

2020 Year Zero

Article by Jamie Kendrick

November 29, 2020

Whether or not it echoes down the generations, the health crisis has been a clear moment of rupture, showing both the need and the potential for a very different world. But change will depend on the choices, movements, and ideas that define our response.

The health crisis has blurred the lines between the many challenges facing us in the 21st century. How do we live together in a globalised world, what does our society value most, how to relate to science, medicine, and technology, and how to reverse environmental breakdown? Through the pandemic, such fundamental questions have converged around that which lies at their centre: life and living together. The effect is that 2020 has been experienced as a general crisis: the shock of the health crisis and economic collapse, as all the while forest fires and cyclones rage and conflicts within and between societies grow. Humanity has also displayed its greatest sources of hope throughout the pandemic: solidarity and care, cooperation and inventiveness.

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Amid sweeping societal shifts, behavioural change, and government intervention, many visions for a better post-pandemic world have been put forward. After all, the virus exposes deep injustices in its devastating effects and the vulnerability of many Western countries reveals the fragility of systems primed purely for market efficiency. Covid-19 is not simply a natural disaster. While the investigation into its origins continues, extractive land use and an industrialised food system are key drivers in the emergence of new deadly diseases. However, a pathogen will not suffice to bring forth a fairer, more sustainable future; the actions of states, movements, communities and businesses will be critical.

It is through this lens that this edition of the Green European Journal approaches the pandemic and what it means for society. From the role of women in essential work to the accelerating digitalisation of work and social life, the pandemic reinforces and reconfigures existing divides and inequalities. Seen in the global upsurge in anti-racist organising and shifting political landscapes, new solidarities, narratives, and tensions emerge. As felt in Italy's deserted tourist sites, Barcelona's crowded neighbourhoods, and France's new green municipalities, the questions of public services, space, and environment that define life in the city gain even greater urgency. Faced with the price of dangerous public sector cuts in many countries, the edition goes on to explore the shortcomings of our economic model and the indispensable but changing role of the welfare state in ensuring the wellbeing of all. From bio-surveillance and global migration to anti-microbial resistance and the cultural ramifications of this collective shock, we also look forward, asking how this crisis will influence our world in the years to come.

Though health experts and scientists warned of pandemic risk for years, that the first wave caught Europe by surprise is understandable. Through solidarity – spontaneous as well as channelled through the welfare state –

European societies made it through. The severity of a second wave just months later raises further questions of resilience, state capacity, and a worrying tendency towards complacency. For a European Union accustomed to lurching between crises, the pandemic continues to test its institutional framework. Despite a stopgap recovery fund, its politics remain distant from reality on the ground and constrained by power games between its members. The next frontier for European cooperation, whatever the hurdles, must be a positive politics centred on wellbeing, health, and solidarity.

The pandemic struck just as ecology was adjusting to a new centrality. While the struggle against climate change is far from won, it now shapes politics domestically and globally. With Covid-19, the consequences go far deeper. The health crisis, lockdowns, and recession put public services and jobs back at the heart of the debate but, at the same time, green issues from air pollution and urban space to the care economy and quality of life have only become more pressing. In many European cities, regions, and countries, Green parties are governing in a crisis, faced with difficult trade-offs and unexpected priorities.

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In a tumultuous political scene amid growing discontent, Green government must channel the demands of new movements and respond to people beyond traditional consistencies, if it is to make a decisive impact. But making sure the links between the health crisis, climate warming, and mass extinction are not lost is the real challenge. With Covid-19, the connection between our health and that of the wider environment has become immediate and personal. In this tangibility lies a powerful narrative that needs to be unlocked to drive change for a better future. Much more than an environmental question, it touches every aspect of how we live together, work and produce, and make collective decisions.

The year 2020 marks our unambiguous entry into the 21st century. The politics of life are here in all their complexity. In a manner unlike financial crises, wars, or political upheaval, this health crisis has forced everything to a halt. Restarting society in a way that prevents the same from happening again will require a deep rewiring, the need for which should now be beyond dispute. Political ecology is essential to navigating this uncertainty. Through strengthening solidarity and resilience, forging a new consensus on what really matters, and creating a new relationship with the natural world, it can keep life and living together at the centre of our politics.



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Published November 29, 2020

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/2020-year-zero/>

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