

An aerial photograph of a multi-lane highway. A single white car is visible in the middle of the road, driving away from the viewer. The highway has multiple lanes in both directions, separated by a central divider. The background shows more of the highway and some greenery on the right side.

What would happen to Europe and North America if COVID-19 lasted a year or more?

Special Circumstances Intelligence Unit
The Grey Briefings, April, 2020

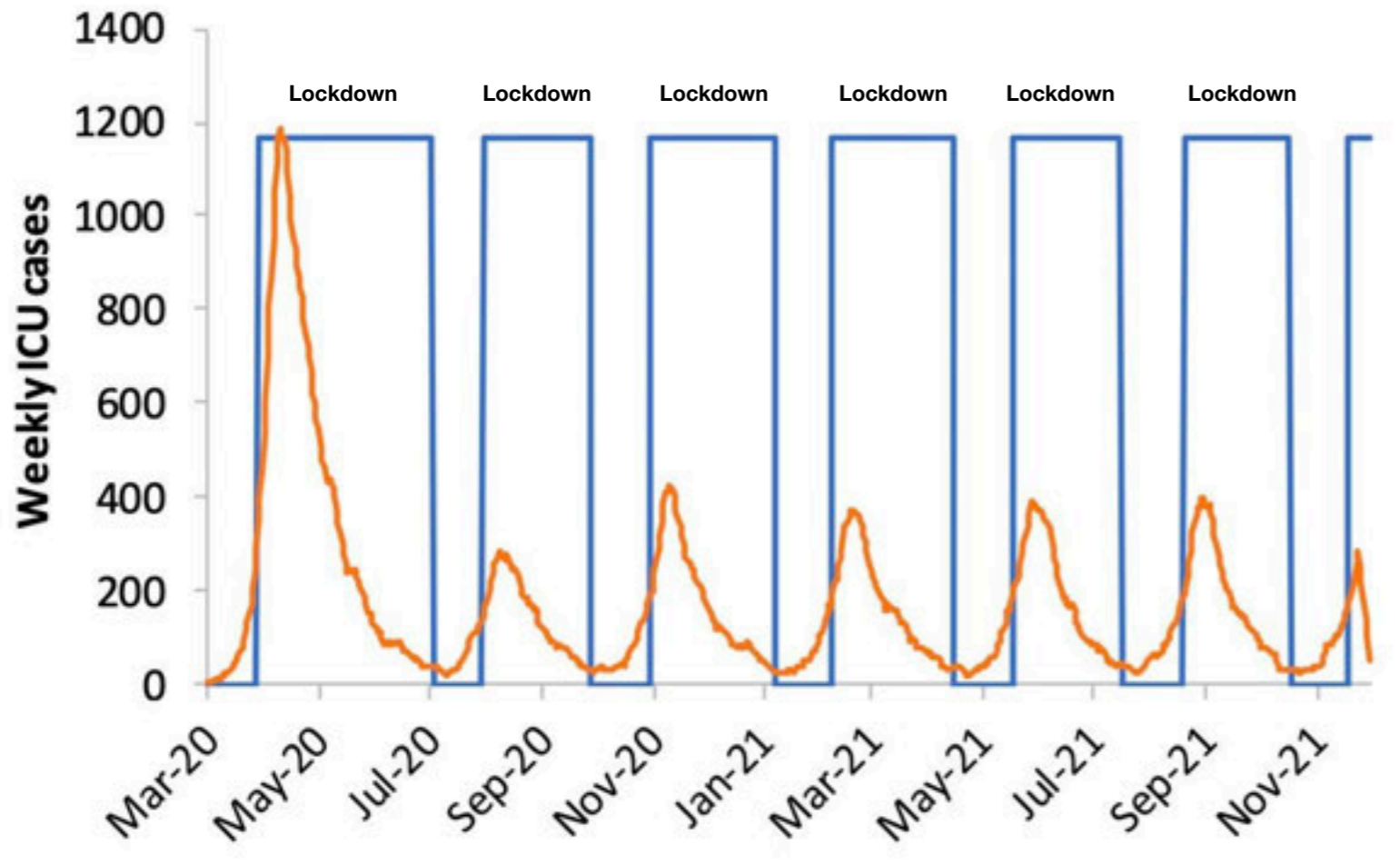
The Catalyst

The Coronavirus may require a lockdown of up to a year or more to handle properly.





