

An aerial photograph of a coastline, showing a mix of green, brown, and blue tones. The land is a mix of green and brown, with a dark blue body of water in the foreground. The sky is a pale blue. The overall tone is somewhat somber and dramatic.

JAN ROTMANS

with Mischa Verheijden

EMBRACING
CHAOS

How to deal with a World in Crisis?

Embracing Chaos

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Embracing Chaos: How to deal with a World in Crisis?

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Introduction: The Turmoil in Ourselves and the World

It's not surprising if you feel uneasy right now. In fact, it would be strange if you didn't. It's very turbulent in the world, and it feels like we are in a series of permanent crises. The restlessness in the world reflects the restlessness in ourselves. We are living on the cusp of a new era, in which everything that we took for granted is being called into question.

Transformative change of this kind is far more drastic, difficult and threatening than 'regular' change. Transformative change is deep change and it's about thinking, acting and organizing the world in a quite different way. This places an almost impossible pressure on us: to let go of the tried-and-tested while embracing the new and the unknown.

Instinctively, we prefer not to. Our evolutionary development means that our brains are geared to stability and continuity, but that's the one thing we lack today. And yet a lack of this kind sometimes indicates a new direction. Chaos and unrest are inherent in the development of complex systems, such as our society and its economy. And no less importantly, they are inherent in us humans. In complexity theory, chaos is the transitional situation between two periods of equilibrium. It's the in-between-period, the time between 'it is' and 'it will be'. Chaos is a necessary precondition for a transition, and then it literally creates scope for the birth of something new.

We are now in just such a time: our social systems, the economy and we ourselves are changing in fundamental ways. Searching for equilibrium, we must choose a new path in this period. 'Time no longer has any direction' is how Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han puts it. This in-between-period has no clear beginning or end and so lacks direction, which people sense. Many people find this confusing.

This lack of direction is the cause of our unrest and has hugely increased since I published my book *In het oog van de orkaan* (*In the eye of the hurricane*) in 2012. In the eye, it's windless and cloudless, while outside the storm rages. Depending on where you are, you experience one or the other. Many people were in the eye of the hurricane in 2012: they didn't see the storm raging through society. But, as I wrote at the time, it was a question of time before they would experience it. Much

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has happened in the last 10 years, and many of those who escaped unscathed at first have felt the effects of the tempest first-hand. Now that the covid storm has been raging across the world since early 2020, many of us have come to realize that we as a society have reached a tipping point.

Three Developments

In 2014, I highlighted three developments in my book *Verandering van tijdperk (Change of Era)* explaining that we aren't in an era of change but in a change of era.

- (1) *A new societal order is taking shape.* Vertically ordered, centralized, top-down society is evolving into a horizontal, decentralized, bottom-up society with connections, such as communities, cooperatives, and virtual and physical networks.
- (2) *A new economy, with other foundations, is coming into existence,* which is distributed, digital, sustainable, glocal and circular.
- (3) *A change of power is taking place,* globally with a shift in economic and political power from West to East and underlying a shift from established and destructive power to innovative and transformative power. A new power that has the capacity to change the way resources are distributed.

That these three developments and the material changes they produce are fundamental, are found in practically every area of society, occur simultaneously, and reinforce each other, means they are harbingers of a change of era – the birth of a new era. It's high time because the covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine have made us face the facts and shown that society is vulnerable to disruptions. Moreover, it has become even clearer that we humans are not living in equilibrium with nature, and many of us now think that we can't continue like this any longer.

But you have been telling the same story for 20 years, my children sometimes say. How can you be such a bore? They are right: *I have* been telling the same story for 20 years, but I keep updating it. And I constantly use the lessons I learn to deepen the story. It has evolved from highly analytical and academic to something increasingly human.

In the preceding years, I had come to realize that transitions are the result of work done by people. It's ultimately people who determine the course of transitions, naturally subject to and in interaction with a complex web of technology, markets, institutions, policies and culture. But when push comes to shove, a system transition requires a personal transition. It's only possible to embrace chaos and overcome fear by looking more deeply into ourselves to discover who we really are. Only then do we make the connection between head and heart and only then is a sense of unity possible. The big challenge for all of us is developing that connection. Once we have done so, the process is irreversible. And that's what we need.

Alongside this personal aspect, the world is facing a multifaceted systemic crisis that deeply affects our vital systems, such as trade, food, energy, mobility, healthcare, education and democracy. For 10 years, the world economy has been muddling through and it's now moving towards another recession. There is also an ecological crisis, which is fundamentally influenced by humans and is ruining the earth. But the systemic crisis is at its most profound level a moral crisis. We have internalized the systems, and they pervade our norms and values, our attitudes and behaviour. But these vital systems have passed their expiry date: they no longer meet the standards we set for them.

