



## Book Review

***COVID-19: The Great Reset* by Klaus Schwab & Thierry Malleret, World Economic Forum / Forum Publishing, Geneva, 2020, 280 pp, ISBN 978-2-940631-12-4, price £7.99**

Reviewed by **Andrea Halewood**

Published in June 2020, *The Great Reset* claims to be a guide to understanding the disruption and suffering caused by the Covid pandemic, as well as to the changes the authors believe necessary to ensure ‘a more inclusive, resilient and sustainable world going forward’. The authors – Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum (‘the global platform for public–private cooperation’) and Thierry Malleret, former head of the Global Risk Network at the WEF – aim to explain ‘what is coming in a multitude of domains’. *The Great Reset* draws on Schwab’s manifesto for a global technological transformation outlined in *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*; a revolution which he believes will lead to ‘a fusion of our physical, digital and biological identity’, as well as enabling new forms of surveillance. Both initiatives are due to be launched at the Davos summit in 2021.

The authors argue that a better global economy for all is possible, and insist that companies need to uphold their duty to society, show zero tolerance towards corruption and support human rights throughout their global supply chains. In addition, ‘stakeholder capitalism’ will require the private sector to consider issues such as the gender pay-gap, equal opportunities and environmental issues, as well as how much they

pay in tax. While the authors note that Covid-19 is ‘one of the least deadly pandemics the world has experienced over the last 2000 years’, and that ‘it does not constitute an existential threat’, a complete restructuring of every aspect of our lives is thought to be essential and inevitable; all world leaders and countries must therefore ‘reset’ towards a united global economy: ‘...people feel the time for reinvention has come’ (p. 11).

The book is divided into three broad sections. The first assesses the impact of the pandemic on five macro categories: economic, societal, geopolitical, environmental and technological; the second considers the impact on business; and the third considers the consequences of the pandemic on the individual. Rather than consider each section in turn I will focus on key themes.

In the section on ‘Economic reset’ the authors argue that the social anxiety and uncertainty engendered by the pandemic will have a negative impact on economic behaviour. They insist that economic recovery will be impossible until the virus has passed and confidence returns, and that rigorous lockdowns are therefore essential to contain the pandemic, regardless of the catastrophic impact on the economy and the rise in unemployment, which will also be increased

by ‘labour substitution’ – i.e. the replacement of workers with robots and ‘intelligent’ machines. ‘Societal reset’ will therefore be necessary as disparities in income, wealth and opportunity will cause social unrest, leading to the return of ‘big government’: governments which may decide that ‘it’s in the best interests of society to rewrite some of the rules of the game and permanently increase their role’ (p. 93).

However, national responses to these crises are clearly not what the authors have in mind. They insist that the world is now so interdependent (due to globalisation and technological progress) that all risks must be faced collectively. In addition, due to the ‘velocity’ created by the Internet and the Internet of Things (IoT) we are now subjected to the ‘dictatorship of urgency’. Therefore some form of effective global governance is needed: ‘Put bluntly we live in a world in which nobody is really in charge’ (p. 114).

The authors believe that global governance is also necessary to cope with climate change and ecosystem collapse. With not a hint of irony, these committed technocrats assert that ‘it will be incumbent on us all to rethink our relationship with nature and question why we have become so alienated from it’ (p. 139).

The authors further consider how measures adopted during the pandemic can now be utilised to accelerate technological changes: for example, the introduction of contact tracing will make mass surveillance possible, while so-called ‘social-distancing’ requirements have created ‘a remote everything’. They predict that the technological adaptations made during the crisis will become ‘more natural’ (p. 154) as individuals become habituated to them: ‘as social distancing persists... it will, little by little, gain ground on formerly ingrained habits’. For example, we may choose to do a cycling class online ‘safer (and cheaper!)’ or an academic course (‘not as fulfilling but cheaper and more convenient!’). And rather than driving to a family gathering for the weekend, a *What’s App* family group could be used instead – ‘not as much fun, but safer, cheaper and greener!’ (p. 155).

Ominously they assert that these new regulations will stay in place, that social-distancing measures will persist after the pandemic subsides, justifying the decision in many companies to accelerate automation: ‘After a while, the enduring concerns about technological unemployment will recede as societies emphasize the need to restructure the workplace *in a way that minimises social contact*’; ‘Automation technologies are particularly well suited to a world *in which human beings can’t get too close to each other or are willing to reduce their interactions*’; and ‘Our lingering *and possibly lasting fear* of being infected with a virus will thus speed the relentless march of automation’ (p. 156, my italics).

Business leaders are warned that going back to the old normal ‘won’t happen because it can’t happen. For the most part “business as usual” died from (or at the very least was infected by) COVID-19.’ Leaders must therefore find ways to prosper ‘in the new normal’; to manage issues such as remote working, virtual interactions and ‘the acceleration of digitization’, all thought to be ‘transformative’. Businesses who fail to make this transition are thought unlikely to thrive, or even survive. The ‘new normal’ will involve contactless operations, digital content, robots, drone deliveries, telemedicine, at-home diagnostics, online education, online banking, online shopping. Unsurprisingly, ‘beneficiaries’ from the crisis have been companies such as Alibaba, Amazon, Netflix and Zoom.

