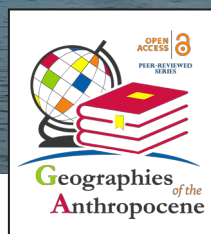


# NARRATIVES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE ERA

*Charles Travis, Vittorio Valentino (Editors)*

Preface by Kirill O. Thompson

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# Narratives in the Anthropocene era

Charles Travis  
Vittorio Valentino  
*Editors*



IL Sileno  
Edizioni

“Narratives in the Anthropocene era”

*Charles Travis, Vittorio Valentino (Eds.)*

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The book series “Geographies of the Anthropocene” edited by Scientific International Publisher “Il Sileno Edizioni” will discuss the new processes of the Anthropocene epoch through the various worldviews of geoscientists and

humanists, intersecting disciplines of Geosciences, Geography, Geoethics, Philosophy, Socio-Anthropology, Sociology of Environment and Territory, Psychology, Economics, Environmental Humanities and cognate disciplines.

Geoethics focuses on how scientists (natural and social), arts and humanities scholars working in tandem can become more aware of their ethical responsibilities to guide society on matters related to public safety in the face of natural hazards, sustainable use of resources, climate change and protection of the environment. Furthermore, the integrated and multiple perspectives of the Environmental Humanities, can help to more fully understand the cultures of, and the cultures which frame the Anthropocene. Indeed, the focus of Geoethics and Environmental Humanities research, that is, the analysis of the way humans think and act for the purpose of advising and suggesting appropriate behaviors where human activities interact with the geosphere, is dialectically linked to the complex concept of Anthropocene.

The book series “Geographies of the Anthropocene” publishes online volumes, both collective volumes and monographs, which are set in the perspective of providing reflections, work materials and experimentation in the fields of research and education about the new geographies of the Anthropocene.

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# CONTENTS

Preface	
<i>Kirill O. Thompson</i>	9

Introduction	
<i>Charles Travis, Vittorio Valentino</i>	33

## Section I

### *Resilience: literary and sensory narratives*

1. Italian writers and the Anthropocene	
<i>Chantal Colomb</i>	40
2. Extinction, atavism and inevitability: life after collapse. A study of The Eternal Adam by Jules Verne and of The Death of the Earth by J.-H. Rosny aîné.	
<i>Kevin Even</i>	57
3. We are not alone in the world	
<i>Noé Gross</i>	72
4. Animals' Optical Democracy in the fiction of Cormac McCarthy	
<i>Geneviève Lobo</i>	91
5. Idyll and threat: man-nature relationship in the history of music, art and literature	
<i>Federico Volpe</i>	107
6. Countering Anthropos with Trans-Corporeal Assemblages in Rita Indiana's Tentacle	
<i>Sarah Sierra</i>	122
7. On the environmental issue: when poets listen to Mother-Land	
<i>Sébastien Aimé Nyafouna</i>	140

## Section II

### *Transformative Action and Global Ecological Sustainability*

8. Becoming aware of the living air: from scientific and indigenous narratives to care ethics  
*Clément Barniaudy* 164
9. An Evaluation of a Shambaa Community's Tradition of Adaptation to Local and Global Forces to Maintain Socio-economic and Ecological Sustainability, and Plague Resilience in Lushoto, Tanzania  
*Raymond Ruhaak, Philemon Mtoi* 182
10. Fire and Form: First Nation Eco-Georgic Practices in "Borri is Fire Waru is Fire" by Lionel Fogarty  
*Trevor Donovan* 216
11. All my earthothers: Levinasian tools for deep ecology  
*Erika Natalia Molina Garcia* 232
12. Bio-deconstructing Bioremediation: Tailings Ponds, Oil-eating Bacteria, and Microbial Agency  
*Aaron Bradshaw* 251
13. Healing the Earth, transforming the mind: how the COVID-19 pandemic generates new insights through the Econarrative writing workshop  
*Angela Biancofiore* 266

### **Section III**

#### ***Crisis and pandemic: dynamics of writing and thinking***

14. COVID-19 as a wake-up call. Potential for more sustainable attitudes and behaviors in Poland  
*Justyna Orlowska, Alicja Piekarz* 285
15. Young People's Geographies in the Times of Covid-19: System Threat as a Chance for System Change?  
*Lydia Heilen, Andreas Eberth, Christiane Meyer* 302



