



Photo: Stanley Wu

THE LONG VIEW

An OMEGA Digest

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Dear Colleagues,

2020 has challenged each of us personally and professionally. Interest in the polycrisis has grown exponentially this year--so has the interest for the exploration of possibilities to bend the global vectors towards a more just and green world. Our greatest single strength is our community--friends and partners like you.

To support our shared understanding of these challenging times, we offer an OMEGA news digest on a global, systems view of interconnected and interacting stressors. We hope you find it useful.

Thank you for being a part of OMEGA and The Resilience Project, we are truly grateful for your continued interest and participation.

Be well,
Stanley Wu
Coordinator, Resilience Project & OMEGA

Articles: The Big Picture

Toby Ord places the risk of our extinction during the twenty-first century at one in six—the odds of an unlucky shot in Russian roulette. Should we manage to avoid a tumble off the precipice, he thinks, it will be our era’s defining achievement. The book catalogues many possible catastrophes. There are the natural risks we’ve always lived with, such as asteroids, super-volcanic eruptions, and stellar explosions. “None of them keep me awake at night,” Ord writes. Then there are the large-scale threats we have created for ourselves: nuclear war, climate change, pandemics (which are made more likely by our way of life), and other novel methods of man-made destruction still to come. Ord is most concerned about two possibilities: empowered artificial intelligence unaligned with human values (he gives it a one-in-ten chance of ending humanity within the next hundred years) and engineered pandemics (he thinks they have a one-in-thirty chance of bringing down the curtain). [How Close is Humanity to the Edge?](#), by Corinne Purtill, The New Yorker.

One of the dominant themes of the last few years is that nothing makes sense. Donald Trump is president, QAnon has mainstreamed fringe conspiracy theories, and hundreds of thousands are dead from a pandemic and climate change while many Americans do not believe that the pandemic or climate change are deadly. It’s incomprehensible. I am here to tell you that the reason so much of the world seems incomprehensible is that it is incomprehensible. From social media to the global economy to supply chains, our lives rest precariously on systems that have become so complex, and we have yielded so much of it to technologies and autonomous actors that no one totally comprehends it all. [The Modern World Has Finally Become Too Complex for Any of Us to Understand](#), by Tim Maughan, Medium.com.

We live in hugely uncertain times. COVID-19 has shocked the very systems on which we rely, kickstarting a decade already heading for extreme turbulence. We are set to see wide-ranging change and transitions – both positive and negative. Come 2030, will we find ourselves in a just, resilient and sustainable world? Or one in which we witness ever more destabilising shocks? Forum for the Future’s latest Future of Sustainability report, *From System Shock to System Change – Time to Transform*, explores the five key dynamics that lie at the heart of these transitions. It considers the interconnected nature of human and planetary health, and reveals four trajectories emerging from the COVID-19 crisis – only one of which will deliver the just transition urgently needed if we are to avert the worst of the social, climate and biodiversity crises we all face. [From system shock to system change - time to transform](#), Forum for the Future.

The year 2020 has been kind to Turchin, for many of the same reasons it has been hell for the rest of us. Cities on fire, elected leaders endorsing violence, homicides surging—to a normal American, these are apocalyptic signs. To Turchin, they indicate that his models, which incorporate thousands of years of data about human history, are working. (“Not all of human history,” he corrected me once. “Just the last 10,000 years.”) He has been warning for a decade that a few key social and political trends portend an “age of discord,” civil unrest and carnage worse than most Americans have experienced. In 2010, he predicted that the unrest would get serious around 2020, and that it wouldn’t let up until those social and political trends reversed. Havoc at the level of the late 1960s and early ’70s is the best-case scenario; all-out civil war is the worst. [The Next Decade Could Be Even Worse](#), by Graeme Wood, The Atlantic.

In late August, more than 600 separate wildfires ravaged California, killing seven people. Meanwhile, two tropical cyclones struck the Gulf Coast only days apart: first Tropical Storm Marco and then Hurricane Laura, the latter of which killed 26 people in the United States and tied the record for the strongest storm to hit Louisiana. Extreme events such as these signal a worrying trend. In the coming decades, as temperatures continue to climb, seemingly isolated climate disasters will begin to overlap, their impacts becoming more than additive. Scientists expect to see more intense tropical cyclones and more heat waves. Each disaster could

compound the damage of the next, with less and less time for people to recover in between. [As the World Burns](#), by Michael Oppenheimer, Foreign Affairs.

In “The Storm Before the Calm,” I wrote of two crises coming to a head in the 2020s: a socio-economic crisis and an institutional crisis. The latter has hit us like a hurricane. There is a distrust of American institutions that crosses ideological lines. A quarter of voters, including half of Republican voters, believe the election was stolen from Donald Trump. In 2016, there was a widespread belief that Russian meddling helped Trump win the election. Other parts of the theory held that Trump had made a deal with the Russians or was being blackmailed by them. This seems to derive from claims by the losers and so was dismissed by the other side. But they argue the same thing: that democratic institutions are corrupt and are not to be trusted. [The Institutional Crisis and COVID-19](#), by George Friedman, Geopolitical Futures.

Articles: Deep Dive

In a public imagination fueled by reality TV, preppers are lonely survivalists, members of fanatical religious groups, or even wealthy Silicon Valley moguls who buy luxury underground bunkers and keep a getaway helicopter fueled. But in reality preppers range from New Yorkers with extra boxes of canned goods squeezed in their studio apartments to wilderness experts with fully stocked bunkers. Eight months into the coronavirus pandemic, something has shifted in our collective psyche as we remember empty aisles and medical supply shortages. Firearm sales are up, bread baking and canning are trendy, and toilet paper stockpiles are common. Are we all preppers now? [Disaster ‘prepping’ was once an American pastime. Today, it’s mainstream again](#), by Nina Strochlic, National Geographic.