

## **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).

UfM launched a webinar on COVID-19 impacts in late May 2020, co-organised by the UfM and the MEDports Association, to take stock of information and guidance provided and calls made by the international maritime trade and transport community in alleviating the impacts of the pandemic on the sector. New concepts were studied, “new business models to create a regional oriented supply chain and new public strategies to help realise the necessary shift in the paradigm already exist and do not need to be reinvented”.

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”?

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 our daily lives 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”.

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? Are we moving towards a dystopia close to “Qualityland”, the novel by Marc-Uwe Kling published in 2018?

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 planed 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

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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.

Even acknowledging this, it is true that COVID-19 has triggered public debates on ethics and governance that will last for the coming decades. We learnt a lot during COVID-19, we have more information and knowledge, even if our values, and desires, remains 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 to have a wider scope.

A possible conclusion is the need to rethink the criteria conventionally applied in transport and mobility projects 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 on the one hand the value of public health, social inclusion and conviviality, and in the other jobs and economic growth.

### **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 (a fundamental right) was restricted to just indispensable reasons. At the same time, virtual communication grow exponentially. It was a living simulation of a different world, a 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, maybe consuming more, moving just at a walking distance from home. Many people in large cities bought stationary bikes though Internet, and get them few hours or days afterword’s. Lucky people had detached houses in suburbs or small villages, maybe got more time to take care of their garden while working through smart mobile phones. The conventional criteria to assess transport and mobility policies seemed 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).

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.

A circular urban mobility system focuses on effectively accommodating the user’s mobility needs by diversifying modes of transport. Core benefits of a circular economy development path include reducing virgin material consumption from the mobility sector, eliminating waste and pollution, maximising infrastructure and vehicle utilisation, and lowering use and operation costs. Minimising trip length, duration, and operational energy use via digital solutions. Mobility assets operated and maintained in new business models Refurbishing and repairing vehicles to extend material cycles 4. New techniques for infrastructure operation and maintenance Shorten distances and reduce the need for transport upstream – the answer lies in creating local networks by choosing local level resources, products and partnerships.

The decisions people and governments took in such a turbulent times faced tragic dilemmas. Values such as safety and security, public health, were considered a priority in most democratic countries. The responses 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.

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.. 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. After and initial shock on stoke markets, some companies (the same first to cancel their participation on the Barcelona World Mobile Congress) begun to grow rapidly. The NASDQ 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.

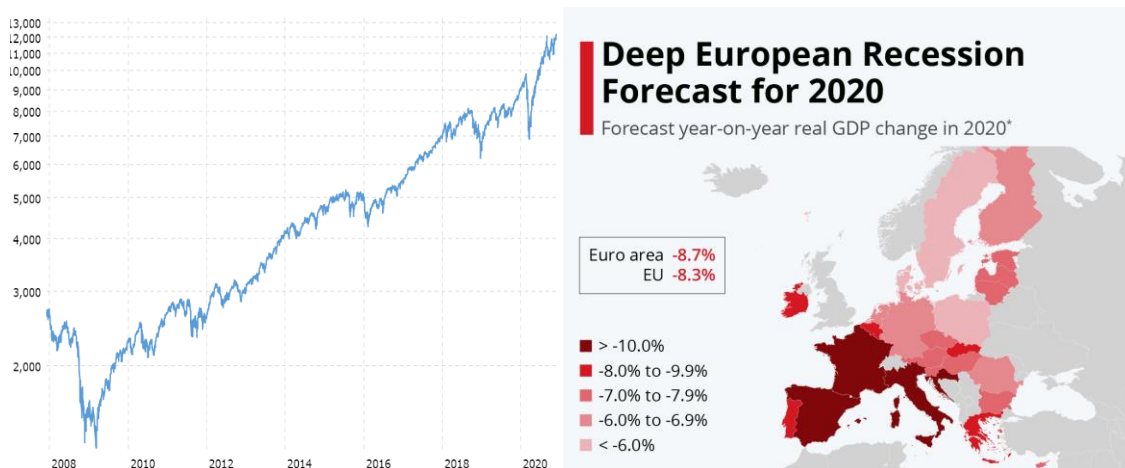


Figure 1 NASDAQ [www.macrotrends.net/2489/nasdaq-composite-index-10-year-daily-chart](http://www.macrotrends.net/2489/nasdaq-composite-index-10-year-daily-chart)

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

## Cultural Responses to the Crisis

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)

The South Korean Philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2020), explained the efficacy of the "Chinese" or "Asiatic Model", a family-oriented well-disciplined society enjoying advanced technology:

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)

Han critically analyses the cultural impacts that digitalisation may have:

There's a reason for the tremendous panic. Digitization eliminates reality. Reality is experienced thanks to the resistance it offers, which can also be painful. Digitization, the whole "like" culture, suppresses the negativity of resistance. And in the post-factual era of fake news and deep fakes, an apathy towards reality arises. So, here is a real virus, and not a computer virus, which causes a commotion. Reality, resistance, is once again noticed in the form of an enemy virus. The violent and exaggerated panic reaction to the virus is explained by this shock to reality (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.