16. Mapping the Anthropocene: The Harrisons' and The Deep Wealth of this Nation, Scotland <i>Inge Panneels</i>	321
17. Prolegomena to containment tourism. Happy and smart self- deconfinement sheet or "links to free oneself" <i>Charlie Galibert</i>	343
<b><i>The Authors</i></b>	356

## 14. COVID-19 as a wake-up call. Potential for more sustainable attitudes and behaviors in Poland

*Justyna Orlowska<sup>1</sup>, Alicja Piekarz<sup>2</sup>*

### Abstract

Poland has been quite hesitant to adopt changes (both systematic and on the individual level) necessary to mitigate climate change. The country's economy is heavily dependent on coal mining, which is supported by a very powerful Silesian (main coal region in Poland) culture, with the miner being the most respected profession in society. In addition, there being a rather "young" European democracy, paradigms of economic growth and consumerism are still dominant development drivers. In this context, introducing a societal change to support the necessary energy transitions and drastically cutting fossil fuels emissions seem extremely challenging. However, COVID-19 pandemic has forced certain, at least temporary, changes to people and the economy. In our study, we have investigated what potential comes from redefining people's everyday rituals for fighting climate change. We have focused on different behaviors with high-carbon footprints, such as daily transport, travel, consumption, and food waste. It turned out that some of these changes could be introduced in the future. What is more, the health crisis and the lockdown inspired sort of national reckoning on "what is really important" and, to some extent, reconnection with nature. If appropriately supported, it gives a great potential for societal change towards sustainable living. The study was conducted in April and May 2020, during the so called 'first national quarantine'. It was based on the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. For purposes of this paper, we focus on the results of the former method only, which provides much better insights into the narratives of the Anthropocene in the Silesian region. The survey was based on 150 in-depth interviews conducted via online communication tools. Although such a sample is not representative by definition, it aims to display diverse strategies and changing habits of various subjects in different regions of Poland, as well as

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various life situations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (families with kids, pensioners, young adults, etc.).

**Keywords:** social change, sustainable living, carbon footprint, environmental crisis

## 1. Introduction

Although the exact effects of climate change are impossible to measure with ‘surgical precision’, humanity managed to translate preventive measures into very specific requirements that each country is obliged to meet. The general goal for the international community is to drastically cut emissions of fossil fuels, the main contributor to climate change, and to become carbon neutral. Countries contribute to climate change to different extents depending on how their economies and societies are organized. In the case of Poland, which is heavily dependent on coal mining, it is necessary to reduce emissions of fossil fuels by 40% commensurate with 1990 levels. This requires a complex transformation of the energy production and distribution systems. Such systematic changes that are the responsibility of governments need to be accompanied by increased awareness and openness of the societies to accept certain compromises connected with cutting emissions. Hence, achievement of climate-neutrality is a civilizational challenge, also for people individually. This requires changing our way of thinking about the interactions between humans and environment, the use of the natural resources and an awareness of the importance of individual choices for contributing to climate change.

After the first coronavirus cases in Poland were identified in March 2020 and the infection started to spread, the authorities decided to introduce various preventive measures. Probably the most strict and significant one from the perspective of our study was the prohibition to leave home freely, but for a few exceptional reasons. This was accompanied by a temporary closure of most public institutions, markets, common spaces, restaurants and service points. Similar lockdowns were introduced in many countries. In a way, the world stopped. This unusual situation led some people to redefine how they organized their social, family and work lives. Also, being locked at home, inspired certain existential thoughts, including these on global threats or relationships between humans and the environment.

The main aim of the research presented in this chapter was to analyze to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic could positively lead to societal change in regards to environmental sustainability. The results are based on qualitative interviews with 150 participants from different regions of Poland and characterized by different social variables. What we can learn from the interviewees and their accounts are subjective descriptions of their everyday routines during the first national lockdown and more general feelings about the pandemic. During these in-depth conversations, we were searching for some patterns that could foreshadow a change on the level of individual consciousness and actions towards more sustainable living, which is necessary to overcome environmental crisis and slow down global warming.

