

## **The Ethics and Politics of Transport and Mobility in the CV19 Aftermath**

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### **Has COVID-19 pushed us into a “new Era”?**

“There can no longer be any doubt, COVID-19 has pushed us into a new Era” stated Nasser Kamel the Secretary General of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).

The need for a paradigm shift has been advocated by most European political documents. According to the European Union’s 2020 “Circular Economy Action Plan” for instance, over the next forty years, global consumption rates of biomass, fossil fuels, metals and minerals are expected to double, and annual waste generation is projected to increase by 70% by 2050. Half of all greenhouse gas emissions and over 90% of biodiversity loss and water stress are the result of resource extraction and processing. These numbers exemplify the highly resource-intensive “Take-Make-Waste” economic model of the world economy. Is COVID-19 hard experience going to make easier the implementation of the “paradigm shift”?

To what extent COVID-19 will actually represent a tipping point, a moment of change, when political-aims and strategies agreed years ago can be actually implemented moving us towards a new Era –as stated by Nasser Kamel? Will our future be different because of the whole world passed through the COVID-19 experience –a singular time when entire countries served as “guinea-pigs” (Harari, 2020) in large scale social experiments? Would people, everywhere around the world, be ready to accept their intimacy being monitored in order to increase public health and security? Would citizens prefer a technocratic/authoritarian government based on data and black-box algorithms? Would people become against globalisation and wish to reinforce old political borders and Nation-States? Is future governance paradigms up to people choices? The evolution of technology will leave us to more authoritarian or more participatory type of government? To what extent the experience of COVID-19 will change ourselves?, the way we work, we move and communicate, the way we live?, the policies we need? Are we moving towards a dystopia close to “Qualityland”, the novel by Marc-Uwe Kling published in 2018?

The CETMO and the IEMED launched a joined initiative to explore post-COVID-19 scenarios in June 2020. “COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on a planetary scale”, stated both institutions. “Economic recovery is an immediate challenge, as well as knowing what new medium and long-term scenarios this pandemic will draw”. What happens when everybody works from home and communicates only at a distance?, when millions of people get used to ecommerce? While passenger transport was reduced to the minimum, as well as many global logistic chains, ecommerce was booming.

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At the moment I am writing, December 2020, the COVID-19 vaccine is being mass produced by pharmaceutical industries and thousands of millions of doses are planned to be distributed early next year to the whole world population. The most likely hypothesis is that COVID-19 impact will be to accelerate already existing trends (e.g. digitalisation, from ecommerce to teleworking) but hardly inducing significant short-term changes on social values, policies and governance processes. The solution to the pandemic has been scientific and technologic, at least in the Western World. In a moment of rising political populism, the prestige of scientists, the work of health professionals and the efficiency of the industry has been recognised. Economic policies adopted in most developed countries, particularly in Europe, learnt a big deal from the experience of the 2008 crisis. Austerity policies applied by European institutions in the 2008 crisis were easily forgotten and expansionary policies were applied instead, without hesitation, by the European Central Bank. We learnt a lot during COVID-19, we have more information and knowledge, but our values, and desires, will likely remain roughly the same.

This article further investigates tragic moral dilemmas highlighted by how COVID-19 has been handled in different countries. Even if mobility and transport, and the Mediterranean region, are always in the background of the article, the ethical and political discussions aim a wider scope.

### **CV-19 as large scale global experiment**

When the World Mobile Congress in Barcelona was cancelled the 12<sup>th</sup> February 2020 because of global American corporations such as Google, Amazon or Facebook, or Apple, decided not to attend, few experts were able to see the future ahead, and no politician was beginning the preparation for a “worse-case” scenario.

During months, all over world people physical mobility was restricted to just indispensable reasons. At the same time, virtual communication grew exponentially. It was a living laboratory of a different world, an utopian world working at two speeds: production based on mass customisation and specialised freight transport, fast automatized logistics relaying on intelligent machinery or robots, and people at home, working to provide virtual services to others, moving just at a walking distance from home. Many people in large cities bought stationary bikes through Internet, and got them just few hours or days afterword's. Lucky people had detached houses in suburbs or small villages, had more time to take care of their gardens while working through smart mobile phones. The conventional criteria to assess transport and mobility policies seemed by then obsolete (e.g. most effective mobility policies can no longer be those able to transport as many people as possible, as fast as possible and at minimum cost, just if people was like freight).

Key political ideals such as decoupling economic growth from transport demand, were also tested. On 28-29 March 2019, in Nicosia, Cyprus, the *MED Urban Transports Community* co-organised two conferences on circular economy and sustainable mobility, just before COVID-19. “The shift from sectoral planning to integrated planning can provide better and more sustainable possibilities for the urban spaces, while ensuring the safety of citizens and the protection of the environment”, was stated in Nicosia, involving alternatives solutions that reduce transport needs, active and low-impact mobility

solutions, multimodal transport as an integrated service and optimised freight capacity through shared solutions and distributed centres.

