

# What conflict work may offer about the Covid-19 crisis

Eric Le Van Quyen



(Wall Street Journal illustration, March 2020)

We are now entering the fifth week of lockdown here in Paris. I have to say, while I have been relatively spared and privileged with my partner here these past few weeks, I have also been quite alarmed for my parents who both fall in the at-risk population.

Our neighbors Spain and obviously Italy have been tragically hard-hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, just as the horrible death

toll reaches the 14.000 mark here in France when I am writing this (April 13, 2020).

I have personally been reading up a lot during the lockdown, trying to keep up with the horrifying daily news, while also trying not to get too overwhelmed and distressed. There is a lot of available and often conflicting material out there, which can be confusing, especially in a time of crisis when accurate, timely and relevant information is needed.

The corporate group seminars I run are now largely on hold, or moved online, since all in-person events have now been postponed or indefinitely cancelled. My job as an organization coach dealing with individual and group conflicts, helps me try to develop my own, very human-oriented, perspective on the current events.

My intention with this (possibly these) article is to shed a new and very personal light on the current horrifying outbreak using a theory for conflict resolution.



(Michelle Gustafson for The Washington Post, March 2020)

## The new normal

Our new collective reality is rapidly emerging and changing. What we see out of our windows, in our households, the way we interact and conduct business are morphing everyday as we have been adjusting to the lockdown. I borrow below in parts some elements from Arnold Mindell's Processwork (process-oriented psychology) theory. This "level" of our mundane experience is what Mindell calls the **consensus reality level**, as we can all agree on what we can observe, as distressing and horrifying it may be.

Now is obviously the time to focus on the emergency of helping those directly affected by the virus, as far too many lives are lost

every day, and as the health care professionals are our frontline heroes against this virus.

The luckiest among us now have to stay home with minimal trips outside, wash our hands repeatedly and have to follow social distancing measures, in order to minimize infection for ourselves and most importantly for others.

Almost half the world is in lockdown. As of March 21st, India has announced the world's largest lockdown in human history: 1.3 billion people.

On the social and economic front, we have entered a recession some are already comparing to the Great Depression of 1929. Some European countries are expected to lose 30% of their GDP as a result of the outbreak. It is also more and more likely that the overall unemployment rate could reach 30 % by the summer in some Western economies.

*The metaphor of war has been touted by many European leaders to describe the unprecedented various national efforts to eradicate the pandemic. Processwork posits that within conflict itself there actually lies opportunities for individual and collective transformation.*

There are indeed phases that we are going through in this pandemic, that mimic the various phases of conflict resolution.

Let's explore.

## Phase 1 –The slumber

It certainly was a rude awakening for many. Folks here in France had been living these past few weeks quite unconscious of the looming disaster. Populations were happily unaware, largely carefree and just going about their daily life. This is **Phase 1 in Processwork theory** when working with conflict.

It had indeed been business as usual for many here, getting through our daily routine, getting together socially, sometimes even partying despite the official early announcements, recommendations and warnings. Much of the same has been going on around the world. This collective behavior of being happily unaware is our **u Energy**, an energy we are very familiar with.

Some of our world leaders themselves had also been slow to acknowledge the upcoming disaster, downplaying early forecasts and recommendations.

*One may argue that Phase 1 in the context of the coronavirus pandemic has in effect largely spread the infection further in certain areas of the world.*

## Phase 2–Unrest

We are now deep in **Phase 2** for an open-ended period of time, in open conflict with Covid-19 as acknowledged by many international leaders. On a global scale, we have indeed entered

a war, a declared conflict with this external threat that is the Covid-19 virus.

Paradoxically, while Covid-19 has altered the shape of existing geopolitical tensions, by sometimes halting local conflicts, the UN now warns it may very well also threaten global peace and security.

*At the individual level, Conflict work identifies 3 types of conflict: interpersonal conflict, conflict with “the world” and internal conflict.*

*The current outbreak has caused conflicts on all 3 fronts.*

The forced isolation and lockdown can be difficult to live for some, sometimes even creating dramatic situations of domestic violence when trapped in an abusive or coercive relationship (interpersonal conflict).

In the media, on the internet, “researchers” as a whole, all “governments”, whole “countries” sometimes have been blamed for the outbreak by some commentators. The “tech” sector as a whole for instance has also been sometimes blindly targeted for its invasion of privacy when tracing cell phones , or hacking into our video conference calls (conflict with “the world”).

