

Critical Fantasy Studies Meets Global Cooperation Research: A New Research Agenda for Investigating Crisis Politics

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The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a global health crisis; it is expected to lead to lasting changes in various policy areas, including health, mobility, trade, industry, finance, and sustainability. We are in a formative moment which we might call the Corona Virus Crisis (CVC). Like any moment of shock and dislocation in history, the CVC does and will enable deep structural changes. It is therefore interesting and timely to investigate how global sustainability governance is influenced by CVC and how it will be reimagined and rearranged in its aftermath. Not only the changes in the practices and discourses but also the fantasies and imaginaries of global sustainability governance will change following the CVC. New priorities, synergies, and trade-offs in sustainability; new conceptions of recovery, improvement, and social transformation are already being (re)imagined. The extent to which we can contribute (as citizens and stakeholders) to these imaginaries in an equitable fashion might also determine what the ultimate future sustainability goals should be in a post-CVC global society.

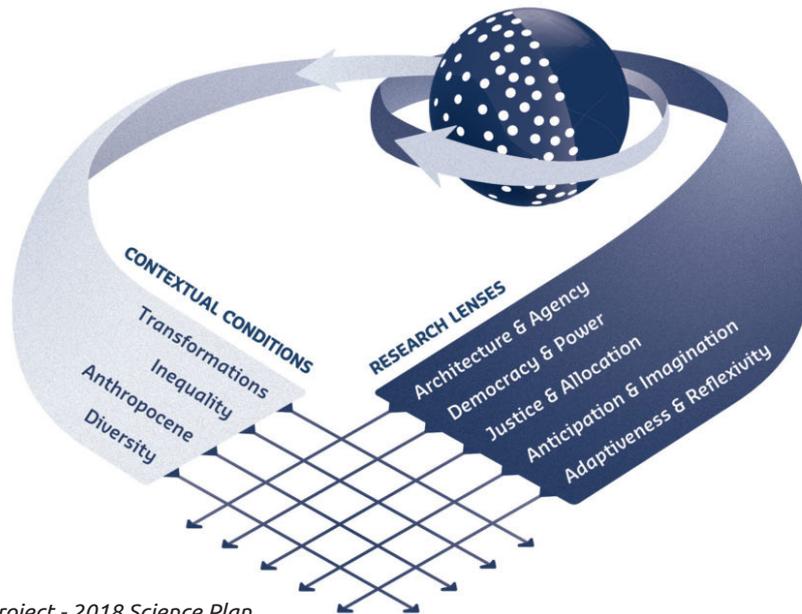
Crisis and political change

Throughout time, and across the ideological spectrum, the relation between crisis and change is an important research theme for social scientists. As Milton Friedman (1962: 7) wrote, crises are moments when 'the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable'. According to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), such dislocatory moments open the social horizon to deeply structural changes and make a new symbolic order possible. In the context of the CVC,

behaviours, policies, and ideas that seemed impossible only a few months ago are now considered both legitimate and necessary. Borders are closed; travel arrangements, conferences, world-wide entertainment, sports and business events are cancelled; most education has been moved to digital platforms; working conditions and employment options changed, and democratic rights have been suspended in many of the pandemic's epicentres.

New practices and ideas following the CVC have already revealed emergent synergies and trade-offs between different policy objectives, especially in the field of sustainability governance. Measures taken by individuals and states, such as social isolation and travel bans reduced air pollution and carbon emissions (EEA 2020) improved water quality (Brunton 2020), resulted in banning of wet markets, and the sale of certain species of wildlife associated with the pandemic (McCall 2020). The CVC however also affected financial markets, igniting an economic downturn and instigating massive stimulus and bailout packages (Baldwin and Weder di Mauro 2020). While economic measures taken by some governments in response to CVC relax environmental regulations (Milman and Holden 2020), environmental groups call for a green and just recovery¹, and demand company bailouts to be made conditional on climate targets (Harrabin 2020). At the beginning of the pandemic, the United Nations (UN) has indefinitely postponed the Conference of the Parties (COPs) for biodiversity, oceans,

¹ See the Open Letter on 'Principles for a #JustRecovery from COVID-19' at <https://350.org/just-recovery/>.



