

Principle 5 Reading Group

Hope in Hell by Jonathon Porritt

this book is dedicated to all those ready to embrace more radical responses to today's climate emergency.

For young people today already stepping up with the kind of conviction, courage and compassion on which our future depends.

And for all the rest of us, who now know where our duty lies.

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Introduction

As I signed off the proofs of *Hope in Hell* back in March, more than a third of the global population was in 'lockdown' on account of the COVID – 19 pandemic. In just a few short weeks, the world had moved from 'business as usual' to introducing increasingly dramatic measures in response to the worst public health emergency in more than a century. It was clear even then that things were going to get a great deal worse before getting better. The cost of COVID – 19 is literally incalculable – for individuals, families, communities, businesses and whole economies. Nation states will be paying down the staggering debts incurred to deal with it for decades to come.

For completely understandable reasons, with so many people's lives so painfully disrupted, pretty much all consideration of the climate emergency has disappeared from the news. What we're witnessing is a particularly telling example of 'the tragedy of the horizon', with COVID – 19 posing an immediate and un-ignorable threat, with the lives of so many at risk, necessitating comprehensive, draconian interventions from government, to be extended for as long as it takes. By contrast, the Climate Emergency is still seen by most people today as a challenge for

tomorrow. Even though our continuing failure to get to grips with it today, *right now*, is putting at risk the lives of countless millions of people in the future.

The Climate Emergency poses an infinitely graver risk to humankind than COVID – 19, but has warranted very little political engagement over the years. That's the tragedy of the horizon: today *always* trumps tomorrow.

Unless, that is, the sheer, gut-wrenching trauma of COVID – 19 causes us all to start thinking very differently about the future. At the very least, people have already begun to understand that COVID – 19 is almost certainly just the first in a new wave of pandemics – caused in large part by our seemingly insatiable desire to go on abusing the natural world and its wild creatures, with no thought for the consequences to ourselves.

Experts have been warning for many years that most of the new diseases that have emerged since 1960 come from wild animals; the risk of pathogens jumping from animals to humans has always been there, but our constant encroachment on the world's rainforests and other habitats has multiplied those risks many times over. As have the global trade in wild animals and wild animal markets.

Governments could put a halt to all those things, specifically to reduce the risk of future pandemics, with exactly the same kind of urgency and resolve they've demonstrated in addressing this particular pandemic.

Might that be just the first of many dramatic shifts in policy that pre – COVID 19, were seen to be 'unthinkable'? Throughout *Hope in Hell*, I've set out to explain why this is *the* decisive decade: if we do what we need to do by the end of the decade to avoid runaway climate change, however 'unthinkable' that may be to most politicians at the moment, then we'll have a fighting chance of ensuring a better world for humankind in the future. But if we fail to grip that challenge, then it's more than likely that today's young people will be looking back on COVID – 19 as a relatively insignificant, short – lived perturbation.

COVID – 19 is a hellish shock. Paradoxically, it's also the reason why we should be more hopeful than ever before about the climate challenge. Cauterised as we are by the intensity of the damage done to the global economy, with its chilling reminder of how vulnerable we all are in this hyper-connected world of ours, I believe COVID – 19 makes it significantly *more likely* that we will indeed do what needs to be done regarding the Climate Emergency – just so long as the post – COVID recovery process puts that emergency at its heart.

Just so long as people (and their governments) realise that warnings from experts (on pandemics or climate change) *must* now inform *all* future policy, and that those who dismiss that expertise as 'fake news' are dangerous enemies of their own people. Just so long as we come to recognise ourselves once again as creatures of the Earth, governed by the laws of physics and the biological interdependencies of *all* living creatures. Just so long as we use this unprecedented shock to our way of life to rethink our basic values and, indeed, our ultimate purpose as human beings.

As and when the virus recedes, we'll be emerging into a very different world from a climate perspective. Emissions of greenhouse gasses in 2020 will be dramatically reduced, providing a critical 'breathing space' in the inexorable upward trend over the the past few years. But we know from past experience (for instance after the financial crash of 2008), that falling emissions driven by economic distress are not sustainable. And they're easily reversed. As António Guterres, Secretary – General of the UN, put it: "We will not fight climate change with a virus."

Above all, we must therefore beware of any kind of 'rebound recovery'. For some, the desire to return to a pre – COVID – 19 state will be all – consuming. We must be ready with an equally compelling narrative – a just, compassionate, zero – carbon narrative – as highlighted throughout the following chapters, as the best possible way of restoring jobs and injecting purchasing power back into our shattered economies.

After everything that we have learned through the COVID – 19 crisis about the power of community, solidarity and empathy, there's no reason to suppose that people will unthinkingly re-embrace the false promises of individualistic, me – first consumerism. Or beg to have their lives blighted all over again by filthy streets and foul air, or diminished by the insanity of the daily commute – when working from home often makes so much more sense for employees and employers alike.

And we can take some comfort from glimpses of that better future already in our midst today: the citizens of Wuhan (the Chinese city at the epicentre of COVID – 19) eventually allowed out onto the streets of their city – and delighting not only in that freedom but in the unprecedented joy of being able to breathe clean air; reports of wildlife returning to all sorts of less polluted, less frenetic city environments; people out and about in gardens, parks and woodlands, finding not just comfort but increased wellbeing and even healing in reconnecting with the natural world.

It may seem insensitive to be talking about the politics of recovery when we're in the midst of a life and death struggle to minimise the personal and economic consequences of COVID – 19. But the Climate Emergency is upon us, in good times or bad. So for all those dedicated climate campaigners, watching another precious year slip by without serious progress in addressing the Climate Emergency, especially after the postponement of the big climate change conference at the end of the year, and for the tens of millions of citizens around the world increasingly concerned about the threat of accelerating climate change, there's a simple message: do everything we possibly can to keep family, friends, colleagues and communities safe and supported, in the midst of the crisis, while recognising that it *will* end, and that we will then have an unprecedented and *unrepeatable* opportunity to invest in the kind of social and economic recovery that will make it possible to avoid the horror story of runaway climate change.

The 2020's will indeed be the decisive decade in addressing today's Climate Emergency, We now know that 2021 will be the decisive year.

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