



today:tomorrow

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FOUR YEARS ON ...

A somewhat belated Happy New Year, one and all.

It's that time of the year when the nights are long and we are prone to reflection. In this edition of the newsletter, I wanted to share some thoughts on where we find ourselves at the start of this new year.

January 2022 marks two years since I was in Davos, Switzerland, for the events surrounding the World Economic Forum and was starting to hear serious murmurings about a new virus. This coming spring will also mark four years since I joined Philip Morris International (PMI) with a mission to help the company deliver a smoke-free future as quickly as possible. I was expecting disruption when I came to PMI—it was a core part of my brief—but little did I realize just how dramatically that disruption would be magnified and accelerated by a novel coronavirus that would transform both the company and the wider world.

TURBULENCE AND TURMOIL

When I moved to Switzerland from the United States in 2018, it felt like leaving an ocean of turmoil and landing in a sea of tranquility—a place where even shops closed early for respite. In the years leading up to the 2016 election, the U.S. had grown more agitated and divided than I had ever known it, and it has become even more so since. This agitation is by no means a uniquely American phenomenon. Following the referendum



that nixed Britain's EU membership in 2016, triumphant Brexiters and die-hard Remainers doubled down on polarized identities that are [still competing today](#). In France, discontent bubbling under the surface burst out in 2018 with the [gilets jaunes](#) (yellow vest) protests that brought parts of the country to a standstill pretty much every week for months on end. From Myanmar and Afghanistan to Hong Kong and Israel, populations were in conflict.

We might have expected the spread of COVID-19 to have pushed politics aside and united everybody in common cause. That's not what happened. The various lockdowns, mask mandates, and social distancing measures helped contain the spread of the virus, but they did little to contain the turbulence and turmoil. Quite the opposite.

May 2020 saw heightened tensions—and age-old grievances brought to the fore—with the callous murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. That incident and others preceding and following it sparked months of mass demonstrations and introspection [across the U.S. and far beyond](#). Worldwide, monuments regarded as having racist connections were challenged, defaced, and [removed](#). With demonstrations and counter-demonstrations playing out regularly, it was no surprise—although shocking nonetheless—when on the 6th of January 2021, demonstrators marched on the U.S. Capitol and violently attempted to [halt certification](#) of the 2020 general election results. Somewhat more surprising to me were the [anti-lockdown protests](#) that erupted across Europe in 2021 and into 2022. Even the eminently calm and pragmatic Netherlands has experienced unruly [street protests](#) of the sort not seen there since the early 1980s. And now Canada’s capital city is [under siege](#) by anti-mandate protestors.

In fairness, most people in most places these past four years have been restrained and law-abiding. They may disagree with what political leaders and other authorities have been doing, but they express their opinions in conversations and at the ballot box—not through violent conflict or the intentional spreading of disinformation. They may grumble and roll their eyes as decrees change, but they follow the public health guidelines, more or less. But these aren’t the people who generate news coverage and set the tone of the zeitgeist.

POLARIZATION, TRIBALISM, AND SECTARIANISM

I am no stranger to the ways people sort themselves into like-minded groups in opposition to one another. I grew up during the Cold War, in which the U.S and its Free World allies were pitted against the USSR and Communism. All my life, power in the U.S. has swung between two parties: the Republicans and the Democrats, “big tents” that used to bring together a lot of diverse views and attitudes. But the two parties have become less diverse in their perspectives. These days, if you know somebody’s views on climate change and gender, you have an excellent chance of correctly predicting their opinions on the full range of contentious issues, from criminal justice and immigration through to trust in science.

This sort of entrenched polarization is often called tribalism, but what we are increasingly seeing is actually [sectarianism](#). These words may seem interchangeable, but they describe

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very different phenomena. For all the negative usage the word gets, [tribalism](#) is a largely positive force. It describes the natural tendency of people to group together around common interests, to develop and observe common rules, and to provide mutual support that contributes to social cohesion. Tribes are typically aware of “us and them,” but they aren’t automatically hostile to outsiders. By contrast, when people are sectarian, the “us versus them” divide becomes much starker. This has been intensifying over the past four years. Insiders (“us”) regard outsiders (“them”) as alien. They dislike and distrust “them” intensely, perceiving them as immoral and wicked—or even as a genuine existential threat. Fear begets hostility.