## **2. Theoretical perspective**

The environmental crisis that we are facing as a human species requires an interdisciplinary approach. Physical sciences provide hard data and evidence of the catastrophic effects of our actions. Technology is expected to provide a wide range of solutions for saving energy and converting to renewable resources, which present key challenges for sustainable economies. However, the upcoming changes of our reality have to be compatible with social acceptance and, preferably, also a rise of awareness on environmental issues. This implies the grand role that the social sciences and humanities can play in the ‘green transition.’ Until recently, these disciplines were underestimated in facilitating actual change. Carolyn Merchant points out that it is not just their ephemeral contributions, but that the humanities directly influence ecological management strategies. In her view, we need a “new story,” and a new ethic, which will help us transfer from the Anthropocene to sustainability (2020, 144).

That “new story” can be interpreted as narratives that refute humans as those controlling nature. Some contemporary philosophers go even further. Rosi Braidotti believes that our traditional perceptions of the human species is now completely obsolete. She argues that the world of animals, humans and machines overlap and interpenetrate one another, questioning the subjectivity of man (Braidotti, 2013). Certainly, the first step on the pathway for us to overcome environmental crisis is to start considering ourselves as one of the million species, on planet Earth, which we are in fact are.

The need for an interdisciplinary approach to change our reality from Anthropocene to sustainability is also reflected in economic studies. Jeffrey Sachs underlines that sustainability combines economic, social and environmental objectives (2015). Equality, justice and inclusiveness are dominant values in the discourses of sustainable development. A dominating discourse is that it is possible to maintain economic welfare without exploiting the Earth. Some of the practical reflections of such approaches are the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and, to some extent, the European Green Deal.

But how to transform these ideas into actual change?

A discipline which can meet the current need of providing framework for the change of behaviours is Geoethics. Its role is to redirect human behaviours and practices so that they respect "preservation of nature, territory and the common good" (De Pascale, Roger, 2020). A key concept for geoethics is that humans influence the natural environment and are responsible for the planetary system (Peppoloni, Di Capua, 2017).

### **3. Methodology**

The methodological approach of our study strictly matched to its goal, which was to explore circumstances for meaningful change in collective behavior towards becoming a sustainable society. On one hand, it was important to collect data that was representative of the whole country. On the other, it had to probe more deeply with qualitative approaches that would allow to us to discover nuances in people's attitudes. As a result, we combined quantitative and qualitative research methods, which complemented each other. For purposes of this article, however, the qualitative material seems to be much more useful, as it clearly shows actual narratives of human relationships with the surrounding environment in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

The project was designed as a longitudinal study in order to identify any potential changes in attitudes as situations changing over time. The first part was meant to capture attitudes from the beginning of the pandemic and was conducted in April and May 2020, during the so called 'first national quarantine.' The main research question was: what are the key changes in everyday life that could help achieve climate neutrality? In other words, what limitations – from those forced by the pandemic – that people viewed as acceptable to adopt to some degree even after the pandemic is over and such limitations are no longer obligatory. A following survey was initially

planned to be repeated approximately a year later, which we assumed would be 'after the pandemic'. When we realized that the world health crisis might be stretched over a much longer period of time, we decided to conduct the second part of the research in the fall of 2021. The main aim of the second part is to compare declarations for change with the actual change in people's everyday lives. When the whole project is completed, we will be able to juxtapose the openness to changes and the actual capability to introduce them by the same group of interviewees. In this chapter, we focus on the potential of changing everyday routines as experienced during the first stages of the pandemic as described in our interviews.

The unusual situation created by COVID restrictions was potentially interesting from the perspective of possible benefits to the environment from the universal slowdown of daily life. At the same time, the ban on social interactions implied certain challenges for our research methodology. Our aim was to collect in-depth data on people's attitudes, so individual face-to-face interviews would have been our first choice in normal circumstances. However, during the quarantine, when both interviewees and interviewers were 'trapped' at home, we decided to attempt to conduct them via remote, mostly online communication tools. In some cases, we allowed telephone interviews in order to avoid digital exclusion, especially among the elderly interviewees and country dwellers who had limited access to stable internet connections,

In this manner, we spoke to 150 adult Poles. As our sample was quite large for qualitative methods, we decided to make it partly purposive, and partly per quota. This means that although the data may not be representative for the whole population, we recruited interviewees that represented certain characteristics in certain proportions. The main criteria included the variables of: gender, the region of Poland (three of the Northern voivodships, namely pomorskie, warminsko-mazurskie and podlaskie; Central: wielkopolskie, lodzkie, mazowieckie; Southern: slaskie, malopolskie i podkarpackie), place of residence (rural areas, towns or cities) and life situations. However, the groups' sizes were too insignificant to conclude differences depending to these criteria.

