

## Environmentalism after the Pandemic

▼ **KEYWORDS** Environmentalism, COVID-19, sustainability, ecocentric, governance

▼ **ABSTRACT** The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the explosive emergence of environmentalism accompanied by increasingly influential scientific, regulative and managerial roles for the environmental sciences. Since then, there has been a comprehensive increase of awareness and understanding of a whole spectrum of global to local environmental and socio-cultural dilemmas. Environmentalism has experienced a complicated set of tendentious relations with the various forms of capitalism. We argue here that any transformation to truly sustainable futures requires either a transformative integration of green growth within a modified capitalism, or a progressive shift to radically new ways of experiencing and living around sustainable localism. The pandemic has brought the world extraordinarily almost to a halt. It has offered a unique opportunity to consider, debate, and possibly implement sustainable livelihoods in myriads of different cultural and political settings via progressive social, political and economic reforms. By reconceptualising historical ideas of environmentalism into a new set of global to local arrangements post-pandemic, we can begin to shape and to live into sustainability, ideally across the whole planet. It is vital to progress with hope and through the yearnings of young people, and not with despair and through degeneration by clinging onto the old ways.

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## Introduction

*It could be that this idea of a humbler world, or some idea like it, is both radical and necessary in the way that cutting off a leg can be both radical and necessary*

(McKibben, 2003: 201)

Since the 1960s, environmentalism and the environmental sciences have rapidly become an embedded part of modern life by generating and contributing to the growing awareness of the overwhelming dilemmas of environmental and socio-cultural degeneration across the world, and of confronting these as they are slotted into ill-suited policy arenas (Taylor and Buttell, 1992; O'Riordan, 2000). As a result, we have exploded environmental knowledge and hugely complicated the processes of repair and restoration. The ironic legacy is a plethora of causes and consequences of diverse environmental challenges (e.g. rising global temperatures, melting ice caps, loss in biodiversity, soil degradation, natural resource depletion, habitat loss, deforestation, toxicity, widening and deepening economic inequality, and social and political injustice) all of which pose a significant risk to the Earth's interrelated systems; including the longevity of all forms of life.<sup>1</sup> Yet, we continue to cascade down paths of unsustainable growth and consumption which greatly amplify these issues.

*Environmentalism* (O'Riordan, 1976) was the first systematic engagement with the history and rise of modern environmentalism, covering a lot of ground in doing so. This included comprehensive discussion and debate on growth and resource management, environmental law, the politics of environmentalism and the lessons resulting from various measurements of environmental quality with a purpose of illuminating the ever-growing, complex and multifaceted issue of environmentalism and environmental degradation. *Environmentalism* was prescient and possessed insights that are still highly applicable in 2020 (see Adger and Jordan, 2006).

It was written at a time of great intellectual, scientific and political ferment in the environmental scene. There were the frenzied *Limits to Growth* debates (Meadows et al. 1972) claiming, with increasing modern accuracy, the depletion of critical natural resources and life support mechanisms. There was also Ernst Schumacher and his *Small is Beautiful* (1972) book which spurred *The Ecologist* and *Resurgence* Magazines. These were cultivated social and political movements: they were not just publications. They have now very effectively combined and have long supported Schumacher College, with its thousands of active eco-alumni, based in Totnes, in Devon. On

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1 For an analysis of the 'dark forces' opposing net-zero, see Klein, N. (2015) *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*, London; Wallace-Wells, D. (2019) *The Uninhabitable Earth; Life after Warming*, New York.

the science/politics front came the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (Owens, 2015), and the various forms of the Green Party (Porritt, 1984). *Environmentalism* captured the emergence of both the global with the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, and the local with the emergence of eco-communities, for instance, in Findhorn, and the Centre for Alternative Technology in Machynlleth in Wales.

O’Riordan (1976) identified that modern environmentalism can be separated into two main intellectual and ideological branches: ecocentrism and technocentrism. Ecocentric approaches position the natural world, self-sustainability and self-reliance at the heart of decision-making and recognise the intrinsic value of all lifeforms and ecosystems. This spurs the eco-community movement and the flourishing of local credit schemes (Smith et al., 2015). At the heart of ecocentrism is a vision, but not yet an actuality, of redistributive power-sharing and social justice along with cultural flourishing at millions of local scales. Technocentric approaches, however, dominate the environmental world, buoyed up by a hubristic optimism that science and technology will forever discover solutions or management techniques to alleviate pressing environmental issues and increase conventional growth. Such an approach concentrates power and widens inequality thereby maintaining the environment as a component of capital. This is the standard critique of capitalism as typically portrayed by Naomi Klein (Klein, 2015; McKibben, 2019).

