

# **This what real emergency looks like: what the response to Coronavirus can teach us about how we can and need to respond to the planetary emergency**

**A Green House Gas by John Barry**

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“Hard times are coming, when we’ll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We’ll need writers who can remember freedom – poets, visionaries – realists of a larger reality.”

Ursula K. Le Guin, Speech in Acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, November 2014

## **Introduction**

My father, a wise Irish peasant from Co. Wicklow in Ireland, like a lot of parents had many stock sayings that I grew up with. “Your health is your wealth” was one these (along with standard Irish ones like “There’s no fireside like your own fireside” *i.e.* “There’s no place like home”, and some non-PC ones: “Every cripple has their own way of walking”, which I found out later he got from the Irish playwright Brendan Behan). And one that has come back to be as I reflect on the unfolding coronavirus pandemic across the world and the responses of citizens and states: Which is more important? Wealth or health? Of course most of us want both, but what do we do when we have to prioritise? This is one of the lessons from the coronavirus, what happens to states and citizens when we are forced to choose health, specifically public health, as the over-riding social imperative? Life and its preservation over (almost) everything else?

“At all stages we have been guided by the science” (Boris Johnson), “we need to listen to what the science says” (Arlene Foster), ‘It’s a war’ (Italian medic), ‘Horse Racing Ireland: putting people before profit’ (RTE News, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2020), and this remarkable statement from Irish Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar,

“I know that I am asking people to make enormous sacrifices. We’re doing it for each other. *Together, we can slow [it] in its tracks and push it back.* Acting together, as one nation, we can save many lives. Our economy will suffer. It will bounce back.”

The ‘it’ here and the background reason for the other statements is not addressing the climate and ecological emergency, but the coronavirus crisis of course. Yet unlike the coronavirus, there have been official political declarations of ‘climate and ecological emergencies’ from parliaments in the EU, UK, Ireland, France and over half of UK councils. But, unlike the determined and swift actions of most governments around the world – from China, to Italy, Ireland, the USA – to the public health threat from Covid-19, there is little evidence of the same governmental determination to take radical and tough decisions on the climate and ecological crisis. It is pertinent to ask why not, given the latter crisis presents an even greater threat to the lives of vulnerable citizens in those ‘minority world’ countries and others in the global south or the ‘majority world’.

Could it be that all these declarations of ‘emergencies’ are just that? Some ‘in tune’ public and ‘politically correct’ rhetoric and associated positive media coverage for politicians forced by mobilisations like Extinction Rebellion and the Youth Strike for Climate to do (or say they will do) more on climate action? Cheap talk about recognising there is an emergency.... But in reality not believing it really is an emergency? Why is it that our political leaders listen to and make decisions informed by the science in the case of coronavirus – closing schools, restricting travel, putting in place financial support for those who ‘self-isolate’ etc. – but not when it comes to the climate and ecological emergency?

Here we need to start from asking a simple but revealing question: Why do we see politicians acting on medical science and expert advice on how to deal with the coronavirus, including making some very difficult decisions, but not on the climate and ecological crisis? While politicians say they accept the climate science, we have very little evidence of the type of action consistent with what the climate science recommends. The climate science indicates we need to urgently and at scale decarbonise not just our energy system (i.e. move away from a dependence on coal, oil and gas) but decarbonise our economies and ways of life: how we travel; the resource inputs and structure of our food system; how we build and maintain our urban spaces and homes; to our views of the ‘good life’ and expectations of ‘normal’. Responses to the pandemic have led to dramatic and radical changes to the lifestyles of most people in countries most affected. These range from citizens staying at home (whether ‘self-isolating’ and/or working from home, with some people forced to do so as in Italy and France), a massive drop off in air travel, car journeys, and community self-help with neighbours and organisations helping the most vulnerable (but this needs to be balanced with some ‘panic buying’ of food, household items and medicines in some countries such as the UK). And when we look at some state responses we can also observe radical action. Perhaps the most dramatic of which is the Spanish government taking all of Spain’s private health providers and their facilities into public control as it declared a

national emergency. Along with Italy, Spanish regulators also implemented a ban on the short selling of stocks in more than 100 companies. Other radical initiatives include the temporary suspension of evictions, mortgage holidays and the UK government committing to pay 80% of the salaries of employees who no longer have any work to do. Even in that most neoliberal of states, the USA, we see federal transfers of cash to hard pressed Americans.

