

# “Flattening the Curve” while Flattening Emissions

By Kevin Buckland

*In responding to the global health emergency and global climate emergency, youth movements must show international solidarity that goes beyond national boundaries and build political pressure to ensure that any economic bailout prioritizes people - not polluters - and is compatible with the Paris Agreement.*

## Welcome aboard

The Diamond Princess cruise ship has 20 bars, various pools and hot tubs, an award winning steakhouse and regular opera performances. It prides itself as a place to “relax and rejuvenate” with “the best pizza at sea”. However, once Coronavirus struck and spread rampantly throughout the nearly 4,000 passengers, none of these luxuries probably seemed very important to anyone on board.

This ship is perhaps an apt metaphor for our planet’s situation. We are suddenly reminded that there is no way out and that we are subject to nature’s laws and whims - rather than the other way around. The ship, like our planet, runs on dirty fossil fuels. There is a limited supply of water, food, and toilet paper. Its monoculture hallways are full of identical rooms and its stylish dining rooms are full of monoculture food. And, importantly, it only functions via a strict class system that has some people drinking champagne from jacuzzis while others wash the glass.



*Diamond Princess cruise ship, Sakaiminato, Tottori Prefecture, Japan<sup>1</sup>*

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But, when someone coughs from across the dining room, suddenly our floating planet can feel very small, very vulnerable, very intimate and rather ill prepared to properly deal with this type of situation. In recent years, the *Diamond Princess* has undergone a number of important financial cuts as part of a neoliberal goal of maximizing efficiency. The number of room attendants was cut in half, and the whole on-board hospital and the nurses were also affected by the cuts. The lifeboats were auctioned off for not being used often enough to be worth the 1<sup>st</sup> class deck space. These changes all happened gradually and were barely noticed. However, with the onset of the virus, all of these decisions became blatantly obvious. While some of the first class passengers of the Executive Suites may be hoping for this all to end as quickly as possible so they can get back to “normal”, perhaps many of the staff and crew, who sleep crammed into the windowless cabins below deck, and who have been the most exposed to danger in maintaining the community onboard, may be less nostalgic about returning to “normal”.

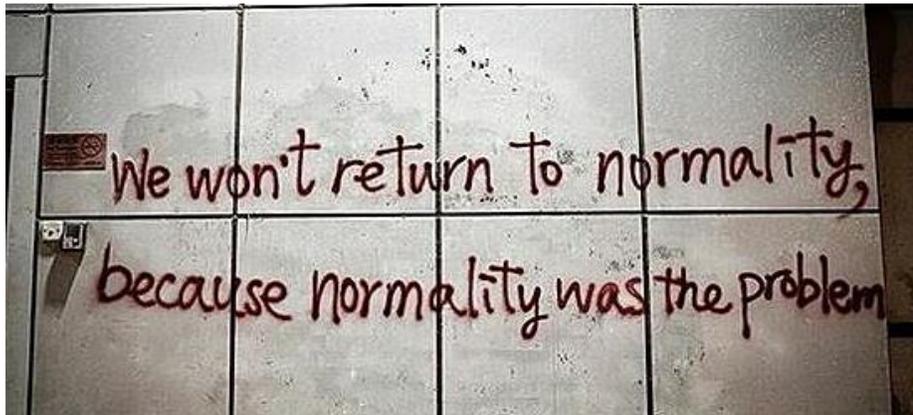
To properly build upon this metaphor there would be one important little detail to add: there is also a typhoon that is headed straight for our boat. The winds of the global climate emergency are already picking up speed and those in charge are largely ignoring it - declaring that it is “politically impossible” to take action.

### **No Return to “Normal”**

The current Coronavirus pandemic will have lasting impacts on humanity: both physically and psychologically. It has ripped a wide hole in the human myth of mastery of nature and our separation from it. What it has exposed in its swift journey through passport controls and air ducts around the world, are the particular vulnerabilities that neoliberal capitalism has constructed for itself, and consequently, for us all.

These infections, and our collective response, remind us that viruses require hosts, and how we host them matters. Decades of cuts to public services, such as healthcare, combined with exponentially increasing inequality have left us dangerously unprepared to deal with most people’s daily needs, let alone a crisis of this magnitude. Also, we must remember that many populations, weakened by centuries of structural racism, have been suffering from the current HIV/AIDS pandemic or combating regular outbreaks of tuberculosis and cholera which together caused approximately 1.6 million deaths in 2018. A hundred years earlier, during the last major global pandemic - the Spanish Flu - the majority of victims were in drought stricken western India where structural poverty combined with environmental conditions resulted in lethal consequences.

As we watch this pandemic spread like wildfires across the globe, we must ask if countries and economies will simply “return to normal” while the coronavirus continues to ravage historically exploited and systematically weakened parts of the globe? Furthermore, will the world return to “normal” once Coronavirus is quelled, while leaving other deadly infectious plagues, such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS to continue? Or will we respond like the valiant Cuban doctors who have recently arrived in Italy to confront a threat that knows no borders?



