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Organizing for the Future Beyond the Coronacrisis: A UK Perspective

Neil Howard

Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath

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**Organizing for the Future Beyond the Coronacrisis:
A UK Perspective**

Neil Howard

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Introduction

This is different.

It is different from anything that most people on these islands have ever experienced, and different from what the vast majority of us ever imagined experiencing.

It is not simply a public health crisis, an economic crisis, or even a capitalist crisis, depending on your standpoint. For reasons I will go on to explain, I think it is a crisis that cuts to the core of our very humanity, our individual and collective being, and in it, I believe, is contained the potential best and worst of what is possible amongst our species.

The first thing to emphasise is that many people are dying and more will do so; each one of those deaths will be a tragedy for every single loved one left. That has always been true and one of the more poignant elements of what we are living now is that finally so many of us are remembering it.

Let's remember, too, the medical, care and food workers who are keeping everyone alive by stepping into the kind of service that only really has parallels in war. Let's pause to imagine what they are living...and give thanks.

Now let's ask ourselves what is to be done.

This is my faltering and incomplete attempt to begin answering that question, specifically in the context of the UK, where I live. I aim to make sense of what is so unique about this time, identify the opportunities that it is opening, and lay some foundations for how we might organize to make the most of them.

I do not doubt that others are doing similar things, possibly more effectively than me. I also know that, in making my case, I choose to emphasise certain more hopeful elements of what we are witnessing over other more disquieting ones. This is not (only) because I am optimistic, privileged and naive, but because the disquieting elements represent a continuation or exacerbation of the status quo, whereas the hopeful ones point beyond it.

In reading my hope, please know that I do not deny our differences. Nor do I suggest that we are all now one in the rainbow nation of Pandemia. Everything we experience is mediated by our social position and our privilege or lack thereof. This is why the breakdown of impacts is disaggregating and will continue to disaggregate by class, race, gender, and so on. Similarly, there is a possibility – even a likelihood – of violent and regressive responses from authorities and people alike. It is partly in order to help make these less likely that I am writing now.

I structure what I have to say in two parts. Each can be read independently. Part 1 identifies why and how this crisis is so significant and different; if you are focussed on making sense of what is happening, then this may be of interest. Part 2 articulates a vision along with some principles and strategies for how we might use the present moment to usher in the better world latent in this one. If your interest lies in action, then you may want to start there.

Fundamentally, my key points across the two parts will be these:

- i) we are living through a historical moment in which the logic of accumulation (and, within it, separation) is being challenged systemically by that of care (and, within it, our interrelatedness);
- ii) this is seeing resources channelled to meet human needs in a way previously unthinkable;
- iii) traditional orthodoxies are breaking down, on both the left and right;
- iv) opportunities are therefore opening up, to see things differently, envision a different future, and organize towards building one;
- v) in organizing for this different future, *hope* is emerging as our golden thread and *care* our guiding principle;
- vi) this points towards two central strategic demands: for #NoGoingBack and for a state-mandated people's assembly to decide how we react, how we build anew, and how we use this crisis to address the other, bigger crises that await us. A movement of movements could help us get there.

Part 1

Why Is This So Significant?

When Chinese officials first announced that they had identified a previously unknown virus on January 7th, few of us imagined that this is where we would be only a few months later. True, there had been warnings. Epidemiologists had been speaking for a while of a '[Disease X](#)' that could wreak havoc among the human population, while [critical biologists](#) have long warned us that intensive, profit-driven systems of agriculture (and in particular animal farming) create the perfect conditions for pathogens to emerge and quickly spread. Likewise, economists of all stripes have [predicted a coming recession](#), noting for some time that the post-2008 recovery was largely fictitious because built on ever-increasing concentrations of wealth, a huge spike in debt, and the decline of real production. Yet still, no-one predicted this. So, what is different about it? These are the things that strike me as especially important.

Unprecedented

1. This is not strictly (or only) a capitalist crisis.

At least not in the sense of being one of the regular meltdowns that 'the system' undergoes as a result of its own [internal contradictions](#). Yes, it is grinding to a halt and possibly even collapsing before our very eyes; what we are living is both dependent on and entirely mediated by our existence as beings within it; and it is true that we probably would not be here were it not for the fact that capital has pushed back the frontiers of nature, unlocking previously locked-in pathogens and [creating conditions for their transmission](#) through global transport networks. However, this is different from 2008, 1987, and even 1929, in part because what we are experiencing feels like a *deus ex machina* moment, a black swan event that comes from beyond the system, from the world of life that exists outside of it and yet can still impact it.

This, I sense, opens up space, both to see the system *as a system* – albeit a messy, unstable and inconsistent one – and to react to it in different ways. For example, on the right and in the so-called centre, crises are usually lived as important but rarely do their impacts become so personal and thus challenging. Likewise, on the left, although crises are expected (even longed for), we usually have clear, established pathways that we seek to operationalise in building the better world. But what if this crisis and the organic responses emerging to it point towards different destinations and alternative routes for getting there? And what if those who are usually our enemies are now joined with us in shared experience? I will have a lot to say about these questions below.

2. An unexpected political response

It is a truism that capital ignores externalities when it is allowed to; or, in everyday language, that business interests are generally sanguine about causing a bit of damage along the way (think of oil spills). It is also a truism that most governments, including the UK's, work in the service of business by structuring society in ways that subordinate most people's well-being most of the time to profit-making and growth. These truisms are both widely borne out by fact – in ordinary times, many of the economically expendable are left to [suffer and ultimately die](#). Which is why, ordinarily, one might have expected those in power to respond to this outbreak in a neo-Malthusian way, allowing it to rip through populations, rooting out the elderly and the weak, while business carries on and potentially [even benefits](#), as Naomi Klein so powerfully documented in *The Shock Doctrine*.

But what is interesting right now is precisely that this is *not* the way that many governments are responding, and certainly not the UK government. In fact, its response is broadly the opposite: although its actions still leave much to be desired, they nevertheless largely involve subordinating business in the service of wider society. This is evident in the immense disruption caused to most businesses by lockdown and to specific (structurally important) businesses in the [nationalisations](#) and [compulsory production orders](#) that are taking place.

Of course, many will rightly point to the fact that the nationalisations are only temporary, while the lockdown difficulties are being eased by massive injections of liquidity that will probably be followed by huge corporate bailouts that seek to resume 'normal service'. Likewise, people can see dangerous and damaging heel-dragging on the part of authorities keen to protect the status quo but who are ultimately having their hands forced by a groundswell from below. This is true and it is vitally important. However, if we focus exclusively on it then I fear we may miss part of what is potentially so transformative about this moment.