However, while there is a flurry of discussion and proposals to link the response to the pandemic to addressing the planetary crisis (and this ‘Gas’ is a contribution to that growing body of ideas), there are questions to be considered as to whether we can or should link them, and even if it were possible, can the same ‘crisis/emergency’ response we see in the pandemic be replicated in responding to the planetary crisis? The reality might be that unlike Covid-19, climate breakdown and ecological devastation, is not impacting the lives of people in the minority world, it is not something these populations can see rapidly spreading and killing people around them within their own communities and societies. Climate breakdown is more abstract, distant in space and time, than the pandemic which is a ‘clear and present danger’. The dominant public and political discourse around the pandemic is that it will be defeated and therefore a ‘temporary risk’, the drastic changes to our lives are short-term, and then there will be a ‘return to normality’. In short, there is confidence (warranted perhaps) of ‘solving’ the Covid-19 crisis. However, this is not the same with the planetary emergency which, even if we were to achieve the impressive task of getting greenhouse gas emissions down to stay within a 2 degree warmer world, would also mean us having to adapt to a climate changed world. There is no ‘solution’ to the climate crisis, only adaptive and on-going coping strategies, over a much longer period of time. The demand for ‘emergency solutions’ could usher in large scale technological solutions such as geo-engineering; proponents regularly view such planetary scale technologies as ‘insurance policies’ (Royal Society, 2009), but they bring with them a ‘moral hazard’ of distracting or downplaying mitigation efforts. The fears and concerns around the virus within populations in the minority world which legitimate (at least for now) the unprecedented changes in our lives, including the restriction of our mobility, and the rapid intervention of the state into the economy cannot be said to be present within the same populations around the climate and ecological emergency<sup>1</sup>. However, this is not to say that this is case for other populations more directly experiencing the ‘real and present dangers’ of climate and ecological breakdown in the global south. While this has arguably always been the case for those in the global south suffering the impacts of planetary devastation here and now, it is increasingly a ‘red line’ for those nations within international climate politics, as witnessed at the last climate summit in Madrid in December 2019 which ended in failure due

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this point to John Foster.

in large part to the unwillingness of the high carbon emitting global north to accept responsibility and obligations around the ‘loss and damage’ from climate breakdown caused by minority world emissions, in nations in the global south.

A final set of caveats to be considered are the dangers from mobilising action or framing an issue in terms of ‘crisis’ or ‘emergency’ which can suppress discussion and debate. Here we can witness how the UK government has suspended debates in Parliament and thus the scrutinising of the government’s response; how a reactionary ‘Brexit-Covid nationalism’ is being promoted by some elites (Ramsay, 2020); or the brutal way the Chinese government approached the pandemic in Wuhan. Or the ever-present dangers of a new round of entrenching neoliberalism through a pandemic mode of ‘disaster capitalism’ as ‘Coronavirus capitalism’ as Naomi Klein calls it (Klein, 2020), or the ‘crowding out’ of calls for more localised, distributed and variegated responses (Oxley, 2020).

However, despite these concerns that there is no direct ‘read across’ from the pandemic to the planetary emergency, there are surely lessons and insights and glimpses from responses to the pandemic as to what might work to speed and scale up climate action. Some of the changes to the daily lives of citizens we have witnessed, and actions by some states, could be viewed as ‘dry runs’ for the types of changes the 2018 IPCC report recommended when it stated that “limiting global warming to 1.5C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” (IPCC, 2018). They can also be seen as suspensions of ‘business as usual’, temporary and extraordinary measures deemed as necessary state actions (and largely so far accepted as necessary by populations) to meet and overcome the pandemic. The latter has been framed in many countries as ‘flattening the curve’ – delaying, via some of the drastic actions above, the sharp peaking of the inflection rate and thereby spreading out over time the numbers of people infected to enable health care systems to cope.

### **From ‘Flattening the Curve’ to ‘Bending the Curve’?**

It is welcome and heartening to see how quickly the graph in Figure 1 and the rationale behind the importance of ‘flattening the curve’ has gone viral (excuse the pun) as one of the dominant communicative framings of what the public can do to halt the spread of the virus. This ‘flattening the curve’ idea is simple, clear and intuitive, and gives people a sense of agency. It also enables people to understand the rationale for and aims of government action, and reasons for the necessity of altered social practices and changes in lifestyles.