*Photo by Kevin Buckland*

The question of “returning to normal” is vital for two reasons. Firstly, let us remember that for many people around the world the previous “normal” wasn’t so great to begin with. The past year has seen major uprisings in Sudan, Haiti, Lebanon, Bolivia, Chile, France, Catalunya, Algeria, Iraq, Hong Kong, India and others - showing a widespread and growing disapproval for “normal”. Secondly, let us remember that “normal” is itself suicidal, and based on the combustion of fossil fuels that is giving our entire planet a fever. The millions of people who took to the streets in 2019 for climate justice and the hundreds of thousands of youth climate strikers were protesting exactly this mindset that is willing to sacrifice the future, in order to satisfy the overindulgence of an elite few in the present.

### **The Growth Economy or Life on Earth**

The combination of weakened social and natural systems, with the onset of a disease whose only known remedy is to slow down, stay home, skip work, and not consume, is not what global capitalism is designed for. Before you ever heard of COVID19, the global economy was already on shaky grounds as an infinite growth based economy is not compatible with a finite planet. The “Carbon Bubble” (representing between 1 and 4 trillion USD in known fossil fuel assets that must be left in the ground to stay below 2 degrees of warming) is a prime example of the fragility of the global economic system and its preference for “growth at all costs” above human or ecological needs.

The global health emergency, like the global climate emergency, poses a dilemma for humanity: either the economy or life on Earth. As economies around the world are confronted with the choice between keeping up their production and saving lives, the inhumane priorities of the global economic system are being rapidly exposed through practices such as industry bailouts that do nothing to strengthen health systems.

Spain and Italy have seen the immediate shutdown of most “non-essential” industries while crucial economic activities, such as food markets and pharmacies, have remained opened, illustrating how the vital (often low-paid and female-led) reproductive work of society is deemed so essential that it cannot be shut down. In Italy, however, massive industry lobbying was able to persuade government that heavy industry was also “essential” for its role in maintaining the economy, despite not directly supporting this global health emergency. Our responses to the global health emergency represent a crisis that challenges and questions the underlying values of our global economic system.

There is a difference between seeing a tiger in the zoo or seeing it in the wild. To generations more familiar with viral videos and computer viruses than a pandemic, Coronavirus has jumped off of their screens and into the center of their life. This, like any brush with death, clarifies our own priorities; both individually and collectively.

A crisis such as this can strip life down to its bare essentials, refocusing priorities. In a practical example, [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) has redirected its warehouses to prioritize “basic needs” such as diapers, food, and medicines while putting your “matching family swimsuits” on hold. Yet, such a realignment of priorities also reminds us that just two weeks ago this same system was perfectly willing to let people around the world die for lack of clean water or basic medicines while allowing others to order overnight an electric crepe maker. What we do in response to Coronavirus also begs the question of why we didn’t do it before, will we do it again, and what “normal” was in the first place?

### **The Task at Hand**

It is time to rethink and reimagine globalization. Decades of neoliberal policies have opened the doors for consequence-free extractive models of production that privatize gains while collectivizing risks and damages. Is it impossible to think that planetary health systems and climate solidarity could not be as connected and integrated as current extractive supply chains?

Action is already underway and suggests the growth of new values for an open-source global culture based upon solidarity and mutual aid. The “Maker” community [are producing 3D printed respirators and masks](#), while sharing their downloadable patterns online. Almost daily, these prototypes are being improved through online collaborative platforms. Breweries in Ontario are producing alcohol based hand sanitizers, FabLabs in Barcelona are collaborating directly with hospitals, individuals are jumping into domestic production of face-masks, and solidarity networks of mutual aid are springing up in neighborhoods across the world.



*“We are not quarantined, we are organising” Photo by Kevin Buckland*

The response to Coronavirus represents our best opportunity for both a material and social restructuring of society that is centered on mutual care - for each other and for the rest of nature - as the window for averting a climate catastrophe closes. Neither Coronavirus nor the climate crisis adhere to national boundaries, and so historically privileged parts of the world have the moral obligation to mobilize unprecedented international solidarity that supports those most vulnerable, wherever they may be. Youth, with their notably low risk-rates for infections, as well as their familiarity with digital networks, can play a leading role in the emergency response networks that may model a new path forwards for our global society.

### **Flattening the Curve while Flattening the Economy**

The rules of the world are being rewritten. What we have been told for decades to be “politically impossible” has just happened overnight. Emissions around the world are dropping at tremendous speeds; airplanes are grounded while cruise ships lay empty, proving that the drastic emissions reductions needed to avert a climate catastrophe are not only possible, but can happen overnight. The bailouts underway make it clear that there is - and has always been - the money needed to radically and swiftly transform our economies.

A massive economic shift is already underway in an attempt to further consolidate wealth by rewarding the companies who created the conditions for both the global health emergency and the global climate crisis. It is our responsibility to ensure that people, not corporations, get a climate compatible bailout that prioritizes the needs of workers in the necessary shift to a low carbon economy. **Movements, and youth movements in particular, cannot allow any bailout that is itself not compatible with the Paris Agreement, otherwise we are solving one crisis while we provoke another.** Our planet’s response to this crisis will either further deepen inequalities and structural vulnerabilities as we wreck our climate, or it will turn our response to coronavirus into a just transition from unnecessary, heavy polluting industry towards low-carbon care work.

It is youth who will bear the greatest burden of the impacts of the climate crisis, and they must therefore play a leading role in reshaping and reimagining a climate compatible world, and have a share in the power and decision-making. Yes, we must “flatten the curve” of infections but we must also “flatten the economy” towards a model based on stability, sustainability and resilience- rather than growth. Otherwise we are solving one problem by racing into another.



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