

The great reset. Restratification for lives, livelihoods, and the planet

Perspective article

Steffen Roth, Department of Strategy, La Rochelle Business School, 102 Rue de Coureilles, 17000 La Rochelle, France, and Department of Social Research, University of Turku, Assistentinkatu 7, Turku, 20014, Finland. e-mail: roths@excelia-group.com and steffen.roth@utu.fi

Author biography: Steffen Roth is Full Professor of Management at the La Rochelle Business School, France, and Adjunct Professor of Economic Sociology at the University of Turku, Finland. He holds a Habilitation in Economic and Environmental Sociology awarded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research; a PhD in Sociology from the University of Geneva; and a PhD in Management from the Chemnitz University of Technology. He is the field editor for social systems theory of *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*. The journals his research has been published in include *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Ecological Economics*, *Administration and Society*, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *European Management Journal*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, and *Futures*. His ORCID profile is available at orcid.org/0000-0002-8502-601X.

Abstract: In reviewing the Great Reset, an initiative launched by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in response to the global coronavirus crisis, this perspective article considers the scenario of an epochal transition from capitalism to “restorism”. To facilitate the observation of underlying trends and assumptions, a systems-theoretical framework is developed for the observation of both this Great Reset scenario and those scenarios that are by implication excluded by the WEF vision. It is thus shown that the “shared goals” advocated by the WEF would converge to a transition from a modern pluralist to a “new-normative” order stratified to the primacy of individual, institutional, and planetary health. In discussing sociological implications of this transition, a vision emerges of a new digitally enhanced middle age where health plays the role once played by religion. In this restorist scenario of a neo-medieval brave new world health society, the emergence of new social strata corresponding to different levels of purity, infection, or pollution would be a probable consequence. The paper concludes that ideas of deliberately caused great resets and other control illusions nurtured by the WEF initiative are barely smarter than and spur what the UN Secretary-General refers to as “wild conspiracy theories”.

Keywords: Great Reset initiative; World Economic Forum; fourth industrial revolution; restorism; scenario; social theory.

Introduction

From the outset, the 2020 coronavirus crisis has been declared not only a “medical war” (Emmanuel Macron, 16 Mars 2020; Donald Trump, 19 Mars 2020) against an epidemic virus disease, but also a war against “another epidemic – a dangerous epidemic of misinformation”. The term “infodemic” appears in a WHO report on “the “2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan” from 04 February 2020. In further describing this “other epidemic” in his video message on *COVID-19 and misinformation* from 14 April 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres speaks of a “global ‘misinfo-demic”

on the ground that “wild conspiracy theories are infecting the Internet” and “hatred is going viral”. He concludes that “media companies must do more to root out hate and harmful assertions about COVID-19” and announces “a new United Nations Communications Response initiative to flood the Internet with facts and science while countering the growing scourge of misinformation – a poison that is putting even more lives at risk”.

The idea that governments and private sector organizations must systematically combat perceived misinformation in the event of a global pandemic had been propagated on several occasions long before the actual COVID-19 crisis. One such occasion was *Event 201*, “a high-level pandemic exercise” co-organised by the Johns Hopkins University, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the World Economic Forum (WEF) on 18 October 2019. The purpose of this exercise was to identify critical gaps in global pandemic preparedness. One key recommendation developed in this context was that governments should engage in public-private partnerships with traditional and social media organizations in order to acquire “the ability to flood media with fast, accurate, and consistent information. (...) For their part, media companies should commit to ensuring that authoritative messages are prioritized and that false messages are suppressed including though (*sic!*) the use of technology”.¹

While the *Event 201* recommendations suggested themselves as a blueprint for the operative management of the COVID-19 crisis, one co-organizer has also worked on filling the strategic and discursive vacuum in the flooded global media landscape. Launched by the WEF on 03 June 2020, the core message of the forum’s *Great Reset* initiative boils down to the claim that “there is a golden opportunity to seize something good from this crisis” (HRH the Prince of Wales on the occasion of the initiative’s virtual opening event). This optimism, however, implies that the world before the COVID-19 crisis was a crisis in itself and that, therefore, “our systems need a reset” on a track that harnesses the benefits of the *fourth industrial revolution* (Schwab and Davis, 2018) for a sustainable recovery based on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Schwab and Mallert, 2020). As the WEF makes the impression of being among the few organisations worldwide to be at least intellectually prepared for the present crisis and its aftermath, in this perspective article, I shall summarize pertinent WEF suggestions for crisis mitigation and recovery as promoted in its *Great Reset* initiative. Whereas WEF initiatives and agendas are regularly associated with technocratic elitism (Morgan, 2019; Sharma and Soederberg, 2020; Trauth-Goik, 2020) and desires for a new world order (Veltmeyer, 2005; Schiølin, 2020), however, the focus of my reading of the WEF recommendations is on possible social macro trends for which the *Great Reset* might be a token or magnifier rather than a catalyst or implementation.

To facilitate the observation of these underlying trends, I draw on works by Niklas Luhmann to develop a framework for the observation of both the *Great Reset* scenario and the scenarios that are by implication excluded by the WEF vision.

Based on this framework, I show that if achieved the “shared goals” assumed and advocated by the *Great Reset* would converge to a transition from a modern pluralist to a global “new-normative” order stratified to the primacy of health broadly conceived to include its individual, institutional, and planetary dimension.

In discussing the sociological implications of this possible transition, a vision rather than prediction emerges of a new digitally enhanced middle age main where health plays the role once played by religion. In this restorist scenario of a neo-medieval brave new world health society, the emergence of new social strata corresponding to different levels of purity, infection, or pollution would be a probable consequence.

