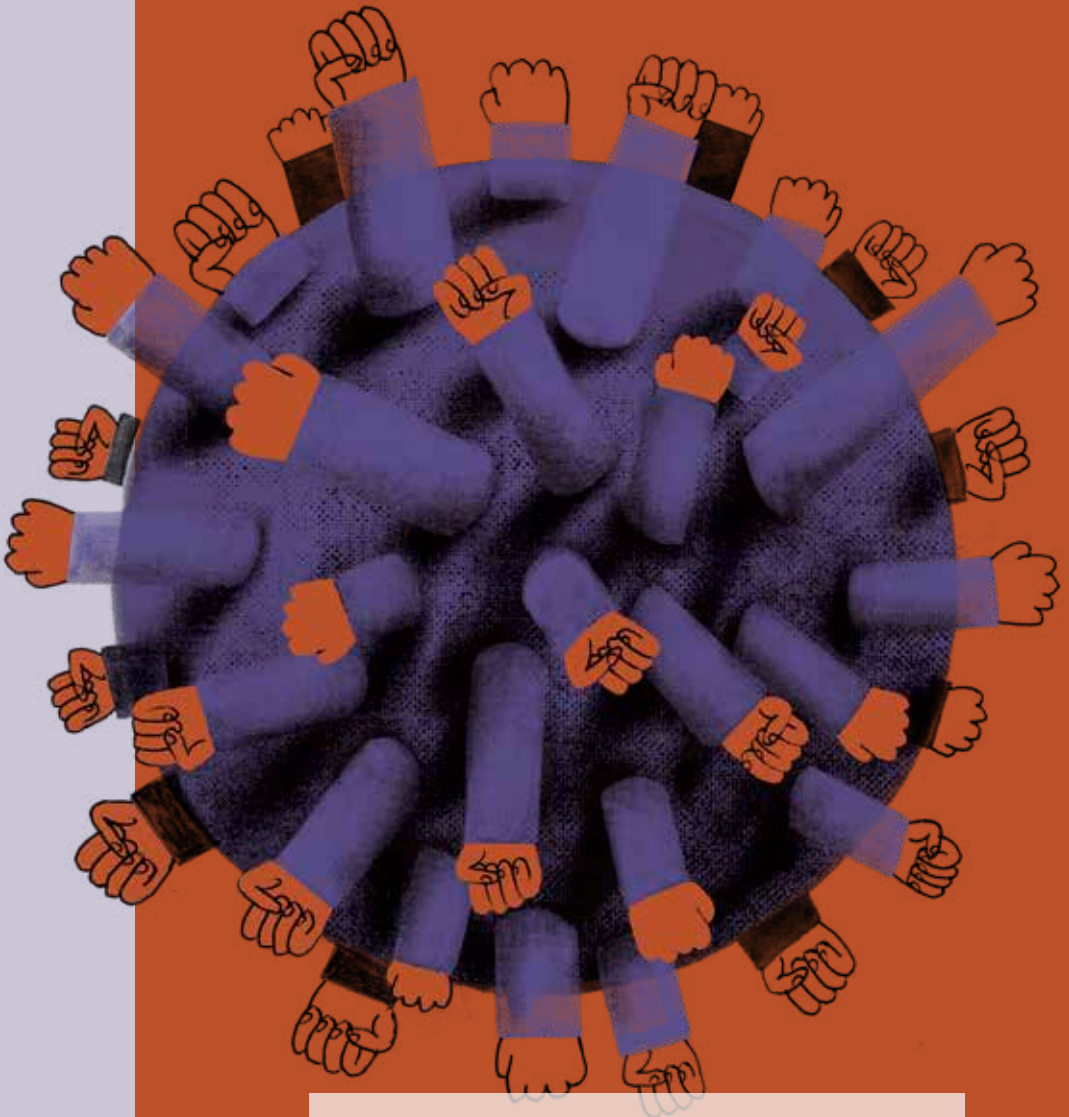


# GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

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## LIFE UNDER SHOCK

UNDERSTANDING THE PANDEMIC

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# EDITORIAL

## 2020 YEAR ZERO

JAMIE KENDRICK FOR THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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Whether or not it echoes down the generations, the health crisis has been a clear moment of rupture, showing both the need and the potential for a very different world. But change will depend on the choices, movements, and ideas that define our response.

**T**he health crisis has blurred the lines between the many challenges facing us in the 21st century. How do we live together in a globalised world, what does our society value most, how to relate to science, medicine, and technology, and how to reverse environmental breakdown? Through the pandemic, such fundamental questions have converged around that which lies at their centre: life and living together. The effect is that 2020 has been experienced as a general crisis: the shock of the health crisis and economic collapse, as all the while forest fires and cyclones rage and conflicts within and between societies grow. Humanity has also displayed its greatest sources of hope throughout the pandemic: solidarity and care, cooperation and inventiveness.

Amid sweeping societal shifts, behavioural change, and government intervention, many visions for a better post-pandemic world have been put forward. After all, the virus exposes deep injustices in its devastating effects and the vulnerability of many Western countries reveals the fragility of systems primed purely for market efficiency. Covid-19 is not simply a natural disaster. While the investigation into its origins continues, extractive land use and

an industrialised food system are key drivers in the emergence of new deadly diseases. However, a pathogen will not suffice to bring forth a fairer, more sustainable future; the actions of states, movements, communities and businesses will be critical.

It is through this lens that this edition of the *Green European Journal* approaches the pandemic and what it means for society. From the role of women in essential work to the accelerating digitalisation of work and social life, the pandemic reinforces and reconfigures existing divides and inequalities. Seen in the global upsurge in anti-racist organising and shifting political landscapes, new solidarities, narratives, and tensions emerge. As felt in Italy's deserted tourist sites, Barcelona's crowded neighbourhoods, and France's new green municipalities, the questions of public services, space, and environment that define life in the city gain even greater urgency. Faced with the price of dangerous public sector cuts in many countries, the edition goes on to explore the shortcomings of our economic model and the indispensable but changing role of the welfare state in ensuring the wellbeing of all. From bio-surveillance and global migration to anti-microbial resistance and

# D R I A L

the cultural ramifications of this collective shock, we also look forward, asking how this crisis will influence our world in the years to come.

Though health experts and scientists warned of pandemic risk for years, that the first wave caught Europe by surprise is understandable. Through solidarity – spontaneous as well as channelled through the welfare state – European societies made it through. The severity of a second wave just months later raises further questions of resilience, state capacity, and a worrying tendency towards complacency. For a European Union accustomed to lurching between crises, the pandemic continues to test its institutional framework. Despite a stopgap recovery fund, its politics remain distant from reality on the ground and constrained by power games between its members. The next frontier for European cooperation, whatever the hurdles, must be a positive politics centred on wellbeing, health, and solidarity.

The pandemic struck just as ecology was adjusting to a new centrality. While the struggle against climate change is far from won, it now shapes politics domestically and globally. With Covid-19, the consequences go far deeper. The health crisis, lockdowns, and recession put public services and jobs back at the heart of the debate but, at the same time, green issues from air pollution and urban space to the care economy and quality of life have only become more pressing. In many European

cities, regions, and countries, Green parties are governing in a crisis, faced with difficult trade-offs and unexpected priorities.

In a tumultuous political scene amid growing discontent, Green government must channel the demands of new movements and respond to people beyond traditional consistencies, if it is to make a decisive impact. But making sure the links between the health crisis, climate warming, and mass extinction are not lost is the real challenge. With Covid-19, the connection between our health and that of the wider environment has become immediate and personal. In this tangibility lies a powerful narrative that needs to be unlocked to drive change for a better future. Much more than an environmental question, it touches every aspect of how we live together, work and produce, and make collective decisions.

The year 2020 marks our unambiguous entry into the 21st century. The politics of life are here in all their complexity. In a manner unlike financial crises, wars, or political upheaval, this health crisis has forced everything to a halt. Restarting society in a way that prevents the same from happening again will require a deep rewiring, the need for which should now be beyond dispute. Political ecology is essential to navigating this uncertainty. Through strengthening solidarity and resilience, forging a new consensus on what really matters, and creating a new relationship with the natural world, it can keep life and living together at the centre of our politics. ■

# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

## PUBLIC HEALTH AND A GREEN RECOVERY

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**PETRA DE SUTTER**

Europe has been rocked by the health crisis caused by Covid-19. Though some urge for a quick return to business as usual, there is a growing consensus for a more resilient, sustainable future. Greater European cooperation on public health and the direction provided by the European Green Deal are key building blocks. We spoke to Petra De Sutter, Belgian deputy prime minister and minister for the civil service and public enterprises, about the future of health systems and European cooperation.

**GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL:** Healthcare professionals were celebrated as heroes in 2020. How can we go beyond applause to protect public health and the healthcare sector?

**PETRA DE SUTTER:** The “how” questions are the most difficult because everyone agrees that this crisis has been a wake-up call for health systems in the EU. As always in a crisis, it’s the public sector that has to come forward and find the solution. Applauding healthcare professionals is not sufficient; structural reforms and increased health spending are needed. The austerity policies that drove us towards liberalisation, privatisation, and higher cost efficiency in the healthcare sector were always dangerous because they left European countries with no surplus capacity for crisis management. Across Europe, every political party now understands the need for greater investment in public healthcare.

It’s not only about intensive care capacity; more investment in mental health and prevention also needs to be taken away from this crisis. Isolation and lockdown have caused serious mental health issues. Depression and anxiety peaked during the first wave and the same risks happening again. Then, if you look at how the crisis evolved and

how the virus spread, it is clear that stronger preventative healthcare saves in the treatment department. Prevention goes far beyond the healthcare sector. It concerns the environmental risks and pollution, food quality, and trade policies, and safety at work, to name just a few areas. An important way to support the healthcare sector is by taking a “health in all policies” approach so that the health impacts are taken into account across all areas.

### **Will this new consensus around ending austerity in the health sector outlast the crisis?**

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That’s the million-dollar question. Some political groups may want to return to business as usual once the crisis has been handled. However, public sentiment is strong. Even before the crisis, polling from across Europe showed that over 70 per cent of EU citizens consider health to be a priority and want the EU to do more.<sup>1</sup> What’s more, the measures put in place now will not just be temporary, they will lead to structural changes. At the European level, solidarity between member states and their health systems needs to be deepened. Healthcare is of course a member state competence so it will be a struggle. But moments of crisis are typically the time when the European Union takes steps forward and crises like Covid-19 know no borders.

### **What would greater European cooperation on health entail?**

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A full European-level healthcare policy probably would not work as it touches on too many areas such as social security and financing. European countries have different systems with different levels of privatisation, so it might not even be desirable and it’s not realistic either. But what the European Union can do is incorporate measures that improve health across areas in which it does have power: food and agriculture, trade, and employment for example.

Where it can act directly on health matters, such as in crisis management, the EU should go beyond recommendations to take more binding action. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control has a mandate for crisis management and preparedness as an EU agency and it should be strengthened, with greater powers to coordinate border closures and emergency stocks of medicines and equipment. One Green proposal is the creation of an EU Health Force that would be part of Europe’s civil protection systems. Doctors and nurses in hospitals across Europe could be trained and prepared for mobilisation in case of a local crisis or outbreak.

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1 European Parliament (2017). *Eurobarometer 87.1*.

### **What about cooperation on medicines and medical equipment?**

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Europe's dependence on essential medicines produced elsewhere in the world has been exposed during this crisis. Paracetamol is produced in China, packaged in India, and then shipped to the EU. Imagine a crisis where borders were really closed and access was cut off. So some relocalisation is needed and should be organised at the European level. The European Union also has competence over the development and marketing of pharmaceuticals and vaccines. During the Covid-19 crisis, some member states began to negotiate directly with pharmaceutical companies to pre-order vaccines. Of course, the industry likes to negotiate with multiple countries. Fortunately, the European Commission has since taken over and the result will be much better terms for the development and production of vaccines. If we want to ensure affordability and access for countries in the rest of the world, the European level is essential.

The crisis raises questions as to how we produce and market pharmaceuticals more generally. The power of the pharmaceutical industry is tremendous. They both negotiate prices to their benefit and concentrate on the most profitable drugs. They're not interested in orphan or low-cost drugs. The public sector, including at the European level, should

consider taking the initiative and investing in public labs for research and development. There is also an argument for decoupling the development and the marketing of drugs. The public sector could guide where development needs to happen and then work with the market to organise research and marketing. The pharmaceutical market is not like other markets because first, as a patient, you don't choose your sickness and, second, in the end, everything is paid for by either public money or insurance.

### **The pandemic has triggered a social crisis but it is also very much an environmental crisis. How can Greens make sure that its root causes aren't lost in the push for economic recovery?**

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The Covid-19 outbreak happened because of the risk of zoonotic spread that our relationship with ecosystems brings. Experts have already warned that other diseases like Covid-19 will emerge in future, particularly if the destruction of wild animal habitats continues. The task for Greens is keeping this message high on the agenda. The World Health Organization has incorporated this narrative in its analysis of the Covid-19 crisis. Its director Tedros Adhanom has talked about how the pandemic reminds us of the "intimate and delicate relationship between people and planet". It almost sounds like a Green talking. The next step is making sure this link is just as recognised by governments and European



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institutions. The EU's commitment to protecting biodiversity in 30 per cent of all ecosystems by 2030 needs to be backed up by investment and action. Links between biodiversity loss and the origins of this crisis, as well as those between air pollution and vulnerability to Covid-19, show that the environment, climate change, and health cannot be separated. If we want to think about resilience and avoiding future pandemics, such issues have to be addressed as one.

**Is there a sense in which the implications of the health crisis go much deeper than climate warming? It's not just about energy systems; Covid-19 has touched every aspect of how we live our lives.**

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It might sound strange to say but climate change is insipient. It goes very slowly and people cannot see its immediate effects. Of course, you'd need to have had your head buried in the sand to have missed the changes in the world's weather systems. But still, we're talking about events that take around 10, 15, even 30 years to become visible. Climate change is abstract and often it's been the next generation's problem. The pandemic, on the other hand, has been so disruptive; it brought everything to a standstill in a way that we couldn't have imagined a year ago. It was something out of science fiction, but it happened. When the change is so radical – for society, for companies, for industry, everyone – it's the moment to orient the recovery in a new direction.

**Will we see that kind of break?**

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The forces, mainly on the extreme right, that want to return to business as usual and stick to a fossil fuel economy are now in the minority. Across other political groups, in most EU countries (though not all), and even in the European Commission, this crisis is understood as a moment to build a future based on climate neutrality and digitalisation. Green proposals and ideas for recovery and resilience put forward during the crisis went on to shape the EU's recovery package. Because when you rebuild an economy, you don't

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think on a two or three-year timeline but look 20 or 30 years ahead. The ambitions and the timeline for the climate and the energy transitions are clear and they provide the direction to take.

#### What risks threaten these prospects for a green recovery?

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The European Green Deal of course sounds great and ambitious but plans always sound nice on paper. The Greens have always taken a constructive but critical attitude while waiting to see what it means in practice. Coherence is the plan's Achilles heel. The progress made through a biodiversity strategy and green investment can be completely undermined with agricultural reforms that don't mandate the pesticide cuts you say you need and a trade policy that allows standards to be undercut.

Another real question is how the recovery money will be used. EU countries are meant to invest in the green and digital transitions but how rigid will the oversight be? Will the focus be on a purely economic recovery rather than its ecological and social aspects? Social issues, health, and education have never played a major role in the European semester. On the contrary, EU countries were often encouraged to reduce public investment and, in the past, the European Commission even asked member states to privatise parts of their healthcare systems to save money. Let's hope nothing similar will return and the investment goes where it should.

**Belgium's two Green parties entered government in October 2020 and Greens are in power in many other cities, regions, and countries around Europe. Does leaving opposition to govern in a crisis require some adjustment?**

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After only a short time in government, we are still getting used to it and many people in our party remain in opposition mode. When you make a deal to enter government, it becomes your programme

even if it's not your manifesto. The Belgian coalition agreement has many green elements and we held the pen for climate, energy, and mobility. Some other parts didn't come from our programme but that's what being part of a governing majority means. It takes a mindset shift after almost 20 years in opposition. In Belgium, the Greens are now in power at the federal level and in the regions of Brussels and Wallonia. In Ghent, a city close to my heart, they have been in power for six years. People see the effects on their quality of life and appreciate that Greens are not only dreamers. Moving from theory and opposition to making change happen is important.

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**PETRA DE SUTTER**

is deputy prime minister and minister of civil service, public enterprises, telecommunication and the postal services in the Belgian federal government since October 2020. She is a professor in gynaecology at Ghent University, specialised in reproductive medicine. Before becoming a minister, she was an MEP for the Flemish Green party, Groen.

# THREE RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS

ARTICLE BY  
**JEAN DE MUNCK**

Different approaches to the pandemic are showing the strengths of different systems. In the United States, right-wing populists mixed wishful thinking about the virus's longevity with opportunistic moves to increase corporate power and paid the price at the ballot box. Elsewhere, authoritarian regimes have shown themselves capable of containing a virus, but at what cost to freedom? The European welfare state offers an alternative, providing protection while balancing the collective and the individual. Though severely tested by the current crisis and undermined by years of austerity, it remains the key institution for a fair, green future.

**H**ow can we manage the pandemic? What will happen in its wake? Some believe the coronavirus crisis will spontaneously lead to a greater awareness of the dead ends of anarchic globalisation. They dream that the end to the crisis will also be, in one fell swoop, the end of deregulated capitalism.



This article was first published in French in *Etopia*. It is also available in French on the *Green European Journal* website.

## TROIS RÉPONSES À LA CRISE

La crise du coronavirus nous rappelle l'urgence de ré-enchanter l'État social en Europe.

Such optimism is questionable. The end of capitalism is not on the horizon. Meanwhile, and unfortunately, authoritarian and populist political tendencies are immune to the coronavirus. There is no single automatic, rational political outcome inherent to this crisis. Democracies will be severely tested, not only by the health crisis but also the economic crisis to follow.

When it comes to crises, Europe has ample experience. After 1945, Europe responded with a model of practical synergy between the state and capitalism. The welfare state's architecture, boldly rebuilt, can inspire a unique response to the current crisis. The economist Éloi Laurent is right

in asserting that, “the most useful lesson of the beginning of this crisis is also the most universal: the welfare state is the strategic institution for the 21st century.”<sup>1</sup> But two dominant models are challenging the welfare state model today: the authoritarian state capitalist model and the right-wing populist model.

## **AUTHORITARIAN STATE CAPITALISM**

Authoritarian state capitalism combines an authoritarian, centralised mode of government with aggressive capitalism. China and Russia are the obvious examples.

In response to the crisis, these countries are tightening control over public space, silencing dissenting voices, and imposing authoritarian measures. The crisis has made it possible for them to expand and perfect extremely intrusive electronic surveillance systems, notably facial recognition.<sup>2</sup> The state apparatus is centralised, bureaucratic, and supported by a loyal army. Against the coronavirus, these states, unlike democracies, do not have to improvise a “state of emergency” because that is how they rule all of the time. As demonstrated by the case of China, brutally managing the health crisis is particularly useful in generating regime propaganda.

Direct control over civil society is a legacy of 20th-century totalitarian regimes. The ideological state apparatus impels citizens to suffer their fate silently, and controls daily life according to the imperatives of order and productivity. State capitalism goes to great lengths to seize world market shares, especially in niches pried open by the health crisis (masks and drugs, for example). Such regimes intend to take advantage of the looming economic crisis as a means to extend their influence over global institutions, competing with Westerners at their own game: accumulating capital.

## **RIGHT-WING POPULISM**

Right-wing populism emerged after 2008 and has become established since the electoral victories of Donald Trump in the United States in 2016 and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018.

Under right-wing populism, the relationship between the state and capitalism is reconstructed around reaffirming the state’s role (which distinguishes this model from neoliberalism). The state remains formally democratic but assumes a fierce, authoritarian attitude. The ruling bloc aggressively takes over the public media space, in part by incessant scapegoating. It transforms elections into popular plebiscites for programmes centred on the

1 Éloi Laurent (2020). “Gare à l’épidémie de solitude”. *Le Monde*. 25 March 2020. For more from Éloi Laurent, see this interview in the *Green European Journal* <[bit.ly/hooks-on-growth](http://bit.ly/hooks-on-growth)>.

2 See for example: Mary Ilyushina (2020). “How Russia is using authoritarian tech to curb coronavirus”. *CNN*. 29 March 2020; Florian Bieber (2020). “Authoritarianism in the time of coronavirus”. *Foreign Policy*. 30 March 2020.

THE WELFARE STATE  
BORROWS THE IDEA THAT  
AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO  
DYSFUNCTION AND CRISES  
REQUIRES THE INTERVENTION  
OF A STRONG (BUT  
LEGITIMATE) STATE

defence of sovereignty against internal and external enemies.

However, unlike authoritarian state capitalism, this type of government does not seek to control civil society directly. It does not deploy an omniscient administration – on the contrary, it destroys the government’s public services expertise and capacity for action and instead seeks to allow companies to take full control of society. Thus, this autocratically inclined state supports, according to a seeming paradox, economic, health, educational, social, and environmental deregulation on a massive scale. It does not seek to control or replace private-sector leaders but rather to promote them and allow them to operate freely throughout all levels of society.

Like authoritarian state capitalism, right-wing populism has also been able to flourish and expand during the coronavirus crisis. The state has gone all in on policies of tight borders and police management of public security. The crisis presented the perfect opportunity to re-advertise the “wall”, which supposedly stops migrants and the virus along with them. While systematically denigrating experts and intellectuals, the government saturates the media with chaotic, aggressive speeches. Meanwhile, the

pandemic has provided the opportunity to eliminate regulations (employment, environmental, tax) sup-

posedly unkind to business.

Thus, we are seeing the kind of policies observed after hurricanes Katrina (2005) and Harvey (2017) in the United States. Naomi Klein dubs this the “shock doctrine”: transforming disasters into opportunities to reinforce capitalism.<sup>3</sup> For example, the “corona stimulus bill” passed in the US in March 2020 does not aim to launch a new nationally managed healthcare and prevention programme. It is devastating for American workers and (what remains of) social security while being extremely business friendly. And in March 2020, the White House suspended all environmental regulations on its territory for an indefinite period.<sup>4</sup> It took advantage of the crisis to impose pro-free market solutions that normal circumstances would not allow.

## A WESTERN EUROPEAN RESPONSE: A MIXED MODEL?

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey represents an interesting mix of authoritarian state capitalism and right-wing populism. The dictator inherited a totalitarian state apparatus which

<sup>3</sup> Naomi Klein (2007). *The Shock Doctrine*. Toronto: Knopf Canada.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Milman & Emily Holden (2020). “Trump administration allows companies to break pollution laws during coronavirus pandemic”. *The Guardian*. 27 March 2020.

inclined him towards the former, but adopted a political style that clearly goes in the direction of the latter. In Europe, meanwhile, the second model is seducing the Polish, Hungarian, and English elites, as well as attracting extreme-right parties in the Belgian region of Flanders, France, and Italy.

The current fortunes of both authoritarian state capitalism and right-wing populism testify to the fact that it is simply no longer possible to continue shrinking the state, as neoliberalism tried to do from 1990 to 2016. Both models reinvest the state's power, not to move beyond capitalism but to save it. This comes at the expense of fundamental freedoms, social justice, and public deliberation.

A third model is available, however. The welfare state was born in Europe out of the great social crisis caused by industrialisation and was institutionalised after the disastrous Second World War. It tries to preserve the rational core of the irrational formulas outlined above. From the authoritarian state model, the welfare state borrows the idea that an effective response to dysfunction and crises requires the intervention of a strong (but legitimate) state with powers that penetrate civil society. It mitigates this by embracing the rule of law. An interventionist state is not necessarily anti-democratic; on the contrary, under certain conditions, it can be favourable to individual freedoms. At the same time, like right-wing

populism, the welfare state holds that the market can be a form of effective coordination, but it rejects the idea of a generalised commodification of life, which leads to dictatorship by private companies and mass inequality. It also rejects the policies of scapegoating, exclusion, and incessantly manipulating public debate.

We are entitled to expect European governments to immediately revive this third model. Unfortunately, they are not demonstrating such lucidity. They remain intellectually bound to neoliberal ideology. In recent years, they have imposed ever more drastic cuts in what they have learned to call “social costs” (instead of “investments” in education or health). They have practised a budgetary austerity blind to the genuine social needs of people, deliberately reduced the state's tax base, and, to top it all off, voted enthusiastically for international agreements (such as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, with Canada) which limit their own investment and regulatory capacities.

## THE PRINCIPLES OF THE WELFARE STATE

The coronavirus crisis will be politically useful if it takes us back to the foundations of this alternative model of managing capitalism.

The welfare state is not a liberal state with a small dose of generosity. Liberalism sees in society only a set of individuals whose

relations are governed by contracts. Such a vision had an undeniably liberating power in the holistic, hierarchical realm of the *Ancien Régime*, which assigned to every individual a place and a status. But it is an insufficient vision for guiding and governing industrial societies. It can, however, be rectified by what the social sciences revealed during the 19th and 20th centuries. This can be summed up in a fairly simple idea: interdependencies bind individuals together. Organised into systems, these interdependencies constitute an autonomous level of reality, which cannot be regulated by our individual wills, nor even by contracts between individuals.

If there is one area in which the importance of this systemic approach to the social is borne out, it is public health. A pandemic like the one we are experiencing shows that health cannot be fully privatised. Health does, of course, have an individual aspect which is unique to each person: one person's risks differ from another's. But it also has a social aspect, whether local or broad-based: my personal health depends on the hygiene of those around me. It depends on every other person with whom I happen, to be in physical contact, even sporadically. Since a virus can circulate via and thrive on surfaces, our health also depends on the physical infrastructure that connects us, and the quality of the water, air, and food that flows between us. Hence the reality of interdependencies which eludes the

simple aggregate of individual behaviours. This is what sociologists call the "system", whose structures and functions cannot be reduced to individual behaviour (although that does not mean the latter is insignificant).

The interdependencies of which the coronavirus reminds us also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to work accidents, unemployment risks, financial systems, global migration, and climate change. This dimension of social reality was not readily apparent to political philosophy. It only became salient with industrialisation, which continually generates new interconnected, material, and social systems. These systems emerge or decline, change or evolve, and are unpredictable. They can be identified and understood only by the natural and social sciences – not by political philosophy, whose reasoning is based only on normative concepts, themselves essential but insufficient for managing a society.

Since the Enlightenment, modern democracies have been guided by building a rational, or at the very least reasonable, society that expands individual freedom and social equality. The new systemic social theory does not break with this, but it does give an essential role to the state. As the expression and instrument of the collective will, the state is a system that has the responsibility to regulate other systems as much as possible. To do so effectively, the state must have three characteristics: it must be sovereign, democratic, and interventionist.



THE MODERN STATE IS  
 A SYSTEMIC PROTECTION  
 DEVICE FOR A GIVEN  
 TERRITORY; THIS  
 SOVEREIGNTY IS NEVER  
 FULLY ACQUIRED, BUT IT  
 IS AN IDEAL REGULATOR

## HEALTH SOVEREIGNTY

First, the current pandemic shows the crucial importance of “spatial” control over human interactions, which is essential to stopping the pandemic and distributing aid. The modern state is a systemic protection device for a given territory. This sovereignty is never fully acquired, but it is an ideal regulator, which is repeatedly challenged by previously unnoticed interdependencies.

The current crisis demands a new concept: health sovereignty. In the health field, it would be the direct counterpart of the “food sovereignty” demanded by farmer global justice movements.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is absurd for Europeans to import protective masks from China or rely heavily on drugs produced in the US. The state must strive to localise the production of basic public health equipment. The deregulated world market disseminates production capacities according to the law of specialisation, which is bound by comparative advantage. This is why no community can rely on free trade to survive.

However, it is also clear that new interdependencies in terms of sickness and health are emerging. They result from the circulation of

goods, people, and equipment. These systems know no borders. The causes of medical problems lie both

outside and within countries. New drugs are invented all over the world; products must be exchanged. We must not misconstrue health sovereignty as health self-sufficiency. Health sovereignty presupposes the state’s inclusion in a transnational framework that can produce and distribute worldwide equipment paramount to the health of all. Hence it has nothing to do with narrow-minded nationalism or dogmatic protectionism. Cooperation in transnational institutions is as essential as local basic infrastructure.

## DEMOCRACY: A CONDITION FOR EFFICIENCY

The restoration of a “Leviathan state” would destroy freedom to guarantee security. The second condition for an effective welfare state is therefore an open, attentive, and deliberative public space.

The current pandemic provides striking proof: the greatest threats to collective effectiveness are the concealment of information (China finds itself among a number of countries suspected of hiding morbidity figures in the early days

<sup>5</sup> Annette Desmarais, Priscilla Claeys & Amy Trauger (2017). *Public Policies for Food Sovereignty. Social Movements and the State*. London & New York: Routledge.

of the pandemic) and lack of debate. Amartya Sen demonstrated this in the case of famine.<sup>6</sup> The state must ensure that information flows completely and freely to allow continuous policy deliberation. Only through open debate can uncertainty and complexity be tackled. Muzzling certain members of society limits the public space as well as the choices required to address the magnitude and multidimensionality of health problems. At the same time, open discussion is essential if citizens are expected to apply binding government measures. Citizens deprived of the opportunity to discuss the purpose of such measures react with suspicion and free-riding. Thus, the measures fail and the state, thanks to its baffling high-handedness, loses legitimacy.

## MODERATE SOCIALISM

Building democracy is not just about building a free public sphere. It is also about levelling the playing field. Without adequate infrastructure, the “right to life” and the “right to health” are empty words. Infrastructure can be partially supplied by the market, but unfortunately only at the expense of equality and with adverse effects. Indeed, we know how free-market healthcare can become “iatrogenic”, harming rather than healing, as the philosopher Ivan Illich pointed out.<sup>7</sup> We know the terrible

inequalities that come with it. Hence the state, assigned a dual mission of healthcare production and distribution, must introduce corrective measures. On the supply side, the state must guide the economy to produce healthcare goods and services, and, on the demand side, make them universally accessible in accordance with principles of justice.

Unlike hyper-liberal countries, the welfare state offers permanent tax-funded public health infrastructure. In addition, various social insurance and regulatory control schemes provide for affordable care, moderately priced drugs, and public hospitals. Today, the importance of these schemes is tragically proven. Tackling health inequality is a measure of a healthcare system’s legitimacy, and even of its effectiveness: sizeable inequalities between individuals and groups increase the risks to both the healthcare and political systems.

The collectivist structure of some public healthcare systems does not completely exclude the market mechanism from the healthcare sector. The market has certain advantages: it promotes innovation and productivity while also making it possible to combat rent-seeking. Hence a state-market institutional mix must be established, as was the case in all Western European countries after 1945. Certainly, the

<sup>6</sup> Amartya Sen (1982). *Poverty and Famines. An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>7</sup> Ivan Illich (1981). *Némésis médicale*. Paris: Seuil. “Iatrogenesis” refers to the adverse effects of the over-medicalisation of life in industrial societies. In its pursuit of eradicating death, pain, and sickness, modern medicine turns people into consumers or objects, destroying their capacity for health.

recipe for this institutional compromise must be constantly transformed and adjusted to the economy's new constraints. But a balance between collective and private ownership of the means of production is essential. As elsewhere, a certain dose of socialism is recommended when it comes to health.

