

# THE NEW ECONOMICS ZINE

PEOPLE. PLANET. POWER.

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WHAT WORLD DO WE WANT TO RETURN TO?

HOW A NEW ECONOMY CAN HELP BUILD SOMETHING BETTER

with articles by: Lydia Prieg, Nim Ralph, Beth Stratford, Minnie Rahman, Lani Parker, Christine Berry, Miriam Brett and many more



# WHAT WORLD DO WE WANT TO RETURN TO?



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## THE HOPE FOR A NEW WORLD

**W**e're moving into a new world!" people said. "We can't go back to normal – hard truths have been learned and new possibilities have suddenly opened up!" But, 16 months after the UK went into its first lockdown, some things haven't changed. The government is still obsessed with the size of the public debt and trying to push through fossil fuel infrastructure projects. It doesn't seem likely that we'll be stepping into a new world come autumn – but perhaps the pandemic has supercharged shifts that have been happening slowly for some time.

At the New Economics Foundation (NEF) we, of course, think that we need a new economy (what gave it away?) and there have been some moves in the right direction: the government has supported people who have lost out on work through the furlough scheme, and made big noises about a green economic recovery from the pandemic. But we are still living in an economic system that doesn't support us when we need it, that burns through the earth's resources, and that values arbitrary measures of economic success over how happy and healthy we are – clearly, there is much further to go.

In a world where families have to choose between good healthy food or new school shoes for their kids, where 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions, where the carbon emissions of the richest 1% are more than double the emissions of the poorest half of humanity, and where a nurse can't afford a home in 74% of the country, it feels so obvious that change is necessary. So it's easy to think that the case has been made and the argument won. Even the government are sensing a shift as they promise 'real' change through levelling up, investment in communities and taking the climate crisis seriously.

The now-famous Arundhati Roy quote that has graced the pages of this publication before goes: "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing." The idea of change is a slippery one – it can be hard to envisage, and yet the very thought can be terrifying. The pandemic has caused things to shift –

some things will have changed forever, and others may flip back in the coming weeks. Change is not an inevitability or always a good thing – the status quo has untold strength. Talk of 'going back to normal' by those who do not understand why 'normal' wasn't so great for many in this country belies both a safety in the familiar and a failure to learn the lessons of our pre-pandemic economy. But this is no accident – it a result of the way our economy is designed. There is power embedded in 'how things just are'. If we want change, we must make it happen. So, if a new world is on the horizon the real question is: will it be the one we want to see?

In this issue we explore the different ways the world is changing – looking at old challenges and new, from ownership over vaccines and the future of travel through to increased pressure on our social care system and consumption-driven economic growth. And each piece contains within it a challenge for how we might move things forward and how we might begin to shape the world we want to live in.

The problems with our economy predated the pandemic. Covid-19 may have highlighted more people using food banks, the struggles of small businesses, and a government more preoccupied with the size of the deficit than funding the NHS – but it didn't create these problems. In our scene-setting essay for this issue, our new head of economics Lydia Prieg explains how we got here, and why we're facing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build a fairer, more sustainable economy. To do this, however, will take the government focusing on something other than maximising GDP. Beth Stratford explains how, from high levels of individual debt to the lack of a strong social security system, our economy has become dependent on constant growth – and how we can end the straitjacket of growth dependence.

Over the last year and a half most of us have thought more about our health and wellbeing than ever before. Yet our NHS is struggling after a decade of cuts, and our social care system neither provides adequate affordable care for those who need it, nor does it support the key workers who keep it going. NEF's own Daniel Button takes

a look at the toll the pandemic has taken on our care system and argues for a truly universal access to social care. At the same time, access to vital medical technology and development like the Covid vaccines is determined by a global system of intellectual property which has fuelled vaccine nationalism. Miriam Brett explains how it all works in this issue's explainer essay.

Emerging from the pandemic into a new economy cannot mean ignoring the voices of the most marginalised. After a year of relentless media bigotry against trans people, Fergal O'Dwyer interviews trans organiser and educator Nim Ralph about how the economy shapes trans lives. Disability justice activist Lani Parker writes about the dangerously simplistic portrayals of disabled

But without a thorough understanding of the economy and power, we cannot hope to get there. That's the message of the new book *Planet on Fire*, reviewed by Margaret Welsh in this issue.

Some problems the pandemic has brought into the light. Some are deep and embedded in our economy. But our issue ends with Christine Berry setting out the case for why the uncertainty we're all swimming in can actually be the best grounds for hope.

While this issue delves into many of the challenges we are already facing, and those coming down the line, it does so with that hope. It is more important than ever that we use our voices and build power to have a say in the kind of world we live in. That's why at

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people throughout the pandemic, and how a new understanding of vulnerability can pave a way forward. Minnie Rahman explains how the government's hostile environment policies have meant that migrants have been disproportionately exposed to the virus. And after a year of being told to stay at home, our local areas have dominated our lives like never before. In their piece for this issue a team of young researchers talk us through their investigation into what the rampant gentrification of south London is doing to the wellbeing of the young people who call it home

These challenges and opportunities fall against the backdrop of the ever-worsening climate crisis. The government pumped huge amounts of money into the aviation industry over the past year, even though we know how much it has damaged the climate. Alex Chapman uses the story of aviation to show how government decisions can create the behavioural changes we need.

NEF we have just launched a campaign for a Living Income – to fight to create a social security system that will ensure everyone has enough to make ends meet.

The climate disaster is unfolding before our eyes, from the pipeline explosion in the Gulf of Mexico to deadly heatwaves in the US, Canada, and Pakistan. And as we look towards this autumn's UN climate summit, we are beginning our work fighting for a new deal to bring about an economy that is not just fair but green. As Christine Berry's long read in this issue reminds us, via Rebecca Solnit: "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act."

We hope you enjoy this issue of the New Economics Zine and that it gives you hope, inspiration for action and food for thought when looking to the future.

*Sofie Jenkinson & Margaret Welsh, Editors*

# THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

*The pandemic didn't create inequality in the UK – it only made it worse. Lydia Prieg takes us through the state of our economy, and why what happens next isn't inevitable*



**T**he past year has been extremely difficult for all of us. More than 4 million people in Britain have tested positive for Covid, and more than 150,000 people have died with the virus on their death certificate. 2.7 million people were relying on jobseeker's allowance or universal credit in March 2021, compared to 1.4 million in March 2020. 11 million people have been furloughed at some point over the past year, meaning that many were earning less than usual. The pandemic has prevented us from seeing friends and family, and forced many into social isolation. It has produced the worst recession since the second world war, and has exposed longstanding weaknesses in British society, like our deep inequalities, low pay, insecure work, and weak safety net for people struggling to make ends meet. But it has also increased public appetite for change and shown us how interconnected we all are.

The pandemic is exacerbating problems which existed long before 2020. Black, Asian and minority ethnic workers, for example, have been three times more likely to be made unemployed during the crisis than

white workers. Meanwhile, foodbank use went up in 90% of English urban councils in 2020, and people on low incomes have been most likely to be furloughed and have their pay cut.

Many economic forecasts are currently very optimistic. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) expects the UK

“*...the pandemic has also increased public appetite for change and shown us how interconnected we all are*”

economy to have recovered to its pre-pandemic size by the second half of 2022, which would be the most rapid recovery from a recession in 50 years. But these

predictions may turn out to be overly optimistic.

This is because, firstly, when the furlough scheme and the temporary £20 universal credit uplift are withdrawn in the autumn, the economy will face a cliff-edge. Many people on furloughed jobs will find themselves unemployed, with an even more meagre social security system to fall back on. Even with the government's tax break for investment, many businesses will struggle to survive, let alone invest, given the amount of debt taken on during the crisis. And while many households saved money during the pandemic, these were typically higher-income households, who are more likely to keep this money as savings, rather than spend it all in the recovery. In contrast, lower-income households are more likely to have seen their savings shrink in the pandemic rather than grow.

Secondly, if this government doesn't shake its fixation with reducing the public deficit, it might not put enough stimulus money into the economy, which would end up stifling our recovery. Even fiscally conservative organisations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the



International Monetary Fund (IMF) think we shouldn't worry about government borrowing until the recovery is well underway. While government borrowing costs have risen over recent months, they are still very low, and most of the money the government borrowed during Covid has been locked in at extremely low rates. While there are constraints on the amount a government can responsibly and sustainably borrow, these are determined by complex macroeconomic dynamics. They can't be trivially reduced to a single number, like the debt-to-GDP ratio that the chancellor is obsessed with. A one-off increase in government borrowing at very low rates to steer the economy through a once-in-a-lifetime crisis is not a cause for panic. Economic scarring, where people's livelihoods are damaged long after the recession ends, is a far greater threat to the UK's economic future.

But none of this is inevitable. The government has a choice to build a stronger, fairer and more resilient economy – and it should start by properly supporting people living on the lowest incomes. Before

the pandemic, our social security system provided the third-lowest rate of support amongst wealthy countries. If someone working on the national average wage in Luxembourg, for example, lost their job, they would have got 86% of their former wage for a year through the benefits system. In Britain, it was only 34%. Our government has temporarily boosted universal credit by £20 a week, but it's not enough: even with the boost, around one in five people and one in three children in the UK are still living in poverty. At the New Economics Foundation (NEF), we've found that around a third of people are living in families with too little income to meet everyday needs.

A strong social safety net doesn't just mean that we can live with dignity when we are struggling – it benefits everyone, regardless of economic security. Supporting people's incomes during an economic downturn, when they are out-of-work and reliant on social security, acts as something called an 'automatic stabiliser'. When people on the lowest incomes receive extra money, they will generally spend every additional penny, unlike higher earners, who are more

likely to save it or invest it in things like overseas assets. This means that a proper safety net provides an economic stimulus because it enables households to keep spending money on goods and services even during a recession, with good knock-on effects for the rest of the economy.

One way of making sure this happens during the pandemic would be to introduce a minimum income guarantee: a payment of at least £227 a week to everyone who needs it so they can afford the basics, like food and housing. But an income guarantee should not just be a pandemic response. It should, at some level, become a permanent feature of the UK's social security system, so we don't go back to having one of the weakest safety nets out of all wealthy nations. After the pandemic, this income guarantee could be fully funded through making our taxes more progressive. This could mean making income tax fairer, or taxing income from wealth at the same rate as income from work – income from wealth is currently taxed approximately half as much as wages.

While a strong social security system supports people directly, helping businesses

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**Let’s not squander the opportunity to build a fairer, more resilient economy: where we can all meet our everyday needs, with properly funded public services, and a healthy environment**  
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also supports people by providing jobs. The government has introduced a range of measures for struggling companies during the crisis, including the furlough scheme, grants, lots of low-interest and publicly-guaranteed loans, and tax deferrals. These mean that many UK businesses are well placed to grow when the economy begins to recover. However, like households, the impact of Covid on companies has been highly unequal. While some companies – even many small businesses – have been able to increase their cash reserves during the crisis, others – particularly in sectors highly affected by Covid like hospitality – are still struggling. One in nine businesses currently have little or no confidence that they’ll make it through the next three months, and as many as a third of firms with Covid loans may struggle to make repayments. Across all sectors, smaller firms have been more likely to struggle, as they have more limited ways to raise funds than their larger counterparts.

High levels of business debt, particularly debt used to pay for cash-flow problems rather than for investment, can hinder future business investment and companies’ abilities to grow. This is because these businesses’ profits have to be put towards paying off interest payments rather than investing in improvements. This in turn

could hold back the UK’s economic recovery, through suppressing business’ spending and income. High levels of debt could also make companies more likely to go bust if they encounter any short-term drop in revenue in the future.

The government should give debt relief to businesses in sectors that have been heavily impacted by Covid, including things like partial debt write-offs for companies with Covid emergency loan debts or who are in rent arrears. This support could prioritise small and medium businesses.

