Climate action: is coronavirus what we have been waiting for? (and now what?)

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In the beginning of 2020, it looked like serious climate action was finally going to take place after decades of procrastination, but we are now inevitably leaving the transformation path. Abruptly (and remarkably), the coronavirus outbreak almost silenced all ongoing efforts to protect climate, while also bringing carbon emissions to a halt. A global tragedy is unfolding with vast social impacts and we are reaching a roundabout with several distinct exits. While embracing the uncertainty of current times, we try to envision likely transition pathways using the multi-level perspective. Climate activists, social innovators, dreamers, and networkers are expected to gain momentum and play critical roles in a sequence of co-evolutionary waves leading to a just, conscious and regenerative recovery.

Keywords: Climate action; COVID-19; transformation; transition pathways; multi-level perspective; community resilience

2020 was expected to be the beginning of a decade of climate action, finally facing “the most systemic threat to humankind” (Guterres, 2018), set to anticipate the future (Anderson, 2010). Detailed scientific knowledge, civil society uprising, bold political decisions, technological breakthroughs, extensive media coverage… everything looked ready to nurture the seeds of a good Anthropocene (Bennett et al., 2016). For some, it looked like we were (finally) at the edge of a quantum leap (O’Brien, 2016) or social tipping point (Hopkins, 2019a; Otto et al., 2020).

But, when the 2020 spring was arriving, another entirely different thing was spreading globally: we were in the middle of a new coronavirus pandemic, that abruptly disrupted our lives and ‘silenced’ climate action (Bordoff, 2020; Temple, 2020). The outbreak of 2019 novel coronavirus diseases (COVID-19) in China (Wu and McGoogan, 2020) should be no surprise (Balkhair et al., 2013; Fan et al., 2019; Zlojutro et al., 2019). The new pandemic is part of the observed rise of animal-borne infectious diseases (Smith et al., 2014), which is likely a consequence of our broken relation with nature (Brulliard, 2020). However, the rapidly and profound impact in many areas of our society was quite a shock, including climate action.
Suddenly, climate protests were cancelled and even become unimaginable in the usual format. Climate change almost disappeared from the political and media agendas.

Somehow ironically, the new virus withdrew climate action while simultaneously caused vast and unprecedented climate mitigation. Carbon emitters that looked untouchable, like air travel, almost came to a full stop in just a few weeks. The oil and gas sector were thrown into turmoil (Carrington et al., 2020). Social isolation and a decrease in industrial activity lowered pollution levels and allowed nature to recover in many places (Henriques, 2020). Beyond any wild activist’s dreams.

The crisis is also bringing new insights into our capacity to adapt. Vast volunteers’ initiatives from neighbourhoods, media, or companies are minimizing some of the impacts by offering innovative services (e.g. Comunidad Aveirense, 2020; Tech4Covid19, 2020). Emergency declarations allowed radical political decisions that did not face significant civil resistance. Even extreme precautionary laws and practice changes are accepted broadly and anticipating actions become legitimate (Dunford et al., 2020). Health practitioners and researchers mobilized, possibly on an unprecedented scale (Cueni, 2020). At the international level, some degree of coordination allowed to face the worst consequences.

An obvious question is: why were we not already supporting transformation in a similar way to face the climate crisis? A reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions on the scale that has been witnessed since January 2020 could not be achieved on a consensual way because its suddenness would provoke harmful consequences for employment and well-being. However, the sudden decrease in emissions proved that when higher values, with immediate repercussions, such as human lives, it is possible do the right thing, even if that harms our current economic system. The problem is that climate change is seen as a long-term threat that does not demand immediate responses (Comerford, 2020). With the coronavirus we face an immediate risk. We face the consequences of the risk right here and right now.

Like all crises, this pandemic brings opportunities. And climate activists (and others) are already asking how we can make the reductions in greenhouse gas emissions permanent, favouring long-lasting shifts away from carbon-intensive behaviours.

Sustainability transitions have already been extensively studied (Köhler et al., 2019). Climate change was creating disruptive change that was perceived as moderate. Accordingly, regime actors were slowly changing the direction of development trajectories, frustrating demands from several outsiders, including activists and researchers (Ripple et al., 2019). Using the multi-level perspective on transitions, we will now argue that the coronavirus moved us away from this direction, named as the transformation path (Geels and Schot, 2007).