Placing this in a historical context, *Environmentalism* portrayed a disjointed distinction between captured technocentrism alongside a neglected ecocentrism. The emerging ‘green’ technocentrism persistently seeks to aggregate the forces of planetary destruction and injustice in various assuaging measures of acceptability to political power brokers, technological innovators (Hulme, 2014) and indeed, to many mainstream environmental movements as seen in the business community, academia and the running of government across the planet. It is hardly surprising that the Davos World Economic Forum contains a sustainability component, and that the Olympic movement seeks to recycle as much as possible and run on renewable energy. However, none of this changes the overall ill-being of the world very much. But it appears progressive and positive, and environmental damage would be harshly more prominent if the ‘sustainability concept’ was absent.

Yet the contradictions between ‘green technocentrism’ and more demanding self-sufficient ecocentrism are becoming frustratingly evident. Before the pandemic, we witnessed a rise of regular, youth-led climate movements (Fridays for Future). These mix ecocentric and technocentric elements that reflect the idea that the future has to redefine planetary wellbeing and meaningful life for all future generations. Still, it is difficult to conceptualise any pathway to a net-zero society without a fair chunk of technocentrism, even though the end state could be ecocentric. This is evident in the recommendations of the Citizens’ Assembly UK (2020) which grappled with how to reach net zero with dollops of green technocentrism. Technocentric approaches often fall short by favouring continued ‘sustainable’ growth, even if truly sustainable

living is incompatible with such initiatives. They can act, however, as bridges to an ecocentric world.

## COVID-19

The COVID-19 experience is different from other big economic crises of the last 50 years (Oil Crisis in the 1970s, Financial Collapse in 2008, other global health scares) in that it reaches all facets of life on Earth and requires rapid and drastic attention in the form of global lockdowns.<sup>2</sup> The oil crisis dented Western security and escalated geopolitical tensions in the Middle East. The Financial Crisis caused near-total economic collapse, mass unemployment, and over a decade of insidious austerity. That left its baleful mark by tearing through communities, withering public services, and lowering the quality of life. We have experienced potentially global public health scares of easily transmissible illnesses, even in our lifetimes (e.g. swine flu, SARS, Ebola, and Zika) but these have been contained by excellent medical science and vastly improved public health services.

COVID-19 is different for many reasons:

1. We have witnessed major global lockdown to protect public health against a virulent biological threat that was not contained early enough, and which is highly contagious – the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It shows no signs of leaving in a hurry and may prove to be forever endemic in the human population. The technocentrists yearn for a vaccine which will harken normality: no governing politician can contemplate a permanent non-normality.
2. The economy was paused for the sake of public health. It was once easier to imagine an apocalypse than to imagine the end of capitalism (Fisher, 2007). This is no longer the case. The economy can be paused if the need is sufficiently great. There are plausible speculations that the collateral economic and social damage of lockdown may end up being worse than the possible health effects of the virus itself. We suggest this is more likely if some variant of technocentrism is doggedly pursued that will champion 'business-as-usual' approaches.
3. COVID-19 has opened a fast-forwarded window onto what effects of climate change may be like (even if still 30 or so years away). We have already witnessed deep distress for health and livelihoods. We understand the connection to the destruction of natural biomes and the release of viruses contained in wild animals profoundly stressed and displaced. We face for the first time a possible future where our children will be demonstrably and progressively worse off than we are, and who will become unable to claw their way to sustainable living.

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2 Few countries were the exception in enforcing a lockdown.

Broadly, the pandemic has revealed the fragility of public health, existing economic systems, social and political governance, and is exacerbated by the looming threat of grand environmental challenges. It is now thought that COVID-19 may become endemic to human populations, or if not, we may see a rise in other global pandemics (Murdoch, 2020). If so, we will need a major transformation of our current ways of life that can attend to the growing complexity and intersectionality of pandemic and environmental challenges.

As COVID-19 has spread across the globe, shutting down economies and causing global health crises for all human populations, we find ourselves at a fork-in-the-road when imagining viable human futures after the pandemic. Spaces are emerging to implement more ecocentric modes of living that were never previously so readily accessible and desperately needed for life hereon.

## Environmentalism vs Capitalism

Environmentalism challenges almost all features of modern Western democratic culture, despite the element of capitalism that is centred on distributive justice, e.g. the welfare and benefits provisions, volunteerism, and philanthropy. Exploitative methods of resource extraction, degenerating land-use and persistent industrial production – based on dubious economic viability and chaotic market volatility, continue to put profit for the few before the progressive protection of the environment and the wellbeing of the entire planet. This will continue despite any attempt at national or international government intervention in a capitalist order (UN Environment, 2019).