## REVIVE THE WELFARE STATE

Sovereign, democratic, interventionist, and redistributive: only the successor to the 20th-century welfare state can ensure the democratic resilience of our societies in the 21st century. After two decades of criticism and attack, many voices are giving it new life in the midst of the coronavirus crisis.

Nothing is simple, however. Today's welfare state is in mortal danger, undermined by four structural challenges. The first is financial: debt and austerity have left it on life support. Its tax base has to be entirely redefined (for example, via a Tobin tax on financial transactions, a digital tax, or a wealth tax). Second, the relationship between the welfare state and economic growth must be rethought. Growth is not an end in itself, but a means. If our societies' resilience (ecological, financial, health, social) is everyone's goal, then growth must touch certain sectors and not others. In any case, the umbilical cord between the welfare state and productivism deserves to be cut. Third, the welfare state's integration

into transnational channels would allow it to confront long-term interdependencies, which extend (well) beyond its territory. Finally, the welfare state must reduce its bureaucracy. Hierarchical, standardised, and purely managerial relationships undermine its legitimacy in the eyes of the public it claims to serve.

The coronavirus crisis is reminding us of the urgency of meeting these challenges. It is forcing Europe to revive the welfare state. Without new consensus in its favour, crises will deepen, and upheavals will become increasingly violent. If that happens, then in Europe too, the way will be clear for the two state models already ravaging the planet.



**JEAN DE MUNCK**

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# ROOTS IN NATURE

## THE PATHOGEN AND THE POLITICS OF BIODIVERSITY

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ARTICLE BY  
**CLARE TAYLOR**

The pandemic has brought home the consequences of biodiversity loss for human health and wellbeing. But unlike climate change, which structures the way we think about the future of our societies, economies, and geopolitics, biodiversity has not yet fully broken through onto the political agenda. Despite established European Union and United Nations frameworks for biodiversity, the understanding that preventing species loss is critical to health and prosperity remains undermined by an inability to properly account for nature in food systems and many other areas.

**T**he effect of environmental degradation on human health has long been recognised. From increases in asthma rates caused by air pollution to toxic contaminants in fish and habitat fragmentation driving the resurgence of Lyme disease, the relationship between human civilisation and the natural world is at the root of many modern health risks. For decades, scientists have recognised the link between the origin of zoonosis (an animal disease that can be transmitted to humans) and the mismanagement of nature and wildlife.

“Crises create opportunities,” said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay at the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity in September 2020. “The opportunity to change how we see our relationships with nature, with each other, and with the Earth [...] There is no future for business as usual. We need a ‘new normal’ for biodiversity.” Over 150 world leaders convened for the online summit to discuss “urgent action” ahead of the 15th UN Biodiversity Conference of the

Parties (COP15) due to be held in Kunming, China, in 2021. While biodiversity has not yet achieved the level of response that produced the Paris Agreement, species loss is increasingly recognised as a global challenge just as significant as, and highly related to, climate breakdown.

It is now recognised that the Wuhan wet market was more likely an early “superspreader” event rather than the origin of the virus. Nonetheless, the “pangolin narrative” struck a chord with conservationists and brought increased media focus on the wildlife trade as a hotspot for pathogen transmission. However, according to zoologist Peter Daszak, president of the New York-based NGO EcoHealth Alliance, the wildlife trade is just one piece in a larger puzzle that involves hunting, livestock, land use, and ecology.<sup>1</sup>

Recent research published in the scientific journal *Nature* shows how biodiversity loss usually results in a few species replacing many.<sup>2</sup> Those that tend to survive and thrive – rats and bats, for instance – are more likely to host potentially dangerous pathogens that can make the jump to humans.

Deforestation is a major factor in the increase of zoonotic disease transmission. According

to a paper published in *Science*, tropical forest edges are major launch pads for novel human viruses.<sup>3</sup> As road construction and forest clearance for timber production and agriculture extend the length of forest edges, increased interactions between wild animals, livestock, and humans elevate the risk of disease transmission. Tipping points can be identified here: contact between humans or livestock and wildlife is more likely when over 25 per cent of the original forest cover is lost.

Industrial meat production is perhaps the biggest part of the picture. IDDRI, a leading French sustainable development think tank, has identified the agri-food industry as a particularly powerful driver in biodiversity loss and the generation of zoonoses. In an interview, ecology and international affairs expert Aleksandar Rankovic explains: “Many emerging infectious diseases and pandemics over the last 50 years (especially the recent influenza pandemics) have come from domestic animals – poultry and pig farms. In others, domesticated animals have been at least one part of the chain transferring new viruses from wild species to humans.”

The intensification of meat production and the consequent increase in animal concentration

1 Jeff Tollefson (2020). “Why deforestation and extinctions make pandemics more likely”. *Nature*. 7 August 2020. 584, pp. 175-176.

2 Rory Gibb et al. (2020). “Zoonotic host diversity increases in human-dominated ecosystems”. *Nature*. 5 August 2020. 584, pp. 398-402.

3 Andrew Dobson et al. (2020). “Ecology and economics for pandemic prevention”. *Science*. 24 July 2020. Vol. 369, Issue 6502, pp. 379-381.

make livestock, as emphasised in *Science*, “critical reservoirs and links in emergent diseases.”<sup>4</sup> Bird flu was transmitted from wild birds to poultry to humans, while swine flu made its way from wild birds to humans via pig stocks. Many livestock-linked outbreaks, such as the Nipah virus in South Asia, have reached the cusp of pandemic emergence in the 21st century.

The connection between human health and biodiversity is twofold: first, deforestation and species decline increase the risk of zoonotic pandemics; second, human health threats such as pandemics and antibiotic resistance are driven by factors that intersect with the drivers of biodiversity loss.

Around the world, this link between health and biodiversity, as well as the environment more broadly, is increasingly politicised. Humberto Delgado Rosa is a director at the European Commission’s environment department. He stresses how the intense focus on the social and economic impacts of the pandemic extends to environmental protection. “It won’t mean putting biodiversity or environmental issues to one side,” he explains. “People are starting to notice nature’s invoices: forest fires burning koalas, loss of pollinators, plastic in the oceans – public support for nature protection is growing.”

## A PRIORITY AT LAST?

Nature restoration has been on the agenda in Europe for 30 years. Ecologist Ben Delbaere began his career in the 1990s, “the era when biodiversity first got on the radar and into public policy.” The Habitats Directive – one of Europe’s key nature protection laws – was adopted in 1992, followed by Europe’s adherence to the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1993. At the turn of the century, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and other studies firmly linked the conservation of biodiversity and nature to sectors such as agriculture, forestry, and infrastructure development through the concept of “ecosystem services” that recognised the many beneficial effects of healthy ecosystems on other areas of our lives. Nevertheless, Delbaere points out, when the economic crisis hit in 2008, “biodiversity fell down the agenda”, with jobs and economic recovery coming to the forefront. More recently, political attention on nature and biodiversity has returned, buoyed by the climate agenda and the European Green Deal.

“2020 is a key year for the EU’s biodiversity policy,” explains Delbaere. Released in October, the European Environment Agency’s six-yearly report *State of nature in the EU* found that biodiversity in Europe faces “deteriorating trends from changes in land and sea use, overexploitation and unsustainable

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

management practices” and that EU targets for 2020 had been missed.<sup>5</sup> A new strategy for the years up to 2030 was announced in May.

Delbaere leads a team examining the extent to which European funding for nature conservation (via the LIFE programme, Europe’s key funding instrument for the environment) has contributed to an improved conservation status for the species and habitats protected by European law. Delbaere’s team found that conservation efforts have been successful throughout all habitat groups and all species types – but mostly at local and regional levels.<sup>6</sup> “The investment is paying off,” says Delbaere, “but the projects are still too localised to have a large impact.” The actions carried out under the LIFE programme only managed to slow biodiversity loss rather than halt or reverse it.

Delgado Rosa echoes this point: “Action by the EU was not of sufficient breadth nor sufficiently integrated with the sectors that underly the drivers of biodiversity loss to counter it.” However, he indicates that these shortcomings are gradually being overcome.

Part of the EU’s Green Deal, the new biodiversity strategy for 2030 aims to expand legally protected areas in Europe to at least 30 per cent of land and 30 per cent of sea (with at least 10 per cent of these areas under strict protection) and create ecological corridors as part of a trans-European nature network. Legally binding targets for nature restoration are expected in 2021, and 20 billion euros per year for biodiversity will be sourced through EU funds as well as national and private sources. Delgado Rosa is upbeat about the prospect of Europe taking a leading role in the global biodiversity talks at the COP15 in 2021. “European leadership is happening de facto. Europe’s biodiversity strategy for 2030 is the most ambitious the world has ever seen.”

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<sup>5</sup> European Environment Agency (2020). *State of nature in the EU*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at <[bit.ly/2JfYp9F](https://bit.ly/2JfYp9F)>.

<sup>6</sup> European Commission Environment Directorate-General (2020). *Bringing nature back through LIFE*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at <[bit.ly/31OEVZz](https://bit.ly/31OEVZz)>.

THE BEST THING  
WE COULD DO  
FOR BIODIVERSITY  
WOULD BE TO  
PUSH FOR A DEEP  
TRANSFORMATION  
OF OUR FOOD  
SYSTEMS

But while biodiversity policy might be gaining political weight, truly integrating nature, human health, and the economy remains a challenge.

### AT ONE WITH NATURE

To stop the biodiversity free fall, the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, a global treaty signed in 1993, argues that much of human activity needs to be dramatically transformed.<sup>7</sup> Its eight transition areas include food systems, climate action, fisheries, and forests, as well as “One Health”, an integrated approach to human health and environmental management.

Political-economic systems and international institutions across the world have so far failed to adequately integrate human, animal, and environmental health in order to contain the spillover and spread of infectious diseases. Research by IDDRI stresses how the pandemic has revealed the “current difficulties of the institutional, health and economic systems in learning the lessons of repeated infectious emergencies, in terms of preventative actions, global surveillance and strengthening resilience.”<sup>8</sup> According to their report, the only approach that “brings together international agencies with a certain capacity for intervention” is One Health. Officially adopted by international organisations and scholarly bodies in 1984, the One Health approach aims to address global health challenges through coordinated action on human, animal, and environmental health.

In 2018, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) agreed to use the One Health approach to tackle antimicrobial resistance. However, this cooperation has remained a “principle of collaboration between

<sup>7</sup> Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2020). *Global Biodiversity Outlook 5*. Montreal.

<sup>8</sup> Serge Morand, Jean-François Guégan, Yann Laurans (2020). “From One Health to Ecohealth, mapping the incomplete integration of human, animal and environmental health”. *IDDRI Issue Brief*, N° 04/20. Available at <[bit.ly/3oy82AE](https://bit.ly/3oy82AE)>.



specialised agencies”, lacking action, funding, or specific standards.<sup>9</sup> Thus, although the approach may be the most developed framework of its kind, its principles have not yet become practice.

Rankovic considers that the link between the environment and health poses a “deep problem” for international institutions. Looking at One Health, he points out how the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) is not involved, leaving the environment sidelined. A WHO enquiry is underway to explore the emergence and management of the Covid-19 crisis but, again, adds Rankovic, “UNEP is marginalised in this enquiry.” Only when the environmental component is on the same level as food and health in how health risks are framed will approaches such as One Health correspond to what is at stake, he concludes.

## RETHINKING FOOD PRODUCTION

Intensive agriculture is widely recognised as the single biggest driver of biodiversity loss. Transforming the agri-food system is therefore critical, if not sufficient, to bend the curve of species loss and ensure a healthier environment. However, as seen with One Health, moving from recognising this connection to effecting real changes in

how humans produce food from nature is not straightforward.

Europe remains committed to a largely unreformed common agricultural policy (CAP) which accounts for around one third of the EU budget. For decades, the CAP has been criticised for its perverse incentives and poor environmental impact. A key element of the Green Deal, the EU’s Farm to Fork strategy sets targets to transform the European food system, including a 50 per cent reduction in the use and risk of pesticides, a reduction of at least 20 per cent in fertiliser use, a 50 per cent reduction in sales of antimicrobials used for farmed animals and aquaculture, and reaching 25 per cent of agricultural land under organic farming. But much depends on how member states choose to implement the common agricultural policy at the national level. Europe appears unlikely to break the link between food production and species loss in the near future.

Rankovic argues that a radical rethink of agricultural policy is required, “The message is clear. The best thing we could do for biodiversity would be to push for a deep transformation of our food systems.” The challenges are numerous. “If it was only a case of changing the culture, the task would be much easier,” says Rankovic. “Many livelihoods depend on jobs in the agri-food industries.”

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## TIME FOR GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

The European Union would like to position itself as a global leader in biodiversity protection. China, the host country of the 2021 COP15, is also putting forward ambitious plans. “Our solutions are in nature,” said President Xi Jinping in his opening address to the UN summit. As the host of the summit, China is underlining its role in environmental governance.

Undoubtedly, new strategies for biodiversity governance are required: over the past decade, none of the global biodiversity targets have been met, nor those set at the European level. In October 2020, Hans Bruyninckx, director of the European Environment Agency, referred to climate change and biodiversity loss as inseparable issues: “The scientific understanding is clear: if we want strong climate solutions based on nature, then we need to have strong nature.” While net-zero emissions will require making the most of the natural carbon cycle, the politics of climate and biodiversity have long been distinct agendas. As Bruyninckx notes, “these are often two separate worlds.”

In contrast to climate governance, international biodiversity governance has so far failed to generate sufficient political will and societal urgency around the severe risks associated with global biodiversity loss. Now that the pandemic

has brought home the consequences of those risks, could global biodiversity governance see a “Paris moment” of international consensus and commitment to nature restoration, with nature valued not as an aesthetic but rather as the foundation of human health and effective climate action?

At the UN summit, President Xi called on global leaders to “uphold multilateralism and build synergy for global governance on the environment,” stating that “cooperation is the right way forward.” But national interests have risen to the fore in the response to Covid-19 and acts of international solidarity are lacking. Whether the mounting evidence – and repercussions for human health – of biodiversity freefall will be sufficient motivation for the international community to cooperate rather than compete remains an open question.



**CLARE TAYLOR**

is a moderator and journalist specialising in sustainable energy and the environment.



# THE COST OF CARE

## RETHINKING VALUE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**MARY MELLOR**  
 BY **ANNABELLE**  
**DAWSON**

From nursing the sick to keeping grocery stores open, the coronavirus crisis has shone a spotlight on the work that is essential to the survival of societies. Its burden has fallen heavily on the shoulders of women. Economist and ecofeminist Mary Mellor explains why the economy sidelines certain work and workers, pointing towards opportunities for a new system of value. In the push for economies guided by the principles of justice and sustainability, reconciling work with life will be essential.

**ANNABELLE DAWSON:** The health crisis has given the question of work in our societies huge visibility. What has been the role of women in the pandemic?

**MARY MELLOR:** Life for women has become much more complicated since the beginning of the crisis. Women are well represented in essential work and work in the home has changed dramatically too. It is not only about caring but also avoiding infection and home schooling. The opportunity to interact with female friends – at school gates, the park, children’s play areas – has been reduced, while worries about income or cramped space are greater than ever. Mental health and domestic violence are major concerns. Nearly all of the problems that a woman can face, she is facing now.

It comes down to two types of patriarchy. One is patriarchy in the home. Are men changing their behaviour, and if so, will they sustain that change after this crisis is over? And then there’s the patriarchy of the wider economy. Does it make space for caring? If the economy is patriarchally organised and assumes that it is the role of women to step in whenever there is a crisis in the family, then men can’t help even if they want to as they don’t get the same understanding from employers.

Ideally, we would see a “new normal” that maintains respect for the essential jobs in the human lifecycle – caring for the old, the young and the sick, and education. People talk about universal basic services. Caring and education should be seen as the universal basics of the economy – the essential, most important parts. They should, therefore, be properly rewarded. Though it varies between societies, the gender pay gap is still large. In part, it’s because much of the work done mostly by women, like care work, is unpaid or underpaid. If those kinds of jobs were better paid and valued, more men would do them.

**You’ve observed that women’s work is body work. Is this observation relevant in the context of Covid-19?**

I see body work as the responsibility for human existence as a body in nature. Body work is not only done by women – it can be done by men, it can be done by children. Historically, it was done by slaves. However, it tends to fall back on women and their sense of duty, fairness, love, commitment, and compassion because nobody else takes responsibility for it – something I call “imposed altruism”. Body work is not just doing the care work, it’s the responsibility for it, the time it takes, and the constraints it puts on women’s lives – being “available”. You can’t plan it. You know people are going to grow old or that children have to be brought up. But when it comes to mental and physical breakdown, it can happen at any time.

We are creatures in a body, and our body is in the environment. The economy marginalises the life of the body. I developed the idea of “Economic Man” (who could be female) to refer to how the economy is carved out of human existence in nature. People who work in the economy have to ignore body work, the unexpected and daily cycle of routines of the body. Of course, it’s not that they don’t have bodies; they still have to live through their 24-hour cycle and the lifecycle from birth to death. They can marginalise their embodiment but they can’t get rid of it. Economic Man must pretend that they’re not sick, that they’ve not got responsibilities, that they’ve not got to work close to home so they can pick the kids up from school.

**So body work tends to be the “essential work”: the nursing, teaching, and care work that meets the very human needs of the body?**

It’s also collecting the rubbish, ensuring there’s a clean water supply, transport... quite a lot of body work is associated with men as well as women. We should be careful not to gender body work too much. The big question is, are we going to continue to recognise these jobs as essential further down the line? Are we going to reward the sewage workers and the food processors? We can certainly do without a financial sector, without superyachts for billionaires, and new SUVs. We need an economy that upends the priorities of what we pay for, or don’t pay for, in the case of unpaid labour.

**Why are female leaders such as Jacinda Ardern, Nicola Sturgeon, and Angela Merkel generally perceived to have been more effective leaders throughout the crisis?**

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This is certainly gendered. I'm not saying that there are no competent male leaders, but these women have been outstanding. They all have different politics – Merkel is from the Right, Sturgeon's Scottish National Party is to the Left, Jacinda Ardern is Labour – so it strikes me that what they share is a lack of political ego. You cannot imagine these women behaving in the same ways as narcissistic politicians like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. On a continuum of how purposeful, rational, and undramatic their behaviour is, those three women and Johnson and Trump are at opposite extremes. It's strength without ego, and I really admire them all.

**You've worked extensively on money and the financial system. How do you link this focus with your work on ecofeminism and reproductive labour?**

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My work on money grew out of my work on ecofeminism. I became interested in ecofeminism when it began to grow as a movement in the mid-1970s, and I began writing about it in depth in the 1990s. My original framework was Marxist theory, in a very loose sense – the general theory about inequalities, class, and economic structures.

I started looking into the distinction between domestic work and the economy as we perceive it, and women's place in this distinction: their unequal treatment by the economy, with their work unpaid or underpaid. I felt that this came down to body work – that the male-dominated formal economy cushioned itself from the implications of being a human body in nature by making women responsible, by imposed altruism, for that work of maturing, dying, sickness, and health.

I began to think, "What is the boundary here?" "How is it policed?" It struck me that money was the boundary. Women's work, and the natural world, are externalised by how our economy is structured. I began to ask, "What is money?" How come many things that are unnecessary or trivial get a value, whereas the things we need don't? This led me to question what money actually is, who controls it, who owns it, and how it functions.

**Could money be a lever for change in the transition towards more sustainable and just economies?**

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If we understand what money is, how it works, its history, and its social and political nature, we can realise its radical potential. Now, the dominant model of neoliberalism has almost total control and most people think that the economy is immutable, that you can't change anything. But the body of work on rethinking

MOMENTS OF  
CRISIS EXPOSE  
THE LIMITATIONS  
AND POTENTIAL  
FAILURE OF THE  
MARKET SYSTEM

money is not just academic theorising, it is building up a framework powerful enough to fracture the status quo. Friedrich Hayek began his work on neoliberalism in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. It took 30 years for his ideas to coalesce into what became the heyday of neoliberalism from the 1980s onwards. Thinking around radical alternatives has been growing from the 2000s and, in 20 to 30 years, it might be the new common sense.

**The scale of intervention in moments of crisis undermines the idea that government action is financially constrained. Are there opportunities to be found there?**

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This is the possible breakthrough: moments of crisis expose the limitations and potential failure of the market system. In 2007 to 2008, it was the financial system. In 2019 to 2020, it has been a health crisis leading to an economic crisis. It is significant that health has so far trumped the economy. The great claims of neoliberalism – the myth that money is in short supply, that only the market creates wealth, and that the state does not create money (or if it could, it shouldn't) – have been blown out of the water. The state rescued the financial markets back in 2007 to 2008, and again here it comes with bucket-loads of money.

The assumption that the state must cover its expenditure by taxation, and even then that the taxpayer is uniquely a product of the private sector, is very persuasive. However, the public sector contributes to gross domestic product (GDP) and its employees also pay taxes. We have no conception of the public economy, only the market economy. The very concept of debt is the denial that there is a public economy and that money is public. The public has the sovereign right to create and circulate money. If the government borrows off the financial sector, that's borrowing. But if the government borrows off the central bank, the state is effectively borrowing off itself.

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**Which narratives can challenge assumptions around debt? Post-2008, the politics of debt were used to justify austerity. Going forward, this is also a huge threat.**

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It is a source of hope that the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which wrongly advocated austerity after 2008, now has a very different tone. With its influence on global monetary policy, the IMF is now – quite rightly – calling on states to not stop their massive injection of new money through quantitative easing and direct support for the private sector. The public sector is still functioning, but the private sector is being rescued by unlimited funds.

There is no natural limit on funding or money in the economy. At the moment, the money that was in the market economy has disappeared with unemployment and reduced demand. It's like a football game where the ball has been kicked out of play. The players are still there, but until the ball is put back in, they cannot play. The money has gone out of play and it won't come back unless somebody puts it back. The only source of money that is strong enough to do that is the state. The flow of money only needs to stop when the economy begins to "overheat" – to inflate. But our economies have been flat for a very long time. The context for monetary policy has completely changed since the 1970s.

**So, there is hope that we won't see the return of austerity politics?**

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Oh, absolutely. Ideas about money that were originally marginalised are becoming mainstream. One of the starting points of the monetary reform movements was the realisation that banks created money out of fresh air. Before then, it was assumed that banks took in savings and lent them out to borrowers. But there was always much more lending than there were deposits, so it became clear that the banks were creating money. What kind of money were they creating? Public money: pounds sterling, euros, dollars. The money supply began to depend on



bank lending, and when lending seized up in 2008, the money supply shrunk dramatically. The ensuing crisis forced a kind of recognition, even among central banks and the IMF, that the uncontrolled private creation of money was unsustainable.

The institutional structures of money are beginning to understand the argument that radical money theorists like myself have been making, and they are shifting their position. The role of the public in the creation and circulation of money is seen as being part of the process of how money operates. We need to start asking questions like, “How much direct funding is possible by the state?” and, “How should bank lending be regulated?” Many discussions can be opened up that enable us to break away from market-based concepts of profit and growth. The public economy works on different principles: it’s about needs, services, and the circulation of money to support this exchange: “I’ll nurse you, you teach my child.” That’s not a market structure, that’s a public structure.

In Finland, more than half of GDP is in the public sector. It’s a public rather than a private economy. The economy of the United States, on the other hand, is about a third public. Balancing the public and the private economies is where money comes in. It is allocation through bank lending, and state spending needs to be at the centre of the debate.

**In their role as caregivers, women often find themselves at the sharp end of cuts to public spending. A similar gendered dynamic can be seen in the impacts of environmental change and degradation. How would you describe the link between the feminist and climate movements?**

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I have worries about this. Ecofeminism arose in the 1970s at the same time as ecologism and the second-wave feminist movement. I don’t think the feminist movement has incorporated green thinking at its heart, and I don’t think the green movement has taken feminism to its heart either. The two have been linked by ecofeminists, but they are neither exclusively feminists nor exclusively green – they are ecofeminists. My concern is that the climate debate will fail to integrate feminist thinking. I think it will be largely male-dominated and focus on technical arguments. The idea of the separation between the work of the body and the work of the economy as it is currently structured is probably not going to be broken down. The Green New Deal is likely to be all technological solutions – which will get public funding, but there will probably not be public funding for care and community work. This kind of work most likely won’t be recognised in monetary terms.

**The Green New Deal for Europe calls for a care income for people who care for others and the planet. What do you make of such a proposal?**

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Back in the 1970s there was a campaign for wages for housework. Some feminists were against the idea, arguing that it trapped women in gendered work, in body work. It's a fair argument when it comes to a care income, which would be a transfer payment from the economy to women or nature for the work they do. What the Green New Deal has to do is integrate work and life, taking into account both ecological time (the time it takes for nature to regenerate) and biological time (the birth-death lifecycle of the body). If the Green New Deal does not integrate work and life in this very complete way, I don't think it will overcome the care question.

What we want is an economy that prioritises our basic needs. I call it "sufficiency provisioning": enough for everybody, but not too much or too little. Provisioning brings in unpaid work, convivial work, and community, not just profit-generating activity. Profit should be the last calculation. When it comes to private or public work, the key question to ask is what human need it meets.

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**MARY MELLOR**

is professor emeritus at Northumbria University, UK. She has published extensively on ecofeminism, social economy, social justice and sustainability, and radical theories of money. Her most recent book is *Money: Myths, Truths and Alternatives* (2019, Policy).



**ANNABELLE DAWSON**

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# BEYOND THE BUBBLE

## AGEING, SOLIDARITY AND COVID-19

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ARTICLE BY **CHRISTA  
MÖLLER-METZGER**

Elderly people have suffered not only the health impacts of this pandemic but also the isolation that comes with limited social contact.

The pandemic has exposed many unresolved challenges for older members of society – social care, the digital divide, loneliness – but demographic ageing remains critically underdiscussed. For Christa Möller-Metzger, Covid-19 is a chance for a new generational compromise built around connection, participation, and solidarity.

**A**lfons is from Gera, Germany, and is 84 years old. During the coronavirus lockdown, he did not see his wife for weeks. She lives in a nursing home and, from one day to the next, visits were banned. As she suffers from dementia and is hard of hearing, they couldn't speak on the phone. Before the crisis, he would visit her every day, hug her, and make sure she felt that she was not alone. For Alfons, not seeing his wife was a real struggle.

In time, the rules were relaxed and Alfons could visit his wife again. Alfons's story is one that many elderly people will recognise. In Hamburg, half of people aged 80 and above live alone. During the worst months of the health crisis, many scarcely dared to go outside, whether to do the shopping, see the doctor, or go to the bank. Apart from essential trips, they were advised to stay at home.

Statistically, the risk of developing severe Covid-19 symptoms increases with age. But Covid-19 does not only impact the elderly – rather, it affects those with certain pre-existing medical conditions worst. The exclusion of certain groups from social life – “shielding” – cannot be the answer.

Not only are undifferentiated assessments based on age overly simplistic (age is not always synonymous with poor health), they fail to account for the harmful consequences of excluding elderly people in our societies, already a problem at the best of times. Covid-19 has shown that there is much to be done to make our societies inclusive for people of all ages.

## THE LONELINESS PANDEMIC

The principal coronavirus response has been to minimise personal contacts to reduce the spread of the virus. University of Edinburgh research spanning 27 countries found that older people avoided public transport and many no longer felt comfortable receiving guests for fear of infection.<sup>1</sup> Limited possibilities for personal contact meant that people turned to digital tools, and for many elderly people the coronavirus crisis has been a chance to use social networks and messenger services like never before.

Unfortunately, digital tools do not work everywhere or for everyone. Germany's digital divide is growing.<sup>2</sup> People who spent fewer years in education generally have reduced access to means of digital communication, and this is especially true for the elderly. People with low incomes may lack the hardware,

internet connection, or the necessary skills. This disparity means that some miss out on increasingly crucial channels for participation in social life. As society ages and becomes more technologically oriented, digital inclusion will become an increasingly salient question. Easy-to-access online training and free internet for older people would go some way to preventing loneliness and exclusion.

As multi-generational households become less common in Europe, loneliness is growing, especially for the over-75s. Lonely people tend to be less healthy, more prone to dementia, and require more and earlier care. Poverty increases the risk of loneliness because many social activities come at a cost. The 2014 ageing survey in Germany found that a fifth of those affected by old-age poverty also experienced deep loneliness.<sup>3</sup> For older people, poverty is often persistent as they have reduced opportunities to improve their financial situation, especially those who have been out of work for a long time. Women are particularly vulnerable to old-age poverty, as they are likely to have worked part-time or poorly paid jobs, or to have left employment to care for children or parents, resulting in lower pensions. The pension system ought to recognise care work and guarantee a decent life for all in old age.

1 J. -F. Daoust (2020). "Elderly people and responses to COVID-19 in 27 Countries". *PLoS ONE* .15(7). Available at <[bit.ly/35qlEp1](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0235111)>.

2 German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2020). *Older People and Digitisation: Findings and recommendations from the Eighth Government Report on Older People*. Berlin: Federal Government of Germany. Available at <[bit.ly/2TIOvoB](https://www.bmfsfj.de/SharedDocs/DEAS/DEAS-8.pdf)>.

3 The German Ageing Survey (DEAS) is a nationwide representative survey of the German population aged 40 and older. Available at <[www.dza.de/en/research/deas.html](https://www.dza.de/en/research/deas.html)>.

THE NURSING HOME  
OF THE FUTURE  
SHOULD BE OPEN,  
ALLOWING RESIDENTS  
TO BE PART OF WIDER,  
MULTI-GENERATIONAL  
COMMUNITIES

## A NEW MODEL OF CARE

Across Europe, care homes were Covid-19 hotspots.

In Belgium, residents of retirement and nursing homes represented half of the total fatalities (according to data from August 2020).<sup>4</sup> But problems with the current care system go beyond infectious diseases. For many elderly people, entering a care home in their current form is not a desirable option.

Large homes are frequently run under tight budget constraints that leave little room for attentive care. Too often, the service is geared towards meeting basic needs, but little more. Staff often lack the time to care as they were trained to: with the aim of maintaining people's independence for as long as possible. Low pay and poor conditions across the sector mean that care workers are in short supply and overworked.

The coronavirus crisis should be considered an opportunity to move away from a model of care provision based on large-scale homes. Care sector working conditions must be improved, with higher salaries and more thorough, specialised training that includes intercultural communication. Mental health and independence should be valued on par with physical wellbeing. The nursing home

of the future should be open, allowing residents to be part of wider, multi-generational communities.

Good outpatient care and the individual preferences of residents should be prioritised.

## HELPING HANDS

As terrible as the pandemic has been, it has been a source of greater cohesion and solidarity between generations. After all, the elderly people among those most at risk from the virus are not anonymous: they are Grandma and Grandad, Mum and Dad, Aunt and Uncle. Family ties are part of the reason why most people are happy to comply with government restrictions. Many younger people took it upon themselves to shop and run errands for elderly relatives or neighbours, welcome support that helped many older people to cope. Nevertheless, the ability to live independently is an asset that should not be underestimated. Older people have the right to make informed choices about what is best for themselves.

The lockdown saw extraordinary acts of solidarity. Neighbours gathered in the streets to share a socially distanced meal outdoors. The German organisation Ways Out of Loneliness (Wege aus der Einsamkeit e.V.)

4 M. Apelblat (2020). "Coronavirus: Belgium faces a reckoning for its care home strategy". *The Brussels Times*. 12 August 2020.

held online meetings for the over-65s with up to 80 participants experimenting with video conferencing for the first time, participating in fitness classes, listening to lectures, or just chatting. The Oll Inklusiv association, which usually holds day-time “club nights” for older people in Hamburg, organised bingo to techno music. As the pace of life slowed down, many people took more time to call and speak with older friends and relatives.

