

Eco-Social Steps to Resilience

An interview with Rosa Martínez Rodríguez, Yayo Herrero

July 30, 2020

As the world reels from the fallout of the Covid-19 crisis, discussion turned to rebuilding Europe's economy with the EU clinching a deal on a coronavirus recovery fund after marathon negotiations this July. In this interview, Rosa Martínez spoke to activist and anthropologist Yayo Herrero about how to approach reconstruction in an eco-social way. In forging societies that are resilient to shocks, whether caused by pandemics or climate change, the challenge will be breaking with capitalist logic to propose solutions that prioritise wellbeing while factoring in ecological limits.

Rosa Martínez: The coronavirus crisis has shed light on the fallibility of the system. To what extent could we have foreseen a crisis of this scale, and with such serious repercussions?

Yayo Herrero: This is exactly what the scientific community has been occupied with in recent decades. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services and the World Health Organization have been warning for years of the possibility of pandemics and the difficulty of containment in such a globalised world. Back in 1972, several of these scenarios were set out in the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* report. Despite this, it is astonishing to see how just ten days of lockdown and economic downturn can cause everything to collapse like a house of cards.

Scholars in the field of social ecology have envisioned how the precarity of the economy could lead to its collapse, and how society would have to learn to live with less. They anticipated that the way out would involve collective work and cooperation. While many cooperative networks have emerged, it is striking that isolation and physical distance remain an important aspect of overcoming the pandemic.

Would you say that it is the isolation that differentiates this crisis from others we are facing, such as those relating to the environment, care, migration, and democracy?

While these crises share certain qualities, Covid-19 is the first crisis experienced on a global scale, with real consequences for our daily lives, reaching all places and all sectors of society at once. Other pandemics, extreme climatic events, or fires have been terrible but many have only experienced them as onlookers, myself included. Additionally, each new crisis takes root in increasingly precarious situations. The current health crisis is being experienced within the already precarious post-2008 financial crisis world which is characterised by dismantled public services, job insecurity, high rates of unemployment. One crisis is superimposed upon another and societies, rather than seeking greater resilience, are having to deal with them in increasingly fragile conditions.

Right now, a lot of money is being put on the table for reconstruction. How should this economic stimulus be designed to prepare us for the next crisis?

From an eco-feminist perspective, there are two huge reconstruction priorities right now. The first is protecting individual lives. This requires thinking in terms of human needs – housing, basic energy supplies, sufficient food – but also in terms of relationships, care, and participation. In policy, a “social shock plan” is needed to guarantee a

minimum threshold of needs. Second, we need to restore economic and social metabolisms that stick to those guaranteed minimums for wellbeing, rather than trying to break through an ecological ceiling already pushed to its limits. The millions invested should, for example, be channelled into a system of multi-criterial indicators that encompasses both human wellbeing and safety and the need for a drastic reduction of our environmental footprint, all the while taking into account the materials required to carry this out.

All investment should be guided by these principles. Any Green New Deal or transformation proposal which does not discuss the transformative power of renewable energies alongside the ecological ceiling and the minimum threshold of needs inadvertently risks favouring the lifestyles of those who can afford it while leaving many people out. At the heart of the transformation should be meeting the basic needs of the population, not the needs of an ever-growing system – which would anyway be physically impossible.

Taking this into account when investing in reconstruction will ensure that people and economic models are more resilient when the next crisis comes. How much longer can we go on making colossal investments every 15 or 20 years to prop up a system that is sinking and unsustainable? Of course, some of the issues which politicians must deal with are more immediate than others, but the challenge is making sure that response measures in the short term do not get in the way of reasonable medium-term goals.

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business.*

The urgency and increasing complexity of the situation, as well as the balance of powers, make thinking outside the framework of capitalism seem impossible. When thinking about how to get everything up and running as quickly as possible, what occurs to us is the trio of housing, tourism, and the automobile industry. The great triumph of capitalism is that it has instilled in us the idea that to protect people, we must first protect business. It has confused the interests of the public for the interests of businesses.

The same mistake is made when, with good intentions, investment of money in the car industry is endorsed with a view to protecting workers. Of course, workers in the automobile sector must be protected, but let's give the money directly to them and not to the companies who uphold a redundant model. The same applies to the mining industry. How could we not protect the miners when we owe them a priceless civilizational debt? Protecting the miners is not the same as protecting the mine owners.