The seasonality of the virus, as well as how rapidly and how well we develop long term immunity, will determine the degree of disruption we experience in the coming years.



If we required sustained periods of lockdown, we could see dramatic, long-term changes to our economy and society.



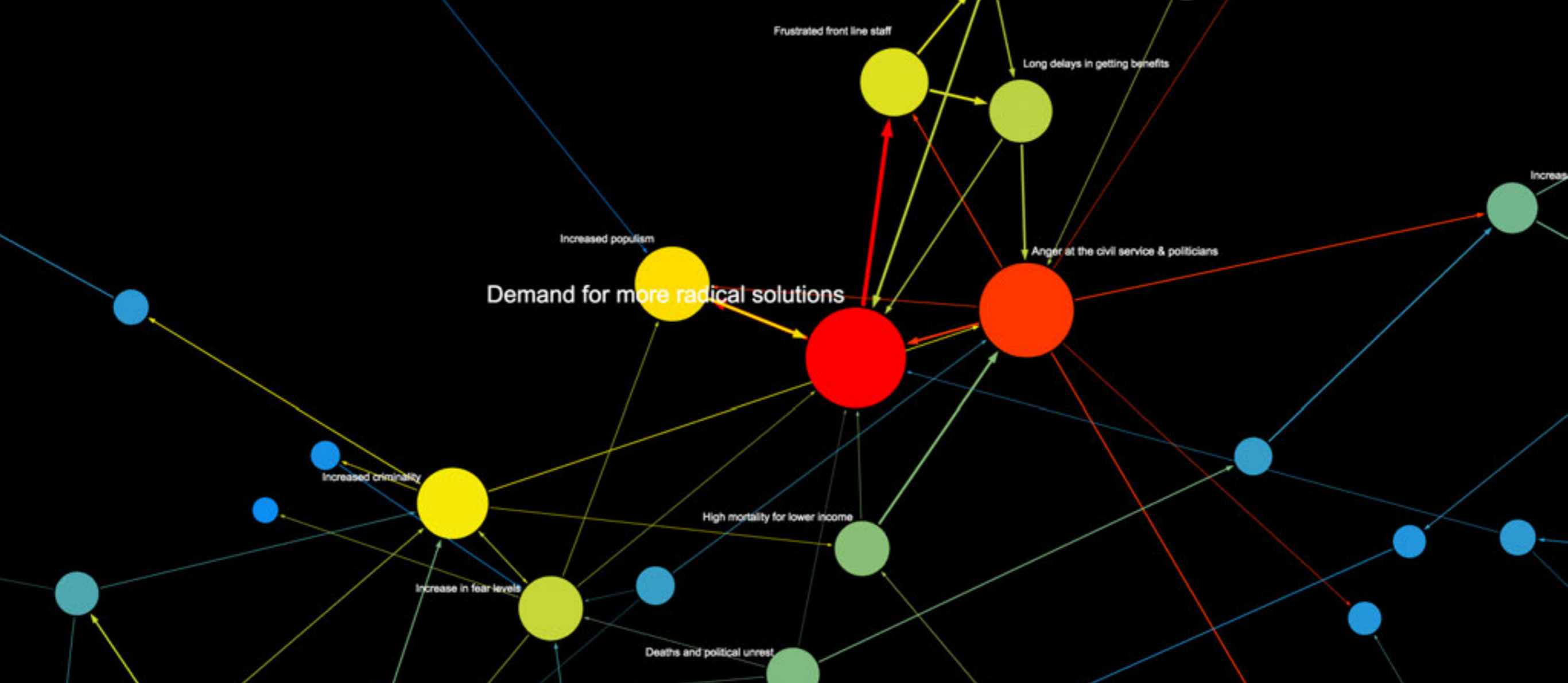
If this were to occur, it is unlikely that we would be able to “return to normal.” What might these changes look like?



A group of global futurists, designers, technologist & policy makers came together online to explore this.



