

# Democratic horizons in times of corona governance

Wednesday 25 March 2020, by [HUOTARI Pauli](#), [TEIVAINEN Teivo](#) (Date first published: 18 March 2020).

**Gatekeepers of the present order adapt efficiently. But others can open up a plurality of futures.**

Exceptional moments legitimize exceptional policy responses. Declarations of emergency, usually by definition, mean that democratic rights and liberties are diminished. Times like this, however, can also provide opportunities for experiments that expand the limits of the politically possible in ways that enhance democratic imagination.

Changes in what seems politically possible can mean expansion of state regulation. National budgets suddenly become more flexible, providing new policy space for Keynesian-inspired arguments to increase state intervention to mitigate the shock. At the same time, the crisis can also trigger non-state forms of collective organization. Mutual aid, emphasized historically by many anarchists, becomes concrete in many localities.

Industrial action by workers can get new dimensions, such as bus drivers refusing to control tickets for fear of infection. This can create experiments in free public transport simply as an unintended consequence, but it can also open horizons for social movement unionism in which unions include the demands of other social movements. For privileged scholars, staying home can increase available time to reflect on alternative world orders and digitally discuss how to make them concrete.

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Many of these experiences may be brief and reversible. The Covid-19 pandemic spreading at the moment has terrible human consequences. The risks of contagion are not shared equally. Many have duties that make isolation and social distancing difficult. It is important to confront the possibility of dystopian despair it is creating for the most vulnerable in addition to seeking democratic horizons during the crisis. For better or for worse, the crisis opens cracks in the present that can provide signs of the future.

## Corona governance

An exogenous shock to the social and political realities attracts what Vivien Schmidt has called discursive entrepreneurs. They “serve as catalysts for change as they draw on and articulate the ideas of discursive communities and coalitions” (Schmidt 2008, 310). A successful intervention of discursive entrepreneurs may lead to the definition of possible ways forward in terms of the paradigm of the entrepreneur. From a different perspective, this can also mean what Naomi Klein (2020) is suggesting: “The future will be determined by whoever is willing to fight harder for the ideas they have lying around”. Klein might be overemphasizing agency here, but different media platforms are now filled with attempts to articulate immediate responses on how to control the

pandemic crisis. Combined with responses of states and other institutions, a new field of participatory expertise that we call corona governance has emerged.

Corona governance includes ideological oddities, such as the right opposition asking for the left-leaning government to assume more authoritarian powers in Finland. More globally, many are asking whether the way the crisis has been handled by China provides evidence in favor of, or against, the crisis management possibilities that an explicitly authoritarian state has. In the emerging corona governance talk, South Korea is sometimes mentioned as a possible model.

If the Europeans or North Americans are now looking at Asian experiences as something to learn from, it may have some longer-term consequences. In traditional Eurocentric and colonial approaches, still very alive today, others need to learn from Europe. Learning to learn from others, if attempted by Europeans and other parts of the “global west”, could make the world less Eurocentric and, at least potentially, in some sense more democratic. Using terms coined by Saara Särnä, there is a possibility that the post-coronial world might be slightly more post-colonial. Then again, learning from China can also mean more efficient diffusion of authoritarian control techniques. For democratic futures of various kinds, the corona crisis presents both dangers and opportunities.

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As argued by Naomi Klein (2007) already in *The Shock Doctrine*, the opportunities of sudden crises are often defined by the capitalist and other elites. Nevertheless, a shock like the Coronavirus can also allow new ideas to enter the public discourse. For example, during the “mad cow disease” outbreak some demands external to the elite discourse managed to temporarily enter the world political arena. These included public health and consumer protection demands (Aaltola 1999). Long-term effects, however, were limited. It is possible, but by no means guaranteed, that the unprecedented global media attention to the present crisis helps make health concerns a higher priority in public policies of the future.

### **Lifting a veil on the past**

The reaction to the corona crisis can help unveil fallacious assumptions of the past. The claim that public financing of a green new deal is impossible is questioned by the new policies to confront the perceived incapability of markets to handle the current crisis. If there is public money and political will to confront the corona crisis, why not also the climate change crisis? Fiscally conservative countries like Germany are adjusting their stances on public spending and fiscal deficits. British conservatives are changing austerity policies to huge fiscal stimulus, although there was a noticeable shift already before the pandemic.

Expanded state intervention surely involves an element of class solidarity: capitalists have their immediate interests at stake. The inherently political nature of capitalism becomes more visible when business corporations cannot rely on the markets and need to shield themselves against potential protests from below (Zinn 1990, 328). There has been a longer-term debate going on among economists and finance professionals on the roles and possibilities of monetary and fiscal policies. Some of the disputed policy ideas are now being tested.

The crisis also inspires policy proposals to alleviate suffering, even if an important part of their motivation may be to support the existing power structures. In the US, Tulsi Gabbard, [candidate for the Democratic nomination](#) in the [2020 presidential election](#), proposed a Universal Basic Income (UBI) of 1000 dollars for the time of the crisis. Since her proposal, the helicopter money plans have gotten even wilder and now the Trump administration is actually proposing to cut checks to

Americans to fight the economic downturn. For a country enjoying a relative monetary sovereignty, enacting Gabbard's proposal would not be a major financial problem. There is no guarantee that any such exceptional practices would result in long-term transformation, but they can make more radical demands socially more acceptable. A more permanent basic income scheme could help prevent contagion in future pandemics, since people could stay home more easily.

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## **The end of TINA**

The current macroeconomic rescue packages are no proof of a paradigm shift. But there are new practices in other areas as well. Routines are disrupted and there are material changes in everyday lives. Work and leisure habits change. All of this makes it possible to see beyond the classical claims that there is no alternative.

Grassroots movements can gain prominence in times of crisis. New mutual aid groups are coming up with ways to help people in their neighbourhood. A Facebook group in Helsinki states that "The idea is to link those in quarantine, the sick, and the vulnerable with community members near them who can run errands and deliver necessary supplies (or whatever needed)". It remains to be seen to what extent this kind of organizing could develop into more enduring forms of non-state political community-building.

In a forthcoming book, *The Revival of Political Imagination*, Keijo Lakkala writes that "specifically, utopia can be understood as a social counter-practice motivated by a desire for better being. Utopia has the potential to both relativize the current society (to distance us from the existing and given social order) and to create cracks within the present and open possibilities for new forms of being and doing. Disruption of the present opens a plurality of futures." (Lakkala, forthcoming 2020, 20). Analogous to the current negative supply and demand shocks in the markets, the crisis can increase the supply and demand for utopian thinking.

The crisis opens up cracks in "a world that presents itself as closed" (Holloway 2010, 9). When the cracks are big enough, the myriad of possibilities in the structure of social reality, underneath the current practices, becomes visible. The safeguards of the present order adapt efficiently and there are authoritarian demands trying to seize the moment. But others are utilizing the concrete disruption of the present to expand democratic horizons, opening up a plurality of futures.

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