

## The Entropic Event: Introduction to the Pandemic Issue

*Greg Urban and Nancy Ameen*

“You may see a cup of tea fall off a table and break into pieces on the floor. But you will never see the cup gather itself back together and jump back on the table. The increase of disorder, or entropy, is what distinguishes the past from the future, giving a direction to time,” Physicist Stephen Hawking speaking in the 1991 documentary film: “A Brief History of Time.”

A disruptive, potentially catastrophic event unfolds over time. How do human beings with their culture respond? Do they persist in habituated ways, like those depicted in the movie *Don't Look Up*, carrying on with their customs as second nature as their world breaks into pieces, like Hawking's teacup? Can they have efficacy in changing and adapting during the time course of the unfolding? Are the effects of such entropic events always negative, or can something positive emerge during the unfolding? What does the response tell us about the cultural and social worlds in which it unfolds? These are questions that motivated our solicitation of essays by business anthropologists.

We had in the backs of our minds the counterpoint as formulated by Vaclav Havel, the dissident, playwright, and former Czech leader: “Just as the constant increase of entropy is the basic law of the universe, so it is

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Page 1 of 7

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610

the basic law of life ... to struggle against entropy.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the human imagination can contemplate a reversal of Hawking’s teacup, visualizing it reassembling and jumping back on the table. Witness the use of reverse motion in film, perhaps the earliest example being Louis Lumière’s 1896 use in *Démolition d’un Mur* (“Demolition of a Wall”),<sup>2</sup> in which the catastrophic event unfolding in time is first shown in forward motion as the wall comes down and breaks apart, and then backwards as it reassembles and rises up. The technique has been widely used in cinema, especially in magical or science fiction contexts.

We envisioned for this issue a collection of short pieces by business anthropologists that would record their experiences during the pandemic, including the impact of the pandemic as an entropic force that has disrupted routines in businesses and for business anthropologists. Just as one can get caught in the middle of an unforeseen storm and have no way of knowing when or how it will end, so it has been with the pandemic! Indeed, we conceptualized this as a *post*-pandemic issue; yet we find ourselves still *in* the pandemic, awaiting the “*post*.” Such is the mystery of entropic force as it unfolds over time.

The disruptions brought about by the pandemic, challenging and frightening as they are, simultaneously afford opportunities for growth and knowledge. As some of the following articles suggest, getting caught up in unforeseen events can result in positive change, though that change is not at first apparent. What insights about space and time can entropic events offer us? Do remote electronic interactions necessitated by lockdown have only negative consequences? Or do they open up opportunities for creativity? What about the effects on social time and creativity? Has the pandemic exposed societal fault lines, the injustice of economic and class inequalities, the embodied presuppositions of global capitalism? If so, can exposure produce positive as well as negative responses?

As Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, resulting in catastrophic human and economic tolls, so too has the pandemic come rolling into our cities, towns, and country sides. Struggling against entropy, as Havel suggests we must, requires adaptation. How adaptive have we been? The worldwide response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked coordinated global responses. Out of the disruption and tragedy, the global community has responded in unanticipated ways, forcing us to change and adapt. How well have we done against the pandemic? In the face of uncertainty and disruption, what role can business anthropology and anthropologists play? Business anthropologists are uniquely positioned to offer insights into coping and making sense of the myriad

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<sup>1</sup> Havel, Vaclav 1992. *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*, p. 71. New York: Vintage Books.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yh26rA8ZMnc>.

disruptions. Given the entropic forces unleashed on the global political and economic scene, business anthropologists have had to adapt as individuals as well as professionals, just as have the businesses that employ them or open themselves to ethnographic study by them.

Many of the articles explore the effects of transitioning from in person to virtual spaces, with both negative and positive results. After experiencing the dissatisfaction of virtual conferences, Matt Artz decided to create a space for meaningful interaction by and with business anthropologists. He started two podcasts. This virtual space opened up a business opportunity for him to share insights and career advice from practitioners in an informal communal setting. Listeners' comments include statements such as "Listening to your podcast is already helping me to better articulate my own professional value as an anthropologist working in a business context."

Erica Jaffe Redner explores how working in virtual spaces in some ways creates a more positive work environment for white collar employees from blue collar backgrounds. Social hierarchy and status distinctions are arguably less apparent online. Interestingly, though, while her interlocutors discuss some of the benefits of online working, she notes that "a virtual work arrangement would do nothing to address the underlying classism that lies at the heart of this problem." Other means of addressing the belongingness challenges faced would be necessary.