For me, this is the fact that, on paper at least, the very *system-logic* of profit has temporarily been suspended; even more radically, it is being replaced by a system-logic of [care](#). This not only involves certain of our structures being purposefully re-jigged to send resources to where they are needed rather than (as is normally the case) to where power is concentrated. It also involves our leaders tacitly admitting the simple but revolutionary truth that there *is* another principle by which life can be organized – care. This was evident in Boris Johnson's remarkable repudiation of Thatcherite doctrine, when he stated that ['there is such a thing as society'](#) in his last speech before hospitalisation. That kind of rhetoric opens the long-suppressed possibility that there is in fact an alternative and a market-dominated system might not be the best way to advance human well-being after all. I think this is at the heart of what makes this such a historical moment. Because we have not seen anything like it since WW2, and that was a catalyst for building the Welfare State.

3. The unimaginable has become inevitable

Following on from the above, one of the more remarkable consequences of what we are living is that leaders ideologically (and at times fanatically) committed to the 'free market' and all its accompanying policies are now enacting measures that for many progressives look like a wish list. In the UK, we have a Conservative government that has effectively temporarily nationalized the railways and is discussing (though still resisting) unconditional basic income. In Spain, formerly privatized hospitals have been nationalized into a kind of NHS, while even Donald Trump is giving unconditional cash transfers to every citizen. These are extraordinary steps and to me they call forth two reflections.

First, although progressives have long argued that profit(ability) is not the (only) metric by which resources should be allocated, traditionally they have been seen as unrealistic or even dangerous by establishment figures unable to see or countenance another way. Yet right now those same figures are acknowledging, however grudgingly, another way to be possible and desirable. They are also acknowledging that care sits at the heart of that other way. In turn, they are both enacting measures that progressives once only dreamed of and legitimating their purpose as enabling society to care for everyone, including the vulnerable. The radical potential in this is colossal and I am sure our leaders know it – the genie is out of the bottle. It will be difficult, for example, for the Conservative Party to let things go back to the way they were without facing a backlash. In this respect, the perverse silver lining of having conservative leaders at this time of crisis may be that it will be harder for them to write off their own progressive changes once it is over.

Second, even if this is true, organizing to keep any progressive gains will likely still prove very difficult. And not just because many establishment forces will seek to quickly resume what they recognize as normal service. For me, the greatest danger here lies in the possibility that radical measures such as universal healthcare will become indelibly associated with crisis and emergency. That framing could serve as the basis of a narrative that again forecloses possibility within the supposed inevitability of market life. It is going to be vital that we do not allow that framing to crystalize.

4. A moment of shared humanity

In the struggle to avoid this framing from crystalizing, I think one of the most important tools in our conceptual arsenal will be our *humanity*, and if there is any beauty in this moment at all, it is precisely the fact that it is reminding so many people of the fact that our humanity is shared. This is categorically not to claim that our suffering is evenly distributed or that the impacts of this crisis are equal. They are not, and we know that its impacts are tragically breaking down along the lines traced by existing systems of inequality. We also know that many negative trends are being exacerbated – for example, in relation to the incidence of domestic violence. But that is not the whole story. And a more encouraging part of the story is that right now there is a pervasive sense of sharedness in the unpleasant experience of our vulnerability and dislocation.

This is connected to and by how *bodily* this crisis feels. Of course, everything is lived in our bodies and Marxist feminists along with many others have for decades reminded us that our experiences, including of domination under systems like capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy, are always embodied. But what is especially significant right now is that so often many people who forget or repress this fact are being viscerally reminded of it. Because what a virus brings home so forcefully is the fact that we are all made of the same stuff, we are all human, vulnerable, and thus in need of care. This is potentially very connecting.

My sense is that right now it is also *actually* very connecting. Ordinarily, pretty much all of us get by in the face of life's suffering by subtly enacting everyday forms of separation, alienation, and ultimately dehumanization. We see this on a grand scale in our political leaders who justify systems of inequality as necessary or inevitable even when confronted with evidence as to the misery they cause. We also see it in ourselves when we choose to admit it. But right now, something different is in the air. And we can sense it in the political *and* grassroots responses that are emerging – with an [enormous outpouring](#) of [collective solidarity](#) presently fostering new forms of community. This ranges from city-folk singing with each other across quarantined balconies to previously disconnected dwellings becoming neighbourhoods through the process of organizing provision for those less able to survive the challenges of lockdown. Unquestionably, a big part of this is the shared experience of our humanity in the face of the bodily threat to us all.

Yet I think there is more. And what I keep coming back to is that inside all of us, no matter how disconnecting, alienated or violent some of the things that we ordinarily say and do to each other are, we retain a deep-seated, hard-wired and apparently un-bury-able *desire to care*. This is something that evolutionary biologists as well as psychologists have been telling us for some time – not just that we *need* care, but that we actually *want to offer it*, and when given the chance to do so we will. I think the political significance of this is vast.

First, it means that we now have empirical evidence on a societal scale that the theory of human nature which is so often used as a justification for unbridled capitalism – that we are selfish and self-serving beings who can only be motivated by the competitive market system of winner-takes-all incentives – is rubbish.

Second, we have a similar bank of evidence that humans are also caring beings whose better nature is ordinarily repressed by the flow of life in a system not set up to serve it. (Although some will point to the fact that people often volunteer or do 'charity work' even in ordinary capitalist times, what is different now is the sheer scale at which people are willing to come forward to help each other. This strongly suggests that more people would be willing to offer their care if they had the chance to do so).

And third, perhaps most vitally, we now arguably have the basis of an alternative story of human nature as well as human society to tell into the future. I will come back to this again.

Before that, there is one further layer to look at which brings me back to the point about our

shared humanity. What we are living is weaving together the threads of a very large [imagined community](#), to use Benedict Anderson's famous phrase. On a basic level, this is because it is global to an extent that even pandemics – by definition global – have rarely been. Much of that is due to the communications infrastructure of globalised capitalism, which links us physically in a way that spreads the virus everywhere and digitally in a way that makes our individual experience of this moment planetary, with news of the many elsewheres reaching the many heres moment by moment. Beyond that, cognitively at least, many people are experiencing the us in this as an us – and perhaps for the first time. That too is made manifest in the radical uniqueness of the response. For a pandemic brings to life the relation between the particular and the universal, the parts and the whole, like nothing else. One individual can ultimately be a vector of transmission for all others. Likewise, protecting (caring for) one individual becomes a universal imperative – if we fail to protect the one, we might all get ill. In the same vein, if we are to protect the whole – all of us – we must act as if each individual life is all our lives. That is why contained in the logic of social distancing – however worrying its implementation may be – is something so potentially transformative. Authorities which usually compel us to be separate and alienated in our togetherness, our collective experience of market life, are now compelling us (and in many cases pleading with us) to be together in our separateness, and this time in service of life (our lives) beyond the market.