Europe in Polycrisis

Europe is confronted with an accumulation of crises that can partly be traced back to decades of failed policy. Where other world powers such as China and the United States have been working on energy and raw materials policy for a long time, Europe has been hesitant and naive for too long. Only now, shaken awake by the war in Ukraine, is Europe realizing that energy and raw materials are being used as modern weapons in a global power struggle. The geopolitical dimension of the energy transition is becoming increasingly important and with it the pursuit of energy autonomy. In the urge to quickly become independent from Russian gas, Europe is forced to fall back on fossil alternatives such as buying gas elsewhere, importing liquefied gas and using coal for longer, thereby further fuelling the climate crisis. With this emergency package, with a bit of luck, there will probably be just enough gas reserves to get through the coming winters. However, that is not the real problem. The fossil reset will make Europe even more dependent on gas and oil in the next 5–10 years and will literally pay the price for this. Gas and oil prices will probably not remain as high as they are now, but fossil energy will no longer be really cheap. We can expect sharp fluctuations in a volatile fossil market with medium high prices. This also means that the climate targets are further out of sight, which will further increase instability. This is bad news for European citizens: the next 10 years will be rough, with prices for energy (both gas and electricity) remaining high, even if caps are set. And in the meantime, accelerated efforts must be made to increase sustainability, which also costs hundreds of billions of euros, and the user will also have to pay for this in part. This calls for a social emergency plan to provide European citizens with long-term support, because not only the vulnerable are at risk of financial problems, but also the middle class. A social crisis is imminent and a social uprising can no longer be ruled out, because it is already germinating in England and France.

The accumulation of crises constitutes a polycrisis, a concept introduced in 1999 by the French systems thinker Edgar Morin, who described it as intertwined crises that cannot be traced back to a single cause and carry systemic risks, thus posing a potential risk to people and planet. The polycrisis in Europe is an almost inextricable tangle: Covid-19 and the Ukraine war have led to food and raw material shortages and a deep energy crisis, which is fuelling the climate crisis,

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which in turn leads to drought and water shortages, which leads to the deterioration of nature, which is exacerbated by the agricultural and nitrogen crises, which also have adverse consequences for construction (housing shortages, infrastructure). Weather extremes due to climate change threaten the energy supply again, partly due to low water levels, which means that insufficient cooling water is available for nuclear power stations and inland vessels can transport less coal and gravel. On the other hand, the energy crisis leads to rising inflation and interest rates, fuelling an economic recession and resulting in growing energy poverty, which can lead to a social revolt. Because not only energy is becoming more expensive, raw materials, water, food, care and groceries are also becoming more expensive, to such an extent that it threatens to become unaffordable for many people.

On this basis, I think that in Europe we are heading for a prolonged period of social unrest. Perhaps comparable to the second half of the nineteenth century, when the industrial revolution brought about social and economic inequality and plunged many workers into poverty. This led to major social unrest that forced the government to intervene radically in several areas. Legislation and regulations were introduced to protect vulnerable citizens, trade unions were formed to protect workers, housing associations were founded for affordable workers' housing, education was designed to elevate the social underclass and the power of large steel, coal and railway companies was broken by splitting them up.

Translated into the current transition period, it is quite conceivable that the government would initiate a similar structural recovery programme as part of a series of radical measures needed to tackle the related crises. Short-term emergency bandages no longer help. We can no longer avoid a thorough agricultural reform. And that applies to all transition domains. Because we have failed to really intervene for decades, we have to cut through the pain. Only more than ever this has to be done together with citizens, otherwise the social unrest will become much greater. The covid crisis has taught us that it is crucial to offer citizens perspective and to communicate clearly. Telling the honest story to citizens: we are facing difficult times, it will ask a lot of us, it will cost a lot but it will yield much more. Such as a new and clean energy supply that is ultimately affordable for everyone. Or circular agriculture that goes hand in hand with sustainable nature restoration. This does, however, require authentic leadership from people who stand firm in the storm. Who do not continue to muddle through with poldering, but who dare to make radical choices. Who consistently work on a reform programme based on a vision that we want our country to achieve. It is now or never, otherwise a social uprising of citizens, fuelled by populists, threatens to have a disruptive effect on our society.

For this reason, we must focus on the core of the problem, which is deeply anchored in the capitalist system we have created. Together we have created a society that bases its assessments on extremely hard values: efficiency, returns, effectiveness, cost/benefit. These are all harsh masculine values. We have gone too far; the human dimension has been lost. A society ordered in terms of efficiency – which I call a 'spreadsheet society' – can function well in rational terms but is in fact ailing and makes people ill. The most prevalent diseases these days are

anxiety disorders and depression, which are increasingly prevalent, especially among young people.