Nearly 90 experts contributed, identifying over 200 trends, connections & impacts in just over 24 hours.



Their insights were mapped in real time, using scenario planning software developed at MIT.

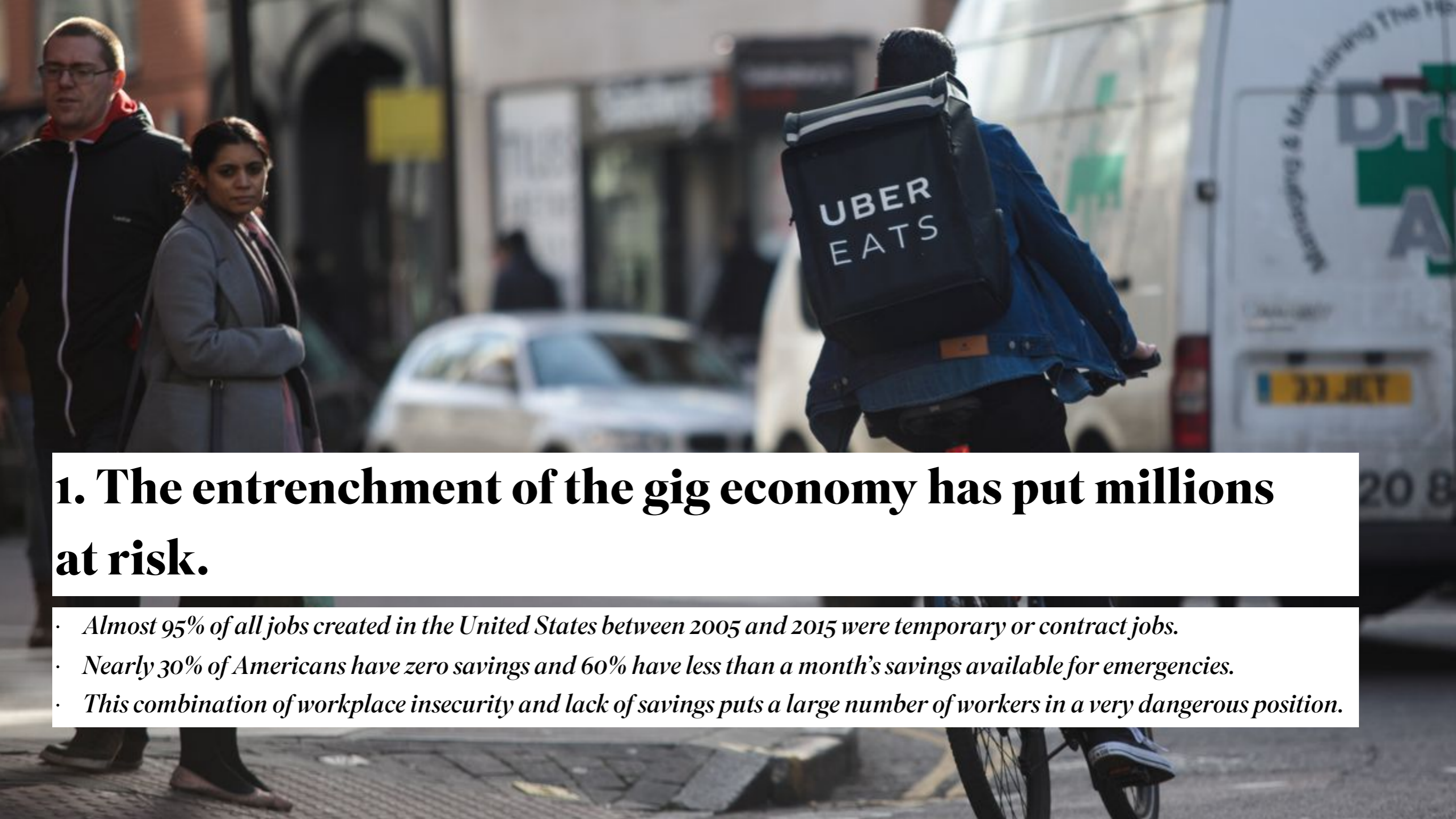


Here is what they thought could happen, offered as a prompt to discuss what we all might want to happen.

