

# Shifting Theory in the Midst of a Pandemic

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*The global COVID-19 pandemic threatens much of the theory of human proxemics, and raises fundamental questions about human evolution and contemporary life. If we evolved in close contact with each other for thousands of years, does “social distance” contradict this fact? In today’s world, what should be local and what should be global? How much human suffering and death should be tolerated to “save the economy”? These and other questions are examined in this essay.*

I have just finished watching the PBS News Hour, where Judy Woodruff recites the day’s events in the midst of this global COVID-19 pandemic. She is a consummate professional, clear in her delivery, but the news she relates is catastrophic. We have never been here before...the previous SARS and MERS viruses were little league players compared to the World Series of COVID-19. The news is shocking, utterly demoralizing, and frightening. People all

over the world who might rarely think about death, suddenly are.

I have been thinking a great deal about Native Americans in the 1830’s, when smallpox was introduced to the north American continent, wiping out entire villages and wreaking deathly havoc on the populations of our continent’s first people. How did they interpret this great dying happening all around them,

as entire villages succumbed to the new disease from which they had no natural resistance? Did they interpret this death trap as the wrath of gods, a creator, evil spirits, or their enemies? Did they realize the depth of connection between the white invaders and their own demise? We post-native immigrants to their continent would do well to remember their suffering as we, ourselves, are threatened with similar devastation.

And then there are the historic European and Western plagues. Did the Black Death of the mid-14th century, the notorious bubonic plague, result in any scientific insight into cause and effect? One third of Europe’s population, an estimated 20 million people, died as a result. Then, in 1918, the Spanish Flu hit. This misnamed global H1N1 virus infected nearly a third of the world’s contemporary population, 500 million, and killed 50 million. What did we learn from this, the most severe pandemic the world had ever seen, coming on the heels of World War One, arguably the most pointless global conflict in history?

By then, the science of disease had established a foothold, and further scientific and medical advancement gave rise to the evolution of modern epidemiology and virology.

Now we are faced with an equally threatening virus, the novel coronavirus (labeled as COVID-19). Owing to intensive inter-continental travel followed by community transmission, the new coronavirus has infected nearly all regions on Earth. Simultaneous lockdowns restricting the movement of billions of people have become the new normal reality, with schools closed, whole sports leagues and most audience events cancelled, billions out of work, and a 2% death rate among infected people. No one alive today has lived through the last “worst” pandemic in the world, so we are all charting new territory here.

Which brings us to a whole host of critical questions: What will we learn from this? Will the hard-earned health care preparedness lesson last, or will we lapse back into the superficial consideration and denial that preceded COVID-19? Will the



## Sign in a Wyoming store window.

Fig. 1

Photo by David Robertson

economic catastrophe unfolding before us now result in a realignment of wealth downward into the broader reaches of the income pyramid, or, as after the great recession of 2008, we will quickly resume rapidly increasing inequality? Will the die-hard libertarians and right wing politicos finally see the advantages of “big government”, or not?

As a regionalist, I sense one question rising to the top of my intellectual curiosity: will there be lasting change to our spatial relationship to each other and to our lived environments? Will social distancing ... in some more benign form, perhaps ... become ingrained in our group behavior?

Just prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, much was written about the growing philosophical and political divide between urban and rural constituencies; I did some of that writing. It seems that rural Americans have been practicing mild forms of social distancing already, preferring to stay in spatial realms that are far less dense than the packed metropolises of the current world. It is those dense city regions where the virus is taking its worst toll, and generating the greatest social fears. For rural folk, social distancing as a response to pandemics is not likely to be as jarring or challenging than it is to apartment dwellers in New York City's lower east side. Just

when urban and environmental theorists had begun to convince us that dense, walkable cities, accessible open spaces and public transit were beneficial ways to curb carbon output and help resolve global warming, along comes a fierce viral attack that has us staying far away from each other. Dense cities are now hot spots of infection, and those traveling out of those urban regions are suspected of increasing viral diffusion.