Spreadsheet society has not only resulted in our loss of trust in each other but also in social systems, large companies, and their CEOs, and in government. The Edelman Trust Barometer is an annual study of the level of trust in governments, media, NGOs and business. For many years, this barometer has shown a decline in trust.

We can see an example of this distrust in healthcare, where there has been an accumulation of distrust. Everything is about returns and efficiency, and everything must be measured, checked, and controlled according to protocols. This is based on fear and distrust. In itself, there's nothing wrong with efficiency: replacing a worn knee with a prosthetic must be done efficiently. But every knee belongs to a person. Nobody only wants to be treated efficiently. You also want to be treated with affection. I experienced this first-hand when I had a bike accident. I saw many different surgeons because I had sustained injuries to so many parts of my face. Technically, they all gave me excellent assistance, each in their own area of expertise. But oddly enough, no one ever looked at the composition of my face as a whole or asked me about the mental harm, which was at least as great as the physical damage. No one, apart from the nurses. They treated me with concern and affection and were my real heroes.

This human value will predominate in the era ahead. Humans will again be the central focus: in healthcare, in education, in fact everywhere. Nonetheless, there are still many people, especially in the establishment, who are still in the eye of the hurricane and want to return to business as usual, life before corona, the 'old normal' as soon as possible. The authorities are still quite capable of protecting existing resources: knowledge, money, lobbying power, fossil fuels, infrastructure, and so on. But for how much longer?

More people will now accept the idea that the Covid-19 crisis has cleared the way for substantive changes. The transformation to a new social order, another economic basis, and a change of power will be the irreversible and ineluctable result of the in-between-period we are living in now. That goes for the Netherlands, Belgium, the rest of Europe, and in fact the entire western world.

Making a Difference

A period of transition does not occur in everyone's lifetime, so you and I are fortunate to experience one. Fortunate because every individual and every initiative counts in this transition. You can make a difference right now. Yet we humans have a deep-seated fear of far-reaching change. Our brain is conditioned in such a way that if the change is too great, too fast, and too dramatic then we are more inclined to take a step backwards, fearing for our livelihoods and loss of status, income, power, and identity.

We would prefer change based on positive energy and inspiration, but we are obstinate in our behaviour, so a reset is needed. Crises often go hand in hand with a great deal of personal pain, but they also have a cleansing effect. We seem to

need these crises to make us aware that we are heading towards a dead end. This is why I see a crisis as a *blessing in disguise*. If something that happens to you deeply affects you then you are more likely to think: what am I doing with my life? That's why people who have been through a personal crisis more often undergo radical change. They are people with the courage to deal with chaos – people who overcome their fear because something else is more important to them: a mission, a vision another perspective. That way you can put aside your fears. That makes you a real leader in my eyes, and I see far more of this kind of leadership in society than in politics.

The Illusion of Powerlessness

Wonderful things are taking place in many areas, such as food, energy, construction, mobility, healthcare and education. People see these examples but fail to make the connection with themselves. They go to a school or hospital and are pleasantly surprised to find that people really are the focus there. Then they go home and think up all sorts of reasons why that's not possible in their situation. I call this the illusion of powerlessness.¹ People can't imagine that another system is possible.

That is a common misconception. People make systems and systems form people. So, it works both ways: structures partly determine people's behaviour, but people can change systems too. Behaviour (people) and structure (systems) are intertwined and co-evolve. That is the crux of Giddens' structuration theory. In periods of chaos, systems become unstable, and people's actions can lead to rapid change. In addition, the indirect effect of an action is at least as great as its direct effect: those who think in stationary terms underestimate their power to affect change, whereas those who think in transformative terms use this potential. The direct effect of what you do might not be so great, but the indirect effect is. That is transitional thinking.

Take the indirect effect of the Urgenda lawsuit which was filed in 2015 against the Dutch State for its failing climate policy. The case attracted attention in many other countries. There are currently nearly 2,000 climate lawsuits against governments and companies. These may not be comparable to the Urgenda lawsuit, but many cases refer to it. The number of lawsuits has exploded in 8 years.

The Urgenda lawsuit also led to a climate lawsuit against Shell, brought by the same lawyer, Roger Cox. He won this case too, and its indirect effect is hard to overstate. It will reverberate for a long time across the whole oil supply chain. Comparable oil giants such as BP and ExxonMobil can expect lawsuits, and other multinationals such as Tata Steel will also have to adjust their fossil-fuel strategy.

These climate lawsuits exert a great deal of pressure on the entire fossil-fuel system: on its structure, legislation, culture and funding. Ultimately, this will certainly contribute towards system change. The timing is crucial. A climate lawsuit would not have made much difference 10 or 20 years ago, but it does in

¹The term was coined by Flor Avelino, one of my PhD students.

this period of chaos. Policy failure has made governments and companies far more vulnerable now, and the whole fossil system has become fragile.