Pre-Crisis Context

A photograph showing a crowd of people, many wearing face masks, standing behind metal crowd control barriers. The scene appears to be outdoors, possibly at a public gathering or protest. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

The virus amplified four major, pre-existing challenges. In one fell swoop, it has pushed these fault lines to a breaking point.



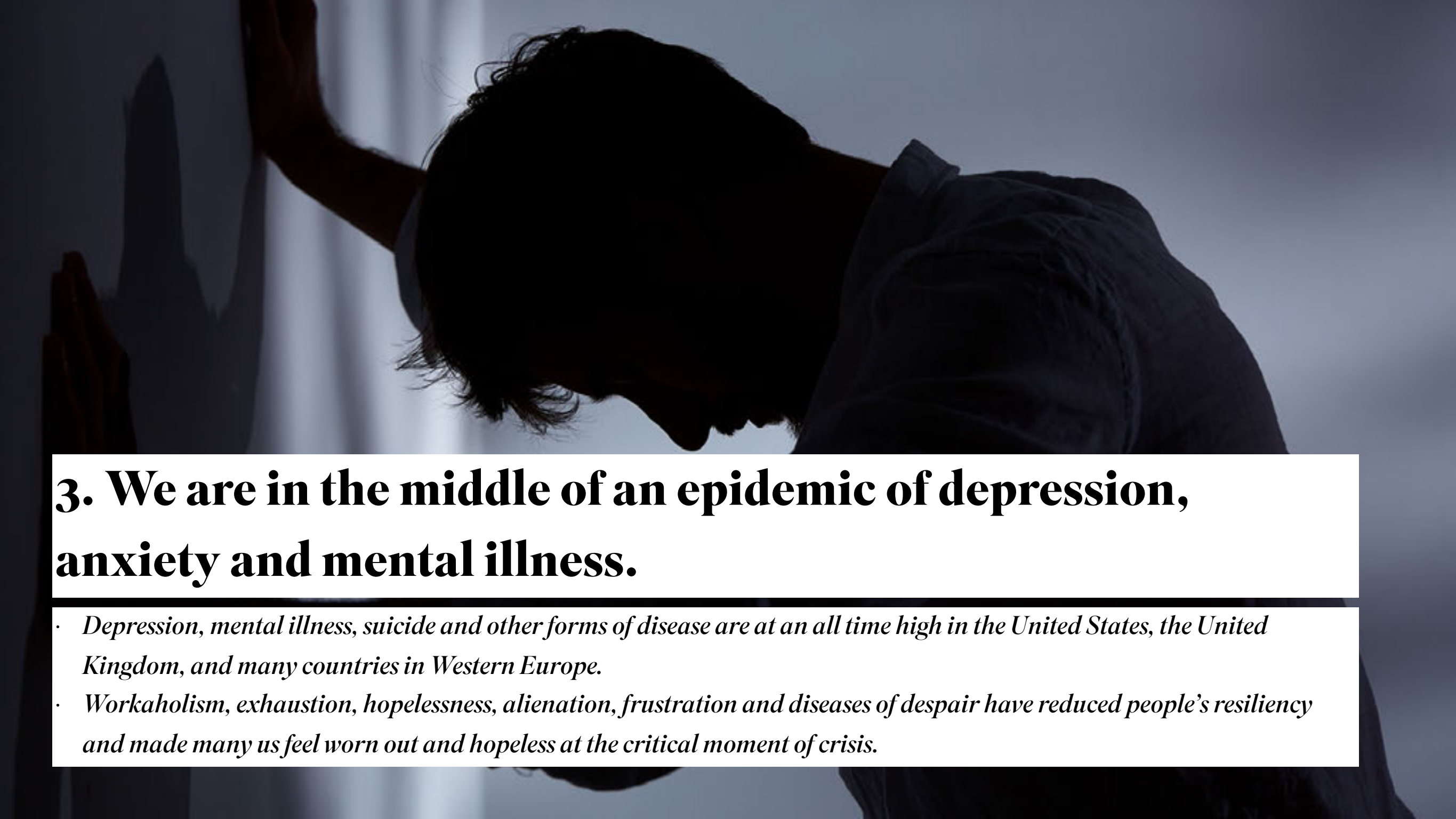
1. The entrenchment of the gig economy has put millions at risk.