But it’s not enough to keep businesses going – as we emerge from the crisis, the government must also invest to help drive the recovery and create new jobs. Right now, there are three unemployed people for every job vacancy. Investing in new jobs will not only support people’s livelihoods but also get the economy ready to tackle longstanding challenges like the climate crisis and an aging population.

The UK has set a target to cut its carbon emissions to net zero by 2050, which will cost a yearly £33bn of public money above what we’re currently spending, according to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). This £33bn would not only help the government meet its climate targets – it would also put many people back into work. At NEF we estimate that investing £28bn over 18 months in green infrastructure – that’s stuff like energy efficiency, reforestation and transport – would create the equivalent of 400,000 full-time jobs.

The government is going to have to spend to get us out of this recession. But the government should make stimulus decisions not just with an eye on the incomes of families and firms, but with a longer list of quality-of-life indicators – like they do in New Zealand. This could help direct public money towards crucial public services that have been underfunded for the last decade. Spending per head on adult social care in England, for example, was 8% lower in 2020 than in 2010. At NEF we estimate that spending £15-20bn over 18 months on social infrastructure – such as care workers, nursing assistants and teaching assistants – would create 700,000 full-time equivalent jobs, improve lives, and help rebuild public services. It would also take some of the strain off underfunded councils when it comes to paying for social care. Finally, the

jobs have the added benefit of being low carbon, so between investment in green infrastructure, and investment in public services, we could create over a million low-carbon jobs.

Despite the challenge, over the last year the government has engaged in unprecedented intervention in the economy. As the vaccine is rolled out, lockdown is relaxed, and our thoughts turn to the future, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build a fairer, more sustainable economy. But the government must have the right goals, and show far greater ambition and vision for a better future than it has done so far. The government still has much work to do to protect families, companies and jobs. Economic crises are devastating, but they also provide a political opportunity for real change. Let’s not squander the opportunity to build a fairer, more resilient economy: where we can all meet our everyday needs, with properly funded public services, and a healthy environment.

*Lydia Prieg is head of economics at NEF. She previously worked at Oxfam and Goldman Sachs, and completed a PhD at the University of Cambridge.*

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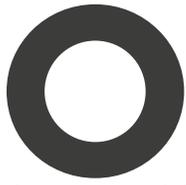
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# WHO OWNS VACCINES?



Over recent months, talk of ‘vaccine nationalism’ – where wealthy governments work to secure deals for vaccination supplies while many poorer countries are effectively denied equitable access – has grown. Indeed, while the speed at which the vaccines have been developed is incredible, their uneven global distribution highlights the fundamentally flawed way medicines are owned and distributed.

As we celebrated the vaccines being administered in the UK back in January, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), warned that “the world is on the brink of a catastrophic moral failure – and the price of this failure will be paid with lives and livelihoods in the world’s poorest countries.” By mid-January, while over 39m doses had been dispensed in at least 49 higher-income countries, only 25 had been administered in one lowest-income country. In the words of Dr Tedros: “Not 25 million; not 25 thousand; just 25.” By April, while one in four people in wealthy countries had been vaccinated, only one in 500 people in low-income countries had received jabs.

How has this happened? Why are so many countries unable to access adequate supplies of the Covid-19 vaccines? To get to the heart of one important aspect of this, we have to delve into the ownership of the vaccines themselves.

Who gets to own vaccines is governed by intellectual property rights (IP), a group of rights and protections around creations of the mind. IP influences how ideas and inventions are used, and covers everything from patents and copyrights to trademarks. In the case of vaccines, even though their development is often part-funded by public research and development money, the rights to the ‘know-how’ are often exclusively owned by pharmaceutical companies. The pandemic has shown how inadequate this system is.

IP was designed to safeguard the ownership of knowledge and creativity, in order to encourage innovation. But today’s approach has often fuelled the power and wealth of multinational corporations – and pharmaceutical giants are no exception. Protecting the IP of Covid vaccines will only prolong the global pandemic by undermining the collective capacity to rapidly administer vaccines for all.

There were attempts to tackle this through creating a global patent pool, where pharmaceutical companies would give up the exclusive rights to their vaccine patents so that other countries could afford to buy or create versions of the vaccines. This would allow for a more rapid rollout from all governments and could help boost production capacity. Last year, for example, the WHO introduced an initiative to share intellectual property and scientific data to help fight the pandemic: the Covid-19 Technology Access Pool. Among the countries which supported it were Argentina, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Ecuador and Panama. Notably absent were the influential voices of countries like the UK, US, France and Germany. Pharmaceutical giants AstraZeneca, GlaxoSmithKline, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson chimed in to condemn the concept of intellectual IP pools.

IP is a hallmark of today’s global trade system, upheld through ‘TRIPS’, an international legal framework that establishes minimum requirements for intellectual property rules. This often enables a patent-holding pharmaceutical company to oversee the production and licensing of drugs for decades. India and

South Africa initially proposed an IP waiver for Covid vaccines at the World Trade Organisation in October, and the idea has since gained traction. In May, the Biden administration backed a narrow waiver for intellectual property related to Covid-19 vaccines. And while there is a growing appetite within the EU for a temporary IP waiver, members of the European Parliament are yet to reach a consensus. While global activists continue to make advances, there is a long way to go before any robust waiver is adopted.

With a failure to quickly back the sharing of IP for vaccines so far, many low- and middle-income countries have been left without adequate access to a vital tool to combat the pandemic. There have been some developments, most notably an initiative known as Covax, of which the UK is a member. Covax aims to deliver 2bn doses of vaccines around the world by the end of 2021. But this alone won’t make the global vaccine rollout rapid and equitable. As the WHO says: “Even as they speak the language of equitable access, some countries and companies continue to prioritize bilateral deals, going around Covax, driving up prices and attempting to jump to the front of the queue.”

At a time when we badly needed cooperation and transparency, governments channelled vast sums of public money into a private, monopoly-based system. Oxfam warned in December that nine out of 10 people in poor countries are set to miss out on Covid-19 vaccines in 2021. Campaign organisation Global Justice Now called for pharmaceutical corporations and research institutions to “share the science, technological know-how, and intellectual property behind their vaccine so enough safe and effective doses can be produced.”

Covid-19 has highlighted the stark imbalances designed into our current approach to IP. And beyond the immediate need to secure safe and effective vaccines for all, we must re-evaluate our broader approach to IP. This is a system that can disproportionately benefit corporations, and often neither fairly distributes products and services nor maximises innovation. We need to rebalance power, moving away from a system of exclusive ownership, and towards one where our approach to vital IP is grounded in principles of equal access and public ownership.

Intellectual property is an important part of any economic system, but if we want incredible developments like new vaccines to protect all of us around the world, we need to transform our approach to IP to ensure that it meets our needs. This is a global crisis, and we need a global response. Sharing the IP for Covid vaccines would help to safeguard fairer, global access to vaccines and accelerate our collective ability to tackle the pandemic.

*Miriam Brett is director of research and advocacy at Common Wealth, a think tank working on ownership strategies for a democratic and sustainable economy.*

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# WHAT IF NOBODY



*During the pandemic, disabled people have been relegated to the position of the clinically-vulnerable shielder, or the passive recipient of mutual aid. These simplistic ideas about disabled people are dangerous, writes disability justice activist **Lani Parker***

**A**s the reality of the pandemic kicked in last spring and we went into lockdown the first time, like many involved in activist communities, my days were filled with frantic activity: constant WhatsApp conversations, new mutual aid groups as well as existing groups trying to reorganise ourselves, endless Zoom meetings. Despite not having left the flat for days, everything felt like it was happening with dizzying speed. In that moment, above all else I was grateful to be part of political communities trying to support each other.

Yet at the back of my mind was that familiar question: what's my role in all these activities when I can't jump on a bike and deliver groceries, or update spreadsheets with people's shopping requests and addresses? What felt very present within the immediate flurry of so-called 'mutual aid' activity was a distinction between those who were helping, and those who were being helped. It was clear that it was difficult for many of these new groups to think about how disabled people like me could be anything other than the latter.

In that moment, I also noticed a lot of anger among my disabled friends and online communities. So many of us have experienced different types of isolation our entire lives, and have had our needs and access requests repeatedly denied. Yet suddenly, seemingly overnight, things we had previously been told were impossible (like remote attendance for work and

education) were possible – because non-disabled people needed them.

Disabled people became both hyper-visible and invisible in pandemic politics: we were the people with 'pre-existing health conditions', the 'clinically vulnerable' to be 'shielded', shut away for our own protection. Alongside the anger, I noticed a sense of resignation among some of those who had been told to 'shield': after all, the isolation they were being asked to endure wasn't new to them. Once again, our knowledge and experiences were being sidelined at the same time as our lives were repeatedly dismissed as expendable in eugenicist debates about herd immunity.

Simplistic constructions of disabled people as inherently vulnerable are dangerous. This isn't just because they deny us agency, but because they disappear the complexities of our lives and the multiple and cross-cutting ways in which people (disabled and non-disabled) are made vulnerable by the world we live in. Many disabled people, for instance, are not primarily vulnerable to Covid-19 because they have an impairment, but for other reasons. Disabled women are disproportionately likely to experience poverty and to be performing informal care work; many disabled people are key workers, unable to social distance; some are denied access to state benefits and healthcare by racist border regimes. Other disabled people, like myself, are not clinically vulnerable, and may also be protected from vulnerability through privileged race and class positions.

Vulnerability, in other words, is produced at the various intersections of health, class, race, gender, immigration status, and more. This interlocking production of vulnerability became starkly evident very early on in the pandemic, as the disproportionate numbers of Black and Brown people dying from the virus became clear. Sins Invalid, a US-based disability justice performance project, state: "Ableism, coupled with white supremacy, supported by capitalism, underscored by heteropatriarchy, has rendered the vast majority of the world 'invalid'". Sins Invalid teach us that vulnerability is not the exception – the political structures which we live under make most people vulnerable in one way or another.

The disability justice framework that Sins Invalid created originated with queer disabled people of colour in the US in the mid-2000s. These activists developed a politics of disability liberation which centred those most marginalised by interlocking oppressions – something which has not been the case within mainstream disability rights movements in the US and the UK. As per Sins Invalid's principles of disability justice, the framework is explicitly anti-capitalist and has a commitment to cross-movement organising. It asks us to organise sustainably, have commitment to cross-disability solidarity, and to reject the idea that disabled people are broken and in need of fixing. It emphasises our fundamental interdependence and calls on us to collectively create a world which leaves

# WAS DISPOSABLE?

nobody behind.

At the core of disability justice is the belief that nobody is disposable. It tries to answer the question: how do we need to change the world to make that belief a reality? The pandemic and the Black Lives Matter uprisings have brought into sharp and devastating relief the different value placed on different kinds of bodies. I hold onto the hope that this moment, while full of grief and trauma, is also one of possibility: a moment of awakening in which more people have come to realise that this violent system cannot be allowed to continue.

As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, Black and Brown, disabled, and working-class folks have been practicing mutual aid in order to survive for a very long time. This history has generally not been recognised by the white and middle-class dominated mutual aid groups which sprang up in response to the pandemic. Writing in Gal-Dem last summer, Eshe Kiama Zuri, who founded the UK Mutual Aid Facebook group in 2018, described these new groups as “basically white people discovering ‘community’ for the first time ... whilst bulldozing pre-existing, local marginalised community networks”. For mutual aid to be truly transformative, it must, as Kiama Zuri stresses, be anti-capitalist, and “align[ed] ... with reparations and redistribution of wealth”. It must also resist ableist ideas of productivity and usefulness, to break down the binaries of helper/helped, vulnerable/not vulnerable, and to embrace and learn from

the wisdom of disabled people.

Non-disabled people, and many disabled people too, are not used to thinking of disabled people as having skills and wisdom that we use every day to survive and thrive.

