

# Crisis, hope and the future: in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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*“Hope is the pillar that holds up the universe” – Pliny the Elder*

The social sciences often neglect the future as a research topic, instead preferring to focus on the linear relationship between the past and present. Frequently, the future is studied by scientists that look to the future by promoting scientific forethinking, which is shaped by tactics to enhance sustainability through scientific and environmental planning. Although this strand of future-gazing is essential to the physical wellbeing of our world, a focus on social forethinking is equally as important to understand the relationship between human behaviour and the development of our social and political future. Consequently, it is useful to explore how the future is imagined during a global crisis that has impacted the social landscapes of communities all around the world.

On 30 January 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The events that have defined the years of 2020 and 2021 are unparalleled within the memories of the living generations: the effects of such an unprecedented crisis have extended to every corner of the human world. Inevitably, governments began to lockdown their populations, forcing schools to shut, industries to close their doors and people to resign to working from home for the foreseeable future. A crisis can be defined as a time of great difficulty or danger. Spurred on by the rocky psychological consequences of living through a crisis, the world had no choice but to cling to the promise of returning to normal life in the future. To understand which moments during the crisis at which the future became a positive driving force to the imagination of the world, it is useful to create a timeline of the events that have defined the pandemic (figure 1.)

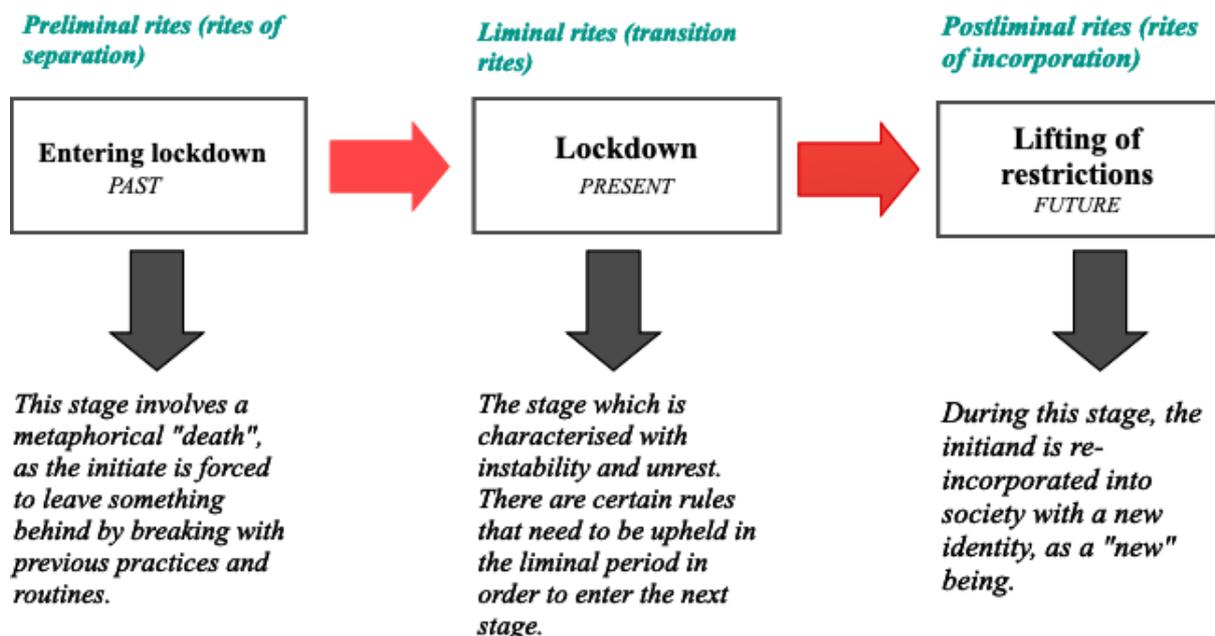


Figure 1: A timeline of the transitional phases of the pandemic

Here, the concept developed by French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep coined Rites of Passage (1909) has been used to display the phases of the pandemic through time. A rite of passage refers to the process an individual goes through when transitioning from one significant change in life status to another. Figure 1 shows the transitional relationship between the three stages of the crisis that are associated with the past, present and the future. The perspective of this journey is from an individual that is in a current state of lockdown. The first stage of this journey began with what Van Gennep named the preliminal rites. The transition from 'normal' life to living in lockdown was the start of pandemic life. This moment is characterised by the individual leaving behind previous routines and normalities that were once deeply ingrained in the 'normal' routine of life. Once the individual has left behind these old routines, they enter what Van Gennep calls the liminal stage of the journey. A liminal period is an in-between time that is spent adjusting to the feeling of leaving behind an old life whilst complying with a new set of rules. The period spent in national lockdown is the liminal space that was inhabited during the crisis. As mentioned, to complete this stage and move forward, there are certain rules which must be upheld. For example, to follow the restrictions enforced by the government that insisted on social distancing and mask-wearing. During the liminal phase of the crisis, there is a significant feeling of instability as it is uncertain when it will be acceptable to enter the final phase of the journey which is the future lifting of restrictions. This final stage is named the post liminal rites which are defined by the incorporation into the new status/society. In the context of the pandemic, entering this stage would mean returning to 'normal' life without COVID restrictions.

