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– ARTICLE –

SOCIAL SCIENCE IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the role of the social sciences in the time of COVID-19. The pandemic has led to a renewed appreciation of the social and with this comes the prospect for the social sciences to gain greater relevance. We note the reasons why disasters lead to an increase in sociality and the activities that social scientists are well-placed to undertake: speaking truth to power, calling out lies and sectional advantage, separating fact from opinion, assessing the consequences of political action, predicting social futures (saying how the world will be), assessing public opinion (saying how people would like it to be), and advocating for social justice (saying how the world should be). Social science work shows that another world is possible and that another world is desired. More significantly, it also shows how to bring this world into being.

Keywords: altruism; COVID-19; prediction; production of pandemics; production of vulnerability; responsible speech; return of the social; social justice; social sciences

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19's impacts are felt at all scales, from micron to the world itself. The pandemic seemingly marks all activities, from intimate interpersonal relations (no more kissing or hand shaking) to global commerce (including unprecedented interruptions to international trade). People have been redeployed as essential workers, found themselves suddenly working from home, been furloughed, or made permanently unemployed. Parents have become their children's primary teachers. Shopping, like much work, education and entertainment, is also now increasingly online. Lockdowns have altered our sense of our place in the world and our relationship to others. With the distinction between physical space and digital space blurring, other boundaries have also collapsed, including those

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between home and work, leisure time and professional time, and sometimes even between individual days as well (every day is 'Blursday').

Confronted by a frightening and disorienting reality and the need to understand it, COVID-19 is much discussed, but only partly understood. Like other threatening viruses before it, it has precipitated an 'epidemic of signification' (Treichler 1987). The primary vehicle through which it is apprehended is our language, that core component of consciousness and communication, and consequently of how we think and connect. Quotidian conversation adopted public health discourse, people spoke of bubbles, contact tracing, deep cleans, flattening the curve, achieving herd immunity, lockdown, long haulers, PPE, the R number, self-isolation, social distancing, and super-spreaders. New words were coined to describe social practices within our new reality: anti-maskers, the 'rona, coronaskeptics, covidiots, covidivorces, coronapocalypse, doomscrollers, essential workers, the infodemic, quarintinis, WFH (working from home) and Zoom (Roig–Marín, 2020). The latter becoming 'the default modality for remote engagement, rapidly morphing from brand name to eponymous generic—a verb and a place and mode of being all at once' (Architexturez Research 2021). Fashion, itself a mode of symbolic communication, has also been said to have responded to COVID with dress styles expressing anxiety, frustration and resistance. Hate-wear encompasses ensembles that are constantly worn in lockdown despite being neither stylish nor comfortable, while sadwear celebrates clothing that is worn to lift lockdown spirits (Elan 2021). Amongst the weightier meanings generated, COVID-19 is taken to be a signifier of end times, a punishment from God (Dein *et al.* 2020), a portal between this world and the next (Roy, 2020), an opportunity for international medical cooperation (Buss and Tobar 2020), an opportunity for fascism to flourish (Davis 2020, 44), and an opportunity for communism to flourish (Žižek 2020a).

Doubtless lives will be parsed into pre-COVID and post-pandemic times. Unique in spatial and temporal terms, this virus affects all people. COVID-19 is everywhere at the same time, and – due to global news networks, ubiquitous social media, and near real-time tallies of fatality rates thanks to advances in digital epidemiology (Ritchie *et al.* 2021) – we know it. Many of the world's remotest regions have been hit, with infections recorded in Greenland, Montserrat, Rapanui (Easter Island) and even Antarctica (Letzing 2020; Radio New Zealand 2020). As of March 2020 three quarters of the world's population were living in countries with stay-at-home commands, over 90 per cent were residing in countries where schools had closed, and workplace shut-downs applied in nations responsible for 99 per cent of the planet's Gross Domestic Product, (Chossière *et al.* 2021).

While the world has known other pandemics, this one has produced something unprecedented. As the first genuinely global disease, it has ushered in a whole 'new understanding of the vulnerability of the human species qua species' (Arias-Maldonado 2020).[2] 'One of the first striking features of the pandemic is its planetarity, its contemporaneous and inter-communicated experience on all continents', Göran Therborn (2020) stated. 'Never before in its history has humankind had such a long consciously common experience of life and death'. Thus, unlike previous pandemics, which were analysed retrospectively, and were therefore the domain of history, this pandemic can be analysed in the present, making it fully amenable to the scrutiny of social scientists.