We used semi-structured interviews as they resembled a casual, everyday conversation, in which the participants could feel comfortable to express their true opinions and feelings. There was a discussion guide known to the data collectors, so they could make sure all areas of interest were covered in each interview. These included: everyday life during the lockdown, homelife, work, use of public spaces and attitudes towards the world and global risks. The core subject of the research, i.e. the potential for reducing

individual carbon footprint, was not directly communicated as involuntary accounts were treated as a new valuable set of data.

The average length of interviews was 53 minutes, and altogether 8,000 minutes of recorded interviews were collected. All contents of the recordings were transcribed in an anonymized way to protect personal data. The result is 3,000 pages of text which was analyzed with the use of MAXQDA software dedicated for qualitative analysis.

## **4. Results**

For every individual, it is possible to estimate a carbon footprint, which is the total greenhouse gas emissions coming from their activities and lifestyle. The way we commute, travel, shop, eat, use energy and water, and manage household waste – all these factors contribute to fossil fuel emissions. Carbon footprints can also be estimated for a production process, a service, an event, a place, etc. In our research, we examined if Poles reduced their carbon footprints as a consequence of the lockdown and to what extent they would continue with it after the pandemic. Before the collection of data, we pre-identified some elements of everyday life which have impact on the environment (especially such connected with fossil fuel emissions). We did not aim to measure precisely the change in carbon footprint. Instead, we asked them to describe the changes in their daily routines. We drew special attention to transport, consumption and shopping patterns, use of energy, waste management, and leisure time. Results in some of these areas showed very clear patterns (e.g. transport), other were too difficult/subtle to observe by the interviewees (e.g. most were unsure if they changed energy consumption).

Apart from discussing their everyday lives, we also invited research participants to share how they perceived the contemporary health crisis in the wider perspective of multiple global threats. Freezes in the public sphere, and remote work connected with stress and uncertainty triggered various existential thoughts. A common anxiety, fear of the new disease, and finally the lockdown itself inspired feelings that could work as a wake-up call and facilitate a critical evaluation of the contemporary world. It could inspire societal change towards sustainability, which humanity certainly needs due to the environmental crisis.

The two sets of the collected data, answering questions in the described areas, have potential of showing to different ways towards sustainable society. The first one, regarding a change of habits with high carbon footprint is more direct. Basing on changes during the pandemics, it shows

what people could do in a different way in the future. The second one refers to ideas and attitudes, rather than actions, but is equally important. The increased awareness of environmental crisis plays an important role in 'green transition'. Following these two areas for potential change, it could start on two levels: a more practical change in everyday living to less harmful to the environment and a conscious change of attitudes towards the planet, environment, and nature to non-predatory ones in order to limit its exploitation on purpose.

#### *4.1. Reduction of habits with high carbon-footprint*

In the interviews, we investigated changes in everyday routines caused by the restrictions imposed during the pandemic. We drew special attention to those which directly link with carbon emissions and contribute to climate change. Among those we looked for changes of behaviors in the use of transport, the organization of work, household and leisure time, consumption models, etc. For the purpose of this article, we will describe the most apparent trends.

##### *4.1.1. Commuting to work*

One of the areas of life which was significantly changed by the pandemic was the way people work. The restrictions forced many companies to close their offices and move to remote work. This in turn created changes in the use of transport to and from workplace. One third of research participants shifted to online work at least partly and they voiced extreme emotions towards it. Interestingly, the need to introduce remote work was like a real-life experiment for previously non-conventional solutions in Poland. The biggest highlight of online work, directly connected with fossil fuel emissions was the limited need to physically go to workplace. During the strictest period of the lockdown, once-busy streets became quiet and empty with no cars; only few means of public transport were left. On the other hand, the interviews revealed a crisis of confidence in the mass communication system. While some people started to walk or cycle to work in order to avoid using cars others increased their use. The first model of change in behavior seems attractive from the perspective of fossil fuels emissions.



- *So, you are saying that you use your car less than before?*  
- *Yes, definitely. Much less as I don't go to the office (...).*  
*Now, I use the car, when I have something to do and it is too far to walk. But, if I have a choice, I prefer to walk. I need to take exercise* (woman, 30 years old, project coordinator, kids, Pruszkow near Warsaw).

