

# Corona and Climate - Eight Paralells

## What we can Learn From one Crisis Regarding the Other

For decades we have been witnessing a collective failure: one climate agreement after the other, painstakingly fought for, has proved ineffective and thus meaningless. Those who were aware of the scale of the catastrophe we were heading for regarding global warming, despaired by the stoic indifference with which everything simply continued to take its course.

But then, all of a sudden, things change: the coronavirus appears. Within a few weeks, large parts of our gigantic machinery come to a halt. Regardless of economic losses or personal conditions and whatever the cost, drastic measures are being taken, like none of us have ever experienced before.

These measures happen on a way larger scale than anything even the most radical eco-activists ever imagined in their wildest dreams. Soon critical minds raise their voices: why are we ignoring one threat for decades, while no effort is too much for another?

Part of the answer is certainly that the threat posed by the climate crisis is very abstract and therefore intangible for many people. This is exactly where the coronavirus

pandemic can help us, because in some respects this crisis is a smaller model of the much larger ecological crisis we have been heading towards for decades.

Even the little break that the temporary standstill of our economy and society gave nature will not change anything if we continue as before. Or – even worse - if we then throw hard-won environmental standards overboard in order to merely get the economy going again, as some are already demanding.

But perhaps we will succeed in using this crisis to act more intelligently in the much larger and more complex climate crisis. This article tries to identify key similarities to support this learning process.

## **1. Exponentiality and tipping points**

The coronavirus pandemic is a crash course for all of us in terms of exponentiality. To put it in a nutshell: by the time the effects become visible and tangible, it will be too late to stop the catastrophe. That applies to corona and it also applies to the climate.

In both cases, the spread (of the virus)/increase (of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere) progresses invisibly. We look doubtingly at the calculations by experts, who predict the collapse of certain parts of the system in the near future. Our mind understands what they are saying, but everything inside of us goes into resistance. Because it

cannot be felt and experienced, it remains completely unreal.

## **2. Failure of intuition**

This also leads to our intuition failing. Since gut intelligence is based on experiential knowledge, it is overwhelmed by this situation. No matter how much data we evaluate, it remains abstract and surreal on our perceptive level. We still have the subjective feeling that everything is fine and we are safe.

That's how most people felt in the first weeks of the pandemic, when it was still an abstract threat somewhere in China and everyone wondered whether the media weren't exaggerating excessively once again. Only when politics started to take draconian measures, like closing borders, shops and schools, did we start to see the new reality. But even then, many were still doubting. Conspiracy theories and trivializations seemed much more plausible than the horror scenario that the experts predicted. When it comes to climate change, there are still people today who stubbornly claim that it's just normal weather phenomena and similarly with regard to the coronavirus, there are those who trivialize the virus as just being like the flu.

## **3. "We couldn't care less"**

This attitude can be found in both crises. In the case of the climate crisis, it is the older generation, which mainly

has the decision-making power and who can say that they don't care anyway. When the effects of the current inaction are felt, they will not be here anymore. This is what Fridays for Future has been telling them again and again over the past year and a half. The young people demand a say and participation in saving their future.

With the coronavirus pandemic the opposite is the case. Some young people seem to think they don't need to care: the virus is a particular threat to people over 60 and those with pre-existing conditions. Young people celebrating "corona parties" can be seen as an analogy to the inertia of older decision makers when it comes to climate protection.

#### **4. Solutions can only be found through cooperation and solidarity**

Both crises can only be overcome through cooperation and solidarity - and this offers a great opportunity. The short-sightedness of the "corona parties" and the protracted climate policies is obvious: decision-makers usually have children and grandchildren who will have to pay the price. Young people attending to those parties are not only precisely those children and grandchildren, they are also deeply dependent on the functioning of exactly those systems that their behavior endangers.

Both corona and the climate are a new kind of challenge for us. As a culture and society, we are very good at fighting a common external enemy and as humans we have thousands of years of experience in that.

Some politicians and journalists use this picture in their rhetoric and soon started to talk about the "war against corona". In recent times, the attitude has also become increasingly martial in dealing with the climate. Charles Eisenstein analyses this so-called "war mentality" in climate activism in detail in his book "Climate - A New Story".

But this attitude overlooks the fact that we are not facing an external enemy here. During times of war the following principle applies: any harm done to the other is our benefit. If, the winner is the one who does the most damage to the other as ruthlessly as possible.