In the material that follows, we note the resurgence of the social and by extension of the social sciences too. We note the general reasons why disasters lead to an increase in sociality and the specific ways in which this pandemic has done so. We pay particular attention to the roles social scientists can play in the context of this pandemic: speaking truth to power, calling out lies and sectional advantage, separating fact from opinion, noting the consequences of political action, predicting social futures (saying how the world will be), assessing public opinion (saying how people would like it to be), advocating for social justice (saying how the world should be), and identifying the mechanisms through which another world can be made possible.

THE RETURN OF THE SOCIAL

As social scientists we know that we are social beings, that the self is a social construct, that we are enmeshed in networks of mutual dependency, that as a species we rely on social labour to survive. The social is within us (in language, norms, values) as well as beyond us. And we know that without social contact we struggle, even die. Indeed, loneliness is now recognised as a significant public health problem. COVID-19 has now given the world an object lesson in social science – illuminating the 'constructedness' of society, the radical re-setting of priorities, the possibility of transformational change – such that we can speak of a renewed salience of the social.[3]

Lockdowns showed people the world that we lost. We have had to forego the social contacts, exchanges and rituals that we cherish. Friendships, collegiality and collaboration have all become more difficult to perform. In this newly sequestered world, we realise 'that the most intimate subject, the most individual and singular, is a social subject' (Dubet, 2021 4). Our sequestration reiterated our dependencies on others, particularly those essential workers provisioning healthcare, food and education. It told us that society is only possible because

of the division of labour. In addition to reminding us that we must rely on others, it also reminded us of our reliance upon systems (such as those that disburse emergency welfare provisions) and institutions (like hospitals). 'With the lockdown, each of us discovers the value of social life' (Dubet 2021, 4).

Physical distancing to prevent contagion is one means through which we demonstrate this, for our individual actions to this end are generous other-directed acts. It is individuals behaving altruistically for the collective good, putting social welfare above personal desires. (And given the national lockdowns, it was also the privileging of public wellbeing over private profit.) 'Everyone needs everyone to stop the spread, to stop moving, to stop being governed by illusion and delusion, to stop social indulgence and denial,' Wendy Brown (2020) wrote, 'Stillness and containment are not individual self-protection but a worldwide mutual social pact'.

Indeed, we have seen the rise of people power the world over responding to COVID-19. Grass roots organization can be an awesome force. For Garrett M. Graff (2020) '[t]he public's response to the coronavirus will stand as a remarkable moment of national [US] mobilization'. In March 2020, in order to cope with the pandemic, the British government called for a quarter of a million volunteers to come forward to assist senior citizens, those in isolation, and frontline medical staff who required supplies delivered. Over three times that amount offered assistance (Solnit 2020). As George Monbiot chronicles, we have witnessed such acts the world over, from the young volunteers in Hyderabad who are provisioning the city's precarious workers with food packages, to the helpers in Wuhan who are ferrying essential medical workers between hospital and home, to the programmers in Latvia who organised a hackathon to create optimal face shield components for 3D printers, to the student babysitting service in Prague, and those groups internationally who are picking up medical supplies for the elderly. 'The shift is even more interesting than it first appears,' Monbiot (2020) states. 'Power has migrated not just from private money to the state, but from both market and state to another place altogether: the commons. All over the world, communities have mobilised where governments have failed'.

This 'superbloom of altruistic engagement' (Solnit, 2020) should not surprise. The strengthening of social bonds during times of disaster has been long observed by social scientists. Numerous studies across a century have come to the conclusion that 'disasters bring out prosocial and innovative behaviors in communities' (Knowles 2011, 213). Because this phenomenon has been 'discovered' so frequently, it is known by numerous terms within the literature. Common

phrases include: 'the brotherhood of pain', 'communitas', 'emergency togetherness', 'extraordinary community', 'post-disaster solidarity', 'post-disaster utopia', 'pro-social behavior', 'social utopia' and 'therapeutic community' (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021).

