

# Humankind Crowned – Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Virus

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To put it up front, this essay is not about relativization. I am sitting in my flat, trying to make ends meet between supervising my childrens' chaotic home-schooling, my own home-office, and maintaining social and supply relations especially with more anxious elderly relatives. I am glad that the Austrian government decided in good time to issue severe measures, and so I am slightly optimistic that the pandemic, which I recognize as a serious threat, might not result in utter disaster here, as I fear it might occur in other countries.

So whence my subtitle? Isn't the use of "Love" merely cynical in this context, as is the allusion to Dr. Strangelove, armageddon? No, it is not, I reckon, and here is why:

Gaia, the world organism, fired a shot across the bows of humankind's ship.

On this ship, a couple of captains, officers, and administrators have been steering the course they deemed the right one, and the only one. The rest of the ship's complement, passengers and those hidden in the depths working the machinery tended to believe that "there is no alternative" – oh yes, I remember, Maggie Thatcher. The world system with its increasingly neoliberal and technocratic control loops has been compared to "nature", to "laws"; and divine entities like "the markets", or "the Economy" were instantiated to steer us like fate towards the one and only end.

For Gaia's well-aimed shot, the captains were forced to instantly slow down the ship and heave to the side, avoiding the fatal hit foreseen. We are steering a different course now, slower, elsewhere bound, and somewhat aimless. The captains and officers assure that after the current crisis, we will – of course – step by step turn back to "normalcy". Back on course.

It amazes me what is possible. China locked down much of transport and production, and airborne nitrogen dioxide significantly decreased during this phase. Austria's chancellor waved his hand and four billion Euro materialized to support local economy. As this turned out to be much too small an amount, another magical gesture: And Let There Be 38bn Euro. Climate change activists have been trying to convince people, companies, and governments to reduce flying, virtually without any result, and now: air travel is almost on a halt, globally.

The current course involving severe restrictions cannot be upheld for long, this is clear, as damage is unavoidable, mainly menacing small-scale enterprises, artists, McJob-workers, and similarly underprivileged. It should not be maintained longer than absolutely needed. We have to bring the ship back on course, but not necessarily on the old one.

Why I love the virus: the damage-impact-ratio is overwhelming. Many other crises, wars, mass migrations, global warming, and other health threats like ebola, or malaria, are much more dangerous and have caused and probably will cause much more casualties, deaths and suffering, again mostly among the underprivileged. However, no crisis has hitherto triggered such powerful responses in regulating general pollution, companies, transport, and trade, and even – hopefully – in social re-orientation towards solidarity. I assume that this is due to a rather ignorant perception of threat: wars, ebola, migrants, or the climate are commonly regarded far away or even neglected by

the powerful. With the virus, though, politicians, CEOs, and top-level criminals are as affected by fear as the rest of the world – they all are either old or they have elderly relatives and friends, and neither money nor power prove reassuring at all. The virus crowns humankind democratically, Prince Charles was tested positive, as was a child in my son's school.

When the ship will be back on course, we all will therefore know that “there is an alternative”. It is not the law of nature that locks us to neoliberal capitalism. We witness how powerful the state can be, backed up by democratic majorities. We witness that the ship can be steered on a course that is decided by the crew and not by destiny or the divine market. With this knowledge and trust in survival that we will have gained from the virus-shot-across-the-bows, many things become possible in our collective future.

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