5. Blurring the boundaries

Nowhere is the reality of life beyond the market made clearer than in our homes, which can be (though sadly often are not) refuges of connection and love, spaces where the non-market logics of care and reciprocity prevail. Typically, within Western market society, home and work life are separated, with the two spheres constructed not just as distinct but as opposites. Again, feminists and other critical thinkers have long made the case that this is a false binary, not least because so much of the unpaid (primarily female) labour that takes place in the home underpins and indeed makes possible the paid (often male) labour in the market. Nevertheless, the fiction of separation persists, especially for those in more privileged, middle-class occupations.

But what is happening now? Now, for perhaps the first time in the history of capitalist civilisation, we are almost *all* being asked to work and care from home at the same time, the entire theatre of production therefore moved backstage to the ongoing realm of social reproduction. Again, I think this has revolutionary potential. For one thing, it means that it is less and less possible to maintain the fiction of separate realms: children running into otherwise 'professional' meetings very much gives away that those present are living, breathing beings with commitments and concerns beyond the domain of work. In turn, I think this may open space for those usually compelled to pretend to more authentically bring their 'real' selves into the world of the market in ways which disrupt its foundational fictions, its behavioural codes, and the lies that have to be told just to survive both. This, in turn, could lay some groundwork for what Frederic Laloux has described as the urgent task of ['reinventing organizations'](#) by bringing our whole selves to them.

In addition, as anyone who has dependents knows, you get a lot less ‘work’ done when you have people around you who need constant attention. This is not simply cute, a joking recognition that working parents share regularly with each other. Right now, it is even being acknowledged by employers and the powers-that-be, which in turn tacitly acknowledges two things as meta-level truths. First, that care actually takes priority – it cannot be put off to the extent that no-one does it and indeed we do not want it to be. It is the foundation of all else, long suppressed, but ultimately more important and now irrupting into the world of capitalist performance. Second, bosses are humans too – they also have children they have to be caring for when apparently ‘at work’.

My next point may sound somewhat speculative and in no way intends to romanticise care (I have two children and parenting them is hard and frequently messy, especially right now). But I offer it nonetheless: when it comes down to it, I think that the vast majority of us prefer to care than to do the often [meaningless tasks](#) that comprise so much paid work. This is not to say that care is easy or that work in the market is never satisfying. Nor is it to deny that paid care work often takes place in difficult, under-remunerated and at times undignified conditions. Nevertheless, what is true is that humans have evolved to crave both care *and* meaning. And that performing the former often leads to an experience of the latter, particularly if it takes place in conditions that are respectful, dignified and themselves also caring. The issue, of course, is that in ordinary market life, much of what goes by the name of ‘work’ neither cares for anything, nor gives anyone a sense of meaning, while a good deal of what takes place under the banner of ‘care work’ does so in horrid conditions which are deeply exploitative. This present shut-down is therefore opening a plethora of both structural and psychological Pandora’s boxes. For those whose work is usually meaningless, the social return of the ethic of care may be throwing their ordinary lives into a new, dissatisfying light. Likewise, for those who are paid to care but usually do so in the shadows and without recognition, the widespread expression of gratitude for society’s carers may be unearthing deep-held frustrations about their usual experience. Either way, the system and its status quo is being called into question.

6. Slowing down

A key part of all of the above is *pace*. Normally, as many others have argued, life in capitalist hyper-modernity is super-fast, with little escape from the experience of running to stand still on [a treadmill that never stops](#). Yes, for many, digitised working offers the possibility for that to simply continue in a different form (it is not coincidental that Zoom usage is exploding and bandwidth is being exceeded). And yes, this does create conditions for even more speed and pressure to be experienced. But it is undeniable that we are also experiencing a planetary slowdown. Production everywhere is reduced, the amount of work most people are expected to be doing has dropped, and [NASA images](#) even show that in certain places air pollution has radically decreased.

Once more, I recognise that this is not all unambiguously positive – for many, slowdown is a disaster, and I will have much to say about that below. But I want first to underscore that for

millions the difference between this moment and the norm is so great that it provides a standpoint from which to put the norm into perspective. That does not necessarily mean that everybody will suddenly conclude that the norm does not work, but many may well do so, and at the very least large numbers will have a chance to see the norm for what it is – only one way of doing things, rather than the only way.

Second, I think it is possible that slowing down may enable many people to see things more clearly, or at least to connect to thoughts, feelings, needs and facts which are often buried or missed in the rush to move so fast. When we are feeling unhappy, for example, and drink lots of wine instead of sitting still enough to work out why and then choose how to respond based on our underlying needs, we both feel worse the next day and still have to deal with whatever problem upset us in the first place. That is basically a metaphor for life under contemporary capitalism. Most of us have to move so fast just to stand still that by the end of the day the only thing we want to do is have a drink and go to bed. Before we get up and go again. This relentless cycle means that we miss so much – ranging from how we really feel about the lives we lead, to what we would love to be doing instead, to the wider issues our societies face and what we would like to change about how they are organized. Likewise, it means that we simply lack the time to connect to the places in which we live, which [as many have argued](#), leads to a tragic and dangerous kind of alienation.

In my view, this is key to understanding why slowdown could be so radical. Although we cannot be sure of how it will play out, it is certainly possible that under conditions of slowdown tens of millions of people will have the chance to connect to the fact that they actually hate living the way they are forced to in ordinary times; that they really want to be able to live differently, including with more connection to where they live; and that the incessant noise, pollution, and disposability of our societies is frankly unpleasant. My guess is that some people – though by no means all – will also feel happier with more time on their hands, as well as grateful (even inspired) to finally be living, however briefly, in a system that both aims to care rather than extract and urges us to look after rather than fight against each other. From there, to me at least, it does not feel like a huge leap to imagine that many will begin asking themselves whether and why we should go back to the way things were.

7. Cross-class solidarity through shared economic insecurity

Beyond this, it is essential to understand that, for millions of people, slowdown equates materially to being sacked or having the wafer-thin rug of their zero-hours contracts pulled from under their feet. This means that huge swathes of the population are presently living through having their means of subsistence taken from them, and few things politicise quicker than that. Importantly, this is happening both to those at the foot of the economic ladder *and* to many in the middle classes for whom the system normally works well enough to at least meet their basic needs for food and shelter. To me, that sounds like the basis of a powerful coalition.

