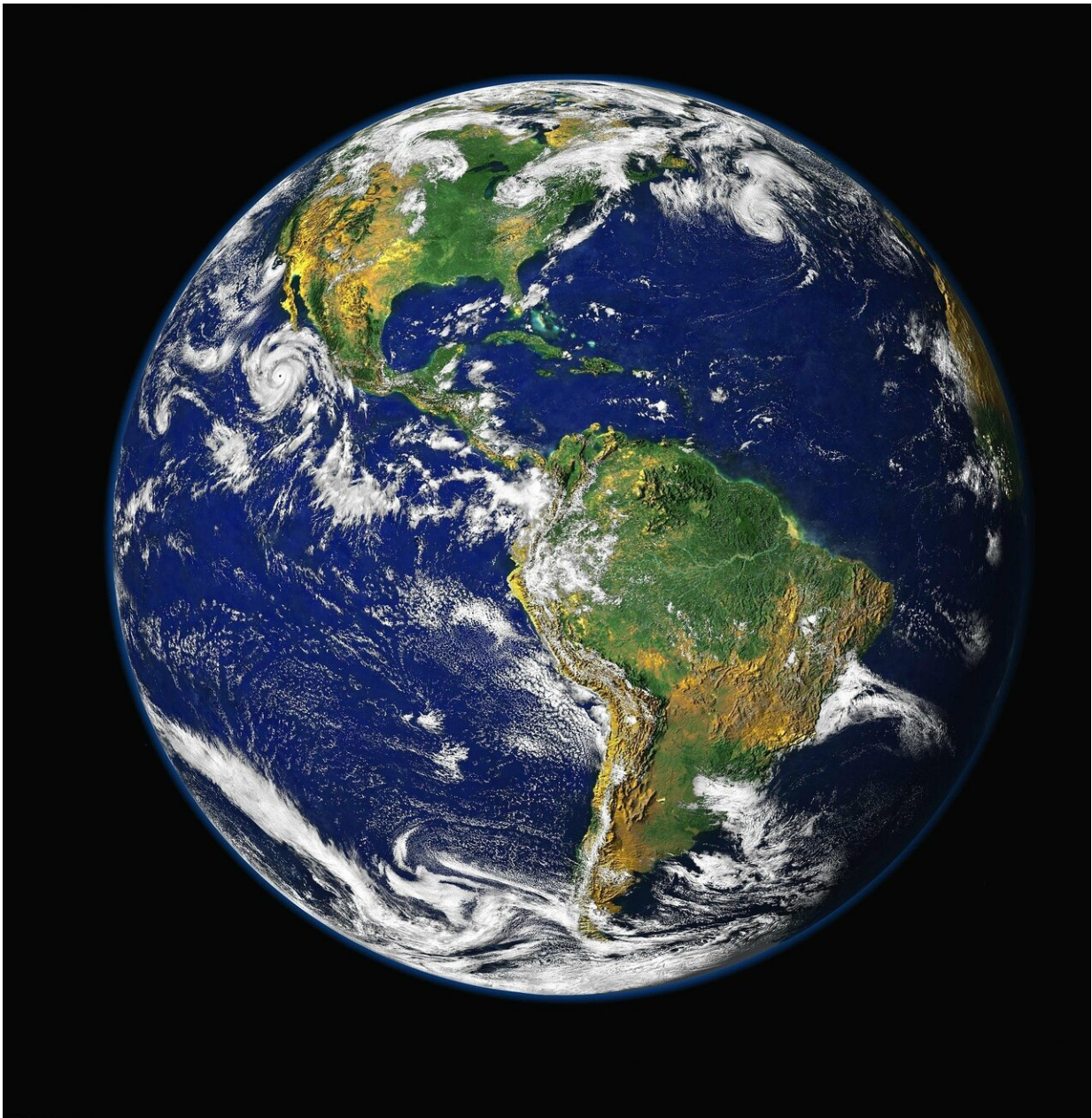


Predicting the future response to our current cascading crises

June 15 2020, by Steve Cohen



The study highlights a fundamental shift in the nature of crust formation 3.75 billion years ago, which facilitated the formation of Earth's unique, stable continental crust. Credit: CC0 Public Domain

If the past hundred days or so have taught us anything it should be humility about our ability to predict the future. Here, in New York City, we have seen the horror of a pandemic that locked many of us in our homes while critical workers risked their health to keep the rest of us alive in hospitals and comfortable at home. We have seen a Black man in Minnesota brutally murdered in public by a policeman, and a global multi-racial movement rise up against the forces of racism and hatred. This year has provided catastrophe beyond belief, and courage on the front lines and in the streets that gives me hope and faith, that somehow, we will break on through to the other side.

