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## Will the New Normal be the Old Normal?

Published on May 6, 2020 [Edit article](#) | [View stats](#)



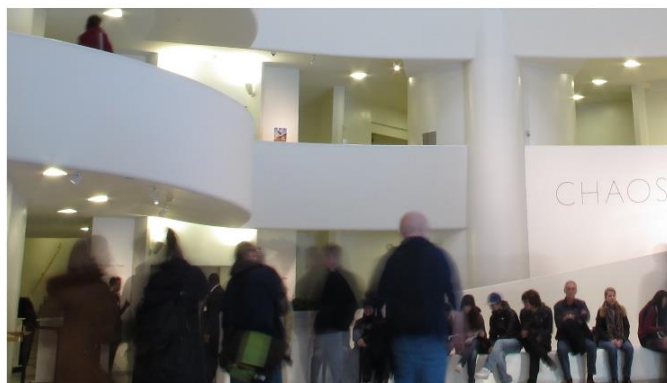
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5 articles

**Quite often currently one can hear talk about a new normal in which we are finding ourselves. I think such views are misguided for no matter how we define a new normal, surely it must describe a state we can accept as normality and surely it must differ from the old normal in some meaningful way. The real question therefore is how much will be new in the post Covid-19 normality.**

The rhetoric around the new normal is inaccurate on two counts in my view. First, we may temporarily accept the necessity for strong limitations to vital freedoms and rights but we ought not to call the abnormal a new normal. Second, most efforts are currently geared towards pragmatic adaptations to the old normal but not towards a new normal.

**We are in the abnormal not in a new normal**



*We may currently see a showing of the true strength of the welfare state*

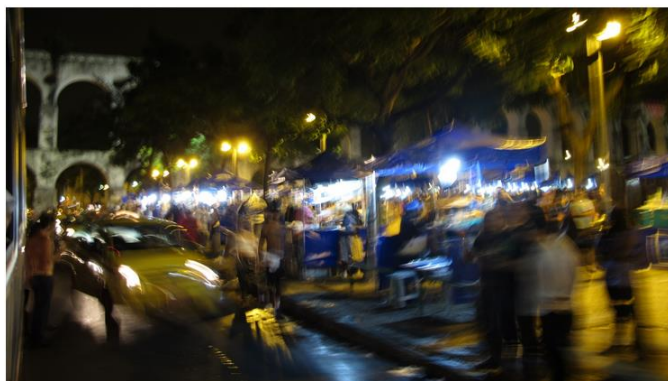
Self-imposed or not and regardless of its duration, I do not think we should call a state of substantive limitations to our freedoms, rights, mental well-being and livelihoods normal in any way. This may not be happening to the same extent everywhere, but by what I observe the vast majority of people and interests that are impacted by the measures aiming to slow down the spread of Covid-19 not only accept them as necessary, but also **embrace them as doing the right thing** and acting in solidarity. They see their personal interests deeply hurt and yet support the measures taken. More so in places where the welfare state is showing its true strength; without having to fear existential hardship, people are more willing and able to prioritize the common good over their direct personal interests. All around the world though, it is moving to see bankrupt restaurant owners and their former staff, work-less freelancers or flight attendants and many more people whose livelihoods are under threat, agreeing to the measures taken when reflecting on the consequences of alternative courses of action. Equally, even deep believers in the good nature of humanity may not have expected the high level of self-restraint people are voluntarily submitting themselves to, when following behavioral recommendations exceeding the coercive measures which are in place.

*The term normal implies that acceptable principles of order are in place*

We are seeing that the lockdowns are delivering on their mission to "flatten the curve" i.e. to slow down the spread of Covid-19 so that our health services are better able to cope with the demand. Even in those places where the health system has been tragically overwhelmed it would likely have been much worse without a lockdown.

Given that there was no real alternative our governments have done the right thing and in many places I would argue they have done it the right way too. But we have been **Propelled into Hyper-VUCA** and not into a new normal. Calling this a new normal and thereby implying that we should accept these strong limitations to our freedoms, our rights, our mental well-being and our livelihoods as something normal, as a new principle of order, cannot be right.

**We have been served an opportunity for meaningful social innovation**



*We can aim higher than reestablishing the status quo ante*

We are currently in the abnormal but not in a new normal while we hear day in and day out that the world will never be the same after this pandemic. But what can we expect to be different post Covid-19? Austria, China, Colombia, Denmark, Germany, India, Israel, Nigeria, Poland, Switzerland, the UK and many more countries are currently announcing, adjusting or implementing schedules for a slow and phased re-opening of social and economic life.

While the schedules all differ, what they share is the promise that things will get as close as possible to how they were before. The promise is therefore to restore the old normal, it is not a quest for a new normal. Now this of course need not be a bad thing, it is only too understandable in the current situation, that we long for what we know. We overwhelmingly agree that our world was a better place to live in three months ago than it is today, because it was. However, that does not mean our highest aim should be to simply restore the status quo ante. As tragic and unfortunate the circumstances may be, the pandemic is presenting us a rare opportunity for meaningful social innovation.

### Can we afford to restore the old normal?



*Many businesses have embarked on an ambitious sustainability agenda and they will stay committed to it post Covid-19*

Many business organizations around the globe have embarked on an ambitious sustainability agenda over the last years and I greatly admire those business leaders who are making bold moves towards enhancing their impact for a more sustainable and more equitable planet. Furthermore, and importantly, I don't think that the current crisis will turn back those efforts. They have fast become integral parts of the identity and culture of those businesses and many more will follow.

