

We Have Been Here Before: Crisis, Response, and the Stasis of Urban Policy

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The disruptions produced by the global pandemic have spawned predictions of sweeping change that are unlikely to materialize. An example from a century ago explains why, and what we can do about it.

The front-page headline in the *New York Times* on May 6, 2021, optimistically announced a turning point in the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States. “Americans have entered a new, hopeful phase of the pandemic,” the *Times* reported, ushering in a “newfound optimism [...] buoyed by a sense that the coronavirus is waning” and that “we’re clearly turning a corner” with declining rates of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths across the country (Bosman and Mervosh 2021).

Projecting the future

Well before the apparent turnaround in the statistics on Covid in the US, however, observers across the disciplinary, political, and ideological spectrum had been busy projecting the long-term effects of a prolonged pandemic on the culture, society, economy, politics, technology, lifestyles, and well-being that would follow a return to “normalcy” in everyday life. Only a few months into the global onset of Covid-19, in March 2020, *Politico* polled “30 smart, macro thinkers” on their predictions regarding how “[c]oronavirus will change the world permanently,” the imperative “will” dispelling any uncertainties that may have clouded perceptions so early in the crisis.

Responses ranged widely, reflecting a diversity of perspectives. Some projections were ethereal (the increased popularity of “contemplative practices”), fanciful (a “decline in polarization in the face of a common enemy”) or sweepingly simplistic (an end to “our romance with market society”). Other responses were contradictory (renewed trust in institutions, authority, expertise, and “truth” but also an opportunity, albeit unspecified in its details, to “permanently change the rules”). Several observers predicted programmatic improvements (in health care, family care, childcare or voting procedures) or ideological shifts (the “demilitarization of American patriotism” and the “rebirth of the patriotic honor of working for the government”). A few commentators tended toward the alarmingly apocalyptic (from the right, fear of an overweening government with the “potential to infect the foundations of free society” and, from the left, warnings of a “political uprising” with “drastic, pitchfork consequences”).

Notwithstanding *Politico*’s characterization of the contributors as big-picture (“macro”) thinkers, their responses hewed closely to their established areas of specialized expertise and largely echoed themes for which these commentators were already widely known and which had presumably prompted their invitations to participate in the predictive exercise in the first place. The aching familiarity of the futures envisioned by the respondents augured a replication of the status quo rather than a revolutionary reordering of values, policies, practices or ways of thinking that might be expected to fill the void left by the massive disruption of habits and institutions wrought by the global pandemic.

None of this is especially surprising. From the perspective of history, expectations of radical change following large-scale disruptions caused by wars, epidemics or natural disasters have rarely been realized in practice. The frequently expressed desire for a “return to normalcy” implies a resumption of habits, systems, and ways of thought that, in turn, rely on and reproduce hegemonic structures and existing power relations. With a few extraordinary exceptions—the flourishing of the Enlightenment (Toulmin 1990); the abolition of slavery (Franklin 1947); the “great transformation” of market society (Polanyi 1944)—the combined forces of ingrained habit, structural dominance, and cultural hegemony conduce more toward inertia and stasis than to radical change (Rodgers 2011). The rare instances of revolutionary transformation, as in the examples just cited, unfolded slowly and piecemeal over decades or centuries, their effects discernable in long historical hindsight while remaining opaque in the conscious lived experience of contemporaneous participants. In sharp contrast, at the local level where urban politics and policy are played out, current debates focus on immediate, prosaic concerns rather than systemic change: overcoming vaccination resistance but not a wholesale reinvestment in public health; reconsidering techniques of policing but not incorporating marginalized groups as full members of the urban polity; reopening bars and sports venues but not a systemic rethinking of the meaning of work; addressing commercial property vacancies but not rethinking the role of cities in public life. In New York City, in the midst of a hard-fought mayoral campaign at the time of this writing, the leading candidates debate perennial issues of public safety, municipal spending, and the candidates’ depth (or lack) of experience, in a manner that is virtually indistinguishable from pre-pandemic elections in recent memory.

