Preface: from COVID-capitalism to survival of the species

There is an almost mythical story of an alternative to capitalist production, developed by workers in the British arms industry in the 1970s and 1980s, that is sometimes hazily recalled by older political activists. It is a story that should be dusted down and its lessons re-learned as a guide to our times. The ‘combine plan’ developed by a large number of unionised engineering workers – employed by the arms corporation Lucas Aerospace – is one that seems more and more incredible as the years go by.¹ Those workers, fed up with their skills being used to produce weapons, developed prototypes of a number of socially useful technologies. Many of their inventions were groundbreaking and were not fully developed for many years: wind turbines, electric vehicles and a type of energy-efficient heat pump that is now widely used. The list goes on and on. Those workers were responding innovatively to the collapse of the British manufacturing industry and sought to harness the country’s capacity for making the things that were really needed, not merely the things that could really sell. Tragically, despite the

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detailed plans and business cases, and the revolutionary inventions that came together years ahead of their time, the 'Lucas Plan' failed to gain the support of government or private investors.

Some of the industries that today bear the most blame for the climate crisis, including auto manufacture, air transport and the arms industry, are all likely to suffer major long-term losses as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. They could do with a 'Lucas Plan'. On the manufacturing side, the UK company Rolls Royce is projected to lose 8,000 jobs; and all of the major airlines are projecting thousands upon thousands of job losses. The human tragedy of the virus will be immeasurably compounded by the economic fallout. Yet, our commitment to a booming, carbon-based air transport sector seems absurd at the moment, as does the scale of public investment in arms.² And yet, there are signs that repurposing both transport and arms companies in this day and age might not only be possible but essential.³ At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, British military giant BAE Systems very quickly started producing essential medical supplies, including face masks and ventilation units.⁴ Although the examples of an immediate switch in production are relatively small, such cases do show the potential we have to transform our economy.

However, none of the economic measures introduced by advanced capitalist states in response to COVID-19 have seriously sought to make our economy more sustainable. Indeed, governments around the world,

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rather than taking a Lucas-style approach, have only one solution: protect the system as it is!

Initial 'business support packages' in Europe were valued at around 15 % of GDP in countries like Spain, Germany, France and the UK. The final value, which we will all pay for in the long run, will certainly be much more. In the US, just three months into the crisis, the bailout was valued at around three times the total for government-backed funds made available following the 2008 economic crash. They are called 'business support packages' because that is exactly what they are: wage subsidies (most of those payments went to corporate payroll departments rather than directly to workers); large government-backed loans; and one-off payments to keep transport and infrastructure corporations afloat. Another tranche went to the self-employed and small businesses, largely to maintain a labour market based on the casualised and cheap labour that our major corporations thrive on.

An iron rule of corporate capitalism has been revealed by this crisis again, perhaps more clearly than before: the profit-making corporations at the heart of the system can only survive economic shocks if they are kept on life support, by us. The scale of this life-support effort has revealed to us how possible, and indeed necessary, a major economic transformation might be. Yet, at this undeniably decisive point for the future of the planet, no one is asking how we use the immense resources being thrown at COVID-19 to precipitate a social transformation that does not involve

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reproducing the means of our own self-destruction. This is precisely the question asked and answered in full by the Lucas Aerospace workers. With 40 years of hindsight, now, more than ever before, we need to ask the most fundamental questions about how we can survive as a species.

There is, at the same time, a sinister, 'hidden' aspect of this bailout. In many countries around the world, there has been a silent crusade against the safety and environmental standards that corporations are expected to meet. European car manufacturers have been demanding subsidies to ensure survival, and, in the very same breath, have been lobbying hard for CO₂ emission standards to be lowered.⁵ In Canada, oil and gas companies have been pushing to lift environmental regulations, and the Keystone XL pipeline to facilitate the extraction of high carbon oil from tar sands was approved with a \$5 billion subsidy.⁶ In the US, the government has used the crisis to speed up the repeal of environmental laws and the sale of land to oil and gas mining and timber corporations.⁷ The US Environmental Protection Agency has suspended enforcement of environmental laws. The Chinese government gifted its coal industry with an unprecedented mass issue of new mining permits. Many US states lifted rules on single-use plastics. In England, the ban on plastic straws was postponed and plastic manufacturers in Europe are fighting hard to shelve the ban on plastic forks. The list goes on and on.