While it is obvious a full-on conflict against this new pathogen has erupted, forcing us to find a treatment and hopefully eventually develop a vaccine, a more

subtle **internal conflict** rages just under the surface. This subtle realm is where I would like to focus.

In the face of the Covid-19 terrifying outbreak, our usual lifestyle had to adapt to a new, unsettling, sudden and unprecedented form. Our usual inner world is threatened by new internal disturbances (which Mindell identifies using the term **X energy**). That is a much trickier issue, because its root cause is not an external “Other”, not some pathogen separate from ourselves, and we its victims.

This subtle internal conflict pits our everyday carefree lifestyle (u energy) against a new internal aggressor (X energy) with all its various uncomfortable components. We are essentially there are war with ourselves.

Obviously, each one of us faces a different X energy, waging a private war. But what the current crisis broadly brings about for most of us revolves around: self-isolation, loneliness, loss of sense of community, loss of physical contact, germaphobia, boredom, helplessness, anxiety and sometimes depression.

We might hopefully eventually emerge from the pandemic victorious against Covid-19, but we cannot know if our new collective identity will be any different then. Processwork argues that permanently changing this collective identity is only possible by individually integrating the X energy which we are strongly fighting against right now.

How to go about it then?



“We are all Edward Hopper paintings now”

## The undercurrent

Just below the surface of the necessary, urgent, strict measures we are taking, lies a whole new world: new emotions and sensations emerging, things left unsaid wanting to be heard, new intuitions and aspirations appearing... This aspect of our new collective awareness is what Processwork calls **non-consensus reality** (or Dreamland) because we would be hard-pressed to all agree upon and describe that very subjective experience of the pandemic.

However, in a way, non-consensus reality has an equally strong impact on ourselves as consensus reality. The X energy can indeed sometimes feel very uncomfortable and alien right now in our daily lives.

Fear itself for instance is a strong pandemic and social media use has been helping to propagate it widely. Dealing with that fear individually and collectively is a first step in the right direction.

In a wider sense, we have largely lost a feeling of normalcy, of habitual connection, of confidence into the future. And we are grieving these losses. This feeling of collective grief in the air is both palpable and unusual.

For me, one aspect of the X energy the lockdown has caused revolves around procrastination, around my difficulty to manage time, between work and downtime. A strong inner critic easily comes to me about being the most productive with all the new unstructured time.

Another X energy component for me is a strong inner voice which criticizes others' lack of civic-mindedness during this outbreak (a tyrant really...).

*When this virus broke the edge between the animal kingdom and the human world (as is the case with all zoonoses), it forced us against an inner edge. In a way, we have been grounded in our homes, forced to do our inner work before we can collectively go on with our normal lives.*

Some of our leader themselves must deal with this inner work of transformation to successfully tackle the current outbreak.

How can we process all these aspects of our current X energy?

## Phase 3–Building deep immunity

Analysts and commentators are predicting a couple of scenarios to end the pandemic over the coming months.

Economists are talking about L, U, V, W-shaped scenarios for an economic rebound and recovery. Most likely the endgame will entail alternating lockdowns, with populations allowed out of their homes in various sequences. Time spans though are still up in the air.

Whether through building herd immunity or possibly producing a vaccine, we might eventually develop a collective immunity against Covid-19. This is one of the most optimistic scenarios for the consensus reality of the outbreak.

At the non-consensual level, we will individually and collectively be dealing with our usual u energy and the new foreign X energy until both have been integrated with one another. That is **phase 3** which I call developing **deep immunity**.

Deep immunity entails integrating this foreign and uncomfortable X energy, otherwise it will remain active within our inner systems albeit being unconscious.

Sadly, most human conflicts (both interpersonal and internal) often end at phase 2, with no possible integration of the foreign X energy. In the context of the Covid-19 outbreak, this will mean

we might come out mostly unchanged from the self-isolation, the social distancing and the lockdown measures.

*For me, my X energy around procrastination is teaching me a lot about using my downtime to be creative, without beating myself up about it. It is showing me that new interesting ideas can actually emerge from idleness, and ultimately be pertinent insights for my work. Reverie is more welcomed. (for writing for instance...)*

Another aspect of my current X energy, around judging folks whom I perceive to be non civic-minded, is teaching me a lot about putting myself more in service of others, and also lets me have insights about how important public service is.

