

Can we expect ecological transformation post Corona?

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The Corona Crisis is frequently commented upon these days with the question if this crisis impacts the Climate and Ecology Crises. It is much too early to say that, but some observation can be made from looking at voices and debates in the public media. In this contribution it is mainly Dutch media that are looked at (but not only). The suggestion is made that there are many similarities and many differences, between these crises, but one practical element that is pointed at is the first aid systems that are deployed to help the ill. Even when these systems are overburdened and in distress because of the volume of severity of cases, it is clear these systems are vital. When it comes to climate and ecological distress one could state that first aid systems are lacking. There are no public or private services helping civilians to act on symptoms (physical and mental) to restore and put in place a balance with nature. As leaders and key people within public services call for a Post Corona Economy that has made structural changes to how it functions and can deal with a health crisis (like Corona or maybe the next Corona), it is suggested to include ecological public services into those structural changes.

Key words: Corona Crisis, Climate& Ecological Crises, Normality, Physical and mental health First Aid, First and second order science, First Aid in relating to nature.

Introduction.

At the moment debates in the public media are about changing the economy after the Corona Crisis and because of it. There are also debates in the media comparing the Corona Crisis with the Climate & Ecological Crises.

Can we expect ecological transformation to come from the strong voices now making the case for a more social and caring economy to be built post Corona? This is the question I reflect upon.³ Concluding that there are clear observations to make in comparison of these crises and how 'societies' address them.

I start with mentioning several comments that one can pick up from the media. First comments on the Corona Crisis itself and then secondly on the Corona Crisis in relation to the Climate and Ecological Crises, before going more deeply into the question. Living in the Netherlands, the commentaries I use are mainly Dutch, but some come from the United

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² A first draft was written at the end of march. This version (9th April) is a revised text based on what seems to be a next phase in the commentaries about the Corona Crisis, made in the first week of April.

³ Looking at individuals (including oneself) as much as to the social, and nature when trying to understand a topic as it unfolds in real life.

Kingdom and the United States of America as well as from European countries (Belgium, Germany, France, Sweden).

Corona.

The post Corona economy change debate is addressed by leading figures. I show a few of those voices. For instance, Birger Priddat - an economy and philosophy professor from Germany - says:

The Corona Crisis is the biggest economic crisis since the beginning of time, without a market failure (as in the Lehmann crisis). The virus requires measures that act as an external shock to the economy. It is a matter of life and death, i.e. a dimension that is usually not important for the economy. We are dealing with social and economic changes that were never thought possible before, or at least only gradually and not all at once. (Priddat, 2020)⁴.

A second comment is from Tuur Elzinga the chair of the FNV, the largest labor union in the Netherlands:

Care providers, teaching staff, shelf fillers and transport and distribution employees have been undervalued in recent years. (Elzinga, 2020).⁵

A third public statement comes from Kim Putters, the head of the Dutch Social Cultural Planning bureau, a government agency in matters of national health and care. Putters spoke through national television, saying that after the crisis the Netherlands will have to repair the public services and appreciate and invest in them more.⁶

One also comes across comments from economic sector and industry leaders who advise the government how to invest the money in order to safeguard jobs and economic growth.⁷ But it is not only industry leaders being concerned and suggesting measures. Within populations people voice their worries about the economy as well, for instance in Spain.⁸

These comments and appeals are made in the moment several weeks after the more severe lockdown measures were installed here in the Netherlands (16th March 2020). Now 14 days

⁴ This quote is from a social network (Linked in). Priddat is Professor of Economy and Philosophy at the University of Witten/Herdecke.

⁵ Zeelandnet (ANP) 26 maart 2020 - 09:54 De economische impact van de uitbraak van het nieuwe coronavirus zal de wereld veranderen, voorspelt FNV. Wat 's lands grootste vakbond betreft wordt de crisis de aanzet voor de overgang naar "een duurzame economie die gericht is op het welzijn van mensen".

⁶ <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2328365-na-deze-crisis-kunnen-we-niet-gewoon-verdergaan-zoals-we-altijd-deden.html>, visited 28 march 2020, 10.34 am.

⁷ For instance <https://www.cobouw.nl/woningbouw/nieuws/2020/03/eib-bepleit-woonfonds-van-een-miljard-101283244>, visited, 2 April 2020, 1.34 pm.

⁸ <https://www.spanjevandaag.com/31/03/2020/economische-situatie-belangrijker-dan-gezondheid-in-spanje/>, visited, 2 April, 1.50 pm.

later all kind of financial rescue programmes for the economy are in place. Children follow online education, volunteer initiatives are undertaken to help or look after vulnerable people, while flight attendants are helping out in hospitals and all kinds of people from other professions who are not allowed to work at the moment are working for farmers that can no longer hire cheap workers from abroad, in order to harvest asparagus and other crops.