Now, we can see that city traffic is back, which can be interpreted as the trend of limiting use of cars that our research revealed was only temporary. However, at the same time, results showed a high potential for the popularization of remote work in the future, which – as already announced by many companies – will be partly maintained even after the entire population is vaccinated. By testing remote work in real life, both employees and employers recognized its benefits. It proved to be just as effective; however, face-to-face meetings should be continued from time to time. Limiting driving to work and use of the office buildings gives hope for some progress in cutting emissions. Unfortunately, another clear trend showed by the research was substituting public transport with the private car. In other words, some people who used bus, tram or tube to commute, had switched to their cars for safety reasons and convenience. Apart from fear of infection, mass transit became a less trusted way of getting around. The interviewees reported their disappointing experiences, such as an inability to enter a vehicle due to exceeding the limit of passengers allowed on board. It is likely that it will take time before trust in public transportation will be regained. Still a large part of Polish society is not willing to get vaccinated, so public transportation can continue to be perceived as connected with a higher risk of infection.

#### *4.1.2. Food and shopping*

Another clear and new trend recognized in the analysis of everyday habits during the pandemic was certain changes in the way research participants shop and eat. It showed a tendency for more conscious shopping, rational buying and some self-imposed restrictions in this area. On one hand, it was connected with the need to limit physical presence in potentially dangerous public spaces such as stores and supermarkets. In many houses, one person was delegated to do the shopping. People reduced ad hoc shopping in the local shops in favor of less frequent supermarket shopping. In addition, some people started to buy their groceries online. The willingness to reduce complementary shopping enforced better planning of

menus and less opportunity for extra spontaneous shopping. Unfortunately, less frequent grocery shopping was also connected with buying plastic and paper packed products more often, which were considered safer, but are harmful to the environment. What is more, some interviewees (also a strong trend noticed in the second, quantitative part of the research) recognized the pointlessness of shopping for pleasure. As shopping malls were closed, people could not spend their leisure time going there, and many of them came to the conclusion that it was dispensable.

Apart from better planning, reluctance to visit shops and supermarkets also awakened a certain need for food self-sufficiency. Supplies of fresh products and bread, which in Poland are often bought in the local shops, became one of the biggest issues during the lockdown. Bread is a staple of Polish cuisine, and fruit and vegetables were important for immunity during the pandemic. As a result, many people started growing plants and herbs themselves and baking bread, which was one of the most spectacular examples for pursuit of self-sufficiency at that time. It was becoming popular even before, but limited access to fresh and “safe” bread during the health crisis additionally reinforced this trend. Interestingly, bread baking inspired local solidarity among families, communities and friends expressed by sharing the sourdough necessary for baking bread. Many people also started to buy milk, eggs, vegetables and fruit from the local farmers as such products were considered safer than those from the supermarkets. An additional trigger for producing their own food that the interviews revealed was an economic insecurity connected with the health crisis. The worry of losing jobs and the rising inflation meant that for some it was a way to save money:

*At first (when the pandemic was officially introduced), there was this madness, the panic that there would be food shortages. This was when I thought that it would be much better to be self-sufficient. We own a plot of land (...), tomatoes can be grown there, other things too. We have just planted lettuce and radishes there (woman, 35 years old, psychologist, kids, Gdynia).*

It is important to know that Polish people experienced food rationing in the post-war era. As the democratic transition took place only back in 1989, the typical image of empty shelves in the stores before 1989 is still vivid for the elderly and the middle-aged. The pandemic brought these memories

back and triggered panic at first, followed by the search for alternative solutions. All these pandemic practices significantly increased the popularity of permaculture and local farming. As food production is also a great contributor to environment pollution and climate change, this positive trend has a great potential to change the existing paradigm in farming to a sustainable one.