It is necessary to note that the instability of the journey through the pandemic has affected individuals and communities differently. Many people faced unemployment, whilst many families lost loved ones. But the situation was so impactful and wide-reaching that it not only forced individuals to cling onto the future as a beacon of hope, but the whole of society to do the same through shared suffering. The pandemic has changed the fabric of society, in ways that have stripped back the functioning of activities that usually define a society. The transition from entering lockdown, followed by living through lockdown, to eventually getting to the point of the future in which restrictions are lifted is a collective adventure full of shared experiences and shared trauma.

Now, it is interesting to explore how this transitional journey through uncertain times made people feel when looking to their future. A paper published in 1999 by Janice Morse and Janice Penrod effectively contextualises the events of the pandemic by exploring the relationship between a traumatic event and the subsequent manifestation of hope. They begin by highlighting that the events of trauma can evoke both feelings of hope and despair. The damaging impact of the pandemic on mental health in the UK was substantial, with 62% of adults reporting that they felt anxious or worried during the First Wave in 2020 (Mental Health Foundation, 2020).

However, Morse and Penrod are firm in their belief that crisis, although rich in its ability to create uncertainty, is certain in its ability to create hopefulness. They reference a study conducted in 1995 by Morse and Doberneck which employed qualitative methodologies to explore the experiences of patients with a diverse plethora of conditions and prognoses. They found that although their sample group faced diverse life experiences, the groups shared the commonality of developing hope in the light of a perceived threat. Further into Morse and Penrod's article, a narrative is formed in which characteristics of trauma are chronologically organised. Enduring lends itself to uncertainty, uncertainty causes suffering and as previously stated, suffering often creates hope. This way of theorising the experiences of an individual who has faced hardship is complex and possibly flawed due to its inability to deem it universal. However, it is effective in suggesting that embracing hope is a mechanism employed by

humans and subsequently shows that hope was a powerful tool used by individuals and the global community during the pandemic.

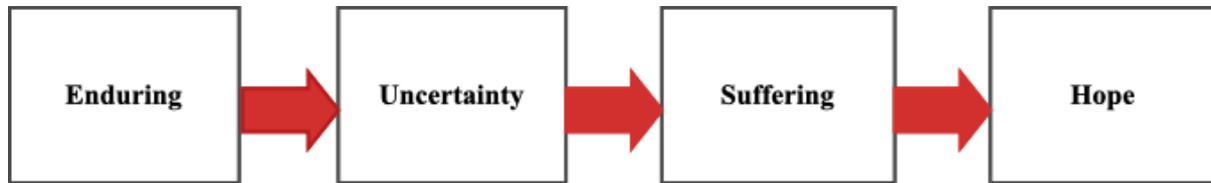


Figure 2: Morse and Penrod's model of the formation of hope (1995)

Morse and Penrod's way of conceptualising the emotional experience of crisis can be used in parallel with the transitional journey through the past, present and future that was previously outlined in this article. The feeling of enduring, uncertainty and suffering should be applied to the times entering lockdown and subsequently to the liminal period of lockdown. Hope is surely produced in this time, as the future (the post-liminal phase of returning to society) is imagined. The future is intangible at the point of imagining; thus, the collective imagination of society has free rein when visualising what it could hold. Imaginings of the future lend themselves to the theory that has its roots in sociology. Utopianism has several definitions which are highlighted in the work of Ruth Levitas (2010). In short, imagining a utopia equates to imagining how we would live and what kind of world we would live in if we could do just that. Levitas highlights that the construction of an imagined future that is idealistic takes place in one form or another in every culture around the world. To some, envisaging the 'good life' can be through a religious lens in which heaven is looked forward to. To others, the utopian future is merely secular and is instead a vision of material wealth, or better, just governments or a greener planet.