¹ Source: *Event 201* recommendations entitled *Public-private cooperation for pandemic preparedness and response. A call to action*. Available at: <https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/event201/recommendations.html>

The paper concludes that the idea of deliberately causing great resets and other control illusions nurtured by the WEF initiative are barely any smarter than and actually spur what the UN Secretary-General refers to as “wild conspiracy theories.

The Great Reset

There is little doubt that the repeatedly declared war against SARS-CoV-2 has changed society as we knew it. Many agree now that the virus has exposed the flaws of neoliberal policies, austerity mechanisms, and a world economy geared to efficiency rather than resilience and sustainability. Some also rejoice in the cleared skies and smaller ecological footprints we owe to travel restrictions and lockdowns. There is broad awareness that the crisis has demonstrated how interconnected the global risk society is and that the coronavirus crisis has accelerated the digital transformation of our world.

It is with the ambition to build on and shape the momentum of the coronavirus crisis that the WEF has rolled-out its *Great Reset* initiative. The theme has been borrowed from an eponymous book (Florida, 2010) written in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 financial crisis. It also headlined a RAND Corporation report on “Policing in 2030” from April 2020 and a Goldman Sachs research paper on “A framework for investing after COVID-19” from 28 May 2020. HRH the Prince of Wales, too, used the short-lived hashtag #ReimagineReset as of 22 April 2020, yet, the theme’s first appearance with reference to the WEF initiative was on 22 May 2020, when *The Telegraph* reported that HRH was “to launch ‘Great Reset’ project to rebuild planet in the wake of the coronavirus”. The initiative was then launched during a virtual meeting on 03 June 2020, when HRH the Prince of Wales and WEF founder and executive chairman Klaus Schwab announced the Great Reset as both the theme of the Annual Meeting 2021 and “a call to build a greener, smarter and fairer world as we seek a way out of the COVID-19 pandemic”. They were joined by UN Secretary-General António Guterres and IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva, among others.

From the onset, a sense of doom and urgency has prevailed. The key message is that the “global health crisis has laid bare the unsustainability of our old system”. Mankind has only one planet and “climate change could be the next global disaster with even more dramatic consequences” (Klaus Schwab). Thus, the “Great Reset is a welcome recognition that this human tragedy must be a wake-up call. We must build more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are more resilient in the face of pandemics, climate change and the many other global changes we face” (António Guterres). The COVID-19 pandemic is hence a “golden opportunity” in terms of a “unique but narrow window” to put people and planet over profit. “If there is one critical lesson to learn from this crisis, it is that we need to put nature at the heart of how we operate. We simply can’t waste more time” (HRM the Prince of Wales). Yet, time is even more an issue as the pandemic has not only exposed the dysfunctionality of existing institutional settings but also “accelerated our transition into the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution” (Klaus Schwab), i.e., the looming age of a society redefined by artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, biotechnology, and quantum computing, to name just a few key technologies.²

As traditional institutions have failed to manage “the climate and social crises that were already underway” and have now been exacerbated by the coronavirus crisis, there is a risk that “these crises, together with COVID-19, will deepen and leave the world even less sustainable, less equal, and more fragile. Incremental measures and *ad hoc* fixes will not suffice to prevent this scenario. We must build entirely new foundations for our economic and social systems”

² All quotes in this paragraph from the WEF post “The Great Reset: A Unique Twin Summit to Begin 2021”, available at <https://www.weforum.org/press/2020/06/the-great-reset-a-unique-twin-summit-to-begin-2021/>.

(Schwab, 2020). This is the meaning behind the slogan initiative's "Our systems need a reset". This great reset then implies the design of new institutional arrangements that steer markets towards fairer outcomes, incentivize investments towards "shared goals", build and sustain greener infrastructures, and harness the momentum of the fourth industrial revolution for the resolution of pressing social, health, and environmental challenges, including climate change (Schwab and Malleret, 2020). The paradigmatic core of this reset is a shift from neoliberalism to an interventionist approach, which is complemented, on the theoretical level, by advocacy of a radical and irrevocable shift from shareholder to stakeholder management, and by the development and promotion of alternative environmental, social and governance (ESG) metrics on the methodological level.

With regard to the immediate future and hence the management of the coronavirus crisis, there are regular cross references between the Great Reset initiative, the WEF's Covid Action Platform, and other formats where "the World Economic Forum is mobilizing all stakeholders to protect lives and livelihoods". These stakeholders include Bill Gates, whose talk at the 2015 Vancouver Ted conference the WEF recycled to promote a set of recommendations including shorter turnaround times for vaccines and therapeutics, "medical reserve corps", the pairing of medical and military experts, simulation games for preparedness assessment, and "lots of advanced R&D in areas of vaccines and diagnostics" (Sault, 2020). Note that in this WEF article, the above-mentioned Event 201 exercise is referred to as a "World Economic Forum simulation in October 2019 [that] showed we're unprepared for a pandemic". Other ideas catalysed by the WEF include "untact", a core concept of the South Korean "Digital New Deal" that refers to the increasing robotization of services, in the context of which contact-free service customer experiences are promoted as new standard in healthcare, hospitality, or retail, and thus as a major weapon "in the fight to stop the spread of COVID-19 and to aid economic recovery" (Hutt, 2020). Again with regard to healthcare facilities, the WEF promotes the use of smart wearables such as wristbands that "help creating a record of who has been near whom, where and for how long" (Dave, 2020). Mandatory wristbands or keychains for infected or all citizens who cannot install tracing apps to their smartphones have been discussed, tested, or implemented in many countries worldwide including the USA, Germany, France, Romania, (Hong Kong), and the UK. There is also a WEF feature on CovidPass, a COVID-19 health passport app that draws on "blockchain technology to store encrypted data from individual blood tests, allowing users to prove that they have tested negative for COVID-19" and, for the sake of the planet, also "commits to mandatory carbon offsetting for each flight passenger, to preserve the environmental benefits of reduced air travel during the crisis" (Broom, 2020). Yet another technique pertains to what the WEF considers a successful attempt at public health campaigning: In early March, the Indian Ministry of Communication's Department of Telecommunications asked telecom operators to replace regular mobile phone ringtones by COVID-19 awareness messages. "As people made calls, they heard a 30-second message on how to stop the virus' spread as well as healthcare center contact information. This simple solution helped leverage cheap technology to reach the millions with a phone in their pocket, including the country's 26% illiterate population." (Magsamen and Shutko, 2020).