#### 4.1.3. *Back to nature*

One of the interesting results in the context of this book that we did not pre-identify is a re-evaluation of green spaces. Apart from stress, fear and several inconveniences connected with the lockdown, many people suffered due to the very fact of being locked at home. It was especially painful for those city dwellers who do not own gardens, as even parks and forests were closed for the public for some time. On the other hand, those living in houses or owning summer houses, allotments or cabins outside the city felt much more comfortable as the safety of their home expanded outside. The realization how beneficial it can be to own an allotment resulted in a great rise in demand for them, and hence, in their prices across Poland. How to explain such sudden great interest in owning a plot of land? According to our study, during the pandemic, gardens and other types of private recreational greenery were seen as an asylum protecting from the threats to civilization; it is safe as there are no other humans (strangers) there. Some interviewees described green spaces as "clean" and "safe to touch". Another benefit of being outdoors which gained value during the pandemic were the therapeutic qualities of nature, so desirable during the health crisis. As the research results show, during the pandemic nature was also rediscovered as an intrinsic value. One of the interviewees directly expressed their belief, which inspired the research that the experience of pandemic can be beneficial in fighting climate change.

*Air is less polluted, that's for sure. I was actually searching for such positive news, like the one about dolphins returning to Venice when people got locked, wildlife starting to come out of hiding... Nature... When we went to the summer house of my mother-in-law by the river Narew, we immediately noticed that there are many more birds. This is when we started realizing that. I wish, and I think it is that way a little, I wish people started to appreciate nature more (...) I think they do, at least a*

*little bit. It is a sort of awakening* (woman, 35 years old, psychologist, kids, Gdynia).

It is also symptomatic that restrictions on use of forests and parks met the greatest public disapproval. Appreciation for nature can be an important ethical and educational result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### *4.2. Pandemic as a wake-up call*

Analysis of the data from the interviews show that the COVID-19 pandemic was also an important stimulus for many people to reflect on their lives, the state of the country and global issues. Interesting results regarding climate change, ecology and sustainable living could be found in all three categories because during the interviews this subject was not indicated as a separate block in the questionnaire. In order to learn true attitudes, we waited until the main issues of our interests were voluntarily mentioned. In terms of thoughts on own life inspired by the lockdown, interviewees spoke predominantly on how the pandemic made them realize that before it started, they had lost their life-work balance and did not have enough time for themselves and their families. When forced to work from home or go on a leave, along with the school and nursery shut-downs, many people realized how much they had needed such changes in their daily routines. Many came to the conclusion that they had been overworked, which often led to stress and neglect of personal needs, influencing their overall well-being. Interestingly, from the perspective of this chapter, one of the topics stressed by the interviewees was their will to minimize consumption in the future. Such declarations were made by the majority of those who shared their reflections on own life during the pandemic (20% of the whole sample) and mostly by those possessing a university degree. This repeated sentiment is clearly expressed in the following quotation:

*We probably now all realize that this chase after money, the profit, higher turnover is... it can be all destroyed in a couple of days. So, does it really matter? This fast pace of the world. I think many people can agree with this opinion that such coronavirus was necessary for people to slow down a little, stop, look around and notice things that are truly important in life, what their goals are and what they are doing that makes them*

*really happy. So, this is also a time for reflection* (woman, 28 years old, kids, on maternity leave, Lesser Poland).

The dominant understanding of *minimizing consumption* in the accounts of the research participants was the desire to reduce their orientation for possessing things. One possible explanation can be that limited access to certain products and services motivated them to question whether they are essential in their lives. From the above quote, it can also be seen that the will to reduce consumption is connected with the feeling of participating in the incapacitating chase for profit. The author of the words above believes that contemporary people may feel trapped in a vicious circle of earning and spending money, but the lockdown and the health crisis made them realize the pointlessness of such attitude.

Certain reflections inspired by the pandemic and related to the wider societal or global perspective were shared by the vast majority of the research participants (130 people). Some interviewees, were inspired by the pandemic to question the surrounding world in more general terms. Dominant capitalism with its logic of constant growth imposes a high pace of life which people do not feel comfortable with. For the purpose of this article, the most crucial reflections are those related to the environment. These turned out to be the main subject when discussing the topic of nation- and world-wide problems. They were mentioned by half of the sample (predominantly in voluntary way), which can prove the rising awareness in this area. However, it is important to say that environmental issues were discussed almost uniquely by interviewees with high school or university educations. Apart from the issues strictly related to climate change, research participants mentioned a wide spectrum of other problems connected with the natural environment: water scarcity, renewable energy, air pollution from transportation, world hunger, overpopulation and smog from coal burning, which is a widely-discussed subject in Poland in the recent years. Some of the interviewees shared apocalyptic beliefs, where humans were presented as the biggest threat to the Earth, possibly leading to its demise. In one of the statements, a person highlighted solidarity as key for the survival of humanity:

*If we want humans to survive and identify with humankind, we should now focus on improving our behavior towards the Earth. What difference does it make that China or United States are the most powerful economies in the world if we can all die from the pandemic? There is none. So, as I said. Our goal*

*should be the common good of the Earth and human solidarity. No matter who is who. We should have a clear-cut vision of what is good for all of us (young man, HR, Warsaw).*

The spread of the pandemic was discussed as an example of how all people are equal in face of global risks:

*I think we all know what is most important. The problem is to change this knowledge into action, to start caring more for what is most valuable, let me call it the homeland of humanity, the Earth, so we don't destroy it, don't kill it, don't make it subjected to us, like it has been happening for the whole history of our species. To make the Earth subjected to us means exploit it (...) the Earth and the environment we live in are key for our species to survive. Smart people say: "The Earth can cope without us, but we cannot live without the Earth. We will die without the Earth. If we continue to treat GDP as an idol, it will always contribute to the destruction of the Earth and the environment". So, what really can be more important than where we live and how we live? (man, 60 years old, country dweller).*

During the interviews, we also asked if people believed that lessons coming from the pandemic can have a lasting effect. The majority of research participants were skeptical about this, although they believed that changes – in terms of ecology, economy, also politics – are desirable. The general attitude can be accurately summarized by what one of the participants said “Everyone is just waiting in the starting blocks to return to business as usual”. What is quite striking is that the interviewees believe that it is valid especially for Poles in particular not to learn a lesson from the pandemic.

*I think it could be (a lesson), but probably won't, because people are reluctant as a masses, masses of man are reluctant to learn, so we probably won't learn anything. I guess it depends on society. I don't think that our Polish society will learn anything, but, some other probably will. Some more developed ones. I don't know: British, Germans, Scandinavians. But us – no. In a year we won't remember what was happening. And if it*

*(pandemic) continues by this time we will be as lost as we are now (Man, 40 years old, kids, product manager, Warsaw).*

The common idea shared by the interviewees was that Polish society is characterized as able to unite and be ready for heroic gestures under an impulse, but it never lasts long. The interviewees mentioned some key events for Poles in the past decades, which prove this point: death of Pope John Paul II, the Smolensk air disaster, and now the pandemic:

*There could have been some positive aspects and we could have learned an important lesson, but I doubt it will happen. It won't last. It reminds me of the great thrill in the Polish nation, many great reflections, and some grotesque situations, such as mending fences by football hooligans from feuding clubs, miracles happened, everything just for a moment to return to normal (man, 38 years old, kids, carpenter, country dweller in Silesia).*

Many interviewees shared such fatalism and did not believe that even traumatic situations can change societies.

*You know what? Human never learns anything. No matter how meaningful is the lesson, people return to business as usual. There has been a pandemic 10 years ago and they were telling people to vaccinate. Some did and some didn't, but life continues and everyone is fine. 100 years ago there was a Spanish flu and people survived it. There have been wars. Did people learn anything? First, Second World War... nobody learns nothing. They go through with this. (Man, 56 years old, kids, office work, country dweller, Sub-Carpathian region).*

Some research participants believe that – unlike the pandemic – issues related to climate change and environment are a crawling crisis: a slowly developing process with long-term effects. They believe that the only trigger to any actual change of human actions and habits towards more sustainable ones can be a tangible and direct threat to the individuals and their families, such as water scarcity or very high energy prices.

*If you say, for example, that ice sheets are melting, it doesn't have a direct impact on life of an average Kowalski, does it? Kowalski will not come out on the street because of this (to*

*come out on strike). However, if you take away something specific from his life, then you can possibly make him angry. People need to be aware of a specific threat, then they can actually feel the power to go out together in solidarity. However, as long as it (a threat) is vague, then it won't work that way, in my view (Woman, 66 years old, Cieszyn).*