Daniela Peluso describes her experience of creating a start-up while working in a virtual environment, which lead her to reflect upon the "new possibilities for connection and for conducting research within and across borders." Unable to fly to the research site as she would typically do, she instead pivoted and positioned herself as a "coordinator rather than as an on-the-ground fieldworker" by hiring local anthropologists. Reflecting upon her experience she notes that "the pandemic provides an opportunity to gather and learn more about hardships and otherwise veiled accounts about such hardships because it sadly accentuated the economic challenges of workers' lives."

Researching online gamers and their communication methods led Sally Darling and Jessica Keller to change their "perspectives on remote workplace culture and the technology available to socialize and collaborate" in their own work and personal lives. Their research allowed them to use their study to reflect upon how people go about creating safe spaces and boundaries in a virtual environment. Darling notes that the kind of concrete-boundary setting their participant subjects were doing with online gaming was directly relevant to what she found herself doing with her son. She writes, "I find myself doing it, too, in a very tangible and recognizable way to protect my son's social and emotional health."

Moving from the more concrete to the more theoretical, Timothy

Malefyt raises the possibility of longer-term cultural change arising in our sense of space as we transitioned from in-place to online work within educational and social environments. What is gained and what is lost as we find ourselves more and more in virtual spaces? A lesson from the pandemic, Malefyt argues, is “that places can be non-stable locations, situated apart from non-traditional ideas of dwelling and stationary sites.” For Malefyt, the changing sense of space brought about by the pandemic challenges our idea of space as physical; it “reassures us that our sense of place can be created, irrespective of where place is actually located.”

Eitan Wilf looks at space/place from yet another angle. He asks: are in-person workplaces critical to creativity and productivity? Is the free flow of information, ideas, and the resultant innovation only possible in in-person office settings? Wilf’s answers problematize business executives’ beliefs about physical contiguity in workspaces. He argues that practicing anthropologists must “take their analytical concepts and see how and to what extent they can be repurposed in order to clarify the nature of remote work. This move will require practicing anthropologists first to demystify the importance of physical co-presence for employees’ creativity, and second to demystify the importance of their own physical presence in the office or on the factory floor for executives who would like to understand how employees work and how they can be managed in the most effective and productive way.”

If a key theme raised by business anthropologists in this issue is effects of entropy on socio-physical space, along with the responses to it, another is the role of entropic phenomena in relation to social time. Grant McCracken, among the most in-the-public-eye of business anthropologists, states, perhaps ironically, that he does not think of himself as a business anthropologist. Rather, he uses “business consulting to finance [his] anthropology,” with a half year of consulting supporting a half year of writing. This is how his time was organized prior to the pandemic. What happened once SAR-CoV-2 exploded in the world? For McCracken, it proved an opportunity. He reorganized his time, producing not one but two new books. How is that for a creative response to broader entropic catastrophe?

Such was not the case from the perspective of Drs. Ioana Pasca and Ashish Sinha. As they observe: “Over the first part of the pandemic, twenty percent of acute care medical professionals left the field, most of whom viewed themselves high risk for COVID-19 morbidity and mortality.” The organization of time was anything but normal: doctors endeavored to quarantine from their loved ones for fear of exposing them; they worked unbearably long hours in states of exhaustion; and they engaged in tasks outside their routines. As the authors recount: “our emotional energy was drying with our tears, under the excuses of burnout and PTSD our relationships and social support networks disintegrated,

humanism became lost, and our *Zoom* videos replaced human touch. More than ever, we desired to protect and heal our patients, but even with a tremendous effort to improve technology and the COVID-19 armamentarium, physicians struggled with the tangled rollercoaster rides of multiple COVID-19 surges.” Like Louis Lumière’s reversing the film of a falling wall, watching it rise back up again, Drs. Pasca and Sinha end on a hopeful note, that the pre-COVID world can be “reinstalled,” with a renewed sense of “community and purpose.”

In many ways similarly to McCracken, Michael Powell found “that the pandemic has been a moment of opportunity for professional anthropologists in the business world.” While exploring the possibilities opened to him by going remote, he simultaneously discovered alternative long-term career trajectories. He glimpsed how his future might be narrated differently, developing this insight through the use of what literary critic Gary Saul Morson dubbed “sideshadowing.” Unlike foreshadowing, in which the future casts its shadow over the present as if directing time along a single luminous pathway, sideshadowing involves alternative pathways to the future casting their differing shadows across the present, thus opening it up to multiple possibilities. For Powell, the temporally-extended entropic event refracted a linear time course into a multilinear, sideshadowed one.