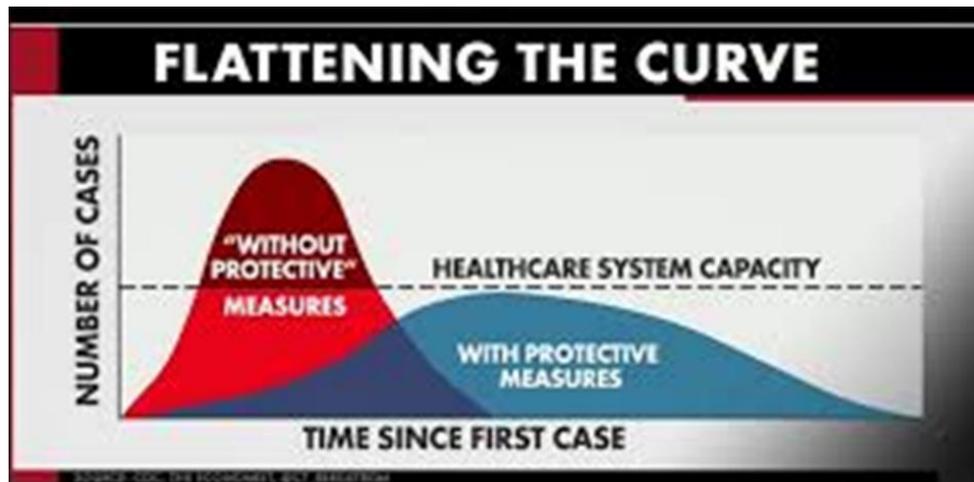


Figure 1

Can something similar be used to promote and communicate to people the same logic in relation to our planetary emergency? Can the simple effective and mobilising pandemic communication of ‘flattening the curve’ (Figure 1) but applied to a climate crisis one of ‘bending the curve down’ (Figure 2)?

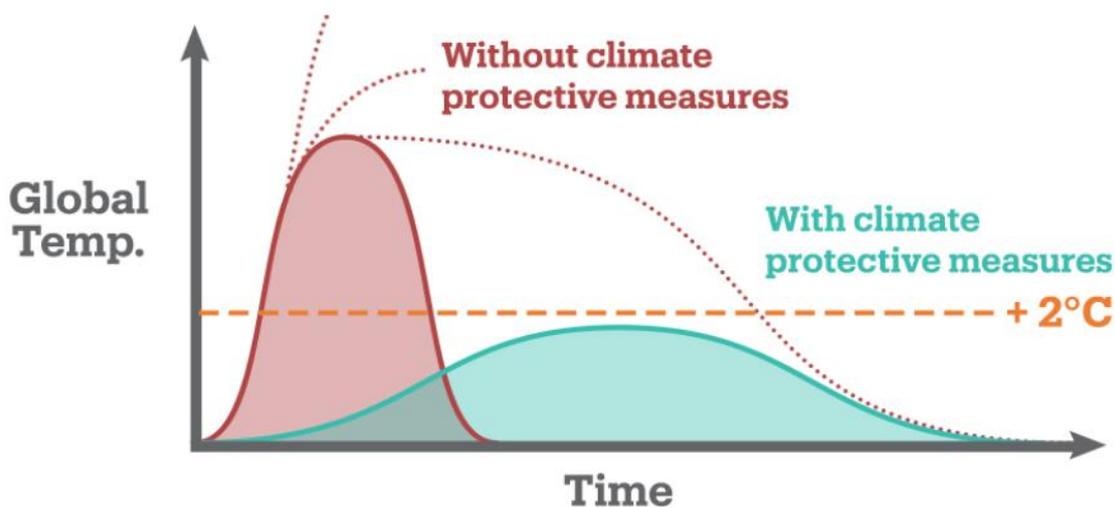


Figure 2

An important point here is that while medical innovation is needed to cope with the virus: testing kits, new ventilators and ultimately a vaccine, and a massive ramping up in production of required equipment – including ventilators, face masks, gloves, etc., to address both crises social innovation and new social practices are vital. This not only gives people a sense of agency, that through social distancing, self-isolating, reducing red meat consumption or international flying, they can ‘flatten the curves’. It also demonstrates that there are cheap, non-technological political and behavioural changes – what might be called ‘social innovations’ – that can be also be effective. That is, in relation to climate breakdown, we can

choose expensive (and non-proven) ‘big tech’ or we can choose new ways of living and new material and social practices. Essentially the choice here comes down to ‘greening business as usual’ via technological adaptation to our climate-damaged and carbon constrained world, or disrupting business as usual and fundamentally restructuring our systems of energy, food, transportation *etc.* to create a different and less unsustainable political economy. What if the latter is the most effective way to ‘bend the curve’ on climate and ecological breakdown?

This is especially the case when we consider how it is not the virus itself that will kill and harm people, but our capacity as society’s to respond to it, not least in terms of helping the most vulnerable. While the virus is natural, it is our social response to it that is and will determine how badly affected our societies will be. On this issue two related ideas come to mind, both in relation to famine. Firstly, a well-known (but contested) summary of the great Irish famine of the 1840s, one version of which goes, “The Almighty Sent the Blight, but the English Created the Famine”. This could be updated to read “Bad luck created coronavirus, but capitalism caused the pandemic”, as we see significant differences within European public health care systems in terms of being prepared for the pandemic, with some, like the UK suffering from a decade of being starved of resources and investment by policies of austerity. Secondly, there is Amartya Sen’s argument that famine is not the absence of food *but the absence of the ability to buy food*, and that we need to look at politically structured and supported entitlements to food not merely food supply. It is for this reason we do not see famines in welfare states where people have welfare rights and hence an entitlement to food (imperfect though this is). As in the Covid-19 pandemic, the necessity for and the positive role of the state cannot be underestimated.