Second, the nature of the crisis engendered by this lockdown/slowdown is quickly exposing

the routinised brutality of the system we normally live under. Whereas, in ordinary times, many people are too busy to worry about the homeless, too stressed to think of those living hand-to-mouth, and too distracted to remember all those bodies in need of specialised care, right now such societal detachment is impossible. Slowdown is bringing vulnerability into the public consciousness like never before, focussing attention at last on everyone for whom the system is not well designed. Partly this is because millions now actually have the time to stop and see what was always there. But partly it is because slowdown is impacting 'normal' lives so deeply – with countless numbers losing income security and access to the services they rely on – that suddenly they have a sense of what life is ordinarily like for the disadvantaged. This is, therefore, like a structural return of the repressed and when the repressed returns it tends to make a mess. Again, that mess could come in the form of a broad coalition in favour of major change.

8. Some thoughts specific to the left

Before I conclude this part of the essay, I want to add a few thoughts specific to those who consider themselves to be on 'the left', based on my own experiences of both party and grassroots leftists and on critical reflections as to how I have been one of them. To put it bluntly, what I love most about people on the left is that we are committed, in principle, to caring for all. What I dislike most about us is how often we fail spectacularly to do so, in both our personal and political lives. For me, this manifests most concretely in the ways in which we unconsciously re-enact patterns of violence and domination even as we (think we) are fighting against them. There are infinite examples of this but one that is infrequently acknowledged, at least in my experience, is that we too have a habit of de-humanising others, particularly those we disagree with. The ways that we usually talk about our political leaders and opponents, for example, tends to be pretty grim. As is our discourse around the rich and those who hold different forms of social power.

For me, this is an issue. It is an issue because it limits us from attaining the kinds of awareness that might enable us to see more clearly where our biases lie and thus what we are missing. It is an issue because it drives wedges between us and those with whom we could be seeking connection towards a solution. And it is an issue because it fundamentally delegitimizes us – it is no coincidence that the left is held to moral account in a way never expected of the right; we claim the high ground and therefore only we can be made to fall off it.

This matters all of the time, but making the most of this moment requires us to confront it now. This moment also offers us a chance to do so. For it is making increasingly clear how many of our judgements and sacred cows remain too simplistic to be accurate and therefore useful as a basis for organizing. One often repeated trope, for example, is that our economic and political leaders are impossible of humanity and only out to dominate us. Another constructs employers and business owners as 'bad', with much of the middle class simply stupid or uncaring. In certain traditions, the state is also constructed as a mortal enemy. All of these things are presently being shown either to be false or in need of major nuancing, for all the reasons articulated above.

Yes, you could make the case (and many are doing so) that the political and economic powers-that-be are out to save their skins and so enacting desperate and at times rear-guard measures just to save the system and their place within it. This is certainly part of the story that we see unfolding around us. Similarly, you might argue that the many hundreds of thousands of people (which include many from the middle classes) who are organizing within their neighbourhoods are only doing so to feel and look 'good'. But I simply do not buy it. For if it is true that there is something collective stirring in most of us, then it is implausible to suggest that it is not also stirring in those moved to act, whether they be ordinary citizens or powerful elites. Indeed, if there is anything universal to our species – and my entire argument rests on the premise that there is – then it would be hard for it to be otherwise.

A further point here relates to the way that this crisis is revealing the profound interwovenness of our lives as beings within capitalism. Often, for many leftists (though certainly not all and definitely not for Marx, who rightly saw capitalism as a system of abstract domination), there is an 'us' and a 'them'. The many categories of 'us's include those who work for others or who are somehow socially or economically subordinate. The many categories of 'them' include those who employ others or are higher up socio-economic ladders. Yet right now, as capitalism goes into slowdown/meltdown, employers and those higher up the ladder are also suffering. Although you might be the boss of a medium-sized company and it may be horrid that you lay off your staff, the reality of your position within an economic system that relies on perpetual motion is that as soon as the motion stops, your orders, your supplies, all of it disappears. This means that you face collapse just as your employees face redundancy. Everyone stands to lose, even if very unequally, and this throws into relief the vulnerability built into the heart of the system.

Lastly, the state. Often, the state is the source of our problems and undoubtedly much of the difficulty that so many people normally experience is due to the way in which the state uses its vast power in the service of only a minority. This is of course why some on the left seek to turn away from the state, to 'smash' it, or otherwise replace it. But right now, for better or worse, what this crisis is revealing in the UK is that, as things stand, the state is vital for our individual and collective survival. That is because only it can provide the kind of mass-scale response required, whether that be in the form of socialised medicine or an [emergency basic income](#). In this respect, I understand the state less as an enemy and more as an entity within the capitalist system that has relative autonomy and to which, in our collective power, we can put demands for positive and supportive intervention. In turn, it follows that the more we are able to make the state a vehicle for the expression of collective will, the more it can be made to serve our collective interests.

Why does all this matter? For me, it matters because I think we are living through an unprecedented time of beyond-the-system possibility, with care rather than accumulation at its heart. To this extent, the future is within touching distance, and I desperately want us to reach out as effectively as we possibly can to grab it. For that, we will need to think beyond our received ideas.

Part 2

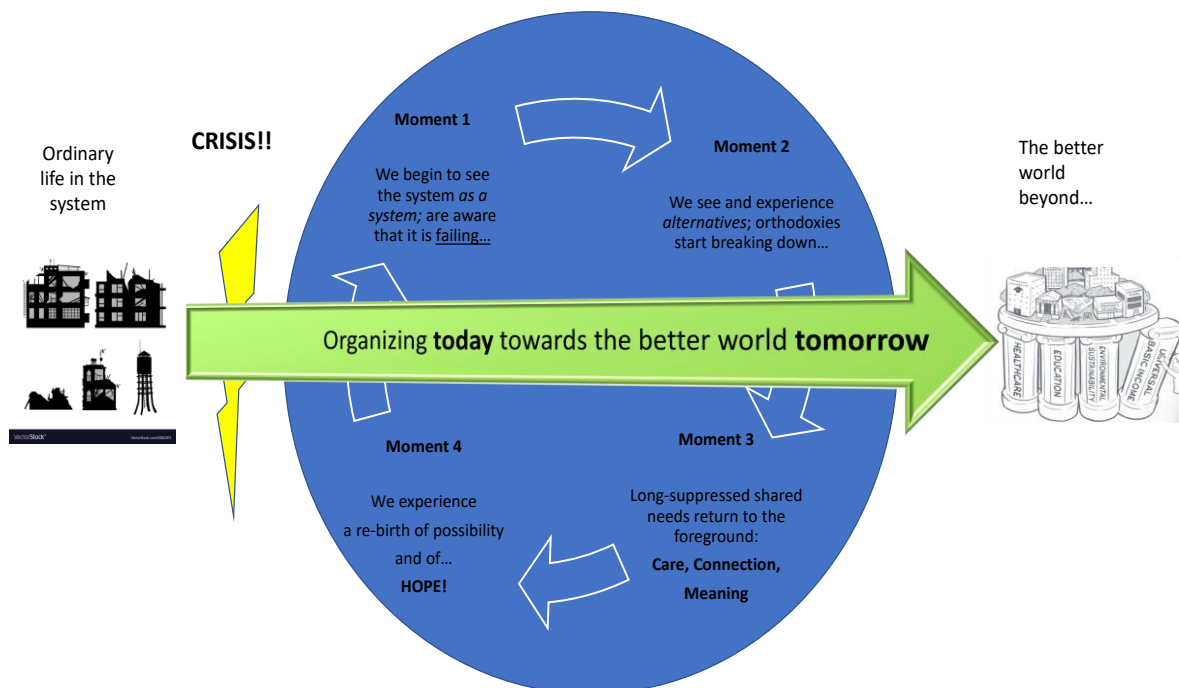
What Could Become Possible and How?