In this technological dystopia, the remote and the contactless are celebrated; social interaction with others is constructed as socially irresponsible, unhygienic, a health risk. The authors predict with worrying certainty that the travel, hospitality and entertainment industries may never recover.

They conclude that we face two options – only one of which appears plausible:

We are at a crossroads, one path will take us to a better world: more inclusive, more equitable and more respectful of Mother Nature. The other will take us to a world that resembles the one we just left behind – but worse and

constantly dogged by nasty surprises. *We must therefore get it right.* (p. 250, my italics)

Essentially, *The Great Reset* is a whitewash – attempting to convince the reader that the global elite intends to abandon materialism in favour of wealth redistribution and a focus on the environment – on sustainable development. We are encouraged to believe that an unelected group of billionaires can be trusted to resolve these issues, that it is necessary to bypass representative democracy in order to do so, and that the only remedy for the crises the world is facing is global governance, state surveillance and a technological revolution.

It is difficult not to feel cynical about the philanthropy of those who have been, and continue to be, enriched by globalisation, and who have profited further from the pandemic. Given that public anger with inequality has led to a number of political shocks such as the votes for Trump and Brexit, this sudden altruism might be better explained by what Furedi (2002) refers to as ‘democracy panic’; the authors note that should they fail to address inequality with some urgency a reset may be imposed ‘by violent shocks... and *even revolutions*’ (p. 244, my emphasis).

Furthermore, Schwab’s ‘crisis opportunism’ – his callous attempt to utilise the human tragedy of the global pandemic and its aftermath, as well as climate change, to push through his technocratic manifesto – suggests that the Great Reset is yet another example of a ‘shock doctrine’, a term coined by Naomi Klein to describe the process by which the powerful utilise crises to promote policies that benefit them, and enable them to further restrict civil liberties.

*The Great Reset* manages to be both mind numbingly tedious and alarming at the same time; to read it (immersion is neither possible nor advisable) is to enter into a bleak, schizoid and joyless world; left-hemispheric thinking in its purest form. The book is described by the authors as ‘a hybrid between a light academic book and an essay...’ (p. 20). Academic it certainly isn’t, although I concur with ‘light’:

this is a superficial, disingenuous and manipulative text, heavily reliant on propaganda to sell a totalitarian agenda, which only serves to increase the sense that the authors are unreliable narrators whose worldview seems far removed from consensual reality.

Furthermore, while critics of ‘techno-totalitarian state surveillance’ are cited – like Shoshana Zuboff, Yuval Noah Harari and Evgeny Morozof – the authors make no attempt to engage with their critiques or even to refute them; it is as if they cannot conceptualise a worldview so different to their own, so critical views are dismissed: ‘Dystopian scenarios are not a fatality’ (p. 171), they retort. In their ‘new normal’, permanent state surveillance is entirely justified on the grounds of public health and well-being.

With its crisis opportunism (‘we should take advantage of this unprecedented opportunity’ – p. 19), its focus on efficiency, its disregard for the relational, for social connections (and the psychological and health benefits of the latter), the book is a disturbing portent of what the trans-human might look like in practice. I was left wondering what mind or minds could have produced this.

In *The Master and His Emissary* (2009) psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist considers the hemispheric differences of the brain, and the essential functions of both. While the right hemisphere is more involved with social functioning and bonding, with empathy and understanding, the left hemisphere’s attention is on parts of the whole, on the impersonal, on abstractions:

Not only does the right hemisphere have an affinity with whatever is living, but the left hemisphere has an equal affinity for what is mechanical. The left hemisphere’s principal concern is utility. It is interested in what it has made, and in the world as a resource to be used. (p. 55)

McGilchrist imagines what the world would look like if the left hemisphere of the brain dominated the right, suggesting that ‘technology would

flourish, as an expression of the left hemisphere's desire to manipulate and control the world. ...' (p. 429). Furthermore, he hypothesises that 'social cohesion, and the bonds between person and person, and just as importantly between person and place... would be neglected, perhaps actively disrupted, as both inconvenient and incomprehensible to the left hemisphere acting on its own' (p. 431).

Should the left hemisphere become more dominant, McGilchrist foresees a world of total panoptical control, for 'according to the left hemisphere's take on reality, individuals are simply interchangeable ("equal") parts of a mechanistic system' (p. 431). He points out the dangers of being seduced by left-hemisphere propaganda, which suggests that its functions are 'more highly evolved' than those of the right, and emphasises that 'a return to the right hemisphere is of ultimate importance' (p. 437).

Lyotard (cited in Sim, 2001) reflects on the dangers of what he refers to as 'techno-science' (i.e. technology plus science plus advanced capitalism), and exhorts the reader to 'bear witness' to this process (and campaign against it) before techno-science imposes its programme by stealth. And he raises an important question, one that feels particularly urgent today: 'what else remains as "politics" except resistance to the inhuman?'

## References

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