- *Almost 95% of all jobs created in the United States between 2005 and 2015 were temporary or contract jobs.*
- *Nearly 30% of Americans have zero savings and 60% have less than a month's savings available for emergencies.*
- *This combination of workplace insecurity and lack of savings puts a large number of workers in a very dangerous position.*



2. There has been a hardening of borders, attitudes & policies where populist nationalism has taken hold.

- *Populist movements around the world have spent years fueling anger and dissatisfaction towards the state (i.e., the “deep state”), leading to a widespread distrust of political institutions and authority.*
- *This expresses itself both as anger towards politicians and civil servants, as well as a distrust and a lack of willingness to abide by collective constraints.*



3. We are in the middle of an epidemic of depression, anxiety and mental illness.

- *Depression, mental illness, suicide and other forms of disease are at an all time high in the United States, the United Kingdom, and many countries in Western Europe.*
- *Workaholism, exhaustion, hopelessness, alienation, frustration and diseases of despair have reduced people's resiliency and made many of us feel worn out and hopeless at the critical moment of crisis.*



4. We are subject to pervasive digital surveillance.

- *Billions of dollars have been spent building mechanisms of social and economic surveillance over the last 10 years.*
- *From Google and Facebook to Palantir and ClearView, we are subject to categorization, sorting, and surveillance of all kinds.*
- *Sophisticated tracking, analysis and targeting software is now an integral part of our lives, for better and for worse.*



These four trends set the context for a major crisis.

The Road Ahead

The group identified three scenarios for Europe and North America if the virus required long-term lock downs.



A photograph of a diverse group of people standing in a line behind a metal crowd control railing. The individuals are dressed in casual to warm clothing, including jackets, hoodies, and a baseball cap. One person in the foreground is wearing a white face mask. The background is slightly blurred, showing more people and a red structure, possibly part of a stadium or event venue.

All scenarios begin with widespread unemployment.

- *We would see widespread unemployment and bankruptcies as businesses dependent on travel, footfall, group activities and face to face interaction are closed.*
- *This would include retail, entertainment, sports, F&B and many services, including the industries that supported them (such as manufacturing, shipping, logistics, finance and trade).*
- *The economic contraction would hit freelancers, contractors & small and medium-sized businesses the worst, with devastating effect. Large businesses which operate with small margins in these sectors would be wiped out, as well.*



Which requires profound state intervention to manage.

- *State leadership will be essential, especially after the immediate urgency of the crisis passes.*
- *Long-term management of the crisis will require both medical and economic intervention, necessitating strong communication, economic stimulus and clear stakeholder engagement.*
- *Historical distinctions between public and private sector will necessarily blur.*

A wide, empty city street, likely in Paris, with traffic lights and trees lining the sidewalks. The background is hazy, suggesting a distant city skyline. The street is empty, with only a few distant cars visible.

The nature of this intervention, combined with how society responds, will determine what happens next.

- *How governments respond, and to whose benefit, will interact in complex ways with people's expectations and circumstances.*
- *The interaction between these two variables, and their consequences, defines the following three scenarios.*

Scenario 1: The Pyramid





Government responds by enacting policies that benefit the few, resulting in economic concentration & inequality.

- *As contractors and small business goes bust, only companies with the deepest pockets will survive.*
- *In this scenario, we would see major bailouts for the largest companies with the best political connections.*
- *Companies with such connections thrive, whilst those less connected and with different politics suffer.*
- *We see a wave of mergers and acquisitions, as well as investment in automation and AI, as more power shifts into the hands of fewer people.*