Social scientists note five reasons for this heightened sociality. First, it arises because disasters are social phenomena. Threats and damage are public and collectively experienced. Shared risk and suffering bonds survivors. Second, collective action is fostered as current power structures are nowhere near as robust as is commonly thought. They often dissipate or disappoint. Mutual aid from within this 'society of equals' may be the only resource available (Haney, 2018, 106). Third, this pronounced sense of agency is seen as a vital sense-making activity which yields both affective and applied benefits. Adjustment to the 'new normal' is a coping strategy which enhances both individual and collective wellbeing. Fourth, another major driver for collective action comes from the realization that disasters (at least those triggered by natural hazards) are often experienced as 'uncontrollable'. No one can be blamed or, if they can, those persons, groups and organizations reside beyond the community. Instead of internal scapegoating and community division, there is a sense of togetherness, a 'democracy of common disaster' (Wood quoted in Kutak 1938, 72). Finally, undergirding all of this is the fact that we are essentially social beings. We cannot exist alone. We are products of culture and collective labour. We exist within networks of mutual dependency. We share norms and relations and are remarkably altruistic. As such, we are disposed to assist others (Peek 2020). Disasters throw this aspect of our species into the sharpest relief.

The connections between personal troubles and public issues have never been clearer. Concepts like the social, the global, figurations, and questions like our relationship to authority, the nature of punishment and conformity, the basis of trust, which are so often discussed at a high level of abstraction within the academy, are now viscerally embodied in everyday life. 'The stuff of the tutorial room has become the talk of the town' (Reicher 2021).

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

> *…coronavirus. That sounds like a beautiful place in Italy, right?*
> — President Donald Trump, Campaign Rally in Jacksonville, Florida, 24th September 2020

There may be senses in which we are all social scientists now. We all have a heightened appreciation of the social, and all of us must have a certain sense

of how the world works in order to be competent in it. But social scientists still claim that their knowledge is more robust and reliable than the wisdom of common sense. Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May (2019, 4–10) note that social science (they were specifically writing about sociology) is superior to common sense in key ways: the commitment to responsible speech (discussed below), the size of the field – it moves beyond an individualistic frame to consider the experiences of multiple life-worlds, the way it makes sense of human reality by situating agency and personal interactions within the context of the social forces, institutional structures, network effects and interdependencies that make our lives what they are, and by applying strategies of 'defamiliarization' which unsettles what is taken for granted, subjecting everything to critical scrutiny.

Let us elaborate the point about responsible speech. This is part of sociology's scientific ethos. In the common-sense scheme of things, you can say whatever you like. By contrast, sociologists – and social scientists more generally – are careful to distinguish fact from value and tested findings from beliefs. There is a vigilance to social science thinking as well as clarity and transparency in this process. Social scientists must show their reasoning and present their evidence. They should be open to scrutiny and they should consider the veracity of alternative viewpoints and propositions.

Part of that commitment to responsible speech also entails speaking truth to power. The powerful have the ability to broker our reality, to successfully name and classify the world, to say what can exist and how the world should be. They have the ability to determine the horizons of our existence, stipulating what is acceptable, what is thinkable and what is possible, what can be said and done (Bourdieu 2018). Such actions may be in their own sectional interest rather than for the greater public good. Social scientists should openly state when this is the case.

There are additional reasons for social science intervention here: the powerful need to be held to account as they lie. As evidence of this one need look no further than the then-world's most powerful man: President Donald Trump. On 2nd March 2020 he said: 'My administration has also taken the most aggressive action in modern history to protect Americans from the coronavirus'. Social science fact checkers have made a mockery of this claim. And this was but one of his falsehoods about COVID-19. Others lies and poor advice in the first nine months of 2020 included: questioning the efficacy of masks; promoting false cures such as convalescent plasma, disinfectant, hydroxychloroquine and ultraviolet rays; undermining his own health officials, notably Dr. Fauci but also the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; falsely claiming to

have the virus 'under control' very early in the pandemic; racializing the virus (even referring to it as 'Kung Flu'); spuriously claiming that COVID-19 would go away as temperatures rose; urging governors to open their states well in advance of any vaccine roll-out; suggesting shut downs are more problematic than the virus itself; stating that that large gatherings of unvaccinated crowds are 'very safe'; saying that testing is 'overrated' and noting that without testing there would be 'no cases'; arguing that only the elderly with pre-existing conditions are vulnerable to COVID-19; consistently saying the virus would just go away; and routinely lying about rates of infection and death in the United States while over-inflating excess mortality rates in Europe (Kiely *et al*. 2020).