It is probably examples like these that confirm the WEF's technocratic image. On the other hand, the WEF occasionally invites speakers that are overtly sceptical about or warn of what they perceive as technological threats or technocratic excesses. One particularly prominent example is Yuval Harari. In his WEF 2020 Annual Meeting talk on "How to survive the 21st century", Harari (2020) adds "technological disruptions" to his shortlist of "already familiar threats" and existential challenges to mankind, namely nuclear war and ecological collapse. By technological disruptions Harari understands social impact of the dark sides what the WEF milieu refers to as the fourth industrial revolution:

- The creation of a class of useless people whose jobs have been made redundant by automation,
- The emergence of unprecedented forms of inequality including a worrying divide between a few immensely wealthy “high-tech hubs” and “exploited data colonies” as result of an artificial intelligence “arms-race”, and
- The “rise of digital dictatorships, that will monitor everyone all the time”.

Harari boils his vision down to a simple equation: “ $B \times C \times D = AHH!$ Which means? Biological knowledge multiplied by computing power multiplied by data equals the ability to hack humans, ahh.” In this context, he concedes that the “power to hack humans can be used for good purposes – like providing much better healthcare” before he warns that “if this power falls into the hands of a twenty-first-century Stalin, the result will be the worst totalitarian regime in human history”.

The potential uses and misuses of the technological drivers of the fourth industrial revolution for health purposes is a recurring topic in the work of Harari. In 2017 bestseller “Homo Deus”, he points at examples of prominent “Silicon Valley luminaries” whose shared dream and “stated mission is ‘to solve death’” (p. 24). He concludes that immortality is the new moonshot project of the 21st century with health enhancement and life extension remaining constantly shifting intermediate goals. On several occasions, Harari (2017, p. 335ff; 349f; 387ff; 399f) illustrates how this mission is pursued through ceaseless attempts at an ever-increasing integration of technological systems and human organisms, whereby the former typically monitor and control the latter rather than vice versa. If successful, this mission will turn humans from individuals in the traditional sense into knots of a global intelligent network similar to the global brain discussed in a 2017 special issue of *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* (Heiylighen, 2017; Lenartowicz, 2017).

“Eventually, we may reach a point when it will be impossible to disconnect from this all-knowing network even for a moment. Disconnection will mean death. If medical hopes are realised, future people will incorporate into their bodies a host of biometric devices, bionic organs and nano-robots, which will monitor our health and defend us from infections, illnesses and damage. Yet these devices will have to be online 24/7, both in order to be updated with the latest medical news, and in order to protect them from the new plagues of cyberspace. Just as my home computer is constantly attacked by viruses, worms and Trojan horses, so will be my pacemaker, my hearing aid and my nanotech immune system. If I don’t update my body’s anti-virus program regularly, I will wake up one day to discover that the millions of nano-robots coursing through my veins are now controlled by a North Korean hacker.” (349)

Though more sceptical than that of the WEF, Harari’s future vision also comes with strong assumptions about drifts towards technologically enhanced forms behavioural control under the umbrella of health conservation and restoration, with the latter aspect feeding back into the technological realm. In this sense, Harari complements the optimistic prospects of a Great Reset on a global track towards healthy people, healthy institutions, and a healthy planet with a side glance on potential side effects of an—almost—inescapable development. Equally important, his book suggests that this strategic healthicization dates back decades and does not limit itself to repairs of the human organism.

This assessment resonates with WEF attempts at appropriating or providing a platform for Greta Thunberg as role model for how “young people can heal our divided world” (Sanvee, 2020) and all the many agendas, policies, and initiatives grounded on the idea that our world is indeed ill. On more than one occasion, this “ill world” implication is more than explicit. A prominent example includes *A message from HRH The Prince of Wales on Earth Day 2020*, which HRH repeated, in slightly modified form, on the occasion of the launch event of the WEF Great Reset initiative on 03 June 2020. In this message, we read:

“The parallels between the human and the planetary condition in the coronavirus are quite clear. If we look at the planet as if it were a patient, we can see that our activities have been damaging her immune system and she has been struggling to breathe and thrive due to the strain we have put on her vital organs. To treat her we need to restore balance and put Nature back at the centre of the circle. To achieve this we must: act for health and well-being; understand Nature’s patterns and cycles; recognize the value of diversity, unity and the interdependence of all living things; consider the importance of innovation and adaptation; and invest in Nature-based solutions to help stimulate a more circular bioeconomy that gives back to Nature as much as we take from her.”

The key message clearly is that nature deserves a capital letter, that *she is ill*, and that we must do whatever necessary to restore her *health*.

In her panel speech to the WEF dialogue on “Building Future Resilience to Global Risks” from 17 November 2020, EC President Ursula von der Leyen, too, emphasized the urgent need to “restore and protect nature” for the sake of the health of both human individuals and the planet as “we know, for example, that there is a link between the rise of infectious diseases on the one hand and the rising temperatures and, mainly, the loss of nature, the loss of biodiversity”.