Most galling for some has been that many of the

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stimulus packages prioritised some of the worst environmental offenders. The Bank of England's qualitative easing programme included BP and Rio Tinto, of whom we will hear more later in the book. Why, when those sectors are clearly failing and are unable to withstand the shock, is our government's automatic reflex to protect investors at our expense? Why is the government's auto-reflex not to protect our environmental standards, but to support the fossil fuel industry and weaken existing regulation and controls that could help us reverse climate change and the ecological crisis?

Crispin Odey, who made an estimated £115 million from the crisis by betting on market failure in March 2020, has also invested heavily in projects that destroy the environment. In February, Odey increased his stake in Brazilian firm SLC Agricola, a corporation that has been revealed to have a stake in deforestation. The system of investment that determines what is valued, and who makes money from crises, is cyclical. Social disasters reap profits which are then ploughed into environmental disasters, producing more social disasters, and on and on it goes – a sick game that we can only stand back and watch.

It is difficult to see how this predatory cycle of investment can be broken. Odey is unusual in the sense that most investors are able to remain completely anonymous. Indeed, if you want to remain removed and distant from the source of your wealth, you can. This is the real scandal of social distancing that we need to talk about in light of COVID-19, since, as this book

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will show, this feature of capitalist systems has a more pernicious and central role in destroying our planet than we ever acknowledge.

The COVID-19 crisis has put into sharper focus the stark choice we face for the future of the planet. We can choose to depart from the crisis by developing a sustainable economy and sustainable jobs: a green industrial revolution. Or, we can simply allow the biggest corporations to win again and strip away any environmental regulations that stand meekly in their way. There are obvious alternatives to the way our failed systems are organised. We have a whole range of other models, tried and successfully tested in different countries, normally after things have failed in the past. From Argentina to the Basque Country and Catalonia, we could recite an ABC of alternatives to capitalist production that have been created by people just to survive the economic shocks of the twenty-first century. We know from real, lived, human experience in the aftermath of economic crises, that protecting corporations and their investors is not the only way to organise an economy.

The problem is that they would mean removing the right of the ultimate beneficiaries of the corporation – investors – to profit in perpetuity. It would also mean removing the rights and privileges of their most senior managers and directors. In other words, dealing with the corporation means precipitating a fundamental shift in the balance of social classes. It means overturning the social position of elites.

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COVID-19 is one of many global tragedies we will witness in our lifetime. Yet it is because of its global nature that we have no choice but to recognise the nuts and bolts of how pandemics like this germinate. There is clear evidence that new strains of viruses like COVID-19 are only able to move between species in large-scale 'factory' meat farms.⁸ It is no coincidence that our most recent outbreaks were 'swine-flu' (H1-N1) and 'bird-flu' (H5-N1). Those are the most intensely farmed animals and that are kept in environments that are of a scale that allow viruses to mutate from animals to humans. What are those industries characterised by? The domination of large corporations. Huge global pork producers like Smithfield and poultry producers like Tyson and Doux have led a revolution in meat production that is based upon growing the scale and intensity of farms.⁹ This is not to say that those corporations are responsible for COVID-19 or any other virus. Rather, it is a particular model of capitalism that is at fault, and this model creates the conditions that simultaneously allow corporations to dominate and viruses to spread. At one level this is an unfortunate coincidence. But given that the domination of the sector by large corporations facilitates and encourages viral conditions, the reality of the situation is that we need to break this model of corporate capitalism if we are to have any chance of controlling future outbreaks.

If we cannot contemplate such a basic human need as food production outside the structure of corporate capitalism after what we have just been through,

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then we are destined to face the ultimate human existential threat. Indeed, as this book will argue, if we don't imagine food production, energy, transport and indeed all extractive and manufacturing industries outside the structure of corporate capitalism, then we reduce our chances of humans surviving as a species catastrophically.

Long after the COVID-19 crisis has passed, future generations will look at this period as a 'moment' that everything might have changed direction; a moment that woke us up to the fact that we could not live side-by-side with corporations. They will question why we did not break the back of a corporate structure that is killing us. Most of all, they will question why we did not kill the corporation when we had the chance.

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May 2020