Where Part 1 sought to explain why this crisis is so historic, in Part 2, I want to dive into the opportunities it is opening and their implications for political organizing. I will structure what I have to say in four sections. First, I break down the overarching revolutionary moment that we are living into four separate moments. Each of these represents a potential container for our organizing. Second, I outline a vision for the world beyond this time and towards which I think we can organize. This vision is of a better world and it is latent in this one, perceivable now because of crisis. Third, I articulate some guiding principles for our choice of actions and strategy towards the world beyond. Finally, fourth, I point to some concrete strategic possibilities and make the case for why these would be worth coalescing around.

Four Moments

For analytical and organizational clarity, I contend that the overarching revolutionary moment that we are living through and which Part 1 attempted to make clear, can be broken down into and understood as comprising four separate moments. In reality, each of these moments is happening at once, all are interrelated, and all will be playing out amongst individuals and groups in different, often barely perceived, ways. Nevertheless, in order to help us recognise and act on their uniqueness, I separate them. All can be seen in the diagram below.

Figure 1: Making Sense of Moments of Opportunity



In Moment 1, millions are starting to perceive the system we live under as a system and to see the many holes in it. People are recognising that it leaves too many unsafe or on the verge of being so. This is generating anger and it is generating resistance.

In Moment 2, people are sensing that other ways of doing things are possible. In some measure, this is inherent to seeing the system as a system rather than an inevitable and timeless truth; crisis relativises the norm, and now the norm is no longer normal. But citizens and political leaders are also responding in unanticipated ways, by taking care of each other and organizing the flow of resources in order to do so. Crucially, this entails the entire *system-logic* of profit being suspended and replaced by a *system-logic of care*.

With Moment 3, we are witnessing the irruption of long-suppressed needs into the mainstream of public and political life. First, *care* has returned as a central principle of our collective being; second, a sense of *connection* and *community* is being fostered in our shared vulnerability and the many responses to it; third the interaction between care and community is generating *meaning* for many millions.

All of this coalesces in Moment 4, which is woven through and a consequence of the previous three: **hope is back**, specifically in the sense that so many people can now, finally, smell possibility in the air, the possibility of living different lives in a world set up to attend to our needs rather than to accumulation. My primary intuition is that this critical form of hope should be the golden thread uniting all activism at this time. In this respect, our task is to

throw ourselves into what Ana C Dinerstein has called '[The Art of Organizing Hope](#)', to nurture it, grow it, and channel it. To learn and educate it. This will involve striving to expand the space opened by each of the moments discussed above, to bring more people and coalitions into them, and to weave them together in a common thread towards the new world.

Vision

Every revolution needs a vision, a meta-narrative, and in organizing our hope I think we need one too. For me, it makes sense that our narrative would centre on the core, universally-shared human needs which are irrupting back into individual and collective consciousness: for care, connection, and meaning. Let me illustrate what I mean. The dominant narrative of our now eclipsed age is a tragic one. It posits that humans are inherently and only self-serving beings, and that all acts of collective action are tragically doomed to failure. This is supposedly what makes the market economy the 'natural' system for organizing the distribution of resources amongst us, since it is competitive and incentivises our desire to dominate. However, according to this narrative, the sad and unavoidable reality is that there are never enough resources to go around, which is why some people always lose in the game of the market and others have to protect themselves and their belongings with force, lest one day all be taken from them. *This is the definition of hopeless* – it posits scarcity as a condition of our existence and thus that some people will inevitably have to suffer their needs not being met. In turn, this links to another especially pernicious element of the story – that people can and should be divided into the deserving and the undeserving.

This is a traumatised and reductive telling of the human story. And the alternative story that I tell myself and would love to see us tell each other, particularly right now, is as follows. We are complex creatures with the capacity to love as well as to harm. When we organize ourselves so as to bring our loving and collaborative impulses to the fore, they make it easier for us to avoid violence and separation. We are primed for connection from birth because born into and sustained by webs of care. These webs can be nurtured, and when they are, we grow. The fun that we have when we compete is at least matched by the joy we derive from cooperation. If we have trust in each other and in the abundance of life on this planet, then we are able to cooperate in amazingly creative ways to distribute resources to meet needs. These needs are always shared, and as a species we are united in our experience *as needing-beings*. For we all require food, water and air, just as we require care, connection, and meaning. These threads of shared-ness are also threads of possibility.

Critical hope is revitalised right now precisely because these threads are again perceivable on a mass scale. People are connecting to their shared humanity and with each other; they are doing so in order to offer care through the provision of things like food and water; and in the process they are experiencing meaning. This is unbelievably radical and in it are contained the foundations of the future.

In my vision, much inspired by [Miki Kashtan](#) and [Ian Gough](#), the outline of the future looks like this: people everywhere are willingly collaborating to organize the flow of resources to

meet needs. Each day is meaningful because we all know that what we are doing contributes to life, to individual lives, and to the whole. Maybe we are a delivery driver or a rubbish collector or a nurse; whatever we do, we are part of a system set up explicitly to care. Basic needs are provided for, be these food, water, clean air, or shelter, alongside systems that support our physical and mental health. *We are the ones doing the providing*. Because of this, we all feel deeply that we belong, that we are part of a community, and this engenders a foundational trust – that each of our needs matters to our fellow people. This trust is what enables us to stand humbly but calmly in the face of uncertainty. Although we do not always know how to overcome our challenges, we are clear in our shared intention: to work together to find a solution that works for all of us, because in this world we see everyone as innately valuable.

This vision, of a world structured around care and the collaborative meeting of our shared needs, is the utopian horizon that I think has just come into view. It contains only the best of what already exists within and between us.