“**Non-disabled people, and many disabled people too, are not used to thinking of disabled people as having skills and wisdom that we use every day to survive and thrive**”

Things like figuring out access, surviving and resisting isolation, staying connected and supporting each other across barriers of various kinds, not assuming anything about someone’s capacity or intelligence, knowing your limits, and living with grief. When we challenge our ableist thinking, space opens up for us to remember that we are all connected to each other, that we all have skills, creativity and value; that we

can slow down, that maybe we even need to slow down in order for us and the planet to survive. In this moment, let’s challenge ourselves to rest with this question and see where it leads us: what if nobody was disposable?

*Lani Parker is a facilitator, trainer and coach with a passion for making connections and developing new ideas and visions that centre disabled people and other marginalised groups. She would like to thank the many people and organisations whose work has informed her thinking, including Healing Justice London, Sisters of Frida, Dzifa Afonu and Terese Jonsson.*

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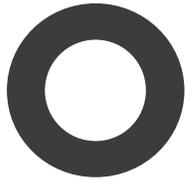
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# GROWING PAINS

*Over the last year our economy has entered the worst recession since the second world war. **Beth Stratford** asks: can we end the pandemic's hardship without going back to environmentally destructive consumption growth?*





ver the summer it became a running joke that Covid-19 must not be contagious if a card reader is present. How else to explain the government's

position that eating in a busy restaurant was perfectly safe, while inviting family to your garden unacceptably risky? In reality, of course, these inconsistencies reflected a desperation among policymakers to boost flagging gross domestic product (GDP) growth. The prospect of a lengthy decrease in consumption made the government both slow to introduce and eager to remove restrictions in workplaces, in spite of clear warnings from public health experts.

This is not the first time that the spectre of shrinking or stagnating GDP has been invoked to block or dismantle policies that are essential for the common good. Regulations to protect labour, improve food standards, preserve wildlife habitats, tackle climate change and reduce harmful waste have all, at different times, been watered down or rejected in the pursuit of cheaper goods to fuel faster growth.

The recent Reset Inquiry found that that two-thirds of the UK public want the government to prioritise health and wellbeing over GDP. So why do politicians across the political spectrum remain fixated on this widely critiqued way of measuring economic success? Part of the answer is that our economy is dependent on growth for its stability. If GDP flatlines or shrinks, the economy can quickly topple into crises of unemployment, debt and inequality.

Fortunately, our growth dependence is by no means an inevitable feature of life. In fact, the changes we'd need to end our dependency on growth would also reduce the precarity and exploitation that millions of people currently suffer. And the economic ruptures of the pandemic offer an opportunity to start pushing for that change.

### **Why is our economy dependent on growth?**

Governments tend to be preoccupied with growth for several reasons. The first is the threat of unemployment. Automation and other technological innovations allow us to produce the same amount with less people and time, creating the spectre of 'robots stealing our jobs'. Conventional economic wisdom says we must boost consumption in order to generate more work and avoid rising unemployment. But there is an alternative and more environmentally sustainable way to keep everyone employed: share out the remaining work. Instead of

using automation and other productivity improvements to drive down prices and sell more goods, workers could be offered a shorter working week at a higher hourly pay rate. But companies, who are largely focused on making profits, are unlikely to deliver this of their own accord.

The second reason is the risk of private debt crises. We need growth to maintain financial stability because our economy is heavily burdened with debt. Debts are promises to pay, often based on hopes about the future, usually that your income will go up or the assets you own will increase in value. If those expectations don't come to pass – for instance, if you lose your job, or customers stop coming to your shop – debt obligations can become dangerously destructive. Unlike stocks and shares that shrink or grow with the fortunes of the company, debts are fixed relative to prices at a particular point in time, and if the interest cannot be paid, they grow exponentially. In economies like ours, with high levels of indebtedness, a modest fall in expected growth rates can lead to a full-blown crisis.

The third reason has to do with rent extraction. We need growth in order to protect the privileges of landlords, financiers, monopoly interests, and other 'rentiers'. Most people have to work to earn a living. Rentiers make money by extracting rents through control over scarce or monopolisable assets like land and housing, energy infrastructure, finance, and intellectual property. Rewards for rentiers inevitably come at the expense of those with less power – be they tenants, debtors, workers, smaller competitors. As long as the rate of economic growth remains higher than the rate of rent extraction, the injustice of rent extraction can be masked. But if GDP flatlines, while asset-owners continue to extract rents, the inevitable result is rising inequality and hardship. This dynamic has played out most obviously in the housing market, where landlords have been under no obligation to take their share of the hit from Covid-19 by offering rent reductions to struggling tenants, despite being entitled to mortgage payment holidays themselves.

The final factor making growth necessary is our failure to make sure everyone can meet their basic needs. High levels of unemployment, indebtedness, and rent extraction are all-the-more dangerous in an economy like the UK, where essential goods and services like social care, energy, and transport are rationed by price – ie, by our ability to pay. In this context, the ability of the poorest to meet their basic needs is threatened by a fall in income, or a rise

in rents or other costs. There is nothing natural about this system. Land, water, raw materials, and energy resources are gifts from nature – common resources that still account for more than half of our national wealth. In an ideal world, the rents arising from control of these common assets would be captured and invested in public services and a strong social safety net, to ensure that nobody goes short on life's essentials. Instead we have allowed private interests to profit from the control and exploitation of these resources. Over recent decades, much of our publicly funded infrastructure has also been privatised, leading to rising prices for essential services like energy, transport, and water.

These four causes of our growth dependency discouraged policymakers from taking swift action to contain the pandemic, and have made the impact of belated restrictions far more painful than necessary. Of even graver concern, however, is the way that our dependency on growth is hampering our response to the climate emergency and other ecological crises.

### **Gambling on green growth**

The correlation between GDP and environmental impact – whether measured in resource use or carbon emissions – is startlingly tight. There is no doubt that we can weaken this relationship – that we can, to some extent, 'decouple' GDP from environmental impact. We can use renewable power, expand public transport and make our homes and workplaces more efficient, so that each mile travelled, each good purchased and each service enjoyed has a lower ecological footprint.

But the faster we grow, the faster we must decouple. Even a modest growth rate of 2% per year translates into a doubling of consumption every 35 years. Can decoupling happen quickly enough to deliver actual green growth? Three recent reviews of the evidence – by Haberl et al (2020), Hickel and Kallis (2019), Parrique et al (2019) – all reach the same sobering conclusion: the rates of decoupling required to get back within planetary boundaries, while maintaining growth-as-usual, are beyond the realms of plausibility.

Take carbon emissions: for rich countries to pull their weight in the global effort to keep warming below 1.5-2 degrees, without sacrificing consumption growth, we would have to roll out currently unproven negative emissions technologies (to suck the carbon out of the air) at a scale and rate that most experts do not think is plausible. Alternatively we would have to expand

renewables at a rate that most experts do not think is physically feasible, and achieve a net energy payback (the amount of energy generated by the infrastructure minus the amount of energy required to build and maintain the infrastructure) from that renewable infrastructure that most experts do not think is possible.

Pinning our hopes on 'green growth' is therefore a profoundly reckless strategy. Alongside ambitious investments in green technologies and infrastructure, we need two insurance policies to ensure we stay within our fair carbon budget. The first is a robust regime of taxes, resource caps, habitat protections, and more, that tighten over time until we are back within our fair share of ecological space. Such limits would mitigate the risk of the rebound effect from investments in resource efficiency. (The rebound effect is when efficiency savings lower the price of goods and services, stimulating more consumption, which then reduces the expected environmental benefit of the efficiency improvements). The second is a plan to prepare for the strong possibility that these environmental protections will limit our output and consumption – ie, will constrain growth. Fortunately, the economic adaptations that would make our society resilient in the face of slowing growth would also liberate millions of people in the UK from economic insecurity and exploitation.

### **Escaping the straitjacket of our growth dependence**

The Covid-19 crisis is exacerbating many of the economic injustices that underpin our dependence on growth. But by exposing the vulnerabilities in our current system, the crisis also presents opportunities to tackle these problems head on. In a recent report published by the University of Leeds, *The UK's Path to a Doughnut-Shaped Recovery*, Dan O'Neill and I propose four ways to reduce our growth dependence as part of planning our recovery from the pandemic.

The first is to empower and protect workers. The pandemic has revealed that millions of workers are so disempowered and precarious that they haven't stay home when sick. It has exposed the moral bankruptcy of corporate bosses, who funnelled billions in public bailout money to shareholders while cutting jobs. We must use these experiences to push for an end to companies' legal obligation to maximise money

for their shareholders, to win worker representation on boards, to raise the minimum wage, end insecure work and extend collective bargaining rights. Only with these changes can we hope to reduce and redistribute working hours as part of a long-term strategy for maintaining employment in the face of automation and slowing consumption.

The second step is to reduce our exposure to private debt crises. The unfolding crisis in household and business debt reinforces the need for structural changes that will reduce our exposure to private debt crises over the long term. First steps should include: regulating to reduce exploitative and inflationary forms of lending (eg, excessive mortgage lending); changing the tax system so that it no longer encourages firms to use debt rather than equity investment; clamping down on the use of debt for tax avoidance purposes; restructuring our banking system to improve financial resilience; and more strategic and extensive use of the state's power of money creation, including to facilitate debt cancellation for households in problem debt.

The third step is to tackle rent extraction. To prevent a consolidation of rentier power in the wake of Covid-19 we urgently need conditions on bailouts to prevent public money from being siphoned upwards by shareholders, and interventions to help small businesses survive the recession and to protect tenants from eviction. Tax revenues from employment and consumption have fallen dramatically, creating an opportunity to push for the taxation of unearned incomes like capital gains, dividends and monopoly profits. Meanwhile, mounting rent arrears for businesses and private renters underline the need for fundamental shifts in the ownership and governance of land and housing.

Fourth, we need to safeguard our basic needs. Due to Covid-19, millions of people now have first-hand experience of the inadequacies of universal credit, the flaws in our statutory sick pay system, and the tragic consequences of under-resourcing our NHS and care system. There is now an opportunity to push for a strengthening of our social safety net, the de-financialisation and democratisation of adult social care, and sustained investment in the social infrastructure which all our lives depend on. With customers going into arrears on their utility bills, and many transport

companies in need of extensive public support in the wake of Covid-19, this would also be a good time to make a certain amount of transport and energy free for all. Guaranteed access to a minimum of energy and transport would have the added benefit of making it far more feasible to introduce the high carbon taxes that we need.

### **Building back better will require some demolition**

When certain forms of economic activity become dangerous to our health and wellbeing, or to the living systems we depend on, our government needs to be able to scale back those activities – without fear of triggering crises of unpayable debt, unemployment, or rising inequality. This can only happen if we dismantle the underlying causes of our dependence on growth: the structures of extractivism that push people, planet and public services toward exhaustion.

As well as directly reducing the precarity and exploitation experienced by millions in our society, the four structural changes outlined above would make our society much more resilient in the face of slowing growth and economic shocks. Shedding the blinkers of GDP maximisation would allow us to focus at last on the health and wellbeing of all people, and the living planet upon which we depend.

*Beth Stratford is an ecological and political economist, a lecturer on housing, land and monetary reform, and a proud member and co-founder of the London Renters Union.*

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# CARE FOR ALL

*From horrifying Covid death rates in care homes to not enough PPE for workers, the pandemic has hit care services hard. Daniel Button looks at the fresh attention that coronavirus has put on our broken social care system – and how we can fix it*



**B**efore the pandemic, public understanding of the social care system was very low. Despite its important role supporting older and disabled adults to maintain their health and wellbeing, and that many of us will rely on social care over our lifetimes, lots of us didn't know what care was at all or assumed that it was covered by the NHS. But for much of the last year, this has changed: the social care sector has featured on the front pages of newspapers, from lack of personal protective equipment for staff (PPE) to the horrifying death rates in care homes.

Far from being part of the health service, or freely available to those who need it, access to publicly funded care is heavily restricted. Some people end up paying huge sums for their care, and others have to rely on family members caring for them, or simply go without. For those able to access care, there are concerns about quality. Staff are given as little as 15 minutes to do home visits, and are often set a number of standardised tasks focused on the basics of survival. This leaves little autonomy for those supported, and little room for help with the things that most of us care about, like getting out to see friends or participating in our communities. Even though they are the backbone of the sector, care workers are vastly undervalued, with the majority paid below the Real Living Wage.