The attention to mental health issues is definitely in the media, but they are not on the forefront of the debates. Comments can be found about Chinese people suffering mental health issues because of splitting up families, having to live on without being able to say good-bye to loved ones, or the processing of the stresses one felt because of total lock-down can be found, but not many. There is also mentioning of domestic violence and abuse happening here in the Netherlands because of lockdown and people confined to their homes. There is mentioning of more children at risk or being victims of domestic violence. Also, here volunteer workers and organisations step in. The worries with respect to the capacity of the hospitals to deal with so many patients are in the news every day, in fact the whole lock down and group immunity approach is built around the number of Intensive Care Beds available within the system. As if the CEO steers clear from the financial bottom line. Comments can be found stating our mental health system is far behind in being able to respond and accommodate to the Corona Crisis.

Some people state that the sentiment that all of this will go over and will go over soon, is a false sentiment. We see this in an article written by Aisha S. Ahmad who has experience in dealing with humanitarian crises.⁹

Yet as someone who has experience with crises around the world, what I see behind this scramble for productivity is a perilous assumption. The answer to the question everyone is asking — "When will this be over?" — is simple and obvious, yet terribly hard to accept. The answer is never (Ahmad, 2020).

That people hope they can return to 'normality' was clear through earlier messages like the one about Chinese harbours, where it was reported that the number of ships being handled is growing, after a considerable decline in the previous months.¹⁰ Also normal is about having an income, being able to sustain oneself, live the way one thought life was meant to be. But in that case normal also refers to a psychological state. We prefer life to be predictable, being confirmed in one's beliefs, not having to worry or be on guard to veer of the next threat.

It can be seen that in the response to Covid-19 there is a difference between states in terms of their dominant culture (and politics). For instance, republican leaders in the United States made statements that they would be willing to die for the economy as they are proud of 'their' economy as it is. South Korea was effective (so far clearly far beyond other countries)

⁹ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-You-Should-Ignore-All-That/248366/#.XoRv1ND0IjA.email>, visited, 2 April 2020, 10.30 am

¹⁰ Solar Magazin, 26th of March.

because it immediately started testing. While Cuba's social services and health care are of a high level and are high on the countries list of core values. Cuba also immediately offered help to other countries. As it is interesting to notice this differentiation, it is also noticeable how in some countries (including the UK and the US) populism has lost some of its shine, as existential suffering and pain quickly start calling for real substance and real effective measures, measures that require a collective response and acting in solidarity. But even today, weeks into the crisis in a country like the US, the necessary means and resources are sold to the highest bidder, as apparently that is how the US culture is used to function.

Nevertheless, solidarity in the case of Corona seems to be a collective longing to bring life back to how it was as soon as possible and in the meantime leadership coordination and efficiency is accepted as the way to get there. But what if it is not possible to go back to normal, what if Covid-19 is here to stay, or the next Corona is already spreading around the corner?

Now more than a week after I wrote the first version of this article, some signs of the Lockdown working to stabilise the numbers of people going to hospital are there. It seems the joined voices of owners of small and medium sized businesses can now be heard louder and louder. They are directed at the government, demanding a clear plan of how to open up businesses again. The very words 'going back to normal' are used by the prime minister in speaking to the nation several days after the business sector made itself heard, stating this might take longer than people could hope for.¹¹

Corona and the Climate and Ecological Crises.

What about debates that connect Corona with the Climate & Ecological Crises? These comments are of a great variety. For a while they have been not there, as if the Climate and Ecological Crises did not exist. But they did come back. Some comments are highly practical, like the comment Marjan Minnesma from Urgenda made in addressing the government not to postpone Climate measures too long because of the Corona Crisis. Let's make sure all money spent to keep the economy going by heavenly subsidising the business that have come to a standstill, is at the same time allowing for climate measures, is what Urgenda says.¹²

Other comments make connections of a different kind. Belgian thinktank Oikos is referenced in a large Belgian magazine (Knack) where University Lecturer Myriam Dumortier says that closing down some China wet markets will not be enough to stop the biodiversity crisis that Corona is confronting us with. Dumortier makes the connection with recent studies and reports on biodiversity loss eg. IPBES (UN Panel) that show massive loss of species and numbers of animals and plants, but also some species growing, among which certain

¹¹ <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/politiek/artikel/5083976/premier-rutte-tijdens-persconferentie-lange-adem-corona-rivm>, visited, 8 April, 2020, 11.55 am.