I haven't yet completely integrated these aspects of my X energy the lockdown caused. I have not fully developed my deep immunity yet, as the X energy pops up now and again, but it is a work in progress.

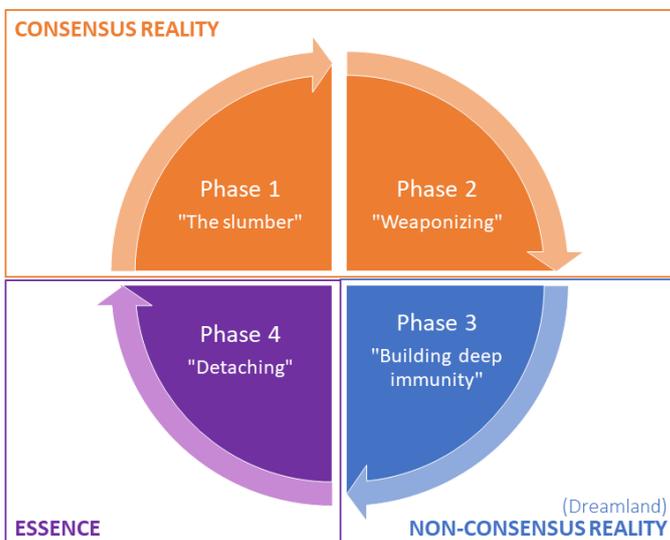
Phase 3 may actually feel like a very humbling proposition of letting go of old identity structures, much like progressing in a real-life individual (and collective) initiation.



(Pope's blessing in empty St Peter's Square, The Guardian, March 2020)

## The Endgame

The last phase of conflict resolution implies stepping back from our opposing u and X energies. At this level (called Essence level), what is required is detaching. It comes with letting go, “not-doing”, “being” which develops a greater acceptance of life. This is a very quiet, passive and creative phase, as opposed to phase 3.



The feelings generally associated with that phase are therefore relaxation, openness. It might feel like you are yourself being moved about (flowing) by larger forces during that phase. Often, what needs to emerge, does so from a place of deep calm and

centeredness. (phase 4 is a phase and paradoxically for the purists also at the center of all phases)

## **Phase 4 –Detaching**

When we have hopefully developed immunity (and deep immunity) with the virus, and learnt to live with it, we will have essentially removed ourselves from the Covid-19 threat. Much like most cases of today's flu, the coronavirus might become an integrated pathogen, which we may grow immune to.

Survivors from previous pandemics are already great teachers, when recounting their personal transformations throughout these ordeals (be it the 1918 Spanish flu, the less known but very deadly 1967 Hong Kong flu, or more recently the Ebola outbreak).

Integrating and detaching from our old u energy and our current X energy might possibly usher a new awareness, a new form of resilience. Our inner posture will have possibly changed; we might have evolved toward reclaiming a new form of inner power.

*In the long run, we will be better prepared and most importantly internally more pandemic-ready when the next pathogen comes around, which will be a normal and expected turn of events, essentially cycling back to phase 1.*

*Phase 4 is still a phase, and it too shall pass.*



(South China Morning Post review, March 2020)

## Conclusion

Conflict resolution shows us indeed that these various phases keep repeating themselves, much like the cyclical seasonal phenomena in the natural world. In other words, much like we will most likely see a second and a third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, we might possibly cycle through phases 1 to 4 again internally.

What the current first wave of the pandemic will have taught us though, at the non-consensual level, might prepare us for the next wave, even possibly for the next outbreak. Asian countries, already victims of the 2003 SARS outbreak were much better equipped (both at a consensual and non-consensual level) to take on Covid-19 with minimum casualties. Some of them are even now ready to extend their support to other less fortunate countries.

This tends to show that going through these **phases of disaster** can in time bring resilience. That cycling through these phases can be seen as a natural phenomenon of growth. Finally also, Mindell argues that beyond sexism, classism, racism and much of the other “isms” we face in our modern societies today, conflict work invites us to acknowledge our collective **phase-ism**: our stubbornness to stay stuck in phase 1 and 2 and reject phase 3 and 4 of conflict which require inner work.

This way of thinking means we will resume doing “much of the same” after the outbreak. Whereas, having the courage to go through phase 3 and 4 makes this pandemic a likely tool for a collective initiation, a possible rite of passage.