It was a time of dilemma. The decisions people and governments took in such a turbulent times faced “tragic dilemmas” indeed. Values such as safety and security, or public health, were considered a priority –the people’s right that deserved paramount protection- in most democratic countries. But concrete policies differed significantly from country to country, even among richer countries; shaped by historical legacies, political culture and social mores. In less developed countries, limiting economic activities may cause even worse impacts on people’s wellbeing and public health. Totalitarian surveillance technologies applied in Asian countries demonstrated to be more effective than citizen empowerment policies in European countries.

It was also a time of paradoxes. Political decisions that in normal times could take years of deliberation were approved in a matter of hours. New information and communication technologies were pressed into service, as well as laboratories of pharmaceutical corporations to develop a vaccine. After and initial shock on stock markets, some companies (the same first to cancel their participation on the Barcelona World Mobile Congress) begun to grow rapidly. The NASDAQ index hardly reflects the impact of the COVID-19. At the same time, the reductions on GDP in Europe were enormous, particularly in Southern Mediterranean regions.

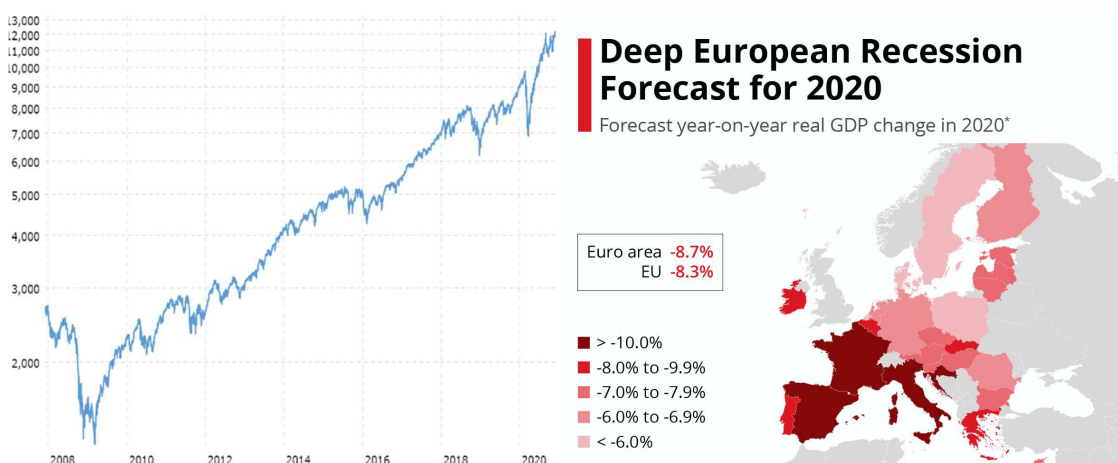


Figure 1 NASDAQ [www.macrotrends.net/2489/nasdaq-composite-index-10-year-daily-chart](http://www.macrotrends.net/2489/nasdaq-composite-index-10-year-daily-chart)

Figure 2 GDP forecasted in summer by the European Commission (graphic by statista)

## Facing Tragic Dilemmas

China, then South Korea, Hong-Kong, Taiwan or Singapore, relied on social discipline, ubiquitous sensors and powerful algorithms:

By closely monitoring people’s smartphones, making use of hundreds of millions of face recognising cameras, and obliging people to check and report their body temperature and medical condition, the Chinese authorities can not only quickly identify suspected coronavirus carriers, but also track their movements and identify anyone they came into contact with. A range of mobile apps warn citizens about their proximity to infected patients (Harari, 2020)

There are 200 million surveillance cameras in China, many of them equipped with a very efficient facial recognition technique. They even capture the moles on the face. It is not possible to escape from the surveillance camera. These cameras equipped with artificial intelligence can observe and evaluate every citizen in public spaces, in shops, on the streets, at stations and at airports. The entire infrastructure for digital surveillance has now proved to be extremely effective in containing the epidemic (Han, 2020)

The Swedish historian Sverker Sörlin, himself a CV-19 survivor, noted in an article that there was never just one global pandemic but many, each shaped by its own national culture. Sweden opted for a calmer – and highly controversial – approach, empowering citizens. Instead of draconian lockdown, and digital surveillance, social distancing was a matter of self-regulation. Citizens were instructed to use their judgment, and to take individual responsibility within a framework that rested on mutual trust, rather than top-down control. The “Swedish model” could have been exported to countries such as Spain, Italy or Greece? In Mediterranean countries levels of social and institutional trust are much lower, societies are less disciplined and not so eager deploying digital technologies to monitor people daily lives.