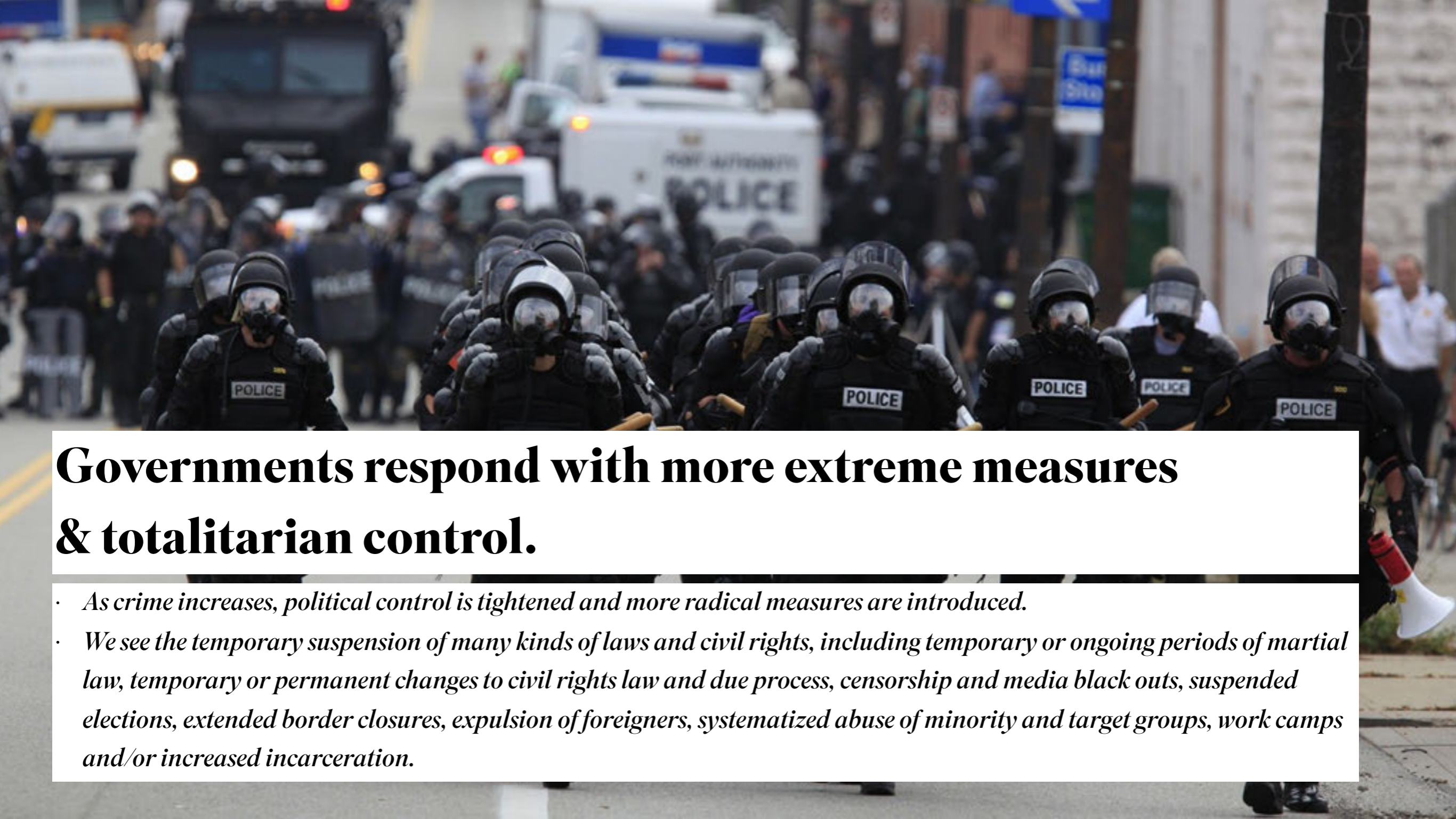
Millions are left angry, frustrated & exposed, looking for someone to blame.

- *Underfunded public services stretch to the breaking point, exacerbated by further austerity measures. Millions are left without adequate care or protection.*
- *Political pressure for immediate, radical solutions increases.*
- *Clever politicians ride this wave of discontent, fueling nationalistic, populist and xenophobic campaigns.*
- *Incumbent and moderate parties are driven out in a wave of anger and blame.*



Poverty and violence increase. Gangs, protests, organized crime and quasi-militias flourish.