Then there is the concept of supply chains: How long *should* they be? Across the Pacific Ocean or around the world? Or more local? Which would be more resilient? Must the United States wait until some other countries that still have viable medical equipment industries send us the testing apparatus or ventilation machines we need right now? Implicit in this question is the larger one it represents: Just *how* beneficial is a spatially-integrated and globally-scaled manufacturing base after all? It will be ironic if, sometime after this writing, COVID-19 is greatly thwarted in the U.S. by emergency manufacturing of medical equipment and test kits by companies right here on American soil. If that is true, will any national economic policies follow? (The U.S. does not have an official industrial policy, unlike some other developed countries).

An Elephant in the Room of theoretical questions is this: humans evolved by engaging in close social contact. Without earlier human bands, then villages, and then cities, we would not be here. Near perpetual proximity to other humans allowed us to beat the odds and wind up as evolutionarily successful as we are now. Isn't “social distancing”, therefore, some kind of violation of our own evolutionary momentum? I am sure that millions of human beings worldwide are wondering about this question as I write. It is as if, tribally, we are moving from resembling the early native American Pueblo people, who once built and now still live in close quarters, toward being like the Navajo, who live farther apart as is typical of their pastoral culture and lifeways. Will cities themselves lose their luster as images of maxed out emergency rooms and crowded makeshift morgues are burned into our memories? Could there be a renaissance of low-density suburban life? Will rural living rise in popularity?

And what about the other environmental crises, some of which were and still are considered critical prior to the explosion of COVID-19. Not too long ago, Greta Thunberg was imploring us not to fly on airplanes. Now, ironically, hardly anyone is. Who could have predicted that a disease pandemic would reduce carbon emissions from air travel so drastically? Will this newer reality stick at all, or, like the post 9-11 era, soon reverse itself with even more jet travel than before?

Those of us who espouse regenerative and renewable resource solutions and human behaviors wonder if it would somehow be possible to emerge from the current pandemic by taking a different tack regarding transportation and carbon emissions. If we can mobilize globally to beat this pandemic, why not do so again to solve other critical global problems? Could the pandemic be a wakeup call for the power of critical and globally connected *action*? I have my doubts, and might be more prone to recognizing that COVID-19 may sort us out into more finite chunks of space than the entire globe. As the author of a book on bioregionalism, I must now confess that it just hasn't turned out as I imagined. But, in terms of speculations on the shape of the future, it hardly ever does.

But the central geographic questions remain. Foremost among them is this: *What should be **global**, and what should be **local**?* After COVID-19, the spatial location and relative movement of money, people, goods, energy, labor, medical equipment, diseases, carbon dioxide molecules...even ideas themselves... are up for grabs.

On an even more serious note (if that is possible), one person's comment to a recent pandemic news article struck me: perhaps humans have it wrong. *We* are the virus, and COVID-19 is the antibody army trying to control us. This misanthropic twist on the Gaia Hypothesis theory is repulsive to me, but plausible enough that it should make us all think. The evolutionary path of humanity has yet to finish, and who knows how, or if, it ends.

And, lastly, what of the recently cited plea by a Republican Senator that the loss of elderly lives to the virus is a small price to pay for not tanking the global economy. I am 72 years old. I would be willing to die if it meant saving my wife, sons, daughter, or granddaughters. But I'll be damned if I leave this earth just to bail out Boeing, prop up the Dow Jones Industrial Average, or further line the pockets of Jeff Bezos, the wealthiest man in the world.

Indeed, in the midst of the worst pandemic in recent history, the theoretical ground is shifting underneath us.

## This Place on Earth

Fig. 2

©2020, Robert Thayer, 24", Aluminum and paint.  
 Blue: Earth/water/air;  
 Brown: Continent/land/soil;  
 Green: Bioregion/plants;  
 Yellow: Community/animals/people;  
 Red: Home/hearth/heart