Additionally, the planet is becoming increasingly uninhabitable for a forecast population of 10 billion as it currently is being treated. If we continue down business-as-usual approaches to living or focus on long-term technocentric solutions, life on Earth will remain under the notorious double-edge sword of Damocles; one side leading inexorably to environmental collapse and climate perturbation, the other being a breathless race between the damaging effects of technologically alleviating degradation and profound and widening human misery. This vision seems dire, but it is supported by many official reports.<sup>3</sup> Population does not have to be an issue if we can transition to more equitable and just consumption rather than a continued regime that sees countries like

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3 For the global picture please consult the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Global Warming of 1.5 Degrees* (2018), and *Climate Change and Land* (2019). Other global summaries include UN Environment, *Emissions Gap Report* (2018); US Global Change Research Program, *Fourth National Climate Assessment* (2018); and the International Energy Agency, *World Energy Outlook 2019* (2019). For the UK, see the UK Committee on Climate Change, *Net Zero: the UK's contribution to stopping global warming* (2019). The report of the Global Adaptation Commission, *Adapt Now: A Global Call for Leadership on Climate Resilience* (2019) will initiate five years of considerable financial and political resources into planning, financing and coalition building.

the USA and the UK exceed their biocapacity (Global Footprint Network, 2020). More localised approaches to living and governance should alleviate this – even more so during this and future pandemics – as travel is necessarily restricted. A focus on the sharing of local goods – food, trade, culture - is needed, not only to avoid the widespread circulation of the virus but also to reduce our damaging relationship with the environment.

*Environmentalism* was published 44 years ago, during a time in which recession and economic crises were evident for most of the Western world. The warning signs of a dramatically changing environment were early and apparent throughout the world. Now in 2020, our knowledge and general understanding of environmental change are extensive, but fundamental actionable steps toward sustainability are still lacklustre. Nonetheless, there have been some admirable attempts for introducing sustainability science as a means for improving environmental futures, especially on the collective global front (O’Riordan et al., 2020). Notable other examples include the major global scientific commissions of planetary audit, and the emergence of Future Earth as a global stocktaking interdisciplinary science linked to government, business and civil society. Nevertheless, these shining initiatives are mostly rigidly attached to technocentric solutions and futures.

The pandemic offers us the chance to imagine what life may look like in a post-corona-crisis world. Such a world will require the transformation of moral outlooks, institutional arrangements and collective actions into what can and should be reasonably pursued to move progressively towards sustainability. This would combine a blend of ecocentrism and technocentrism at first but could move progressively to ecocentrism at the local scale over a couple of decades. The pandemic has paused the economy and created the space needed to implement a phased-replacement of capitalist systems and structures that would not have happened otherwise. Governments are in a position, with political weight, to attach sustainability conditions when bailing out exploitative industries (e.g. no domestic flights, supporting emissions cuts, aligning business models to surpass the Paris Agreement). There is appetite call for meaningful change. For example, EU member states have been quick to agree that the EU’s response to the pandemic must remain aligned with its European Green Deal (EGD) (European Council, 2020). Yet this purpose is primarily technocentric in construction. Nonetheless, we sketch out possible governance options for more sustainable futures in a post-pandemic world or future-pandemic world

## **Governance Options**

The first stage in creating more ecocentric futures is to redesign governance. Governance applies to arrangements for steering and guiding nations, regions, local government and citizens into common commitments for the kinds of transformational change that make a sustainability transition, partially

envisaged in the EGD, actually work. The relevant institutions here are legislatures, executive organisations, regulatory bodies, business representative groups, non-governmental organisations, policy analytical investigatory groups, community bodies, and citizens' forums. Essentially it needs to extend to every individual, but always in a social and cultural context.

To transit to a post-pandemic sustainability, all of these arrangements will face up to having to alter their interrelationships, their ways of communicating inwards and outwards, their forms of measures and performance indicators, and their patterns of power and authority.

The primary ecocentric settings for this process are:

- **Wellbeing for present and future generations** as a core value and objective for defining and enhancing the common good;
- The progressive pivot towards **self-reliant localism** (placing community and self-sustaining economy into a combined and caring/sharing setting) as the centre of gravity in future governance;
- Greater use of **citizen-based democracy** via mechanisms such as citizen assemblies, civic conversations, active sustainability learning across the full spectrum of citizenry and co-production/design that leans towards complete inclusion for all engaged citizens and communities. All over the world publics have both suffered and been frightened. The demand for enabling those motivated and enabled to do so, directly to steer their futures with less interference from the controlling centre is an important feature of the post-pandemic age.
- **Long-range sustaining expenditure in all sectors** is already beginning to happen. The remarkable investment in maintaining the consumer viability and personal employment dignity through massive government-financed support schemes could morph into very significant collective expenditures on low carbon infrastructure, on retraining otherwise redundant millions (at risk of losing their jobs and livelihoods in the looming, immediate recession and years of economic collapse) for creating a net-zero economy, and for buttressing social enterprises to uplift a wellbeing society. Here is where true ecocentrism could evolve.