The research participants talked about benefits from experiencing COVID-19 pandemic, some of which can have also positive influence on societal transformation towards sustainability. Creating better procedures for risk management, establishing international procedures, but also strengthening patterns for social self-organization, are among the expected benefits of the current crisis. Some interviewees also mentioned increased social responsibility and discipline in obeying regulations imposed by the authorities. Interestingly, it was also said for the younger generation of Poles who did not experience Second World War, like their grandparents did, or like their parents the Russian occupation, the COVID-19 pandemic was the first threat of this scale that they were to experience. Such an event is likely to sensitize them to other issues, including climate change, as it helps not to take peace and safety for granted:

*Every experience is a lesson. The question is: are we doing our homework, or not. In my view, many people will. The most important thing is that the elites do their homework as they have real, direct and immediate influence on our reality. I am sure that some of the currently established procedures can be used in case of another epidemic, they will help us to act more effectively. But will it transfer to other things, such as climate change or other global issues? I think, that current needs and political profit will always be most valued (man, 38 years old, culture manager, kids, Bielsko-Biała).*

The above quotation precisely indicates the key questions that arise from our analysis: has the pandemic taught us anything and, if yes, will this lesson be temporary or permanent? In the first stage of our research, we examined whether there was any room for change. Whether this potential was strong enough to bring about the actual long-lasting change? For now, it is difficult to say, but we hope to learn more after the second stage of our research.



## **5. Summary and discussion**

The world has reached a moment in history where there is an urgent need for a change of paradigms. Capitalism and an economy promoting unsustainable growth led us to the limits of the planet in terms of balancing ecosystems and natural resources. Despite certain steps in the international arena to unite in efforts for sustainable development and actions to prevent climate change (e.g. Paris Agreement, European Green Deal), we still seem to be heading towards a catastrophe. Without a major change of attitudes and actions of governments, businesses and civil society, it seems progress will be impossible to achieve. The question is how to trigger such change. In 2020, a global health crisis hit the world. For the first time in years, it affected everyone: global South and North. Before, it was unimaginable to see what would make the world stop. But it happened. A severe health emergency caused by a new dangerous virus crippled the economies around the world and caused an existential threat for everyone. Can such shock awaken humanity?

Of course, we don't know it yet. Perhaps it will be possible to properly evaluate over the course of coming generations. However, faced with the ongoing environmental crisis, we have no time to lose. We should use traumatic experiences of COVID-19 for the benefit of fighting climate change, make it a turning point in the Anthropocene and redefine our development goals. Our research gives preliminary, but very specific directions, in which the pandemic triggered a change that could be continued. First of all, it showed a great potential of reducing transportation followed by popularization of remote work. Polish society was rather hesitant to accept online work before. However, when it was the only option during the lockdown, research participants had to take a position and examine their feelings about it. Thanks to this real-life experiment, it can now be managed better and benefit employees, employers, and the environment.

Another clear trend revealed by our research is the need and will of the society to redefine farming. The research showed a bottom-up tendency for local communities to share food and popularity of local farming. This trend should be supported by the authorities. The first way to support it is to introduce education, which draws much more attention to food production. This trend has already started in some preschools in Poland: children have their own gardens and learn to live in harmony with and respect for nature. Such approach should be mainstream. Authorities could also favor more

food cooperatives and support small food businesses. One more trend visible in the research result is the need for green spaces and contact with nature. Probably a dialogue, cooperation and subsidies could encourage local governors to make the cities and towns greener. Fulfilling this need should be the result of a collective change in the way people perceive their relationship with nature. Thoughts shared by the research participants and presented in this article give hope for societal readiness. The pandemic showed that people can live with buying less, and, in fact, needing less. Perhaps, the recovery from the health crisis and the need to rebuild the economy and our everyday lives provides a chance to do it in a better, more conscious, and more sustainable way. There is no doubt that COVID-19 gifted us a lesson. The question is whether we do our homework and use this lesson wisely.

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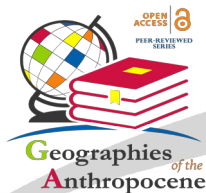
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"The Anthropocene has still the rank of a scientific hypothesis. Yet, it has already sedimented in our imagination with its stories of climate change and mass extinctions, global pandemics and energy crisis, technofossils and oceanic plastic, social justice and new minerals that are changing the face (and the bowels) of the planet. Investigating this imagination from multiple angles, *Narratives in the Anthropocene Era*, brilliantly edited by Charles Travis and Vittorio Valentino, is an indispensable tool for situating these stories into the conceptual horizon of the environmental humanities".  
(Serenella Iovino, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

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