The statements in this section, therefore suggest, that the ecological turn of the recent decades is not properly understood if we associate ecology only with the science of that name. The health connotation is as dominant in HRH’s gentle call for emergency care of an ill planet as it is in the WEF seemingly more technocratic attempts to restore or reset dysfunctional technological, social, and ecological systems. And even in reviewing Harari’s vision of the probably somewhat totalitarian age of the fourth industrial revolution, we find that if data is the new oil of the 21st century, then health data is the new kerosine.

Framework

The idea that health in its broadest sense to include planetary health must take precedence over economic and other considerations has been trending for quite some time. It is, therefore, not new to scholars with backgrounds in a broad scope of disciplines ranging from earth over life to social sciences. The WEF’s paradigmatic foundation, stakeholder management, is not precisely unpopular in business or policy studies either.

Though many arguments for interventions for individual, institutional, and planetary health emanate from natural-scientific reasoning, the conclusion that policies must prioritise people and planet over profit constitutes a social claim. Thus, the system at stake in calls for ecological transformations and great resets is society.

Ideas of society in general and of dysfunctional social systems warranting resets in particular, however, are typically grounded on strong assumptions about initial states, normal conditions, or even higher purposes of society. Yet, if we agree that these assumptions do change in the course of history, then over-reliance on historically contingent assumptions may counteract attempts at great resets as it promotes roadshows of intellectual fashions rather than roadmaps back to the basics or forward the futures of society. A true interest in a great reset of as complex a system as is world society would, therefore, suggest a recourse to intellectual systems that are particularly free of presuppositions. One such system is present in the form of George Spencer Brown’s “Laws of Form”.

Located at the interface of mathematics and philosophy, Spencer Brown’s system starts from the idea that “There isn’t anything” (Spencer Brown, 2013) and that in order to observe something, we must “take as given the idea of distinction and the idea of indication, and that we cannot make an indication without drawing a distinction.” (Spencer Brown, 1979, p.1) The most basic understanding of this quote is probably that there is no observation without the drawing of distinctions and that every world observed by an observer unfolds as a pattern of distinctions. Again in a basic form, the idea that distinctions create windows to “the world”

may be exemplified by the notorious management tool SWOT, a matrix made of the distinctions positive/negative and internal/external (Weihrich, 1982) or present/future (Humphrey, 2005), respectively. In fact, the combined observation of these two basic distinctions already creates an effective tool that allows for the observation of four different perspectives—namely strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—on any given system of reference. The same principle is at work in the case of Talcott Parson’s notorious AGIL paradigm, which is also created by the crosstabulation of the distinctions internal/external and means/ends (1937) or instrumental/consummatory (1951), respectively. True, the Parsonian paradigm has been described as “a triumphalist Occidental organizing framework, within which evidence of historical complexity is exquisitely tortured to fit Parsons’ grand theoretical apparatus.” (Holton, 2001, p.156) Yet this criticism challenges Parson’s insistence on his pet distinctions rather than the basic principle of this theory design, which has, therefore, remained prominent in the form and context of scenario techniques where four quadrants matrices are built by the orthogonalization of two scales or clear-cut distinctions (see, e.g., Amer et al., 2013). The major difference between the Parsonian paradigm and the scenario frameworks is that the latter approach allows for a free, context-specific choice of those distinctions that ultimately create the window to the world or a world of four different futures, respectively.

As is well-known, Niklas Luhmann (2013a, p.23f; 46ff) built on key ideas from Spencer Brown’s work in order to avoid a Parsonian self-lock-in into an inflexible theory architecture made of predefined distinctions. In abstracting from much of the complexity and elegance of the Luhmannian “jargon”, we may say that Luhmann’s translates Spencer Brown’s above concept of form into his notorious definition that “a system is the difference between system and environment” (Luhmann (2013a, p. 44). A system, therefore, is *both* the distinction between a system and the corresponding environment *and* the indication of that system. Thus, the system roughly corresponds to what Spencer Brown calls the marked state and the environment to the unmarked state. In other words, the system is whatever is *in* focus whereas the environment is the complementary state of everything that is faded *out*. The distinction between distinction and indication, system and environment, or most basically inside and outside is, therefore, the only presupposed distinction in Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory (Roth, 2019, p.90).

In order to move from systems theory to social theory, however, social systems need to be distinguished from all other forms of systems. Luhmann’s solution to this problem: social systems are defined by the operation by which they distinguish themselves from their environment. This operation is communication. The distinctions between inside and outside and communication and non-communication are, therefore, the only two basic presuppositions of Luhmannian social systems theory. Thus, social systems theory boils down to observations of what is inside or outside of non-/communication.

The observation of more sophisticated forms and constellations of social systems—including observations of society as the “system of all communications” (Luhmann, 2013b, p.147)—then pertains to the internal differentiation of society. “Few differentiation forms have so far developed in the history of society. It seems that in this field, too, a “law of limited possibilities” applies, even though it has yet to be constructed in a logically conclusive manner (e.g., by cross-tabulation).” (id, p.12)

Luhmann himself did not produce the proposed matrix, but rather at first resorts to a combination of “two dichotomies, both of which are asymmetric: system/environment and equality/inequality”, from which he, surprisingly, derives only three forms of differentiation (Luhmann, 1997, 33). Later, Luhmann (2013a, 12ff) avoids combinations of distinctions altogether and attempts at drawing four forms of social differentiation out of what most likely is a self-application or “re-entry” of the distinction similarity/dissimilarity.

