

What protective measures can you think of so we don't go back to the pre-crisis production model?¹

Bruno Latour (translated from French by Stephen Muecke)

Perhaps it is a little inappropriate to project oneself into the post-crisis, just when the health workers are, as they say, 'on the front line', while millions of people lose their jobs and while many grieving families are not even able to bury their dead. And yet, it is right now that we have to fight so that the economic recovery, once the crisis has passed, does not bring back the same former climatic regime against which we were battling, until now somewhat in vain. In actuality, the health crisis is not embedded in a crisis (because they are always transitory), but in an ongoing, irreversible ecological mutation. If we are lucky enough to 'come out of' the first, there is no chance we will 'come out of' the second. The two situations are not on the same scale, but it is very enlightening to articulate with the one with the other. In any case, it would be a pity not to use the health crisis to discover other means of entering the ecological mutation without a blindfold on.

The first lesson the coronavirus has taught us is also the most astounding: we have actually proven that it is possible, in a few weeks, to put an economic system on hold everywhere in the world and at the same time, a system that we were told it was impossible to slow down or redirect. To every ecologist's argument about changing our ways of life, there was always the opposing argument about the irreversible force of the 'train of progress' that nothing could derail 'because of globalisation', they would say. And yet it is precisely its globalised character that makes this infamous development so fragile, so likely to do the opposite and come to a screeching halt.

It is actually not just the multinationals, or the trade partnerships, or the internet or the tour operators that globalise the planet. Every entity on this same planet has its very own way of hooking up with each other and all the other elements that compose the collective at a given moment. This is true for the CO₂ that is warming the atmosphere globally by spreading through the air and migrating birds carrying new kinds of flu; but it is also true for—we learn at our peril once again—the coronavirus that has the capacity to link 'all humans' by passing by way of our apparently inoffensive droplets from coughing. Germs are super-globalisers: when it is a matter of resocialising billions of people, the germs make short work of it!

Hence the incredible discovery: already in the world economic system there was, hidden from us all, a bright red alarm button with a nice big stainless-steel handle that the heads of state could pull, one after the other, to instantly stop the 'train of progress' with all the brakes squealing. If in January the demand to make a 90 degree turn to land on the Earth seemed like a gentle illusion, now it becomes much more realistic: every car driver knows that to have any chance of making a sudden turn of the wheel to get out of trouble (without heading into the landscape), it is better to have slowed down a bit first...

Unfortunately, it is not only the ecologists who see, in this sudden pause in the globalised system of production, a great opportunity to move ahead with their programme for landing on Earth. There's also the globalisers, who since the middle of the 20th century invented the idea of escaping our planetary limits. They too see here a great opportunity to break even more radically

¹ This article appeared in AOC on 29th March 2020: <https://aoc.media/opinion/2020/03/29/imaginer-les-gestes-barrieres-contre-le-retour-a-la-production-davant-crise/>.

with the remaining obstacles in the way of their escape from Earth. A wonderful prospect for them: extract themselves from the rest of the welfare state, from the safety net for the poorest, from what remains of regulations against pollution, and, even more cynically, get rid of all these supernumeraries cluttering up the planet.²

But let's not forget the hypothesis that these globalisers are conscious of the ecological mutation, and all their efforts for the past fifty years consist in both denying the importance of climate change and also avoiding its consequences by building fortified bastions of privilege, which are necessarily inaccessible to all those who are going to have to be left in the lurch. They are not so naïve as to believe the great modernist dream of the universal distribution of the 'fruits of progress', but what is new is their willingness to not even give the impression of believing in it.³ These are the ones proclaiming every day on *Fox News* and who govern all the climate-sceptical states on the planet, from Moscow to Brasilia, and New Delhi to Washington via London.

What makes the current situation so dangerous is not just the dead piling up every day at an increasing rate, it is the universal suspension of an economic system that gives those who want to go much further in the flight away from the planetary world a marvellous occasion to 'put all the cards on the table'. One must not forget that what makes these globalisers so dangerous, is that they have to know they have lost, that the denial of ecological mutation cannot go on forever, that there is no chance of reconciling their 'development' with the various planetary envelopes in which one way or another the economy has to be inserted. This is what makes them ready to try anything to secure, one last time, the conditions that are going to allow them to last a little bit longer and to shelter them along with their children. This putting on of the brakes, this 'stopping of the world', this unexpected pause, gives them an opportunity to flee more quickly and further than they could ever have imagined.⁴ At the moment, they are the revolutionaries.

It is at this point that we have to act. If opportunities are arising for them, the same is true for us. If everything has stopped, and all cards can be put on the table, they can be turned, selected, triaged, rejected for ever, or indeed, accelerated forwards. Now is the time for the annual stock-take. When common sense asks us to 'start production up again as quickly as possible', we have to shout back, 'Absolutely not!' The last thing to do is repeat the exact same thing we were doing before.