At the very least, ‘Bending the climate curve down’ could be a simple message to communicate the collective action necessary to both adapt to and also reduce the root causes of our climate crisis.

“With many people working from home and schools shut, people are less governed by routines and strict adherence to times for commuting or the school run. This has caused the typical morning electricity “peak” to flatten out, as electrical showers, kettles, lights and heating are spread over a slightly longer period”. (Wilson et al, 2020)

‘Big tech’ solutions after all do not address the root cultural, political and economic causes of greenhouse gas emissions, only the effects of these. But ‘bending the curve down’ in relation to coping with our climate crisis demands a political, collective response, not just the aggregation of individual actions, important as these are. Just as ‘Social Distancing’ and ‘flattening the curve’ are examples of community design principles for managing our common health and healthcare resources, so ‘bending the

curve down’ could function as a design principle for managing the global atmospheric commons.

### **‘Wartime mobilisation of production’**

Another important response to the pandemic is the re-alignment of the productive assets of society towards combatting it – Louis Vitton producing hand sanitisers, to engineering firms being asked to help in the massive scaling up of the production of ventilators. Much in the same way that the economies of the UK and USA were re-directed by the state towards fighting the war against fascism, and the productive assets of the society were redeployed and coordinated accordingly. In the UK, the Prime Minister’s office has publicly asked the engineering sector “to come together to help the country” by producing ventilators and other critical medical equipment (BBC, 2020). In a statement it noted that

“Preparing for the spread of the coronavirus outbreak is a national priority and we’re calling on the manufacturing industry and all those with relevant expertise who might be able to help to come together to help the country tackle this national crisis”.

While falling radically short of the Spanish government’s reappropriation of private health care assets to deliver public health objectives, there are distant echoes in Prime Minister Johnson’s plea of ‘wartime’ mobilisation and appeals for everyone to join together in a common cause in facing a ‘clear and present danger’. While analogies with World War II mobilisation are incomplete and contestable (as well as normatively questionable), not least in terms of a state ‘asking’ companies as opposed to demanding this temporary redeployment of capital, equipment and labour, an analogy and argument can at least be made for the legitimate use of state power in the context of a ‘war-like’ emergency to protect public health and the common good, as opposed to supporting capitalist ‘business as usual’.

### **Political Economy and Ecological Causes of the Pandemic**

“humanity’s destruction of biodiversity creates the conditions for new viruses and diseases such as Covid-19, the viral disease that emerged in China in December 2019, to arise – with profound health and economic impacts in rich and poor countries alike”. (Vidal, 2020)

The coronavirus pandemic is a wake-up call to stop exceeding the planet’s limits. Deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate change all make pandemics more likely. Deforestation drives wild animals closer to human

populations, increasing the likelihood that zoonotic viruses like SARS-CoV-2 will make the cross-species leap. Likewise, both international bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warn that global warming will likely accelerate the emergence of new viruses (IPCC, 2018), and national bodies like the UK's Parliamentary office of Science and Technology stress the causal relationship between global heating and ecological disturbance and vector borne diseases (Houses of Parliament 2019).

The rise of the COVID-19 pandemic is but another example of an expanding, globalising capitalist economy hitting against planetary boundaries (Rockstrom et al, 2009). Research indicates that factory farming, monocultures, the destruction of biodiversity and climate disruption are all triggers for the emergence of new infectious diseases (Quammen, 2020). There is a clear need to re-think many assumptions that have been made about the nature of progress and modernisation. Although too early to tell, the pandemic reveals how industrialised and commodified, large-scale farming within globalised supply chains has led to humans taking more and more, reducing biodiversity and coming into closer contact with those degraded ecosystems. When biodiversity declines as a result of habitat loss, it does not do so in a random way; some species are more likely to disappear while others are more resilient. The latter who survive and thrive after biodiversity declines are the ones that are also most likely to give us new diseases (Mortillaro, 2020). And the global aviation industry is the perfect delivery mechanism for spreading any such novel diseases across the planet in a matter of weeks.

As such we need to qualify describing Covid-19 as 'natural'; both its causes and consequences are thoroughly related to particular human institutionalised practices and ideas around capitalism which regard globalisation and consumption based undifferentiated economic growth as a permanent features of the human economy (Barry, 2018). Like the climate and ecological crisis, the pandemic is an endogenous not an exogenous shock to the global capitalist system. As Marxist geographer David Harvey notes, 'the economic and demographic impacts of the spread of the virus depend upon pre-existing cracks and vulnerabilities in the hegemonic economic model' (Harvey, 2020). Updating the saying about the Irish famine of the 1840s ('Providence sent the potato blight, but the English caused the famine'), we might say 'Globalised capitalism caused the both the virus and the pandemic'. So how can a solution or a coping mechanism be found from within capitalism? An unsustainable capitalist *status quo ante*, we need to remind ourselves, that most governments, and perhaps most citizens of affected countries, want to return to.