Yet, there is an appearance of the envisioned matrix in Roth et al. (2017, p.309), where the authors combine the distinctions equal/unequal and similar/dissimilar to derive a crosstabulation that contains the four forms of differentiation intuitively identified by Niklas Luhmann (see Table 1):

	Equal	Unequal
Similar	Segmentation (Families, tribes, nations, etc.)	Centralization (Civilizations, empires, etc.)
Dissimilar	Functional Differentiation (Economy, Politics, <i>Health</i> , etc.)	Stratification (Castes, estates, classes, etc.)

Table 1: Social Differentiation (slightly modified from Roth et al., 2017, p. 309)

In looking at Table 1, social theorizing boils down to a specific form of communication about dis-/similarities and in-/equalities of or “between” different forms of communication, and Roth et al. (2017) seem indeed to imply that this matrix covers, in principle, all relevant forms and subforms of social differentiation.

Table is useful in our context because it shows that

- Economy, politics, health and other subforms of functional differentiation are incommensurable systems as they are both fundamentally dissimilar and basically equal. The basic idea is hence that economy is not health is not politics is not science, etc., and that there is no default ranking according to which politics is always more important than science or economy more important than health.
- Stratification (ranking) and functional differentiation are fundamentally different forms of social differentiation. The observation of different classes or castes therefore refers to a different level of analysis than that of the observation of different function systems.
- There can nonetheless be combined observations of different forms of social differentiation which lead to more complex perspectives on society.

One such combined observation may result in the apparent contradiction that social systems theory defines politics, economy, health, science, and the other “function systems” as incommensurable and thus of, in principle, equal importance to society, whereas scholars (e.g., Schimank, 2015) regularly observe considerable differences in the importance that these systems have to different parts of society. This apparent contradiction, however, can be resolved as soon as we realise that the absence of a predefined ranking of the function systems is a necessary condition that these systems can be ranked at all.

This idea also seems to underlie the works of Roth et al. (2017) and Roth et al. (2019), where the two teams of scholars draw on big data research to demonstrate that the importance of function systems may feature significant changes over time. The 2020 coronavirus crisis has added much weight to this claim.

In the subsequent section of this article, I shall therefore draw on the above framework as well as the recent groundwork in order to explore a scenario related to recent trends of the function system *health*, which I assume to have gained importance to society in the context of the coronavirus crisis.

Scenario

As explained above, scenario frameworks and other windows to the world emerge as combinations of at least two distinctions. As this article is concerned with the prominently promoted idea and the consequences of a society where individual, institutional, and planetary

health comes *first*, the corresponding window emerges by a combination of the function-systemic distinction health/non-health with a distinction from the realm of stratification such as superior/subordinate or primary/secondary. Yet, the idea that one function system shall always or ultimately prevail over all other function systems implies that stratification supersedes functional differentiation. The issue at stake is therefore best represented by a cross-tabulation of health/non-health and stratification/non-stratification (see Table 2).

	Non-Health	Health
Stratification	<i>Capitalism</i> <i>Scientocracy</i> <i>Middle Age (Theocracy)</i>	Restorism (Health comes first)
Non-Stratification	<i>Pluralism</i> <i>Fluctuation</i>	<i>Healthicization</i>

Table 2: Contrasting the WEF vision (top right quadrant) with scenarios negated by this vision

The benefit of the cross-tabulation presented in Table 2 is that it provides a framework not only for the *Health comes first* scenario promoted by the WEF’s Great Reset and similar initiatives (top right quadrant), but also for other scenarios that are, by implication, negated if the WEF scenario is applicable or implemented (the remaining three quadrants).

Excluded are all non-health-isms, some examples of which are listed in the top left quadrant. E.g., the famous depiction of capitalism as a Pyramid of Capitalist System presents a society stratified by economic capital, whereas in a scientocratic society, science would dominate society in ways that resemble the role religion is assumed to have played in medieval European and similar societies. All these and many further versions of a society stratified to a function system other than health are implicitly negated by the WEF’s future vision. This leads to contradictions if the WEF’s credo that individual, institutional, and planetary health must take precedence over economic considerations is associated with the WEF’s idea of a “Great Reset of capitalism” or a transition from shareholder to stakeholder capitalism, respectively. In fact, a *Health comes first*-approach cannot be easily reconciled with the idea of capitalism in terms of a society in which economic considerations prevail.

Other scenarios excluded by the WEF vision include the *Healthicization* scenario located in the bottom right quadrant of Table 2. This scenario is different from *Health comes first* scenario in that it assumes an increasing importance of health, yet, without this increase translating into a situation where health becomes the dominant system. In recalling the results of Roth et al. (2017) and Roth et al. (2019), we find that health has been among the least important function systems of the 19th and 20th century. Thus, it is not unfounded to assume that even a substantial healthicization of society would not necessarily lead to a dominance of health over all other aspects of society.

The last set of scenarios implicitly negated by the WEF’s vision pertains to a society in which the importance of the different function systems is and always remains in flux. This *Fluctuation* scenario largely corresponds with the idea of modern society as both a functionally differentiated society and one in which functional differentiation is the dominant form of social differentiation. In such a society, we would hence expect to observe constant changes of the importance that individual function systems have to society as a whole as well as considerable differences in the value that individual subsystems of society such as organizations or families place on the different function systems. This functionally *pluralist scenario* hence contradicts the idea that one function system like health could dominate society in a more-than-temporary or -local form.

By implication, all the above scenarios are excluded by the prospects of a Great Reset that succeeds at putting world society on a *Health comes first*-track towards the *restoration* of individual, institutional, and planetary health. As it has been shown, the WEF considers this restorist agenda justified in view of a considerable list of institutional systems failures as well as of the sheer severity and urgency of the current pandemic and climate crises. The WEF also leaves no doubt that this agenda is without alternative or “alternativeless”.