The COVID-19 outbreak can be considered a specific shock (Suarez and Oliva, 2005), with high amplitude and speed. It is challenging regimes profoundly and can bring the destabilization that was considered necessary to overcome path-dependencies and lock-ins. The creative destruction (Geels, 2014) that we have been ‘waiting for’, as mentioned in the intended provocative title of this paper. The crisis is also expected to create a paradigm shift that can act as a deep leverage point, altering the systems’ intent (Abson et al., 2017). A strong sense of interconnectedness and the magnification of altruism and localism might be emerging (Boni, 2020; Foster, 2020).

With the exacerbation of problems, regime actors might become more willing to incorporate symbiotic niche-innovations, particularly the ones that focus on community resilience (Penha-
Lopes and Henfrey, 2019). This openness to a reconfiguration path (Geels and Schot, 2007) is expected to grow when resources of national governments and allied business actors get depleted, making local, rooted responses critical. Possibly, this will not be enough to deal with the current health crisis, mainly due to the expected economic impact, and incumbent actors might begin to lose faith and legitimacy, unable to incorporate the lessons of the crisis to build more sustainable futures. Prolonged uncertainty and the collapse of several systems are expected (idem), leading to vigorous discussions on possible futures (Mair, 2020).

For community resilience (including climate action) to replace the current system and become the ‘new normal’, several propositions would need to be met (Fazey et al., 2018). These include dealing with inequalities (that are likely to increase even faster due to the coronavirus crisis) and focus on the unprivileged, alongside with the formulation of updated change narratives (Wittmayer et al., 2019). This can bring hope and unleash imagination (Hopkins, 2019b). We envision three waves for supporting regime substitution in a medium to long term perspective, fully taking advantage of the windows of opportunity created by the coronavirus.

The first wave is about resistance. Changemakers are expected to protect themselves from the immediate threats by avoiding or delaying contamination, assured means of subsisting, and dealing with the psychological impact of quarantine (Flu Mob, 2020a). Whenever possible, virtual mobilization could happen to prevent probable tendencies to ‘business-as-usual’ approaches to the crisis that might lead to an emissions rebound (Peters, 2020). This would include strong resistance to any kind of ‘stimulus packages’ to carbon-intensive activities (Green Stimulus Proposal, 2020). Several initiatives are already running to advocate for a just recovery (350, 2020).

Even with clear limitations, climate movements can explore the new possibilities (Rose, 2020) and make good use of people’s quarantines by way of tools like digital rallies and on-line broadcasting (Climáximo, 2020; Sunrise Movement, 2020). “Refusing to go back to work” is already under discussion (White, 2020), and we are challenged to ask the ‘right’ questions (Flu Mob, 2020b), such as “what world shall we live in?” (Eisenstein, 2020).

The second wave, which we name ‘support’, would explore the possibilities of the aforementioned reconfiguration path, further backing the change of the “rules of the game” (Avelino et al., 2017). As the pandemic spreads and formal systems get overwhelmed, transformative social innovators can promote local responses. The ecovillages and permaculture projects worldwide have more than 50 years of experience of living of the land and building local communities (Penha-Lopes and Henfrey, 2019). The Transition movement is well-positioned in the urban areas to play a constructive role in the process due to a relatively effective experience in reflecting and acting locally in the perspective of global collapse (Feola and Nunes, 2014; Loorbach et al., 2016). Its capacity to move across a wide political spectrum, an optimistic approach, and a focus on resilience and collaboration (McGregor and Crowther, 2016; Macedo et al., 2020) might favour the symbioses with (still) prevailing regime actors.

Grassroots initiatives can contribute effectively to fight the virus if they manage to adapt to the changing context (Engler, 2020), gaining momentum in the process. From ‘street activism’ we might start getting caretakers, working as fungi to nurture the needed parts of the system and building an interconnected and trustworthy community, with the seeds of new possibilities. From caretakers on a healthier current system, many might start becoming midwives of a new society.
The third wave, related to re-alignment (Geels and Schot, 2007), might arise following a broader collapse, including a breakdown of democracy as we know it. A new translocal governance might emerge by linking cross-scalar, collective, and distributive agencies (Moragues-Faus and Sonnino, 2019). To effectively countervail the current power structures, there is a call (Flor Avelino, 2019) for more strategic collaboration between movements and networks (alongside the spread of new narratives). Entities like ECOLISE, the European Network for Community-led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability, might play a critical role by joining grassroots initiatives and active local governments (EUROCITIES, 2020). These bridging organizations also connect local actors and communities with other scales of organizations, bring resources, and mobilize knowledge and social memory (Folke et al., 2005).