Guiding Principles

Organizing for the better world will involve many strategies and probably many disappointments. My hope is that this essay can contribute in some way to minimising the latter by supporting effective choices around the former. To that end, in this section I offer a list of guiding principles for the strategic and tactical choices that we are going to have to make. Although far from complete, if I am right in my analysis as to why this time and the four moments within it are so different and full of possibility, then these follow on logically as core parameters for what we do. All are inspired by women like [Miki Kashtan](#), [Ana Dinerstein](#) and [Joanna Macy](#), whose work intends to build a prefigurative politics that closes the gap between means and ends.

1. Grow the space opened by at least one of the four moments

In whatever we do, let's seek to expand the space opened by one of the four moments identified above. Otherwise, we are wasting the openings and the energy attached to them. Say that we want to further expand awareness that the system is failing. If so, we could either strive to bring more and more people into that awareness or build on the awareness that exists among some people by showing them more and more of the system's many interlinked failings. Ideally, we would do both.

2. Link different moments to each other

Likewise, in each of our choices, let's attempt to link the various moments together. This will help us grow the space opened by each moment and do so in ways that could set off mutually reinforcing dynamics. When we mobilise against the system's failings, we are implicitly positing that another way of doing things is possible. Let's make that concrete by giving examples of these many alternative possibilities. Doing so will also tend to hope.

3. Link everything to the golden thread of hope

Far greater thinkers than I have made this case [before](#) so I will only restate it now: hope is the foundation of all progressive politics and arguably the precondition for any political action. This is because it affirms not only that other, better worlds are possible but that we can sense them in this one. That is joyous and it is why we tingle when we feel it. It is also why nothing inspires more deeply than shared hope. In my view, it is absolutely vital that whatever strategic choices we make be grounded in the intention to grow people's hope.

As we do that, I think there are a few points to bear in mind. First, again, it is worth *trying to be concrete*. Let's point to real-world examples of hopeful practices and to potential future states that look better than the present. Let's inspire people by showing that hope is already here and tether that hope to possible, better future destinations. For example, it is hopeful that so many people in the UK step outside at 8pm on Thursdays to clap in appreciation of the health workers currently moving mountains. This hopeful practice could be linked to a better future – where all care work is socially appreciated and caring services are well-funded.

Second, although this may sound contradictory, *let's allow ourselves to be comfortable in leaving the precise content of hope open*. In other words, it is OK if we do not yet know how what we hope for will be organized. What matters is that it needs to be organized, because it is so important that its lack in the present makes the present un-workable. Often, establishment forces will crush hope by luring it to battle on establishment terrain. That is, they will ask hoppers to 'get real' by producing exact blueprints of the better future, which can then be unpicked as impossible by the masters of the present. We categorically need to avoid falling into this trap. Part of the radical potential of hope lies in the fact that it anticipates a good that we may not yet be able to define but is nevertheless real. This is what we need to keep reaffirming.

Third, I think a way for us to resolve the seeming paradox set up by the previous two paragraphs is to *articulate what we hope for in terms of human needs*. All of us share the same needs and to this extent needs are both concrete and uncontroversial – it is hard for anyone to disagree with the fact that we have them and that they are part of what makes us human. It is also hard to disagree with the idea that it is desirable for us to live in a world where everyone's needs are attended to. By contrast, we can and do disagree over how to go about attending to those needs, since there are always different strategies for doing so. Tangibly, what does this mean for political action? It means that we have much to gain by linking our hope to needs, by articulating what we hope for in terms of the shared needs that are presently unmet, and by being open about the fact that there are many different ways of meeting those needs. This will invite more and more people into the space we occupy and make it harder for those who defend the status quo to do so.

4. Resist the trap of drawing a complete picture of the better world

Although I have mentioned this, it is so important that it merits its own point. If we cannot

fully articulate exactly what the better world we hope for looks like, we must not give up on articulating that we want it and are working towards it. Let's articulate what is lacking in this world, point to examples of where that lack is filled, and build coalitions around both the unmet needs that are the lack and the vision of collectively attending to them. *It is vital that we make it OK not to have all the answers yet.* Doing so will also invite us into humility and vulnerability, each of which are powerful and attractive mobilizing forces.

5. Link everything to needs

Again, this has been mentioned but it also merits its own point. My theory of humanity, in large part derived from the humanistic psychology of people like Carl Rogers and Marshall Rosenberg, understands humans as needing-beings. My experience of personal and political life tells me that when we connect to our own and each other's needs, huge space opens up, for connection and possibility. Because of this, I think it is essential that in every one of our strategic choices we be conscious of which shared human needs we are aiming to meet. Our education has ensured that this does not come naturally to most of us, but we can get better at it by making it a practice to articulate to ourselves which needs we are serving and to articulate publicly, in terms of needs, why we are doing what we are doing.

6. Link everything to the meta-narrative: care, connection and meaning

I have argued throughout this essay that part of what is potentially revolutionary about this time is the fact that long-buried needs for care, connection and meaning are now irrupting into the foreground of public consciousness and on a societal scale. Our political and business leaders have partially suspended the prime organizing principle of accumulation and replaced it with one of care. Millions of people are connected to the desire to care and are acting to offer it. Similarly, millions are experiencing a sense of shared humanity which is opening space for feelings of connection, community and belonging. All of the above make this moment and how it is being lived feel more meaningful than ordinary life for many people. I am convinced that everything we do right now will be strengthened if we seek to grow awareness of these facts, of these long-suppressed needs, the fact that they are vital for our flourishing and that we all want to live in a world where they are served. This will involve constantly re-telling versions of the alternative human story I told above.

However, I want to be clear that care, connection and meaning are far from our *only* needs. The list of needs is long and it includes many that are typically more strongly emphasised by those on the right of the political spectrum, such as freedom, safety, and respect. My sense is that we will have more success in connecting across political divides if we also bring those needs into the conversation. Safety, in particular, will be vital, since many people will understandably be experiencing great fear right now and fear can quickly lead to separation.

7. Pivot around care

If I am right in my analysis, then I think inside the meta-narrative and at the end of the golden

thread is the Promised Land and the Promised Land is care. Care is the alternative principle by which we can (and so often do) organize our lives. It is also the principle that is irrupting back into the present and shaking our society to its foundations. Care is the principle that unites us beyond systems of separation, alienation and domination, like capitalism, patriarchy or coloniality. Care affirms that we all matter, that all are inherently worthy, and that in our shared humanity we can all participate in the best of what life has to offer. When coupled with recognition and respect, care allows us to be different as well as to be the same. It unites us while leaving us space and attends to rather than ignores our needs. *Inside every single progressive policy or demand I can think of is care.* Universal healthcare is about, well, care; welfare systems are about care; the demand for basic income or basic services is about care. Worker's rights, women's rights, indigenous rights – all are about care, including for our many other unmet needs. Likewise calls for rewilding, a ban on plastics, an end to fossil fuel dependence – all of this is about care, for us and for the planet on which we depend. This leads to placing care front and centre in whatever strategic choices we make right now, and to being very explicit about it.