But no matter how admirable, needed and timely those efforts are, on a systemic level we simply are not yet doing well enough. According to the Footprint Network we are currently consuming the resources of around 1.6 planets on a global average while we consume the resources of about four planets in the rich parts of the world, we only have one. At the same time income disparities have been growing substantially over the last decades, putting at risk social peace and cohesion. We know that change towards a more sustainable and more equitable planet is not an option we have but an imperative we must act on. So can we really afford to restore the status quo ante, without innovating to help us to address the challenges we face as a global community?

If you have to rebuild it anyways you may as well do it right



*Covid-19 is exposing our systemic weaknesses  
it is not causing them*

For decades we have been biting the hand that feeds us, as social peace and cohesion on a healthy planet are the foundations for free and prospering societies. This is one of the core arguments we make in the [Humanistic Management Center and Network](#), so in many ways I think Covid-19 is merely exposing our systemic weaknesses rather than causing them.

Strongly nationalist-populist policy makers have diminished our capacity to build international consensus on urgent matters, not Covid-19. Organizations in which power and status is valued more than our humanity and well-being are making us long for more humane workplaces, not Covid-19. The lack of a safety net for honest, hardworking people is causing mile long lines at food banks, not Covid-19. Turning market economies into market societies has weakened many healthcare systems around the world, not Covid-19. The reemergence of blue skies in places that were smog covered for years on end show us how strongly our lifestyles and industries impact the planet, not Covid-19.

*Are we missing an opportunity if we don't  
rebuild institutions and organizations to be  
more resilient?*

So would we be missing an opportunity if we don't rebuild institutions and organizations to be more resilient and more sustainable when we emerge from this crisis? Would we rebuild something we already know is broken? I think in parts we would and I don't see why we should not aim higher.

We could aim to strengthen our capacity to co-create solutions for the challenges we face, rather than grounding policy making in populist rhetoric. We could aim to build organizations based on humanistic principles rather than returning to offices where status and power trumps over our humanity. We could aim to invest in our societal well-being rather than standing by as employment markets are picking up again without a safety net. We could aim to implement equitable tax systems rather than serving our debt through cutting healthcare expenditure. And we could aim to learn to live within our planetary means rather than powering up again industrial activity with little respect for the planet.

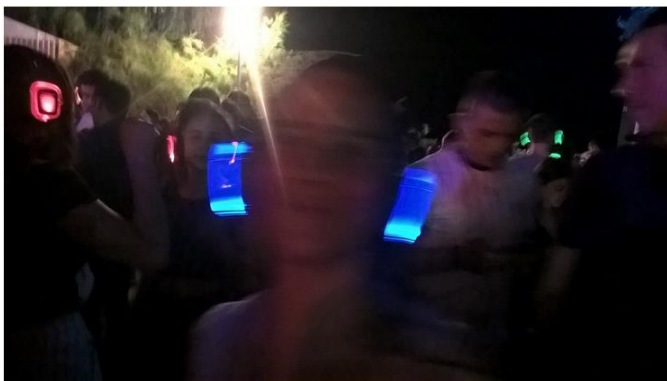




*It does not make economic sense to rebuild the status quo ante without including improvements*

We know that growing inequity is harmful for our societal well being, eroding the foundation of all of our prosperity and we know that we have to reduce the environmental footprint of our economic activities. In consequence it does not make economic sense to invest only in reestablishing the status quo ante in full knowledge that we thereby create the need for substantial corrective investments later on when we can do at least some of it in one go.

I think the tax paying public have a right to see businesses that chose to relocate their headquarters to some far away off shore tax haven under scrutiny over benefiting from bailout programs. The available funds should primarily support the many responsible, progressive businesses in our communities that are happy to see their tax money invested to help create conditions that allow them to prosper. I think it makes sense to tie public credits for saving or rebuilding energy intensive industries to measures that will also reduce their environmental footprint. And we should see to it that subsidies favor businesses offering dignified livelihoods over those offering precarious working conditions. These are but a few examples that we actually could aim for a new normal that would be meaningful for people, planet and profit.



*A new normal should be something more meaningful than pragmatic adaptations to the old normal*

We will get used to wearing face masks on public transport for a while, working from home will become more acceptable and we will substitute some personal meetings with a video call. Businesses will in-source activities and some will be more vertically integrated to obtain less fragile supply networks. We will probably see things like body scanners at airports equipped with heat sensors to measure our body temperature before boarding a plane. And, just as we got used to not taking bigger liquid containers or sharp objects in our hand luggage when flying after 9/11, we will also get used to such new precautions. But is that really it? Is that so different from the old normal in a meaningful way?

The real question is in my view is if we will establish a meaningful new normal post Covid-19? If we want this new normal to be more than some pragmatic adaptations to the old normal, we will have to stand up for it and promote a strong narrative for social innovation.

For now, we have pressed the pause button waiting to continue with the same song once our lives are no longer at risk. But perhaps it would be a good time to also press the stop button and use the opportunity to reflect, before we press play again to a new song.

*Ernst von Kimakowitz is passionate about strengthening the positive impact of business towards a more equitable and more sustainable planet. He is founding director of the [Humanistic Management Center](#) and co-founder of the [Humanistic Management Network](#). He holds a research position at the [University of Lucerne](#) and leads the executive training provider [Ethics First](#). Ernst is also a lecturer at the [University of St. Gallen](#) and held visiting faculty positions in Colombia, Germany, India, and Japan*



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