Similarly, one of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's first press conferences began: 'I must level with the British public: many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time' (Quoted in Stewart, Proctor and Siddique 2020). Instead of implementing widespread testing, track and tracing, and enforcing social distancing and outright lockdown to flatten the curve, they opted for herd immunity, which is an ill-advised strategy absent an effective vaccine. Isabel Frey notes how this logic aligns with neoliberal ideology: it belies the people-before-profits tenet of the country's economics, and the state's relinquishment of responsibility in this privatised environment. If you are at risk, poor, precarious, or unemployed it is your own fault for not competing adequately in the market. For her, herd immunity is nothing other than 'epidemiological neoliberalism,' a strategy of letting the epidemic, much like the market, go unregulated (Frey 2020). Speaking truth to power here means calling them out for their erroneous approach and noting its consequences. It also emerges that pitting the economy against public health is an entirely false binary. Here, then, is another role for the social scientist: the debunker of myths. Research has shown that the United Kingdom would have saved 65,000 lives had it adopted a very strict style of lockdown early on and its GDP would only have fallen 0.5% instead of the 11 per cent that it did (Aum *et al*. 2021).

It's the end of the world as we know it? Prognostication and its perils

The desire to predict events is one of the rationales for all of the social sciences (Hechter, 1995 1520), and the ability to accurately do so within a field shows that a scientific endeavour has reached maturity (Kaplan 1940, 492). Within the academy and beyond, prognostic skills are also a basis for claiming relevance.

Albena Azmanova (2020) argues that pandemic responses have marked a radical disjuncture with the old normal in three key ways. First, lockdowns around

the globe have shown that serving the economy is not the sine qua non of government. Contra neoliberal orthodoxy, private profit does not have come before everything else. Second, the inability of even the wealthiest countries to secure public wellbeing shows that those societies are also afflicted by a widespread pathogen – that of precarity. As a result, elites have lost their legitimacy. They have been shown to govern in the interests of themselves alone, and all too often democracy has given way to authoritarianism. Third, the virus has disproportionately impacted the most marginalised communities. Pre-pandemic their precarity may have rendered them servile. But in exposing the false promises of neoliberalism and by magnifying already-existing injustices, oppressed groups will be galvanised into action.

For Bob de Wit (2021), this coronavirus will catalyse a social revolution, ushering in 'Society 4.0'. In his four-stage schema, the first society to emerge was an agrarian one. Settled agriculture displaced hunter-gatherers. The second society saw a shift from agriculture to trade and the onset of economic globalisation. The third social formation of note was driven by industrialisation, inaugurating mechanised labour. Now we must reckon with its negative consequences. In so doing, we must usher in Society 4.0 in order to replace extractive industries with regenerative ones.

Azmanova and de Wit are amongst a group of scholars predicting that the pandemic will be an 'event' in the Foucauldian (1984) sense, a genuine break in history, leading to new forms of social arrangements. Slavoj Žižek (2020b) concurs: 'It's time to accept that the pandemic has changed the way we exist forever. Now the human race has to embark on the profoundly difficult and painful process of deciding what form the 'new normality' is going to take'. The broader commentariat have also announced that COVID-19 has ended the world as we knew it. A partial list of such pronouncements includes the end of: asylum (Ghezelbash 2020), cash (Barrigan 2020), cars and commuting (Fengler 2020; Anon 2020), big cities (Tavernise and Mervosh 2020), mass protests (Brannen 2020), democracy (Repucci and Slipowitz 2020), globalisation (Gray 2020), US hegemony (Norrlöf 2020), neoliberalism (Alfredo Saad-Filho 2020), and capitalism (Mason 2020).

Historians can lend some credence to claims of imminent – and significant – transformation. Walter Scheidel (2017) argues that there are only four major phenomena that have made for a more equal society: war, revolution, state failure, and pandemic. He argues that pandemics have had the greatest impact. The most spectacular example of this comes from the worst plague of them all: The Black Death. This pandemic killed a third of the world's population.