8. Build coalitions

There are myriad social movements active today and even more social justice organizations. At root, I think all of them are pushing for a world of care. Right now, each of these movements and organizations will be thinking about how to respond to this time of crisis, and all will be asking themselves how best to use the opportunities that it has opened. In my view, this makes now an unprecedented chance to push for the broadest possible coalition in the direction of a world of care.

In striving to build that coalition, I think it is vital that we avoid falling into the trap of 'either/or' thinking. Rather than viewing the battle for the planet as somehow in competition with the battle for racial or gender justice, we would do better to emphasise that all of these struggles are united in longing for a different world, a world in which the full shared humanity of every person is respected and each of our needs is attended to. Given the many histories of oppression and exclusion, and the pain that these histories bring into the present, skilful weaving will be necessary to forge alliances that are nourishing, respectful and inclusive. For this, tools like [nonviolent communication](#) and [convergent facilitation](#) can be priceless.

9. Be intentionally diverse

This point follows on inevitably from the above and is not included as a tokenistic acknowledgement of privilege or the fact that many lack it. Tokenism is not the same as active co-creation. And in order to actively co-create a movement, its participants need to be intentional in striving to develop strategies and tactics in conversation with those who a) they might ordinarily not encounter, and b) they might not ordinarily expect to agree with. Embracing difference and disagreement as useful and healthy feedback is one of the greatest gifts an organizer can possess, and learning to learn with those who usually see things otherwise grows the ability to influence.

10. Target different pillars of the status quo

In their [book on civil resistance](#), Paul and Mark Engler argue that major social shifts tend to seem impossible until they feel inevitable. The avalanche of inevitability gathers pace as, one by one, established pillars of society begin to reject the old paradigm and move into line with the new one. This suggests that any effort seeking to take us beyond today's world and towards tomorrow's needs to identify and target the many pillars of the status quo. These pillars can be understood as important blocks of social institutions. Churches, mosques, temples, universities, business associations, unions, public bodies, branches of government, political parties, civil society coalitions: all of these are examples of such blocks, and to whatever extent possible let's aim for our actions to progressively nudge these blocks through the four moments identified above and towards a demand for a different future.

11. Set winnable targets and announce victory

Again, drawing from the Engler's (who themselves draw on decades of history), it seems clear that at times like these, momentum is everything. Avalanches are so impactful because the momentum they gather is so vast. This is why it would be productive to target what we do at building and increasing momentum towards a meaningful outcome. One way to build momentum is to continually set winnable targets and announce victory when they are met. These targets can range from small but widespread protests to petitions delivered to politicians to anything else people can think of. What matters is that they be experienced, narrativized and widely understood as victories.

12. Walk the walk whilst talking the talk

Few qualities are more attractive or inspiring than integrity. And if we want to build a new world based on care and respect for our shared humanity, then we are going to have to treat everyone with care and respect. This does not only mean those we organize and agree with. It also means everybody we disagree with or think of as our enemies, even if and whilst we disagree with them. As Audre Lorde once said, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.

Likewise, for those in positions of privilege, it is utterly vital that we be willing to confront the many painful realities of how our experience of privilege is made possible by the suffering of others who lack it. This does not have to involve blame and shame, but it will involve acknowledgement, regret, and humility. That is part of how I understand prefiguration.

Prefiguration also points towards the importance of nourishing *willingness*. Whatever we do will only work sustainably if it is grounded in people's genuine willingness to do it. Likewise, we can increase willingness by *encouraging* each other and each other's efforts, as well as responding with care and gentleness when we disagree. In the same vein, we will need to offer ourselves and each other *emotional support* to stay the course. Life in systems of inequality and domination involves violence, exploitation and marginalisation. As we seek to

move beyond those systems, a lot of pain and anger will come to the surface. Let's welcome and care for these emotions while simultaneously resisting building our politics on the back of them. Anger, in particular, can be destructive. So instead of acting from it, let's support each other to dig inside of it and locate the longing at its base. *That* is the space from which to build our politics. For it is the space of needs and the world that is coming into view is the world where our needs occupy centre stage.

Potential Strategies and Targets

There are myriad different actions that people could be taking right now and their scope is as wide as our collective creativity. In the end, I expect that an ecology of interlinked and different responses will be healthy and productive, and I think that these will stand more chance of being effective if they follow the guidelines above. However, it is not my intention to write in detail about specific actions; rather, I am interested in offering some final thoughts about larger strategies and strategic targets around which coalitions can rally. I do not pretend that this is the final word, nor that I am right. But if my analysis stands up to scrutiny, then I think these steps could be fundamental in pushing forward the vision it contains.

For Now

1. Mutual Aid

First and foremost, those of us looking to leverage this moment into the future need to care for and nourish each other through it. Already an exceptional outpouring of solidarity has coalesced around localised mutual aid groups providing sustenance to residents throughout the crisis. All of us can be a part of these, in our localities and through our existing networks. They are vital both for now and as prefigurations of the better world. By participating in them, we can stand in solidarity with our fellow people. We can also bring to our participation an awareness of the four moments outlined above and an intention in all we do to grow the space opened by them.

2. Universal Basic Services and Universal Basic Income

If we want to live in a world in which we share our resources to attend to our needs, we require the infrastructure to make that possible. This principle is the cornerstone of the Welfare State, of the universal provision of basic services, which has long been established as desirable, particularly in the UK. Yet for decades, public services have been under-funded and stealthily privatised. Now, as the Coronacrisis bites, we are seeing the effects of these decades. Because of this, millions of people are rapidly becoming aware of the fact that this is not how we want to organize our affairs. Now, then, more than ever, is the time to push for a reinvigoration of our public services, and to ensure that they are free at the point of delivery *for all people*, including the many non-citizens and illegalised peoples who live and contribute to life on these lands largely in the shadows.

In addition, until such time as we move beyond cash as the means through which we access what we require to survive, we need a basic income. Basic income can be understood like a pension – only for everyone. All people receive it monthly and unconditionally simply because they are people. Its central purpose is to give everyone who lives in the cash economy enough cash to survive. In this sense and at this time it represents a humanitarian intervention – [people will starve if they run out of money](#), and right now millions may be about to do so. For this reason, [whatever one thinks](#) of its overall merits as a progressive or even revolutionary policy, let's all call for basic income right now.