## **GROWING OLD IN THE CITY**

One positive development in recent years has been the increasing number of cities embracing the World Health Organization concept of “age-friendly cities”, launched in 2010. An age-friendly city aims to minimise the discrepancy between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy, taking steps to develop and maintain the ability of its elderly population to live an active life. Membership of the Age-friendly Cities Network does not come with any requirements, but participating cities and municipalities undertake to pay increased attention to the needs of older people. One thousand cities and municipalities across 41 countries are currently represented, including London, New York, Madrid, Tampere, Bern, Brussels, and Dijon. Canada has signed up nationally.

Measures for age-friendly cities, such as barrier-free access, wide and safe pavements,

and cycling infrastructure, benefit all ages. Ottawa has repaired damaged pavements, put up more pedestrian traffic lights, and installed 100 new benches. These benches are not just for recreation but aim to increase mobility for the elderly by providing places to rest when out and about. In Akita, Japan, local companies are encouraged to join an age-friendly partner programme to deliver groceries directly to older people unable to shop for themselves. London has organised health walks for older citizens to walk together in the park. In Tampere, citizens’ advice centres in central shopping locations raise awareness of the municipal and private services that are available.

While Hamburg has not yet joined the network, making the city inclusive for all ages is an important focus for local government. Despite the difficult budgetary situation, the city’s Social Democrat-Green coalition is planning action. The Hamburg Greens’ focus is digital inclusion for the elderly, with measures including barrier-free training sessions designed for accessibility (no unfamiliar words or jargon), a computer lending scheme, and the installation of wifi in care homes.

The age-friendly city provides an orientation for the future of cities: neighbourhoods built around mutual support, with public meeting places; long-term care communities integrated with multi-generational housing; and flexible

residential units that can be resized according to demand, giving older people the option to downsize their homes, freeing up larger homes for families.

## WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

The Covid-19 crisis has thrust issues of care, ageing, and loneliness to the fore, sparking a conversation about ageing societies that is often deferred. Europe must be prepared for demographic change. To combat the creeping generational divide, we must create inclusive spaces and build a society where people of all ages and backgrounds meet and live together.

For generations, life has been divided into three main stages: education, work, and retirement. This model may have had its day. Education and training should be accessible to all ages through lifelong learning. Working arrangements should allow time and space for caring for the young and old. The definition of work should be broadened to include not just gainful employment but also activities such as volunteering, education, and care. For pensions to remain sufficient while being affordable for future generations of taxpayers, working lives may lengthen. But as good health lasts longer and ageing is delayed, many people will want to work for longer. Improving quality of life in old age also implies improved working conditions in certain trades, particularly in professions heavy in manual labour.

The younger generations also stand to benefit from a reconfigured balance between the three phases of life. The pressure to finish education as quickly as possible in order to start work should be lifted, and working life should provide opportunities for time off.

Mainstream media often present a narrative that pits the old against the young. But is the clash of generations credible? As many young people fight for the climate in movements like Fridays for Future, we older Green activists march alongside them bearing slogans like “Oldies for grandchildren”. For decades, the older generations have fought battles around nuclear power, working conditions, world hunger and inequality, gender justice, and clean air and food. Side by side with our children and grandchildren, we will continue to do so.



**CHRISTA MÖLLER-METZGER**

is a board member of the European Network of Green Seniors and Green speaker for senior politics in the Hamburg parliament, Germany.

# LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

## DISEASE AND THE EMERGENCE OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**CLAAS KIRCHHELLE**

Pandemics permanently change the societies that they affect. The public infrastructure saving lives today may not have been built without earlier experiences of infectious diseases and ill health. Historian Claas Kirchhelle traces the history of disease, public health, and international cooperation from cholera to Covid-19. In the 21st century, threats such as zoonotic diseases and antimicrobial resistance will once again demand a collective step forward to protect human life.

**GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL:** How can history help us understand the current pandemic? Can we draw conclusions about the effects of pandemics through history?

**CLAAS KIRCHHELLE:** History doesn't offer any simple answers to the current crisis, but it can highlight the underlying trends that limit our choices and shape our public health structures – and provide some warning signs along the way. Although history offers a wealth of information on how to deal with pandemics, historians have a duty to warn against attempts to oversimplify and overgeneralise alleged lessons.

Every pandemic is different. It depends on the pathogen, the society it hits, and the technology available. Pandemics can, in certain cases, bring societies together, but we have seen many other epidemic disease outbreaks that make societies more divided and unequal. It is already clear that Covid-19 will not be a great equaliser. What this pandemic does is highlight how complex and interconnected the world is.



### **What role did the cholera pandemics of the 19th century have in bringing about the public health infrastructure we know today?**

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The cholera pandemics that swept the globe from 1817 onwards had a huge influence on the development of modern healthcare infrastructure. They also had a powerful impact on popular culture and imagination. Though we should be careful about using modern concepts to interpret historical disease experiences before the advent of germ theory, the repeated waves of cholera drove home a message of international interconnectedness and vulnerability to disease in other areas of the world.

Within Europe, the pandemics lent legitimacy to a group of experts who had started to use statistics to study health at the population level. The young European nation-states formed alliances with these practitioners. Key to this alliance was a common concept of health and efficiency not at the level of the individual but the population. Public health advocates argued that the state should collect and use statistics to systematically improve health and lower mortality and morbidity throughout the population. The result was large-scale investment in sanitary improvements such as water and sewer systems. This age of sanitary infrastructure projects saw effective sewage and water management systems put in place across many larger cities.

### **What about on an international level?**

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The cholera pandemics laid the foundations for today's global health framework. In 1851, at the behest of the French government several imperial powers – who at the time controlled many of the world's trade routes, territories, and peoples – came together to determine sanitary conventions and standardise quarantine rules to minimise disruptions to trade. Representatives also tried to agree on cholera's cause and procedures for notification – something that we are still struggling with. Though it took almost 50 years for international consensus and action to emerge, the repeated cholera outbreaks were a significant driver of collective international thinking about disease and public health.

### **How did the multilateral health infrastructure – today's World Health Organization – come into being?**

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The brief phase of internationalism after the First World War led to the founding of the League of Nations and its Health Organisation (LNHO). The LNHO was the first large international health organisation with a global mandate. Its task was to consolidate disease reporting, aid disease prevention, and help nation-states within their territories. It was very successful, for example in helping manage epidemics in war-torn Eastern Europe, but suffered from a lack of support from the

US and increasing political tensions between advocates of “horizontal” social medicine – focusing on primary care and welfare – and proponents of “vertical” technology-based health interventions.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a reboot of this predecessor. Its remit is similar: to help nation-states combat health problems, improve and standardise disease reporting, and coordinate international interventions – which also involves working with non-governmental organisations such as the Rockefeller Foundation. The WHO thus functions as a platform for internationalist thinking and health planning.

#### **The World Health Organization continues to be prey to geopolitical tensions.**

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The WHO has always been strongly affected by the competing interests and ideologies of its member states and donors. This is especially true regarding whether to prioritise horizontal or vertical healthcare programmes. Historically speaking, the United States has been a major donor and so domestic US controversies over healthcare have often spilt over to the WHO. American governments have often been far more comfortable discussing technological interventions such as vaccination than expanding access to primary care. By contrast, primary care programmes were often at the heart of approaches being advocated

by Communist powers like the Soviet Union and China. European powers often pursued their own (post-)imperial agendas. It would be naive to assume that the international health system has ever been or will ever be divorced from the politics and ideological biases of the major global powers.

#### **Is global cooperation on Covid-19 new compared to earlier pandemics and epidemics?**

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The reaction to Covid-19 builds on the frameworks that were put in place in response to previous pandemics but goes beyond them in the scale of resources mobilised, the coordination of scientific responses, and the rapidity of information exchange. The degree and speed of the exchange of scientific knowledge on what this disease is, how to control it, and how to develop treatments are unprecedented. In part, this is due to lessons that were learnt after the first SARS outbreak in 2003, which resulted in updated International Health Regulations in 2005, and the swine flu pandemic of 2009, which highlighted the potential of web-based mass data sharing and rapid diagnostics via antigen detection. These information-sharing structures have dramatically accelerated communication and improved responses to Covid-19.

Politically, Covid-19 has cast a spotlight on the inherent weaknesses of our international health system. While WHO coordination of

scientific research and clinical trials has been exemplary, the divided international public health response, public conflicts between prominent member states like the US and China, and uncoordinated travel bans reflect the inbuilt weaknesses of an international system which was designed to coordinate rather than dictate national responses. In many ways, the WHO has done the best it could despite structural constraints.

**In 2019, you warned that typhoid could return because the response in richer countries was based on vaccines, surveillance, and travel restrictions rather than long-term investment in water, sanitation, and healthcare access in lower-income countries. Could the same happen with Covid-19?**

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Awareness regarding any disease often stops at the border. Many traditional killers like typhoid never disappeared. They only disappeared from Western memories. In the West, typhoid is perceived as a disease of the past. It is something that your grandparents might have suffered from or a disease of “other countries”. The idea of typhoid as ancient and foreign is misleading and damaging. It also leads to an unfair discourse whereby low-income countries are blamed for being “backwards” and not providing water and health infrastructures – despite being unable to afford them.

This flawed mindset hides the structural constraints outside of high-income settings. It also facilitates a mode of thinking that limits international health to providing technological fixes rather than addressing underlying drivers. The global eradication of smallpox was possible because it was relatively easy to identify cases, the vaccine was cheap, and officials could employ targeted ring vaccinations around acute cases. Strengthening health infrastructures to tackle endemic disease threats that are not amenable to a single technological intervention is much harder. In the case of typhoid, the post-war period saw many high-income countries spend heavily on stopping “exotic strains” from crossing their borders. In the medium to long term,

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FROM WESTERN  
MEMORIES

it would have been much more effective to have funded sewage systems, clean water provision, and affordable access to basic healthcare in poorer areas of the globe.

Covid-19 will pose similar problems. Well-financed and effective surveillance, isolation regimes, and (eventually) vaccines will, in time, mean that the disease is relatively well controlled within high-income borders. However, it will flare up again if we don't find a way to design and roll out effective health interventions across the globe. The most dangerous analogy between the coronavirus pandemic and past experiences is a false sense of complacency that assumes that once a disease is no longer in our backyards, it won't come back.

**You're an expert in antimicrobial resistance. Can you explain why it is one of the largest health challenges in the 21st century?**

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Covid-19 is one pathogen that is spreading around the world and causing havoc. Antimicrobial resistance is a problem affecting multiple pathogens all at once. Antibiotics are of crucial relevance to our healthcare systems, as well as our food systems. If they no longer work due to antimicrobial resistance, this poses a potential systemic threat to health and food security. Across the world, bacterial pathogens have already managed to acquire the ability to resist the effects of many of the drugs relied on to curb disease since the 1930s. In 2016, the British O'Neill Review made a conservative estimate that 700 000 people were dying as a result of antimicrobial resistant infections every year<sup>1</sup>. By 2050, the number is projected to rise to 10 million people a year.

**Will Covid-19 affect the problem of antimicrobial resistance?**

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Traditionally, pandemics tend to exacerbate problems with antimicrobial resistance because antibiotics are used to treat secondary

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<sup>1</sup> J. O'Neill (2016). *Tackling Drug-Resistant Infections Globally: Final Report and Recommendations*. London: The Review on Antimicrobial Resistance.

“superinfections”. The classic case is the Spanish flu. Many deaths were not caused directly by the influenza strain but by bacterial pneumonia. We also saw rises of global antimicrobial consumption and resistance in the wake of the 2009 swine flu outbreak.

As a historian of antibiotics, I would also stress the great danger of deprioritising antimicrobial resistance interventions amidst the current crisis. Global health only has so many resources to go around. Antimicrobial resistance was a growing topic for 20 years but, since 2015, international awareness has begun to slide. There is a well-evidenced danger that regearing global health to narrowly focus on pandemic preparedness may distract leaders from the arguably far graver medium to long-term threat posed by antimicrobial resistance. We are already seeing the first signs of this. The political economy of attention is limited. A high-level UN General Assembly panel on antimicrobial resistance in April 2020 was meant to re-galvanise the issue but it has been postponed indefinitely.

#### **What would a solution look like?**

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We need a grand international bargain to achieve a sustainably managed global antimicrobial commons. It would have to be a bargain between high-income countries, who have historically had better and earlier access to antibiotics, and low and medium-income

parts of the globe where access has been – and often still is – far more limited. Global reductions of antibiotic use are necessary to reduce selection pressure for antimicrobial resistance. However, income and access inequalities mean that expecting reductions is unrealistic – this approach has been tried and it has failed. Everybody will profit from reduced antimicrobial resistance. However, high-income countries will have to shoulder some of the economic burdens involved in asking low- and medium-income areas of the globe to develop effective solutions. In general, interventions need to address the structural factors driving consumption like lack of health or veterinary care.

Who should lead this framework is another question. It would be fantastic if our existing tripartite United Nations agencies in this area – the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) – could lead it. But individual states or coalitions of states will also have to play a major role.

#### **What could the EU's role be?**

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Within its borders, the EU has been very progressive in terms of antimicrobial stewardship even if there is still room for more progress. Since 1998, common precautionary standard-setting regarding agricultural antibiotic use within the Single Market has been a success.

**DIVIDING THE PUBLIC  
INTO "PRO-SCIENCE" OR  
"ANTI-SCIENCE" CAMPS  
RISKS ARTIFICIALLY  
POLARISING SOCIETY**

The EU has also pioneered an integrated monitoring system for antimicrobial resistance, which has successfully put pressure on states with higher usage and higher rates of resistance to implement reforms. The EU also has enormous power beyond its borders through control over market access, for example for agricultural products. Ideally, the EU would finance surveillance systems within lower-income countries to improve production standards and reduce infectious disease pressure in return for market access. But neither the EU nor the US has the power to solve the global antimicrobial resistance crisis by itself. Even the best-intended international interventions will not work if they are not co-designed by partners in low-income countries and supported by middle-income regional stewards such as Brazil, India, and China.

**Over the last few years, the anti-vaxxer movement has been growing and the authority of the medical sciences has been challenged. Is there a crisis of faith in scientific knowledge?**

I don't see a dramatic crisis of trust in science and public health. Think about the large percentage of the world population complying with scientific advice and following quite severe public health guidance. Around the world, people are tuning into WHO press

briefings, washing their hands, wearing face masks, and keeping social distance. In a way, Covid-19 has been an exercise in mass compliance with scientific expertise.

This compliance may wear thin over time – especially in politically polarised countries – and there are exceptions and rule-breakers. However, the current “crisis of faith” narrative assumes that “science” is an easy-to-follow monolithic body of expertise. This notion is naive. Science is a broad church. Different schools of expertise use different forms of data and theoretical frameworks. Opinions differ and some arguments are never fully resolved. The novelty of Covid-19 and the expectation that science will protect us means that many normal scientific controversies are receiving much more attention than usual. At the same time, the narrative of an alleged crisis of scientific authority fuels over-reporting on radical outliers of denialism. Anti-vaxxers may enjoy press coverage but research has found that the hardcore of ideological deniers is quite small. Most vaccine non-compliance has historically been based on limited access to vaccine services. People not being able to take time off to take their child for a second vaccination, for example. Even though polls show that a new Covid-19 vaccine faces challenges of vaccine hesitancy, we shouldn't exaggerate the problem.

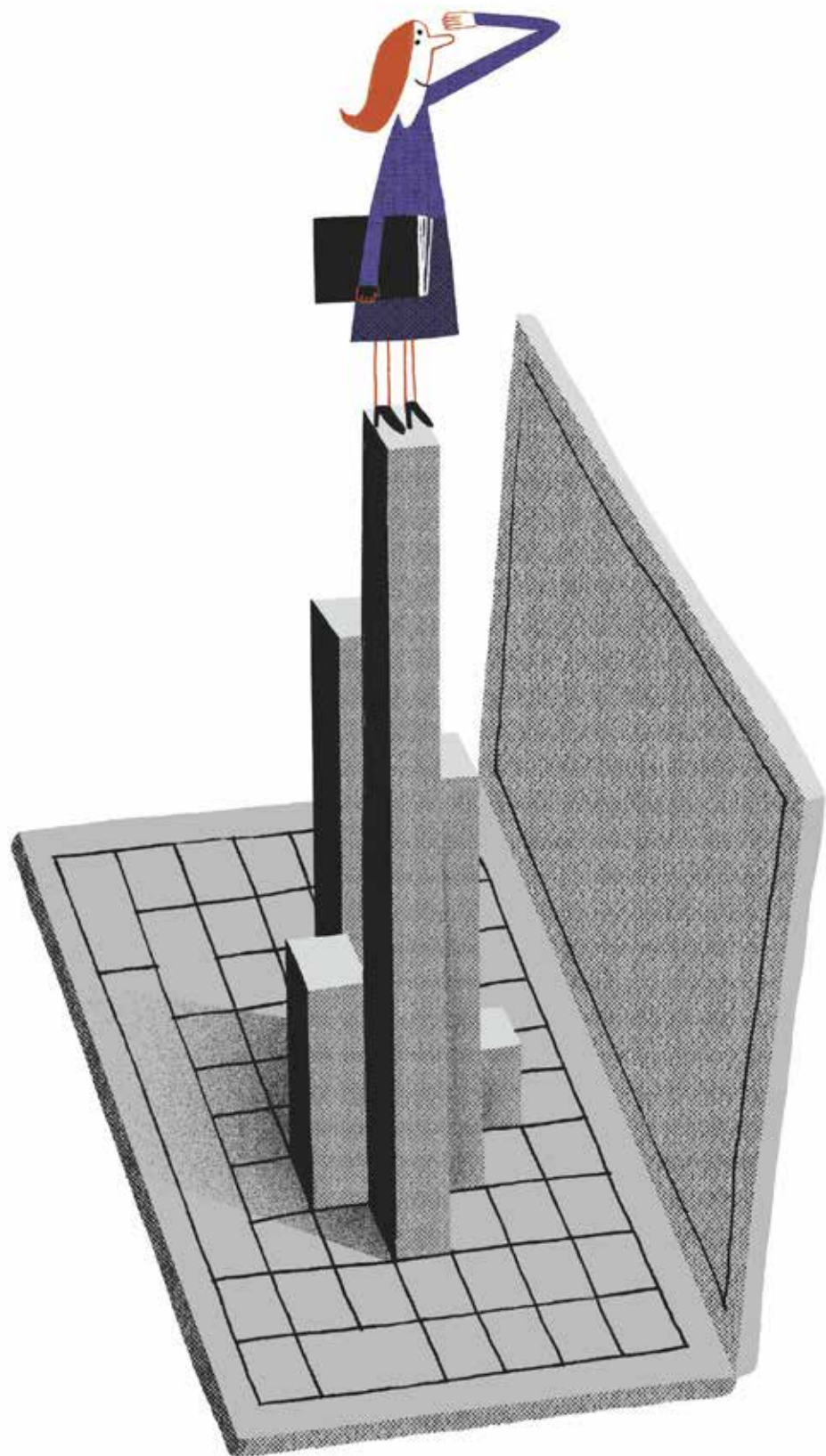
Dividing the public into “pro-science” or “anti-science” camps risks artificially polarising society. Most people are not uniformly pro- or anti-science. Questioning data and evidence is legitimate and people will reach different conclusions. Seeking a middle-ground of discourse about societal risks and ways to mitigate them is essential. We should pause to ask why people are perhaps not following every guideline. Public finger-pointing risks glossing over the large grey areas of compliance and semi-compliance that exist. It also aids ideologues and populists, who profit from binary thinking and falsely claim that a partial public questioning of expert authority signals buy-in to their ideological camp. Simplistically demanding that people “follow the science” without explaining why they should does not work either. Every scientist worth their salt will admit that science is complex, constantly evolving and that good scientific advice acknowledges economic and social constraints. While it is important to counter conspiracy theories and attacks on good research, scientists have to reconcile the need for clear, simple messaging and responding to legitimate public concerns. Ultimately, it is our duty as citizens to act responsibly vis-à-vis others. But talk of anti- and pro-science camps needlessly polarises a situation that is already tense enough.

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### CLAAS KIRCHHELLE

is assistant professor in the History of Medicine at University College Dublin. Supported by a Wellcome Trust University Award, his work explores the global history of infectious disease surveillance. His book on the history of antibiotic use, resistance, and regulation, *Pyrrhic Progress* (2020, Rutgers University Press), won the 2020 Turriano Prize.





# WORKING ON OVERDRIVE

## THE FUTURE OF PLATFORMS AND WORKING TIME

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**JULIET SCHOR**

Adapting to Covid-19 has meant changing how and where we work and consume. In an economic recession, the major risk is that work will become more precarious, conditions more unequal, and platforms more powerful. But the disruption of old habits offers opportunities too. We sat down with economist and sociologist Juliet Schor to discuss the gig economy in the context of the pandemic, accelerating digitalisation, and the need for a new economy based on security and resilience.

**GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL:** The gig economy's original positive self-image of flexibility and autonomy has clearly not materialised. What went wrong?

**JULIET SCHOR:** The gig economy started with an idealist discourse making three sets of claims: economic, social, and environmental. The environmental claims were mostly bogus. Transportation and travel are carbon-intensive activities. If you make them cheaper, you'll get more of them. On the economic and social side, the gig economy promised a new way to work: without a boss. Unlike with conventional employment, workers could work whenever they wanted and as much or as little as they liked. This flexibility, autonomy, and, in particular, the idea of not having a boss suited many people.

What went wrong differs according to the worker. For those for whom platforms are a source of extra income rather than a means to make ends meet, the gig economy is attractive. They may already have a full-time job, a pension, a well-off spouse, or be operating a business.

For those trying to make a living, on the other hand, gig work has fallen down. Some apps have really squeezed the sums that workers receive per job, forcing them to work extra hours. In ride-hail, the workers' share just kept getting eaten away. The other problem is that the apps are open access, meaning that the platforms have become flooded with workers. If the overall volume of work stays the same, workers are spending their time waiting for jobs without being compensated. People working full-time in ride-hail and delivery, including on apps with high hourly rates, don't even reach poverty-level incomes. It all comes down to company policy, which has pushed the rates down while allowing too many people on the apps for the given amount of work.

**The Covid-19 pandemic has pushed people out of work and reduced incomes. Won't these conditions make more people reliant on gig work?**

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Delivery services have seen major growth in demand in the pandemic. The US-based grocery pick-up and delivery company Instacart, for example, has taken on many more shoppers. The drop in demand for ride-hail has forced even larger numbers into delivery work. Today, too many people are chasing too little work as people lose jobs and turn to the apps. In that situation, it gets pretty desperate and companies take advantage.

**The economy is moving increasingly online, from shopping to government services, and the only companies doing well in the pandemic are big tech firms like Amazon and Google. What will this mean for work more generally?**

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The big takeaway is stratification. Digitalisation is not going to mean the same thing for everyone. It's important to separate digitalised work from remote work. Remote work for more privileged workers offers some level of autonomy and has been largely positive. Some permanent changes we will see are companies letting employees work from anywhere, meaning they can live in cheaper areas while avoiding long commutes. Childcare is an issue, but the option for remote work is an expansion of freedom for many. If people get to choose, they'll choose what is best for them. In other areas, the digitalisation of work will be far more problematic. Digitalised human resource functions are already being used to hire people using often-discriminatory algorithmic decision-making.

An even bigger risk is a growing division between privileged positions working digitally and the many occupations that will remain in-person and non-digitalised. The growth of the middle class in the second half of the 20th century eroded strong class differences by education and occupation, but these appear to be coming back. Delivery workers, frontline workers, work that you don't need a degree

SHORTER HOURS  
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POLICY

to do, could become a much more stigmatised set of occupations with a split between increasingly digitalised white-collar work and non-digitalised, predominantly manual work.

**Could remote working be a first step to white-collar jobs becoming more like gig work?**

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If you think about doctor's and medical visits, you can see them being turned into piecework, which is what the gig economy basically is. Many scholars think that the modern corporation may soon be a thing of the past. Modern corporations pulled much of their activity out from the market and organised it through command and control. One of the ironies of the free market is that the major institutions of capitalism operate like socialist countries. However, increasingly, the "fissured workplace" and outsourcing involve firms devolving their activity out on a market-contractual, contingent basis. Historically, the piecework system in the West was fairly bad when it came to working conditions. If it were to happen in a context of security, through a universal basic income or other robust ways of meeting basic needs, then a piecework system might not be as bad as it was in the proto-industrial Britain with which we associate it.

**Your book *After the Gig* argues that we shouldn't give up on the original promise of the gig economy. Is it worth saving?**

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I have many criticisms of the gig economy but there remains potential and many workers do experience positive aspects of gig work. Some of the technology is fantastic in the sense that it makes much of what management does redundant. Buyers and sellers are automatically matched. Quality control is organised without management and often applies to both consumers and workers. The problem is not the technology but the social relations. Worker- or user-owned platforms, instead of predatory capitalist firms, have the potential to make algorithms that conform to people's wants and needs.

The global network of sharing cities shows what cities can do in this respect, from regulation and technical support to start-up funds for true sharing initiatives. A combination of regulation, fostering the cooperative ecosystem, and even municipally hosted or owned platforms could be the basis for an alternative platform economy. Of course, the big corporate players don't like competition. But, going into another period of high unemployment and depression, we need cities to get more creative about producing and promoting jobs.

**Many European countries have used reduced working hours to manage the economic downturn, and there is a growing discussion about a four-day week. Is the current crisis an opportunity for a new balance between work and leisure?**

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Particularly at the beginning of the crisis, it seemed like an opportune time to discuss reduced working time because people had gone back to basics in terms of spending and consumption. Countries were prioritising basic needs in the supply chain and, even if you went online, you couldn't always find what you were looking for. This moment prompted the question of what we really need. Our basic needs are food, healthcare, education, and shelter. If as societies we focused on those needs rather than maximal output, it would free up a lot of labour for other activities. At the same

time, positive imaginings of a different, simpler way of living were something of a preserve for privileged people whose needs were met during the lockdown.

The other dimension of reduced working time is the climate crisis. The relationship between hours of work and carbon emissions shows that countries where working time is shorter have, other things held equal, lower carbon emissions. We need to push this because there's no way to have a robust climate agenda while trying to continually expand the size of national economies. In that sense, shorter hours are about survival and need to be in the toolkit for climate policy. Greens in Europe have understood this point for a long time and it's been a key part of their agenda since the 1980s.

In Europe, reduced working hours and much of the post-growth agenda has entered the mainstream. Not the centre of the mainstream, but it's a legitimate point of view. The debate in the United States has not reached this point – even though the Green New Deal talks about jobs but not growth. The question of growth, in a way, needs to come out in the wash. Carbon, employment, and wellbeing should be targeted with policy.

**Covid-19 is first and foremost a health crisis, but it exposes many flaws in how our economies are run. What should Greens focus on to make this crisis a turning point?**

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The focus should be on what the economy is for. Is it growth for growth's sake? The pandemic has shown once again how the economy isn't functioning in a way that meets people's needs. In the 1950s, people said, "What's good for General Motors is what's good for the country". I would have criticised it but it was a plausible argument. Now the key is to hammer on questions of meeting needs while protecting the planetary ecosystem. That means talking in terms of security. The climate crisis will create increasing economic insecurity for more and more people through disasters, food prices, instability, and migration. It is already causing chaos and that will bring further economic chaos. It might be a bit of a hunker down message, but it's about focusing on people's needs: security, resilience, and minimising risks.

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### **JULIET SCHOR**

is an economist and sociologist at Boston College. Her research focuses on the sociology of work, consumption, and climate change. Schor's most recent book is *After the Gig: How the Sharing Economy Got Hijacked and How to Win It Back* (2020, University of California Press).

# THE MASK SLIPS

## RIGHTS UNDER ATTACK IN POLAND

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ARTICLE BY **ADAM  
ROGALEWSKI**

Around the world, authoritarian governments seized the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their grip on power. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice party attacked the social partners before moving on to assault women's rights. Trade unionist Adam Rogalewski analyses the party's opportunistic attempt on trade union rights, explaining the links to growing attacks on LGBT people and reproductive rights, and drawing lessons for the struggle over Poland's future.

**P**olish trade unions have been challenged by shrinking memberships and declining power for a long time. Since 2015, the right-wing populist party Law and Justice (PiS) has confronted unions not only through assaults on fundamental rights and the rule of law but also by hijacking their social policies.<sup>1</sup> With Covid-19, the mask has slipped to reveal that PiS's only objective is authoritarianism, not social rights. In true populist fashion, the party used employment and social rights to win elections but is hostile to any external power base. The pandemic was an opportunity for PiS to attempt to dismantle Poland's already weak social dialogue and attack reproductive rights. However, trade unions have, if anything, emerged stronger and new possibilities have opened up. If the opposition can recapture the issue of social rights, it could make progress against right-wing populism.

### FROM NEOLIBERALISM TO AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM

Between 2007 and 2015, Poland was governed by the Civic Platform (PO). During this time, work in Poland became increasingly precarious,

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<sup>1</sup> J. Czarzasty and A. Rogalewski (forthcoming, 2021). "Polish unions towards populism: strategies and dilemmas". In: B. Colfer and R. Hyman, *European Trade Unions in the 21st century – workplace democracy and solidarity in the digital age*. Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan.

the retirement age was raised, and social partners were sidelined. Towards the end of its time in office, PO changed its stance and introduced improvements to social dialogue, but it was too little, too late. In 2015, PiS came to power on a platform of social policies, most notably a substantial child benefit package. As David Ost has argued, Law and Justice emerged in opposition to the liberalism of the first post-communist decade.<sup>2</sup> In its place, the party called for reviving “traditional values” and a strong state. After a landslide win in 2015, Law and Justice delivered on its social promises early. Ever since, the minimum wage has steadily been raised to reach almost half the median wage (an increase from 1750 to 2250 złoty between 2015 and 2019). Higher pensions and free medical prescriptions attracted support from older voters, while many trade union demands, such as a minimum wage for freelancers, were met.

However, the background to this was the slow dismantling of democracy. Social policies were a smokescreen for destroying the rule of law and a gradual attempt to build an authoritarian system. Since taking power, PiS has taken over the Constitutional Tribunal and created a politically managed body to oversee the Supreme Court and the judiciary. Reproductive rights have consistently been

under threat. PiS’s first attempt to ban abortion sparked the 2016 Black Protests. In October 2020, just before the second wave, party judges on the Constitutional Tribunal significantly reduced the already limited right to abortion, causing general outrage. Since the 1990s, abortion has only been allowed when the woman’s life or health is endangered, when pregnancy is a result of a criminal act, or when there is a high probability of a severe and irreversible foetal impairment. The third possibility, under which 90 per cent of abortions are carried out in Poland, was declared unconstitutional.

The government has also fuelled attacks on LGBT people with politicians declaring their cities and regions “LGBT-free zones”. In August 2020, LGBT activists were brutally arrested by the police for peacefully protesting. The EU has criticised these attacks but to little avail. When the EU cut subsidies for municipalities that declared “LGBT-free zones”, the Polish government committed to compensating any losses.

Progressive trade unions such as the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions have strongly criticised the brutal attacks on the judicial system, women’s rights, and LGBT people.<sup>3</sup> Until recently Law and Justice was commonly

2 D. Ost (2018). “Workers and the Radical Right in Poland”. *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 93, pp.113-124.

