Chapter 15: Social Change in a Post-COVID World

Since the first cases of COVID-19 in China appeared in the media, people have been making predictions about the pandemic. Scientists initially predicted that the virus would be far more deadly than it turned out to be. This was spurred by the terrifying death rates in Italy (13%), South Korea (2%), and the US (4.3%) before testing improved and people began to recover (the actual mortality rate is likely between 0.5% and 1%). When the pandemic was declared in Canada, many of us predicted that supply chains would be interrupted. We rushed out to buy toilet paper, flour, and canned goods, inadvertently causing the very shortages we believed would occur (although one toilet-paper manufacturer notes usage increased 40% during stay-at-home orders, so perhaps we were on to something). On February 27, 2020, US president Donald Trump predicted the pandemic was "going to disappear. One day it's like a miracle – it will disappear." As of July, it has not "disappeared." If predicting the future is a "fool's game" at the best of times, as I argue in this chapter, then predicting the future during a global pandemic that is in the process of radically and fundamentally altering our behaviours, social institutions, and world—well, that's just asking to be wrong.

Of course, this hasn't stopped anyone. In an article for the *Financial Times*, the novelist Arundhati Roy wrote, "[Historically] pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next." While the pandemic may spark many of us to imagine all the interesting ways COVID-19 might affect the future, it is important to keep a critical, perhaps even cynical, approach to some of these predictions. Naomi Klein invented the term "disaster capitalism" to describe how powerful interests use crises to impose their agenda (for example, liberal economic policies,

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privatization, the removal of environmental protections) when people are less likely to notice or be able to react to oppose them. While people who make predictions may not be up to such nefarious ends, they may be trying to control the scope of an issue and limit the discourse. For example, car companies might predict that during and after the pandemic, people will rely more on automobiles to maintain social distancing (and avoid crowded public transport). This prediction might appear to be borne out by increased interest in drive-in movie theatres and art galleries. But it could also create the very kind of change it predicts, as businesses try to move into this space to meet perceived demand. In contrast, bike advocates might predict that the pandemic will result in increased bike infrastructure and a decreased

reliance on automobiles. Reading that, people might choose to buy bikes, thus contributing to the critical mass necessary to move governments on creating more bike infrastructure. Making predictions can be a fool's game, but it can also be a powerful political tactic.

As you read the chapter, consider the following questions:

- A [survey](#) by the Angus Reid Institute found that the pandemic appears to have improved support for a four-day work week among Canadians. Now, 53% believe it is a good idea. How would this social change be interpreted from a modernist perspective, a conservative perspective, and a postmodernist perspective?
- The pandemic appears to have increased our reliance on technology in our work and social lives. As we discuss in the chapter, the Luddites demonstrated that technology is never socially "neutral." What might be some of the positive and negative effects of this increased engagement with technology? Do you think there might be a movement against these changes, such as the one formed by the Luddites? Why or why not?
- Now that you have read this textbook, what might be a pandemic-related sociological study you would like to undertake? Describe your topic and type of study. Would you take an insider or outsider approach? What type of data would you collect—quantitative, qualitative, or mixed? What would be your methodology? (See chapter 2 to refresh your memory, if needed.)

Additional online resources

Have you noticed if the pandemic has introduced new words or phrases into your speech?

- Burridge, K., & Manns, H. (2020, May 10). *['Iso', 'boomer remover' and 'quarantini': how coronavirus is changing our language](#)*. The Conversation.

Here are some theories about how the pandemic will reshape our public and private spaces.

- Chayka, C. (2020, June 17). *[How the coronavirus will reshape architecture](#)*. The New Yorker.

Read Arundhati Roy's full article.

- Roy, A. (2020, April 3). *[Arundhati Roy: 'The pandemic is a portal.'](#)* Financial Times.

In this interview, Naomi Klein explains disaster capitalism and how she observes it playing out during the pandemic.

- Solis, M. (2020, March 13). *[Coronavirus is the perfect disaster for 'disaster capitalism.'](#)* Vice.