Covid-19 made things worse. This government prioritised protecting the NHS – but left the social care sector in the cold, leading to a number of grave mistakes early on. At the beginning of the pandemic, care staff couldn't get hold of PPE, and when patients were discharged from hospitals to care, they weren't tested for the virus. This meant that Covid-19 ripped through care homes. There are reports of residents who caught the virus being denied their right to NHS services, including hospital admission, when they did catch it. Care workers and people who receive care have been much more likely to die from Covid than other groups. From December 2019 to June 2020, there were almost 30,000 extra deaths in care homes alone compared to the

same period the year before. Almost 20,000 of those have Covid listed on the death certificate, and this doesn't even take into account those who died during the second wave of the pandemic.

Social care is now more central to the national conversation. News segments where loved ones speak to one another through care home windows have been a regular feature of the daily news cycle. This has led to increasing pressure on the government to improve the care system.

Reforming social care should be at the top of our priority list as we emerge from the pandemic, and a universal care service is the only way to go. Quality support – that enables people to live the lives they want and participate on equal terms to others – should be available to everyone who needs it, regardless of their ability to pay. If we pooled risk at a societal level, and spread the costs of social care so that those with the broadest shoulders carried the most weight, we could guarantee access to social care in the same way that we do with healthcare.

Investing in a universal social care system like this would help us deliver the sort of society and economy that organisations like the New Economics Foundation are calling for as part of campaigns to build back better after the pandemic. It would provide help to people, many of whom have been isolating for several months, not just to survive, but to fully participate in society. It would also build on our rekindled sense of connection and social solidarity – best demonstrated by the network of mutual aid groups that quickly spread across the country during the first lockdown – to ensure we all have the security of knowing that we will never have to go without the care we or our loved ones might need at any point in our lives.

If done right, investment in social care would also tackle poverty, as well as gender and race inequalities, by boosting wages and creating new, low-carbon jobs throughout the country, in a sector staffed predominantly by women and people of colour. Unpaid carers, who for many years have been picking up the pieces of underinvestment in the care system – highlighted and made substantially worse by

coronavirus – would be able to make freer choices about the balance of care, work and free time in their lives.

For years, the government has made promises to fix social care, but nothing has materialised. Boris Johnson even said that they had a plan ready to go almost two years ago, but there's been no sight of it. The greater public awareness of social care has opened up the space for change, with polls showing public backing for funding and reform. It will be hard for the government to ignore it for much longer.

But once this government finally presents us with a plan, it looks like they won't go far enough. When it comes to talking about social care, key figures within the government rarely go beyond saying that people should not have to sell their homes to pay for it. This is a very low bar for success. Plus, the government has been making worrying noises about the supposed need for austerity. At the March budget this year, the chancellor was fixated on the 'need' to pay down the deficit. Even among organisations that have supported austerity in the past, there is now a consensus that cutting government spending to pay off debt as we recover from a recession is economically foolhardy – but the chancellor doesn't seem to have got the message. He also cut the budgets of non-protected departments by around £4bn – including funding for local government, which is in charge of social care. A universal social care system is an opportunity to both improve our welfare and revitalise our economy – but it is in danger of being treated as a cost that we cannot afford.

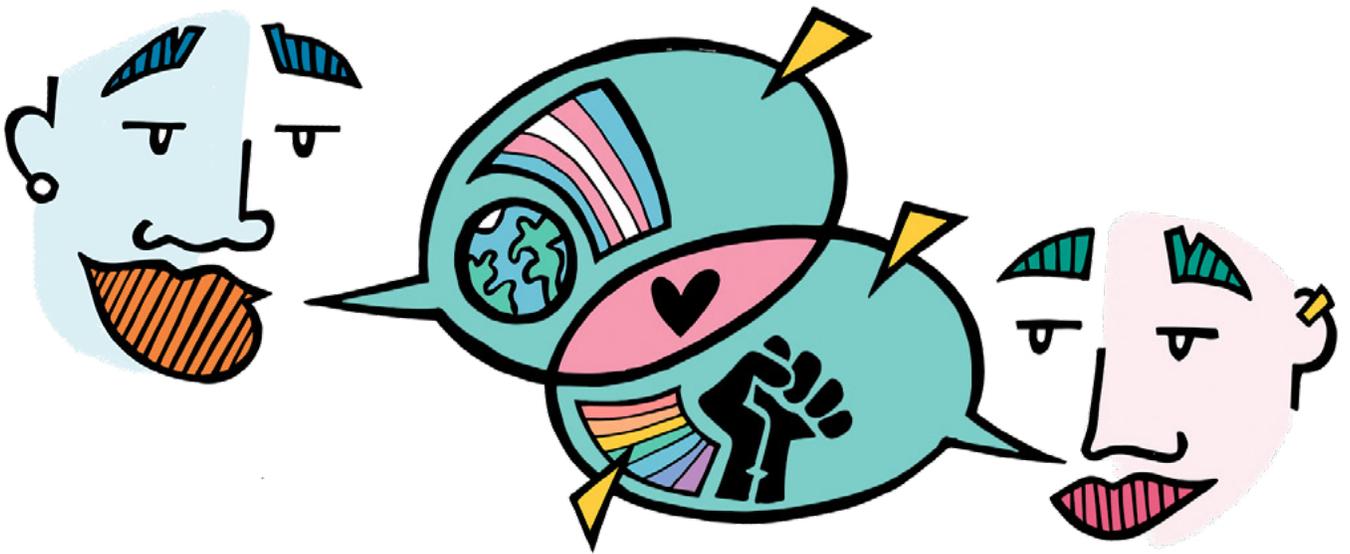
The window for reform is now. This must be met with proposals and action that meet the scale of the problem, or we will miss a generational opportunity for change and all its benefits.

*Daniel Button is a senior researcher at the New Economics Foundation.*

## FURTHER READING

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# CONVERSATION

## Why trans liberation is a class issue

*When most people hear about trans rights, they hear about bathrooms, pronouns and confusing legislation like the Gender Recognition Act (GRA). But are these really the main issues impacting the lives of most trans people today? Fergal O'Dwyer sat down with organiser and educator Nim Ralph to discuss the dangers of ignoring the material conditions that shape trans people's lives, and why we should advance a vision of trans liberation which is rooted in class solidarity*



**FERGAL: Hey Nim, to start us off could you unpack why we seem to spend so much time talking about bathrooms and pronouns – and how this can suit opponents of trans rights?**

**NIM:** Topics like these are often not part of an agenda set by trans people ourselves, but instead by the people who hate us. They are sites of transphobic rhetoric that play on non-trans (or cisgender/cis) people's discomfort: for example the fear of 'getting language wrong', having to use 'weird language', self-ID (a trans person being legally understood as trans without jumping through bureaucratic hoops), trans people in sports, and trans women in bathrooms. All of these are designed to evoke feelings of unease and make abstract questions out of real people's lives. Don't get me wrong, toilets and pronouns are important, but the manufactured debates around them distract us from the structural ways that trans people are harmed – through things like homelessness, alienation from support structures, education, work and healthcare, and experiences of violence from partners, families, the state and strangers.

These constructed debates then feed the 'social-mediafication' of allyship. Support for trans people is seen as easy-to-reach-for soundbites and acts of well-meaning but often performative allyship. Responses like this are defined by the cultural agenda set by transphobes, instead of solidarity that's contextual to the day-to-day material needs of trans people.

**FERGAL: So, why is trans liberation a class issue?**

**NIM:** In a very simple sense, because struggles for trans liberation are the same as broader working-class struggles.

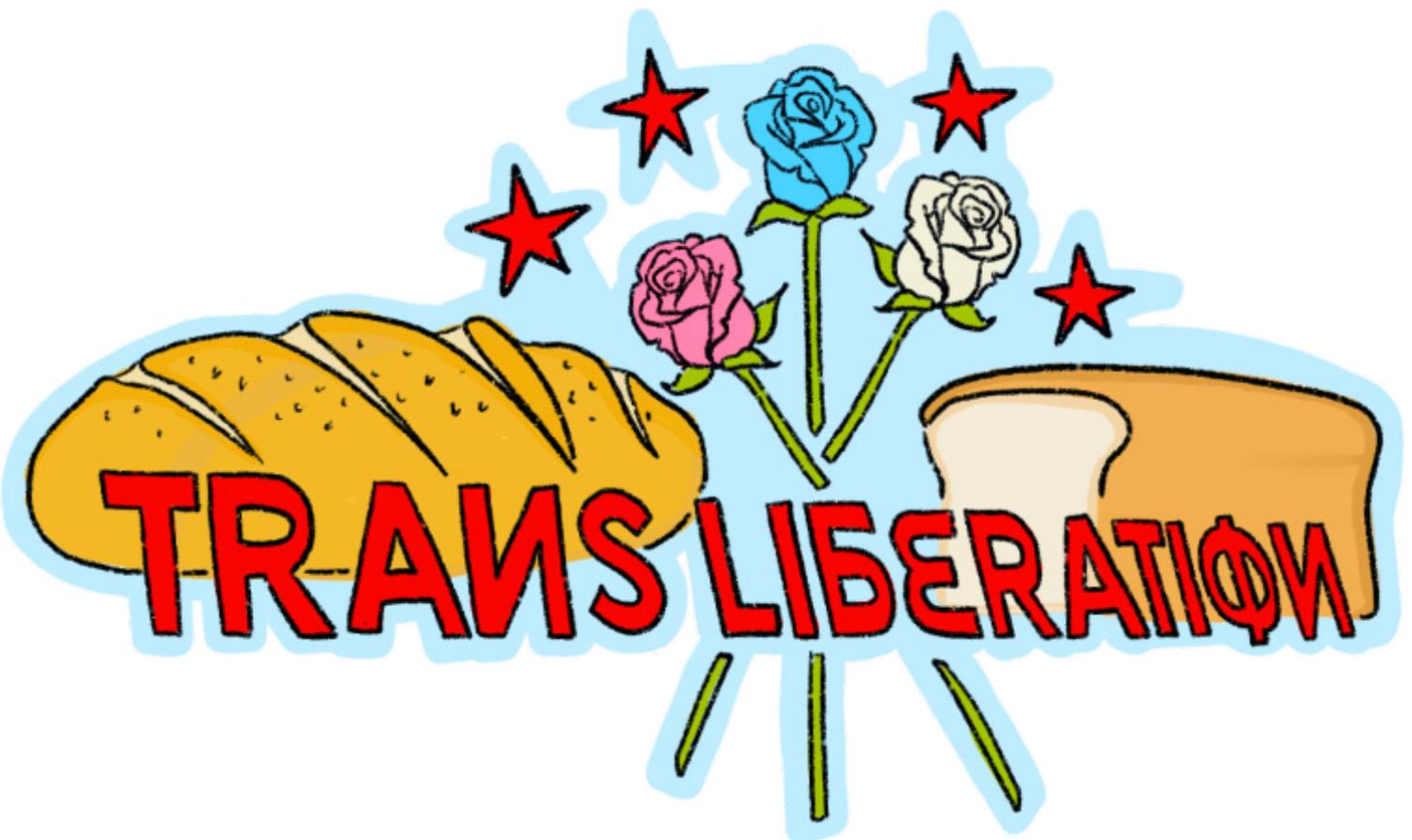
To give a few stark examples, half of transgender people in the UK are unemployed, with one in three employers saying that they wouldn't hire a transgender person, according to one report. One in four trans people have experienced direct discrimination in healthcare. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans + (LGBT+) young people make up at least 24% of the youth homeless population. 16% of trans women experienced domestic violence in 2018 compared to 7.5% of women more broadly.

Some of this is explained by the unique oppression that trans people face (and, of course, trans people's experience of these issues can vary wildly based on gender, race, work, disability and other things). But clearly trans people are impacted by the same structures that oppress the working class. We should be arguing for solidarity within the working class across our differences, and that includes trans people.