Would people, everywhere around the world, be ready to accept their intimacy being surveilled 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 againts globalisation and wish to reinforce old political borders and Nation-States? Is future governance paradigms up to people choices, or the evolution of technology will leave us either to more authoritarian or participatory 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?

This viral quality of narratives that COVID-19 addresses makes us think of personal narratives as “microbes”. The mutation of viruses finds its counterpart in the mutation of narratives! It seems to be an aspect that is overlooked in "public" communication. Politics and administration - with their fact-based, expert-supported information policy - operate in a bipolar dichotomous paradigm: "wrong vs. right" (rational) information. This seems to be completely inadequate in the current situation. On the one hand because even this narrative mutates on the other hand because, in a systemic-holistic perspective, insisting on "true" expert based information virtually contributes to, invites, challenges to take a counter-opinion.

From an understanding of mutual interdependences of phenomena it appears that, if politicians insist on "their truth" - the “true truth” – exactly this insistence opens the door to "alternative facts". Precisely this dichotomy of "guilt/innocence", "right/wrong" no longer plays a role in a world of multidimensional complexity; on the contrary it is misleading.

### **Facing Tragic Dilemmas**

“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. When Johnson refers to the “vast majority of the people” is applying a classic utilitarian ethics, aiming “the greater happiness for the greater number”, disregarding the costs to be faced by minorities, or the rights involved. 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.”

The argument of Dan Patrick is ethically controversial since it seems to envision a dynamic in which the economy returns to normal even when hundreds of thousands of elderly Americans succumb to a deadly virus. 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. This remains a consequentialist argument, but takes into account the long-term consequences even for people not yet born. In this sense, the moral argument becomes almost deontological: saving lives is a moral duty regardless the consequences because human lives are ends in themselves.

### **A grotesque calculation**

In order to carry out a proxy of Cost-Benefit Analysis, the standard utilitarian or consequentialist decision-making criteria (a “grotesque calculation” according to Taylor (1991, p. 6), let's assume that a large majority of victims are elderly people, and therefore the average age of victims may be about 65 years-old; also let's assume that many of the victims at any age would have a number of other illnesses and therefore a life expectancy inferior to the rest of the population, well below 80 years. Let's also assume a statistical value of life of, at least, \$5 million for an average person in Italy or Spain, well above the common value indicated in official European Cost-Benefit Guidelines. We may assume

that 150.000 persons were saved in each one of these countries because of large part of the economy was stopped during a month.

On the other hand, estimates of the economic impact vary: the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) predicted that COVID-19 will lower global GDP growth by one-half a percentage point for 2020 (from 2.9 to 2.4 percent); Bloomberg Economics predicted <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-coronavirus-pandemic-global-economic-risk/> that full-year GDP growth could fall to zero in a worst-case pandemic scenario, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Estimates at the end of 2020 by the European Commission indicate a lost about 9% in Southern European countries but a rapid recovery in 2021. With these figures (almost two-figures reduction of GDP in 2021, several hundreds of thousands of lives saved, mostly old and vulnerable people, an standard Cost-benefit assessment may give a net positive social return rate assuming an statistical value of life in between EU and USA values o a very negative one, if some of these assumptions change.

Therefore the hesitation of some politics is not totally irrational; they had rational economic reasons if analysed from a pure classic utilitarian mind-set; but humanitarian concerns should prevail: who would like to live in a society that does not take care of elderly and more vulnerable population? A democratic society can not afford the health system to be under stress for months, expecting the economy to continue unaffected.

The need for a paradigm shift on transport appraisal methods is not new. The discipline of Cost-Benefit has always had resolute detractors, and its foundational principles were never free from ethical and practical controversy, mostly concerning the valuation of travel time savings and the social and environmental impacts entirely through an analogy with the market mechanism. Cost-benefit may produce contradictory outcomes in relation to the stated goals of public policies. Not surprisingly, the results of standard Cost-benefit use to be misunderstood in public deliberations and maybe considered a technocratic practice. Given these drawbacks it is not likely that Cost-benefit will easily gain reputation in public administrations and countries where there the tradition of project appraisal is weak.

A new foundation for Cost-benefit analysis requires to rethink the concept of “Value of time” to reflect ongoing social and technological trends, and further develop alternative concepts.

### **Introducing new values on 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.

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, even if unexpected. 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?

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.

But on the other hand, forcing people to stay at home generates psychological stress that should also be considered. Mobility is a human need, just like freedom, or prosperity.

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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