## **From the Pandemic to the Planetary Emergency**

“Lost time in school or college will be recovered. In time, our lives will go back to normal. Above all, we all need to look out for each other. Ireland is a great nation. And we are great people. We have experienced hardship and struggle before. We have overcome many trials in the past with our determination and our spirit. We will prevail.”

Irish Prime Minister, Leo Varadkar

When will we see the same being said in relation to the planetary emergency? Not much chance, given the ‘neoliberal by default’ setting for most politicians and political parties in modern capitalist societies...unless citizens see in the state and their own responses to the pandemic that this determined state action and community mobilisation is precisely what is required. And this will necessitate political mobilisation and agitation by citizens to demand states to work with them and continue to protect us from the multiple threats (and lost opportunities) of our planetary emergency.

Unlike the coronavirus, tackling our climate and ecological crisis could bring multiple benefits from new innovations, investments and jobs in the green energy sector, improved air quality in cities, better conditions for public health. As well as, of course the not insignificant benefit of ensuring the long term sustainability of human civilisation on this radically destabilised planet. But it is clear that this will require not simply the temporary suspension of ‘business as usual’ *i.e.* capitalism, but its transcending.

But unlike meeting and ‘overcoming’ or ‘solving’ the coronavirus pandemic (perhaps in a year or two), my own view is that the best we can do is not ‘solve’ the climate and ecological crisis, but rather learn to ‘cope’ with it. That is, while the pandemic may be a one-off event, coping with the planetary crisis means endlessly adapting to a dynamically unstable climate, enduring, thriving and surviving as best we can. And this will involve political struggle, endless struggle in a ‘long game’ of which the pandemic and its climate possibilities are but one chapter. And such endless political struggle has no guarantee of succeeding, as even a cursory knowledge of climate science will tell you. But struggle and endure we must, not in the knowledge of success (at least not for us here and now), but that *‘la lute continue’*, the struggle itself for a better world becomes, in part, the end in itself, the solidarity making and meaning making justification of our actions and grounding of who and what we are. After all, ‘There is no way: we make the road by walking’ as Antonio Machado observed. We make, struggle and endure not discover, lead and succeed. This is where I take comfort in the wise words of Vaclav Havel (along with those of my dad), when he noted in his poem ‘Hope’:

“Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out”.

Whether some of the positive social and ecological lessons and habits learnt and cultivated under pandemic conditions – by both states and populations – become strong enough to continue and be utilised to cope with the planetary emergency remains to be seen. On the one hand there are arguments that

‘Where adaptations and behaviour changes reveal possibilities for more sustainable behaviour – such as avoiding unnecessary travel – they could be encouraged to become the new norm, and made part of the broader response to the climate emergency’.  
(Rapid Transition Alliance, 2020)

On the other hand, will we witness states which have exercised their powers to prioritise the protection of the health and wellbeing of their populations over the ‘normal’ functioning of a capitalist economy, simply return to a ‘neoliberal by default’ position once the pandemic is under control? Or will the capacity and legitimacy of the state to act and intervene in the economy for the achievement of goals other than orthodox economic growth, profitability and competitiveness etc. continue as we move from this crisis to addressing the bigger one? Can populations continue some of the changes that have been forced or enforced on them by the pandemic? More importantly, does the response to the pandemic demonstrate to them that there are other ways of organising the economy when objectives other than GDP growth and ‘business as usual’ are prioritised? Can the lessons of how citizens and states are responding to the public health crisis from Covid-19 be used in addressing the planetary health crisis represented by climate breakdown and ecological degradation?

“Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.”

Milton Friedman

While an unlikely person for me to quote, Friedman’s insight is apposite and appropriate to the current crisis we are living in and through. While open to being insensitive to the suffering of those made ill or bereaved as a result of the pandemic, a pandemic that is not over yet, to not make this link between it and the planetary crisis would also be insensitive and a wasted opportunity to try to ensure some good comes out of the current crisis.

## **Learning Lessons from the failed ‘Green New Deal’ from the Last Economic Crisis**

Governments are, or should be, drawing up stimulus plans to counter the economic damage from the crisis. We have been here before: massive social and economic disruption; rapid and massive intervention by states around the world to minimise or prevent social disaster. Except it was the 2008-09 global financial crisis when states bailed out the banks. In the wake of that crisis there was a lot of talk about, and an opportunity for a ‘green new deal’, using the various stimulus packages being proposed by states to usher in a step change in the economy, encompassing a low carbon, inclusive agenda for a different economy. But while it failed, it still stands as a key component of an effective strategy that states can implement to respond to the economic impacts of the pandemic, to ensure that as we emerge from the crisis, we are putting in place the building blocks of a new economy, not a return to the old one.