Equally, action researchers are expected to support the co-evolutionary processes by facilitating governance, social learning, resourcing, and reflexive monitoring (Avelino et al., 2019).

Without pressure from incumbent actors and facilitated social acceptance due to the mentioned paradigm shift, a large-scale transition pathway might take place (Hof et al., 2016). More important that jumping to preconceived solutions considered best practices or more sustainable (‘what’), we are called to move upstream. Daniel Wahl (Wahl, 2016) invites us to question not only ‘what’ we manifest, ‘how’ we implement it but also ‘why’ we are being it and doing it. The iceberg model is a framework from systems thinking designed to help an individual or group discover the patterns of behavior, supporting structures, and mental models (such as values, beliefs and assumptions) that underlie a particular event or action.

Also, Daniel integrates in his book frameworks that allow us to be designers of a regenerative culture. Terry Irwin wrote “Until designers shift to a more holistic worldview, design will continue to be part of the problem, not the solution” (2012). For that reason, integral theory frameworks (O’Brien and Hochachka, 2005), such as AQAL (all quadrants, all levels) allow us to operate in the world considering inner and exterior dimensions as well as individual and collective, but also the consciousness levels in our different lines of development (such as cognitive, emotional, spiritual and others). The three horizons framework also bring clarity to all involved in planning, once it considers that we always have to address and nurture the potential and needs of: the present system and situation (1st horizon), the end-state reality we want live in the future (3rd horizon) and the transition state in between both, where some parts of the current system need to adapt, be reinvented or die, and others need to be created, prototyped and developed (2nd horizon).

Since 1970 we are living beyond Earth regenerative capacity (Global Footprint Network, 2020). Regenesis and their members have been testing regenerative development frameworks all over the world (Mang and Haggard, 2016). The work is focused on the developmental potential of place (including territory and its community) with the understanding that we design living nested systems. By exploring the history and uniqueness of the place with the local community and stakeholders in that region, they invoke a deep sense of belonging and ownership.

Inviting all to see the potential of that region (idem), something we all have in common regardless of our other differences, participants understand or can take up new roles of value adding that benefits both community and territory (taking into consideration the human, social, natural, produced and financial capitals). This tends to enhance their will to express themselves in the three lines of work: developing themselves (1st line of work), developing the
capability of the group, team or initiative they are involved (2nd line of work) and serving the development and evolution of larger nested wholes (or the systems beyond the scale it’s been co-creatively designing, 3rd line of work). Accomplished regenerative practitioners might trigger an evolutionary process in the communities they serve that does not stop when the project or policy/funding scheme is over. They are expected to leave the communities better equipped, with new energy (vitality), agency (viability) and capabilities, to keep moving forward (evolution), despite difficulties and obstructions and with a stronger connection to their place, both the natural and human build environment and ‘neighbours’.

In this paper, we have tried to mix both informed and wishful guesses to possible outcomes of the COVID-19 crisis, namely relating sustainability transitions. Before closing, we stress two aspects. First, the COVID-19 is primarily “an international crisis, and a personal tragedy for those who have lost, and will lose, loved ones” (Peters, 2020). The burden is expected to “fall disproportionally on the old, the weak and the poor” (Foster, 2020). If some were fighting to close airports (Periskop, 2020), no one for sure wanted them to become morgues (BBC, 2020). Exploring windows of opportunities does not mean to welcome the epidemic.

The second call for attention relates to the uncertainty of the scenarios explored. Path dependencies are intense, and previous crises frustrated similar expectations (Loorbach et al., 2016; Eisenstein, 2020). Many other situations, like the emergence of authoritarianism and the perpetuation of a culture of domination, are for sure possible or even probable (Eisenstein, 2020; Mair, 2020). Also, a reinforced transformation path might emerge after the crisis, due to a new political culture of prevention and long-term thinking. We need to acknowledge our ignorance and expect the unimaginable. We have to “accept that Earth is winning”, avoid the “saviour narrative” and “accept the limitation of what we can do now” (White, 2020).

For a deep transformation towards a better collective future to happen, not only climate activists, social innovators, action researchers, and networkers, but all society, including regime actors, are called to explore the new possibilities and collectively create a new culture of caring and regeneration. We might not get a unique opportunity like this one to redeem our generation.

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