- *Social distancing and quarantines leads to increased levels of stress and a diminished ability to cope.*
- *The combination of populist rhetoric, economic precarity, crumbling public services and mental illness is a potent cocktail for violence.*
- *Crime and protests increase, with membership in gangs, quasi-militias and organized crime surging.*
- *Women and minorities, in particular, suffer the worst, as domestic violence and racial attacks spikes.*



Governments respond with more extreme measures & totalitarian control.

- *As crime increases, political control is tightened and more radical measures are introduced.*
- *We see the temporary suspension of many kinds of laws and civil rights, including temporary or ongoing periods of martial law, temporary or permanent changes to civil rights law and due process, censorship and media black outs, suspended elections, extended border closures, expulsion of foreigners, systematized abuse of minority and target groups, work camps and/or increased incarceration.*



Which is administered through military power and advanced digital surveillance tools.

- *All of these trends are enabled and administered through widespread use of digital surveillance.*
- *People are required to document their location at all times, track who they socialized with, give up their privacy and share their personal biometric and health data with the authorities at all times.*
- *These tools are used for both epidemiological surveillance and social and political control.*

Scenario 2: The Leviathan



A photograph of military personnel in camouflage uniforms near a helicopter. One soldier in the foreground wears sunglasses and looks down. Another soldier in the background wears a headset. The helicopter's rotor blades are visible against a cloudy sky.

Governments rapidly and dramatically expand their powers, but use it to deliver collective benefits & goals.

- *In the face of economic and political crisis, governments enact new legislation that lets them take more power.*
- *Key industries are nationalized and there is a renewed focus on infrastructure and basics needs.*
- *This “war time footing” is used to focus on public goods and social welfare, with an eye towards transforming the economy and creating a more resilient and sustainable foundation.*



They launch a range of next-generation regeneration projects focused on public infrastructure & basic needs.

- *Massive economic packages are launched covering both household needs (UBI) & major new infrastructure.*
- *WPA-style projects focus on new public networks & digital services, widely accessible next-generation healthcare systems, and climate-resilient energy, transport & housing projects.*
- *Governments act as both guide & delivery partners in this context, supporting entirely new industries & players.*



Everyone is mobilized to develop local solutions, creating a flourishing of bottom-up experiments with active support.

- *Governments act as platforms to set challenges, stimulate innovation & ensure equitable access.*
- *Widespread experimentation, hackathons, grant-making & venture challenges provide financing, guidance, capability building and clear ethical frameworks to build more inclusive & resilient systems.*



This lays the foundation for a post-crisis recovery, but requires significant personal sacrifice in the short-term.

- *The line between the public and private sector blurs, following a state-capitalist model akin to China or Singapore.*
- *Personal luxuries and individual freedoms are curtailed in the service of larger social needs.*
- *Surveillance is pervasive, linked to individual behavior and attitudes, and social compliance is explicitly and implicitly enforced.*



It pays off in the end, resulting in a “New New Deal”.

- *The potent combination of ambitious projects, led by a vibrant public sector & supported by innovative industries, leads to a more resilient economy and society.*
- *Over time, constraints loosen and society opens up again, but on a fundamentally new, shared footing.*



The long-term consequences must be carefully managed, in particular increased conformity and much higher taxation.

- *The ideological commitments required to achieve society's goals leave little room for alternative points of view. As the crisis loosens and society opens up, the tendency to enforce uniformity and stifle debate must be carefully managed.*
- *The cost of public initiatives also requires a dramatic rise in taxes, significant public debt and quantitative easing.*
- *Despite its general success, there is a simmering resistance which aims to restore pre-pandemic policies and norms.*

Scenario 3: The Village





**State intervention proves ineffective or unsustainable,
but local communities attempt to fill the void.**

- *National governments cannot (or will not) manage the crisis, local governments and self-organized communities rise to the challenge and successfully and seize the moment.*



As the economy contracts & support services disappear, we are forced to rely more and more on each other.

- *Large-scale unemployment and restricted services drives a bottom up community response.*
- *This intensifies the bonds of local communities, putting us in better touch with our neighbors, family, and local economies (particularly for those sectors that cannot be automated or virtualized).*



Grey market workarounds & DIY hacks flourish.