¹² The Dutch Government announced to postpone the extra Climate measures it had been ordered to take as of the 1th April 2020; ordered by the highest court in the law suit that the Urgenda foundation had started.

viruses.¹³ Another Belgium media platform reports on WWF stating the same thing.¹⁴ There are also commentaries that stress how fast and decisive people have now been in the Corona Crisis, proving changes are possible, giving hope with respect to responding to the Climate and Ecological Crises. Then there are comments stating that time plays out differently, where the Corona outbreak is fast as a train, Climate is slow, leading to the famous saying about frogs boiling to death without noticing.¹⁵ Finally there are a lot of messages on social media where people testify how nature bounces back.

This brings another aspect to thinking about normality and what is normal. Maybe that has to do with the senses, or how we use them. The sudden change because of Corona shows up in everyday awareness, as if rising above a threshold of noise. The satellite messages testifying less pollution, cleaner air in many places, or show dramatically decreased air traffic. The evidence seen with one's own eyes can hardly be doubted. With Climate and the Ecological collapse there is something about a voice. Greenpeace states it gives nature a voice. The famous Theodore Roszak who was one of the first to use the term ecopsychology, writing a sequel to Freud's work, this time set in the late 20th century – not the late 19th early 20th where social problems were all about psychological suppression. Roszak called his book, the 'Voice of the Earth'¹⁶. He is not the first to make the analysis that we tend to close off from our senses. Many philosophers and critical thinkers have done the same. For example, the members of the Frankfurter Schule warned us for the one-dimensional man.¹⁷

Thinking again about our longing for normality. The voices I mentioned above plea for a stronger care economy in order to deal with the next health crisis, the next public health surprise. Mental health - because of the Corona Crisis - is part of that, but clearly less emphasized, less visible. In the light of Corona capitalist thought that health, mental and other primary services should be privatised or following populist thought that such services are only for some people and not for all, can now be seen as mistakes.

The question.

The question remains, will this be one of those global transition moments and will it include reform of our economy to include nature? This is hard to tell. It is interesting that one of the last opinion polls that wanted to know the impact of the Corona Crisis on people's worries about the climate actually show an increase.¹⁸ However, there are some reflections to make.

¹³ Belgian Magazine Knack, 27-3-2020.

¹⁴ <https://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2020/03/30/wwf-rapport-wijst-op-link-tussen-covid-19-pandemie-en-vernietiging-van-natuur/>, visited, 2 April, 2020, 4.43 pm

¹⁵ <https://www.vn.nl/klimaattraagheid/>, visited, 2 April, 2020, 2.22 pm

¹⁶ Roszak, T. (2001). *The voice of the earth. An Exploration of Ecopsychology*. Phanes Press. Gran Rapids.

¹⁷ Marcuse, H. (1964, 1991). *One-dimensional Man: studies in ideology of advanced industrial society*. Routledge.

¹⁸ <https://www.dagelijksestandaard.nl/2020/04/klimaatgekte-nog-lang-niet-verdwenen-uit-nederland-meerderheid-nederlanders-ziet-coronavirus-als-kans-om-klimaat-te-redden/>, visited, 6 April, 2020, 8 pm.

First the evidence that Corona is real and existential seemed to be understood by the public at large, before political and government measures were taken. By and large this happened in all countries, although some governments were much faster to respond than others. Maybe more people will now make the connection to climate and the environment. While the crisis is allowing for a stronger position of science, there is a difference between science of how to provide first aid and the science that is finding out about a vaccine and all of the biological ins and outs of the virus. We have regulation and monitoring when it comes to the environment, but we do not have something like organised first aid when it comes to Climate change and Biodiversity loss. Such first aid would be helping people to restore their ecological health and balance the conditions for ecosystems to be healthy. However, at the moment such services are not considered necessary or seen as 'normal'. Instead nature is considered free for all and part of the market. Nature, the environment itself is considered dead, we do not consider nature (at large) to be alive and therefore it cannot have a voice let alone one would think of listening to it (Roszak). Although there is an NGO called Greencross (founded by Michael Gorbatsjov) that provides aid in case of environmental calamities. However as much wonderful work certain NGO's are doing, it is not exactly the same, as helping to know if your living surroundings and place are ecologically healthy and if you can be living healthy and being well in them, by helping you to attune to the voice of nature. A big part of that being well as humans, is dependent on the question if non-human others, nature can be well at the same time. With Corona the debate is now that after the crisis elementary services should be at a higher level. But what exists that will do the same for first aid in relation to the climate and nature? This would entail to make something new, different from the old, to create a new normal, to help to restore our relation to nature, as if it is normal to live in harmony with nature instead of trying to push nature away. Such first aid has gone lost, maybe it was the reason shamans were so important a long time ago, as their primary task was to be the connection between humans and nature.