If taken seriously or even successfully implemented, the WEF agenda would therefore challenge or even cancel the concept of a polycontextural modern society up to a point where we cannot but observe a restratification towards a society in which all aspects of social life are defined by, or with regard to, one dominant system. There hence is resemblance between this vision and souvenirs of stratified societies in which hierarchies of families, roles, and values are derived from a canon of typically religious books and define the typically narrow behavioural margins of its “members”. In fact, scholars (e.g., Ward, 2003; 2005; 2006; 2017) have highlighted how narrow these margins have been even in the case of members of the top strata of medieval societies, and how critical early-modern experiments with and the increasing consolidation of functional differentiation have been for the foundations of modern society such as freedom of decision and (social) mobility. Well-known is also the key role the emergence of the modern economy has played, and is still playing, in undermining feudalist systems of governance.

As much as the take-off of one function system may challenge the dominance of another, so too can such momentum be observed to translate into new forms of stratification. The above-mentioned Pyramid of Capitalist System is legend, and in the case of health, the stratificatory potential is also very obvious. There is a wealth of literature on links between social status and rules or rituals of hygiene (as well as corresponding ranks and rankings of pollution, un-/touchability, or im-/purity), e.g., in the context of a caste system. Yet, while contemporary observers from the so-called developed world tend to hold strong views about, e.g., the discrimination of “untouchables” in the Indian subcontinent, the 2020 coronavirus crisis has suggested that the principles that create non-/castes of un-/touchables in first place might still be operational even in the “advanced” among the 21st century societies. On 08 July 2020, for example, the New York Times called Sweden a “pariah state” for its “lax approach to combating the coronavirus”. And it does not require much phantasy to imagine that our current billionfold divisions of the world into non-/mask wearers, non-/hand sanitarians, permanent surveillance non-/consenters, and vaccination supporters or opponents could have far-reaching social consequences just a little further down the current pandemic road. Several institutions of higher education such as the MIT already grant access only to members who are coronavirus-free and prove it using a system similar to the *CovidPass* “health passport” promoted by the WEF. Access to an increasing number of health-sensitive locations and situations might therefore soon require an increasing number of health clearances up to a situation where the certified health status defines even aspects as intimate as mating chances. In this sense, the idea of a Chinese-type stratified social credit system does not appear as alien anymore as soon as we replace the term social by the term health and recall that the WEF’s approach to health is broad enough to include its institutional and ecological dimensions. Thus, in a restorist scenario, access not only to airports and ferry terminals, but also city centres and neighbourhoods can easily be made contingent on health status. There may soon be “health passport” check points before every decent shop, museum, or restaurant. Participation in top-level face-to-face business, policy, and research meetings might become impossible for persons without regularly updated vaccination portfolio (or with too large an ecological footprint). Thus, a broad scope particularly of top professions and roles would require commensurate individual health scores. Still in 2020, some governments have already gone as far as to disenfranchise infected voters, e.g., in Galicia or the Basque Country; in fact, strategic health

testing might become a gerrymandering technique of the 21st century. 2020 has also seen the emergence of new health offences and crimes ranging from fines for mask refusers up to threatened murder charges for people who break quarantine rules and thus infect others with a virus whose virulence is comparable to or lower than that of an influenza virus (Ioannidis, 2020a, 2020b).

All these and similar issues, ideas, and interventions are currently being discussed or implemented under the suggested pretext that they raise serious concerns about the future of freedom and democracy in some while they do not go far enough for many members of our world society. The spirits called by the darker prophets of the post-COVID-19 age combined with the WEF-type technocratic optimism might therefore co-create and sustain views of a world in which envisioned fusions of an internet of things and an internet of organisms give reason to fears or hopes of a total surveillance of larger parts of the world population and their total mobilization for individual, institutional and planetary health. A sociological complement to Harari's above equation of life in the new millennium might therefore be: $H + S + TT = STI$. AHH! Health gaze plus stratification plus total transparency equals *society as total institution*, ahh!

It remains to be seen whether this total institutionalisation will actually be a defining feature of a new-normal world society. Yet, what can be seen by now is that the coronavirus crisis has disclosed or reinforced an already existing trend towards moral communication or communication on morality, respectively. Moral frames demarcating the lines between "solidarity" and "cynicism" have been set up from the outset of the crisis. Hierarchies of values have been redesigned, and most of these new "balances" treat values or rights such as the freedoms of business, speech, or assembly as secondary to the new principle of *health comes first* or the priority of saving lives from the coronavirus. Pharmaceutical rays of hope such as the November 2020 announcement by Pfizer and BioNTech have immediately resulted in discussions about what groups of persons should get the COVID-19 vaccine first; next to risk patients and healthcare staff, answers to this question included policemen, teachers, or "people of colour". Generally, there seems to be a strong urge for agreement on what groups, professions, or functions are of greater "systemic relevance" than others, and we do not leave it at the idea that grandmother's health is more important than the livelihood of a family, but also reproduce or challenge countless other rankings. Rather, we believe that politicians are in a better position than jurists to define the relative importance of both health and the economy. Education, by contrast, is less important than either of the former, but relevant at least insofar as it helps keep kids away from working parents and thus the economy alive, which is why even average teachers are more important now than even top museum directors or musicians. Needless to say that bars are more *superfluous* than restaurants, that professional sport is requiring more exceptions than popular one, and that life scientists are more useful than social scientists these days (even though epidemiology is certainly not *not* a social science).