3 OPZZ (2020). “Stanowisko Kierownictwa OPZZ w sprawie reakcji rządzących na odbywające się obecnie w naszym kraju protesty społeczne”. 25 October 2020. Available at <bit.ly/38uG9UI>.

perceived as the party that understands the blue-collar working class. The perception was that PiS would promote long-forgotten social rights even if it came at the cost of other fundamental rights. But with PiS attacking social rights during the pandemic, this perception has shifted fundamentally.

## NEVER WASTE A CRISIS

Poland was one of the first countries to close its borders in early 2020. The government was keen to show that it was protecting the health and wellbeing of Polish citizens. The government rushed to introduce new legislation, known as “shields”, to manage the effects of the pandemic. Four shield bills have been adopted, of which two undermine working conditions and trade union rights.

The shield legislation contained many provisions similar to what other European governments have introduced, including short-term working scheme and deferred tax payments. However, it also introduced more controversial changes, safe in the knowledge that society was too preoccupied to notice. The legislation was tabled with almost no time for consultation. The only groups that could resist the changes were the opposition, which controls the upper house, and the social partners, both employers’ organisations and trade unions.

The second shield bill, tabled in mid-March, tried to exclude trade unions from representing workers in negotiations over layoffs and reduced hours. Eventually, following resistance from trade unions, these changes were removed. However, PiS MPs in the lower chamber then introduced amendments on the Social Dialogue Council, the body that brings together unions, employers, and the government. The amendments entered into force on 31 March 2020, giving the prime minister the power to dismiss council members almost at will.<sup>4</sup>

Trade unions were outraged. The Solidarność union, previously supportive of the government, warned that “Solidarność does not forget.” European social partners wrote to the presidents of the European Commission and the European Council to request intervention. The president eventually submitted the regulations to the Constitutional Court. But, as the court is dominated by PiS-appointed judges, it was a rather symbolic gesture.

This was not the end of the attacks on workers’ rights. The third shield bill in April ostensibly aimed to provide emergency liquidity to businesses but its provisions went far beyond that. Again, the bill tried to allow employers to suspend collective agreements, make workers redundant, and force workers to go on leave. It

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4 A. Rogalewski (2020). “How Law and Justice (mis)used the pandemic to dismantle social dialogue in Poland”. *Social Europe*. 21 April 2020.



**SOCIAL POLICIES WERE  
A SMOKESCREEN FOR  
DESTROYING THE RULE OF  
LAW AND A GRADUAL  
ATTEMPT TO BUILD AN  
AUTHORITARIAN SYSTEM**

also proposed abolishing a company social fund that supports low-paid workers and cutting the number of civil servants. It seemed that the government was testing the unions' patience. Solidarność threatened a national demonstration even under lockdown and other unions were also vociferously opposed. Eventually, the government withdrew most of the proposals but went ahead with the abolition of the social fund and civil service cuts.

## **DEFENDING SOCIAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS**

After March and April, PiS did not propose any more anti-worker legislative changes. With presidential elections in July, the party changed its stance and unemployment benefits for people laid off during the pandemic were increased (unemployment benefit is below the poverty line in Poland). Nor did the prime minister use his new prerogative to dismiss members of the Social Dialogue Council. PiS won the presidential election by a slim margin in the second round (51.03 to 48.97 per cent of votes, a difference of roughly 400 000 ballots). The narrow result proved that support for PiS is shrinking, and that working people are changing their minds.

The crisis has exposed new government weakness on social rights. The government

came to power by increasing spending on social transfers, yet its response

to the pandemic unprecedentedly targeted workers and sought to make them pay the costs of the pandemic. If populism is about claiming to represent the people against an elite, by choosing business, PiS has demonstrated its hollowness. Moreover, Covid-19 has been a catalyst for Law and Justice's autocratic tendencies. Social dialogue and workers' rights are one of the few spheres still excluded from the party's influence. The pandemic has been a convenient opportunity to take them on. Covid-19 will have devastating economic and social consequences in Poland, as in other countries. However, it will also leave right-wing populism weaker. PiS has paid a high price for using the pandemic to undermine social dialogue.

PiS made a second crucial mistake in attacking women's rights through its judges on the Constitutional Tribunal. After the moves to curtail reproductive rights became public, people risked their health to gather in their hundreds of thousands in cities across Poland. A show of solidarity with women, the protests were of a scale not seen since the end of Communism. Protesters were convinced that the ruling was timed to coincide with the ban on demonstrations and called for the government to restore reproductive rights. "PiS has to go" was one of the most popular slogans.

Alienating the trade unions will have consequences for an increasingly isolated Law and Justice. After undermining fundamental and social rights, the only agenda left for the party is pure nationalism and ultra-conservatism. PiS has “played with fascism” in the past but they now face competition. Ultra-right Konfederacja is increasingly popular; their presidential candidate Krzysztof Bosak received almost 7 per cent of the votes. In comparison, the Social Democrat candidate Robert Biedroń received 2.22 per cent. This shift may drive PiS even further to the right in the future. Its attacks on reproductive rights cater to its only remaining support base: the conservative right.

Sadly, the opposition has not yet been able to increase its support at Law and Justice’s expense. The Civic Platform, to which the Greens are allied, is still associated with its record in government between 2007 and 2015. The parties of the Left re-entered parliament as a coalition in the 2019 election but their support cannot exceed 10 per cent. Though they are united, they are struggling to regain the trust of voters. Polling from November 2020 indicated that while support for PiS had decreased by 12 points to 28 per cent, the opposition has yet to make major gains as the share of undecided voters rose from 9 to 18 per cent.<sup>5</sup>

For all parts of the opposition, the opportunity is there to take on Law and Justice on social rights. Trade unions and opposition parties should use the chance offered by the pandemic to recapture this agenda and convince the undecided. Like other countries, Poland is facing the second wave. PiS may well use the pandemic to once more crack down on fundamental rights – as the abortion law already does – but it will also likely fail to protect citizens’ wellbeing. In the country with the lowest health spending in the EU, the opposition has an unmissable opportunity to defend health and civil liberties.



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<sup>5</sup> “Sondaż IBRiS dla Onetu. Zmniejsza się przewaga PiS nad KO.” *Wiadomości w Onet*. 5 November 2020.



# BLACK LIVES MATTER IN BREXIT BRITAIN

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**NADINE EL-ENANY**  
BY **JENNIFER KWAO**

Sparked by deaths in police custody in the United States and fuelled by the effects of the pandemic, protests in defence of black lives spread across the world in 2020. This revolution of dignity forced a conversation on persistent structural racism in Europe, too. As it leaves the European Union, Britain continues to grapple with its imperial past. A full reckoning remains a long way off but its defiant antiracist movement has shifted the debate fundamentally.

**JENNIFER KWAO:** A UK government report confirms that racialised communities are disproportionately affected by Covid-19.<sup>1</sup> Why is this the case?

**NADINE EL-ENANY:** Racialised people everywhere are dying of the virus in disproportionate numbers. The UK government's report confirms that the Covid-19 pandemic has reproduced existing health inequalities. It shows that, for the time period studied, the risk of dying of the virus was higher among people living in more deprived areas and higher still among black, Asian, and minority ethnic people living in these areas. Members of the Bangladeshi population were overall twice as likely to die of the virus as white people.

There was a particularly high increase in deaths from all causes during the pandemic among people born outside the UK, as well as among nursing and care workers, transport and security staff, and people working in construction and processing plants. Black, Asian, and minority ethnic people died disproportionately in these sectors. In London, more than a quarter of transport workers driving tube trains and buses are racialised.

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<sup>1</sup> Public Health England (2020). *Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19*. August 2020. London: PHE Publications. Available at <[bit.ly/2TgX9os](https://bit.ly/2TgX9os)>.

The government refused to apply the lockdown restriction to these occupations, ostensibly on the basis that they were essential, and at the same time failed to require employers to provide personal protective equipment or put in place proper safety measures.

Exposure to violence, harm, and premature death is not a new condition for racialised people, whether they live in or outside the colonial metropole – we need only think of disproportionate deaths in custody, the 2018 Windrush scandal that saw black British citizens deported, and the Grenfell Tower fire.<sup>2</sup> In Britain, half of people of African descent live in poverty. Two per cent of the white British population lives in overcrowded housing conditions compared with 30 per cent of Britain’s Bangladeshi population, 15 per cent of Britain’s black population, and 16 per cent of its Pakistani population.

### **How did the British government’s initial “herd immunity” strategy affect at-risk groups in the UK?**

The British government’s herd immunity strategy was based on allowing, in the words of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the virus to “move through the population”. This approach necessitates the death of large numbers of people and the result is that the UK has one of the highest Covid-19 death tolls in the world. This

decision was taken after it was already widely understood that the virus was particularly dangerous for older people and those with underlying health conditions. Johnson treated vulnerable people as surplus population, as acceptable sacrifices, so that Britain could remain “open for business”. This dangerous position was exacerbated by a combination of arrogance and racism on the part of officials who considered the virus to be something happening “over there”, to people who were not white, not European, not British; people who didn’t matter. The assumption was that the virus would not reach Britain and, if it did, Britain would be better placed to deal with it.

As people died needlessly in their tens of thousands, officials fudged the figures, showing and then concealing graphs which demonstrated the true scale of the disaster. Effectively, they did what they could to hide the bodies. The same combination of exceptionalism, complacency, and racism was an important part of colonial rule in the British Empire. Colonial subjects were left to die as famines took hold, as illness spread through populations, as people’s land and livelihoods were taken from them in the course of conquest. We can see the parallels in the way that the government left vulnerable populations to die during the pandemic and how racialised people have been disproportionately affected.

<sup>2</sup> The Grenfell Tower fire of 2017 killed 72 people, the majority of whom were from black, Asian, or minority ethnic communities.

**Politicians have described the pandemic as a war, with health workers celebrated as soldiers on the frontline. What do you make of such rhetoric?**

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It was disturbing but not surprising to see the language of war adopted by government officials and the media. There was talk of “frontline workers”, summoning the “Blitz spirit”, and “the great nation pulling together in a time of crisis”. This discourse rests on an odd and inaccurate construction of the virus as a national crisis rather than a worldwide pandemic requiring an international response. It’s a painful irony to watch health workers, disproportionately made up of migrant workers, being asked to sacrifice their lives – and glibly applauded for it – in a context in which they were so recently constructed as unskilled and unwanted.

Migrant National Health Service (NHS) staff whose visas were about to expire were told over the summer that these would be automatically renewed so that they could focus on fighting Covid-19. NHS staff, who face daily abuse from patients asking to see a white doctor, and having been harangued by a media all too willing to unquestioningly repeat the line that “migrants are a drain on the welfare state”, were asked to sacrifice their lives and the wellbeing of their families.

Shortly after the December 2019 general election, the newly elected Johnson government

announced its intention to move forward with a points-based immigration system. This proposed system significantly limits permanent settlement prospects for precisely the people – including nurses and care workers – that Britain has depended on during the pandemic.

**2020 saw the protests against the killing of George Floyd spread around the world. The movement was particularly large in the UK. Why did Black Lives Matter make the impact it did?**

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There was something very specific about the timing of these demonstrations. First, they were organised during the lockdown at a time when people were seeing society being radically restructured from the top down, in ways that we had been told for decades would never be possible. Second, Britain had seen the worst death toll in Europe and people’s ability to grieve and gather was hugely restricted. Unable to fully mark the loss of loved ones on an individual level, people were affected on a mass scale. The disintegration – of society, conceptions of society, and people’s psyches – meant that the anger and collective grief after learning of George Floyd’s death in police custody galvanised people in an unprecedented way.

The pandemic also clearly showed how structural racism makes racialised people vulnerable. It was not only the general public that learned this for the first time; many racialised

**THIS IS AN ANTI-  
COLONIAL MOVEMENT  
AT HEART; IT'S ABOUT  
RESISTANCE AGAINST  
A SYSTEM THAT  
SUBJUGATES BLACK LIVES**

people woke up to this too. I spoke to neighbours and friends from racialised communities who were confused. Before, they would never have gone through their everyday lives thinking of themselves as disproportionately vulnerable to a virus due to racism, but suddenly they had become aware of this and felt scared for their loved ones.

### **Were the protests a landmark for Britain's anti-racist movement?**

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The scale of the uprisings – in terms of locations, the number of protestors, and the frequency – was unprecedented. The reception by the media, corporations, and the establishment was new, too. Of course, much of this was co-optation, but the mere fact that the movement was met with a response that seemed, at least on face value, to take it seriously was a first. All of a sudden, politicians felt they had to comment on police abolition; obviously they were against it, but it entered mainstream discourse for the first time.

At the same time, the protests are part of a long history of anti-racist activism that has been responsible for every progressive win on tackling racism. Thinking about the statue of slave trader Edward Colston that was pulled down in Bristol, it's important to remember that Rhodes Must Fall, the movement for the removal of a statue of colonist Cecil Rhodes,

started in South Africa and then took off in the UK at Oxford University

in 2015. This is an anti-colonial movement at heart. It's about resistance against a system that subjugates black lives. The direct action we have seen is the sort of resistance that tackles structural racism at its core. The law presents the protesters as criminal, as having desecrated public monuments, as having damaged property. The reality is that these protesters are engaging in acts of resistance against centuries of violence and destruction of racialised people, their bodies, their culture, their freedom, and their humanity.

### **Where should the anti-racist movement in the UK go from here?**

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We face many obstacles at the present moment including rising nationalism and a right-wing authoritarian government, which, as the Covid-19 pandemic has showed us, is prepared to let swathes of its population die needlessly. Every progressive win must be vigorously defended. Governments have a way of re-legislating inequality the moment they get the chance. Sometimes there are progressive wins, in or outside the courtroom, only for the government to re-introduce harmful policies. One risk is that the demands become limited to a question of the removal of statues rather than about dismantling structural racism. It's been refreshing to see demands around prison

BRITAIN IS NOT  
THE ONLY  
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A DISHONEST  
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HISTORY

abolition because these are the sorts of radical demands we should be making. The focus on statues distracts from the material effects of racism on poor racialised people's lives. We should be making demands around access to safe housing and work, healthcare, clean air, and food security.

### **Brexit has dominated British politics since 2016. How does it connect to Britain's colonial past?**

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Brexit mixes nostalgia for empire with amnesia. Longing for a time when Britain ruled the waves is a lingering state of mind. We can see it in Britain's cultural reproduction of itself and its discourse about influence on the world stage. Much of this discourse is around Britain as a bastion for human rights, and of course colonialism was sold on the idea of civilising barbaric cultures and places. During the referendum, politicians claimed that leaving the European Union would return Britain to global dominance, a dangerous euphemism for the colonial era of exploitation.

The amnesia comes in with the Vote Leave campaign's construction of 1940s Britain as the island nation that fought fascism. But Britain was not a nation-state during the Second World War; it was an empire with possessions across the world. Mythological narratives around empire – all driven by fantasy, amnesia, and nostalgia – haunt the present day. Britain could only leave the European Union based on the promise of a return to a "Greater Britain" because of ignorance around what the empire really was.

### **What will Brexit mean for racialised people in Britain?**

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Even before the vote, hate crime and attacks against racialised people were rising. Leaving the European Union was quickly made into a matter of taking back control of borders, and curbing immigration was the central rallying point of the Vote Leave campaign. Anybody perceived not to be British quickly became fair game.



The idea of “Leave” had a powerful and devastating effect. There has been a kind of fetishisation of British citizenship that has led to anyone who does not hold that citizenship, or who might be perceived not to, being stigmatised. A horrific consequence of the government’s “hostile environment” immigration policy was the Windrush Scandal that saw black British citizens deported. People who rightly considered themselves to have a secure status were told, “You do not have proof that you are entitled to be here, you must leave.”

### **Does the European Union need to have a reckoning with the colonial pasts of many of its remaining members?**

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Britain is not the only country with a dishonest relationship to its imperialist history. Particularly in its first iteration, the European Union was made up of former colonial powers cutting their losses, pooling the resources that they had plundered through colonial escapades, and pulling up the drawbridge collectively. Creating the Schengen area required the construction of Fortress Europe and Europe’s trade arrangements remain configured to the detriment of former colonies.

The myth that is always told about the European Union is that it was about peace and economic interdependence to prevent future wars. But many European countries still possess colonies, and the absence of war

has always been localised to geographical Europe. There was war in Algeria when it was still part of France, and EU member states continue to wage imperial wars under the guise of humanitarian intervention despite the origin story of peace. Without recognising the European Union’s roots in colonialism and empire, I don’t see how the European Union can deal with the resurgence of right-wing fascist and racist forces in Europe. These are legacies of empire.

### **What role can the Black Lives Matter movement have across Europe?**

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Some European countries do not have the same space in civil society as in Britain for anti-racist organising. In France and Germany, for example, it is difficult to discuss racism because of the counterproductive idea that talking about race invites or is itself racism. The Black Lives Matter protests can provide legitimacy and voice to communities who otherwise do not have the space to draw attention to the material conditions in which poor racialised people live.

I doubt that governments and the European Union can introduce reforms that alter the causes of structural racism. I find hope in the collective organising itself, in movements and communities coming together internationally and nationally. These movements can shift the discourse, support one another, and make sure that these narratives become more prominent.

**The Green Party of England and Wales committed to reparations for slavery in October 2020. Are reparations relevant for European countries to pursue seriously?**

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Reparations are part of righting past wrongs and would be a move towards recognising colonial legacies and their disenfranchising effects throughout the world. But they're not enough, neither for the countries that would receive such funds, nor for countries like Britain, which domestically remains colonially configured to this day. Poor racialised people continue to be made vulnerable to harm and premature death within former colonial metropolises. Would reparations deal with this? I don't think so. Reparations need to be understood in broader terms, as not only covering financial payments to former colonies, but as part of attempts to radically alter structures that we take for granted such as immigration law and difficulties in accessing housing, safe work, and healthcare.

**How can progressive parties support the anti-racist movement?**

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They can start by taking their cue from the demands that are made by people experiencing racial violence. There is so much evidence and research available that could be used to guide policy changes aimed at improving the material conditions faced by poor racialised people. The problem, at least in Britain, is that the

main political parties are pandering to the Brexit logic which holds that resources are scarce and the sole entitlement of white people. It's a dangerous and unnecessary zero-sum politics. When progressive parties appeal to patriotism, it ends in the exclusionary politics of nationalism. There is no progressive in the national.



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# CONNECT THE CITY

## RIGHTS, JUSTICE AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

ARTICLE BY **GUILLEM  
RAMÍREZ CHICO**

Among the trends accelerated by the pandemic, digitalisation stands out for its pace of change. Large parts of education, work, and social services moved online in a matter of weeks. Though many people lack the connections, equipment, and skills to access what are often fundamental rights, much of this change will be permanent. In the 21st century, it will become increasingly hard to live without the internet. For cities such as Barcelona, the answer is a politics that puts people and rights at the centre of the digital transition.

**B**etween 14 March and 18 May, Barcelona experienced a strict lockdown. Residents could only leave their homes for food and medicine, medical visits, or essential work. Until a certain normality returned in June, 73 per cent of people still employed worked from home.<sup>1</sup> School-age children also stayed at home as all education was conducted online.



This article is available in Catalan on the *Green European Journal* website.

### **CAP A UN DRET A LA INCLUSIÓ DIGITAL?**

La inclusió digital és qüestió de drets humans. Aquesta és, probablement, la principal contribució de l'experiència del confinament al model digital europea.

The pandemic has accelerated digitalisation as technology stepped in to facilitate communication, enhance social services, and sustain economic activity during the lockdown. Cities have been the main scene of this acceleration. In Barcelona, digital technologies are at the heart of the response to the health and socio-economic crises: from the manufacture of personal protective equipment and social action to support vulnerable populations to the large-scale shift to remote working. E-administration has ensured the continuity of municipal services.

Preventing physical distancing from becoming social isolation has been the principle under which Barcelona and many other European

<sup>1</sup> Departament d'Estudis d'Opinió, Oficina Municipal de Dades, Ajuntament de Barcelona (2020). *Enquesta Covid-19 a Barcelona*. Available at <[bit.ly/2TJSRGe](https://bit.ly/2TJSRGe)>.

cities have operated. But the lockdown has also exposed blatant inequalities in access to and use of digital technologies. The effects of the increasingly well-known “digital divide” are clear: digitalisation affects access to human rights such as the rights to work, quality education, equal opportunities, access to public services, a decent standard of living, gender equality, and accessibility.

In recent years, “digital rights” – primarily concerning privacy, data, transparency, and technological accountability issues – have become part of the European technology agenda. The adoption of the General Data Protection Regulation in 2016 is a good example. However, the material dimension of digitalisation and its social impact has been barely present. The pandemic offers an opportunity to correct this course and put forth a progressive social agenda for the digital age: the digital transition will not work if it does not work for everyone.

## **TECHNOLOGICAL HUMANISM AND THE PEOPLE-CENTRED DIGITAL CITY**

For the past five years, Barcelona City Council has promoted a rights-based digital city model. During the previous municipal term (2015 to 2019), Barcelona’s digital policy advanced the city’s technological sovereignty. A network of 15 000 urban Sentilo sensors was installed to support the city administration by generating

real-time data on mobility, waste management, air quality, and energy consumption. An open-source digital citizen participation platform, Decidim, was launched and is now used in more than 100 cities in 20 different countries. Free software accounted for more than 70 per cent of the municipal digital development budget, which aimed to ensure that both citizens and the public sector could choose ethical digital services – in terms of data use but also citizen control of technology.

The current municipal government, a coalition between the municipalists of Barcelona En Comú and the social-democratic Socialists’ Party of Catalonia, has broadened the focus of digital politics to promote “technological humanism”. The people-centred digital city will be built on a politics that guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms (privacy, participation, and citizen control); that democratically regulates emerging technologies (artificial intelligence, 5G) based on social use, and that incorporates the digital dimension into the existing set of social rights (education, social care, accessibility, and housing).

## **SOCIAL INEQUALITIES, DIGITAL INEQUALITY**

Barcelona is an unequal city. According to data from 2017, a majority of the population (52.9 per cent) lives in middle-income neighbourhoods and 16.7 per cent in high-

**THE INCOME OF THE  
HIGHEST-INCOME AREA  
IS 6.4 TIMES HIGHER  
THAN THAT OF THE  
LOWEST-INCOME ONE**

income neighbourhoods.<sup>2</sup>

Almost a third of the population (30.4 per cent) lives in low-income neighbourhoods. The income of the highest-income area, Pedralbes in Les Corts, is 6.4 times higher than that of the lowest-income one, Ciutat Meridiana in Nou Barris.

The pandemic affected poorer districts disproportionately. On one hand, many low-income workers could not perform their duties offsite, nor risk forgoing their income by missing work. On the other hand, homes in lowest-income areas are generally 47 square metres smaller than the city average of 134 square metres.<sup>3</sup> The economic crisis has only deepened the existing inequalities. Between January and August, unemployment in Barcelona grew by 2.1 per cent to reach 8.6 per cent.<sup>4</sup> Lower-income areas such as Ciutat Meridiana, Trinitat Vella, and Vallbona saw larger increases than more affluent districts.

The digital divide is built around these same urban inequalities. In 2016, 96 per cent of Barcelona's inhabitants reported that they had internet access. In one of the poorest areas of the city, Torre Baró in Nou Barris, the figure dropped to 62 per cent. Research from 2016 found the average age, gender make-up, educa-

tional level, and income of the neighbourhood to be

clear determinants of internet access and use.

In early 2020, social organisations in Barcelona and Catalonia published data on the impact of the digital divide on the people they serve – particularly vulnerable communities. Twenty per cent did not have a computer at home and 18.5 per cent could not freely access the internet.<sup>5</sup> In households with a net income of under 500 euros a month, 42 per cent did not have a computer and 28 per cent could not access the internet at will. Socio-economic conditions play a clear role, but so does social capital. Among people of non-Spanish nationality served by third sector organisations, the percentage unable to freely access the internet climbed to 37 per cent.

## **THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND COVID-19**

The pandemic further magnified the effects of the digital divide. The Hàbitat3 Foundation is a social housing operator that manages flats for families facing a social emergency. Hàbitat3 guarantees the rent, manages the tenancy, and ensures adequate social care. Data from a tenants' survey on the digital divide from

2 Oficina Municipal de Dades, Ajuntament de Barcelona (2017). *Distribució territorial de la renda familiar disponible per càpita a Barcelona*. Available at <[bit.ly/3mLjDe8](http://bit.ly/3mLjDe8)>.

3 Clara Blanchar (2020). "Confinarse en Barcelona: 87 metros cuadrados de diferencia entre barrios ricos y pobres". *El País*. 18 April 2020.

4 Departament d'Estadística, Ajuntament de Barcelona. "Evolució de l'atur registrat – Barcelona". Available at <[bit.ly/324XLlL](http://bit.ly/324XLlL)>.

5 M4Social (2020). "La Bretxa digital en les persones ateses per entitats socials". Available at <[bit.ly/2Gl0Kip](http://bit.ly/2Gl0Kip)>.

March to June 2020 show the magnitude of the crisis.<sup>6</sup>

During lockdown, 26 per cent of tenant families did not have home wifi; 16 per cent also lacked access to the internet via mobile phones or tablets, and 6 per cent did not have any type of internet connection. Among those who could connect, education and employment were the most common uses. And yet, when 45 per cent of respondents can only access the internet via a mobile phone and 50 per cent of families have three or four members, the effects of the digital divide on access to quality education or decent work are clear. The social workers of the Hàbitat3 Foundation also reported that many tenants also had difficulties processing administrative procedures online, taking part in online educational activities, searching for jobs, and accessing video conferencing platforms. The digital divide is also a matter of skills.

## CITIES TAKE ACTION

Shortly after the lockdown, in July, 79 per cent of Barcelona citizens believed that remote working would become the norm in the future.<sup>7</sup> Sixty-eight per cent supported large-scale remote working for both the private and public sector. But if the digital transformation will generate new needs in relation to access to

public services, should public authorities not create new ways to meet them?

Barcelona City Council's response indicates progress in this direction. By the end of April, 5300 mobile devices had already been distributed to students affected by the digital divide. In parallel, the city's cross-party working group for post-Covid recovery, which also features over 200 civil society organisations, included digital inclusion as a priority for the city. In the last four months of 2020, the city's emergency digital inclusion plan will invest 700 000 euros in facilitating digital access and providing training for people in lower-income areas. Among other measures, the plan will strengthen a network of neighbourhood facilities (municipal Fab Labs) where residents can access the internet and use digital technologies. The council will provide municipal offices in low-income neighbourhoods with trainers to teach people digital skills such as how to access municipal procedures online and use video conferencing software and email. Grants will go to community organisations combatting the digital divide for specific groups such as migrants and low-income women.

The plan is the first of its kind in Barcelona. But cities across Europe and the United States are taking similar action to boost connectivity

<sup>6</sup> Fundació Hàbitat3 (2020). *Informe, Bretxa Digital de les famílies i persones ateses per Hàbitat3*. Available at <[bit.ly/3ehcsqZ](http://bit.ly/3ehcsqZ)>.

<sup>7</sup> Oficina Municipal de Dades, Ajuntament de Barcelona (2020). *Baròmetre Semestralde Barcelona*. Available at <[bit.ly/34QBKJn](http://bit.ly/34QBKJn)>.

CITIES CANNOT  
OVERCOME  
DIGITAL  
INEQUALITIES  
ON THEIR OWN

in times of Covid-19. Through the programme Milano Aiuta, the City Council of Milan has established a collaboration agreement with Samsung to provide free support to people over 65 who have difficulty using the internet. In France, the metropolitan governments of Paris and Nantes have adopted digital voucher programmes: in Nantes, 2000 people have received 50 euros to exchange for digital training sessions with community organisations.

The most ambitious initiative, however, is the New York City “Internet Master Plan”. In January 2020, the city government found that 18 per cent of residents (over 1.5 million people) lack internet access at home or via mobile phone. In the case of people living below the poverty line, up to 46 per cent do not have home internet access. Announced before the pandemic, the plan aims to achieve universal internet connectivity for New York City. In the context of Covid-19, Mayor Di Blasio announced 157 million dollars of investment to speed up its implementation – of which 87 million came from the New York police budget.

## DIGITAL INCLUSION IN A MULTILEVEL CONTEXT

But cities cannot overcome digital inequalities on their own – especially in a context of falling revenues and budget constraints. Actions and policies for a just digital transition will have to be deployed across various levels – from cities all the way to the European Union. If we want to give shape to a broad right to digital inclusion, we need to place the digital agenda at the centre of political debate, update legislation, experiment with policies, and forge collaborations between governments, community organisations, and operators.

Digital policy is rising up the agenda at all levels. In June, UN Secretary-General António Guterres presented a Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, with goals such as digital inclusion and universal connectivity by 2030. The Spanish government has presented its España Digital 2025 plan that promises investment in 100 per cent broadband connectivity, new

technologies, and digital skills. In Europe, the European Commission has urged governments to ensure that at least 20 per cent of the investments made using the Next Generation EU funds is in the digital realm.

But we need to go further: a rights-based approach is probably the only way to place social justice within the analysis of the digital divide, and at the same time force public authorities to take action. In this case, it is up to national governments to update the current legal framework in order to adapt them to the needs of the digital transition. This means reinforcing what have been considered strictly “digital rights” but also recognising that access to social and political rights – the right to participation, education, accessibility, social care, gender equality, work, and housing – now involves internet access, the requisite skills, and suitable conditions to use digital tools on equal terms.

It is in this sense that Barcelona has called on the Spanish government to recognise the right to digital inclusion as a new generation social right. Barcelona has proposed to transform the generic term “right to digital inclusion” into concrete, actionable rights – rights that, if necessary, can be taken to the courts. These include the right to an open and free internet, the right to basic training and vocational training in the knowledge and responsible use of new technologies, and the right to non-

discrimination in access to public services for lack of digital skills.

This does not mean that cities cannot do anything about the digital divide until this happens. On the contrary, promoting digital inclusion involves developing policies to ensure internet access at the micro level. It is about imagining solutions such as a digital discount scheme for low incomes, ways to finance fibre optic connection in neighbourhoods where there is less coverage, increasing the number and type of devices per family, and facilitating the exchange of knowledge and digital skills. The local scale, at the city, district, neighbourhood, or community level, is best suited to testing policies for digital inclusion.

Local governments have a key role to play in solutions like these by detecting vulnerabilities and needs and, to some extent, funding these policies. They can also build an ecosystem of inclusion, linking private technology operators with community organisations working with groups affected by the digital divide, and generating regulatory and financial incentives for their collaboration.

The truth, however, is that introducing social justice and human rights into the debate on digitalisation is a precondition for overcoming the digital divide. That is why, in the post-Covid era, it is more urgent than ever to work for the recognition of a right to



digital inclusion and to place the debate on inequalities and social rights at the heart of the European digital model.

## THE EUROPEAN PATH TO DIGITALISATION

Europe lies between the Silicon Valley model of platform capitalism and data economy, and the Chinese model of digital development at the service of political control. In both cases, digitalisation generates winners and losers. The European path must offer an alternative to this dichotomy.

This means strengthening Europe's ability to play the digital game by developing the capacity for industrial innovation, common data spaces, and artificial intelligence, as already announced by the European Commission. But above all, it means offering a fair digital transition that lives up to the European values of democracy, equality, human rights, and social cohesion.

Justice considerations affect all sides of a digital transition that is necessarily multifaceted. Tax systems need to properly record the activity of transnational digital platforms. Clear limits must be placed on the private sector's ability to profit from personal data, on the basis of our fundamental rights and freedoms. Governments and the private sector must transform modes of production and consumption towards ones that contribute to the ecological transition.