Beyond the present moment, I view basic income as a potentially vital tool for leveraging the new world into existence. This is not because it is beyond capitalism or unproblematically liberatory. It is not, and [many excellent critics](#) are deeply sceptical of it. But what a basic income can offer to the people who receive it ([and the data from trials support this](#)) is a greater sense of freedom in relation both to the ever-present compulsion to work and the pace at which we are required to do so. A basic income could therefore also support people to do things which are [caring or meaningful](#) but not directly remunerated, without fear of destitution. Given what I have argued above about the irruption of care and meaning back into social life, it makes eminent sense to call for basic income right now and to do all that we can to make sure that it survives the crisis period.

3. A Movement of Movements

To my mind, one of the single most important strategic acts we can be taking right now is to attempt to [knit the many movements](#) active in our society together, putting hours and hours of hard work into the conversations, connections, and collaborations necessary to build cross-sectional unity. I argued above that inside every progressive demand, and therefore every progressive movement or organization, lies care, and specifically the desire to organize social life to advance it. If this is true, then all movements for change are united in sharing this fundamental intention. Now more than ever the caring imperative is in our collective consciousness, and now more than ever we have the chance to make care explicit as the foundation of the changes we want to see in the world. In turn, this offers us an unparalleled opportunity to unite our struggles against a common problem and towards a common alternative. If ever there was a time for a movement of movements, it is this.

For What Comes Next

The previous three suggestions focus on the here and now and only in part on the beyond. In the rest of this section I will advance what I think could be cornerstone strategic demands for leveraging us towards that beyond. These are that there can be no going back to the way things were and that we need a people's assembly to decide how we move forward.

1. Key Demand: #NoGoingBack

It is impossible not to be struck by what we are living and how *different* it feels. Much of that

difference involves hardship. But, as public commentary of all stripes has consistently noted, in many respects, it is better. In [a recent survey](#) conducted by the UK's Office of National Statistics, for example, over half of all adults said someone had offered to help them if they needed to self-isolate or became unwell, while that figure rose to over 80% amongst people aged 70 and over. Part of what is happening here is that many people are experiencing connection, community, meaning and care. This cuts across party politics and it makes the cry that there can be [#NoGoingBack](#) one that people of all political persuasions can rally around. Similarly, like many other powerful political demands, this one is open. It does not narrowly circumscribe; rather, it articulates the essence of what is shared by so many and in the process affirms our shared humanity. Again, that is hopeful and it is prefigurative. The essence of the demand is that after Covid-19 we refuse for anything to be the same again. This time has given us time, and we are using it to assess, re-assess, [and long for more](#). To my mind, that makes #NoGoingBack or some variant of it a key communicative pillar for our upcoming campaigns.

2. Key Strategy: A People's Assembly

It will not have escaped anyone's attention that I have so far not discussed any of the enormous elephants in the room. No climate change. No new economic model. No potential collapse. This has been intentional. These are *the* issues and we all know it. The problem is that we are not united in how to deal with them or in believing that doing so is possible. My sense is that now possibility has opened but we are still a long way off from having any shared plan, in part because no one individual or group could possibly come up with a plan that works for everyone without actively trying to include all perspectives. This is why it could be so powerful to demand a state-mandated people's assembly *now* to decide how we deal with what is left of the present crisis and use it to rebuild.

People's assemblies are a way for a randomly selected, representative group of individuals to discuss issues and make collective decisions, in a way that aims to ensure that all voices and perspectives are heard and valued equally, with no one person or interest group dominating. They have a documented record of success. In Canada and Ireland, for example, they were used to develop and put to the public major reforms to each country's constitution.

One of the reasons why they are so attractive is that they are a process in which the outcome is not pre-ordained. In this, they appeal both to those who may have to give up what they currently hold as part of a status quo that does not work for everybody, and to those who want change but do not yet know how to organize it in a way that cares for all. This makes them potentially prefigurative. In my view, it also makes them or some variant of them highly attractive both for working out how we come out of the Coronacrisis and deciding on how society we use the opportunities it has given us as a society to deal with the other, even more pressing crises that we face.

Whether we want to protect the gains that we think have been made (like nationalisations) or defend what we have lost (like our livelihoods); whether we support a Green New Deal to

address climate collapse or are worried about the millions of jobs that could be lost if we got one; a people's assembly – if properly resourced and carefully facilitated, as they have been before – could provide the platform. In this, it may represent a horizon unto itself, a forum that could serve to catalyse our collective energy, give room to our hope, and tend to what matters to each of us in the service of us all. I think this might well be the key demand that we have to make at this time.

Conclusion

“Hope is not just the ability to wish or fantasise. It is a tool for taking alternative realities seriously so that they might actually become possible. With hope, people can make mental space and concrete preparations for alternative ways of organizing their societies – alternatives that are already lurking in the present, but which are simply not thought possible yet...”

-Ana C Dinerstein, [The Conversation](#), 3/3/15

We are living through a crisis of a kind that almost no-one ever imagined we would. That crisis is opening up fissures and shifting tectonic plates. As those plates shift mountains are moving and when they do the ground on which we stand shakes and shakes. These tremors bring danger, fear and uncertainty. But they are also exhilarating. The exhilaration so many of us feel is rooted in the eruption of long-suppressed needs and their re-emergence as the always-ever-there foundations of our lives. In this, there is hope.

We do not know how this will end but we do know that life as we knew it will forever be changed. It is impossible to go back, even if we try. There was once a before and soon there will be an after. But right now, we are living a moment of the in-between; in it, people are breathing possibility and tingling with opportunity. So many of us know deep within us that we now have a chance for what comes next to be different and in significant ways better than what came before. In this, there is hope.

Our hope is intimately bound up with our experience of giving, receiving, and witnessing care. Those who ordinarily sit atop structures that subordinate life to profit are now activating the caring principle and doing so as society's prime-moving imperative. Where they dither, they are met with resistance. Care now flows between people out in the open and as it does so it weaves the threads of a different future. That future is making itself apparent in the many new forms we have of relating to each other, in the joyous explosion of shared meaning, and in the once-buried but now resurrected belief that really, we could all be in this together.

Yet this is far from the whole story. There is also great suffering, fear and anger. People are scared and many are hurting. If we are going to be able to leverage this moment into a better future, we will need to attend to this pain with care whilst also pointing beyond it.

I do not have all the answers for how to do this or for how to build the better world. But, like so many others, I can *feel* the questions more vividly than ever. The first question is, ‘How do

we want to live?'. I do not believe that any of us wants to live alienated, disconnected and overwhelmed lives of precarity. We want the best of what this moment is revealing to be possible. To this extent, the second question is, 'How do we build the world we want to live in?'. It is down to us to find the answers – and we now have a precious chance to do so. Please let's not waste it.

...

If you are interested in doing something now to organise for the better world, then please sign up [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). There is much to be done.