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and climate change. In other words, the economic, political, and environmental dimensions of sustainability governance are being shaken up; finding a new balance between different policy objectives – including synergies and trade-offs – will require careful negotiation.

The global governance architecture currently in place to address and negotiate synergies and trade-offs in sustainability governance is the High Level Political Forum (HLPF), which works to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Culminating in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the 2030 Agenda provides a multi-level, holistic approach to pressing global problems, including health. Starting in 2020, the UN's 75th Anniversary, *A Decade of Action* was launched to implement the SDGs. In late March, all UN institutions were already reassessing their policy areas, re-framing SDGs in the context of the pandemic (United Nations 2020). CVC has arguably thrown progress towards the SDGs decades back (Muelemann 2020), and scholars (e.g. Chonan 2020) as well as practitioners such as former Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon have called for economic responses to be subsumed by environmental concerns in future sustainability governance (Ban and Verkooijen 2020). The practices, discourses, and future imaginaries of sustainability governance are changing.

A new research agenda for global cooperation research: Critical Fantasy Studies

The study of future imaginaries and their relationship with policy practices, institutional narratives,

and political contestations are increasingly central to sustainability studies. Notable examples of large networks and research programs include studies in urban (e.g. Mistra Urban Futures Program), and global environmental governance (e.g. the Future Earth Science Network). The Earth System Governance Project (ESG), the largest network of environmental governance research, has established 'anticipation and imagination' as one of the five research lenses that guides its global research program (Burch et al. 2019). This interest in anticipation and future, imaginaries and fantasies, in the psychoanalytical sense of the term has culminated in a rapprochement of the recently formed field of Critical Fantasy Studies (CFS) and studies of environmental politics and sustainability cooperation. CFS focuses on the psychoanalytic aspects of the political, particularly the role desire and the unconscious play in many of our practices and discourses, including our reactions to key dislocatory moments associated with ecological and pandemic crises (Glynos 2021). The concept of fantasy is critical to further develop the understanding of nature and environment as inherently contingent and political (Behagel and Mert 2021). Accordingly recent literature highlights the political role of fantasy (Glynos and Stavarakakis 2008; Kapoor 2014; Eberle 2019), and regards fantasies as structurally entwined with discourse and meaning, desires and emotions that drive political choices as well as political ontologies and subjectivities. In the context of climate and sustainability politics this provides an important and novel perspective: discourses of nature and the environment hold a privileged position in this entwinement of language, desire, and

being (Glynos et al. forthcoming). At a time of great dislocation caused by ecological crises and global pandemics, fantasies of nature, and the relation between natures and cultures, both human and more-than-human, are central to analyse the transformation of political imageries and discourses.

This agenda can be furthered for various reasons, but particularly in the light of the last two years; exploring fantasies would help us understand the inertia around climate politics which is significantly different from policies around COVID-19. Behavioural and policy changes that seemed impossible only a few weeks ago were being introduced, legitimised, and normalised in response to the pandemic. To learn from this experience and apply some of these lessons to new fields could allow us find ways to tackle the climate crisis and other equally important sustainability issues.

My work at the Centre for Global Cooperation Research attempts to address some of the emergent questions in this novel research agenda. In a project titled *Post-Corona Global Sustainability Cooperation: Imaginaries of New World Orders*, I investigate: 'During and after the CVC, how are the synergies and the trade-offs between different policy objectives and societal values being discussed, contested, and negotiated?' and 'How are recovery, improvement, social transformation imagined and what are the ultimate goals for a post-CVC global society?' I use psychoanalytic approaches as a starting point, to pay attention to the unconscious and use political discourse theory to reveal the semiotic changes in sustainability politics and governance.

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