**FERGAL: Yes, and of course it's also a class issue in the sense that capitalism has shaped our understanding of gender. It's a very big question but I wonder if you can give us a couple of examples to help us understand this.**

**NIM:** There's so much to cover here! It's certainly true that gender was used by European colonisers as a means of social classification and control in the projects of colonisation and industrial labour.

As capitalism was developing in northern Europe from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, industrial production of goods like iron and textiles required parts of the workforce to do the labour and parts of the workforce to provide care for those labourers and children who would grow up to become labourers. Masculinity and femininity were built into the economy as a binary, with one



half of the workforce (women) conditioned to undertake unpaid care and domestic work for the other half (men) tasked with labour and production. It wasn't 'natural' that the economy was broken down by gender – it was designed that way. The division of labour by sex/gender defined our social relations – so it's not that gender determined our roles in the workforce, but rather that our roles in the workforce defined and formed our gender. By not fitting into these categories, trans people disrupted these gendered social relations. The capitalist class therefore deemed us unfit, often leading to institutionalisation. This gave few choices beyond staying closeted, hidden, without work or working in the informal economy.

Outside northern Europe, it was a different story. In the so-called 'civilising projects' of the colonies, colonisers enforced racial categories (the idea that the white colonisers were superior to the colonised people) and a gender binary (the idea that there are only two genders: men and women) onto people in order to control populations and reproduction. Gender and race were bound together to create hierarchies of racial groups organised from superiority to inferiority (with white people on top). When colonisers encountered societies with systems of gender beyond the binary it was used as a demonstration of their 'racial inferiority' and justification for their subjugation. But racialised groups were also 'given' genders to justify this subjugation. For example, Black people were depicted by colonialists as hyper-masculine, and South Asian people as feminine. *[This is hard to unpack in a short interview and these processes are nuanced – for more information check out our Further Reading section at the end of the interview – Fergal].*

This history helps us to understand how capitalism colluded with imperialism, patriarchy and sexism, as well as white supremacy, to decide what it means to be trans.

**FERGAL: I want to go back to something you said about acts of allyship. I think there are plenty of trans allies now who will think of trans liberation in terms of winning legislative change for trans people (like reforming the GRA) or better representation (like more trans MPs or CEOs). What are the limits to this vision of trans liberation?**

**NIM:** So we have two frameworks here. One is concerned with trans rights, and the other with trans liberation. Trans rights identifies the cause of trans people's subjugation as a lack of civil and legal rights which prevents us from gaining power and representation in the existing system. Trans liberation identifies the cause of trans people's subjugation as inherent to the very system itself: we are not experiencing transphobia because the system is broken, we are experiencing transphobia because the system is working as it was designed.

If we understand that capitalism enforces gender, race, sexuality and disability onto our bodies then representation in that system cannot free us. The idea that we can challenge transphobia by gaining more power and representation within the system is a fallacy because the system is the very thing that maintains oppression.

That's not to say that engaging in these sites of conflict can't be meaningful. I myself have campaigned on GRA reform despite being oriented towards a more expansive framework of trans liberation. It's possible to concern ourselves with rights and stay true to a liberatory project (albeit never easy!) – but only if we critically reflect on how this helps us long term, rather than as an endpoint in and of itself.

So coming back to your question: I think allyship is to representation politics as solidarity is to liberation politics. Allyship ends up passive and preoccupied with 'privilege' – whereas solidarity recognises our shared class status and works across differences to build interdependence in our struggles. We need more solidarity and less allyship in my opinion.

**FERGAL: I wonder if it might be helpful to provide a bit of context as to how the tensions between trans rights and trans liberation are playing out in the real world?**

**NIM:** Absolutely: as I mentioned, the endgame of the trans rights agenda is often representation and inclusion in existing structures. For example, recently MI6 flew a trans flag for the first time and many within the trans community celebrated this. This is a moment, to me, when the solidarity of shared experience is fractured by our visions for freedom. Who is in which camp is decided predominantly by our safety within and proximity to the British State. I don't feel liberated by the idea of trans members of MI6 when it's the secret intelligence service for the state to maintain its racist, imperialist border and economic policies.

We currently live under a government where a woman of Indian heritage is heading up one of the most aggressive assaults on migrants and asylum seekers the UK has known. The government recently published a report denying the existence of systemic racism written by a Black man. In the US, Caitlyn Jenner has announced she's running for governor of California as a Republican, parroting Trumpian views against homeless people and trans women in sports as part of her campaign. If we concern ourselves only with trans rights and representation, these count as wins because someone from an oppressed class has enough social acceptance or economic privilege to survive without needing to maintain class solidarity. But having a trans woman collude in the system that subjugates other trans people is never a win.

Don't get me wrong, broader social acceptance is a good thing, but it is not the same thing as liberation. Inclusion can feel comforting to people who are historically, culturally, socially excluded from society – I always say 'if you're not at the table, you're on the menu'. But we should also be concerned with dismantling the table.

Instrumental wins that look like trans rights but help us towards liberation are ones that take power away from the system, not add more power to it. So GRA reform would have been an example of a way trans people gained power to self-ID, and removed some power from the state to determine whether or not we are trans.

**FERGAL: The theme of this zine is “what kind of world do we want to go back to”. What big changes would you like to see in the fight for trans liberation coming out of the pandemic?**

As a whole I would like to see more structural analysis that leads to collective action for all of us. Throughout the pandemic we have seen the biggest one-year transfer of wealth in history: workers have lost \$3.7tn while billionaires have made \$3.9tn. We have seen our government handing contracts to friends and relatives for personal protective equipment and ventilators that never materialised, while they clapped on doorsteps every Thursday night. Even when our fights are different, the groups and people we are fighting are the same.

Although data on trans people is unreliable for lots of reasons, there are statistically very few ‘out’ trans people in the population. This makes it particularly challenging for us to find each other and organise. The unrelenting attacks on our rights and lives for the past few years have put many trans folks into survival mode, isolating us from each other even more. But this isn’t the only story. There are many trans organisers engaged in anti-poverty, anti-racist, housing, and healthcare movements across the country. I’d love to see other parts of our movements proactively building relationships with trans folks and connecting our demands to theirs.

Where this happens best is when I see, for example, health workers learning about supporting trans people and community trans health initiatives outside of professional healthcare settings. Or feminist collectives actively reaching out to trans campaigns instead of waiting for us to tell them they haven’t thought about our needs. I am hopeful about the galvanisation of our movements throughout the pandemic and think the more bridges we build between our struggles, the better equipped we will be to win.

*Nim Ralph is an activist and educator. They organise extensively around issues related to trans liberation, abolition, anti-racism, disability and the environment. You can find more of their work on Twitter: @NMRLPH*

*Fergal O’Dwyer is campaigns, engagement and supporter officer at NEF. In their spare time, they sit on the steering group of The World Transformed (TWT) - a UK based political education organisation - and recently helped organise a programme of political education on trans liberation. You can find them on Twitter: @mxolydian*

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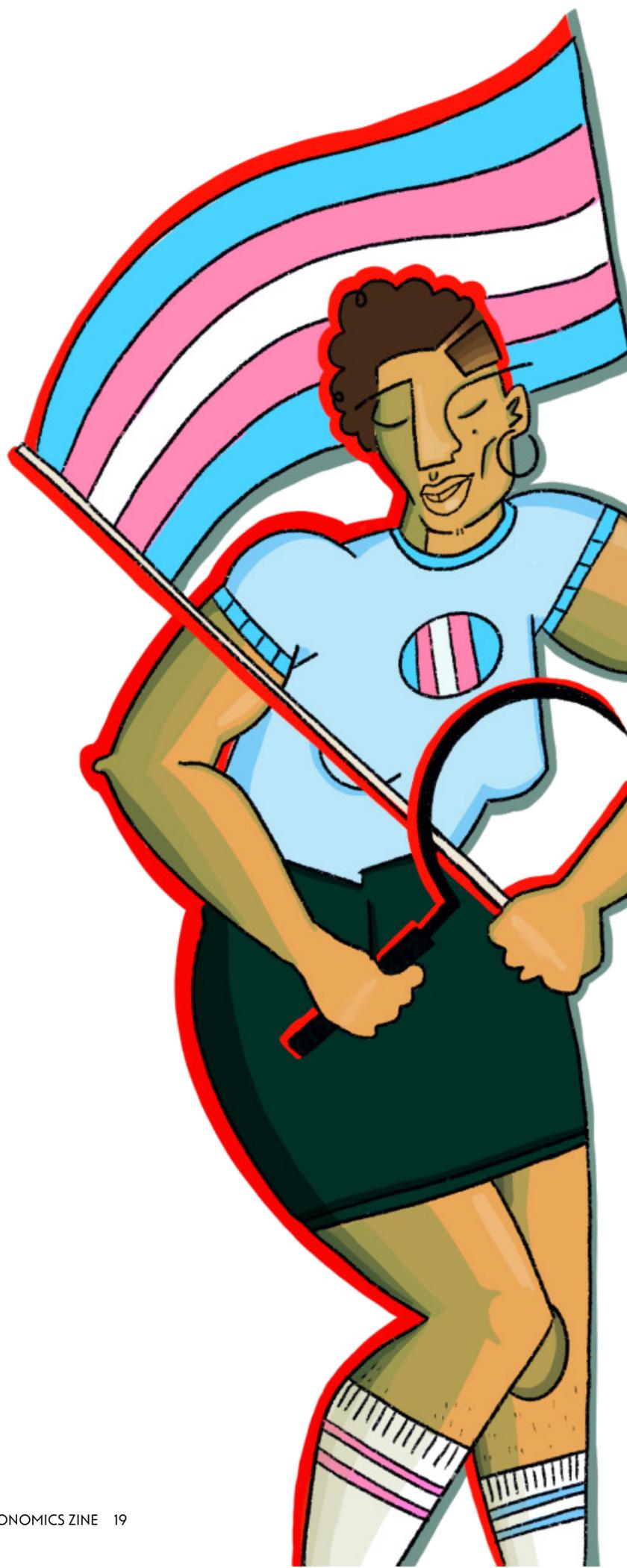
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# NO

# ONE

# LEFT

# BEHIND

Soon after the start of the pandemic it became clear that the prime minister's promise to "protect everyone" didn't include migrant communities. Minnie Rahman explains how the hostile environment and scare stories about asylum seekers affected the lives of migrants during the pandemic



**T**he Covid-19 crisis has been a learning curve for us all. During this time, we've learnt more about the people we love and rely on, we've learnt who keeps our families safe, and who keeps the country going when we need it the most. But we've also learnt where we are failing people, where our social fabric is weakest, and who decision makers are willing to sacrifice or ignore. In particular, the holes in protections for migrant communities have been laid bare, particularly for those who are undocumented, employed in the gig economy or in essential industries like food production, health, and social care.

The government's hostile environment policies, which bar people without the right paperwork from essential services like bank accounts or the NHS, have made it extremely difficult for migrants to be able to keep themselves safe, secure and healthy over the last year. Fear of seeking medical treatment, lack of access to safe housing, and exposure to exploitative working practices have meant that undocumented migrants have been disproportionately exposed to the virus. Most documented and undocumented migrants, the vast majority of whom are in work, are subject to 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) conditions. This deprives migrants of the ability to fall back on the public safety net,

and stops them from accessing support like universal credit, income-based job seekers allowance, housing benefit, child benefit and disability living allowance

From the beginning of the pandemic, decision makers were warned that the hostile environment would lead to higher infection rates amongst migrants and would make it harder to protect the entire population. But

**“During this time, we've learnt more about the people we love and rely on, we've learnt who keeps our families safe, and who keeps the country going when we need it the most”**

the government ignored these stark warnings and it became abundantly clear that the Prime Minister's pledge to "protect everyone" did not include migrant communities. The vaccine rollout too has been compromised by the governments' failure to part with the hostile environment. In a recent survey we conducted at the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI), 81% of undocumented migrants said they feared seeking healthcare because under the hostile environment, they are charged exorbitant amounts for most NHS care, and risk having their health data shared with the Home Office for immigration purposes. The government did announce a so-called 'vaccine amnesty', as a means to make clear to migrant communities that they are eligible for the vaccine without risk of deportation. But this was a single statement of reassurance amidst a 10-year backdrop of hostility. Years of mistrust and the ever-present hostile environment in healthcare will impede vaccine take-up regardless, making the road to recovery far longer and more deadly.