Now states have been forced to ‘bail out the people’, find money to shore up national health care systems, leading to them effectively implementing a ‘basic income’ for workers to compensate them for staying at home, to nationalising all public health resources within their jurisdictions, and injection trillions in ‘quantitative easing for the people’ as an emergency measure... But vital those these state interventions are, this emergency and stabilisation strategy by states needs to move onto thinking about what a post-pandemic economy looks like. Is it a return to the ‘status quo ante’, a completely understandable ‘back to normal’ desire, or should we also be thinking of ‘building back better’? To paraphrase a popular meme on social media, ‘The coronavirus has cancelled the future. But that’s OK. It was a pretty crap one anyhow’.

A green new deal with massive investment by states in decarbonising the energy system, the transportation system, the food system *etc.* is vital. We now know that the excuse of ‘there is not enough money’ for such a programme is a political choice not some immutable fact (see point below on how to fund a green new deal). Just as we now know austerity was a political decision given the ways states have injected funding into the economy and support for workers and businesses to minimise the impacts of the pandemic, we now see that state finances can be generated to respond to emergencies.

In devising stimulus packages and bailouts there is a growing chorus amongst a variety of voices broadly agreeing on ensuring climate action and decarbonisation are at their heart. These range from ‘insider’ voices such as the International Energy Agency’s Director Fatih Birol stating that ‘stimulus packages offer an excellent opportunity to ensure that the essential task of building a secure and sustainable energy future doesn’t get lost amid the flurry of immediate priorities’ (Birol, 2020), to the UN General Secretary

António Guterres calling for both a green and pro-poor response to the pandemic and to ensure we ‘recover better’ (Guterres, 2020). Or similar statements and policies at the European Union level (EDIE, 2020). These chime with more radical positions that were proposed over a decade ago, especially when anchored in the fundamental transformation of the financial system (Green New Deal group, 2009, Pettifor, 2020).

Overall, the Green New Deal proposals from a decade ago, supplemented now by the more developed ‘just energy transition’ idea and policy platform (Barry and Mercier, 2019), still stands as necessary and workable strategies for decarbonising economies, providing employment and managing our planned retreat from fossil fuels as modest first steps in addressing the planetary emergency. The ‘green new deals’ implemented in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis did not lead to a significant decarbonising of the economy, or a paradigm shift towards a sustainable economy. Green fiscal measures and investments amounted to around 16% of total fiscal stimulus spending in 2008-09 (International Labor Organization, 2010).

In drawing up economic stimulus and recovery plans to respond to the pandemic states have a second chance to ensure that this time around they address the planetary emergency, social inequalities, precarious work and the lack of resilience of many of the systems (not least food) that rely on globalised (and therefore vulnerable) supply chains. There are multiple co-benefits that could be realised for states and populations.

**Airlines**, for example, are calling out for state bailouts (Neate, 2020). The pandemic has effectively threatened the viability of the global aviation industry. But here governments should use any bailout package to ensure the airline industry transforms in line with climate science targets for reducing carbon emissions. That is, there is an opportunity for states to implement a ‘just transition’ for the aviation sector whose future expansion is simply not compatible with staying within the commitments of the IPCC 1.5 degree target but whose workforce should not be sacrificed to achieving those climate targets. The 2018 IPCC report recommended that “limiting global warming to 1.5C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” (IPCC, 2018). Well the pandemic has fast forwarded this. Or rather it has brought cheap rhetoric into contact with hard reality.

In the **finance sector** institutional investors such as pension funds are looking for safe assets to hold. Investment in low carbon infrastructure through the issue of ‘green bonds’ by governments could finance a green stimulus. They could be issued either directly by central governments, or through national or regional green investment banks. Across many countries we see central banks prepared to buy government bonds, in principle without limit (Bofinger, 2020), echoing UK Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s statement that the government would do ‘whatever it takes’ to

provide the resources to respond to the pandemic. In effect this can be viewed as states implementing ‘Quantitative easing for the people’ and ‘modern monetary theory’ (the main claim of which is that there are *no* financing restrictions for large countries and cross-national underwriting of debts for smaller countries is possible – as would be possible within the EU if we saw genuine ‘solidarity’). That is, states *can afford to do what they need to do most of the time*, especially in national and global economic contexts of extremely low inflation, with a glut of private capital looking for safe investments, coupled with unprecedentedly low interest rates (Alpert, 2020). MMT could be the way to finance any green new deal response and if accompanied by cross-national state cooperation for the orderly, urgent and large scale divestment from carbon energy across the global financial system, would structurally transform the economies of many nations.