“I want to stress that for the vast majority of the people of this country, we should be going about our business as usual” said Boris Johnson in March 3. Other political leaders, in Europe and America, for similar reasons, were also reluctant to anticipate bold decisions, when still the number of people potentially affected by CV-19 was expected to be small enough. From a pure economic point of view, it is understandable that public administrations hesitated so much to engage in bold measures such as restricting mobility to the minimum and stopping the economic activity of the whole country for weeks. Measures to be taken by governments to flatten the CV-19 growth curve would provoke a drastic reduction in economic activity, which would result in a reduced welfare for “the vast majority” of people, in particular low-income classes and youngsters. The most important social benefit, obviously, was saving lives mostly from the elderly population.

After monitoring the experience in China, a group of modellers at the Imperial College London concluded that if the epidemic was not aggressively contained in the UK, half a million people would die— and more than 2 million in the US. Models such as this one helped to persuade the British government to follow much of continental Europe, following the experience of China and South Korea in putting the economy into a coma (Tim Harford, Financial Times 27 March 2020).

Donald Trump argued at the White House the 23 March that the nation might have to accept drastic public-health consequences for the sake of keeping the economic growth. A few hours later, one of his Republican allies went quite a bit further down the same path. Dan Patrick, Texas' Republican lieutenant governor, on Monday night suggested that he and other grandparents would be willing to risk their health and even lives in order for the United States to "get back to work" amid the coronavirus pandemic. "Those of us who are 70 plus, we'll take care of ourselves. But don't sacrifice the country," Patrick said on Fox News' Tucker Carlson Tonight. The GOP official, who'll turn 70 next week, went on to say, "No one reached out to me and said, 'As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that America loves for its children and grandchildren?' And if that is the exchange, I'm all in."

It is against common sense to believe that it can be economic normalcy or whatsoever while a pandemic sweeps through the population. The damage to the social values of the citizens may be devastating, because the rights of the minority of elderly people were disregarded after a life of work, once retired, and therefore everybody will learn that they should expect a similar future.

### **Introducing new values when assessing transport policies**

We know that in the new digital world our experience of distance and time changes radically. Our beliefs, which have existed for centuries, are resistant to change: but we need new concepts to better understand the new reality and support our decisions. A strong need arises for a paradigm shift on transport planning and management, just because of emerging new technologies and life styles and values of new generations.

As planes stop flying, people stop making unnecessary journeys, and streets are freed of cars, the impacts of mobility is often invisible (because taken-for-granted) become starkly apparent. One of the more spectacular visualizations of the first months of 2020 was a comparison of air pollution (nitrogen dioxide) around Wuhan before and after the strict quarantine measures were introduced. Nitrogen Dioxide is a product of the combustion of fuel. We rightly take emergency action to combat COVID-19 but not to combat air pollution caused by automobility, or even climate change.

We recognise that the political landscape is shifting. Nowadays, European mobility and transport policies have a comprehensive set of goals, well beyond just reducing physical distances by faster travel. This does not mean that reducing travel time is no longer an important welfare gain, for instance to millions of workers commuting daily by public transport, to intercity rail travellers, to intercontinental air business travellers. Instead, it means that transport policies aim at improving a more comprehensive set of goals such as accessibility, sustainability, liveability and affordability.

There are important positive and negative externalities of the measures of restricting mobility to be also considered. Some analysts estimate that more lives were saved in Wuhan due to the reduction in air pollution than the numbers who have died from the virus – perhaps as much as 20 times as many<sup>2</sup>. Given this fact, how much mobility should be restricted in Wuhan from now on? How much should we invest on the electrification of car fleets? How much time travellers should agree to loose in order to reduce pollution and save lives?

Forcing people to stay at home generates psychological stress that should also be considered. Mobility is a human need, just like freedom, or prosperity.

A possible conclusion is the need to rethink the criteria conventionally applied in transport and mobility policies to measure “social wellbeing” (e.g. stated in official guidelines such as the 2014 European Commission Guideline applied by INEA or the EIB). After the COVID-19 we have learnt a big deal in relation to trade-offs between the value of public health, social inclusion and conviviality, on the one hand, and the value of economic

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growth in terms of providing those jobs people also need, and how restraining the fundamental people's right of free movement impacts on both.

Facing tragic dilemmas, a sense of prudence and common sense would recommend to apply measures gradually, sooner than later, to begin by not so expensive measures of buying all medical equipment necessary to face a worse-case scenario and providing right information for people to adapt their behaviour to the circumstances. This should have been the first reasonable decision on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, after closing the World Mobile Forum.

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