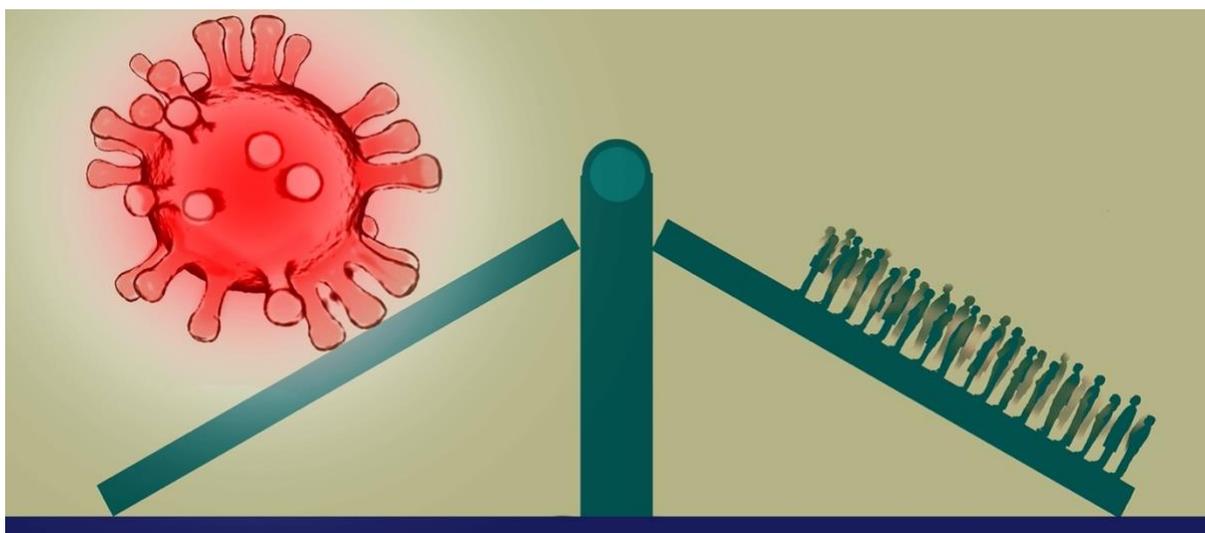


Why we must build a new civic covenant

The Covid crisis can enable us to reimagine how we live together and renew the foundations of our economy.

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The age of individualism is passing. The past 50 years in the West saw a celebration of unfettered freedom. Citizens on both sides of the Atlantic were encouraged to liberate themselves from the relational constraints of family, history and even nature. Now Covid-19 has highlighted our mutual dependence on one another and a desire for community.

President Joe Biden is now deploying unprecedented fiscal resources to repair the damage wrought by four decades of market fundamentalism. First the \$1.9tn American Rescue Plan to kickstart the economic recovery from the pandemic. This is to be followed by an enormous programme of investment aimed at infrastructure, research, net carbon zero, childcare, education and health. Whereas Ronald Reagan in the 1980s saw government as the source of political and social problems, Biden considers it as the solution to them.

It is unclear, however, whether this new age of state activism will address the human need for community and belonging. If national leaders want to strengthen their country's structural resilience, they need to ensure these transformational policies empower local leaders and civic institutions to revitalise their communities. A politics that strengthens belonging can reverse the excesses of individualism without succumbing to the errors of authoritarianism.

Since at least the 1980s, citizens in the North Atlantic world believed a myth that individual autonomy, global markets, digital connections and higher incomes would secure individual happiness and aggregate wellbeing. But the opposite has occurred. In his *New York Times* op-ed in November 2020, Pope Francis put this well: “The pandemic has exposed the paradox that while we are more connected, we are also more divided. Feverish consumerism breaks the bonds of belonging.”

According to the US sociologist Robert Putnam, civic-minded generations that survived the Second World War were replaced by generations that were “less embedded in community life”. In 2017, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, an expert on the long-term health effects of social connection, [testified before the US Senate](#): “There is robust evidence that lacking social connection significantly increases risk for premature mortality, and the magnitude of the risk exceeds many leading health indicators. Social isolation influences a significant portion of the US adult population and there is evidence the prevalence rates are increasing. Indeed, many nations around the world now suggest we are facing a ‘loneliness epidemic’.”

The chief promoters of market fundamentalism such as the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek and the US economist Milton Friedman advanced policies that weakened anti-trust law, unleashed monopoly powers and centralised wealth in metropolises – the symbols of individualistic ambition. The rural towns and smaller cities that were forgotten about became the electoral redoubts for right-wing populist parties, such as *Rassemblement National* in France or the Republican Party under [Donald Trump in the US](#).

Building on the body of liberal political thought by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and John Stuart Mill, market fundamentalists reduced humans to “*homo economicus*”, a rational, selfish animal in search of happiness in the pleasures of cheap consumer goods and wealth accumulation. In his work *The Master and His Emissary* (2009), psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist argues that this reductive view of human beings has led to a “decreasing stability and interconnectedness” and the “destruction of local cultures” across the West.

“*Homo economicus*” is not only theoretically questionable but empirically flawed. In 2001, a [global study](#) led by [evolutionary biologist Joseph Heinrich](#) and economist Herbert Gintis evaluated human behaviour across five continents, 12 countries and 17 different types of societies. It comprehensively disproved the theory of the utility maximising individual. Humans value fairness and reciprocity just as much as they do their own self-interest.

Yet many of our national and international institutions function on out-dated neoliberal models. Without reform, our economic systems will continue to consolidate power into the hands of the tech monopolies, designed to maximise our selfish traits at the expense of mutual flourishing. Local communities will continue to lose their main streets and the lifeblood of local employment. Workers will continue to get squeezed out by labour markets with fewer employers. These results are a recipe for angry, disaffected voters frustrated with the endless failures of democracies to produce better lives.

Covid-19 provides an opportunity to rediscover our natural need for belonging. Protective isolation and the closing of borders have thrown us back onto family and neighbourhood, community and country. In 1943, the French philosopher Simone Weil wrote in her *Draft for A Statement of Human Obligations*, “The human soul needs above all to be rooted in several natural environments and to make contact to the universe through them.”

For Weil, tracing a social philosophy back to Aristotle, this included “the real, active and natural participation in the life of the community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future”. To remove people from place and community is to destroy the very soil of their humanity.

[Harvard’s Human Flourishing Program](#), led by epidemiologist and biostatistician Tyler VanderWeele, is confirming Weil’s insight. According to VanderWeele’s research, humans need material goods such as financial security and physical health. But to truly flourish humans also need non-material goods such as mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue and close social relationships.

If humans are story-telling animals that seek meaning in their lives, then the self only makes sense in relation to something greater than itself. In our quest for a purposeful life, we discern at the heart of ourselves what the late Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi in the UK, calls the greater human “we”: all the covenantal ties binding us together as humans who are social beings.

As we recover after the Covid crisis, we have choices to make about how to undo the winner-takes-all economy. How do we reimagine the new economic covenant between employers, workers and local communities? How do we find new ways to value work and support working families? How do we steward our planet for future generations?

We can only find the answers to these questions if we break with the creed of individualism and build a new civic covenant of international cooperation anchored in the relationships and institutions that matter most to people: family, friends, workplaces, neighbourhoods, and nations. Only then can we renew the foundations of our economy so that everyone can truly flourish.

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