We have been here before

The cycle of disruption provoking wild expectations only to be followed by relative stasis is starkly visible in the historical record. One such instance from a century ago bears examining for the light it sheds on our contemporary post-Covid moment.

In January 1939, a few months before the onset of World War II, John Dewey ([1939] 2008) wrote an essay, titled “The economic basis of the new society,” in which he outlined his vision for a new world order that could emerge from the impending global conflict. In this essay, he revisited an article he had written two decades earlier, in 1918, in the aftermath of the First World War, in which he had similarly discussed the need for fundamental transformations that the war had exposed (Dewey [1918] 2008). (Dewey had supported US entry into the Great War as a way to usher in an era of post-national unity and global democracy, a position that he later repudiated as the wrong means to a worthwhile end (Dorzweiler 2016).) Looking back at 1918 from his vantage point 20 years later, Dewey observed that “During the progress of the [First] World War, positive attitudes and hopes were generated and positive plans and objectives put forward for the creation of a better human society.” But by 1939, with a new global conflagration again looming on the horizon, Dewey reported that “Events after the [First World War] in this country seemed to give the lie to the hopes then entertained” ([1939] 2008, p. 315). “The fact that these hopes were betrayed and objectives failed to be realized is evidence of our failure to take advantage of the opportunity that was unquestionably there” (p. 309).

How did we miss that opportunity? Writing in 1939, Dewey quoted extensively from his earlier article in which he had identified the problem areas or “deficiencies” that had been left unaddressed during the war effort and could now be corrected after demobilization. The problems Dewey identified in 1918, still pressing today, included the insecurity and precarity of work, rampant social inequality, and the organization of production on “a basis of pecuniary profit” (pp. 309–311). He then enumerated what he considered to be “the essential minimum elements of an intelligent program of social organization” (p. 314) required to address these deficiencies. These included “the guarantee of the right to work”; a national minimum wage (already “an accomplished fact” in Europe); provision of “decent, comfortable, and sanitary housing [...] conducted under national

social auspices;” and the expansion of workplace democracy to counter “the absurdity of conducting a war for political democracy which leaves industrial and economic autocracy practically untouched” (p. 314).

Dewey would not easily be dismissed as naively optimistic in proposing these forms of social reorganization. The totality of the war effort itself offered compelling evidence of society’s capacity for transformative collective action in the face of peril. “Before the war,” Dewey wrote, “most persons would have said [...] the whole situation is so big and so complicated that it is not possible to do anything about it [...]. We have got to wait for the working out of unconscious, natural law to accomplish anything serious and important in the way of reorganization.” Nonetheless, he insisted, “the war [...] has proved now that it is possible for human beings to take hold of human affairs and manage them, to see an end which has to be gained, a purpose which must be fulfilled, and deliberately and intelligently to go to work to organize the means, the resources and the methods of accomplishing those results” (p. 315). Nor was he sanguine about the likelihood of success, warning that “there will [...] be a very great inertia, very great obstacles and difficulties to contend with,” and he predicted “a long period of social drifting and social unrest” (p. 314). Citing both the need for reform and the evidence of collective efficacy provided by the war, he concluded that “we cannot in good conscience return, after the war, to the old period of drifting, so-called evolution, as a necessary method of procedure.” But two decades later, in 1939, his attitude and affect were decidedly more somber: “The evils existing then,” he concluded, “still exist now, the things needing to be done then still need to be done now” (p. 309).

