

# What are we doing, people? We have to challenge vested interests much more vigorously

My inbox is overflowing (again!) with invitations to submit to predatory journals, or attend bogus scientific events. The fact that a scientist with my academic background is asked to board an airplane to a conference dealing with “Ecosystems and Climate Change” in China, tells you a lot about the absurdity of our world today. The only positive value I find in such mails: they illuminate our current predicaments by warping economic incentives to such an extent that it becomes easier to see how “economic holy cows” (such as continuous growth, reflected in ever increasing gross national products) led us to our current impasse.

The (alas, still ongoing) pandemic brought enormous suffering. Officially, almost 5 million people died so far (and most experts agree that the figures derived from excess mortality will be much more saddening). The broader societal impact has also been devastating. The one silver lining was a wake-up call with regard to the detrimental effects of our extractive relation to the natural world (making pandemics ever more likely), and the possibilities of less harmful alternatives. Here, I would not only include less consumption but also the ideas to start redressing the extreme inequality in w/health distribution (which of course came to nothing up till now). However, I am baffled to hear colleagues discussing plans to visit “genuine” scientific conferences in the best places on offer while all the grand climate initiatives are either just talk or stalled. Thus, on the micro- and macrolevels we are “getting back to normal.”

The big problem, however: there is no “normal” to go back to. Let me briefly enumerate the *interlinked* challenges we are directly confronted with, though most readers are already acutely aware of them: climate change, massive species extinction, rampant ever-growing wealth inequality, the rise in fake news and paranoid conspiracy thinking, as well as the assault on democracy and human rights. It also is worthwhile to confront the fact that the “normal” state of capitalism always inherently linked exploiting both nature as well as people; see e.g., ref.[1] As biologists, we are well aware that unlimited growth is impossible and that complex systems are linked in often unpredictable ways. That means that further technological solutions have been (and mostly will turn out to be) only temporary or even worse than the problem we are trying to solve. To give us some breathing space to come up with stable solutions we have to have less people, each consuming less (especially in the richer nations).

Now we come to the crux of the matter. The great majority of well-informed, rational people knows all this to be true. However, we do not seem able to implement policies that are both effective and fair. How can this be? I already mentioned that wealth inequality has skyrocketed. Not only is this morally repugnant, it is extremely dangerous. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis already noted in 1941:

“We can have a democratic society or we can have the concentration of great wealth... We cannot have both.” In what can only be called an instance of painful irony the current U.S. Supreme Court illustrates this most effectively. After years of pouring money into influencing its composition, the right-wing court now consistently votes in favor of vested capitalist interests (80–0 such decisions, by either a 5–4 or a 6–3 vote, regarding issues important to those interests; see ref.[2] for more details). Here, we have an extreme example of the most important roadblock to implementation of the necessary measures. In all our societies, and the world as whole, some people are (much) better off than others. Now we (and I say “we,” because most scientists got better than average life chances) may want to delude ourselves and think this reflects inherent superiority and/or hard work, but it is mostly the result of historical accidents (i.e., the vested interests I am talking about). Such a realization makes it much easier to combat their corrosive influence. How does all this translate into effectuating real solutions? First of all, we can have no illusions regarding the necessary contributions of Russia or China (both of which have their own vested interest groups, warping policy decisions). The world’s democracies have to “lead by example” for once, and enact real, climate effective, policies. And we, the people that have the good fortune to live in them, must make real contributions toward sharing both power and wealth. It is either that or the delusional selfishness of using money and power to isolate yourself from what is already happening all around the world. Act!

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