But it is faith and hope that I am counting on, certainly not data, modeling or analysis. Because what precedents and histories could be used to build the algorithms that could assess the probabilities of the future in this unprecedented time? I read and hear pundits telling me that the era of cities and density is over. That the office as we know it will never return. That live theatre will be shuttered for years. At the university I work at and at schools all over the world, educators are trying to figure out how teaching and learning will be conducted this fall. Some confidently predict we will be back in the classroom; others confidently predict we will be teaching online. I don't know about the future, but I know we built crowded cities and workplaces and lively educational and cultural institutions because we like them. Most of us miss the noise, the crowds, the excitement and even the inconvenience. My guess is that when it's safe to return we will; but who knows?

In mid-June 2020 I am confident that I have no idea how we will be living our lives in mid-September 2020. I understand the forces at work attempting to influence the way we will live. In the midst of a monstrous disease, we are only starting to understand, we were shown a graphic image of racial hatred, a disease of the heart and mind, that we understand only too well. Even in the face of a pandemic, [young people](#) took to the streets to demand change and elimination of a disease we can actually control. I am confident that those advocating police reform and pushing to end institutional racism will have made progress toward their goals by the end of summer. Here, in New York, their impact is already being felt. Institutions are analyzing their policies and individuals are examining their own hearts and minds and reexamining their behavior.

I also understand the political force behind reopening the economy. Despite the risks posed by COVID-19, many people believe the negative impact of unemployment, increased poverty and economic destruction is worse. Elected leaders are under ferocious pressure to give greater weight to economic concerns and pay less attention to concerns about public health. This is made worse by politicians and pundits who insist on framing this issue in ideological terms. When there is no good response to a dilemma, does it really help to pretend there is one? We may well decide to reopen the economy, but no one should delude themselves into thinking that such a decision will be cost-free.

And we may see schools reopening this fall. Closing schools reduces a family's support system. In the case of low-income families, this includes both nutrition and childcare. Then there is the importance of education in our brain-based economy. There are real costs for shutting down our schools. On the other hand, we still do not know how to prevent or treat this disease. With all the great scientific minds and organizational resources now devoted to this task, I am hopeful that we will make progress in the near future- but there we are again- no data- just hope. Educators all over the world need to decide if the dangers of

this disease are low enough to risk resuming classroom education. What if we take the risk, but are wrong and cause illness and death? What if we keep the schools closed causing hardship, hunger and even danger to children left at home alone as their parents struggle to earn a living? We will decide one way or the other but is a fantasy to believe that there is a correct answer to what is clearly a dilemma.

Humans are a social species. We are a tactile species. We do not enjoy being alone and do not take well to directions not to touch each other. I saw it on Long Island this weekend, where restaurants were allowed to serve patrons outside. It was a beautiful weekend and restaurants all over Long Beach, New York were doing great business serving tables set up on sidewalks. While waitstaffs wore masks, and tables were not as close to each other as normal, social distancing rules were often violated. But you could almost feel a giant sigh of relief as you walked by and saw patrons joyfully munching and drinking in public for the first time in months. Some of the pressure to re-open is not political or ideological, but cultural and social. The desire to reengage in the world and get out of our homes will continue until the threat posed by the virus is ended.

While I can confidently predict that the social pressure to engage will continue, I can't predict what might happen if the disease spikes again. I would never have predicted that New Yorkers would adhere to stay at home orders in March, April and May. But they did. The combination of George Floyd's murder and declining disease numbers brought people out again, but on the streets of New York City, masks are now common. Again, none of that was predictable. But what if we see a second wave this fall? How will people respond? We all have lockdown fatigue, but will the same fear that sent us home in March, be able to send us home in November?

Another prediction I can make with confidence is that we should really expect the unexpected. This is a presidential election year and we have a

president who loves attention and conflict, and it is safe to assume he will create as much discord as he needs to maintain and stimulate his political base of support. The impact of his behavior on our current cascading crises is difficult to predict because his behavior is difficult to predict. His [election campaign](#) is a wildcard in a wild year.

While there are some fundamental facts that can form the basis for understanding what is happening to us and what is likely to happen, my overall assessment is that anyone who confidently predicts the second half of 2020, hasn't been paying serious attention to the first half of the year. The [warmer weather](#) and longer days provide a sense of hope and normalcy. The streets are less deserted, traffic jams seem to be returning. But nearly 120,000 Americans have died from the virus and millions have lost their jobs. Racism has been restored to the political agenda, but it took an absolutely horrific act of violence to accomplish that feat. In academic terms, June seems like mid-term week, and I'm not really looking forward to the final exam.

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