It is only as we exit the pandemic that the true economic effects will be felt, with a high likelihood of an economic downturn. The government has itself admitted that job losses and redundancies will be rife. It is estimated that 10% of key workers in the UK are not British nationals, and migrants are over-represented in the hospitality sector and health and social work. Migrants are also far more likely to be in precarious work or on zero-hours contracts where economic instability will hit hardest. A recent JCWI survey showed almost 50% of migrant cleaners and hospitality staff had already lost their jobs during the pandemic. Meanwhile, Kanlungan, a Filipino migrant rights consortium, reported that through the pandemic some of their members were earning as little as £2 an hour and sharing flats with 13 other residents. Almost none of their undocumented members felt able to seek NHS care. The effects for migrants with no recourse to public funds will also be compounded long after infection rates begin to drop, as migrants continue to have no safety net to fall back on. With more migrants at risk of destitution, already overstretched local authorities will become overwhelmed with requests for support. And those migrants who need work to survive will be forced to look for work among the most unscrupulous and exploitative of employers.

After a year of sickness, separation and isolation from loved ones, it should be clear that protection and safety comes in many forms. Safety is not just a home that you can isolate in, it's the ability to work, have safe housing, to have a secure income and to be part of a community. And yet at this exact

point in time, the government has doggedly pursued an anti-migrant agenda which removes those protections from the existing migrant population and anyone wishing to migrate to the UK. This is unsurprising, particularly as throughout history migrants have served as a convenient scapegoat for governments during recession, with politicians all too happy to blame 'outsiders' for a lack of jobs, homes and faltering public services – distracting from their own failings.

Last year's announcement that the UK had entered the deepest recession in the G7 was followed by weeks of hysteria around channel crossings. Other announcements and abuses

**...we should be forging a new narrative around the society we want to create after the pandemic...this means supporting the migrant workers who've been so crucial to our pandemic response, but who have often been left unsupported and unprotected in their own times of need**

have followed close behind, including the creation of asylum camps in military barracks, the continuation of deportations, and the development of a 'New Plan on Immigration' which criminalises people seeking sanctuary. The judicial system too has fallen victim to the political agenda to demonise migrants as the Government intends to stop so-called "lefty lawyers" from holding government to account.

As redundancies hit hard once the furlough scheme is wound down later this year, it is likely that the government will increasingly ramp up its hateful rhetoric against migrants as a distraction from the difficulties that many people will face. It makes no difference that

our hospitals, care homes and agricultural sector are so reliant on migrants – that these very workers kept us all afloat. With their New Plan on Immigration, our government looks set to make those born overseas even more precarious and prone to exploitation, all whilst demonising migrants in the press. We must be bold in resisting this politics of division. Defending migrants' rights will be more vital than ever and we must start with the deadly inequalities exposed by the pandemic.

Scraping the hostile environment has to be a priority, but we should also be forging a new narrative around the society we want to create after the pandemic: one based around the values of safety and community, with public health at its heart. This means supporting the migrant workers who've been so crucial to our pandemic response, but who have often been left unsupported and unprotected in their own times of need. It means fighting for decent labour rights for all workers, including the migrant workers whose rights have been dismissed and disregarded. It means leaving no-one behind, regardless of where they were born. A fast and just recovery must include everyone.

*Minnie Rahman is the campaigns and communications director at the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI). She is a writer and campaigner specialising in migrant's rights, climate change and social justice.*

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# UP IN THE AIR

*We're spending more on international travel than ever before, and the government has handed out billions in emergency support to airlines during the pandemic. Alex Chapman explains how government policy has shaped our spending decision in the past – and how it can propel us into a different future*



Changing the system is hard. There's no doubt about that. Yet if ever there is a moment when the cosy consensus of 21<sup>st</sup> century economics can be challenged it's in the aftermath of a crisis like this. The breaking of so many economic myths-turned-rules has opened a door, but system change still isn't guaranteed. The founding of the NHS and expansion of the welfare state after the second world war show us what might be achieved. But we at NEF, along with many others, failed in our attempt to seed a revolution of green investment and better working conditions out of the 2007/08 financial crisis: the Green New Deal. The neoliberal institutions won out, hijacking the narrative with their austerity agenda.

A few weeks ago I was given a grim reminder of our failure, with the latest release of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Family Spending Workbook. This dataset tracks average household spending patterns in the UK in relatively fine detail and allows comparisons between spending in the 2001-02 and 2019-20 financial years. What it shows is shocking: when adjusted for inflation (ie, put in current prices), average household spending in the UK has changed by only a single pound, from £586.90 in 2001-02 to £587.90 in 2019-20 – anyone else wondering what happened to all that GDP growth the media were

constantly talking about?

Beneath the hood however, things have changed. The proportion of their money that UK households spend on rent and building service charges has doubled. Gas and electricity bills have both grown their share of total expenditure by 40%, and rail season tickets are up 50%. Spending on council tax is up 40%, reflecting local authorities' valiant attempts to mitigate the damage caused by austerity. And spending on dentists and opticians has tripled, as the slow creep of NHS privatisation continues.

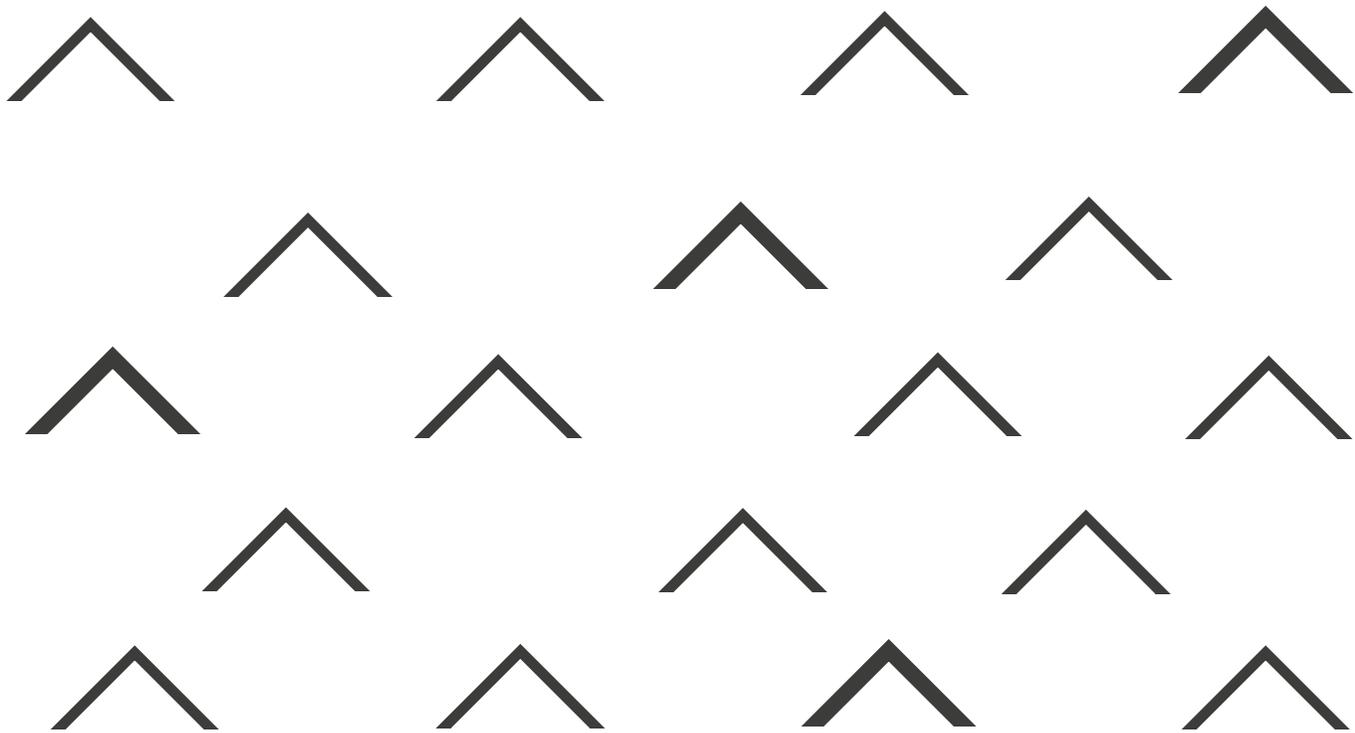
In amongst this depressing array of predictable statistics, one category of household spending jumps out. Spending on international travel has changed more than any other category. Households spend 330% more on international flight tickets, 50% more on package holidays abroad, 80% more on accommodation abroad, and 32% more on money spent directly while overseas. In 2001-02, spending in these four categories (in 2019-20 prices) was at around £1,600 per household per year. By 2019-20, spending had reached £2,600.

Sitting behind these numbers is enhanced opportunity and the benefits of cultural exchange, as long-distance travel has become far more widely accessible. Yet these changes have not been driven purely by individual preference. The government has promoted international air travel, by handing tax exemptions to

the aviation industry worth around £7bn a year, providing exemptions from climate targets and carbon taxation schemes worth billions. Over the years, the government has sanctioned a multitude of airport expansions – directly to the detriment of the neighbouring communities who are left to deal with the health and wellbeing impacts of resulting noise and air pollution. And they have handed out billions in emergency support to airlines and airports through the pandemic.

The decision to pump vast amounts of state support into the air travel industry was not about providing the opportunity of travel for all. Indeed, it is well documented that air travel remains the domain of the wealthy. In fact, the government's preference for aviation is linked more to what was once a set of economic models, and is now an economic ideology. These models suggest never-ending economic growth can be achieved if only we had a few more flights, a couple more routes, or a closer airport.

Few people are suggesting we end air travel completely. But the UK already has enough air capacity to send every single resident to the skies at least three times a year. Many of us are suggesting we stop expanding our air capacity. After all, there is no safe route to a zero-carbon economy while growing the aviation sector – the technology simply isn't there. But to tackle the aviation problem, we will need to



confront the economic orthodoxy. The thinking which, as I write this, has turned the heads of councils up and down the country in favour of airport expansion, has sent the planning inspectorate (who recently approved Stansted Airport's application) starry-eyed, and has cowed many in the UK's political opposition into fearful silence.

The choice we face in aviation reflects bigger questions facing UK society. What type of future do we want? If it's one which prioritises a vibrant, local economy focused on social and environmental wellbeing, now is not the time to be encouraging tourist cash to flow through airports and into overseas economies, inflating the UK's travel spending deficit while pumping pollutants out at high altitude.

Evidence from 20 years of household expenditure shows that the government has the power to shift the system. Look carefully at the data I referred to above and you can see the decline in household spending on tobacco, a direct result of proactive government policy and regulation. But you can also see government policy gone wrong, such as in the significant rise in spending on heavy-polluting diesel fuel, a direct result of a misguided subsidy regime.

To tackle the climate crisis, and 'build back better' out of the global pandemic – two key pledges of our present administration – the government mustn't be afraid to use

its power to shape not just individual's spending decisions, but the structures which determine how fair and sustainable our economy is. Part of this should be a frequent flyer levy. With a frequent flyer levy, the first return flight each passenger took a year would not be charged tax, but each subsequent flight would be taxed at an increasing rate. Frequent flyers (who are generally high earners) would be charged more, to encourage them to reduce their flying. This policy is a useful flagship as it embodies both the principles of environmental action and social justice in one relatively simple concept. The frequent flyer levy also represents a direct challenge to the cosy consensus on the economics of airports and air travel, but for that reason it'll take more than a think tank report to secure.

