



## Book review



### What if health were the world's goal? Life expectancy is worth more than growth Éloi Laurent

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190 pages

### Life expectancy and full health: post-Covid-19 indicators?

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What were you doing on Tuesday 7 April 2020? Remember that date now — according to author Éloi Laurent, it marked the real start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when "half of humanity was stilled and the entire global economy paralysed in an effort to restrict the deadly spread of Covid-19, a pandemic triggered by the destruction of ecosystems and the commodification of biodiversity". Laurent, a Professor at Sciences Po (France) and Stanford University (United States), argues that there is no true tradeoff to be made between health and economics because "consumption is infinitely more difficult when you're dead and no one who's seriously ill is productive". Rather, "the choice presented by the pandemic (...) is between a health catastrophe and economic depression on the one hand,

and safety and resilience on the other". In an easy-to-read style, he takes us back, first to the source of the pandemic, which in all likelihood began in autumn 2019 in the Chinese megacity of Wuhan, the "city that literally fed on the destruction of the ecosystems and biodiversity that surrounded it and developed parasitically rather than symbiotically until it sparked a crisis in the human/animal species barrier by obliterating habitats and then commoditising bats and pangolins", in a process that symbolises the way in which our "modern" economy functions today.

An economist by training, Laurent does not spare his own discipline from attack. Throughout the book, he criticises economists for defying the laws of physics in encouraging us to ignore climate change and thus destroy biodiversity, and for borrowing jargon that belongs to other disciplines such as medicine or finance to defend an approach based chiefly on achieving growth in GDP at any cost.

Addressing this "devastating web of falsehoods", Laurent proposes that we should start over again, using two, more relevant, indicators to reconstruct the post-Covid-19 world: life expectancy and full health (to be interpreted as a kind of solidarity in matters of health between human beings who are aware of the vital importance of their environment). In order to update our social market economy, which since 1944 has aimed to promote full employment in a bipolar world (market economics versus communism's planned economics), "full health" provides a yardstick for combatting the unipolar global ecological uncertainty that makes our societies vulnerable to all kinds of viruses. Worthy of note is the author's concept of a "socio-ecological feedback loop" linking inequalities to ecological crises, and demonstrating that risk exposure does not affect all people the same way, depending on their status as small or powerful players.

In other words, he suggests "building a socio-ecological state that prioritises full health, not growth". The new state would rely chiefly on three functions (similar to those proposed by the economist Richard Musgrave) — allocation, distribution and stabilisation — in a four-scenario world: South Korean or Chinese bio-techno power with continuous digital surveillance; American or Brazilian ecological neoliberalism with its weak environmental

regulations; European-style superficial economic naturalism with its fiscal and social competition; and finally African and Asian natural regulations where exposure to environmental risk is high. Unfortunately, all four scenarios are likely to appear negative to a reader searching desperately for a positive way out of the crisis. And it is at this point that the author sets out his solution, which is based on positive indicators.

In expectation of an ecological update to our national and supranational welfare state system, the author draws up a balance sheet on the gradual progress made in the socio-ecological transitions under way in our cities. Why give priority to urban areas? Because they "are where most people now live (75-80 per cent of the population in North America and Europe) and, although they occupy only 5 per cent of the planet's surface, they account for 66 per cent of energy consumption and 75 per cent of CO2 emissions". He sets out four specific major pillars that underpin urban socio-ecological transition and, as an example to follow, draws up a fairly positive ecological balance sheet of the measures taken by the city of Paris.

By contrast, on the need for reconstruction in Europe, he is fairly critical of EU governance, despite the announcement of the "Green Deal", which is not only silent on indicators for measuring "sustainable and inclusive growth" but also says nothing on whether it is compatible in any respect with the current Growth and Stability Pact, the European Semester or the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The European Union is "very clearly inadequate with regard to intention and method", and is given a fail grade by the professor, who calls on it to take note of the reports produced by the European Environment Agency as well as the European Trade Union Confederation, which "has now made the challenge posed by such a transition the focus of its debates and actions".

"I think (...) that, by isolating us from one another against our will, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown us that isolation is inherently alien to us. (...) The relentless seclusion would perhaps surprisingly appear to have taught us that freedom is other people. Community is important for our wellbeing," wrote Éloi Laurent, probably while in lockdown. What were you doing on Tuesday 7 April 2020?