Secondly what is also noticeable is that the psychological suffering of those falling victim to the virus is really acknowledged and where the chance exists to be with a person at home or in hospital, the care is provided without the intent to fix something. Therapy against inevitable dying does not exist. Everybody knows that. What the care and attention is about is sharing, precious moments, memories, connections, celebration of the life that was and maybe still is, or share anxiety, grief, say goodbye. Even doctors surrender to 'nature' as they advise to some people to consider (as one also does with terminally ill people that suffer from another illness, not Covid-19) if they want to go through the ordeal of being in an IC unit, while actually there is no chance of getting through it. When is a doctor ever going to admit to that, to not being able to do something. It is problematic for them given their oath. Such letting go of control, can be healing in a strange way, not fixing the physical illness, but healing for meaning making, finding peace in the moment of dying, for family members and others to go on, for life to go on. Such letting go of control in the light of the Climate and Ecological Crises can be healing as well, to find new direction, new purpose as the old ways don't work anymore.

Thirdly the figures on Corona, the statistics show the impact and effects of the lockdown measures. There is hope as the figures prove the lock down works, so then everything about

that is worth the trouble in order not to have it go totally out of hand. But what about Climate and Ecological collapse? Here the balance has not yet shifted. Here the figures do not give us hope. But neither are we committed to make such a shift, or do we really understand how to do it - as we think we are doing enough or feel our individual measures do not make any difference, while there is no social control or peer pressure to stick to them. We do not act in solidarity, we do not hold people accountable, tell them to stick to the rules (like 1,5 m distance). Climate psychology as it is developing over the last decade notices peoples underlying concerns that they – if looking more superficially - do not seem to have.¹⁹ It also shows how people feel 'unheimlich' literally without a home as there is nobody to talk to, so how can one take one's feelings and observations seriously if everybody else tells you there is nothing wrong and all your family and or peers do not expect you to spoil the party.

We do not have governments that tell us how life can be better if we stick to certain measures for a while, or how better when it comes to Climate and Ecology, would look like. We have governments that rather push economic growth, while that is considered their contract where money equals well-being. As long as that is considered normal and as long as we do not have simple collective (understood, accepted, embraced) individual measures we are willing to operate upon out of solidarity and out of absolute necessity to stick to them and as long as we do not have support for everybody to live by those rules, including training, education and entertainment, that does not entail more carbon and ecological collapse, there is no hope of living ecologically (and most of us will be wiped out). Corona is an existential threat. It is also possible to learn from Corona, not only to redirect and restructure the economy and then speed things up again, but to see that our economy makes us insensitive, out of touch, shields us off from our own existential fear of nature, exposes the situation we have created of not being able or not wanting to hear the voice of nature and not using our senses. Not in a way we actively engage and make meaning from exchange with non-human others, with nature. While it could be (should be) a positive lesson - an opportunity to change, based on imagination, inspiration and new possibilities of connection, of inclusivity with nature. The meaning of the Corona Crisis is that it stopped us in our tracks and tells us that is possible (and very much needed) to start including the voice of nature, rebuild our relation to nature.

In connecting Corona to Climate and Ecological collapse, maybe the lesson from Corona is that early 'dealing' systems and services - like public physical and mental health services -, do not exist when it comes to Climate and Ecology. Physical health systems are developed and installed to eradicate physical discomfort. Everybody panics when suddenly the defence against nature breaks down. All efforts and resources are mobilized to get rid of the bug, in order to go back to 'normal'. Like mental health systems are available and installed to help people do the same, helping people to function 'normal'²⁰. Such commentaries are not new (see above) but Corona exposes all of this, creates one of those rare moments of being able to look in the mirror.

¹⁹ Lertzman, R. (2015). Environmental Melancholia. Psychoanalytic dimensions of engagement. **Routledge**.

²⁰ This was Freuds project, he introduced psychology to help people to be cured (psychoanalysis as a medical profession) with reference to fitting in the social norms of his days.

Also, when looking at the science involved it is different. Like the global United Nation panels on Climate and Biodiversity and the national and local environmental regulation and monitoring services. Maybe these Climate and Biodiversity monitoring and regulation systems are not perfect, but as long as we think it is normal (for the sake of the economy) to keep deciding to use nature, until nothing is left, the quality of these systems does not matter that much. Again, what is normal? It is normal to be healthy and be protected, it is normal to feel compassion for the vulnerable, do what is needed, it is normal to have our public services at a high level so that we can collectively deal with unexpected health problems and share both the joys and the burdens. But we are not there yet when it comes to Climate and Ecology. While we stick to business as usual, because that is considered normal. It seems we live with the 'wrong' normal when it comes to that. Corona is showing us that.