The horrors of this plague are well known. The collective consequences and responses less so. Survivors could find no divine purpose in it. The power of Church and noble were challenged. The workings of God and the idea of a fixed feudal order were sharply questioned. 'To that extent the Black Death may have been the unrecognized beginning of modern man' (Tuchman 1978, 123). Across Europe and beyond, agricultural workers and craftspersons leveraged the chronic labour shortages to agitate for better pay and conditions. Working hours shortened while wages increased. Most doubled, some tripled (Pamuk 2007).

Yet social scientists should be mindful of the perils of punditry. The Global Health Security Index (2019) ranked the United States of America and the United Kingdom first and second in terms of their ability to counter large-scale infectious disease outbreaks. COVID-19 made a mockery of this prediction, as both countries struggled to implement widespread testing, to provision frontline healthcare workers with sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE), or to secure adequate numbers of hospital beds. Authorities in these countries failed to contain the disease or even predict a single parameter of COVID-19. An article published in *The Lancet* castigated both national governments for being about as far from best practice as it is possible to be. The outright lies and mismanagement of the former and the quasi-criminal delays of the latter 'have provided among the world's worst responses to the pandemic' Sarah Dalglish (2020, 1189) observed. As of late February 2021, the United States passed a grim milestone. Half a million people had died of COVID-19 in that country, accounting for a fifth of the world's fatalities. This figure approximates the American war dead from World War Two, Korea and Vietnam combined (Hollingsworth and Webber, 2021). At the time of writing, the United States has recorded the most COVID-19 deaths globally. The United Kingdom has the third worst overall death rate in the world.

This is but one of many examples showing the failures of prediction and the shortcomings of expertise. As such, we would do well to heed Andy Sterling's (2020) warnings: 'For whatever happens next, what is already evident is that: expert advisers and scientific institutions found themselves so wrong; commentators and policy-makers so short-sighted; affluent societies so poorly resourced; macho demagogues and plutocrats so indecisive; and democracies and autocracies alike so ill-prepared'. Amongst the many potential casualties of the pandemic – just-in-time production systems, neoliberalism, even capitalism itself – perhaps the only one we should actually seek to endorse is the pretence to predictive control (Sterling, 2020).

UTOPIA OR BUST: DEMANDING THE IMPOSSIBLE

The future is hard to predict and impossible to control, but this does not mean that we should cease our efforts to make the world a better place. Albion Small said that sociology was 'born of the modern zeal to make society better' (quoted in Bauman 2011, 160). This social justice impulse is to be found across the social sciences.

For sociologists, utopia is more than just an idea, it is also a method. Ruth Levitas (2013, 153) identifies three sociological approaches to utopia as method. The first she calls an archaeological mode – extracting ideas of the good society from political doctrines, social and economic policies. The second is ontological – looking at what types of people societies promote and enable. In other words, what types of human flourishing are (and are not) permitted within the prevailing social structures. The third mode is architectural – imagining better future worlds, and what they may be like for those who would live in them.

Progressive change may appear impossible. It will be presented as such by those with the most to gain from the current social order. The powerful typically oppose change as they profit the most from the status quo. It is in their interests to disseminate ideologies that cement current social arrangements, and that make them appear natural rather than constructed. It is for this reason that Mark Fisher (2009, 18) stated that 'emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable'.

As German sociologist Sebastian Scheerer (1986, 7) wrote, 'there has never been a major social transformation in the history of mankind that had not been looked upon as unrealistic, idiotic, or utopian by the large majority of experts even a few years before the unthinkable became reality'. Amongst such 'unthinkable' transformations we can list the abolition of slavery, the end of the British Empire, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the culmination of the Cold War, the rise of animal rights and, more recently, the embrace of marriage equality in various parts of the world. For all of these reasons we should revive the slogan of the student revolts of 1968: 'Be realistic – demand the impossible'. Such struggles are worth our while. As Hannah Arendt said of the fight for women's liberation: 'The real question to ask is, what will we lose if we win?' (quoted in Honig 2009, 66).

The seemingly 'impossible' has already happened. The lockdown showed that a supposedly unstoppable global economic system that should be privileged above all else – *There is No Alternative* – can actually be forced to a halt. 'The pandemic has shown us the economy is a very narrow and limited way of organising life and deciding who is important and who is not important', offered Bruno Latour (2020). In demonstrating that capitalism can yield to public wellbeing, the lockdown also provided a time of contemplation, a moment to consider individual and collective futures, what we might need and what we might want, to think about the elements of our pre-COVID existence that should be retained, and what should be jettisoned. Moreover, it has also made it clear that ideas and knowledge can be transferred as easily as viruses.