Cities must be able to regulate the impact of digital platforms on the urban realities in which they operate. Emerging technologies – especially artificial intelligence – must adhere to ethical criteria so as not to reproduce existing social inequalities. At a time when digital connection and skills determine equal opportunity and access to social rights such as education, work, healthcare, accessibility, and public services, they must be available to everyone.

This last dimension places social justice at the heart of the debate on digitalisation: digital inclusion is a matter of human rights. This is probably the main contribution of the lockdown experience to the European digital model. Integrating it into progressive political agendas will be essential to the European path to digitalisation through a fair digital transition.



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# PANDEMIC POLITICS AND THE GREENS

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In the early days of the pandemic, politics was put into the deep freeze. Countries sought unity in a crisis and voters rallied around their governments. But, under the surface, things never stopped moving. As elections were held and governments were formed, it became clear that Covid-19 had changed voters' behaviours and expectations, creating new political bedfellows and forcing issues to the fore. From the new Green mayors in France to the debate over the Swedish response, we look at what the pandemic has meant so far for Green parties around Europe.



## HOPE FOR A DIVIDED FRANCE

With nearly 600 000 cases of Covid-19 confirmed by early October, France was not prepared for a crisis of this extent, to say the least. It was not just the public health system that was overwhelmed by the unexpected virus; French political culture itself has also proven to be quite weak.

The crisis started during the municipal election campaign in February and March. It became apparent that Emmanuel Macron's governing party, La République En Marche, was set to lose. One month before the election, Macron's health minister left the government to run for mayor of Paris. Weeks later, she confessed that at the time she was already aware of the looming public health disaster. Her speech catastrophically undermined already frayed public trust in the government's crisis management abilities.

Mayors are the only trusted political figures in France, and they play an important role in the country.<sup>1</sup> France has almost as many municipalities as the other 26 EU member states combined. After difficult discussions regarding postponing the election, the government kept the date. "Democracy cannot be stopped", was the motto of the opposition. The lockdown started two days later. The election led to many clusters of cases and deaths, including among newly elected councillors and mayors.

Generally speaking, the crisis revealed how France's over-centralised Jacobin political system leads to decision-making failures. Going into the crisis, France lacked sufficient masks

to protect its nursing staff because of earlier strategic mistakes. The management of stocks from the 2009 swine flu crisis had been given to companies and hospitals which did not renew them. Hospitals themselves had seen 10 years of cost-cutting, to the extent that emergency services were on strike for almost a year. France's only mask factory was closed down in 2019 before a former Green minister managed to reopen it as a cooperative.

In this context, Greens won several big cities such as Lyon, Strasbourg, Marseille, and Bordeaux in the second round of elections in late June. The outcome reflected the fact that the Greens managed to embody concerns about health and safety. But their results were not as good as expected and the unusually high abstention rate raised concerns about the legitimacy of the new leaders.

Still, there are grounds for optimism. In big cities, for example, new cycle paths have been created. How long these "coronapistes" (pop-up bike lanes) will last was a point of negotiation in the second round of elections. That they will stay is a clear success story for Green ideas. Beyond improvements in soft mobility and health, the Greens also support the decentralisation of the French state but the plan still needs to make it into mainstream discourse. Preferably in the run-up to the regional elections in March 2021, if they go ahead that is.

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<sup>1</sup> "Les Français font confiance aux maires". *Libération*. 4 March 2020.

## THE SWEDISH ROUTE

Living in London during the pandemic, I, like every other Londoner, dealt with the new reality of lockdown: queues for groceries, empty streets, boredom, and face masks. Returning to my hometown Stockholm in July, the contrast could not have been starker. The Swedish policy of relative openness has become famous or infamous depending on who you ask. No face masks, no lockdown, no closing of non-essential shops. Only a rule limiting gatherings to 50 people, the closure of high schools (not primary or middle schools), and a recommendation to work from home.

The policy has made strange bedfellows, earning the Swedish Social Democrat and Green government praise from US Republicans and other actors far to the right. Within the Swedish context, however, the decision never became politicised since the strategy was proposed by the public health authority. Within Swedish discourse, listening to the experts was considered as the most responsible way forward, while politicians in neighbouring countries were seen as overreacting. This view was shared by everyone from the Greens to the Conservatives.

How has Sweden's openness fared? The jury still seems to be out. The worst fears were not realised. In early March, a virologist feared 50 000 deaths in Sweden. Currently, the number stands at 5900 (close to 600 per million). This is still far higher than in other Nordic countries who opted for a lockdown. Then again, countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands who introduced strict lockdowns ended up with higher per capita mortality figures than Sweden.

Rather than just talking about openness versus lockdown, more nuance is needed. When it comes to keeping schools open, the Swedish experience seems to have been successful. A joint study conducted by the Finnish and Swedish public health authorities comparing Finland's school closures to Sweden's non-closure found that closing schools had no effect on the spread of the virus and Swedish teachers were not overrepresented among reported cases. Given that over a billion children worldwide are estimated to have lost school time – most severely affecting children belonging to marginalised groups – this should be huge news. How can we ask the world's young to make this kind of sacrifice when the effect on spread is marginal at best (or even counterproductive, as the Norwegian public health authority feared)?

Other aspects of Sweden's openness were less successful. While the middle classes have escaped relatively unscathed, poorer immigrant communities are among those particularly hard hit by the virus. Since many were exposed through work and live with large families in small apartments, social distancing has often been impossible to follow, leading to significantly higher death rates.

A progressive pandemic response needs to recognise that openness may have benefited a large majority, while coming at a price for marginalised groups. And at the same time, it should be remembered that some policies introduced globally – such as primary school closures and border closures – still lack clear evidence regarding their impact.

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## GREEN RESILIENCE IN GERMANY

Speaking to parliament in early February, Health Minister Jens Spahn rated the Covid-19 risk for the German population as low. But this assessment was soon withdrawn and a comprehensive crisis management response set up. In March, Chancellor Angela Merkel set “flatten the curve” as the main objective, while federal and regional governments agreed on measures to shut down public life. Though Germany never had a complete lockdown, life fell asleep for weeks. In March, kindergartens were closed as well as schools, universities, restaurants, cultural venues, and sports facilities. As a result of decreasing case numbers, “contact tracing” became the new objective in mid-April and discussions about normalisation increased.

Germany managed the first six months of the pandemic well, both in terms of the economy and public health. The economy was supported by the largest assistance package in the history of the Federal Republic and by tax reductions, paid for by public borrowing. Over a trillion euros of support was approved by federal and regional levels combined. Reduced working-time allowances effectively prevented a rise in unemployment, though certain sectors still suffered particularly badly. In September, unemployment was 6.2 per cent. Following Germany’s first confirmed case on 27 January, about 325 000 cases were officially confirmed by mid-October (9621 deaths). The healthcare system has performed well so far, supported by the lower age of patients, lower contact rates, and efficient pandemic management.

Despite protests against response measures, problems regarding medical equipment supplies, and a confusing patchwork of regional regulations, public perception of the crisis

management is generally positive. Trust in the government has increased since the pandemic started. The governing Christian Democrats surged to 39 per cent in the polls in May before falling back somewhat. Their coalition partners remained stable and support for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland dropped. The Greens experienced moderate poll losses during the first wave but have recovered to just over 20 per cent support, performing strongly in local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia in September.

The stability of the Green party’s level of support is somewhat unexpected but the main reason is that they supported government measures while managing to emphasise resilience, prevention, and looking to the future. In the health sector, the Greens are pushing for a more preventive health system and reforms to health funding. On the economy, Greens were pushing for targeted support that would strengthen local economies rather than general tax reductions that also benefit large online retailers.

There are long-term factors behind the Greens’ strong position too. Co-leaders Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck are popular beyond the party. Greens are governing in 11 of 16 *Länder*, the most important level for Covid-19 policies. Environmental issues remain on the agenda, now related to the debate over a sustainable economic restart after the pandemic. Party growth has been steady since 2017 and there are now over 100 000 members. The Greens are still the smallest party in parliament but have defended their second place in the polls. It’s a good starting position for the federal election in 2021.

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## SIGNS OF HOPE IN CROATIA

In summer 2020, Croatia was one of the first countries in Europe to hold elections while the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic was paralysing societies and politics across the globe. The Croatian government handled the pandemic well in the spring, bringing new daily infections to zero in May. Prime Minister Andrej Plenković thus decided to cash in and ran an efficient campaign that portrayed his ministers and the coronavirus task force as superheroes.

The gamble paid off as the incumbent centre-right Croatian Democratic Union easily won the July election, forming a government with the backing of representatives from the national minorities. For the Social Democrats, the traditional opposition party, this election was the worst result since the 1990s, when the post-Yugoslav war wounds were still too fresh for a non-nationalistic party (and the successor of the Yugoslav Communist Party, at that) to make a strong showing.

On the other hand, the biggest surprise was the performance of the Green-Left coalition *Možemo!* (We Can!). Born as a civic activism platform, the coalition graduated from its activity in the Zagreb City Council, where they have been present since 2017, ceaselessly probing the mayor's many corruption scandals. Three years on, these activists turned politicians joined forces with other left-wing parties to achieve an outcome that exceeded the rosiest expectations: seven seats in the national parliament.

This result was a galvanising beacon of hope for like-minded constituencies in South Eastern Europe. Indeed, another Green success followed shortly thereafter: the Montenegrin Green party URA doubled its number of MPs

from two to four and became the kingmaker of the new government. It was Montenegro's first democratic transition of power in its modern history.

Elsewhere in the region, the situation is not as auspicious. In Serbia, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party wiped out the competition at the June parliamentary election characterised by a boycott by most opposition parties. Under the increasingly autocratic rule of Aleksandar Vučić, environmental problems have increased considerably. Air pollution has risen and non-transparent foreign investments in heavy industry have gone hand in hand with deteriorating environmental and living standards. The next opportunity for Green and progressive parties is the 2022 local election in the capital, Belgrade.

In Croatia, the Green breeze this summer did not mark a watershed in the everyday life of the country. New corruption cases fill the newspapers every few weeks, anti-Serb sentiments are raging, the judiciary is still urging for a complete makeover, and GDP fell 15 per cent in the second quarter. Croatia relies heavily on tourism, which is worth almost 20 per cent of GDP. This dependence underpinned a daring relaxation of Covid-19 rules in the summer. The government opened up Croatia's borders to visitors from all over the world, turning the country into an epidemiological red zone by late August. What seems to have somewhat changed, however, is the level of debate in the Croatian parliament. The tenacious probing of corruption scandals by several new MPs gives scope for some cautious optimism about transparency going forward.

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## HOW ORBÁN EXPLOITED A PANDEMIC

During the first wave of the pandemic, Hungary's rate of confirmed Covid-19 cases was amongst the lowest in all the European Union. Its neighbours had similar numbers. The trend sparked the interest of the international media who tried to decipher the secret to Central European resilience. Is it some miracle vaccine Eastern Europeans received as children? Or did their leaders' fast reactions and determined policies save their populations? Boris Kálnoky, German daily *Die Welt's* Hungary correspondent, who has since become the head of a pro-Viktor Orbán journalism school, went so far as to attribute Hungary's low case numbers to the prime minister's illiberal governance.

And indeed, the pandemic was perfect for Viktor Orbán. Despite its low numbers, Hungary was the recipient of the largest EU coronavirus emergency support payments (3.9 per cent of its GDP, compared to 0.1 per cent for Italy).<sup>1</sup> Still, the prime minister told his voters that the EU was doing almost nothing to help the country, while thanking China and Uzbekistan for the masks they sent. The limited international attention presented an opportunity to introduce emergency measures that included provisions such as jail time for spreading misinformation. They have since been withdrawn. Leaving some of the more painful and politically risky decisions to the opposition-run municipalities, Orbán then used every opportunity to hold the opposition responsible for the casualties of the pandemic. The pro-government press accused Gergely Karácsony, the Green mayor of Budapest, of

"negligence" for allowing the virus to spread in retirement homes.

Developments this autumn have shown that the low case numbers during the first wave were not at all due to the prime minister's extraordinary leadership skills. It is way more likely that luck played a key role: the virus reached the country much more slowly than other EU members and so Hungary had more time to prepare. Most of these opportunities were however wasted: while growing case numbers in Croatia were alarming, no restrictions were introduced targeting the relatively large numbers of Hungarians planning to spend the summer on the Adriatic. Post-lockdown rules such as masks on trains and public transport were not enforced properly.

By early September, Hungarian case numbers had skyrocketed – but the government still could not find better responses than limiting international travel. The next months will show whether social and health institutions were well enough prepared for a second, and potentially much more serious, wave of the pandemic. There are some worrying signs: the health system is underfunded, and although the Hungarian government spent the last months buying 16 000 ventilators, there are not enough trained operators for them. This context might provide an opportunity for the opposition-run municipalities and especially the Green mayor of the capital to show that – even with the limited funds they have – they can act more responsibly than the government. Let us hope they will not waste that chance.

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<sup>1</sup> European Stability Initiative (2020). *The wizard, the virus and a pot of gold: Victor Orban and the future of European solidarity*. Available at <[bit.ly/31N6Obd](https://bit.ly/31N6Obd)>.

## A CRISIS GOVERNMENT FOR IRELAND

Covid-19 reached Ireland in February and a national lockdown was implemented in late March. The disease spread rapidly but it was brought under control by the lockdown which continued until late May. Ireland has a younger population compared to other European countries but years of health underfunding meant that it could easily have been overwhelmed in a surge. This concern was at the forefront of the government's thinking, and its explanation for the strict and prolonged lockdown.

For much of the lockdown, Ireland had a caretaker government. The outgoing minority administration had governed with wide support from the opposition and achieved public satisfaction ratings of more than 70 per cent, but the general election in February produced a fragmented parliament and protracted talks followed for over 100 days.

With 12 seats, the Greens were at the centre of many of the potential government permutations. While the party leadership was always clear about its wish to enter government, a vocal minority of members was not. Indeed, their public pronouncements may have helped the party achieve many of its ambitions in negotiations. The final programme for government was agreed in June and the new administration took office. The coalition is led by Fianna Fáil (centre-right) along with Fine Gael (centre-right) and the Green Party. The Greens secured three positions in the government including the transport portfolio, an agreement on a major investment programme, and notable improvements in social services.

The programme was widely acknowledged as a good deal for the Greens but its first few weeks in government got off to a choppy start.

Several prominent members left the party citing disappointment with the agreement. In line with party rules, a leadership contest was initiated which saw the deputy leader challenge the leader in a largely good-natured debate focused on policy. The leadership was confirmed, with Eamon Ryan staying on as leader and Catherine Martin as deputy leader. Green ministers were not embroiled in the many controversies that bedevilled the government's first few months in office. They remained in the background, and, worryingly for the party, the first autumn opinion poll showed a sharp drop in support.

However, the Green Party is having a clear impact on government policy. October's 2021 national budget plans the largest ever spend by an Irish government. The major increase in capital investment includes a much stronger emphasis on public transport, walking, and cycling, stemming from Green preferences. A well-flagged increase in the carbon tax and disincentives for the purchase of diesel and petrol cars were announced. These policies all fall within the expected orbit of a Green party in government. Perhaps more significantly, Green ministers secured important social spending commitments and were quick to claim those policies in the media.

With the second wave of the pandemic, restrictions on hospitality and travel have been imposed. The Greens do not hold frontline Covid-19 portfolios such as health and education, making visibility a challenge. The party needs to stay in the political spotlight. Learning from the fate of previous small parties in government in Ireland, it must make sure to get the credit for Green policies and deliver on its promises.

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# CITIES AS EMPTY SHELLS

## URBAN TOURISM IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

ARTICLE BY  
**SOFIA CHERICI**

The tourism industry employs almost five times as many people as car manufacturing in the EU. In much of Southern Europe, it has been a lonely growth area throughout years of stagnation. But for cities such as Rome and Venice, its side effects have been gentrification, environmental degradation, and the decline of traditional trades. The pandemic leaves tourist destinations in the lurch: caught between a unique opportunity to build a more balanced relationship with tourism and the immediate pressure of economic need.

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**N**ew York, Milan, Tokyo, Barcelona, Paris. The world's leading cities were the first places to be hit by the pandemic, with infection rates spiking immediately. Modern urban centres proved to be perfect breeding grounds for the virus due to the intrinsic risk of high density, chronic air pollution, and their huge flows of people.

This article is available in Italian on the *Green European Journal* website.

### CITTÀ COME GUSCI VUOTI DOPO LA PANDEMIA

Con l'epoca post-pandemica, i centri urbani attraversano un periodo di transizione cruciale che rappresenta un'opportunità per ridefinire i nuovi termini di sostenibilità e convivenza tra abitanti, turisti e ambiente.

Covid-19 has drastically changed the narrative about large cities. Hitherto seen as the vital organs of modern society, they are now regarded as overcrowded, smog-choked concrete jungles. When the spell wore off, the major metropolises began to empty.

Migratory flows between rural and urban areas reversed, leading to an urban exodus across the world.<sup>1</sup> The influx of tourists to major destinations also ground to a halt. Partly due to new rules on national and European travel, and partly due to the risk of infection, domestic and international tourists turned away from traditional destinations.

<sup>1</sup> Isabelle Mandraud (2020), "Coronavirus : l'exode mondiale avant le confinement." *Le Monde*. 17 April 2020.

Data from cities such as Barcelona, Prague, Amsterdam, and Rome paint a worrying picture of a tourism industry in crisis, one that threatens to undermine the stability of major European urban economies. According to Italy's national statistics body, ISTAT, the country (among the world's top tourist destinations) lost over 81 million visitors in 2020.<sup>2</sup> In March, the number of tourists visiting cities such as Florence, Rome, and Venice fell to practically zero. Given the contribution of cities to GDP globally, the potential economic effects are disastrous.

Battered by a pandemic, rendered sterile by years of policies incentivising mass tourism, and threatened by an unprecedented crisis in the industry, cities have been forced to re-evaluate this relationship at the heart of their urban planning.

## DEVoured BY TOURISM

In 1851, the British entrepreneur Thomas Cook, founder of travel agency Thomas Cook and Son, arranged the travel of 150 000 people to London's Great Exhibition. It was the largest package tour in modern history. In an era when disposable incomes were growing and the public transport network expanding, the grand tour model offered by Thomas Cook quickly took root, leading him to replicate it

abroad with great success. In it lie the origins of the phenomenon known today as mass tourism.<sup>3</sup> Much has changed since: travel giant Thomas Cook went bust in September 2019, while the tourism model on which its success was built has gone from being a symbol of 20th-century prosperity to a capitalist industry where rampant overexploitation reigns.

In a 2016 report on booming visitor numbers to Iceland, online travel magazine *Skift* coined the term "overtourism" to describe the dark side of democratising travel: now that we can move from one part of the world to another faster, more comfortably, and cheaper than ever before, travel is no longer a luxury.<sup>4</sup> But are the world's major destinations ready to receive ever-increasing numbers of tourists? And what are the potential impacts on the economies and ecosystems of these places?

The tourism industry has profoundly transformed the structures and socio-economic dynamics of Europe's cities. One only need think of the business ecosystem supported by accommodation, dining, entertainment, transport, and shopping for tourists. In Italy and Europe alike, the waves of visitors that flood into cities each year have reshaped urban centres, commodifying local heritage in exchange for ever greater numbers.

2 ISTAT (2020). *Una stagione mancata: Impatto del Covid-19 sul turismo*. 29 April 2020. Available at <[www.istat.it/it/archivio/242017](http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/242017)>.

3 Nikola Naumov & David Green (2016). "Mass tourism". Jafar Jafari & Honggen Xiao (eds). *Encyclopedia of Tourism*. Cham: Springer. Available at <[doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-01384-8\\_378](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-01384-8_378)>.

4 Andrew Shevachman (2016). "Iceland and the trials of 21st century tourism". *Skift*. Available at <[skift.com/iceland-tourism](http://skift.com/iceland-tourism)>.

Mass tourism often means overcrowding, increased consumption, and administrative problems for cities, exerting constant pressure on limited resources, infrastructure, and services, from refuse collection to water and energy consumption. The concentration of tourists in the most famous and iconic areas of a city only exacerbates these problems.

Paola Minoia, a geographer at the universities of Turin and Helsinki, explains in an interview how today's Venice is the result of deregulation in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when radical changes in local government policy removed trading restrictions and a cap of 11 000 tourist beds. This precipitated a proliferation of accommodation and businesses aimed at tourists, to the detriment of residents.

In just a few years, Venice became a city of “shops selling tourist tat and carnival masks made goodness knows where”, with what were once homes given over to hotels and disposable, single-occupancy apartments. The arrival of cruise ships worsened the environmental impact of tourism: “Cruise ships are the apotheosis of unsustainable tourism in Venice”, continues Minoia. “Swell generated by large motorboats and cruise ships causes shore erosion, leading to land loss and destabilising the foundations of bridges and buildings, which are now at risk of collapse.

‘Seaification’, on the other hand, creates imbalances in the lagoon ecosystem, eating up land, and introducing alien species.”

In Rome, the commercialisation of urban space to encourage corrosive low-quality tourism has hijacked urban regeneration plans for profit, leaving the city with enormous space problems and “regenerated” buildings that have been removed from the reality of their neighbourhoods.<sup>5</sup> In 2017, it became official that the “Ex Dogana” building – previously an important hub for cultural events and concerts in the diverse student quarter of San Lorenzo – would become a hostel owned by the Dutch company The Student Hotel. Rather than being returned to the people who live there, swathes of the city's *borgate* (quarters) have been given over to exclusive marketing, events, and hospitality catering to tourists.

Mass tourism remakes the space, demographics, and labour markets of urban centres in its own image. It starts with historic centres: growing demand from tourists empties them of their inhabitants who are pushed out by an unaffordable housing market. In their place come luxury apartments selling an artificial local experience at an extortionate rate. Known as the “Airbnb effect”, the phenomenon demonstrates the threat posed by speculation and unregulated property markets.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Gainsforth (2020), “L'effimera rigenerazione di Roma”. *Internazionale*. 7 May 2020.

IN ROME, MANY AIRBNB  
APARTMENTS AND PUBLIC  
SPACES PREVIOUSLY  
PRIVATISED FOR TOURISM  
LIE VACANT, BLACK HOLES  
IN THE FABRIC OF THE CITY

In Venice, Rome, and Florence, local culture is commodified for the benefit of tourists to create an artificial local flavour that damages the sustainability of the urban system. Rome's iconic Trastevere quarter has lost its identity and historic population due to rental prices and the closure of craftspeople's workshops and local businesses.

## RESPIRE FOR CITIES, COLLAPSE FOR ECONOMIES

Blessed with an enduring historical and artistic heritage, Italy has for years sought its fortune in the influx of tourists that pack the country's streets and museums. Considered a safe bet even in times of crisis, the absence of a prudent economic policy of diversification has left Italy critically exposed to tourism's collapse. The promise of lucrative returns led many regions and cities to funnel investment into the sector. Although extremely profitable in the short term, this investment has wrought long-term socio-economic damage.

In light of a drop of over 60 per cent in foreign visitors in 2020, the principal Italian "cities of art" face economic and social upheaval.<sup>6</sup> Urban economies reproduce on a local scale the same dependency on tourism that afflicts the national economy: now that the pandemic has

left Italy's most visited cities empty, urban economic ecosystems are collapsing.

While the Airbnb behemoth is showing signs of recovery after the initial shock of the pandemic, the urban tourism sector that once revolved around it is struggling to get back on its feet. In all the historic centres conquered by Airbnb, tourist districts have remained deserted throughout the pandemic. Even when the lockdown was lifted, there were few signs of life: among for sale and closing down signs, the shutters of many shops remain closed.

In the absence of the usual supply of visitors, owners of apartments that before the pandemic only accepted short-term bookings are now switching to the long-term rental market. Nevertheless, in Rome, many Airbnb apartments and public spaces previously privatised for tourism lie vacant, black holes in the fabric of the city.

But while urban economies have been hard hit, the lack of tourists has brought relief from social and environmental pollution. According to Minoia, the number of cruise ships berthing in Venice reached its peak in 2019. During the pandemic, they have stopped clogging the Canal Grande, enabling an extraordinary recovery in the lagoon ecosystem. With the sharp fall in

<sup>6</sup> Andrea Gagliardi (2020). "Turismo, da Firenze a Roma a Venezia: nel 2020 oltre il 60% in meno di turisti stranieri". *Il Sole 24 Ore*. 25 July 2020.

tourist transport like water taxis and boat traffic, the water in the canals cleared up, allowing glimpses of the rich biodiversity below.

Venice isn't the only example. Air and water quality has improved in cities across Italy because of the reduced level of pollution produced by tourism. With 30 million fewer tourists in Rome alone, the drop in waste water brought respite to the compromised maritime ecosystem in the surrounding Lazio region.

## A NEW FACE FOR URBAN TOURISM

While it is still difficult to see what the post-pandemic era will hold for Europe's major urban centres, the one certainty is that their future will be determined by the political choices made in the next few years. The central problem in re-imagining urban centres is that cities have become empty shells.

In a period of severe economic crisis, the risk is that Italy continues to bet on a short-sighted policy that puts its flawed tourism model at the heart of its economy. Yet, the existential crises that have hit the urban centres of Italy and Europe provide an opportunity for a new, more equitable and sustainable paradigm for urban tourism.

Can social justice and sustainability ever be reconciled with mass travel? Speaking in a series of interviews with *The Guardian*, the mayors of some of Europe's most visited cities argue it is possible.<sup>7</sup> According to Xavier Marcé, the Barcelona councillor responsible for tourism, the problem lies not in the volume of tourists but their distribution: sharing them out more evenly across sites and seasons would make it easier to manage.

Although redirecting where people want to go is not easy, the decentralisation of tourist destinations would allow more peripheral places to benefit from the prosperity that tourism can bring. However, according to an OECD report on tourism trends in 2020, without adequate policies in place, redistributing visitors may simply just move problems elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>

Even before the pandemic, major European tourist destinations like Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Paris had outlined containment strategies to make tourism more sustainable. To tackle gentrification, pollution, and overcrowding, these cities have drawn up policies to regulate housing and curb excesses in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

The most pressing question for many cities remains how to repopulate historic centres and

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Burgen & Angela Giuffrida (2020). "How coronavirus is reshaping Europe's tourism hotspots". *The Guardian*. 20 July 2020.

<sup>8</sup> OECD (2020). *OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2020*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at <<https://doi.org/10.1787/6b47b985-en>>.

establish a new basis for residents and tourists to live alongside one another. For Minoia, cities must prevent tourism from dominating, even capping numbers if necessary. “This period has brought respite to people and the environment; the urban tourism model that we had before involved a takeover of land and cities which, in itself, we can’t even call tourism. We now need to defend urban life”. In the wake of the pandemic, there are hopes that Venice’s unlet apartments and empty buildings will be redistributed to university students, social enterprises, and affordable housing for residents.

But without adequate government incentives and regulation, not to mention a plan for restoring the ecosystems of historic centres and districts, the hearts of cities will continue to be at the mercy of mass tourism or, worse, remain deserted. “It’s not enough to find houses and give them back to residents; we also need to make the city liveable once again: to restore neighbourhood shops and spaces for crafts and culture”, says Minoia.

“Venice’s history is steeped in a type of craft that is being lost; the conditions created by the pandemic offer an opportunity to revive these traditions while promoting new types of employment. Among young people, there’s a real desire to breathe new life into these trades.” Rebuilding the social fabric will also help to prevent a tourism monoculture and

promote greater diversification so that a social crisis like that triggered by Covid-19 does not happen again.

However, the possibility for a sustainable tourism remains subject to the whims of politicians. While cities were emptying, the political debate in Italy was about bringing back tourists as quickly as possible, focusing on encouraging domestic tourism and making urban centres safe and attractive once more. Speaking in September 2020, Italy’s tourism and culture minister, Dario Franceschini, announced that some of the money received from the European Recovery Fund would be invested in “rebuilding mass tourism”: it was a sign that narrow, short-term economic needs are dictating policy priorities once more.

“In Venice, water pollution has never been officially studied,” explains Minoia. “The reasons are fundamentally political and born out of cross-cutting interests.” In the absence of a will for change on the part of government, non-profits and local movements have provided the pockets of resistance necessary to rekindle the debate on urban tourism. “The conflict of interests became clear when the City of Venice recently approved changes in the zoning of buildings from residential use to tourism, showing that it isn’t interested in maintaining the city’s urban fabric. Social movements like No Grandi Navi [a group campaigning against cruise ships] are the only visible opposition.”

Although political decisions are crucial to tourism's future, industries, start-ups, and consumers also have a role to play. In this delicate phase as we try to design more sustainable urban tourism, the challenge is to avoid falling into the trap of greenwashing. Before the pandemic, many initiatives under the umbrella of sustainable tourism turned out to be ethically dubious or difficult to implement. Indeed, there was even a time when Airbnb claimed to be a green alternative to the tourism industry. Today, with the renewed awareness generated by the modern green movement, some in business congratulate themselves for having ticked the environmentally friendly or solidarity economy box while flooding the market with half-baked solutions that confuse the consumer.

Among the flurry of green consumption initiatives, there are nevertheless innovative approaches to be found in the urban tourism market. In contrast to the venality of Airbnb, the community vision promoted by the Fairbnb coop model suggests that not everything about the pre-pandemic tourism market should be thrown away. By giving half of the profits to local projects, the platform aims to share the benefits of tourism more fairly and widely. Although not a silver bullet, the model could point towards a viable alternative if backed by the right policies.

Phenomena like corporate greenwashing, the hollowing out of historic centres, and the

commodification of culture and urban space are just some of the symptoms of a global model of tourism that is coming apart at the seams. For a production model based on commodification, hyper-consumerism, and speculation, issues like preserving local environmental and social ecosystems take a back seat.

Although feared to be a new dark age for cities, this period offers a chance to change the terms of the debate around the social and environmental sustainability of urban planning. With the challenges of the post-pandemic era, urban centres are entering a critical transition period that presents an opportunity to redefine cohabitation between residents, tourists, and the environment.



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# ESSENTIAL VOICES

## MIGRANT WORKERS ON LIVING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

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ARTICLE BY **FELIX  
KWABENA DONKOR,  
CLÁUDIA SANTOS &  
MARULA TSAGKARI**

Migration has been a dividing line in politics in recent years. But the fact remains that society would not function without the contributions of people from other countries. The essential workers who staff care homes and hospitals are often migrants. If more just societies are to emerge after the pandemic, they must recognise and protect the rights of all those within them. We hear from migrant workers in Greece, Iran, and South Africa on their experiences of Covid-19 and their hopes for the future.

**P**eople migrate for a myriad of reasons. Whether they are escaping poverty, conflict, or persecution, they all hope for the same: a more secure, prosperous livelihood and improved wellbeing. Migrants often face stigma and discrimination in their new environments, and women on the move face additional difficulties.

Women make up around half of the 244 million migrants who live and work outside their country of origin.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, understandings of why women migrate have shifted to reflect that women do so not only to follow their spouse or family but also independently to seek work for themselves. As women in many countries – particularly white and middle-class women – increasingly gained access to the labour market, a care gap opened up in their households. This gap was filled by migrant women working in nurseries or care homes, or within the home itself, providing care for children and the elderly or performing household duties. Today, the domestic and care sectors are dominated by migrant women who in many cases have left behind their own families to take up low-paid jobs, often in poor working conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women (2019). *Women Migrant Workers' Contributions to Development: Policy Brief No. 2*. Available at <[bit.ly/38yikLK](https://bit.ly/38yikLK)>.