All these ranking games do make sense if we believe in the dangerousness and urgency of the current health threat, and the more common the sense we make of these rankings, the clearer the hierarchy of individual groups, values, and functions. If we agree that there is no alternative to the emerging *health comes first*-paradigm, then we are heading for a situation in which virtually all aspects of social life are ultimately measured against their health impact and hence for a world in which considerations of individual, institutional, and planetary health would define what is or is not proper economic conduct, right policy, or mandatory course reading. In fact, this very view of the world is neither new nor shocking, as for many a scholar, policy maker, business manager, or street activist, "Heal the world" has turned from a top hit into a top priority in the face of the scale, scope, and urgency of the current environmental, climate, and now also pandemic crisis. And yet it remains surprising that so many observers of modern society subscribe to imaginaries of stratified orders of values that resemble medieval

constellations where religion was thought to define what is proper conduct in economy, science, education, art, politics, and almost all other aspects of social life. This surprise resonates with Huxley (1958, p. 36), who expressed his concern that the then-pressing

“Impersonal forces of over-population and over-organization, and the social engineers who are trying to direct these forces, are pushing us in the direction of a new medieval system. This revival will be made more acceptable than the original (...); but, for the majority of men and women, it will still be a kind of servitude”.

Huxley’s discomfort might be shared by many a witness of the current attempts at a restratification for lives, livelihoods, and the planet. Lest this discomfort be engineered away.

Conclusions

“Everyone has a role to play”. The ambition to “include everyone” has been a leitmotiv of many a WEF initiative and agenda, including The Great Reset initiative launched to shape the management of the 2020 coronavirus crisis and to redefine this crisis as a “golden opportunity” for a transition to a more resilient and sustainable world society. As this article has shown, however, the WEF version of inclusiveness remains limited to bridges over dividing lines drawn by fairly traditional forms of social differentiation. Thus, people of all genders, ages, colours, castes, classes, and regions of the world are warmly invited to participate in the Great Reset on a track towards more sustainable individual lives, institutional settings, and planetary ecosystems, but certainly not those who do not buy into the underlying paradigm that treats individuals, institutions, and the entire planet as patients in urgent need for substantial interventions for preservation and restoration.

In drawing on a social systems-theoretical framework, the article showed that this restorist paradigm implies a systematic health bias and thus a great potential of discriminating persons, groups, or organizations who still “dare” to suggest that “our systems” do *not* “need a reset” only because they prioritize economic, political, or legal issues over those related to the health or restoration of individuals, institutions, or the planet as a whole. If taken seriously, a restorist agenda like the Great Reset would therefore abet a restratification of considerable parts of world society in at least two regards:

- It is beyond doubt that health, economy, politics, science, art, and other function systems are incommensurable. There is hence no eternal ranking according to which, e.g., science would always have priority over religion, or politics over the economy. Against this backdrop, claims for a default or long-term priority of health promotes an artificial ossification of an essentially dynamic process that defines the always context-specific “systemic relevance” of the function systems at stake. If at all possible in modern times, such an ossification would lead to a world society similar to those medieval realms where religion prevailed over and defined all aspects of social life.
- In such a “neo-medieval” world health society, it would be easy and obvious to measure not only specific functions, but virtually all roles, values, or behaviours against their contribution or threat to health. The emergence of classes, castes, or estates corresponding to different levels of health, purity, infection, or pollution would be a probable consequence.

The restorist Great Reset agenda, if actually implemented, would therefore amount to a reverse-engineering of a middle age society under health auspices.

Even if the question remains whether such a reset can be initiated and a system as complex as society be engineered at all, there is little doubt that the WEF and many of its partner

organisations are more than flirting with the idea that the world can be enhanced, and society be made, almost at discretion. In her WEF dialogue speech from 17 November 2020, EC President Ursula von der Leyen, too, echoes the WEF diagnosis that COVID-19 has exposed our fragilities on the individual, institutional, and global scale and joins in the call for an urgent need to “update” our systems and restore before she concludes that “the good news, however, is “that we have real agency here”. Apparently, all it needs is that the right actors play the right roles. The right decision-makers make the right decisions. The right levers are used at the right time. In the initial Great Reset launch session movie from 03 June 2020, the tipping point towards the envisioned new normality is represented by a finger pressing a reset key on a vintage computer console. The message is clear: It is all at our hands.

Such control illusions would be amusing were it not that they nurture what UN Secretary-General António Guterres refers to as those “wild conspiracy theories” mentioned in the introduction of this article. In fact, the idea that strong governments, big businesses, or an alliance of the willing under the thought leadership of a Swiss Foundation can determine the future state of the world is based on the same causalist fallacies and under-estimations of the complexity of social systems and natural environments as are wild theories about the role of Bill Gates or the Chinese government during the coronavirus crisis.

It is therefore better not to advance conspiracy theories by subscribing to the idea that the above transition to a somewhat medieval brave new world health society can be driven and controlled by this smaller elite or that larger social movement.

If this transition nonetheless were to take place in a future near or far, the underlying health trend would likely be much older than the current crisis and most likely not the only trend that defines and shapes our world society. The WEF “Great Reset” initiative therefore amounts to hardly more than a strategic attempt at over-emphasizing one social macro trend. If successful, this attempt would at best result in the replacement of one dominant pars-pro-toto definition of society (capitalism) by another (restorism). By implication, this means that alternative observers will find it easy to observe alternative trends and thus create alternative visions and futures of society.

Even if larger parts of society were to subscribe to the idea that certain organizations or networks have the capacity to talk, write, and code society into a stratified new age of health, then there would still be a wealth of systems theories of organic, mental, and social health that already carry the virus needed to infect health itself and thus cause the implosion of the restorist world view.