## Transformational Eco-citizenship

The second ingredient is the need to create transformational and sustainable communities throughout the political range. This is the essence of self-reliant localism. One possibility is a move towards creative living in collectively designed and self-sustaining garden communities. During the pandemic, in the UK, there has been a surge in fruit and vegetable seed sales, visits to The Royal Horticultural Society website and applications for allotments (Cockburn, 2020; Smithers, 2020). This signals that regenerative agriculture and community-based food production are already being explored which



apply first and foremost to visions of sustainable futures based on decency, fairness, compassion, security and proactive justice. The post-pandemic era will result in a people who will demand much more from their governance so that which they can place their trust and effort into a renaissance of a caring society which is currently being tested in these difficult months of closure. There is also the vital need to create learning and active citizen engagement to enable every person to be trained by active association into being an **eco-citizen**. There can be no successful sustainability transformation if there is no highly active, aware and complying green citizenry (Scottish Government, 2016). Early signs of this are being recognised in the promising youth-led climate movements, but more can be achieved as we chart the terrain of this pandemic.

## Environmentalism and Future-Making

The pandemic has instilled tremendous fear and anxiety throughout the globe as populations attempt to distance themselves (where possible) from the virus. However, governments are attempting hurriedly to return to a pre-COVID-19 world. The promotion of the economy over public health is symptomatic of twenty-first century capitalist dogma. The Western world is now risking the public health of populations and the environment for the sake of growth and regaining control – but this is not a new phenomenon. COVID-19's pause on the economy has illuminated, very publicly (particularly in the UK and US) the immoral and unjust exploits associated with the pursuit of capital. This is illustrated with much of the middle-classes being able to work from home (and work from home relatively comfortably), whilst those in more practical roles, either in health care, construction, trades, mechanics, or in hospitality and retail sectors (to name but a few) are forced return to work, amidst the pandemic, with few other options. Those who are working from home but possess less space (in a flat or house share, lacking equipment) and those with children or dependents, are also struggling in unsatisfactory working conditions, to make ends meet, for the foreseeable future.

Alternative futures to this are being widely speculated. Initially, the '4-day Week Campaign' has been proposed in the UK, but echoed across the globe, to reduce the impact of economic crisis – opening up more time for domestic tourism, community building, and general improvements in well-being whilst the work is shared more equally across the community (Harper, 2020). Moreover, rather than embrace mass employment, we have the capacity to create new jobs for meaningful social maintenance and repair rather than suffer more decades of poor livelihoods. The new jobs could aid and train new forms of eco-communitarianism and eco-governance, or may come from investments into green infrastructure and training to begin



and the formal transition to an ecocentric world. We are still not yet there. The UK Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, has recently announced that the UK will commit an investment of £3 billion to 'green' construction and recovery in order to stimulate job growth in a green technocentric way. In the light of the dire challenge to fulfilling future employment on our doorsteps, this is worthy, but small beer.

## Conclusions

As we move through the pandemic, there is a growing recognition that the economy is only one of the mutually constitutive components in human lives. Those interconnections can now be mapped and connected. We have the media, science and political tools to do it. As we imagine post-COVID-19 futures, one-way forward is to escape the imprisoning traps of technocentrism and begin to embrace the wellbeing of ecocentrism (O'Riordan, 1976) – democracy can only be achieved by realising the creative diversity of mutually sustaining communities – in which the natural world is one of many.

Ecocentric modes of living that predominantly focus on self-sustainability, localism and degrowth are more conducive to an equitable future, just and permanent for all forms of life. This is because they intentionally and actively promote inter-species equality and justice, they require a reformulation of values or morals that go beyond anthropocentrism drawing humans back into the ecology of life in where they play a crucial but not central role. As a result, they limit environmentally destructive and damaging practices as new futures and modes of living are envisioned performed (Washington et al., 2017). This will not arrive soon.

What we have witnessed in this marvellous collection is a range of imaginable futures, illustrative human-nature entanglements, sense and knowledge-making in a pandemic, the future of environmental politics and historical vulnerabilities all of which grounded in rich historical context, nuance and insight. Scattered in this package is a thread of various versions of control, of societies, of economies, of thinking and perspectives, of science, and of governance. Here we offer a possible and hopeful coming decade amidst these fascinating historical interpretations. We are well aware that sustainable localism could founder on the basis of three current failings. One is that localism has as yet, no constituency. A second is that all local governance is starved, by higher orders of government, of imagination, inventiveness and innovation, so is not seen by many as effective and this suits the technocentric powers. And the third is that the next generation, for whom sustainable localism could well prove a salvation, are not yet politically mobilised. Maybe the role of a collection like this is to take it out to the people all over the world and encourage them to extend their visions of history as future and work with the active academic community to forge a new sustainable localism.

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