According to a recent report by the International Organization for Migration, 74 per cent of migrant women work in the service industry (including domestic work).<sup>2</sup> The pandemic exposed the precarity of these women who often work without social protection and basic employment rights. Spanning experiences in Greece, South Africa, and Iran, the stories in this piece are not isolated cases but are representative of the circumstances of millions of women across the world.<sup>3</sup>

## CARING FROM THE SHADOWS IN GREECE

Ivanka and Evi have both lived in Greece for over a decade and work in the domestic care sector. Ivanka is a nurse from Bulgaria who came to Greece dreaming of a well-paid job that would help her support her daughters and grandchildren back in Vratsa. Since arriving, she has worked as a care provider for the elderly. More than 10 years later, she still does not have a residence or work permit. Evi arrived in Athens from Albania 19 years ago. She was pregnant at the time, and she and her husband hoped to find secure jobs and provide a better future for their daughter. Today she earns a living as a cleaner and holds a work permit. Ivanka and Evi both work in the “shadow” or informal economy, meaning

that they have no social safety net or access to the healthcare system.

During the pandemic, migrants in Greece faced a difficult new reality. Following in the footsteps of Italy and Spain, Greece went into a strict lockdown on 22 March that lasted 42 days. To protect the most vulnerable citizens and hardest-hit businesses, the government implemented a series of emergency measures such as covering social security contributions and offering tax relief. Migrants, however, were excluded from these measures. The closing of borders left many people trapped, like the thousands of Albanian agricultural workers not permitted to re-enter. For months, migrant workers in Greece were unable to travel back to their countries of origin. Evi could not visit her parents: “My father had a stroke. I had to try and find someone to take care of him while I was here.” Similarly, Ivanka has not seen her family for a year, though she is grateful they can at least talk via video call.

Separation from family and friends was not the only burden during the coronavirus crisis. Working lives were also radically impacted. Ivanka’s income fell significantly: “Before the pandemic, I was caring for an elderly lady and doing chores for some other older couples

<sup>2</sup> International Organization for Migration (2019). *World Migration Report 2020*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration. Available at <[bit.ly/2JWfjkd](https://bit.ly/2JWfjkd)>.

<sup>3</sup> All names in this article have been changed to protect the identities of the women interviewed.

**WOMEN MAKE UP AROUND  
HALF OF THE 244 MILLION  
MIGRANTS WHO LIVE AND  
WORK OUTSIDE THEIR  
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN**

in the area. Now, I only take care of the one lady because it's dangerous to interact with multiple elderly people." Even though she now earns considerably less money, she tries to send the same amount back home every month to her family in Bulgaria. In contrast, Evi finds herself with an increased workload: "Many women needed household help – as well as cleaning, they expected me to cook and look after their children while they were working online or buying groceries." Nevertheless, Evi considers herself lucky – she knows that worldwide, many female migrant domestic workers have lost their jobs.

Both Evi and Ivanka agree that the Greek government failed to protect them during the crisis. "I never received any help from the government. To them, we do not exist", says Ivanka. Evi complains that "the government wanted us to stop working. They did not realise that we cannot afford to lose our income, and that our jobs are essential to society. This was crazy. We were also not entitled to the financial support offered to workers in other professions." Both women stress the importance of their work during the lockdown, which did not translate into increased recognition or government support. They were not entitled to paid leave, though the nature of their jobs means that working from home was not an option, and they were highly exposed to the virus.

Despite their disappointment and fear, Evi and

Ivanka aspire for a better future for themselves and all other women working in the care and domestic sector. Evi, who wants to stay in Greece, hopes that the pandemic will change the way the government treats migrant workers: "I want to see more respect for the Albanian immigrants who have lived in Greece for the past 20 years and do essential jobs. We should have the same rights as other workers." Ivanka hopes to one day return to Bulgaria. Until then, she calls on the government to protect the rights of migrant women in cleaning and care jobs: "We want decent working rights, pensions, healthcare, and the ability to bring our families with us." She hopes that the many Bulgarian women moving into the Greek care sector will gain easier access to work permits and social rights.

## **HUNGER AS A REALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

When Kanoni left Tanzania and first set out for South Africa, it was with high hopes. Fifteen years down the line, she finds herself trapped on the margins of society, distributing flyers to make ends meet. The reality of shattered dreams has been exacerbated by the pandemic's disproportionate impacts on undocumented migrants in the streets of Johannesburg. After its first confirmed case of the virus on 5 March, South Africa went on to implement one of

the world's strictest lockdowns to combat an infection rate among the highest on the African continent (at one point, fifth highest globally).

Compliance with restrictions was a greater challenge for those with precarious livelihoods. South Africa's Covid-19 response may deepen existing divides in one of the world's most unequal countries. In 2017, approximately two million foreign-born migrants of working age (15 to 64) were living in South Africa. Research suggests that xenophobia has forced this group into extreme poverty, something made worse by the government's failure to include migrants in its Covid-19 poverty relief schemes.<sup>4</sup>

For people like Kanoni, hunger is a reality. But worrying about where the next meal will come from is now one of many problems. What about utility bills and rent? Kanoni and others' exasperation with the hard lockdown points to an often-voiced argument that African countries cannot behave like their European counterparts.<sup>5</sup> Without a clear and considered strategy, strict lockdowns can harm the wellbeing of certain communities. Kanoni wants the curfew to be lifted so that she and others in similar situations can return to full-time work, allowing them to look after themselves, since the government is failing to

do so. Otherwise, she sees the outcome as clear: "People will die of hunger instead of corona."

Kanoni used to send money back home to her family but, devoid of any social protection, no longer can afford to. The sense of hopelessness she feels drives her to avoid their phone calls: "I have nothing to give them [...] it is stressful for me, so I just try to stay away from them." In the debilitating effects of the pandemic, our common humanity is laid bare.

## STATELESS IN IRAN

Born in Iran to Afghan parents, Benesh, Afhak, and Alia have all grown up without Iranian citizenship.<sup>6</sup> All they have is a residence card known as *Amayesh* and Afghan nationality. Their stories are similar in many ways. Their parents fled a country torn by war, hoping for a better life elsewhere. None of them crossed a border; their parents did, and by default they are migrants too. They consider themselves Afghan, notwithstanding being foreign to Afghanistan.

As children, the three girls attended school and sewed clothes in a factory to help support their families. Now that they have graduated from high school, the hardship of the factory

4 Ferdinand Mukumbang, Anthony Ambe & Babatope Adebisi (2020). "Unspoken inequality: how COVID-19 has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities of asylum-seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants in South Africa." *International Journal for Equity in Health*. 19:141.

5 Chukwuma Charles Soludo (2020). "Africa: COVID-19 - Can Africa Afford Lockdowns?" *All Africa*. 24 April 2020.

6 In 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees commended Iran for the introduction of a new law that allows children born to Iranian women and non-Iranian men to acquire Iranian nationality. Despite this effort to reduce statelessness in the country, many others remain without Iranian nationality.

prevails. As the daughters of Afghan parents, they do not enjoy the same rights as others born in Iran. They are not entitled to social protection and are denied the insurance from their employers that should be a legal obligation. Their salaries are among the lowest in the country: Benesh earns a monthly average of 7 million rials (approximately 21 euros), half the minimum salary in Iran.

When the pandemic hit Iran in February, the country had already been rocked by a series of crises, including the government's dramatic hike in petrol prices in November 2019 and the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. The government did not opt for a strict lockdown but instead limited restrictions to cancelling public events and closing schools, shops, and places of worship. Iran's GDP has fallen by 15 per cent since the beginning of the pandemic (figure from October 2020) and, to make matters worse, the United States has announced new sanctions, pushing the country to the verge of a deeper humanitarian crisis.

For Benesh, the pandemic saw her salary cut by almost half, even though she works from 8am to 7pm. While Afhak earns twice as much as Benesh, the pandemic has also caused her monthly salary to fluctuate between 27 and 48 euros. Alia's income depends on the number of clothes she makes. As production fell, her average monthly income dropped from between 23 and 27 euros to around 21 euros.

Afhak acknowledges that the job market is difficult and that the recession brings further hardship. Living in a household with six children and an ill father with no access to medical care, Afhak, her mother, and her sister work hard to provide for the family. All their earnings go towards their father's medical treatment because they cannot turn to Iranian banks for a loan. When they need money, Afhak admits to borrowing from her neighbours. As they do not own their home, her family is shouldered with a double burden: an annual deposit and rent. Afhak must also pay yearly for a residency card despite being born in Iran, as well as for a mandatory working permit after turning 18 years old. Afhak says they have sought financial help from the United Nations but received no answer. She believes the Iranian government could help them if it wanted to. Her wish is for her father's health to improve and her family to have proper medical insurance.

Benesh bluntly states that she has zero expectations from the Iranian government – everything hangs on her hard work. She hopes for a better job in the future, perhaps related to business. If the situation in Afghanistan were to improve, she would like to live there. Benesh observes that, during the pandemic, “Iranians have had better conditions – they have been given a subsidy or a living package”. She felt she deserved the same kind of support: “We also work in Iran like Iranians.”

**I NEVER RECEIVED ANY HELP  
FROM THE GOVERNMENT.  
TO THEM, WE DO NOT EXIST**

If Alia could make one request to the Iranian government, it would be compliance with the law that protects migrants' rights, access to education, and insurance at work – like the rest of Iranians. In face of great adversity, the three women hope to recover and pick up their lives in a post-Covid era, a mark of their resilience.

## **A RIGHTS-BASED RECOVERY**

No two migrant stories are the same. But each unique experience contributes to shaping the global narrative. A common thread from Greece to South Africa to Iran is the hopes of these women as the world recovers from the health crisis. All three feel abandoned as outcasts in their countries of residence and wish for a new reality with better working and living conditions – an environment where they are respected as equal citizens and their invaluable contributions are recognised. For these women, the lockdown highlighted the inequality and uncertainty they face, putting their lives and incomes on the line – as well as the wellbeing of their families back home, whom they were unable to support as before. In many countries, migrants were blamed for the spreading of the virus, while themselves undertaking high-risk jobs.

The pandemic has caused unprecedented levels of deprivation, a historic human crisis that is hitting the poorest hardest and worsening insecurity – yet all the while allowing billionaires to further increase their wealth to a staggering 10.2 trillion US dollars.<sup>7</sup> The International Labour Organization projects that around half of the world's working population is at risk of losing their livelihoods.<sup>8</sup> For migrant workers, the impacts of the coronavirus-induced economic meltdown could be long, deep, and pervasive. If the fortunes of migrant women are to improve, governments must create conducive environments for them to live and work. According to the World Bank, this means including migrants in health services, cash transfer schemes, and other social programmes, all the while safeguarding them from discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

The pandemic has seen examples worldwide of policy responses that protect the rights of migrant workers. New Zealand designed a wage subsidy scheme available to migrants, while in California, a fund provides income support to migrant workers irrespective of their status. Portugal adopted measures to treat migrants as permanent residents, and Italy considered the regularisation of about

7 Rupert Neate (2020). "Billionaires' wealth rises to \$10.2 trillion amid Covid crisis". *The Guardian*. 7 October 2020.

8 ILO (2020). "ILO: As job losses escalate, nearly half of global workforce at risk of losing livelihoods". ILO Press Release. 29 April 2020.

9 World Bank (2020). *COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens. Migration and Development Brief no. 32*. Washington DC: World Bank.

200 000 migrants to avoid labour shortages before closing its borders.

Civil society played a key role in supporting migrants throughout the lockdown. In Singapore, faith-based organisations delivered food to migrant workers and bought calling credit so they could communicate with their families overseas. They also provided masks and essentials, as well as cash donations and a friendly ear on the phone. From Colombia to Ghana and Nigeria, faith-based organisations and NGOs provided essentials to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants where the state failed to do so.

Crises like the one we currently face can be used to downgrade human rights in the name of emergency. But they are also an opportunity to address entrenched inequalities by establishing new ground from which to claim people's rights. Beyond the health crisis, the pandemic has exacerbated long-standing injustice and stressed the need for profound change in our societies. As we try to build that change, listening to those in precarious positions is paramount.

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# SOLIDARITY NOT CHARITY

## MUTUAL AID IN EUROPE

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As governments instructed their populations to stay at home to contain the virus, networks of solidarity went into operation across Europe and the world. Volunteers performed different services: from delivering food and medication to providing emotional support, childcare, and legal counselling. Known as “mutual aid” – a term borrowed from anarchist thinking on reciprocity and cooperation – the motivation behind these initiatives cuts across political traditions to lie in community. While some are run by existing groups, others were created by volunteers responding to emergency needs amid the pandemic.

This stubborn solidarity has been a saving grace for response measures ill-equipped to reach, or blind to, certain sections of the population. Even before the pandemic, some countries were relying on food bank referrals to avoid providing real social protection. Mutual aid thus holds up a mirror to the welfare state and the damage done by austerity. At the same time, it shows that welfare is only not granted from above. The foundations for the national welfare state were laid by the cooperative societies, mutual funds, and credit unions of the 19th century. In bringing communities together in new ways, mutual aid initiatives prefigure possibilities for transformation in the 21st century. The *Green European Journal* spoke to organisers about their activities during the pandemic.

## THE WESTERN BALKANS ROUTE'S NO NAME KITCHEN

The closure of borders and travel restrictions enacted due to the coronavirus outbreak were heavily enforced in the Western Balkan countries. Local and international volunteers active along the Western Balkans route found themselves unable to continue providing direct support to people on the move. After years of finding different means of offering first aid, clothes, and hot meals to migrants crossing the former Yugoslavia countries, the volunteers of No Name Kitchen (NNK) and other grassroots groups were forced to adapt their strategies to the changing circumstances. Unable to “bring food to people”, especially to those sleeping rough and in makeshift camps, due to inaccessible official transit and reception centres, they decided “to bring people to food”.

During the most dramatic period of the pandemic, when almost all international volunteers found themselves forced to leave transit countries, the NNK opted for distributing online vouchers that migrants could exchange for food items at local shops and bakeries the group had previously been in contact with. They termed this mutual aid action “solidarity market”, a means that allowed grassroots groups to provide food to about 500 people a week and support the local economy.

Other groups followed at NNK’s heels. Using social media networks, these groups reached out to people in need and provided them with coupons that could be spent at the local markets of the most important nodes on the migratory path, most notably the border between Bosnia Herzegovina and Croatia. This solidarity market has allowed volunteers and activists to continue reaching out to people on the move despite not being physically present in the field.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected our social and political life in many ways. The pandemic, in addition to its political and social consequences, has considerably altered the context in which grassroots social movements mobilise and organise. To volunteers and activists supporting people on the Western Balkans route, travel restrictions and lockdowns further complicated their activities. At the same time, the restriction measures provided them with the incentive to adapt to a rapidly changing context by developing new tools for mobilisation and reformulating their interventions. With those tools, they were able to continue their activities despite the unfavourable circumstances. Even amid a crisis, new activist and solidarity networks are arising and existing ones have grown stronger.



### CHIARA MILAN

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## FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN NORTHERN ITALY

CampiAperti is located in Emilia-Romagna in northern Italy – a region famous for its vast agricultural outputs of cheese, wine, vinegar, ham, fruits, and pasta, of which only 5 per cent is certified as organic. This skewed situation led to the formation of CampiAperti, an association composed of about 80 small and medium-scale producers and farmers who decided to take back the economy, production, and nature through self-governing their own markets and production.

In adapting food sovereignty principles (in contrast to food security), producers and farmers of CampiAperti exercise complete autonomy over their production and distribution systems. Their farming practices follow sustainable agroecological methods to generate a food system composed of producers and customers alike.

During the pandemic, Bologna City Council closed down all CampiAperti markets immediately, even though supermarkets and food shops could remain open. The lockdown in Emilia-Romagna, which had the second-highest case count in Italy after Lombardy, was heavily enforced by police with cameras capturing licence plates and helicopters in the air controlling public spaces and roads from above. This constrained the space for developing a solidarity structure that would allow CampiAperti's producers to stay economically afloat.

The producers geared up for a direct confrontation with the city council. They organised a virtual protest with the slogan "Defend solidarity, and not the virus!", asking people to join from balconies and gardens and share their individual protests on a collective platform. Two weeks after the petition, three markets were given permission to re-open but under strict social distancing conditions. That meant the markets could only operate as a collection point for produce.

Only customers officially associated with the association were allowed to go to the markets. CampiAperti's painstaking efforts to build up a direct relationship with its customers for years paid off. When the association made an online call to their customers to join officially, member rates shot up. CampiAperti's producers compiled a list of products (vegetables, fruits, cheese, wine, beer, herbal products, and cosmetics) at their markets and posted a summary online. Customers had to place their orders online and producers coordinated the processing and preparation of orders among themselves. This arrangement worked very well and many customers introduced their families and friends to the markets. The pandemic has crystallised the importance of the producer-customer relationship and, in particular, the need for common responsibility in local food systems beyond the Covid-19 crisis.



### DAGMAR DIESNER

is a doctoral student at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University. As permaculturalist, she co-founded a community organisation to advocate on ecological and health issues.

## NAPLES' STRUGGLE FOR MIGRANT RIGHTS

The Movimento Migranti e Rifugiati Napoli started in 2016 as a grassroots initiative responding to the abysmal conditions in many reception centres. It monitors the situation on the ground and offers support where it can. Many migrants do not receive proper medical care, so we set up a walk-in clinic. Because of the bureaucratic hurdles that migrants face, the movement offers legal assistance. In the last few years, we've supported almost 7000 people confronted by obstacles to receiving a residency permit.

Before the pandemic, we were already gearing up for an intense year. In 2018, the Salvini government removed the humanitarian visa status for migrants, a change which promised to cut many people off in 2020. Then Covid-19 happened. A material crisis coincided with many migrants being left without papers. From our social centre, we set up a mutual aid network offering food and other essentials to migrants and local families and, at the same time, we kept our legal support open online and by phone. But our movement isn't only about assistance, it's political.

In Italy, the pandemic caused labour shortages in certain sectors. At the height of the crisis, there was even talk of sending people receiving unemployment benefit to work in the fields. The Italian government's answer was one of its periodic amnesties for people working in the black economy. In Italy, it is estimated that over 670 000 migrants work without contracts nor protection from exploitation. So far, 207 000 people have applied for amnesty, but we still don't know how many will be accepted.

The amnesty is limited to sectors suffering from labour shortages because of the pandemic, notably in the care and agricultural sectors, as well as to workers earning a qualifying wage. An exploited migrant worker in the logistics sector has no recourse. The message is clear: you are only useful to the Italian state if you do a certain job.

Our movement is not at all convinced by this amnesty. We're in a health crisis and yet part of the population is left without access to rights and healthcare. The responsibility for safe and legal working conditions should rest with employers, not workers, and the Italian government should properly enforce and strengthen existing legislation that protects migrants from exploitation. Our movement demonstrated in the streets and took the cases of workers excluded from the amnesty to the district attorney of Naples.

Our legal team has put forward an alternative proposal based on an initial one-year residency permit which would be open to all. In a global pandemic, making rights conditional on work is an assault on the basic right to life. Still, we're not waiting for solidarity from the Italian government. We start from a different principle. Change starts from below. We lived through the health crisis, the quarantine, and the job losses. We know what working on the black is like. The change will come from us.



**MARIEMA FAYE**

is an activist with the anti-racist organisation Movimento Migranti e Rifugiati Napoli.

## AN ALTERNATIVE ECONOMY FOR BIRMINGHAM

Cooperation Birmingham was envisioned in late 2019 by a group of people involved in community groups and workers' and housing cooperatives. Our ambition is to become an active partnership between cooperatives and commons, expanding autonomous commoning experiences in Birmingham while promoting local economic democracy.

We planned to build a network, develop our model in a participatory way, and gradually begin activities over 2020. But Covid-19 changed everything. Birmingham is a city chronically struck by food poverty. Seeing the upsurge of solidarity with the pandemic, we felt the urge to act. In March 2020, we started a solidarity kitchen, a self-organised effort to deliver healthy and hearty warm meals people in need or self-isolation. Between March and August, we delivered over 20 000 meals, relying on donations, support from cooperatives, and the voluntary work of over 200 participants.

The solidarity kitchen was framed as a mutual aid project, although looking back, we were only partially successful. Decision-making was made in open online assemblies, all participants were encouraged to attend, and the minutes were made public on an online forum where anyone could raise discussions. The kitchen crew and drivers always received a meal in exchange for their work. However, we mostly failed in involving recipients in the solidarity kitchen. We also had limited success in involving occasional participants in decision-making. Social distancing, in not allowing the face-to-face interactions that are crucial for building trust, was certainly to blame. However, we also could have done more to explain the project's political values and encourage greater involvement.

The question now is: where do we go from here? In light of the economic crisis, how can we create a sustainable structure based on principles of commoning and mutual aid so that local communities have the means to support themselves?

We are in a transitional period in Cooperation Birmingham. My personal vision (shared with other members) is that we should focus on food sovereignty to create an agroecological food network bringing together organic producers, workers' cooperatives, and vulnerable communities. Our aim is to gradually increase our autonomy by including food production activities and building infrastructure within communities. In this way, we can provide alternative sources of healthy food for those who need it most and encourage practices of food provision based on solidarity, cooperation, and direct democracy.

Our vision involves three groups of actors. First, community gardens and individual allotments. We want to team up with existing community gardens and also create new ones to provide organic, locally grown food and reduce dependence on donations. Second, the lively network of local workers' cooperatives. Many of them are already involved, and they can provide the infrastructure needed for food distribution and preparation. Last but not least, local communities. Our aim is to build community power by creating an alternative solidarity and gift economy around food in Birmingham. To create a structure truly based on mutual aid, we need to involve the consumers in Cooperation Birmingham and create equitable ways of accessing food which do not exclude those in food poverty.



**SERGIO RUIZ CAYUELA**

is a member of Cooperation Birmingham, Plan C, and other self-organised community groups. He is also a PhD fellow at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University studying the expansion of the commons as a post-capitalist form of social organisation.

## SELF-ORGANISED SOLIDARITY IN LEIPZIG

Stiftung Ecken wecken's initiative during Covid-19 was motivated by the idea of not leaving people alone in a crisis situation. At the same time, we wanted to strengthen neighbourhoods in Leipzig and enable citizens to actively support and shape where they live. To this end, we adopted an existing license-free software system to connect people with their neighbours who may be older, living with disabilities, single parents, or essential workers in need of help. Volunteers assist with grocery shopping, run errands, go dog walking, chat on the phone, provide childcare, or perform small repairs.

Within a short time, more than 1100 individuals had registered in Leipzig and offered to help others nearby. The software matched those in need with registered helpers close to their residence, often within a 100-metre radius. Initially, volunteers carried out approximately 250 jobs. However, many of them started shopping or dog walking on a regular basis. So these services probably amounted to many hundreds of interactions leading to growing social cohesion and solidarity.

We are convinced that the banks of knowledge and expertise among citizens make citizen-led support much more targeted and effective than those initiated by the authorities. But these services could be even more effective if local government and civil society provided them in a coordinated and co-productive manner alongside health authorities and social services. We are currently exploring opportunities to export our system to other cities.

In order to provide such support services on a long-term basis, local self-organisation is essential. This requires functioning networks, places of (physical and virtual) encounter, communication systems, and web applications. Appropriate formats of self-organisation must be invented and developed as a whole. They are not only necessary for the provision of assistance in crisis situations but to shaping neighbourhoods in general.

Governments and authorities need to understand that in order to create resilient communities, they should take much greater notice and make use of the services provided by citizens for citizens. They should strongly promote the development of self-organising structures and link them to municipal services wherever possible.



**THORSTEN MEHNERT**

is a management consultant, carpenter, and board member of Stiftung Ecken wecken in Leipzig. He works closely with many local actors from civil society, local government, and politics to develop future-oriented solutions to urban challenges.

# EUROPE'S NEW REALITY

## COVID ECONOMICS, DEBT AND THE FUTURE OF TRADE

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**GUNTRAM WOLFF**  
BY **RODERICK  
KEFFERPÜTZ**

Covid-19 has triggered the largest economic recession since the Second World War. Governments injected billions into the economy and paid wages to protect the jobs of millions. EU countries took on shared debts for the first time. Many bold claims followed: austerity is dead, globalisation is a thing of the past, and the European Union has made a huge stride towards federalism. Are we living through an economic paradigm shift? We spoke with Guntram Wolff, director of the think tank Bruegel, about Europe's economic prospects, the recovery fund, and Europe's ecological and digital transformation.

**RODERICK KEFFERPÜTZ:** Covid-19 is not only a health crisis but also a huge economic shock. What lies ahead in the coming years?

**GUNTRAM WOLFF:** This is the biggest crisis since World War II, and we are not out of the woods yet. The recovery is fragile – it is gradual and very cautious. It will remain so as long as there is no vaccine available. Without a vaccine, patterns of consumption and production will remain changed. We are in for another very difficult year. Economic performance will still be well below trend in 2022. Even when the vaccine arrives, it will take time until normality returns.

**Is a major jobs crisis yet to come?**

That is the key question. I fear the worst may still be ahead of us. The strong response by the European Union and successful furlough schemes stabilised labour markets across Europe. But they cannot protect jobs forever and we don't know how many firms will declare bankruptcy next year, shifting people from furlough into unemployment. It's a real risk.



### **Is the EU's recovery package the right response?**

The immediate focus for recovery needs to be on stimulating demand. But that is not the job of the EU recovery package – it is the job of the national fiscal authorities that borrow money on financial markets to support economies. The recovery package only facilitates this process. The Next Generation EU plan tries to help countries with weaker economies and greater debt, who may not have the necessary fiscal space to stimulate demand. It basically helps those countries to borrow and spend money by acting as a financial facilitator. But this programme is not a short-term, anti-cyclical instrument because payouts will not happen for a while.

### **How would you evaluate the package in terms of quantity and quality?**

Looking at the numbers, this package is significant and appropriate. Some countries in Central and Eastern Europe will receive more than 10 per cent of their GDP, while EU member states in Southern Europe will receive 5 to 8 per cent, or more in the case of Greece and Cyprus. It is a major transfer of financial resources to help those countries stay solvent. The package also contributes to bringing down interest rates. Financial markets have welcomed the fiscal response as a strong signal of unity and European stability, and that has helped bring down spreads. That really benefits countries borrowing huge sums of money.

The quality of the recovery package is more difficult to evaluate and will depend on its implementation. There are big buzzwords attached to the plan – “green”, “digital”, and “social” – but there is no good governance structure in place to ensure the money is well spent. This is still being negotiated. The proposal agreed upon by the European Council is too imprecise and technocratic. Of course, there will need to be a technocratic process and policy coordination, but the EU recovery package particularly needs political accountability. The European Parliament will have to closely monitor how the money is being spent and it should have the right to stop payouts in extreme cases. EU money needs EU-level political accountability.

### **Will the EU countries be able to use all this money and pour it into shovel-ready projects?**

That is a big concern. Some member states will struggle to spend the money. For instance, Italy, Spain, and Croatia take a long time to spend their allocated structural funds. Usually they don't even manage to do so within the EU's seven-year budget framework. In our work at Bruegel, we have shown that countries like Italy only manage to spend around 40 per cent of their allocated funding. Now, of course, the recovery package wants to spend this money very quickly but that may work to the detriment of its quality. It is a dilemma.

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**Some have argued that this recovery package is**

**Europe's "Hamiltonian Moment", akin to the 1790 agreement between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, which turned the US from a loose confederation into a genuine political federation. Do you agree?**

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It's a big word. The package is certainly significant but it's not comparable to what Hamilton did in the US. It is significant because it changes the nature of the monetary union by introducing an explicit insurance mechanism and allowing borrowed money to be transferred to countries hit by the pandemic. This crisis mechanism will be a precedent whenever there is a comparable major recession in future.

**Are we ever going to pay back these huge sums of money?**

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That is the wrong question. The real question is: should we ever pay back this money? The European Council wants it to be paid back. But my prediction is that in seven years, when it comes to discussing the repayment as part of the next EU budget (which will start in 2028), they will postpone repayment by seven years. And that is appropriate because this debt is cheap, long term, and helpful. It helps Europe in establishing a common debt and capital market and it strengthens the euro as an international currency.

I don't see any reason why this debt should be repaid.

Look at national debt – that is almost never repaid but simply rolled over. In the end, it's about growing out of debt.

**But what about inflation?**

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What inflation? There isn't any. Quite to the contrary, all market indicators show that this pandemic has been highly deflationary.

**So on the economic side, there is no reason to worry about debt or inflation linked to the EU recovery package. What about the politics? In Europe, debt and austerity politics divide North and South. Could this package – in the coming years – bring forth a new debt debate that threatens European unity?**

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Indeed. My worry is that the EU will not put in place strong governance mechanisms that ensure accountability. As a result, this new money could make less of a difference in terms of growth and sustainability than hoped for. It is easy to see how this would then turn the narrative in Europe, in Northern Europe especially, against these kinds of EU spending programmes. Germany is particularly relevant. It was a huge step for Germany and Angela Merkel to change their position. When reports on the misspending of EU money start appearing, the narrative could easily become "never again".

**You mentioned that the recovery package comes with big buzzwords linked to the ecological and digital transformation. Does it need to be flanked by an active industrial policy?**

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This is one of the most difficult questions and I wish I had a good answer. The discussion on industrial policy in Europe is very ambiguous. There is no defined industrial strategy, goal, or orientation – there is only a handful of individual documents, which do not make up a strategy. For some areas, there is a clear need for an active industrial policy. Take the ecological transformation. To stop runaway climate change, we need to obtain all the necessary green tech; carbon pricing will not suffice. Carbon pricing needs to be complemented with a green industrial policy that can develop the necessary technologies and business models faster than the market would do alone. Europe needs to make real progress here.

As regards the digital transformation, I am more sceptical. What would a digital industrial policy mean? Of course, there is a need for a regulatory policy, an investment policy, and setting the correct framework conditions. But what else could industrial policy bring to the table? There is some talk of setting up a European cloud, but who would implement and manage this? The state is not a good entrepreneur so I do not see this happening.

**During the pandemic, the state has taken a massive stake in the economy. Will we ever see it retreat from this position and allow some Schumpeterian “creative destruction” to take place?<sup>1</sup>**

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The core function of a state is to provide stability in times of major stress, act as a lender of last resort, and support the private economy. What the state has done since the pandemic began is completely appropriate. Schumpeter did not say that the state should retreat at a time of a historic supply and demand shock, allowing for massive destruction of existing capital. What he advocated was a competitive environment in which new firms have a chance to emerge and unproductive firms can be driven out of the market through that competition.

As we move into 2022, we must evaluate whether the state is so dominant that new firms cannot establish themselves. At the moment, they cannot emerge because of the pandemic and recession. But at what stage should state support and state ownership be reduced? This is a conversation that we need to have because it is not up to the state to run major companies. The state will have to retreat at some point, but I do not think that time is now. We should have this conversation in late 2021 and 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> “Creative destruction” is a term coined by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter in the 1950s to refer to the process through which capitalism incessantly revolutionises the economic structure via spurts of innovation that see old enterprises replaced with new ones.

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**This pandemic highlighted the fragility of international supply chains. Should the state promote the relocalisation of production?**

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No. Reshoring and localised production are not the answer because they make things more expensive, simple as that. Of course, we need to increase our resilience, but we need to find the most cost-efficient way to achieve that. I think we can do it by increasing our stocks and reserves in critical goods, such as medical supplies, or by promoting the diversification of global suppliers. But deciding to put up our borders and produce everything domestically would be a major, expensive shock that would be bad for our welfare and our economies.