However, the opposite is true for both climate and corona, where there is no external enemy: the damage of another puts us all at risk. Every new infection carries the risk of further spread. Hoarding leads to shortages. Every flight, every SUV, every coal-fired power station destroys the efforts of individuals to act more climate-consciously, just like every country that does not care. Both crises can only be solved by radical solidarity and cooperation, not by lone wolves and competition. At the same time, not everyone has to participate. It is enough for the vast majority to be involved.

## **5. A lot of uncertainty**

Dealing with both crises is particularly difficult because of the enormous uncertainty with which all experts, all data

and all models are afflicted. In both cases there is a broad consensus among experts that the danger is real. But how it will develop exactly, whether we are dealing with a temperature increase of 1.5 degrees or 5 degrees, whether two weeks or eighteen months of quarantine are necessary, whether the mortality rate is 0.7 or 6 percent - there is a great deal of uncertainty about all this.

Just like there is regarding economic consequences. Will everything return to normal in a few weeks, as many are still hoping? Or is the pandemic tipping the scales, which trigger the big crash of the unstable economy worldwide, but does not cause it, as many self-appointed crash prophets would have us believe?

This is similar for both cases, because we are dealing with such a new situation that we can hardly draw on any experience. These are times, in which people are drawn to simple answers. Conspiracy theories are strangely reassuring, because here at least someone seems to be pulling the strings. Trivialization and alarmism are both attempts to obtain certainty in a situation that is very unfamiliar to us and therefore difficult to bear: not knowing.

## **6. Who is really systemically relevant?**

In 2008, banks were rescued on a large scale based on the claim that they were systemically important and this was difficult to understand for many people. Systemically

relevant for whom? And for which system? Questions like these were asked back then already.

The corona crisis shows that the definition of system-relevance at the time completely missed the point in society. Systemically relevant for the financial system, for the economic system, yes, but for the people?

In the corona crisis, all those become visible who have so far received little attention and appreciation: nurses, warehouse staff, supermarket cashiers, garbage collectors, police, harvest workers, truck drivers, delivery service drivers and many more. Suddenly it is clear: if they disappear, if they can no longer go to work because they are sick, cannot enter the country or have to look after their children, then we really have a problem.

And this is not an abstract problem happening somewhere on the stock exchange, in figures or on paper, but it is quite tangible showing itself in the form of empty supermarket shelves, overflowing garbage cans, missing staff in agriculture and lack of supplies in the hospitals. The coronavirus pandemic suddenly creates awareness for our existential dependence on one another.

We have the chance to recognize and appreciate ourselves as a system in a completely new way. In London, homeless people are taken to hotels for free by taxi drivers, where rooms are provided for them free of charge, because it is clear: by protecting them, we protect all of us, by taking care of them, we take care of ourselves.

The climate crisis, on the other hand, calls for a much greater recognition of connectedness. It is not just a matter of recognizing us as a society as a system, but as a planetary system. Just as the warehouse workers or truck drivers in the corona crisis, the bees and the forests - to name just two examples – are critical in the climate crisis. To say that we cannot afford species protection, as some farmers argued in opposition to the species protection law in Bavaria, is absurd. Similarly absurd is the idea that we cannot afford to protect the storekeeper or the care worker and pay them a decent salary for the systemically important work they do.

## **7. What is really important?**

It is often said that during times of crises we show our true colors. You could also say that crises reveal our values and show how important they are to us. In the case of the climate crisis, just as in dealing with the migration movements of recent years, the impression was often created that we as a society are actually only concerned with one thing: profit and our own short-term well-being. This is not a pretty picture.

Corona now shows that at least one value is deeply rooted in our cultural self-image: every life counts, even the one of the old and weak. In order to protect this part of the population, we are prepared to make great sacrifices and also to accept severe economic consequences. At the same time, the way we deal with refugees, whom we are



abandoning, shows that this value apparently only applies to our own country or our own continent. Unfortunately.

The climate crisis, on the other hand, shows quite clearly the values that we as a society and as a culture have not yet developed. Every human life counts - but the lives of animals, plants and ecosystems, although theoretically recognized as worthy of protection, are ignored in practice on a daily basis. The problem here is similar: when we realize that life is a whole, just as society is a whole, it may already be too late.