If we are to avoid a repeat of history and this time succeed in our campaign for a Green New Deal, and policies like a frequent flyer levy, we will need to do a better job of organising and building the power to ensure our alternative vision for the UK is heard, and becomes an inevitability. With the present government less resolute in its neoliberal ideology after a decade of failures, we have already seen multiple examples of how coordinated mass pressure can create this inevitability. The government's capitulation on free school meals became an inevitability, as did the

collapse of the European Super League, the extension of the furlough scheme, and the universal credit uplift. The power to create inevitability is not within the hands of corporate interests and the super wealthy, it is only wielded by people and communities. Let's make an end to the cosy consensus just as inevitable.

*Alex Chapman is a senior researcher at the New Economics Foundation*

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# HOME

# SWEET

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*After a year of being told to stay at home, our local areas have dominated our lives like never before. A team of young researchers investigated what the rampant gentrification of south London is doing to the wellbeing of the young people who call it home. Here, they tell us what they found.*

*By Hannah Adeniji, Afnan Bouh, Shamsu Ali, Olamide Bamigboye, Frances Conteh, Elizabeth Kuyoro, Shahani Richards, Amina Sesay and Hana Riazuddin*

**A**s cities across the world locked down in March 2020, we were tasked to stay home to protect ourselves and our families from an invisible and deadly biological threat. Our homes were never just physical structures – but now they became the spaces where we lived intimately with our families, went to school, socialised with our friends and connected to our communities and places of worship. For many of us, it became the place we spent all our time.

Young people were identified early on as a low-risk group for mortality from Covid-19. For us, the virus' greatest threats have been social, economic and psychological. Lockdown measures assumed that children and young people are able to physically distance and have access to privacy and adequate space, wifi and digital devices to learn, play and socially connect – but this isn't true. Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black children in particular are more likely to live in households that are overcrowded, have inadequate access to online learning, and suffer significant income and job losses as a result of the pandemic. It therefore came as no surprise to us that lockdown highlighted stark health inequalities linked to housing – issues we investigated just before the pandemic started.

Over the last 10 years, south London has transformed. Teeming with luxury flats

and hipster coffee shops, areas like Brixton and Peckham have become regeneration and gentrification hotspots. But for local residents, these changes have raised

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**Affordable homes are a foundation on which young people access security, stability and social support necessary for good mental health and wellbeing growing up**

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important questions about its effects. Eager to understand how growing up in regenerating neighbourhoods is impacting young people's mental health and wellbeing, in January 2020 we set out to conduct a

participatory action research project. Using photography, we captured our data visually to help unpack the changes we witnessed around us. As we processed our films, the images were littered with glaring contrasts: dilapidated council estates, shiny new-build developments, and the spacious, terraced houses of wealthy neighbours. Words and phrases like 'abandonment', 'disempowerment', 'division', 'exclusion', 'unaffordability' and 'discrimination' cropped up time and time again in our analysis and discussions. We quickly began to see just how places actively shape mental health outcomes and inequalities.

Unsurprisingly, poor housing plays an important role in poor mental health. Decades of disinvestment in council homes has resulted in low-quality homes for many families. We found that issues such as damp, overcrowding and unreliable heating systems were common, posing well-known health risks for children and young people, such as depression and anxiety. Broken lifts and playgrounds that had not been repaired sometimes for years at a time left young people prone to isolation and unable to safely play outside their homes. Meanwhile, the uncertainty and instability of the local housing market led to increased stress and mental health problems. Demolition and sale of council-owned property to developers underpins regeneration plans and has made way for luxury new-builds

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and mixed-use developments in their place. This has not only resulted in forcibly evicting residents but also a failure by local authorities to secure desperately needed social rent homes. However, few of these properties cater to low-income families, with high rents and sale prices often marketed at £450,000 upwards for a one-bedroom flat. Affordable homes are a foundation on which young people access security, stability and social support necessary for good mental health and wellbeing growing up. Living in these areas raises long-term questions about young people's futures. Will we be able to stay if we can't afford to buy or rent these properties when we are adults?

The way our residential streets look demonstrates the racial and economic divisions of gentrifying neighbourhoods. Rows of privately-owned homes surrounded council and social properties; the former occupied by mostly white, upper-class homeowners and the latter, mostly ethnic minority, working-class renters. We examined the possible psychological impacts that widening and visible inequality in the built environment may have. Children and young people often compare their social status and access to material resources and opportunities relative to others, building ideas about what they are able to achieve and aspire towards. Internalising inequality and social status can, over time, impact self-esteem and reduce psychological wellbeing. As we looked closer at these inequalities, the meritocratic myth we had been taught quickly fell apart for us and gave way to hopelessness and despair. Without access to intergenerational wealth generated through homeownership, how can young people like us overcome socioeconomic barriers to live healthy, flourishing lives?

Housing policy also underpins the ways in which other essential infrastructure is planned. The presence of community and public services such as schools, libraries, youth centres, as well as business and retail spaces, is influenced by who lives in neighbourhoods. In recent years, community spaces and local businesses have been

rapidly replaced by coffee shops, restaurants and co-working spaces targeted at middle-class incomers. Councils and developers argue that this will improve neighbourhoods through economic development and social integration. But community resistance against the redevelopment of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre and campaigns such as #NoHondoTower in Brixton show how regeneration policies haven't addressed urgent community needs and actually diminish existing resources. Safe and affordable spaces for young people to socialise and relax have rapidly been lost in this process, leaving young people at increased risk of loneliness, isolation and youth violence. Without this essential social and emotional infrastructure, young people's healthy psychosocial development and growth is put at risk.

After a decade of austerity and now a pandemic, young people are facing highly uncertain and precarious futures. Living through the last year has made it obvious how where we live has a big impact on our health. As we shift towards recovery, figuring out how housing affects social and economic inequalities is essential for their long-term mental health and wellbeing. At the heart of this we need to ask what it would mean to reimagine housing policy with children and young people at its centre. Whatever the answer, it won't be 'regeneration' or gentrification.

*Hannah Adeniji is a 16-year-old girl who lives in Lambeth and is interested in how her community is changing and how this affects people.*

*Amina Bouh, a 16-year-old girl, lives in Lambeth and is fascinated by her community's growth and how it has altered the behaviour of the people from her area.*

*Shamso Ali is a very curious 17-year-old girl who has a great interest in studying neuroscience. She is obsessed with the neurochemistry of the brain and wants to make her own documentaries surrounding the unseen truth about mental health.*

*Olamide Bamigboye is a 17-year-old girl from south London who is passionate about turning stories into power.*

*Francesca Conteh is a 17-year-old girl and has lived in south-west London her whole life. Although she's moved around a lot, one thing that is prominent in all the areas she's lived in is the variety of cultures and heritages – she wouldn't change it for the world! She has a keen interest in music and the environment around her and would like to portray this through her work.*

*Elizabeth Kuyoro is a 16-year-old girl from south-east London, with an interest in her community, the diversity, and the changes within it. She hopes for there to be a change very soon.*

*Shahani Richards is a young, God-fearing female who is always ready to take on a challenge. She is always willing to explore and try new things and accepts that taking risks doesn't always guarantee a happy ending.*

*Amina Sesay is a 17-year-old from south London. She's lived in the city since she was eight weeks old and just can't see herself leaving! Her interests include the study of Black history, Black archives, anime, travelling, cooking and fashion.*

*Hana Riazuddin is a doctoral candidate in Geography at King's College London and director of The Body Narratives. Her research reflects on questions of young people's mental health and wellbeing within the wider debate on urban and social transformation.*

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# THE REVIEW: PLANET ON FIRE

WORDS BY MARGARET WELSH



**T**here are just five months left until the UK hosts the UN Climate Change Conference (otherwise known as COP26). And despite Boris Johnson's insistence that we will have a green recovery from the pandemic, his meeting with G7 leaders in June didn't produce any new commitments to tackle the climate crisis. We've got so far to go and not much time to decarbonise our economy – so why can't the economic status quo seem to deal with the climate emergency?

These are the questions that *Planet on Fire: a manifesto for the age of environmental breakdown*, by Mathew Lawrence and Laurie Laybourn-Langton, sets out to answer. The book's central insight is that "[f]undamentally, environmental breakdown is about power. It is about who has it, how they got it, what they do with it". Rather than looking at oven-ready, discrete policies like renewable energy capacity or replacing gas boilers, Lawrence and Laybourn-Langton set their sights wider, on "[e]xtractive and exploitative economic structures – legal institutions, market arrangements, trade agreements and policy agendas". They argue that extractive capitalism has reshaped life on Earth,

causing environmental and social harm.

A decade ago, books about the climate crisis had to spend most of their energy trying to persuade the reader that yes, this is happening, and yes, it's going to be bad. Thankfully, this period is now over. Climate campaigners seem to have won the argument. But with this widespread acceptance of the danger of climate breakdown comes competing narratives. Mainstream narratives regard environmental breakdown as part of a

human compulsion to wreck the ecosystems which keep us alive. The book points out that these narratives "rightly diagnose a number of factors that have brought us to this point but ignore others, brushing the inconvenient truths of imperial expansion, extractive capitalism and modern colonialism under the carpet."

Equally as dangerous is an emerging "eco-ethnonationalist" narrative of environmental breakdown. Where hard-right political figures used to deny the existence of the climate crisis, this new reactionary politics "embraces growing destabilisation the better to realise a future of borders, stratification, and lethal inequality". This "eco-ethnonationalism" links racist, anti-immigrant politics to environmental concerns. Environmental campaigners who make the mistake of assuming that "regressive forces" will always be climate deniers do so at their peril.

Lawrence and Laybourn-Langton call their book "a manifesto for the age of environmental breakdown". Manifesto is right – the authors set out an, at times, dizzying array of policies and structural changes to almost every aspect of our economy. They want the plan to fight the climate emergency to be more than "a

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***We've got so far to go and not much time to decarbonise our economy – so why can't the economic status quo seem to deal with the climate emergency?*** ”

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set of discrete policies to decarbonise the economy; it must be a common project to transform society so as to put life first.”

From a managed acceleration of automation to socialising the financial system, their proposals cover the state, private companies, international relations, communal luxury and the nature of work. At the heart of this sits a Green New Deal, a plan to tackle the climate crisis while reducing economic inequality. It rests on an understanding that, while markets are slowly responding to the idea that we need to get a grip on our carbon emissions, we don't have time to wait: the state needs to take the lead.

Followers of the New Economics Foundation will spot some familiar suggestions, including a “comprehensive, generous, non-conditional, non-means-tested at the point of access, minimum income floor”. Another interesting idea is “green community wealth building” where public bodies like local councils only use services and products which are from the local area and adhere to climate requirements – a sort of Preston model for the planet.

Put together, this list of deep structural changes to our economy is more than a little



**...we need to learn from both the grassroots movement-building of the Chipko movement and the think tank lobbying of the Kochs**”

daunting. But, along with many progressive commentators, the book sees the pandemic as a moment when “the boundaries of the possible were seemingly abolished”, as “global financial capitalism stalled, and unprecedented public action to demobilise whole economies was undertaken”. But a greener, fairer future is not an inevitability: “Even as the world fights the effects of Covid-19, a ‘shock doctrine’ politics of the Right is preparing to settle the crisis decisively in favour of the prevailing economic model”.

With this challenge in mind, the book finishes by looking at the strategy that progressives need to win. The authors set out two opposing forces: “life-making” vs “extractive suicide”. These are symbolised

by the Chipko movement (a 1970s forest-conservation movement led by rural Indian villagers) on one side and the Koch Brothers (billionaire American businessmen who use their fortune to finance right-wing think tanks and networks) on the other. For Lawrence and Laybourn-Langton, there's not one single approach climate campaigners should take: we need to learn from both the grassroots movement-building of the Chipko movement and the think tank lobbying of the Kochs.