Other 'impossibilities' were soon realised: homelessness was ended in Aotearoa New Zealand (Davidson 2020), free childcare was provided in Australia (Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2020), hospitals have been nationalised in Spain and private hospitals taken over in Ireland (Payne 2020; MacNamee 2021), basic income has been granted in Canada (BBC 2020), migrants and asylum seekers have been given full citizenship in Portugal (*Schengenvisainfo News* 2020), and Spain has launched a trial of a four day working week (Kassam 2021).

Social science has an additional role to play: assessing public opinion to determine what the people want. Most Britons who were surveyed in a YouGov poll hoped that they personally, and their country generally, would change for the better following the pandemic. A mere nine per cent of those questioned wanted to return to the status quo ante (Binding 2020). A Kudos Organisational Dynamics survey of 1,000 people found that eighty-one percent of respondents thought that the coronavirus pandemic will leave behind a society that has learned good lessons about 'being in it together and being kind,' and 88 percent of those surveyed believed that this sense of community would either continue or grow post-lockdown (Lourens 2020, 2–3). A Massey University study showed that seven out of ten New Zealanders wanted a green COVID-19 recovery. The majority of those questioned said they were going to change to more environmentally friendly practices in the next year even if it inconvenienced them and cost them more (Morton 2020). One of the most comprehensive surveys to date was produced by IPSOS. They gathered the opinions of 21,000 adults in 27 countries in work undertaken on behalf of the World Economic Forum. The results showed that almost 90 per cent of respondents wanted a fairer world post-COVID-19. And of those questioned, almost three quarters – 72 per cent – would like their life to change markedly rather than have it return to the pre-COVID normal. Moreover, 86 per cent would like to see *significant* positive

transformation in the world, particularly in terms of social and environmental justice (IPSOS 2020).

CONCLUSION

This article has addressed the magnitude of COVID-19's impacts and the role of social science in assessing them. The argument has been made that COVID-19 has forced appreciation of, and focus on, the social. With this comes renewed relevance for the social sciences. Indeed, for Stephen Reicher (2021), 'Covid has more effectively demonstrated the importance of the social sciences to a sceptical public and a dismissive government than years of campaigning'. The pandemic has shown us that another world possible. Confronted by rapid change, crisis and a desire for better alternatives, social scientists can guide actions. For as Walby (2021, 25) notes, 'a theory of society is needed' (and see Dubet 2021, 4). Not only is another world possible, social science research shows that another world is desired. The overwhelming majority of those surveyed would like to live in ways that are far more equitable and sustainable. This necessitates the utilisation of utopia as method: identifying notions of the good society, fostering human flourishing, and imagining a better world than this one.

Social scientists have garnered numerous solutions to these ends, with two of our biggest challenges in mind: unprecedented wealth disparities and unparalleled environmental threats. On the former, guaranteed jobs in the public service or voluntary sector funded by government (Tcherneva 2020) would pull a lot of products, activities and services out of the market and help to redefine collective needs and desires. This could be supplemented by expanded welfare provisions – including such things as free health and education, basic income, progressive taxation, a public banking service based on central bank digital currencies, and the redistribution of inheritance. Piketty (2021) suggests that everyone receive a minimum inheritance at 25 since concentration of property is one of inequality's biggest drivers. In France he sets this at 60% of the average wealth per adult, suggesting it be paid from progressive taxation and wealth taxes.

It would make sense to set these new policies within the broader context of a Green New Deal. Amongst other things this seeks to attain net-zero greenhouse gas emissions, secure clean air and water, climate and community resilience, and a sustainable environment for all. As Ann Pettifor (2019) notes, the overriding aim is for a steady state or circular economy. It should not exceed ecological limits (e.g. atmospheric aerosol loading). It should look to minimize waste and maximize recycling. There should be less focus on frivolous consump-

tion, more focus on local production and cooperation, and a just transition to renewable energies.

