic it could change the world even more profoundly than the steam engine, World Wars, jet aircraft, rocketry, space travel and the internet. What we are facing is a 'genie out of the bottle' moment where a world-wide health and economic crisis is driving major and irreversible change to the way human beings conduct their lives and enterprises and, in the process, changing our ideological preoccupations along the way. In no time at all, it could eventuate that we will have crossed our modern-day equivalent of Caesar's Rubicon, closed the coal and oil business and forged a new and more sustainable economy and social existence for modern humans [30] Or not, possibly.

An alternative scenario, anticipated by Harari, is that fewer and fewer people will come to control our new technologies and the wealth of the globe and hence the life prospects of those who lack access

to such wealth. If we take this alternative turning, as some suggest we might, the scenario will be very much unlike the long awaited collaborative commons anticipated by Rifkin and others [16,48,49].

The Future of the Public Health Ideology

Leaving Harari and others aside for the moment, we are being warned that under historical social models of distribution of wealth, the advent of the COVID 19 virus will have disproportionate impacts on the more vulnerable members of society [50]. Marmot, in his 2020 update, documents worsening health conditions in the UK since 2010 and flags further adverse impacts for vulnerable communities as the COVID 19 virus takes its course [51]. With vulnerable communities already at greater risk of adverse COVID outcomes, the virus threatens to exacerbate this situation, unless the recent interim strategies designed to support families through our social and economic setbacks due to the virus are maintained. Implications, under a return to a *status quo* 'business as usual' model, for coming generations of vulnerable young people and their families are dire indeed. Such a situation, should we take this route back to 'normality' once the initial threat has passed, begs the question about how our institutions, which have been designed to support vulnerable populations, along with our teachers, social workers and public health advocates and researchers who people them, might function in the future. What goals, objectives and values will they need to embody in order to meet such a challenge? What strategies might be needed should we allow society to be further divided through our dealings with the COVID threat and what might be the new ideological manifesto of our public health advocates?

These questions are particularly apt for organisations whose reason for being is to study, analyse and mediate the effects of social inequity on the learning, health, wellbeing and life prospects of vulnerable individuals and communities. If we return to business as usual as a social organisational strategy following the worst effects of the virus, much of the gains accruing to us due to modern public health strategies could be reversed as opportunities and outcomes experienced by individuals become increasingly economically determined. The virus could take us either way; towards a more divided and disempowered community or towards the collaborative commons and a world in which the products of our community are more equitably distributed through mechanisms that may well transcend the time locked work and wages system.

As we become increasingly technologically enabled, fewer and fewer people will need to work as we have come to know the idea of work. This will mean that a new model for accruing and distributing the wealth of nations [47] will need to evolve much like it did in Rome when leaders had to find different ways of rewarding soldiers and civilians for their contributions to the republic and empire [52], when slavery was abolished or when convicts in Australia became the backbone of Australian enterprise as free men and women [53,54].

Either way, major changes lie ahead for public health institutions and for people who work in the social support and population health industries. Particularly, our universities and research institutions, already rocked by recent moves towards vocational training and specific saleable commodities in the workforce, will need to ask themselves how they might position such social and population-oriented ventures in the future. If population health institutions, for example, cannot tackle the problems that they so clearly identify and argue against, what will be the role of such institutions in the future?

Should the post COVID world not reflect the Rifkin ideal, but rather eschew compassion and consideration for the less well placed in our societies, what role will there be for advocate groups who hum the mantra of social determinants of health?

Now, whilst such an antithesis of the Rifkin thesis may be unlikely in reality and a mix of the two positions much more likely, there is still a possibility that societies post COVID will become more hard-headed economically in efforts to regain lost ground, make up deficits to national GDP and drive perpetual economic growth. In Australia, for example, estimates are that each week of lockdown costs the budget around \$4b; money that the government does not have. In the USA, with potentially 25 million people unemployed, the impacts on that economy will be catastrophic. Given this economic reality, it is likely that the current socialist, soft economic approaches deployed during the crisis will not persist for long in modern economies and people will be at risk of being left to fend for themselves as we trend toward recovery.

With the imperative to get economies moving and back into growth, pressures will be exerted to reduce the social payments and supports deployed during the crisis. In reality, the short term payments of wages and salaries along with 'job keeper' strategies that fund employers to keep staff on their books, as well as quantitative easing used to keep the economy moving during the pandemic, will be rapidly wound back in order to preserve economic viability. Rifkin's utopia is at risk even before it is realised, therefore, and may not eventuate just as Marx's vision for the ownership of the means of production ending up in the hands of the proletariat or the previously enslaved working class becoming free to be hunters in the morning, fishers in the evening and philosophers at night without being constrained by or having their lives defined by any of these activities as the basis of their subsistence was not realised.

'For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic' [55].

Positioning For the Backlash

Given the extreme unpredictability of the post COVID 19 environment, it will be important for social advocacy groups like public health institutions to get a footing in what might be called 'The New, New Public Health', with no disrespect to the old versions [6,56]. Times change and ideologies are modified in line with the emerging needs of communities and economies. The Romans at one time would not have countenanced the idea of soldiers not derived from the landed classes being in command of legions or positions in the senate being held by people who did not hold sufficient land to be eligible for such positions as was the case for Caesar, but over time, as the empire grew and loot declined, there were not enough landed members left to people the enterprise or money to pay for the armies. Soldiers could no longer be paid from the loot derived from conquests so other ways needed to be found to both secure the

army numbers as well as pay those who were not slaves and chose to fight for the empire. State I and was divided up and given to former 'un-landed' soldiers as payment for their contribution to campaigns, much like the soldier settler programme in Australia post world wars one and two [14].

Such a process would have been unthinkable in Rome prior to the shortages of resources and the advent of crop failures and changes in the capacity of opposing armies [57]. Even in America, suffrage was extended to more male members of the population in the early nineteenth century reluctantly and serendipitously, perhaps, because inflation of the value of land holdings allowed more people into the net of voters due to the 'forty shilling' property value rule in existence at the time [15,p 113].

Not only will the COVID crisis impact on social values, economics and the distribution of wealth in the future, it will also shape our view of public health and the values that underpin concepts such as preventative healthcare in our communities. Should we return, post COVID, to our old ways of doing business, the risk is that a disproportionate burden of disease, economic recovery and life pressures will fall upon the less well off in our communities while at the same time, those with wealth and access to modern medical technologies will be able to look forward to significantly enhanced lives and wellbeing. The catalyst for change may trend either way like an equilibrium equation and lead to either improvements for all or back to a more divided and exclusive culture that values the few at the expense of the many. Are we heading for the collaborative commons outlined by Rifkin where our expanding populations live more harmoniously and sustainably or are we more likely to see the Harari scenario along with the polarisation of communities as access to the benefits of growing wealth and emerging technologies will increasingly advantage a powerful minority while alienating the vast majority? Either way, the role and function of public health medicine will change rapidly. In the case of the former scenario more and more people can look forward being lifted out of poverty and their current limited access to health care while in the case of the latter eventuality; such advantages will become increasingly the preserve of the super-advantaged groups across the planet.

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