References:

- Amer, M., Daim, T. U., & Jetter, A. (2013). A review of scenario planning. *Futures*, 46, 23-40.
- Broom, D. (2020). Could this COVID-19 ‘health passport’ be the future of travel and events? Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/covid-19-passport-app-health-travel-covidpass-quarantine-event/>.
- Dave, P. (2020). This wearable tech is being used by care homes to stem outbreaks of COVID-19. Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/elderly-home-wearables-contact-tracing-apple-google>.
- Harari, Y. N. (2017). *Homo Deus: A brief history of tomorrow*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Harari, Y. N. (2020). How to Survive the 21st Century. Speech at the 2020 WEF Annual Meeting in Davos. Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/yuval-hararis-warning-davos-speech-future-predications/>.

- Heylighen, F. (2017). Towards an intelligent network for matching offer and demand: From the sharing economy to the global brain. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 114, 74-85.
- Holton, R. J. (2001). Talcott Parsons: Conservative apologist or irreplaceable icon. *Handbook of Social Theory*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 152-162.
- Humphrey, A. (2005), “SWOT analysis for management consulting”, *SRI alumni Newsletter*, pp. 7-8.
- Hutt, R. (2020). ‘Untact’: South Korea’s plan for a contact-free society. Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/south-korea-contactless-coronavirus-economy/>.
- Huxley, A. (1958). *The Brave New World Revisited*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Lenartowicz, M. (2017). Creatures of the semiosphere: A problematic third party in the ‘humans plus technology’ cognitive architecture of the future global superintelligence. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 114, 35-42.
- Ioannidis, J. P. (2020a). Coronavirus disease 2019: the harms of exaggerated information and non-evidence-based measures. *European journal of clinical investigation*, 50(4), e13222.
- Ioannidis, J. P. (2020b). Global perspective of COVID-19 epidemiology for a full-cycle pandemic. *European Journal of Clinical Investigation*, e13423.
- Luhmann, N. (1977). Differentiation of Society. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*, 2(1), 29-53.
- Luhmann, N. (2013a). *Introduction to systems theory*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Luhmann, N. (2013b). *Theory of Society, Volume 2*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Magsamen, B., and Shutko, G. (2020). These 5 COVID-fighting technologies show the power of global ingenuity. Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/5-technology-advancements-during-covid-19-wearables-ai/>.
- Morgan, J. (2019). Will we work in twenty-first century capitalism? A critique of the fourth industrial revolution literature. *Economy and Society*, 48(3), 371-398.
- Parsons, T. (1937). *The Structure of Social Action, Vol 1*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The Social System*. New York: Free Press.
- Roth, S., Clark, C., Trofimov, N., Mkrtichyan, A., Heidingsfelder, M., Appignanesi, L., ... & Kaivo-Oja, J. (2017). Futures of a distributed memory. A global brain wave measurement (1800–2000). *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 118, 307-323.
- Roth, S., Schwede, P., Valentinov, V., Žažar, K., & Kaivo-oja, J. (2019). Big data insights into social macro trends (1800–2000): A replication study. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 149, 119759.
- Roth, S. (2019). Digital transformation of social theory. A research update. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 146, 88-93.
- Sanvee, C. (2020). 3 ways young people can heal our divided world. Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/3-ways-young-people-can-heal-our-divided-world/>.
- Sault, S. (2020). This is what Bill Gates had to say about epidemics, back in 2015. Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/bill-gates-epidemic-pandemic-preparedness-ebola-covid-19/>.

- Schimank, U. (2015). Modernity as a functionally differentiated capitalist society: A general theoretical model. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 18(4), 413-430.
- Schwab, K., and Davis, N. (2018). *Shaping the Fourth Industrial Revolution*. Cologne: World Economic Forum.
- Schwab, K. (2020). Now is the time for a 'great reset'. Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/now-is-the-time-for-a-great-reset/>.
- Schwab, K. and Mallert, T. (2020). *COVID-19. The Great Reset*. World Economic Forum Publishing.
- Schiølin, K. (2020). Revolutionary dreams: Future essentialism and the sociotechnical imaginary of the fourth industrial revolution in Denmark. *Social Studies of Science*, 50(4), 542-566.
- Sharma, S., & Soederberg, S. (2020). Redesigning the business of development: the case of the World Economic Forum and global risk management. *Review of International Political Economy*, 27(4), 828-854.
- Spencer Brown, G. (1979). *Laws of form*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Spencer Brown, G. (2013). Interview excerpt, Horningsham, England, June 2013 (Interviewer: Markus Heidingsfelder). Available online at: <https://vimeo.com/181216140>.
- Trauth-Goik, A. (2020). Repudiating the Fourth Industrial Revolution Discourse: A New Episteme of Technological Progress. *World Futures*, 1-24.
- Veltmeyer, H. (2005). Development and globalization as imperialism. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 26(1), 89-106.
- Ward, S. (2003). Honesty and dissimulation in upper-class interaction in early modern France: Madame and the old German sincerity. *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 25(1), 247-258.
- Ward, S. (2005). Madame chats with coquettes: The evolution of early modern theories of conversation. *The Seventeenth Century*, 20(2), 281-293.
- Ward, S. (2006). Functional differentiation and the crisis in early modern upper-class conversation: the second Madame, interaction, and isolation. *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 28(1), 235-247.
- Ward, S. (2017). From Fontainebleau to Facebook: The early modern discourse of personal sincerity and its echoes in the contemporary discourse of organisational transparency. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 34(2), 139-147.
- Weihrich, H. (1982), "The TOWS matrix—a tool for situational analysis", *Long Range Planning*, 15(2), 54-66.