For example, a Dutch florist was on television the other day, weeping because he had to trash tonnes of tulips that were ready for shipping. Without customers, he couldn't air-freight them around the world. Of course, we cannot but feel for him; and it is right he is recompensed. But then the camera tracked back onto the tulips that he was growing without soil under artificial light before sending them off from Schiphol airport, on air-freighters with kerosene raining down, which makes one wonder: 'Is it really useful to prolong this way of producing and selling these types of flowers?'

One thing leads to another, and if we all began on a personal basis to ask such questions on all aspects of our production system, we would become efficient *globalisation interrupters*, just as effective, in our millions, as the infamous coronavirus as it goes about globalising the planet in its own way. What the virus gets from banal droplets from coughing going from one mouth to another—the halting of the world economy—we can also begin to imagine via our little

² See Matt Stoller on the 'frenzied' lobbyists in the US: "The coronavirus relief bill could turn into a corporate coup if we aren't careful", *The Guardian*, 24-3-20 <https://bit.ly/3ac2btn>.

³ "We don't live on the same planet" <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/782>.

⁴ Danowski, Déborah, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. *The Ends of the World (Translated by Rodrigo Nunes)*. London: Polity Press, 2016.

insignificant gestures put end to end, that is, the halting of the system of production. As we ask these kinds of questions, each of us is onto the task of thinking up protective measures, but not just against the virus, but against every element of the mode of production that we *don't* want to see coming back.

So, it is no longer a matter of a system of production picking up again or being curbed, but one of getting away from production as the overriding principle of our relationship to the world.⁵ More than revolution, this is dissolution, pixel by pixel. Pierre Charbonnier demonstrated it: after a hundred years of socialism limited just to the *redistribution* of the benefits of the economy, it might now be more a matter of inventing a socialism that contests *production itself*.⁶ Injustice is not just about the redistribution of the fruits of progress, but about the very manner in which the planet is *made fruitful*. This does not mean de-growth, or living off love alone or fresh water. It means learning to select each segment of this so-called irreversible system, putting a question mark over each of its supposed indispensable connections, and then testing in more and more detail what is desirable and what has ceased to be so.

Hence the primary importance for using this time of imposed isolation in order to *describe*, initially one by one, then as a group, what we are attached to; what we are ready to give up; the chains we are ready to reconstruct and those that, in our behaviour, we have decided to interrupt.⁷ As for the globalisers, they seem to have a very clear idea what they want to see coming back post-crisis: the same but worse, fossil fuel industries and giant cruise ships as a bonus. It is up to us to confront them with a counter-inventory. If in a month or two, millions of humans are capable of learning how to 'social distance' at the blow of a whistle, to space themselves for greater solidarity, to stay home so as not to overload the hospitals, then it is easy to imagine the power of transformation that these new *protective measures* have against bringing back business as usual, or worse, against another battering from those who want to escape from terrestrial attraction forever.

Because I am always obsessed with wanting to link an argument to practical exercises, I would like to invite readers to try to answer a little auto-descriptive questionnaire. It will be all the more useful if it can relate to actually lived personal experience. It is not a matter of expressing an opinion, but of describing and researching. Only afterwards, if we tabulate the responses and compose the landscape created by their intersections, will we be able to discover some form of political expression—but this time one that is embodied and situated in a real world.

Let's take advantage of the enforced suspension of most activities to set out the inventory of those among them we would like to see not coming back, and those, on the other hand, that we would like to see develop. Reply first individually, then collectively, to the following questions :

Question 1 : What are some suspended activities that you would like to see *not* coming back ?

Question 2 : Describe why this activity seems to you to be noxious/superfluous/dangerous/incoherent and how its disappearance/putting on hold/substitution

⁵ See Dusan Kazic, *Plantes animées- de la production aux relations avec les plantes*, thèse Agroparitech, 2019.

⁶ Pierre Charbonnier, *Abondance et liberté. Une histoire environnementale des idées politiques*. Paris: La Découverte, 2020.

⁷ This auto-description picks up on the procedure in the new 'ledgers of complaints' suggested in Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018, and afterwards developed with the consortium OÙ atterrir <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/fr/node/841.html>

might render other activities that you prefer easier/more coherent. (Write a separate paragraph for each of the activities listed under 1).

Question 3 : What kinds of measures do you advocate so that workers/employees/agents/entrepreneurs, who can no longer continue in the activities that you have eliminated, are able to facilitate the transition to other activities ?

Question 4 : What are the activities, now suspended, that you hope might develop/begin again, or even be created from scratch ?

Question 5 : Describe how this activity appears to be positive to you, and how it makes other activities easier/more harmonious/coherent that you prefer and can fight against those that you judge to be inappropriate. (Write a separate paragraph for each of the activities listed under 4).

Question 6 : What kinds of measures do you advocate to help workers/employees/agents/entrepreneurs to acquire capacities/means/finances/instruments allowing for restarting/development/creation of this activity ? (Now find a way to compare your description with that of other participants. By tabling and then superimposing the answers, you should start to build up a picture composed of conflicting lines, alliances, controversies and oppositions.)