Sectarianism is a concept I used to hear in connection with conflicts in places such as Northern Ireland, Lebanon, the Balkans, and Iraq. Over the past four years, I have heard it raised about the United States by both [conservatives](#) and [liberals](#). The prospect of a second American civil war is being seriously [examined](#) and debated. Maybe this is just another example of people paying too much attention to social media and hyperventilating needlessly. I hope so.



GEOPOLITICAL ANGST

In some respects, the world is a little less geopolitically fraught than four years ago. The Syrian civil war is less intense than it was, although millions still [suffer a living nightmare](#). High-profile attacks by the so-called Islamic State and its followers are less frequent or at least less prominent. Perhaps increased surveillance, decreased social gathering, and less travel and tourism during the pandemic have offered fewer opportunities for terrorist attacks.

And yet even as traditional global warfare involving [kinetic force](#) (bombs, shells, bullets) has subsided to some extent, cyberwarfare has moved into mainstream awareness. Ransomware gangs have crippled targets that include [hospitals](#), [infrastructure](#), and [supply chains](#). These gangs are in it for the money, but they give a taste of what might happen if a nation were to decide to launch a large-scale cyberattack on a political adversary. This sort of thing used to be the domain of fantasy thrillers, but it is now an everyday worry for ordinary people.

Meanwhile, that worrying rumble in the background of our lives is the sound of the world’s big powers shifting their positions.

The United States and China have been ramping up the [strategic competition](#) that was hyped up by supporters of President Trump and has stayed front and center [under President Biden](#). China has all but completed its [takeover of Hong Kong](#), has been flexing its muscles [over Taiwan](#), and [has tested a hypersonic missile](#) capable of penetrating U.S. defenses. Meanwhile, Russia has been [massing its military](#) along its border with Ukraine, which is now [much better prepared to resist](#) than when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.

INCLUSION, EQUITY, HUMANITY

This is all dark stuff, so I remind myself to look for the other side of what I have been noticing—the yang to the yin. From this perspective, it is clear that a lot of the turbulence, turmoil, and sectarianism I have touched on has been stirred up in reaction to years of progress toward greater inclusiveness, multiculturalism, and equity. While inequities were becoming more visible in the lead-up to 2020, the pandemic and surrounding tumult laid them bare. As working from home became the norm for many families, it was primarily women who had to juggle paid work, homeschooling, and running the household. It was poorer people, often from disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups, who had to do more of the essential and riskier work to keep things running. It was people of color who experienced the [highest death rates](#) due to COVID-19. And it was the younger cohorts who had to put their lives on hold to protect more vulnerable older populations.



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The pandemic heightened awareness of the inequities that hobble so many people's chances in life. It certainly made diversity, equity, inclusion, and humanity more urgent agenda items for many companies, especially since the rising generations coming into the workforce expect such issues to be addressed with urgency.

Over the past two years, more and more people have begun to question the purpose of their work—the industry and the company they work for, their role in the company, and how that all squares with their values and aspirations. The enforced pause of the pandemic shattered routines, giving millions of people time to look at their lives and ultimately fostering a [“take this job and shove it”](#) mindset. Employees, by and large, used to accept the old mantras of “increasing shareholder value” and “driving

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productivity” as inescapable laws of work and life. Now people are questioning these tenets, reevaluating what they owe their employers and what the workplace can offer them.

Underlying this massive reassessment of modern life: hard questions about the impact of technology, the ethics of the big companies that control it, and the regulations that shape the tech-driven economy. Unease about society’s reliance on tech—especially social media—became more acute during the pandemic as so many of us were limited to online interactions. The Netflix docudrama [The Social Dilemma](#), first aired in September 2020, dramatized people’s concerns over social media platforms and unleashed a push for so-called “[humane tech](#).”

As I wrote in my annual trends report, which I invite you to read [here](#), “Most of us are not heading into 2022 with the same sense of relief and excitement with which we entered 2021. We recognize now that the virus will not disappear anytime soon.

.... We see more clearly, too, the fault lines and fractures within our societies and perhaps also within our personal and professional lives. The ride, one hopes, will not be anywhere near as bumpy in 2022 as it was in 2020, but smart passengers will keep their seatbelts fastened.”

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