

Let's not go back to normal!

ANNA HERRHAUSEN

German political scientist and Executive Director of the Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft in Berlin

We've had months and months with only minimal contact with other people. What can we see if we use this time to look closely at the world around us? We can see nature being exploited, air, earth and water being polluted, biodiversity disappearing. We can see the gulf between rich and poor. We can see cultural identity being invented and idealised. We can see international supply chains intended to reduce costs and minimise warehousing. We can see our dependence on external validation, whether from consumer status symbols or likes and followers on social media. Doesn't it all seem bizarre?

Many people's reflexive response is to want to go back as quickly as possible to how things used to be before the system shock. But what a chance we'd be missing if we did that!

If anything good can come out of the crisis, then it's that it makes us question whether certain developments are really inevitable. It disproves some of the dogmas that we've often used as excuses to shirk our responsibility

Ever since the Club of Rome published the study *The Limits to Growth* in 1972, we've known that our economic system is unsustainable. It's linear rather than circular; overheated; exploitative. Year after year, we see fresh evidence that we still haven't freed humanity from the 'scourge of war', despite that being the declared aim of the UN founding member governments back in 1945.

The great hopes we've placed in science and the economy haven't yet been fulfilled. We hoped, firstly, that we'd be able to 'invent our way' out of

the dilemma of sustainability, and, secondly, that we'd be able to 'trade our way' out of the dilemma of conflict. If anything good can come out of the crisis, then it's that it makes us question whether certain developments are really inevitable. It disproves some of the dogmas that we've often used as excuses to shirk our responsibility: 'That's globalisation! Digitalisation! The market!' But the speed and direction of our future course aren't set in stone. Even 'megatrends' can be reversed.

THE STANDSTILL GIVES US A CHANCE TO THINK ABOUT WHAT WE WANT THE NEW START TO LOOK LIKE

To do that, we need to understand what drives our system. What are its foundations? What do we want to keep, what do we want to let go, what do we want to give greater or lesser weight to? We believe in the dignity of human beings and their right to achieve their full potential. This right goes hand in hand with individual and collective responsibility for the wider community and universal goods.

We need to remind people that nobody is an island. Everyone on this planet is connected, across borders, across generations, across the terms of individual governments. And so we should readjust the balance in favour of nature, in favour of those seeking aid, in favour of younger and future generations. For their sake, we need to finally give substance to the buzzwords sustainability, diversity and humanity.

WE CAN'T KEEP LIVING FOR TODAY AT THE EXPENSE OF TOMORROW

The economic stimulus packages that are now being agreed ought to protect the health of our society and economy. We need to improve our educational system, provide more funding for basic research, expand our physical and digital infrastructure, and make sure people can see the value of work.