During a global pandemic in which the world was forced indoors, it would be expected that utopia would look something like the liberated past that we existed in before all the lockdowns. It could be argued that there was a collective agreement on what the utopian future would look like. This being, a world where we can see our loved ones again, a life unrestricted, basically what 'normal' was before the crisis. A talk about the Utopian Paradox performed by Michael Franchetti in 2019 reinforced the power of a shared utopian vision. He argued that achieving utopia is only possible if we construct an imagined future collaboratively. Utopia emerges from our collective interactions with each other through a sharing of imagined fictions. We can see this happening, with governments around the world mirroring each other's actions with the shared goal of liberating their people and throwing open the door to our lives we were forced to leave behind.

It is important to not get carried away with the idea that the existence of a utopia in the mind of someone experiencing a state of crisis is universal to all those inhabiting the same crisis. There is a certain tension between visions of utopia vs visions of a dystopia, especially in the context of a true crisis. Although there is ample evidence that uncertainty and suffering lead to hopefulness, it cannot be ignored that these hardships often lead to future feelings of familiar uncertainty. Figure 3 takes the narrative formed by Morse and Penrod but demonstrates what might happen if the grounds of utopia have not been met. In the instance of this diagram, hope has been formed because of uncertainty however, the utopia that blossomed from the hope was not fulfilled. This failing will ultimately produce further uncertainty. This

demonstrates the way that utopias are fragile, and their success is dependent on the level of collaboration in their planning as well as the conditions in which they can manifest.

A distinctively frustrating byproduct of the pandemic is the way that it forces society to dip in and out of lockdown. The UK has now experienced three lockdowns, each lockdown following periods of brief societal liberation in which activities are allowed. Each new lockdown has aligned with new waves of infection and new variants of the virus. It is possible that multiple failures in completing the rites of passage, as well as restarting the cycle from enduring to uncertainty, to suffering to hope, thus subsequently failing to reach utopia, has an exponential effect on feelings of uncertainty and suffering. Perhaps, with each new cycle of lockdown, these negative feelings become more prevalent, and the development of hope slows down or even completely diminishes.

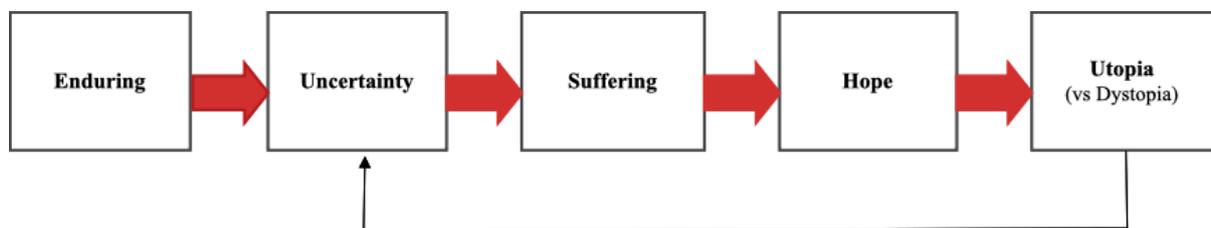


Figure 3: *Utopia vs Dystopia*

It has been demonstrated in this article the ways that individuals, groups and nations digest crisis and do so by inhabiting hopefulness. Van Gennep's model proved useful in exhibiting the route that we all had to follow if we were to get through the pandemic. It has been shown that hope leads to utopian visions of the future, and that utopia is not always achievable. It will be interesting to see how successful the imagined utopia that has been formed during the COVID-19 pandemic is. If our governments are correct in their forecasting, vaccines and social distancing methodologies should eventually allow us to return to our ordinary lives – in other words, our utopia.

## References

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