If Covid-19 has exposed anything it is the fragility of the collapsing care system, yet this seems to have been overlooked in the political debate. Is there a risk of women being left out of the reconstruction plan? How can we approach this from a feminist perspective?

This is certainly a risk. I would not say women in general, as there are patriarchal subjects in women's bodies who are within the system that is protected, though they are a minority; but what you have raised is a key question. One way to approach reconstruction from a feminist perspective is by rethinking what we understand by "care". If we understand care not just as looking after a small child or an elderly person in a care home, but from the perspective that we as human beings need care throughout our lifetimes – from changing a nappy to guaranteeing a decent daily life for all – then care becomes more than a branch of social services.

Instead of treating dependency like an anomaly or ailment that must be endured at certain moments in life, let us try to rethink politics from the starting point of care. In the short term, this involves measures such as ratifying

International Labour Organization conventions to protect female domestic workers, regularising the status of migrant women who carry out this labour without papers, or funnelling public resources into care homes where the model for guaranteeing the lives of the elderly has proved disastrous.

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Care can also be used as a springboard for rethinking policies. Coronavirus mortality rates have been higher in places with consistently high levels of air pollution because inhabitants have weakened respiratory systems. In such a context, it is contradictory to talk about care but fail to address air pollution. The debate on how to care for people, how to guarantee that basic needs are met, should be the guiding principle for the creation of resilient societies. Putting care at the centre means first defining what we need to ensure that lives are cared for, and taking it from there.

With other crises, such as the climate crisis, Greens have cautioned against a purely techno-optimistic outlook which holds that scientific and technical solutions are a silver bullet to all our problems. But right now, science and research are precisely what we need. How can we put science and technology at the service of an eco-social transition and the creation of more resilient models?

There is a paradox here. On the positive side, many people have been working and keeping in touch with their loved ones with the help of technology. But there is also the worrying question of surveillance, excessive control over citizens' lives, and even the daily possibilities for manipulation via fake news and hoaxes on social media. We are reliant on important research into treatments and vaccines, but there is a dispute over who will profit: will vaccines be distributed equally or will the richest countries monopolise them, leaving many people out in a move that aligns with border closures and the retreat into individualism?

The paradox is that while this is playing out, we're also seeing a drastic denial of science. There are whole climate-denying industrial sectors that reject expert knowledge in favour of a system in which personal opinion is worth more than scientific models. We are witnessing simultaneously these two opposing mindsets: a dependency and messianic faith in vaccines, breakthroughs and scientific systems, and an outright denial of everything that's unpleasant or undesirable.

What we need now more than ever is what philosopher Edgar Morin calls "science with conscience": science which is reflective and aware of its role in society.^[1] An ongoing debate questions whether the scientific community was right to be so conservative in communicating the severity of climate change in recent decades. Many sympathise with climate scientists, viewing their conservatism as a response to the external attack on science which forced them to work within the realm of what was practically indisputable. However, this conservatism has stripped science of its capacity to predict, forecast, and intuit — something which Albert Einstein saw as fundamental. Any scientific predictions that go against dominant economic interests will inevitably be criticised and downplayed, but they are now absolutely crucial.

The Covid-19 crisis has seen the emergence of many solidarity and community networks. How do you think these networks will evolve and are they strong enough to become a force for change?

These networks will play a crucial role in any way out of the crisis that values individual lives. In rethinking the logic of care, stability, and support from public institutions, the mobilisation of citizens is undoubtedly vital.

Like in Barcelona, some networks have gone beyond neighbourhood organising to interact with local authorities. Formalising such collaborations between the council and the community is vital to developing a resilient society. We are heading towards a future with limits, and one that requires rethinking public life and the most viable options on all levels, including economically. Such partnerships help protect lives and are affordable. Beyond the coronavirus crisis, imagine what good a nucleus of virtuous interaction between schools, health centres, organised networks, and local councils can do for the eco-social crisis.

Self-organisation is key to ensuring that authorities protect individual lives, but it is especially important if the authorities are failing to do this in the first place. If politics turns its back on the people, the only way to move forward in dignity is for people to take care of each other, even if that means being left at the margins of institutions. What tends to happen with these social movements is that everything is thought of in terms of self-organisation, but this doesn't always lead to change, and for that we need the existing institutions too.