Writing in *Climate & Capitalism*, Andreas Malm (2018) suggests a ten-point programme, beginning with a moratorium on all new facilities for extracting fossil fuels. He also advocates for the shift to 100 per cent renewable energy, and he calls for an end to the expansion of air, sea and road travel (with existing road and sea travel converted to electricity and wind power). Mass transit systems should be expanded – and scaled up where possible. Local food supplies should replace airfreighted goods. Massive reforestation programmes should commence. Old buildings should be insulated; new ones should generate their own zero-carbon power. Plant proteins should replace the global meat industry. Public investment should be geared towards sustainable renewable energy technologies and those capable of carbon sequestration.

The material above deals with production of inequality, which is important, because suffering tends to fracture along the familiar fault lines of age, gender, ethnicity and social class (another skill that social scientists possess is that of pattern recognition). Work by disaster scholars reveals remarkably consistent patterns in which the isolated, weak and less wealthy consistently fare worse (Matthewman, 2015, 13, 20). Infection fatality rate (IFR) is correlated with age. The elderly are feeling coronavirus' physical impacts the most. In terms of social impacts, it could be that the youth are most affected by the lockdown. They are having to forgo work and their education is being compromised. The pandemic is racialised. Asians are being scapegoated and attacked for spreading the virus (Tavernise and Oppel Jr 2020), while official statistics show marked differences between black and white IFRs (Timothy, 2020). Indigenous groups are also at great risk. In Aotearoa New Zealand the 'estimated IFR for Māori is around 50% higher than non-Māori' (Steyn *et al*., 2020). There is an obvious gender component too. Women are on the frontline of coronavirus. The majority of the planet's healthcare and social care workers are female. The WHO puts the figure at 70% (Boniol *et al*. 2019). And this statistic only considers paid care. Women appear more likely to lose their jobs because of COVID-19, and they are more prone to domestic violence because of its many stressors, such that it has been referred to as the 'shadow pandemic' (UN Women 2021). Paula Braverman (2020) made the point cogently when she wrote for the UNESCO Inclusive Policy Lab: 'Inequality is our pre-existing condition'.

Having dealt with the production of inequality, we must also deal with the production of pandemics. As Larry Brilliant, one of the World Health Organization (WHO) figures central to the eradication of smallpox, said: 'Outbreaks

are inevitable. Pandemics are optional' (quoted in Matthewman 2015, 27). The independent scientific task force Preventing Pandemics at the Source (2021) has identified the root cause of pandemics over the last century as human-driven viral spillover. In particular, they call for an end to practices of deforestation and forest fragmentation, and of commercial wildlife trade and markets. They would also like to see improved farm biosecurity. Yet we also need to reckon with global capitalist agribusiness because their reconfiguration of landscapes and ecosystems has proven to be profitable for more than multinational capital. A host of infectious diseases that similarly prey upon people have benefitted from deforestation and plantation monocultures. In the first instance, forest depletion removes the barrier between humans and viruses that are endemic to avian and animal populations. Corporate agriculture's intense production cycles undermine ecosystem resilience and fast-track pathogen transfer. Global commodity chains ensure that bacteria and viruses from the most isolated hinterlands can enter the very heart of our most densely populated cities. The 2013 Ebola outbreak in West Africa was a paradigmatic example of a pandemic created by this very constellation of factors (Wallace and Wallace 2016). Rob Wallace (2017) sees the end of corporate capitalist agriculture as being the only way to truly eradicate the pandemic problem. Local farmers and local communities must be in control of their own lands. 'Public trusts and cooperative models organized around multifunctional agroecologies addressing the needs of food and farmer and environment all together are our best protection against the worst of the new diseases'.

NOTES

1 Steve Matthewman is a Professor in Sociology at the University of Auckland. He wrote *Disasters, Risks and Revelation: Making Sense of Our Times* (2015). His forthcoming book is *A Research Agenda for COVID-19 and Society* (2022). He has interests in disasters, social theory and (now) critical futures studies.

2 One could surmise that unprecedented wealth disparities, entry into the Age of the Anthropocene, and the prospect of the sixth mass extinction event also add to the zeitgeist.

3 For example, a tweet by Mohamad Safa made the front page of *Reddit* on 2nd February 2021. It had over 100 000 views. It read: 'What we learned in 2020? That oil is worthless in a society without consumption. That healthcare has to be public because health is public. That 50% of jobs can be done from home while the other 50% deserve more than they're being paid. That we live in a society, not an economy'.

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