



## Post-Pandemic Culture Shock

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The coronavirus pandemic has created a new kind of culture shock. It has affected essential and highly personal elements of many people's lives within their own environments. A culture shock of this magnitude has not occurred since WWII. When the pandemic ends, societies will be quite different from what they were in the pre-coronavirus era.

In past decades, citizens of Western societies lived their lives and mapped out their futures more or less in line with the expectation of a slowly changing progression from past to future. Individuals might have experienced events that radically changed their lives for the worse—for instance, a serious illness. But such events mainly influenced personal environments. They had hardly any impact on society at large.

The term “culture shock” was coined in the 1950s to describe the experience of people who found themselves disoriented when they went abroad. Immigrants, for example, arrived in societies with unfamiliar cultures and often found adaptation difficult. The same could happen to students who went abroad to far-away universities. Even tourists who visited a country for a short time could experience shock at the country's radically different culture.

In certain circumstances, a form of culture shock can affect Westerners while they are in their home environment. This can happen if, for example, asylum seekers from completely different environments are placed in or close to their Western hometowns. Still, the local people's home environment remains largely the same.

The coronavirus pandemic has caused a very different type of culture shock. It affects essential elements of peoples' lives in their own home environment.

Often very personal issues are at stake. These include where one can go, whom one can meet, where one can work, and who can visit one's home, which can even include a prohibition against receiving close family members.

A culture shock of this magnitude, affecting a great many people all at once in a variety of countries, has not occurred in most Western societies since WWII. That conflict upended the lives of huge numbers of people, and for a far longer time and to a much greater degree than coronavirus.

There have been major culture shocks in past decades in smaller territories as well. The Greek Civil War, which occurred just after WWII, was one example. Others were the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and the imposition of communism on a number of countries in Middle and Eastern Europe after WWII, which had a huge impact on those societies. The subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union and the freeing of its satellite countries from communism created yet another culture shock.

The coronavirus culture shock will have a number of layers that will affect individuals, groups, and societies at large. There are sizable numbers of "new poor," for example. Many of these people never imagined that they were at such risk. Their reaction to this personal kind of culture shock will be heavily influenced by their self-image.

The culture shock for many of the newly unemployed will probably be significant. The problem is particularly difficult because these people live in societies where unemployment has greatly risen, making it much more difficult to find new work. If companies close factories down, the closures will affect not only the factories' employees but the many others who provide services to the factories and their employees.

People over 50 who find themselves unemployed will have great difficulty finding new work. Women might be particularly hard hit, as there are indications that more women have lost their jobs during the pandemic than men. This can partly be explained by the fact that more women than men tend to have jobs that involve contact with others.

Young people entering the work force will be confronted with far higher barriers to employment than they faced prior to the pandemic. Internships and apprenticeships will be much harder to secure. Young people, many of whom are not used to much hardship, will have to cope with more structural societal adversity than did previous generations.

All of this means that many people will have to accept less desirable jobs if they are to work at all. In such a context, those able to take initiative and be resilient will have great advantages over others.

Some people have suffered from the virus more severely than others. After-effects like the loss of the senses of smell or taste might last for people's entire lives. There are indications that mental health problems have multiplied, and professionals might find themselves unable to cope with the increased demand. There are also cases of what might be called long-term disorientation. There is some debate on whether suicides are increasing.

The societal response to those who are suffering may prove to be inadequate or even negligent. In post-pandemic society there will probably be less attention paid to individuals' specific problems. The welfare state will be further weakened. The phrase "social justice" is unlikely to disappear from public discourse, but operationally it will get far less attention.

A frequently raised topic is how children will be affected in the long run by the disturbance of their normal lives during the pandemic. If WWII is to be our reference, we might find that compared to adults, children are more resilient and suffer from fewer long-term negative effects from the disruption to their lives caused by coronavirus.

Not everyone is vulnerable by any means. Not much may change for government employees, for instance, compared to their pre-pandemic lives. Possibly their salaries will be frozen. But still, the societal environment these people will live in after the pandemic will differ from the one before it.

The scale of the problems facing individuals and societies after the pandemic ends is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to forecast. We can, however, identify broad phenomena that will play a role in defining how societies have changed. They may be important enough to represent culture shocks for society at large.

The first phenomenon concerns money. During the pandemic, governments broke generally accepted economic rules concerning budget deficiencies. Several governments injected money into their societies in an unsustainable manner. They will have to allocate budget funds after the pandemic in a much tougher way than before. The shortage of available money versus the accumulated demand of all those who will make claims to receive it is serious. This is likely to lead to far more ferocious battles over funds than in the past.

The second phenomenon concerns civil unrest. There have been many protests against the ways governments made decisions relating to the

pandemic. In many countries, there are demonstrations against government measures such as lockdowns and possible forced vaccination. When the pandemic ends, public discontent will likely mutate in other directions that are not yet foreseeable.

Another issue is how government attitudes will change as a result of the pandemic. The policies of those in power toward the crisis were largely trial and error. This has led to policies that differ substantially from country to country. What the states have in common is that their leaders were not elected to deal with this kind of exceptional situation.

After the pandemic, governments will have to interfere in society more than many of them can justify ideologically. What will this lead to? Will there be new mutations of socialist government due to the need to provide a financial safety net for many more people than before? Or will we see more attempts at authoritarianism? Concerning the latter, it is clear that segments of the public will not let governments get away with the attempt.

Another related issue is trust in the authorities. As governments did not find efficient ways to deal with the pandemic, will the public be able to trust them on other issues? How will this lack of trust express itself? What does this mean for democracy? Is liberal democracy able to deal with the post-pandemic challenges, many of which will likely require a firm hand?

And what about violence in post-coronavirus society? Considering all the new strains on societies, common sense would say that violence is likely to increase. But where and in what circumstances will it erupt, and how will it manifest itself?

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