**So no paracetamol production in Europe, then, as French president Emmanuel Macron has advocated?**

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Let us take face masks as an example. Face masks were sorely lacking during the first two months of the crisis. Now it would seem appropriate to have greater stocks in Europe. But does it make sense to start up face mask production in Europe, where they could cost something like 3 euros each, instead of buying them from China, where each mask would cost around 3 cents? We must look at the costs of our policy choices, too. In this case, more stocks and perhaps a second supplier outside of China sound like better options. The EU is a net exporter of medical goods – do we really want to become protectionist and risk losing exports?

**The global economy has entered a geopolitical phase and the spheres of security and economy are increasingly linked. In this context, focusing on cost efficiency can cost you geopolitically. If the only concern is cost, for example, then Huawei should be allowed to build the 5G network.**

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Security concerns need to be taken seriously. We did not do this sufficiently in the past. Especially when it comes to core infrastructure, it would be wrong to depend on one supplier. And if there are concerns about the security of existing infrastructures, then that is a problem that

needs to be immediately addressed. I would also agree that dependency on countries for the imports of critical supplies, such as rare earths, needs to be scrutinised, and alternative suppliers established.

However, it is economically and politically dangerous to want to “decouple” Europe from other economies. Economically dangerous because it undermines our future economic prospects, and politically dangerous because economic decoupling tends to make military confrontation more likely. Instead of decoupling, the EU needs to work on having a stronger and unified position that allows them to retaliate and increase the cost to trading partners of playing geo-economic games. In other words, we need better EU instruments on investment screening, competition, and state aid control, as well as a stronger international role for the euro and foreign policy.

**The year 2020 has underlined the critical importance of sectors such as healthcare. Hasn't the pandemic also demonstrated the need to change our economic priorities more broadly?**

I agree that it would be extremely useful to discuss what is important for society and give greater attention to welfare and wellbeing in general. Part of the issue is measuring, or the lack thereof. We do not even measure the development and broad impact of the

pandemic at the European level. Eurostat, the organisation responsible for providing statistical data on the EU member states, has no numbers on this. It would be extremely useful, for example, to break out of the daily reporting of GDP and see the bigger picture, including inequality, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and social welfare. Green, health, social, and inequality indicators should figure prominently in the policy debate and shape the political agenda.



**GUNTRAM WOLFF**

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# BORDERS, BODIES AND SEE-ALL TECHNOLOGIES

## PUSHING THE LIMITS OF BIO-SURVEILLANCE

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ARTICLE BY

**AYELET SHACHAR &  
MARIE-EVE LOISELLE**

In recent years, surveillance technologies have increasingly been deployed to monitor, control, and curtail the movement of people. The pandemic is accelerating this trend. While controlling the spread of Covid-19 is of paramount importance, a global regime of technologically enabled exclusion underpinned by a discourse of contagion is emerging. Even in a crisis, a debate over the future of mobility and technological surveillance is critical.

**“**Draw me a border, if you please.” What image comes to mind? Most of us might think of walls or barbed wire fences planted firmly on frontier locations. From the Great Wall of China to the Berlin Wall, fortified barriers have long served as symbols of sovereign control. Today, however, a new trend has emerged: the growth of invisible borders. These are borders that rely on sophisticated legal techniques to detach migration control functions from a fixed territorial location. The unmooring of state power from a fixed geographical marker has created a new paradigm: the shifting border.

Unlike a physical barrier, the shifting border is not fixed in time and place; it is comprised of legal portals, digital surveillance tools, and AI-powered risk assessments rather than brick and mortar walls. The black lines we find in atlases no longer coincide with the agile locus and focus of migration control. Instead, governments shift the border both outwards and inwards, gaining tremendous capacity to regulate and track individuals before, and after, they reach their desired destination. The flexible tentacles of the shifting border were, until recently, deployed primarily to monitor people on the move, escaping poverty and instability. Today, everyone, including citizens of wealthy democracies, is potentially within its ever-extended reach.

This article expands on ideas that first appeared in *Open Democracy*.

## SHIFTING THE BORDER OUTWARDS

The relocation of border controls away from a country's territorial edges establishes a temporal and spatial buffer zone. This in turn permits desired destinations to “filter” and regulate movement prior to arrival. The UK Home Office has clearly explained the motivation for replacing traditional interactions at the border with pre-screening: the encounter “can be too late – [unauthorised entrants] have achieved their goal of reaching our shores”.<sup>1</sup> The emergence of the shifting border has coincided with the rise of big data and the creation of extensive databases that record travellers' biometric data, including digital photos, iris scans, and fingerprints. Even prior to the pandemic, governments were embracing measures such as ePassports and global entry fast-track programmes, which use biographic (e.g. name and nationality) and biometric characteristics to identify travellers before they arrive at the gates of their territory.

As part of Europe's concentrated effort to further migration and mobility management, a pre-clearance “electronic travel authorisation” will soon be required as a matter of course, even for those with visa-free travel and internationally coveted passports. Such electronic pre-clearance must be approved

by the government of the destination country before passengers depart, and is linked electronically to their passports. The European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) will serve as a clearing house for pre-travel authorisation for all 26 Schengen Area countries and is expected to become operational in 2021. This additional layer of pre-clearance and information-gathering creates a powerful yet invisible border that is operational anywhere in the world, prior to departure, adjusting itself to the location and risk profile of the traveller. When the ETIAS proposal was adopted, Jean-Claude Juncker, then president of the European Commission, justified the EU's commitment to rolling out this new system in his 2016 State of the Union address as a “way to know who is travelling to Europe before they even get here”.

In similar vein, the European pilot project iBorderCtrl, designed to protect the region's borders, gives a glimpse of what future digital borders might look like. This EU-funded monitoring system pre-screens incoming travellers, who are required to “perform a short, automated, non-invasive interview with an avatar [and] undergo a lie detector”.<sup>2</sup> The avatar is trained to detect deception by looking for “micro-gestures” – subtle non-verbal facial and bodily cues to calculate the traveller's risk factor. The data is then

1 Home Office (2007). *Securing the UK Border: Our Vision and Strategy for the Future*.

2 See the European Commission's iBorderCtrl project description: <[bit.ly/2TYx4ep](https://bit.ly/2TYx4ep)>.

combined with any pre-existing authority data and stored in databases linked to “portable, wireless connected iBorderCtrl units that can be used inside buses, trains, or any other point [to] verify the identity of each traveller”. The calculated risk factor will appear in any future border crossing and may lead to further checks or even denial of entry.

Government officials foresee a future whereby passengers will not require any travel documents at all. Instead, digital biometric borders will play a key role in the politics of mobility management that relies on shifting the border outwards. To achieve this sweeping vision, the location, operation, and logic of the border have to be redefined to allow officials (increasingly operating transnationally and in collaboration with third parties and private-sector actors) to screen and intercept travellers earlier, more frequently, and at a greater distance from the prosperous nations they seek to reach. These trends have been amplified by the current pandemic.

### **THE BORDER WITHIN US**

As well as stretching outwards, the border is also seeping inwards. Faced with an invisible virus, many countries are turning to what may once have been thought of as futuristic tracing devices, and deploying surveillance tools previously used for anti-terrorism and international espionage against their own

populations. Measures that tap into the bodies of citizens to contain coronavirus infections include: erecting “geo-fences” to draw virtual enclosures around quarantine zones; using electronic tracker wristbands that alert the authorities if people violate their quarantine; flying drones to ensure people remain at home; and activating AI-powered thermal cameras that detect changing body temperatures to identify who in a crowd has a fever (as in Beijing’s Qinghe railway station).

In a bid to contain Covid-19 infections, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Poland, and the Netherlands have rolled out mobile contact tracing applications. These apps automate the labour-intensive contact tracing of positive infections using a phone’s GPS and/or Bluetooth technology to detect if a user was near an infected individual. The information collected is then stored directly on the mobile device or a centralised government server to “reverse engineer” the movement and contacts of citizens who tested positive. The Polish Government’s *Kwarantanna domowa* app not only collects users’ geolocation, it goes one step further, using facial recognition to ensure compliance with quarantine restrictions. With only a few exceptions, all persons subject to mandatory quarantine in Poland are required to install the app on their phone or risk criminal liability.



THE UNMOORING  
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BORDER

Several European mobile applications have been linked to create a pan-European tracing network. Following a successful pilot project, EU member states launched a network in October 2020 to connect national apps through a server located in Luxembourg. The server will be a gateway for sharing “proximity” data across participating EU countries. For instance, an Italian resident who recently travelled to Germany would receive a notification if they were in contact with an infected person in that country or vice versa.

Treating the body as the site of regulation is no longer solely a purview of national governments. International organisations increasingly rely on cutting-edge technology to reimagine the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) are all developing digital identities for migrants. Biometric technologies that capture the unique identifiers of individuals form the backbone of these new management systems.

When deciding whether to agree to such data collection and biometric registration, refugees should ideally be able to make free and informed decisions. Alas, possessing a digital identity is becoming the key to unlocking access to aid. In Jordan’s Azraq camp, refugees pay for food through a blockchain platform called “Building Blocks”. Tapping into biometric data collected by UNHCR and shared with the WFP, 10 000 refugees use iris scans instead of cash or vouchers to buy groceries in the camp. A similar system allows refugees to withdraw a monthly cash allowance in the blink of an eye at Cairo Amman Bank’s iris scan-enabled ATM network. These developments raise important questions: if food and shelter are conditional on the collection of your fingerprints and iris scan, does one have meaningful power not to acquiesce? What does consent mean?

The humanitarian sector’s embrace of these emerging technologies not only transforms the delivery of aid and the ability to track populations

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on the move. It actively stretches state borders outwards. In an attempt to better control cross-border flows, 23 countries in Africa and South America use the IOM's Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS) to "manage" more than 100 border crossings. MIDAS captures travellers' biometric data, checking the data in real-time across an entire border network. It also automatically verifies these data against national and INTERPOL alert lists.

A 2019 agreement between UNHCR and the US Department of Homeland Security provides another illustration of the fusion of the humanitarian aid sector and border enforcement activities. The agreement sets the parameters for a one-way exchange of refugees' biometric data from UNHCR to US government data systems. While only currently concluded with the United States, this type of agreement sets a precedent for future interaction with other countries. In a sweeping shift outwards, border control functions that were once carried out upon territorial arrival are now initiated thousands of kilometres away by aid organisations in refugee camps. As a result, the cross-border mobility of those on the move is tracked at multiple checkpoints along the travel continuum: pre-arrival, at crossing stations, and post-entry. The once-fixed territorial border is not just shifting inwards and outwards but fracturing.

The temptation to collect as much biometric data as possible and the reliance on ever more sophisticated technology by governments and international organisations has destabilised another boundary: that between the public and private sector. In the past, governments had the monopoly to decide on the extent of, and methods for, the collection and management of information about the movement of people. These days are coming to an end. Before the pandemic, the impact of high-tech companies and other corporate actors in the field of bio-surveillance and identity management was already palpable. Today, it's deepening and accelerating. If "knowledge is power", whoever controls the data will have a tremendous edge.

## THE ETHICS OF BIO-SURVEILLANCE

As these systems become more common and integrated across space and time, a new architecture of bio-surveillance is consolidating. The introduction of surveillance techniques that rely on our bodies as the ultimate sites of mobility regulation has been underway for decades, but Covid-19 is accelerating their adoption in our everyday life. The trend may well prove hard to reverse, even after the pandemic subsides, raising deep and profound challenges that remain difficult to see – much like the shifting border itself.

Questions of volitional versus coerced use of such technologies – and their architecture – will have to be debated. Even where consent is the norm, the voluntary use of technology risks being undermined by social and economic pressure. It is not too far-fetched to imagine a near-future in which employers require their staff to download a contact tracing app, or to undergo a temperature scan or saliva-based test, as a precondition to entering an office building. In Germany, PwC markets a contact tracing app, Safe Space, for employers to monitor risks of infections within their workforce. Perhaps each of us will need to carry an “immunity passport” or wear a wrist or ankle bracelet monitoring our vital health signs (oxygen level, pulse rate, body temperature) before we can go shopping or enter a restaurant? Such measures may prove

helpful in containing the spread of the virus, but once put into operation, it may prove difficult to put the genie of bio-surveillance back in the bottle, as it provides governments aided by powerful actors unprecedented technological “see-all” eyes to monitor and track everyone’s mobility everywhere. These developments raise significant ethical and legal dilemmas, and like the pandemic itself, risk exacerbating existing inequalities.

What is in store for global migration and mobility once the pandemic is tamed? In the initial wave of response, close to 200 countries curbed either inbound or outbound travel. Counter to the narrative of border walls, it did not require a single sack of cement for the United States to barricade itself from travellers arriving from China, and later, the European Union. Instead, it took only the stroke of a pen to define who may enter (primarily American citizens and permanent residents) and who will be turned away – everyone else, save diplomats and medical experts invited to help tackle the virus.

Yet another underlying theme emerged, reviving a troubling association between the “infectious” and the foreigner. A narrative that constructs the virus as extraneous to the homeland surfaced in statements made by political leaders. Such rhetoric has served nationalist agendas, as in statements made by Italy’s far-right Lega party, blaming

immigrants for a surge in cases. It may also serve as a pretext, as we have seen in Malta, for blocking asylum seekers picked up at sea from making landfall, or in Greece, for urging the establishment of “closed camps”, whereby refugee movement in and out of the gates will be regulated with microchipped armbands. Similar concerns about verifying identity and arresting mobility underpin the proposed EU Migration Pact’s provisions imposing health checks of irregular arrivals, who “might have been exposed to health threats (e.g. when coming from war zones, or as a result of being exposed to communicable diseases)”.<sup>3</sup>

Closure and exclusion, however, is not the only political response triggered by Covid-19. Several countries have extended healthcare and social protection measures to non-citizen residents in a display of solidarity with migrants. Consider the decision taken by the Portuguese government to give all migrants already on its territory, including asylum seekers, access to the same rights as citizens to “health, social security, and job and housing stability as a duty of a solidarity society in times of crisis”. Here, sharing the same risks, in the same place, and at the same time created camaraderie and community. Canada, for its part, has recognised the contribution of migrants in the fight against Covid-19.

In August, the government announced that asylum seekers working in the healthcare sector during the pandemic will be offered a pathway to permanent residency in Canada. At this juncture, the narrative is altered; rather than being constructed as a health risk, or a “problem” to fix, those who play a role in the collective fight against the deadly virus become part of the solution.

While such policies reveal the possibilities for inclusion, the arc of history shows that discourses of contagion too often provide governments with a purportedly value-neutral, rational justification for imposing restrictions on cross-border movement. The current pandemic is no different. However, today the capacity for surveillance is far greater than at any time in the past. As the examples provided illustrate, borders are not vanishing but rather being reimaged and reinvented. Far from the dream of a borderless world that emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall, today we see not only more border walls but also the rapid proliferation of “portable” legal barriers that may appear anywhere but are applied selectively and unevenly, with fluctuating intensity and frequency of regulation. These developments bear dramatic implications for the scope of rights and liberties that each of us may expect to enjoy, whether at home or abroad.

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3 “After Moria, EU to try closed asylum camps on Greek islands”. *Deutsche Welle*. 23 September 2020.

Long after the pandemic is over, we may continue to be affected by its residue. New ultra-sophisticated technologies of bio-surveillance will trace people in novel relations of power in political spaces of (im)mobility. In this evolving reality, shifting borders are increasingly wielded to determine who deserves passage through the otherwise bolted gates of admission. Decisions made today will have dramatic consequences for tomorrow. Whether, and if so, how, we push back against fast-evolving bio-surveillance measures that overlook considerations of equity, privacy, consent, and proportionality will define the future: not only of shifting borders but also our multiple communities of membership and belonging.

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# LIVEABLE SPACES FOR ALL

## COVID-19 IN THE CITY

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**HELEN COLE**  
 BY **PAOLA HERNÁNDEZ**

For people living in cities during the lockdown, space was a major concern, both in and outside the home. The pandemic has reconfigured the way we use and think about urban space. Will it be sufficient for a fairer, healthier city to emerge? Paola Hernández spoke to urbanist Helen Cole about inequalities in the city in times of Covid-19, and prospects for change.

**PAOLA HERNÁNDEZ:** How has the pandemic affected quality of life in urban areas?

**HELEN COLE:** The pandemic has changed the way we think about cities, including the advantages and disadvantages of living in them. Early in the crisis, cities seemed like bad places to live as their dense populations were associated with a higher risk of contagion. Over time, however, it has become clear that the real problem is the overcrowded, unsafe housing in which some people are forced to live. These conditions are not randomly distributed: the possibility of contagion thus depends on diverse and interconnected dimensions of our society such as racism, sexism, and income inequality.

In my home city of Barcelona there are immigrant communities from North Africa, Pakistan, Morocco, and West Africa who, due to structural racism and bureaucratic obstacles, hold low-paid jobs and often live in neighbourhoods with relatively poor-quality housing. All these aspects compound to put certain populations at greater risk. In Europe we do not talk much about race, but systematic and interpersonal racism is certainly present and affects the quality of life of these populations and our whole society. In terms of gender,

Thanks to Francesc Baró and Galia Shokry at the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA), Autonomous University of Barcelona, as well as members of the Barcelona Laboratory for Urban Environmental Justice, for their contributions.

although there's currently a lack of studies on domestic violence during coronavirus lockdowns, historically during recessions, incidents of domestic violence increase. With families cooped up inside, these risks will be even higher, especially for women, who are much more likely than men to be victims of domestic violence.

**Many cities are experiencing severe housing shortages. What has the Covid-19 crisis exposed about the state of safe and affordable housing in European cities?**

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As with many things, the pandemic has made the issue of housing both more severe and more visible. More severe because the same people who were already unable to afford adequate, secure, and accessible housing have been more affected by the pandemic and lockdown. And more visible because the crisis has prompted us to think differently about our own homes and their real value. It has become apparent that a home that is safe, comfortable, and that has enough space for privacy is the best frontline defence against pandemics and a guarantee against the aggravation of health and economic inequalities. In the past, research has linked inadequate housing quality to poor health when it fails to protect residents from excessive heat or cold, or when it exposes residents to toxic mould or lead paint. Home is not always the healthiest place to be.

In view of the length and acuteness of the current health and economic crisis, housing should be decommodified. Some cities or countries have already attempted this. In Vienna, housing is treated as a basic human right. Here in Barcelona, a new rent regulation law was passed in September 2020 to set maximum rental prices for any apartment or home. On the national scale, governments could reverse decade-long cuts to housing infrastructure – especially public housing – such as those seen in the United Kingdom.

**Another sector impacted by the pandemic is public transport. What are the main issues facing public transport systems?**

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Keeping public transport clean and safe is a real challenge. It is essential to maintain a core service, particularly for those without private motor vehicles or low-income workers who depend on public transport to reach their jobs. Concern about the risks of contracting Covid-19 on public transport puts greater pressure on the already contentious debate about the right to precious public space in cities. This should be considered a political opportunity for investing in, maintaining, and providing safer public transport systems – many of which are already suffering from aged and crumbling infrastructure.

While this could ultimately lead to greater social equality, reduced usage due to the

pandemic places greater political and funding strain on transit systems. As city planners and public health experts assess how to increase active transit like cycling or walking by reducing motorised transport space on roads, another essential equity question arises: who will be able to commute short distances by foot or bike? Active commuters tend to be those living close to their workplaces because they have the financial means to afford living in the city, and thus can benefit more from the new bike lanes that cities like Barcelona or Milan are building in their centres. However, those who live in or beyond the periphery do not have the luxury of commuting by bike or on foot. Active transit is often not feasible for them, so other affordable and low-risk solutions need to be put in place.

**You are currently researching the importance of access to green spaces. What is the value of public green spaces in cities, especially in times of Covid-19?**

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Green spaces in cities are very important for public health. During the pandemic, people really started to notice the disparity in greenery, particularly in Spanish cities where there was such a strict lockdown. At the Barcelona Laboratory for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability, we conducted a survey in collaboration with researchers from Portugal. The results showed that during the lockdown in Portugal,

where short visits to public green spaces were allowed, maintaining or increasing the use of public natural spaces or viewing nature from home were associated with lower levels of stress. In Spain, where visits to public green space were not permitted, maintaining or increasing contact with private green spaces like gardens and greenery like indoor plants was linked with lower stress levels.

In sum, these findings support the idea that unequal access to green spaces is directly related to health inequalities in cities, particularly in terms of mental health. Spanish residents with access to private green space (generally located in wealthier neighbourhoods) could probably cope better with the lockdown. Similar evidence in Berlin, Leipzig, and Halle in Germany as well as in Oslo and Stockholm indicates that this unequal distribution of urban green space – which translates into differences in the quality, quantity, and size of green spaces – is also related to existing inequalities in the housing market and mobility. Hopefully, the preservation, restoration, and understanding of the importance of green space for future urban resilience will continue with renewed force.

**Can the Covid-19 crisis accelerate action on the climate and biodiversity emergencies in cities?**

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During lockdown, levels of air pollution fell in many cities, including Barcelona and Madrid. In November 2018, the Madrid Central scheme



**A HOME THAT IS SAFE,  
COMFORTABLE, AND THAT  
HAS ENOUGH SPACE  
FOR PRIVACY IS THE  
BEST FRONTLINE DEFENCE  
AGAINST PANDEMICS**

was launched to improve air quality by reducing traffic and banning the biggest polluters from Madrid city centre, with great initial results. During the pandemic, this type of intervention has happened naturally all over the world. There is a lot of hope and speculation about what might happen as we recover from the crisis.

At the moment, there are so many health priorities for policymakers and politicians that acting slowly and carefully is complicated. People are desperate to restart the economy and return to “normality” as soon as possible. But it is really worth pausing to think because there are many fantastic opportunities to consider, like investment in localised nature-based solutions. Re-imagining rooftops for public use – both for gardening and recreation – or creating “pocket parks” are two possibilities that would get around spatial challenges and increase access to green spaces in dense cities.

This access needs to be guaranteed for all. Many cities are witnessing a trend towards the privatisation of small, local green spaces paid for by developers. In some cases, these spaces exclude residents who don't live in that specific private development. This creates the illusion of an equitable distribution of green space when it is not necessarily the case. Now is the perfect time to think carefully about these issues.

**For decades, large parts of cities have been dedicated to brick-and-mortar commercial and office spaces. Do increased distance working and online shopping offer opportunities to repurpose urban space?**

That is a good question, and one we won't know the answer to for a while. Although it would be nice to think that the use of urban spaces could easily be traded when circumstances change, that is not always the case. With refurbished brownfields, for example, unused space has been reclaimed for public good. At the same time, so much of the decision-making about urban space depends on economics and power; forces that are incredibly and increasingly uneven. This pattern is unlikely to change despite trends in distance working and shopping behaviour.

I can think of two relevant trends that demonstrate the difficulties with repurposing space in cities. First is the plethora of luxury housing that has been constructed in recent years, sometimes under the guise of creating necessary new housing. Yet many of these homes sit empty despite worsening housing crises. This clearly shows that decisions are not based on need and do not prioritise the interests of the less privileged residents who are impacted by the lack of affordable housing. Secondly, previous patterns indicate that processes such as gentrification are largely dependent on uneven

**CITIES ARE  
CONSTANTLY EVOLVING,  
AND WE OFTEN FAIL  
TO THINK ABOUT THIS  
WHEN CREATING POLICIES**

urban development. The trend initially observed in the Covid-19 crisis of wealthier residents – who are better placed to take advantage of shopping and working from home – being interested in moving out of urban centres has implications for city urban development finances, which are partly dependent on tax revenue. In brief, even if the physical space to do so is available, we can't assume that cities will easily be able to reinvent themselves.

**What do you make of the concept of a 15-minute city, popularised by the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo; the idea that public services like green spaces, healthcare facilities, workplaces, cultural spaces, and all the other necessary urban amenities should be within 15 minutes of where someone lives?**

The 15-minute city concept sounds great in theory but it will face a few challenges in practice. If we were building Lego cities from scratch, it would be quite easy to implement. But in reality, existing cities face the dual challenge of being both dense – lacking available land for new resources – and unequal. A couple of examples of how competition for space and resources plays out in cities come to mind.

The first is the US city of Atlanta, which is constructing a greenway called the BeltLine by repurposing disused railway lines that circuit the city centre. Theoretically, this project should

provide equal benefit to residents in all of the many

neighbourhoods it intersects. But even before construction began, the price of land along the BeltLine's path increased dramatically, meaning that the city could no longer afford to purchase the land needed to finish the project. The effect of speculation and investment was just too strong. This project also faces challenges related to its failure to factor in the varying needs and desires of the communities it impacts. While the assumption was that the BeltLine would bring a wanted resource to all adjacent neighbourhoods, in reality, many residents had reservations or felt it did not address their needs at all.

The second example is from the Raval district of Barcelona, one of the densest neighbourhoods in Europe. Raval is currently served by just one overcrowded health clinic. For years, its healthcare workers have fought for a second clinic, but space is hard to come by. These workers identified a municipally owned building that could be converted into a clinic, but the city had previously leased that building to an art museum looking to expand there. The city offered the nearby plaza as an alternative site for the clinic, but this would have meant trading precious open space for the essential health resource. In the end, the workers were granted the right to use the building. The future of the plaza, on the other hand, remains uncertain.

The reality that needs and desires vary for different communities is a challenge for the 15-minute city concept. Not only that, but as cities and neighbourhoods change, so do the needs of residents. My research shows that gentrification places additional burdens on healthcare providers and facilities: as gentrifying areas become more socially complex, so do the social determinants of health. The displacement of long-term residents also means disruption to the continuity of their healthcare. I suppose proponents of the 15-minute city concept would tout that it would prevent gentrification by equally distributing resources throughout the city, but so far efforts have shown that preventing gentrification is hard, and even attempts to create mixed-income communities have faced challenges. At the end of the day, cities are dynamic, and I do not know how well the 15-minute city concept accounts for that.

**How do you envisage future cities that are better equipped to deal with challenges linked to health and climate?**

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For those working to improve cities, it is really important to think of climate-related interventions, like green spaces, and other essential amenities for healthy cities like transport, housing, and public spaces, as part of a system rather than standing alone. This means understanding that physical changes to cities have impacts on their social

and political environments, and vice versa. Historically, urban areas that have been disinvested in, that are often physically and socially separated from important resources and have experienced worse environmental conditions, also have fewer green spaces and other amenities. These inequities need to be rectified. It is essential to consider the social and political impacts of new amenities, and what policies or planning tools might be used to prevent consequences like green gentrification, rising costs of living, and displacement.

Moving forward, I hope to see cities and decision-makers being thoughtful about the pandemic recovery and re-invention process, and taking steps to protect marginalised urban residents. Related to the physical or built environment of cities, I would like to see efforts to maintain some of the pedestrian space that cities have at least temporarily installed, and to continue reducing air and water pollution. Moreover, a closer focus on social issues that cities have failed to address – like homelessness, energy poverty, the housing crisis, and unequal access to healthcare and education – is very much needed. This is, of course, made more challenging by the still unknown economic impacts of the pandemic for city budgets and resources.

## How can we stop cities becoming spaces of competition and exclusion?

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This is essentially the question that is already in the minds of activists in many cities working to address housing injustices and prevent the negative effects of gentrification. Time and time again, activists and city representatives emphasise how policies are often introduced too late. In cities like Seattle in the US, policies call for the principles of equity and inclusion to be included in all decision-making, but house prices have already displaced many of the city's most marginalised residents, despite these good intentions. In cities of all sizes, house prices have risen far more rapidly than wages, particularly as income inequality increases. Cities struggle to balance the desire to promote innovation and modernisation with the need for inclusion, affordability, and access to essential resources for all. There is no easy answer, but we can start by thinking first, in each decision or policy, about those with the least privilege, and about the potential short, medium, and long-term implications of those decisions on different populations. Cities are constantly evolving, and we often fail to think about this when creating policies.

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# TAKING POWER IN A CRISIS

## FRANCE'S GREEN CITIES

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AN INTERVIEW  
WITH **LÉONORE  
MONCOND'HUY &  
BRUNO BERNARD**  
BY **BENOIT MONANGE**

In June 2020, after a drawn-out process punctuated by the peak of the health crisis, Green lists excelled in France's municipal elections. They are now at the head of the executive in some of France's largest cities, including Marseille, Lyon, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, and Tours. We spoke to Bruno Bernard, president of the Greater Lyon metropolitan area, and Léonore Moncond'huy, the newly elected 30-year-old mayor of Poitiers, about how the pandemic affected their vision for the future, what Green government brings to a crisis, and ecology's place in the French political landscape.

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**BENOIT MONANGE:** French ecologists enjoyed unprecedented success in the 2020 municipal elections. What explains their performance?

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**BRUNO BERNARD:** Above all, our project answered people's expectations, from fighting against pollution and developing mobility to greening the city and improving the urban environment. Ecology responded to the need to restore meaning to life in the city. Political fragmentation and the demise of social democracy undoubtedly contributed. But, in many cities, even where our candidates were not well known, the victories were down to proposals that met the aspirations of citizens. There is potential to progress even further because there are deep shifts at play: our programme appeals to younger generations. Fifteen-year-olds today are probably greener than most voters.

**LÉONORE MONCOND'HUY:** Ecology is no longer an intellectual or activist project on the margins but is increasingly anchored in the grassroots. The cultural battle is gradually being won, as the Citizen's Convention on Climate show.

In cities, the platforms that captured this interest in ecology were often open and left a large place for civil society. In Poitiers, the campaign was built around a collective approach bringing in new people and practices. It was more than just a party making some space for people; the approach was wholly based on citizens and political renewal.

Barcelona was a particular source of inspiration. The image of a city taking control of its political future through participation won us over. Our team met organisers from Barcelona to learn more precisely how they worked and what obstacles they faced. During the campaign, we said: “Poitiers is the new Barcelona!” Our platform, Poitiers Collectif, is based on three pillars: ecology, social justice, and democracy. Of course, ecologists are convinced that ecology is a “whole” that naturally comprises the social, and sometimes get fed up with insisting on this. But it’s reassuring to voters to explain that social issues and democracy are fundamental too.

#### **How did the health crisis affect the elections?**

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**BRUNO BERNARD:** We had to change how we campaigned and, in the long months between the rounds, our opponents strongly attacked the Greens. But, ultimately, the health risk was not a major factor. Abstention was high but also included part of our electorate. Some people linked the health crisis to the ecological crisis

but economic uncertainty dissuaded others from voting Green. The largest differences between the rounds were in cities where Emmanuel Macron’s En Marche allied with the centre-right to try to keep the Greens out. In Strasbourg and Bordeaux, voters punished these alliances.

**LÉONORE MONCOND'HUY:** We stayed mobilised while the campaign was suspended. Events were organised to keep the debate going and anchor the wider conversation about the “world after” in Poitiers. The effect on the result is hard to read. The crisis increased awareness and the desire to take action. People turned towards local food networks, markets, and producers, and voting Green was in a way a logical extension. At the same time, many people turned to safe havens and stuck with the incumbents.

#### **You entered office amid a triple health, economic, and social crisis. What do green politics bring to the exercise of power in a crisis?**

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**BRUNO BERNARD:** We do things differently, for sure. Decisions are made in a very collegial way. Seventy-five per cent of our elected officials have never held office before and there are 32 women to 26 men. Dual mandates are not permitted (*non-cumul*) because elected representatives should be fully invested in their role. In a crisis, we seek to go beyond short-term management, not rely solely on communication, and keep a longer-term

vision. That's why we're in constant dialogue with economic and social actors and other elected officials to determine the most effective measures. I do not make thunderous daily announcements; we want to make a strong impact in the long term.