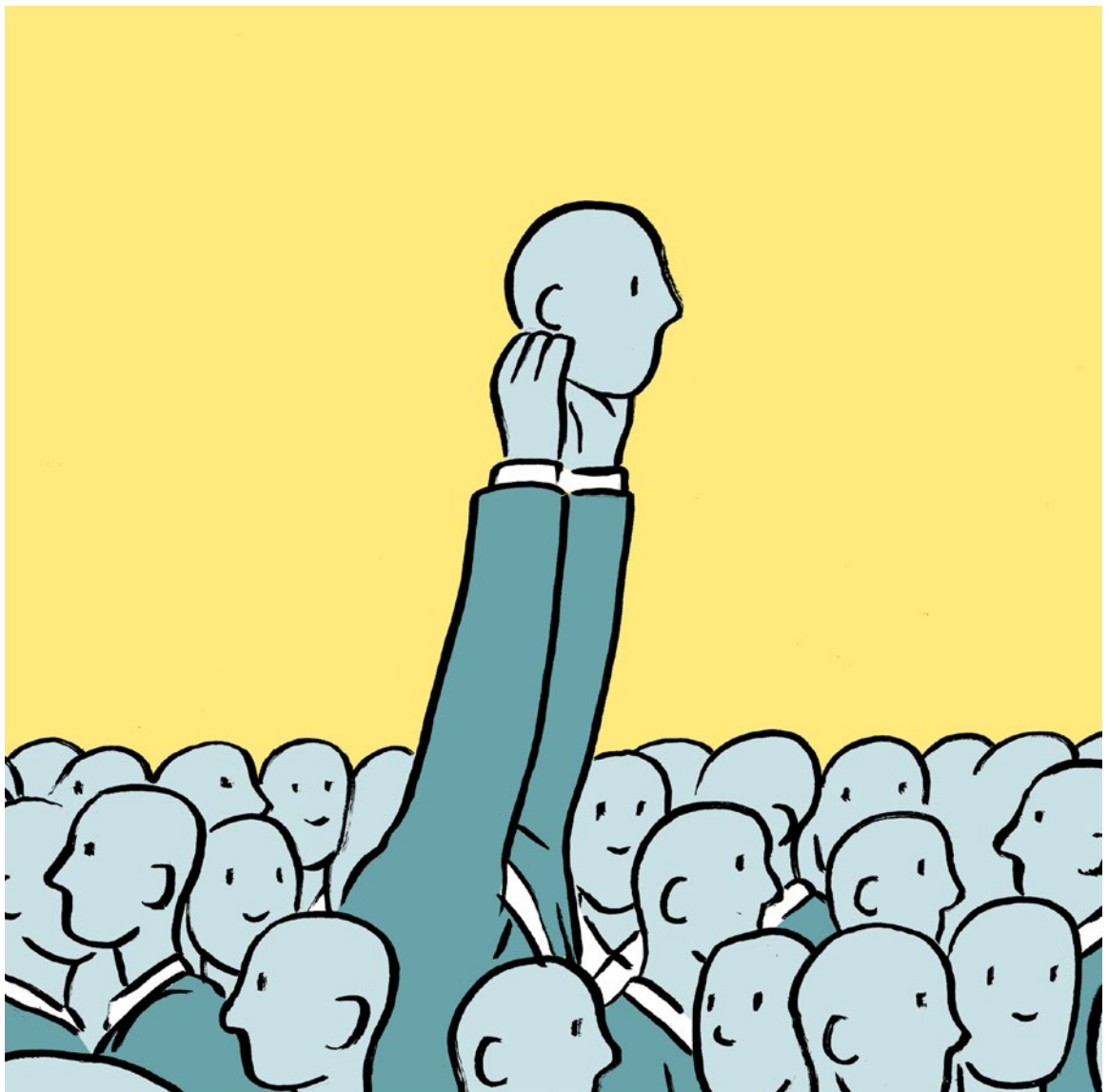
REPLACING LINEAR VALUE CREATION WITH A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

External effects of economic activity, such as when industries consume vast amounts of clean water, need to be reflected in the prices of products. Linear value creation should be replaced by a circular economy.

Even as our lives come to be increasingly dominated by digital technology, so that we could leave decision-making to algorithms, we're still the ones who are ultimately responsible. In short, artificial intelligence mustn't be allowed to cover up for human ignorance.

If we look back at the past weeks and months, we can see how adaptable we human beings are. How similar we all actually are. There are many things we can do without. But we can't do without nature and we can't do without each other. As we come out of the crisis, we should hold onto this self-awareness, think about what we want the new start to look like – and actively work to make it happen.

This text was released on 9 July 2020 in the weekly newspaper „DIE ZEIT“ with the same title in German (issue number 29).





IMPRINT

Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft

Members of management: Dr. Anna Herrhausen and Daniela Kaiser

Unter den Linden 13-15

10117 Berlin

Tel. +49 (0)30 3407 5559

Fax. +49 (0)30 3407 4209

E-Mail: info.ahg@db.com

Commercial Register: Local Court of Charlottenburg, 116881B