A great many breakthroughs in history started with something small. Something small can become big, and something big can crumble and become small. Think of the rapid rise of global movements such as MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and the climate movement. They heavily influence our social norms and are an important driving force in system change. From a transition perspective, there are countless examples of people initiating system change. And this period of chaos helps something small become something big.

Personal Transition

Back to leadership. The new version is no longer based on ego. A large ego always seemed to be related to great leadership, but those days are over. People see through that more quickly nowadays. I prefer the leadership we have in ourselves: far more connective and based on authenticity. This starts with connecting with yourself, without which you can't connect with others. What you feel and how you act must be the same. That is the authenticity we need – without which you will fall flat on your face in no time at all. Making a career for yourself is interesting, but it may serve to muddy the waters and distract from the essence of life. Appreciating this requires humility and is the start of a personal transition. It's all part of your path, along which you may accept that you are but a small part of a greater whole.

In my case, I came to this realization after my children suffered from serious illnesses and after my bike accident. At one time I had been, at 31, the youngest professor in the Netherlands. I was successful and had my own research institute. But I didn't connect with people at all; I thought and acted purely from my mind and the knowledge I had. Only when I had a serious bike accident and couldn't do anything for a year did I think: am I doing what I want to do, and do I want what I'm doing? Only months later did I realize that I wasn't really doing what I wanted, which was painful. While the entire world thought I was successful, I considered myself a failure. I had disappointed myself. It was not what I had promised myself as a little boy. When I was 5 years old, I had exclaimed: 'Make the world better!' But, after my accident, I thought: your impact is not great; you reach perhaps a thousand people at most. Who do you share all your knowledge with? Only with academics. You have little impact, and you are successful in a small world. That was, apart from my children's illnesses, the most difficult moment in my life. And it showed me the way forward.

From that moment I became more of an activist and started sharing my knowledge in society. I founded Urgenda with Marjan Minnesma, and we started a lawsuit against the Dutch State for its climate policy, forcing it to reduce CO₂ emissions in line with the Paris Agreement. Doing so might have cost me some academic authority but I gained social authority. There are now hundreds of activist academics in the Netherlands and thousands worldwide. Young people, in particular, write to me saying that I have been an example to them. I appreciate

this – another example of the indirect effect – because I have been through many difficulties and have often wondered why I do it all. People have hurled insults at me and threatened to burn down my house and my institute; a major Dutch newspaper, *De Telegraaf*, featured me alongside several prominent politicians on its front page, labelling us ‘green villains;’ people have said they hope I get Covid-19. I have been jeered at and threatened but I have always thought what I’m doing feels good, it feels right. I’m doing what I really want to do.

I grew far more connected with myself, and only then was I able to connect with others. I used to mainly show off my knowledge, which doesn’t make you connect with others. It’s more likely to create distance. I started delivering lectures in a different way, more from my heart so that I touched people at another level. Now they react far more emotionally, sometimes even crying. When I first started telling people about my accident or my children, my eyes would also brim with tears. It always embarrassed me until someone said that it was good seeing me with the courage to show my vulnerable side. I wanted to be strong. Until I realized there’s strength in showing your vulnerability.

I had this realization again during the Covid-19 crisis. In the beginning, I was unsettled. I was also angry, but I didn’t know with whom. All my work had ground to a sudden standstill; I was in a panic. I kept my head down for a while as I had not yet clearly worked out what was happening. That would surprise many people because they think I know all the answers as a professor of transition. Well, I was unsettled. Until my wife Inge said: ‘This is what you’re always talking about, a period of chaos, which we must embrace’. She had hit the nail on the head, but I couldn’t yet deal with it.

Until more and more journalists called me wanting an explanation because this was *the* time of transition. My confidence in publicly expressing my opinion grew a bit, and I was able to analyze it more keenly. After the first unsettled month, it sank in and I calmed down because I thought, as my wife had said, I must embrace chaos and show leadership. As a social counterbalance to the Outbreak Management Team, the Dutch government pandemic commission, whose members were all from the medical profession, I founded the Break-out Team: a group of engaged thinkers and doers who examine the effects of Covid-19 on society, the economy and democracy and develop ideas for a post-Covid-19 society. This is necessary because we must view this crisis more broadly than from a purely medical perspective so that we come out of this better together.

Connectors and Demolishers

Years ago, I said that we needed more frontrunners: inspired people who create space. Frontrunners are content-driven; they see *the* solution and can’t imagine that other people do not understand. This means that they are often too far ahead of the pack. Just in the Netherlands, there are thousands of them right now. But frontrunners aren’t good at connecting – when they look back, they discover nobody is following them. This is why we need connectors. The coming decades will be the era of those who link ideas, projects and people, who connect the old