It's a book which owes much to Naomi Klein's 2014 *This Changes Everything* in its understanding of the climate emergency as a crisis of economics and power. Over the last few years, the student climate strikers have shot the climate crisis to the top of the political agenda. But at big climate summits, it's the leaders of the world's major powers who hold all the cards, wrangling over the details of international climate agreements. How can we ever hope to influence these negotiations and the economy at large? With COP26 just around the corner, books which interrogate this question are more vital than ever.

*Margaret Welsh is communications officer at the New Economics Foundation*



# THE CASE FOR HOPE

*Over a year since it began, and despite the vaccine rollout, we still don't know how the pandemic will play out. **Christine Berry** writes about why this uncertainty can actually be grounds for hope*



**A**s the UK economy reopens after a long winter, the mood seems to be dividing into two camps. On one side, business confidence is reportedly soaring, with market sentiment buoyed by the prospect of a return to normality. On the other side are those with the sinking feeling that a return to normality is the last thing we need. The worst-case scenario is a disastrous third wave and another lockdown. The best-case scenario is a 'business as usual' recovery, squandering the opportunity for fundamental change.

This split is mirrored within the Labour party, which – despite leader Keir Starmer's promises to bring 'unity' – looks more divided than ever. Those on the party's right are filled with relief that the long nightmare of Corbynism is over, and 'normal' politics can resume. Those on its left are watching this spectacle with mounting despair, fearing that the radical change they hoped for is being cast into the dustbin of history at the very point when it is most urgently needed.

Yet there's something odd about both of these positions. They are both characterised by a kind of certainty, a confidence about what the past tells us and what the future will bring, at a time when our actual condition is one of profound uncertainty and turmoil. I think back to last spring, when most people expected the pandemic to be under control within a few months. On the one hand, this led to ludicrous projections of a 'V-shaped recovery' that have turned out to be complete fantasy. On the other, it led to many campaigners burning themselves out in the belief that this was the crucial moment of crisis where change would be won or lost.

During this time, I worked with a prominent MP who insisted that his project on the post-pandemic economy must be delivered within three months, because the window of opportunity for change would close very quickly. In his view, there was no time to do deep organising and participatory work: the need was too urgent. Over a year later, we are still in the eye of the global storm.

If nothing else, surely this experience should teach us to question our assumptions about what we are living through, what will come next, and how we should respond. There are still huge uncertainties about how the pandemic will evolve and its long-range impacts on the economy and politics. Of course, this uncertainty is extremely anxiety-provoking: it is a major part of the emotional toll the pandemic is taking, which can make us prone to exhaustion, burn-out and despair. But it is also the grounds for hope.

After 2017, the UK left had a newfound confidence – a growing belief that it was on the right side of history and that its ideas were winning the argument. By 2019, this had begun to ossify into hubris. The despair that many are feeling now is the mirror image of this hope, the painful crash back down to earth. But Rebecca Solnit, in her book *Hope In The Dark*, encourages us to embrace a different, more challenging kind of hope. As she puts it: "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of

**“Even if politicians want to go 'back to normal', the tectonic plates of the economy may be shifting beneath their feet in ways that make this simply impossible”**

uncertainty is room to act." Positive change may yet come out of this experience of collective trauma: we just don't know. I want to offer three reasons for this second kind of hope.

Solnit suggests that political and legal changes are often really just 'ratifying' deeper shifts – cultural, economic, intellectual. These shifts are themselves often hard won through patient and determined organising by people who never see the fruits of their labour. In other words, the current positioning of the official opposition is far from the only thing that will determine the future course of British politics. In fact, the direction of influence may ultimately be the other way around. And there is evidence that the pandemic may be accelerating these deeper shifts.

First, the cultural shifts. The pandemic has brought collectivist values to the fore in a way that has no precedent in my lifetime. Political leaders sagely declare that 'none of us are safe until all of us are safe'. The explosion in the scale and reach of mutual aid shows that when push comes to shove, our survival instinct is to help each other. Of

course, those involved in mutual aid before the pandemic already knew this – but recent events have seeded this understanding much more widely. Meanwhile, the gulf between the things we value most – our health, our family, our friends – and the things our economy values has become glaringly apparent. We now know who the real 'essential workers' are, and it has not escaped people's notice that they are paid the least. The late David Graeber said it best: "if 'the economy' means anything, it is the way we provide each other with what we need to be alive (in every sense of the term)".

More to the point, we don't just know this anymore, we feel it. We have experienced it, directly and deeply, in a way that will leave its imprint on us all. For the generation coming of age during the pandemic, those experiences will be formative. Who knows what they will go on to do when it's their turn to take charge? Who knows how these subtle shifts will ripple out into our culture and our sense of ourselves? The financial crisis, with its narratives of 'greedy bankers' and the 1%, if anything reinforced existing narratives about selfish individualism. But it seems highly implausible that those narratives will hold the same grip on our collective imagination after this.

Second, the economic shifts. Even if politicians want to go 'back to normal', the tectonic plates of the economy may be shifting beneath their feet in ways that make this simply impossible. The most obvious case in point is city centres. All the evidence suggests that office working and high-street retail will never be the same again. Shifts towards remote working and online shopping were already happening: the pandemic has just turbo-charged them. This means that the extractive property-led development models which have shaped cities like Manchester, where I live, may simply no longer be viable. City-centre commercial property giants are struggling; new developments are in doubt; for the first time in years, closures of big chain stores have outstripped those of small independent shops.

Of course, these shifts have negative impacts as well as positive ones, and much depends on how they are managed. It remains the case that, overall, the pandemic is exacerbating inequalities. But it is also profoundly disrupting old patterns of working, shopping and living – and the long-term effects of these changes are highly unpredictable. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that they will fundamentally reshape the UK's economic geography – rebalancing activity away from London,

changing the relationship between cities, towns and suburbs, favouring thriving local communities over 'clone town' high streets. This future is far from guaranteed, but that is precisely the point: what we do now matters.

Finally, the intellectual shifts. In October 2020, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) officially advised governments to keep spending to deal with the crisis – prompting the Financial Times to declare “the final nail in the coffin for the doctrine of austerity”. It is hard to overstate the significance of this. Yes, this government will still try to use the crisis to shrink the state – the public sector pay freeze shows us that much. Yes, the Labour Party seems not to have got the memo and is still paralysed by the fear of being seen as fiscally profligate. But this is not 2010. They are both swimming against the tide, the last bastions of a discredited intellectual position that has been publicly disowned by the very institutions that championed it.

Joe Biden, on the other hand, has very much got the memo. His \$2tn stimulus package and calls for a global minimum corporation tax are signs that we are moving into a new world. This is what a paradigm shift looks like. Does it mean we are headed for the sunlit uplands? No. Does it mean that things can change for the better? Absolutely. Would it have happened without the movements behind Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders? We'll never know – which is precisely Solnit's point. But if we try to

imagine an alternate universe where these movements never existed – where the new thinking and organising that flourished around them never took place and 'socialism' was still a dirty word – it's hard to believe that world would be exactly the same as the one we're in. For what it's worth, the Financial Times credits both Corbyn and Sanders with helping to “swing the political pendulum in favour of more aggressive state intervention in the economy”.

Yes, of course it's not enough. We don't just need more state intervention in the economy – we need a much more fundamental transformation of ownership and power. But looking around at the world today, I don't find grounds for the certainty of despair. I don't find grounds to believe that this deeper change is impossible. In any case, Solnit argues that if our criteria for success is utopia, we will always be disappointed. She suggests that we're looking for change in the wrong place. We're looking for the moment we win, the moment we can point to and say: this is when we fixed what was broken. For classical Marxists, it was the revolution. For those involved in the Corbyn and Sanders movements, it was electoral victory. But the real world is not so binary. Even if these events had come to pass, many challenges would have lain ahead. Indeed, this was the core argument that Joe Guinan and I made in our book on prospects for a Corbyn-led government.

Solnit reminds us that change is not

linear, the world is not straightforward, and we can never truly know the impact of our actions. As Tony Benn famously said, “there is no final victory, as there is no final defeat.” He went on to say, “There is just the same battle. To be fought, over and over again. So toughen up, bloody toughen up.” This is where he and I part ways. As I look at the enormous suffering of the world and of those I care about, I think: no. Now is not the time to toughen up. Now is the time to open up – to let our shared trauma open our hearts to each other, and to let our shared uncertainty open our minds to the possibilities of our ever-changing world. And then to act, with hope and determination, to help build a better future.

*Christine Berry is a freelance writer and researcher based in Manchester. She is currently writing a book on democratic ownership, due out with Verso in 2022.*

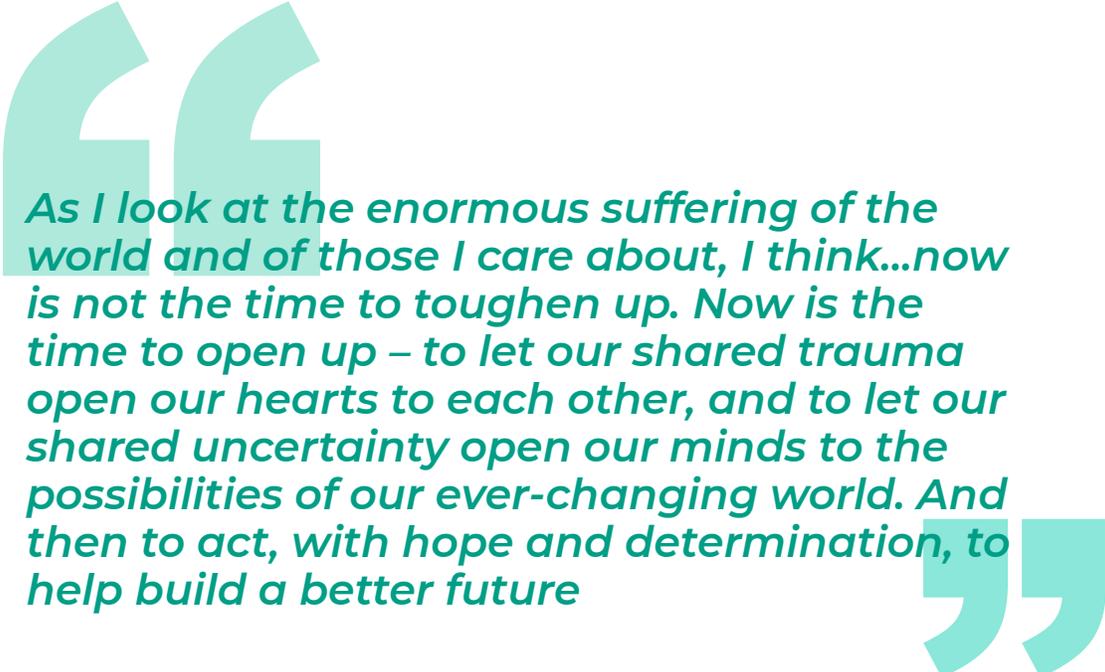
#### FURTHER READING

From Canongate: Hope in the Dark, by Rebecca Solnit (2004).

From Jacobin: After the pandemic, we can't go back to sleep, by David Graeber (2021). <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/03/david-graeber-posthumous-essay-pandemic>

From the Guardian: After Topshop owner Arcadia's demise, what now for UK clothes shopping? (2021). <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/feb/13/after-topshop-owner-arcadia-demise-what-now-for-uk-clothes-shopping>

From IPPR: Who wins and who pays? Rentier power and the Covid crisis, by Christine Berry, Laurie Macfarlane and Shreya Nanda (2020) <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/who-wins-and-who-pays>



***As I look at the enormous suffering of the world and of those I care about, I think...now is not the time to toughen up. Now is the time to open up – to let our shared trauma open our hearts to each other, and to let our shared uncertainty open our minds to the possibilities of our ever-changing world. And then to act, with hope and determination, to help build a better future***

A close-up photograph of a woman and a young girl looking upwards. The woman is on the right, smiling, and the girl is on the left, also smiling. They are in a dark environment with many out-of-focus, warm-toned lights in the background, creating a bokeh effect. The overall mood is hopeful and positive.

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