If the pandemic prismatically expanded temporality for Powell, Tijo Salverda experienced it as closing it off. He focuses on travel restrictions, which curtailed his ability to do on-the-ground ethnography. For Salverda, the anthropologist is his or her “own methodological tool.” That tool cannot be adequately deployed at a distance. The sense of “being there,” so crucial to Clifford Geertz’s conception of ethnography, became an impossible ideal. If this blockage were to continue, Salverda argues, in some ways acknowledging Powell’s sideshadowing, anthropologists would have “to reconsider the ways we conduct research in distant places.” We would, in other words, have to chart alternative pathways into the future.

A number of authors in this issue reflect upon how the pandemic exposed fault lines in existing life-cyclic, social, economic, and class differences and inequities both in the United States and abroad. A seasoned anthropologist, Julia Gluesing, and a Silicon Valley high school entrepreneur, Zach Stephenson, reflect on how they personally experienced the pandemic’s effects on continuity and change in light of their different experiences and stages in the life cycle. In contrast to personal reflections, Allen Batteau argues, in his sweeping overview, that the pandemic has laid bare the corruption and inequalities of the global system of capitalism. He speculates that such exposure could set the stage “for a social and possibly a political revolution.”

In a related vein, but more ethnographically focused, Isabel

Goddard argues that the pandemic heightened and highlighted the impact of entrenched neoliberal ideals. Her study focused on female friendships among university students. The “entrepreneurial spirit of self-invention and self-mastery” pervading free market ideals met with the realities of isolation and the formation of “pods” necessitated by the pandemic. She describes the struggle of her female interlocutors “to overcome their own anxieties about both the illness and social isolation of the pandemic in order to provide the emotionally attuned and uplifting company that is expected in their female friendships.” The internal struggle laid bare the ever-present unease in a neoliberal world that eschews our deep need for community and connectedness in favor of the appearance of self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

Ken Erickson, however, found in the pandemic also the possibility of suturing the fault lines. His account is set in the Hi Lo Country of northeastern New Mexico, the placename coined by author Max Evans in his 1961 novel by that title. Erickson moved there to research changes in the cattle ranching business. He had bought land nearby and was caring for his ailing mother. He found himself an outsider in a small town in need of connections. Guess what? The chance occurrence of COVID-19 surfacing at a local meeting he attended opened an unexpected channel of communication, along with newfound connections.

In contrast to Erickson’s personal experience of the pandemic in which unforeseen connections spontaneously emerged, Ernest Baskin and Michelle Weinberger train their socio-cultural lens, on the global supply chains so crucial to capitalism. They detail the myriad ways in which those chains proved fragile, upending global flows. They argue that “supply chain networks struggled to pivot in part because of this taken for granted cultural system of norms, practices, values, and assumptions that oriented the players within the supply chain as they moved goods across the food system.”

Our final essay, by Matthew Archer, continues the theme of “cracks in this façade” that become “easier to see,” training his sights on the deep entrenching of the global capitalist system, as manifested, for example, in a friend’s incredulity, in the earliest pandemic phase, when the Chinese imposed a lockdown. How could China, a major superpower, the friend opined, “value human life over the perpetually smooth functioning of the global economy.” Archer found the same deeply embodied sensibility in European bankers he interviewed. They believed that the “costs of letting COVID spread had to be weighed against the benefits of leaving the economy running.” Alternative ways of doing things were hard to imagine, as if we were, indeed, stuck in the movie world of “Don’t Look Up,” with a gigantic asteroid bearing down on us. If there is a silver lining, Archer tells us, it is “that more people seem to be aware that their employers are happy to sacrifice them on the altar of profit and are learning to think outside the box imposed by shareholder

capitalism.”

If there is a silver lining, we might add, it is also that business anthropologists could contribute not only to exposing the fault lines inherent in extreme share-holder capitalism, but also to sideshadowing, showing the way to alternative possible visions of the future. And with that, we invite you to enter the space-time of these essays, written in the midst of a globally impactful entropic event. These are essays at once deeply personal and yet simultaneously reflective and abstract, challenging us to take stock of lessons we are learning or could learn, to run time, in our imaginations, backwards as well forwards, and maybe even to peer off to the side, to a universe of alternative possibilities and time lines.