As Tim Lang has pointed out the pandemic has exposed the fragility of the UK’s **food supply** chain, with limited storage, a just-in-time supply model, and dependence on imported food (Lang, 2020). Alongside shifting agriculture away from its dependence on carbon energy inputs, investment and innovation is needed to enhance food security, sufficiency and resilience through the selective relocalisation of the food chain.

Governments should use their stimulus packages to quicken the transition to low carbon **energy systems**. Investment in renewable energy sources, along with low carbon energy infrastructure, especially the upgrading of national electricity grid systems away from centralised carbon energy plants will ensure countries can meet decarbonisation targets. This should also include R&D and roll out of battery storage technologies and associated infrastructural investment, and the ending of fossil fuel subsidies.

A low cost and quick policy win would be to roll out a massive **insulation** programme for the housing stock, targeting the most vulnerable energy poor households first. This would pay for itself in energy savings, improved health and wellbeing outcomes, provide green employment and reduce carbon emissions.

While a long-standing principle of green and post-growth political economy, proposals for a **Universal Basic Income** have been ridiculed and marginalised by mainstream economics and public policy thinking. Now we find them being effectively introduced in countries across the minority world as states are forced to ‘bail out the people’ as an emergency response to the large scale unemployment caused by the pandemic. Spain for example is moving to implement a permanent basic income to help workers and families battered by the coronavirus pandemic (Zeballos-Roig, 2020). UBI (and related proposals such as ‘Universal Basic Services’) are not only useful in the current pandemic in giving economic security and income to households, but are also a key policy in any transition to a post-growth

economy. For example, a UBI would help mitigate the unemployment impacts of divesting from and winding down the fossil fuel energy system.

As almost all the above changes (and the many other sectors that will also have to transform) have employment and other economic impacts along the supply/value chain, an overarching strategy and narrative integrating green stimulus initiatives must be around a 'just transition'. That is, insuring as far as possible, that as we 'build back better' and lay down the infrastructural foundations for a regenerative, low carbon economy, that 'no community is left behind' and the most vulnerable in society do not bear the costs of this transition.

## **Beyond Carbon and Beyond Growth**

“COVID-19 has done in a deadly way what steady-state economists would prescribe in a healthy way: putting the brakes on a runaway economy. In fact, the pandemic has slammed on the brakes and jammed the GDP gearstick into reverse”. (Czech, 2020)

Indicative of the ecocidal logic of the globalised economic system is that it has taken an unplanned, destructive and unwanted pandemic to reduce the ecological and climate damage that globalised carbon based capitalist system was wreaking on the life supporting systems of the planet. How irrational is that? As Czech goes on to state, further underlining the political irrationality of our current global political system, “it’s as if COVID-19 is enforcing the Paris Climate Accords”.

Responses to the pandemic via social isolation and confining people to their homes and concentrating productive activity to essential goods and services (food, water, waste management, energy, essential transport, health and social care *etc.*), has abruptly reduced the negative ecological damage of the economy. Of the many things the pandemic has highlighted is what jobs and sectors of the economy are really important for the functioning of society, when it is stripped back to essentials such as energy/electricity, food, housing, waste management, connectivity and communication. Nurses, absolutely. Currency speculators.....less so. University professors?...well the jury’s out. And given any green new deal/just transition type recovery from this pandemic will require a massive infrastructural transformation, new jobs as well as investments will be required in transport, electricity generation and transmission, food, housing and education, training and skills. Supply chains will have to be restructured, and in some cases, notably food, shortened and relocalised, as already has been the case in the pandemic, revealing the vulnerability of globalised, non-self-sufficient and 'just in time' national food systems (Lang, 2020) .

But welcome as any green new deal/just transition type response to the crisis would be; of ‘building back better’ and orientating any government stimulus packages towards decarbonising the economy and creating well paid green collar jobs in the massive infrastructural investment projects needed, any green new deal is but a step in the right direction. While a green new deal industrial strategy moves us beyond carbon, a not inconsiderable achievement, to really address the planetary emergency requires us to move also beyond economic growth as we know it.