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Institutions and politicians repeatedly evade their responsibility towards people. In the face of such neglect, it is important to set things in motion and create experience laboratories and spaces aimed at solving the specific problems ordinary citizens contend with. From my point of view, these partnerships between councils and communities are exactly what we need. This does not exclude public-private partnerships which can be welcomed and beneficial to both sides, so long as they are led by the aims and interests of the general public and not those of businesses.

It's hard to understand why authorities are not looking into new partnerships at a time when we need new ideas. Are authorities giving up on the idea of utopia, are we a conservative society or is it simply a lack of imagination? Do we need utopia or should we be more realistic?

The answer is a combination of all three. Lack of imagination is key. In *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi wrote that the problem with completely unregulated capitalism is that it threatens to become a form of political religion. Our problem is that a large part of society has internalised this fundamentalism which will have us believe that economic growth and money are sacred. Currently, most politicians – even those with the best of intentions – struggle to break free of the confines of capitalism. They find it hard to leave behind the notion that human life can only be supported when the most sacred thing – money – plays its given role. In turn, we cling to a logic of sacrifice: everything is worth sacrificing for the economy to keep growing because this is the only way to satisfy our needs and keep the system afloat. It is hard to imagine a different way of doing things.

We need utopia. We've had our fair share of dystopia – enough to take stock of where we are. Now we need to turn our attention to designing everyday utopias, ways to make the aspirations of the majority compatible with the physical limits of the planet and notions of justice. Artistic expression and political declarations help us envision a community-centred future founded on principles of sufficiency, but one that is also much more connected and that makes time for other things.

Thinking about all of this is important because it harnesses our imaginations. Otherwise, we remain tethered to the idea that wellbeing is dependent on preserving what we already have. This bubble will continue to shrink and increasingly protect the rights of the few while creating more struggles for the poor, casting more to the margins, and aiding the rise of the extreme right, xenophobes, misogynists, and haters who capitalise on fear and uncertainty.

Despite the difficulty of looking beyond capitalism, feminist and environmental perspectives are gradually colonising public consciousness. The idea that we need to put individual lives front and centre and tackle climate change is increasingly prevalent. Can we be optimistic that we'll manage to break free from the mindset of capitalism?

I believe that one of the greatest gestures of respect towards people, and freedom itself, is to help people see reality up close so they can work from there. Without playing the blame game, which achieves little, it is important to understand the asymmetrical system of responsibilities that exists in a global situation that is increasingly frightening and uncertain. Understanding how these asymmetrical responsibilities are structured is the only thing that will empower us to act on it. In order to intervene, participate, or even take charge of our own lives, we must first be aware of the fact that we are responsible. This is the basis for creating a culture of care: we care for each other, and for the earth, because we feel responsible. Once we start feeling responsible, we can harness the common goal of creating a better, more dignified future. This is what gives me hope.

Presently, an empty hope is circulating that manifests in platitudes like “something will turn up” or “we’ll pull through this together”. For me, this is a discourse of false hope which fails to set out any kind of vision but relies on the idea that things will naturally sort themselves out. It only serves to create more uncertainty.

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But there is also active hope, which involves organising and mobilising to effect change. Small transformations don't necessarily create global change, but collective efforts make that end attainable. By coming together on home ground to make changes that affect the circumstances of our individual lives, people create innovative spaces where they can wield collective power. There are many people, experiences and well-connected initiatives all over the world, and that makes me hopeful. I truly believe that there is the potential and capacity to change things.

Footnotes

[1] Edgar Morin (1982). *Science avec conscience*. Paris: Fayard.



Rosa Martínez Rodríguez has been political coordinator of the Elkarrekin Podemos group in the Basque Parliament since 2019. She was formerly co-spokesperson of the Spanish Green Party (EQUO) and an MP from 2015 to 2019.



Yayo Herrero is a Spanish anthropologist, engineer, professor and activist known for her expertise in ecofeminism and ecosocialism at European level. She was the state coordinator of Ecologists in Action and has extensive experience in numerous social initiatives on human rights and social ecology. She is currently a professor at the National University of Distance Education and the general director of FUHEM.

Published July 30, 2020

Interview in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/eco-social-steps-to-resilience/>

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