Dewey cited several explanations for our societal failure. The widespread desire for a “Return to Normalcy” after four long years of bitter global warfare meant the reinstatement of “the old social-economic regime.” “Attempts at radical social change were defeated,” he reported, and where social reorganization occurred, it bred fascist dictatorships “in a direction opposite to that of the hopes entertained by liberals and radicals in the earlier period” (p. 315). In the nominally democratic countries, “we have [...] a continuation of [...] social drifting plus an amount of social tinkering accompanied by [...] breakdowns of ever increasing severity.” Policies were reactive at best, while “the positive problem of instituting a (new) social-economic order [...] remains practically untouched” (p. 317). Dewey explicitly rejected conservatives’ opposition to social reform, in language that is eerily echoed in today’s political debates:

I am expressing no sympathy for those who complain about the growing amount of money spent upon taking care of those thrown out of productive work and the consequent increase in taxation. Much less am I expressing sympathy with the reckless charges brought against the unemployed, of loving idleness and wishing to live at the expense of society. Such complaints and charges are the product of refusal to look at the causes which produce the situation and of desire to find an alibi for their refusal to do anything to remove the causes, causes which are inherent in the existing social-economic regime (Dewey [1939] 2008, p. 318).

That the same debate, voiced in virtually identical language, resounds today, three generations after Dewey wrote these lines, is testimony to the tenacity of the forces intent on maintaining the status quo. As is still the case today, the country’s failure in 1919 to follow the war’s disruptions with meaningful social change reflected, for Dewey, a “great refusal” to remake the profit system “in the interest of positive and enduring opportunity for productive and creative activity and all that that signifies for the development of the potentialities of human nature” (p. 318).

Where do we go from here?

Dewey’s discussion reveals that the disruptions provoked by destabilizing events like wars and pandemics open possibilities for radical change by upending prevailing institutions and practices in sometimes profound ways. Nonhuman actors like bombs or viruses exert an effect on the social arrangements within which they are inextricably enmeshed (Beauregard 2015; Harman 2014) but

how human society responds to those effects is an open question. Whether, to what extent, and how we act on the opportunities presented remains a challenge for social action moving forward. It is futile to expect that an epidemic will impose actions on human society that society could not or would not enact without the introduction of an external force: if we are to move in the direction of a better world, we will have to do it on our own.

Never satisfied with merely offering critique in the absence of effective action, Dewey's approach to a solution embodied his pragmatic reliance on "a pooled and coordinated social intelligence" mobilized through open-ended public debate, encompassing the broadest possible multiplicity of perspectives, and organized through a process of continuous experimentation rooted in fallibilism, provisionality, and a belief in the possibility of continuous improvement. Today's national conversations aimed at rerouting thinking regarding Black lives, police violence, immigration policy, voting rights or social infrastructure offer encouraging examples of collective intelligence at work. At the same time, Dewey's commitment to inclusive collective intelligence led him to warn against the presumed authority of self-styled experts, which he dismissed as "the mere scattered individualized intelligences of persons here and there, however high their IQs may be" (Dewey [1939] 2008, p. 320). And he cautioned against the seduction of easy fixes and the unthinking recitation of conventional formulas or inherited ideologies. "A great tragedy of the present situation," he claimed, "may turn out to be that those most conscious of present evils and of the need of thoroughgoing change [...] will trust to some short-cut way out [or] may rely upon the frozen intelligence of some past thinker, sect and party cult: frozen because arrested into a dogma" (p. 320). Dewey differentiated between a "planned society" reliant on "fixed blue-prints imposed from above" and a "continuously planning society" operating through "the release of intelligence through the widest form of cooperative give-and-take" (p. 321, emphasis in original). His conclusion applies with equal force today: "Until that method of social action is adopted we shall remain in a period of drift and unrest whose final outcome is likely to be force and counter-force, with temporary victory to the side possessed of the most machine guns" (p. 322). Today, in the aftermath of a global pandemic, the evils existing in Dewey's time still exist now, the things needing to be done then still need to be done now.

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To cite this article:

Robert W. Lake, “We Have Been Here Before: Crisis, Response, and the Stasis of Urban Policy”, *Metropolitica*, 29 June 2021. URL: <https://metropolitica.org/We-Have-Been-Here-Before-Crisis-Response-and-the-Stasis-of-Urban-Policy.html>.