The economy has shrunk but not in any planned or managed manner. For example, it is estimated the UK economy could shrink by 35% by June 2020 (BBC News), while in the USA unemployment could be as high as 32% (for comparison, unemployment in the Great Depression of the 1930s was 25%, and during the Great Recession of 2008-2010 it peaked at 10%) (Heinberg, 2020). It has undoubtedly improved air and water quality in our cities, reduced global aviation and consumerism, all of which have given the planet a break. But while the economic contraction due to the virus has benefitted the planet, it has come at a high human cost and not just in people who will die and suffer as a result of it. This pandemic induced recession is NOT a managed ‘post-growth’ transition after all. It has also harmed those workers now forced to stay at home on reduced wages, those for whom home is not a safe place because of domestic violence, those now made unemployed, or those who fall between the cracks of the emergency finance strategies government have quickly put in place. And we are all suffering from lack of human contact, of meetings with friends, of being able to gather for religious worship, or to make music with others. The pandemic induced socio-economic crisis has laid bare the deep inequalities within and between societies. While many are fearful for the medium term existence of their jobs and economic security, others are enjoying some of the benefits of a shrinking economy, more peace and quiet, more time at home (and online!), an unexpected opportunity to pause our lives and re-connect, to see relations as constitutive of our health, especially mental health. This is not to paint a rosy picture, but to suggest that amidst the suffering, confusion and anxiety, there are silver linings. Yet we have to also recognise the inequality between those who have gardens for example and those who do not. Those in city-centre high rise apartments are experiencing a very different form of self-isolation than those with large or even small back gardens, as are those on welfare or precarious employment contracts. While workers who have been able to work from home are questioning why they should return to the office when the pandemic is over, others question whether they have a job to return to at all.

At the same time government responses to the economic impacts of the pandemic has also revealed the social weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the economy for workers who have lost income, those on precarious contracts, the exclusion of the self-employed, never mind the default reaction of

governments, most notably the Trump administration, to protect corporations and the fossil fuel industry not citizens. Echoes of this can be found in the UK where many suggest the delayed and incoherent initial response of the Johnson government – completely out of step with its EU neighbours – based around allowing the virus to spread in a controlled manner to stimulate ‘herd immunity’ was motivated by concerns to protect the UK economy and not citizens. This is history repeating itself. In response to the 2008-9 financial crash governments bailed out the banks. Now they need to bail out the people, and in a manner that tackles not only inequality but the ‘actually existing unsustainability’ of a carbon-fuelled, globalised capitalist economic system.

### **Conclusion: the need for new narratives**

Crises are events where ‘all bets are off’ and the ‘rules of the game’ can be up for renegotiation and rewriting, where there are openings for new ideas, practices and possibilities. Crises are also lessons in new ways of thinking and acting... And responding to them requires stories, narratives to help us understand them, explain their causes and assess solutions and coping strategies. At the moment there are a variety of narratives or ‘structures of feeling’, as the Marxist cultural critic, Raymond Williams put it, competing for our attention. These range from comforting ones of a ‘swift return to normality’, the ‘master narrative’ or commonsense encompassing how most people and elites think, to others which don’t fit so easily within that ‘return to the Anthropocene’ rather depoliticised, top-down and often naively techno-optimistic response (Lent, 2020, Kothari, et al. 2020, Fremaux and Barry, 2019). During normal times, out of all the possible ways to organise society, there is only a limited range of ideas considered acceptable for mainstream political discussion—known as the ‘Overton window’. The pandemic has forced that ‘realm of the possible’ wide open. In just a few short weeks, we’ve seen political and economic ideas discussed and in places implemented that had previously been rejected as ‘utopian’, ‘unrealistic’ or ‘too radical’. There is a possibility for a new narrative, a new ‘commonsense’.

Let’s hope, for hope’s sake, we do not lose either the lessons we are currently being taught by a harsh teacher or the multiple opportunities for change this current moment offers. We have the ideas, many of us have had them for decades. Now (having missed the opportunity of the 2008 global financial crisis) is the time to act on them and have the courage of our convictions. If, and it’s a big if, anything remotely close to a green new deal or a ‘justice and sustainability’ focused recovery strategy, comes to pass in the months and years ahead as a result of the pandemic and lessons and opportunities learnt and wrested from it, the creation of less unsustainable and ecocidal societies might be fitting tribute to those we have and will lose

due to the current pandemic and the longer existing ‘slow violence’ of the planetary emergency.

The pandemic induced economic slowdown should not be viewed as a temporary pause on either economic growth or capitalism, but rather the foundation upon which a better and different economy and society is constructed. I am reminded here of a wonderful phrase from the Scottish author Alasdair Gray about “working as if we are in the early days of a better nation”. In ‘building back better’ and responding to the pandemic-induced economic contraction, we should insist government bailouts be used to create a sustainable, climate resilient, post-carbon, post-growth and post-capitalist economy. A tall order? Yes. Costly? Yes. Difficult to achieve politically and democratically? Absolutely. But we now know the following:

- Austerity was a lie;
- There is a magic money tree;
- States and populations can act with speed, determination and at scale for the common good when faced with an emergency;
- Another world is possible.

And maybe, just maybe the pandemic has created the possibility for thinking that it is now easier to imagine the end of capitalism than the end of the world.

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