#### **8. To what extent can we leave the responsibility for the common good to individuals?**

We are currently trying out how much individual responsibility and freedom is possible when it comes to protecting the common good. Is it enough when German Chancellor Angela Merkel appeals to the sense of responsibility of everyone to stay at home? Or do we need nationwide curfews, as they have already been imposed in many other countries?

This approach reminds me of the procrastination when it comes to climate protection. For years, demands for stricter measures were rejected with the claim that "everyone should start with themselves". How absurd this approach is gets clear when at the same time the advertising machinery continues at full speed to propagate a highly unsustainable lifestyle and our economic system is dependent on hyperconsumption.

When it comes to the coronavirus crisis, would we demand on the one hand to stay at home and at the same time broadcast commercials for holidays, restaurant visits and other mass events on all channels? Would football matches continue to be held in large stadiums and tickets be sold for them, but we would ask people to stay away?

### **Our current lifestyle threatens the basis of life for future generations**

Those who have made efforts in recent years to minimize their own ecological footprint often felt like the one person who actually stays at home while everyone else rushes into the stadium. In such a context, one's own efforts can at best be understood as a symbolic act. The people who enjoy the football match in the sold-out stadium can't help themselves but only shake their heads laughing cynically at all this. Because it doesn't matter anyway.

Yes, there is not really a point if it's just a single individual who acts. But if we all acknowledge certain restrictions as necessary at the same time, then there certainly is a point. Anyone who now thinks that I am advocating some kind of eco-dictatorship is getting it wrong. I am pleading for restrictions that we choose together for the benefit of us all, just as we are currently accepting for fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

The following example might illustrate more clearly what I mean: Imagine we live in a society where theft is commonplace. Everybody steals, it's considered normal. If

we want to change this, then it's pointless to appeal to individuals to stop. If you are the only person who does not steal in a society of thieves, you are bound to look like an idiot. It would be useless and you would always draw the short straw.

At the same time, it is obvious that everyone is better off if a law prohibits theft and this law is enforced to protect everyone. But only if everyone stops stealing at the same time. This is what comes to my mind when I look at our society. Theft seems to be normal. Our way of life steals the basis of life from future generations of humans and other species.

Every cheaply mass-produced item is a piece of theft. Stealing the life quality of a worker in a low-wage country, the education of his children, the environmental standards violated during production, etc. But this theft is so commonplace in our country that anyone who stops it doesn't really make a difference. They even must accept all of the disadvantages that come with it, if they do. Most of the time, it is the wealthier population who can afford a clear conscience.

Binding, socially acceptable rules that actually make a difference would benefit us all. Not only that. They would, like in the coronavirus pandemic, save lives. The experience with corona shows that the danger is only recognized as real by many when exactly such rules are established. It is similar with climate protection: As long as the ones in

charge do nothing, it will not be seen as a real problem in the minds of many people.

Of course, there is a lot of complaining. Nobody is excited about curfews or cancelled football matches. But corona also shows that people are grateful when clear measures are taken to deal with a concrete danger and that most are okay to comply then.

### **Using the pause**

The corona pandemic also shows us that it doesn't have to be all bad. The lockdown is already resulting in unexpected creativity and solidarity. Artists discover livestreams and offer their performances on the Internet for free. Suddenly, families have loads of quality time together. The enforced distance gives rise to a new longing for togetherness and contact.

Many people also seem to use the pause to clean up inside and outside. Recycling centers were heavily frequented in the first few days of the corona measures, for some even nesting instincts kicked in. Life plans were questioned or completely thrown overboard.

Appropriate climate protection measures that would reflect the real urgency of the situation would not only have to be negative. Like the lockdown, they would force us to become creative and develop new ways of enjoying life. We could discover that real prosperity is not the same as hyperconsumerism.

Other forms of prosperity such as time prosperity, relationship prosperity or creativity prosperity could gain importance. In the same way, our concept of freedom could change: perhaps from our freedom to jet around the world or to accumulate unlimited material possessions, to the freedom to develop our potential as human beings and to contribute meaningfully. Being free from the higher-faster-further maxim of the growth paradigm, we could rediscover what is really important.

Nothing is like it was before and we can also see this as an opportunity. Let's use it together! Not only for dealing with the coronavirus, but for the much more pressing issues about our whole system. Because those will remain, even after the lockdown.

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