**LÉONORE MONCOND'HUY:** Crisis management is a skill that transcends political divisions and for which personal leadership is also important. In a crisis, any elected official has to protect the population, identify what is urgent, and anticipate what will happen next. Where ecologists distinguish themselves is on democracy and the reflection on the "post-crisis world". I was keen to ensure that crisis management did not exclude consultation, even when it's a challenge. Responsiveness requires making quick decisions, inventing new forms, and trusting all elected officials. Finally, ecology remains our compass. It would be useless to simply pick up again where we left off. Faced with this crisis, we must reorient things in the right direction.

**Has the pandemic changed your visions for the futures of Poitiers and Greater Lyon?**

**LÉONORE MONCOND'HUY:** Honestly no, but it confirmed the need to implement our programme more quickly, particularly in relation to food. The threat to food security was stark and sudden. Our supplies depend on national and international systems that are

vulnerable to shocks. So local food systems are not only an ecological issue but also a matter of security.

**BRUNO BERNARD:** The crisis has not changed my vision for Greater Lyon, but it has reinforced my conviction of the need to rebalance the relationship with the territories around the metropolitan area. My predecessors developed Greater Lyon to continually become bigger and richer, and to draw in ever-increasing numbers of people. The results were skyrocketing house prices, congestion and pollution, and overstretched public services. With heatwaves linked to climate change, it was already likely that, over the next 10 to 15 years, disaffection with dense urban areas will grow, whether we like it or not. The Covid-19 crisis is accelerating this dynamic, especially due to remote working. The relationship between large cities and intermediate towns needs to become more balanced.

**The pandemic exposes the link between social, environmental, and health inequalities.**

**How can green policies make cities more inclusive?**

**BRUNO BERNARD:** Two green policies for social justice stand out. First, the massive development of public transport to allow everyone to get around easily. Not everybody can afford a car and so mobility is an aspect of inequality. Unified pricing across operators will be



introduced and, from January 2021, the most disadvantaged will receive free public transport. Second, in January 2023, the metropolitan area will transfer water treatment and supply from private hands to a public authority. This transfer will permit progressive water pricing and free water allowances for people in need.

**LÉONORE MONCOND'HUY:** Public services are key to reconciling ecology and social justice because they are based on the equality of all users. Public services regulate the distribution of resources between people and guarantee access to ecological goods and services at affordable prices. In Poitiers today, buses are seen as a means of transport for the poor. It is up to us, the community, to make sure that they are as attractive as any other means of transport. Changing the way people look at public transport to move beyond the car is a social justice issue.

There is a tendency to see social justice only through the prism of employment. But I want to be part of the political tradition on the Left committed to working less. Free time is a right for all, just like the right to work. Social support services focus on employment but inequality is also reflected in leisure, free time, and holidays. After the lockdown was loosened in June, Poitiers put in place a Holidays for All programme. Children who had been stuck inside for months were given the opportunity to escape Poitiers for a week

or a few days. Of course, the crisis makes supporting employment, integrating young people, and finding innovative solutions, particularly in the social economy, crucial. But social justice goes beyond employment.

#### **What are your main objectives for the term?**

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**LÉONORE MONCOND'HUY:** The ambition is that our three dimensions of ecology, social justice, and democracy are taken into account in all decision-making. It's hard to sum up our goals in a few words but the markers are mobility, energy, and nature education. By the end of the mandate, all residents should have an alternative to the private car. The city already has a climate-air-energy plan but we will translate it from promises into doing everything possible to reduce the community's carbon impact. Making municipal buildings energy-positive will be an important lever. Nature education is our trademark education policy. It'll require training our teams, redirecting our extracurricular activities, and building an immersive nature education centre.

**BRUNO BERNARD:** Reducing pollution is an important objective that involves transport, insulation, pollution sources such as open wood burning, and the regulation of industry. Greening the metropolitan area and preserving biodiversity are also priorities and we'll launch a major plan to protect pollinators. On housing, Greater Lyon wants to double the

current rate to be creating 6000 social housing units per year by the end of the mandate. A pedestrian plan will help calm the streets and improve quality of life. Two hundred and fifty kilometres of express cycle lanes should triple the number of bike trips over the mandate.

Food is another priority. We're aiming for 100 per cent organic and at least 50 per cent local in school catering. Two meals per week will be vegetarian and pupils will always have a vegetarian alternative. The 350 farms in our territory export 95 per cent of their produce outside the metropolitan area and only 7 per cent produce organically. Greater Lyon will work with farms to help them convert to a more locally oriented, organic model, by guaranteeing the purchase of part of their produce, for example. At European level, the new common agricultural policy has to help us move in the right direction.

**Ecologists have been singled out for political attacks in France. How do you deal with being demonised as extremists, backwards-looking and irresponsible?**

**LÉONORE MONCOND'HUY:** I stay calm and keep my distance. The attacks are cartoonish, but most of all they are out of line with who we are and people realise that. The best answers are actions that change people's lives for the better. Our results will prove that these attacks were misplaced.

**BRUNO BERNARD:** The attacks came mainly between the two rounds when our opponents realised our chances of winning. These attacks sometimes came from business interests but, since the election, at the local level, these types of attack have stopped. With my background as a business owner, when I meet local entrepreneurs, they quickly understand that we can do things together. Not only is the economy compatible with ecology, ecology also gives meaning to economics.

**President Macron mocked ecologists as "Amish" and the justice minister even railed against the "ayatollahs of ecology".**

**BRUNO BERNARD:** Today ecology is the most dangerous alternative for those currently in power. That's why we are the target. For the president to speak in such excessive terms to avoid a substantive discussion on 5G, it rather shows how unarmed he is faced with public debate. It damages him more than it affects us. We'll stick to the ideas and proposals that bring about change.

**After strong results at the European and municipal elections, what should ecologists focus on to progress further?**

**BRUNO BERNARD:** We must continue with our project and not let up, because ecology is increasingly popular. But we must build on two essential aspects. First, the better articulation

of the political philosophy behind our ideas. It's about restoring meaning. Everyone feels the need to give meaning to their life, their actions, and re-create links with others and the environment. Ecology is a powerful catalyst for these aspirations. Setting up a composter in a building is of course good for the environment but more than anything it creates ties between people living in a shared place. The second element is making clear that ecology is an alternative economic model and not just a sticking plaster. Ecology proposes a model that breaks with the economic policies pursued in France for the past 40 years, by the Right and the Left.

**LÉONORE MONCOND'HUY:** Our movement has to remain open to the rest of society. The Green party has not yet brought together all of the many people who would like to see ecology come to power. We have to continue our effort to talk to everyone. Other challenges are reassuring people on the credibility of our programme and showing that ecology is not limited to the environment. Our solutions are economic, social, and security-related. Leading local communities will demonstrate that ecologists can run policies in all areas; different and yet responsible management will give us credibility.

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**LÉONORE MONCOND'HUY**

is mayor of Poitiers. A member of Europe Écologie Les Verts, she was elected in 2020 as the head of the Poitiers Collectif list.



**BRUNO BERNARD**

is president of the Greater Lyon metropolitan area. He was previously in charge of elections and relations with other political parties for the executive board of Europe Écologie Les Verts.



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# THE FOUNDATIONAL ECONOMY FOR A GOOD LIFE

ARTICLE BY

**RICHARD  
BÄRNTHALER,  
ANDREAS NOVY,  
LEONHARD PLANK  
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STRICKNER**

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that some economic sectors are more important than others for meeting our basic needs and making a “good life” possible. The foundational economy – education, health and social care, utilities, and retail – is crucial to ensure a sustainable future for our societies.

**T**he crisis has shown the importance of certain economic activities. It has also demonstrated the limits of a radical market economy, throwing into sharp relief the advantages of universal, collective service provision via a public health system compared to systems in which the fulfilment of basic needs is conditional upon the ability to pay.



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in German on the *Green  
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## **DIE ALLTAGS- ÖKONOMIE FÜR EIN GUTES LEBEN**

Die Covid-19-Pandemie hat gezeigt, dass manche wirtschaftliche Zonen wichtiger sind als andere, um Lebensgrundlagen zu sichern und ein gutes Leben zu ermöglichen. An dieser „Alltagsökonomie“ gilt es anzusetzen, um Wirtschaften zukunftsfähig zu machen.

In this way, the pandemic has offered new ways of seeing the economy, work, and contribution. A return to “business as usual”, as we did after 2008, would be a mistake. Valuable lessons from the “pandemic economy” could transform post-pandemic economies and make them more sustainable. However, learning these lessons requires two things: first, a good understanding of market liberalism, which provided the ideological underpinning for liberalisation, privatisation, and financialisation. And second, a vision of a different economic order and strategies for responding to future crises in an effective and socially just manner. This vision can be found in strengthening the “foundational economy”, the everyday economy, which includes large sections of public services and utilities.

## **THE NARROWING OF THE ECONOMY**

The neoliberal triumph of the 1980s radically changed ways of thinking and acting. It was particularly visible in three areas. First, an outward-looking orientation dimmed the focus on the domestic

economy. New markets were created and existing ones liberalised, including various markets for basic services. The guiding principles were the creation of attractive conditions for international capital, as well as efficiency, optimisation, and high corporate returns. Second, a mixed system was replaced by a market-economy system, reducing diverse economies to uniform (global) market economies. Third, macrosocial objectives were replaced by individualised wants and preferences, the common good by self-interest.

Consequently, human rights from healthcare to education to housing became marketable goods and services. These goods and services are produced by private enterprises and purchased by individual consumers on the market. Individual responsibility now meant “emancipation” from collective security systems, for example through private pensions and health insurance, home ownership, and investment in personal “human capital”.

This narrow understanding became not only widespread in the economic sciences but triumphantly advanced into ever-new fields of human coexistence. Gary S. Becker and Guity Nashat Becker pushed this thought to its logical conclusion in their 1996 book, *The Economics of Life*.

A one-sided emphasis on individual optimisation, however, undermines social

cohesion, solidarity, and resilience. Of course it makes sense to identify savings opportunities – for example in the healthcare system. But an unbalanced focus on efficiency in basic services has deeply problematic consequences, particularly when unforeseen events arise. The Austrian Court of Audit’s long-standing demand to reduce “inefficient” overcapacity in intensive care beds was revised at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in recognition of this.

The experience of Covid-19 has underlined the shortcomings of these assumptions. It shows that the market can solve some but not all problems, that economies are more than market economies, that social security cannot be viewed solely from the perspective of microeconomic efficiency, and that a rigidly outward-looking orientation can undermine social cohesion. The *raison d’être* of economic activity is ensuring that a population’s basic needs – as opposed to individual wants and preferences – are met by the effective management and distribution of resources. Sustainable economic activity stabilises solidarity-based communities, guarantees the free development of its members, and safeguards natural resources and ecosystems. Optimisation is unquestionably helpful, but only if it serves these goals.

To ensure that basic needs are met, even when the unexpected happens, reserve capacity and buffers are essential. This is the polar opposite of a “just-in-time” philosophy.

There is therefore an urgent need for a different, more comprehensive understanding of economics. After all, the fact that the “economy” – understood as companies operating on the global market – is doing well (as measured by increasing growth and trade volumes) says little about the wellbeing of all people in society. It is also a poor indicator of whether societies are crisis-proof, let alone future-proof, and of the planet’s ability to sustain life in the face of climate change.

## THE FOUNDATIONAL ECONOMY FOR SURVIVAL

Not all economic activities are equal. While many sectors were shut down during the crisis, this did not apply to those classified as “systemically important”. This “foundational economy” ensures human survival by providing that which sustains our daily lives such as food, healthcare, water and energy, waste collection, and housing. In simple terms, the foundational economy encompasses the activities that are needed on a daily basis, including in times of crisis.<sup>1</sup> These include the collective provision of basic services, i.e. the economic activities of caring – for each other and with each other.

The Foundational Economy Collective, an association of (mainly) European researchers,

released a manifesto for the post-pandemic period in March 2020,<sup>2</sup> just as the lockdown was beginning. Building on years of research, the collective argues for the renewal of the foundational economy with a ten-point programme. This includes, among other things, stronger public healthcare (including prevention), reformed and increased progressive taxation, and greater public participation in the design of basic services.

The key demand is the improved collective provision of a sustainable, socio-ecological infrastructure instead of a return to pre-crisis levels of individual consumption. What we need is not reconstruction, but transformation: of the crisis-prone pre-Covid-19 economy into a sustainable economy. This is the only way to improve our resilience and be prepared for new crises.

The extent to which the foundational economy’s essential goods and services can be organised along market lines is limited. A particular problem is that, in the area of basic services, business models established in the wake of privatisation and liberalisation allowed private companies to access public financing to maximise short-term profits without making the necessary long-term investments.

1 Davide Arcidiacono et al. (2017). *Foundational Economy: The infrastructure of everyday life*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

2 The Foundational Economy Collective (2020). *What Comes after the Pandemic? A ten-point platform for foundational renewal*. Available at <[bit.ly/2FTkSrP](https://bit.ly/2FTkSrP)>.

Basic services, however, are essential to guarantee the provision of basic supplies, comprising those economic activities that function differently from the global market economy for tradeable goods and services. The long-term safeguarding is therefore of particular importance. Sustainable economies require long-term economic thinking, planning, cooperation, and an approach to decision-making that incorporates criteria such as consistency, sufficiency, and resilience. These criteria are fundamentally different from those that currently prevail: short-term profit maximisation and microeconomic competition.

### **"BREAD AND ROSES" FOR A GOOD LIFE**

Since the manifesto was written, further insights into a sustainable "economy of everyday life" have become clear. During the lockdown we experienced not only what we need for our survival, but also what had been missing from our lives; after all, a good life implies more than just survival. A broader understanding of the foundational economy goes beyond the provision of necessities. The contribution of feminist economics is here key to broadening our horizons. The anthem "Bread and Roses", a song written by James Oppenheimer to celebrate the women's rights movement that later became associated with the Lawrence textile strike of 1912, sums it up:

*As we go marching, marching  
Unnumbered women dead  
Go crying through our singing  
Their ancient call for bread  
Small art and love and beauty  
Their trudging spirits knew  
Yes, it is bread we fight for  
But we fight for roses, too.*

A good life requires not only guaranteeing survival (bread), but also decent working and living conditions (roses). This principle was recognised by the ancient Greeks, whose *eudaimonia* can be translated as "the condition of human flourishing or of living well". Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum used it to develop their theory of the good life, in which individuals are enabled to live well by setting the right framework conditions.

Although not essential for survival, cultural and social institutions, bars, restaurants, hair salons, and green spaces are central to basic human needs. Nevertheless, their classification is more difficult, since the definition of the good life is more porous than that of pure survival. It is contextually different, rests on value judgements, and requires public involvement in decision-making. New forms of participation are essential to identify the conditions, infrastructures, and institutions which are the linchpins of "the good life". This infrastructure tends to be organised locally or regionally and produces value and well-being "in situ".

## RETHINKING VALUE IN SOCIETIES

The definition of what is needed to live well, and what form this should take, cannot be imposed from above. Neither can it be delegated to the market. The question of what kind of economy we want and what purpose it should serve is deeply interwoven with the question of which activities are socially valuable, essential, and critical for survival, prosperity and the good life, but also which activities undermine these aspirations.

The rethink provoked by the Covid-19 crisis has shaken the neoclassical theory of value to the core. According to the price theory of value, which replaced that of classical economics from Smith to Marx, individual consumer preferences determine demand and, consequently, price. According to this theory, it is (market-)fair that a nurse receives a fraction of the earnings of an investment banker, while purchasing a third car is no different from buying food. In short, it is (market-)unfair to make moral distinctions between necessity, comfort, and luxury. Any activity that attracts individual purchasing power is said to be productive and valuable, regardless of its social value or destructive power.

To crisis-proof the foundational economy, however, value distinctions are necessary. They allow the conditions for a good life for all to be negotiated democratically. For example, during

the Covid-19 crisis, governments published lists of systemically important sectors whose workers are entitled to emergency childcare, thus making value distinctions. These include healthcare and emergency services, retail banking, farming, food retail, utilities, and education.

Looking beyond the pandemic, there is a need for public debate on what makes a good life. We need to identify which economic activities and sectors are crucial, how these can be made available to all, and who will carry out these activities. It is an expression of social appreciation to strengthen these areas and ensure that those who work in them are appropriately remunerated. It is unacceptable that those who are currently fêted as “key workers” and do the lion’s share of the work within the foundational economy – predominantly women – are also the ones particularly affected by unequal opportunities, precarious work, and low pay.

## WELFARE IN THE FACE OF FUTURE CRISES

What lessons have we learned during the Covid-19 crisis to help us realign economic policies to deliver a good life for all? It is crucial to recognise the value of the predominantly domestic foundational economy, producing as it does the essential goods and services that ensure quality of life and sustainability.



Renewing and transforming the foundations of our economy means paying attention to those who “keep the shop running” (to quote Angela Merkel). The economic and social value of basic services must not be reduced to their exchange value. Instead, sustainable well-being, and thus use value, must become the focus of negotiations and decision-making processes within societies.

To bring about this change, new and broad alliances are needed: between progressive parties, trade unions, and civil society movements, but also with those Conservatives and Liberals who recognise the importance of collective basic service provision. In Germany, Switzerland, and Austria in particular, the local provision of essential services by public utilities, cooperatives, or inter-municipal partnerships enjoys a high degree of legitimacy, providing numerous points of departure. In this way, a new balance could emerge between a competitive economy geared to the world market and a supply- and welfare-oriented foundational economy. This would both strengthen social cohesion and make it possible for other crises – most critically the climate crisis – to be tackled with the same sense of responsibility, expertise, and solidarity.

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# STORYTELLING

## IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

### THE PANDEMIC THROUGH THE LENS OF ENVIRONMENTAL BREAKDOWN

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**AMITAV GHOSH**  
 BY **JAMIE KENDRICK**

With travel restrictions ruling out international flights in 2020, many airlines began selling flights to nowhere. For the price of a ticket and a flight's worth of emissions, passengers could sit back with a drink at 35 000 feet and pretend that everything was normal before landing exactly where they took off. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), acclaimed novelist Amitav Ghosh argues that future generations will look back on the failure to grasp the scale of environmental breakdown as folly. We spoke to the author about the parallels between the climate crisis and the pandemic, and imagining alternatives for our interconnected world.

**JAMIE KENDRICK:** "Unprecedented" is a word that has been used a lot in 2020. You have argued that modern society's inability to prepare for the unprecedented makes us vulnerable. What parallels do you see between the health crisis and climate breakdown?

**AMITAV GHOSH:** There are many continuities between the two, even if the relationship is not causal. The most obvious connection is that the climate crisis and the pandemic are both effects of the world's steady acceleration. Since the 1990s, rates of production, consumption, travel, and the destruction of our habitats and deforestation have sped up to a point where a tiny entity can bring the world to a sudden, screeching halt from a small market in China.

In other senses, of course, they are completely different. The pandemic is a disease, while the climate crisis manifests itself in incredible weather events, from astonishing wildfires to the multiple hurricanes brewing in

the Atlantic. The way the world has responded is an important difference, too. During the pandemic, most governments, if not all, have been quick to take advice from experts and willing to consult with scientists. For China, New Zealand, Vietnam, and other countries, this strategy has worked.

**In *The Great Derangement*, you use the word "uncanny" to describe extreme weather events because it captures a strangeness but also a recognition. The pandemic has been similar: strange but also familiar, recalling collective memories of plagues and quarantines. Is the pandemic forcing us to remember something about ourselves?**

I hope that this pandemic has at least some of the effect of the Great Lisbon Earthquake in the 18th century. Prior to the earthquake in 1755, Europeans had begun to think that they had mastered nature, as if nature was something apart that humans could conquer. The Great Lisbon Earthquake was a moment in the Enlightenment when suddenly people realised that, far from mastering nature, nature has complete mastery of human existence.

The European conception of nature holds that it is regular, that it has its own pace, and that natural processes unfold in predictable ways. Now we see that this is not the case. I wrote *The Great Derangement* in 2015. Back then, I never could have imagined that these

catastrophic impacts would be upon us with the suddenness that they have displayed in 2020. When I first began working on climate change and literature, friends and publishers were astonished, asking, "What has that got to do with writers and writing?" I no longer hear this. Everybody recognises that climate change is a crisis that is enveloping us. The turning point was 2018. People realised that this is not about the future; it is about now, and 2020 is the year it struck with full force.

**The head of the UN Environment Programme, Inger Andersen, said that the earth is sending us a message with the coronavirus crisis and climate change. Would you agree?**

I absolutely agree, except that saying the earth is sending us a message implies that somebody out there is trying to communicate with us. The reality is that the earth is utterly indifferent to us. It simply responds to stimuli that we put out there. Talking about the earth sending us a message is what our ancestors did. They watched the earth and everything around them, and tried to understand what it was saying. That is what we have forgotten.

Over the past few years, as these terrible crises have unfolded, in the United States at least more and more people are moving to areas that will be submerged by rising sea levels and threatened by wildfires. Phoenix, Arizona, is one of the hottest places in the US. Its only

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source of water is the Colorado River. Life is possible in Phoenix only because of mass air conditioning, which was invented in the 1940s. The entirety of Arizona was built from the 1940s onwards and, in the last five years, it has been growing at an incredible pace. Just imagine the madness of that – a completely unsustainable city, expanding relentlessly. People are moving to places that will almost certainly be unliveable within our lifetimes.

Why are they doing this? They are not listening to the messages that are being put out. What are they listening to instead? They are listening to 18th-century forms of reason which tell them that humans will always overcome nature. That science and reason will always prevail. That technology will take care of them. And that this entire earth of ours is supine and conquered. That is what is critically and profoundly uncanny about this moment: all of these 18th-century ideas, that we live in a society governed by reason, are just falling apart in front of our eyes.

**Science offers unproven technology as a potential escape route from the climate crisis. But climate science is also critical in understanding global heating. What should be the place of science in helping us confront climate change?**

We must guard against thinking of science as a unitary entity. The relationship that climate scientists have with society is quite different from that of epidemiologists and biologists, for example. Many climate scientists are extremely humanist in their approach to politics and concerned about climate justice. But a significant number of climate scientists would respond like Matt Damon in *The Martian*: “Let’s science the hell out of this”. Their idea is, fundamentally, to intervene through geoengineering, and elite institutions such as Harvard and Yale are increasingly pushing its normalisation.

Geoengineering will benefit the Global North but may be disastrous for the Global South. For that reason, the climate crisis is a geopolitical

problem. Greta Thunberg, whom I very much admire and completely support, constantly reiterates, “Listen to the scientists”. But putting all scientists in the same box is a mistake. Science can recognise a problem but there is never only one possible solution. Industrial and scientific solutions to climate change will mean more of the same. It is mistaking the disease for the cure.

#### **How has India experienced the pandemic?**

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The pandemic has been hard everywhere, but India has had it worst of all. The numbers are terrible. The only bright spot is that the mortality rate seems to be relatively lower, but the gross number of deaths in India will probably surpass any other country. Even during the Great Flu Pandemic of 1918, a large percentage of the victims were from South Asia.

The Covid-19 pandemic has turned into an all-out class war in India. The government’s response has destroyed the lives of poor migrant labourers. Millions of precarious people have had the legs cut out from under them. Unable to work, they were forced to walk home along highways in the terrible May heat. In India, the urban working classes and migrant workers in the relatively prosperous West are almost all from Bengal or East India. These regions are already badly hit by climate change and many people have been displaced because of sea-level rise. As these

people were walking home, a horrific storm – Cyclone Amphan – brewed up in the Bay of Bengal before hitting the mainland. It was a perfect example of what we are seeing now – multiple disasters interacting with each other in catastrophic ways.

#### ***The Great Derangement* argues that culture and literature have failed to grapple with climate change and the ecological crisis. How do you explain that failure?**

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The argument was not so much about writers but the literary and artistic ecosystem: what is considered serious literature today? Serious literature is almost always about identity in one sense or another, and that has been the case for a long time. Anyone who writes about climate and environmental matters is automatically regarded as a genre writer. But writing about the climate is not science fiction; it is not about the future and it is not speculative. It is the reality that we are living in right now.

Writers pride themselves on looking at the world in an unvarnished way. But the very practice of writing has tended to guide people away from the most pressing issues that surround us. Many incredibly innovative writers have addressed environmental topics, such as Ursula Le Guin. Then again, Ursula Le Guin was marginalised as a science fiction writer, even though her books remain relevant to our present. That is why she is far more

widely read today than many so-called serious writers. However, the literary and arts communities have changed noticeably since 2018, and there has been an outpouring of writing and art on the climate. People have woken up to the catastrophe around us.

**How have you sought to address the changing environment in your fiction? In many of your novels, floods, storms, and other weather events play a major role.**

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One thing I don't want to be doing is writing fiction about an issue as such. I see my writing now as no different from my earlier writing. I want to be writing about the realities of the world we live in. Issues of climate and pandemics are germane to this world – they are not something apart. My writing is very much moulded by my origins in Bengal. Bengal is one of the most threatened areas on the planet. Because I write about Bengal, and especially about the Delta and its mangrove forests, I am keenly aware of how these regions are impacted, perhaps more so than any other place except the Poles.

**What role do culture and fiction have in allowing us to imagine alternatives to the course that we are currently on?**

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It is hard to say. I would like to make large claims for literature, but those claims are no longer credible. When I started writing in the 1980s, literature and novels were central to culture. When people gathered around office water coolers, they would talk about books. Now people talk about television and Netflix. The literary world has shrunk into the background.

Modern literature as we know it emerged in the late 18th century. It was a Western practice of a certain kind and was rooted in, let's admit it, Western white supremacy and the ideas connected to that: a subdued Earth, and subdued, colonised human beings across the planet. Those stories were at the heart of modern bourgeois culture. If we are to adjust to today's world, we will have to tell ourselves different kinds of stories, ones that diverge from those told before and that are not just about human beings. The rise of modern literature cancelled out all other beings. Its stories were fundamentally about humans. But that wasn't always the case; not in Europe and certainly not in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Before the rise of modernity, people always told stories in which there were other beings – animals, or even climate phenomena speaking in personified voices like Aeolus, the Greek god

of the wind. Ways of storytelling that incorporate other beings have existed everywhere throughout history. How to give a voice to non-human entities – a virus, for example – is the fundamental literary issue of our time. We do not know if a virus is alive, but it is certainly interacting with our lives in a way that appears so. What modernity has made us forget is that our lives are enmeshed in a multitude of other things, from diseases to fossil fuels.

**The pandemic has shown how interconnected we are in a globalised world. Your *Ibis* trilogy is a series of novels tracing the stories of characters whose fates become intertwined through the Opium War, the conflicts that tied together the peoples of India, China, and Europe. What is the legacy of empire in today's environmental problems?**

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Always foregrounding capitalism when talking about climate change creates a disastrous misreading of the real problem. Capitalism was preceded by European empires. Empire made capitalism possible. At every stage, it was empire, slavery, and indentured and unfree labour that made capitalism possible. The only reason why it is possible to forget this is because Black, indigenous, and people of colour have been so marginalised. Back in the 1980s, the Black radical thinker Cedric Robinson argued this point about racial capitalism. The Marxist idea that capitalism was somehow endogenous to Europe papers over the realities of power that made it possible in the first place.

Looking at the world today, the geopolitics of fossil fuels is fundamental to Western power. Whether it is the petrodollar or strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean, the climate question is essentially about geopolitics, about empire. A few fixes in corporate law and the price structure of capitalism cannot solve it.

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The Great Acceleration after 1945 coincided with decolonisation. Independent India and Communist China went on to pursue the same development model as the West. Even if the roots of environmental breakdown lie in empire, it is hard to see how the world will get off this trajectory.

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To an uncanny degree, India, China, and Indonesia have adopted settler-colonial policies, as seen in the Indian government's environmental policies concerning indigenous people and forests. The United States, from the 1930s and 1940s but especially since the Washington Consensus of the 1990s, has pushed its particular model of development as the universal ideal. This transition really took off in the 1990s in India, Indonesia, and China, which is the decade the climate crisis began to accelerate. Western discourse asks, "How can we solve the problem?" But who is "we"? The solution no longer lies in the West. The solution lies in the Indian Ocean Pacific Region, which today accounts for a far larger part of the world economy than the US and Europe. The 19th-century dominance of the Atlantic world is a historical anomaly. The world is reverting to a system in which the majority of the world's economic activity takes place around the Indian Ocean.

The climate movement often warns that the Global South will be worst affected by the climate crisis. The pandemic hit industrial centres such as Wuhan, northern Italy, and New York first, and wildfires have ravaged the West Coast of the US. Will the increasingly universal reach of climate impacts create greater impetus for action in the coming years?

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The sorts of disasters that we in India and the Global South are accustomed to living through are now manifesting themselves elsewhere. I remember that in the 1970s and 1980s, every time we were hit by disasters, floods, or heatwaves, our friends in the West would be concerned. Now the traffic is the other way around. Britain has been swamped by floods, and strange weather affects northern Italy and Germany; this would have been unimaginable 30 or 40 years ago. The disasters and political catastrophes that we were used to are now increasingly normal in the most stable of democracies.

I never believed the story that climate activists in the West like to tell, that the poorest parts of the world will be hardest hit. Many poor regions will indeed be hard hit: the Sahel for example. But vulnerability to climate change, just as with the pandemic, does not correlate with GDP. The climate crisis will play out in unpredictable ways. Vietnam has had the best Covid-19 outcomes with a tiny per capita income. Some of the best-performing



countries are in Africa. Early in the pandemic, American philanthropists like Melinda Gates were wringing their hands saying, “Africa will be devastated!” In fact, Somalia sent doctors to Italy. GDP is not a good predictor for the climate crisis, either. We are seeing something much more counterintuitive: the climate crisis is hitting those parts of the world where ecological interventions have been most intensive, like California and south-eastern Australia where ecologies have been re-engineered to look more European. The climate movement made a mistake in pushing the idea that it will hit the poorest in the world hardest. Far from creating a moral response, it led many Westerners to think, “Well, that’s okay then”.

**Recent years have seen groups like Youth for Climate and Extinction Rebellion emerge. What do you make of the new climate movement?**

What has happened with Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion, and the Sunrise Movement is incredibly hopeful. These movements have caught the public imagination because they are doing an alternative kind of politics. A politics that appeals to something very visceral, not just ecological awareness. Ultimately, they appeal to our sense of the Earth as a living entity. Storytelling is fundamental to these movements. That is why they join hands with writers and storytellers. ■



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He is the author of two books of non-fiction, a collection of essays, and ten novels. In 2018 he became the first English-language writer to receive India’s highest literary honour, the Jnanpith Award. His most recent publication is *Gun Island*, a novel.



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# LIFE UNDER SHOCK

## UNDERSTANDING THE PANDEMIC

As both an accelerator of existing trends and a moment of rupture, the health crisis and its tragic consequences have radically changed every aspect of social life. The implications of Covid-19 go deep, worsening social inequalities, speeding up disruptive technological change, and exposing a broken relationship with the natural world. From the experience of urban areas to new solidarities such as the notion of essential workers, this edition traces its causes and effects, as well as our response. Spanning loneliness among the elderly, the future of public health, and biodiversity loss, it tracks how the pandemic shines a light on fundamental challenges for the 21st century. While some wish to return to business as usual, putting health over the economy has forced the politics of life and living together out into the open. The task for Greens and progressives is keeping them at the centre of our politics.