- *There is a burst of innovation in local co-working & socialization tools, combined with tried and tested low tech solutions, which help fill the void left by traditional employment and services.*
- *Local currencies, peer-to-peer bartering systems, resource banking & other forms of local problem solving flourish.*
- *Solutions are rarely as good as they used to be, but they're local, adaptable and sufficient... in most cases.*



Creating dependence on precarious small-scale networks.

- *Such a renewed localism drives more intense local economies and a stronger sense of community.*
- *People band together to teach each other new skills, build businesses & develop new politics at a local level.*
- *This is positive overall, helping us develop more intense relationships & rebuilding a sense of community lost decades ago, but can be precarious, temperamental and, on occasion, violent.*







Communities are more sustainable and self-reliant, but also significantly more fragile.

- *The renewed sense of our own fragility, combined with our dependence on each other, forces a shift towards more sustainable, low-consumption practices.*
- *Not every community is resourced & resilient enough, however, and even the smallest shocks can send communities into moments of renewed crisis.*



The world becomes more fragmented, volatile & tribal.

- *Being different is tough. Local communities become more parochial, conservative, and exclusionary.*
- *Racial, religious & ethnic groups band together and tighten their bonds, as communities close ranks to survive.*
- *Efficiency is reduced, trade suffers and standards fragment. Advanced sciences and innovation grinds to a halt, with industries losing decades of progress in a matter of years.*

	Scenario 1: The Pyramid	Scenario 2: The Leviathan	Scenario 3: The Village
Society			
Economy			
Environment			
Politics			
Technology			

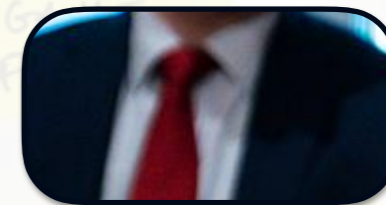
Each scenario would have differing impacts & outcomes

COVID-19

Political
Power

Concentrated → **Beneficiaries**

Elites



The Pyramid

Public



The Leviathan

Diffuse



The Village

The kind of power & how it is exercised, is key.

Open Questions

We still face many open questions.





Is a “return to normal” possible?

- *After the 2001 and 2008 crises, there was a significant desire to “return to normal” as quickly as possible.*
- *It is unlikely that things will be different this time, although the scale & magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis may dramatically exceed either of these previous events.*
- *If we truly experience 12 to 18 months of global lock-down, can we ever truly “return to normal”? Or do these scenarios sketch the outlines of a truly new era for Europe and North America?*



How might these scenarios play out in different countries?

- *While these trends are felt in most Western countries, they vary in their intensity and specific manifestation.*
- *Countries with stronger public welfare & social solidarity are likely to fare better than those without such traditions. The manifestation of these three scenarios might play out different in different contexts, but all three scenarios are possible in various shades in almost every Western country.*



What kind of leadership would each scenario require?

- *The role of the state is a critical variable in how these futures play out.*
- *What kind of leader (and what kind of leadership) might carry us in one direction or another?*

An aerial photograph of a multi-lane highway in San Francisco, likely the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. The highway is flanked by green hills and trees. In the background, the San Francisco skyline is visible, including the Transamerica Pyramid. A few cars are visible on the highway. A white banner with text is overlaid at the bottom of the image.

What can we learn for climate change & social justice?

- *The challenges presented by COVID-19 are a microcosm of the challenges we will ultimately have to address for climate change, but at a much larger scale.*
- *How will we resolve the tension to “get back to normal” versus the reality that “normal” was inadequate and unsustainable for many in the long run?*



Can we balance fear with an openness to try new things?

- *How can we honor people's concerns about new changes but also encourage them to experiment and be open to new ideas? What role for the arts and culture, in particular, in navigating this delicate balance?*
- *How might the tension between more centralized economies, populist policies and xenophobic anxieties interact with the possibility of more resilient, acting and caring communities?*



What might a “Post-COVID19 Renaissance” look like?

- *Finally, could a long term COVID-19 crisis provide stimulation for a new era of social imagination?*
- *How can we better imagine a more healthy, satisfying and fair world in light of the challenges posed by this “Great Transition”?*

Thank You

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