

What do we mean by community?

One thing we can be sure of is that the coronavirus pandemic is a game changer. The world will never be quite the same.

Simon Mair, a Research Fellow in Ecological Economics at the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, University of Surrey, has published a thought-provoking article looking at the possible future-states. He writes:

“From an economic perspective, there are four possible futures: a descent into barbarism, a robust state capitalism, a radical state socialism, and a transformation into a big society built on mutual aid. Versions of all of these futures are perfectly possible, if not equally desirable.”

1) **State capitalism**: centralised response, prioritising exchange value

2) **Barbarism**: decentralised response prioritising exchange value

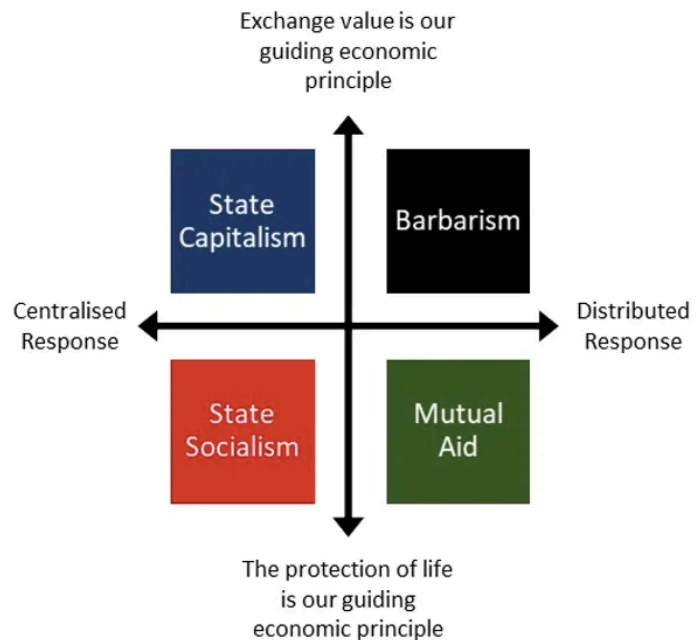
3) **State socialism**: centralised response, prioritising the protection of life

4) **Mutual aid**: decentralised response prioritising the protection of life.

He goes on to argue that much of the response we are seeing at the moment at government level around the world is State Capitalism. It is all about protecting the economy, and it is based on the view that once the emergency is over everything will revert to how it was.

There is a real danger of ‘austerity max’ in a scramble to ramp the global economy back up to the overheated, wasteful, environmentally catastrophic pre-coronavirus levels. We know what direction that economy was going in – it was not “robust State Capitalism”, it was making the rich richer and the poor poorer. ‘Austerity max’ would strip out the remaining workers rights, along with environmental protections and consumer rights, and many, many individuals would be left behind, jobless, homeless, excluded from the economic growth game and spiralling down into poverty. Add to this the mass migrations triggered by climate change and you have the ingredients for a ‘perfect storm’ of social breakdown, paving the way for descent into what Mair calls “barbarism” and which is basically economic protectionism devolved from national level to individual level as systems of government, law and order break down.

I suspect that the period of “barbarism” would resemble the “Dark Ages” of medieval times – the period following the decline of the Roman Empire. Despite the loss of Roman technology, know-how and systems of government, there is evidence to suggest there were, actually, flourishing local cultures during this time. Those still benefitting from the economic activity would be likely to form themselves into extreme versions of gated communities, with hired protection from the have-nots outside who would be seen as ‘the enemy’. Such communities



The four futures. © Simon Mair, Author provided

would, however, be extremely vulnerable to the increasingly frequent ‘extreme weather events’ brought about by climate change. The lucky ones might survive. The unlucky simply wouldn’t. Whole communities could be wiped out on a regular basis. In cities, it is likely we would see the whole Bladerunner dystopia start to play out. This is therefore the bleakest scenario, and one we should strive with everything in our power to prevent.

The positive ‘direction of travel’ is towards ‘State socialism’ - a centralised response, prioritising the protection of life. This is paraphrasing the ethos of Wellbeing Economics, where economic activity is directed towards the wellbeing of people and planet, rather than the wellbeing of people and planet being sacrificed on the altar of economic activity. Mair calls the decentralised response that prioritises the protection of life “Mutual Aid”, and it is in essence the same as what I mean by “Community Resilience”.

It is worth looking at the subtle difference in the relationship between the centralised “State Capitalism” and distributed “Barbarism” (both focused on the means of exchange, ie money), and the centralised “State Socialism” and the distributed “Mutual Aid” (both focused on protecting life).

State Capitalism **causes** Barbarism – or to put it another way, Barbarism is a popular response to the extreme inequality and impoverishment engendered by the failure of State Capitalism to pull off the appearance of middle class affluence that Thatcher and the debt economy pulled off.

State Socialism is the **response** of politicians who see their role as serving the electorate to a powerful national culture of Mutual Aid.

We have very little influence over centralised power. In Western democracy, leaders are chosen not by the people but by the corporate sponsors who fund their campaigns, and the turkeys will not vote for Christmas. The next US Presidential election is likely to be a competition between a delusional State Capitalist (Trump) and a relatively sane State Capitalist (Biden). Both will continue a policy of State Capitalism. In the UK, we have just elected a fiercely State Capitalist Tory government with an untouchable 80-seat majority. Labour is likely to abandon the Corbynist venture into real socialism and although it remains our best bet for transitioning from hard State Capitalism towards State Socialism, its chances of getting into power any time soon are negligible. Elsewhere in Europe, we are likely to see a lurch to the right in the wake of the pandemic, not a demand for socialist revolution. People will be clamouring for jobs, clamouring to get back on familiar territory – back to “normal”. They won’t be interested in clearing up the mess, they will just be eager to re-start the party.

Where we can have influence is in our own communities. We can seek to prevent State Capitalism sliding into Barbarism and work towards cultivating a national culture of Mutual Aid which will apply pressure to the centre to shift towards State Socialism.

This begs the question, what do we mean by community?

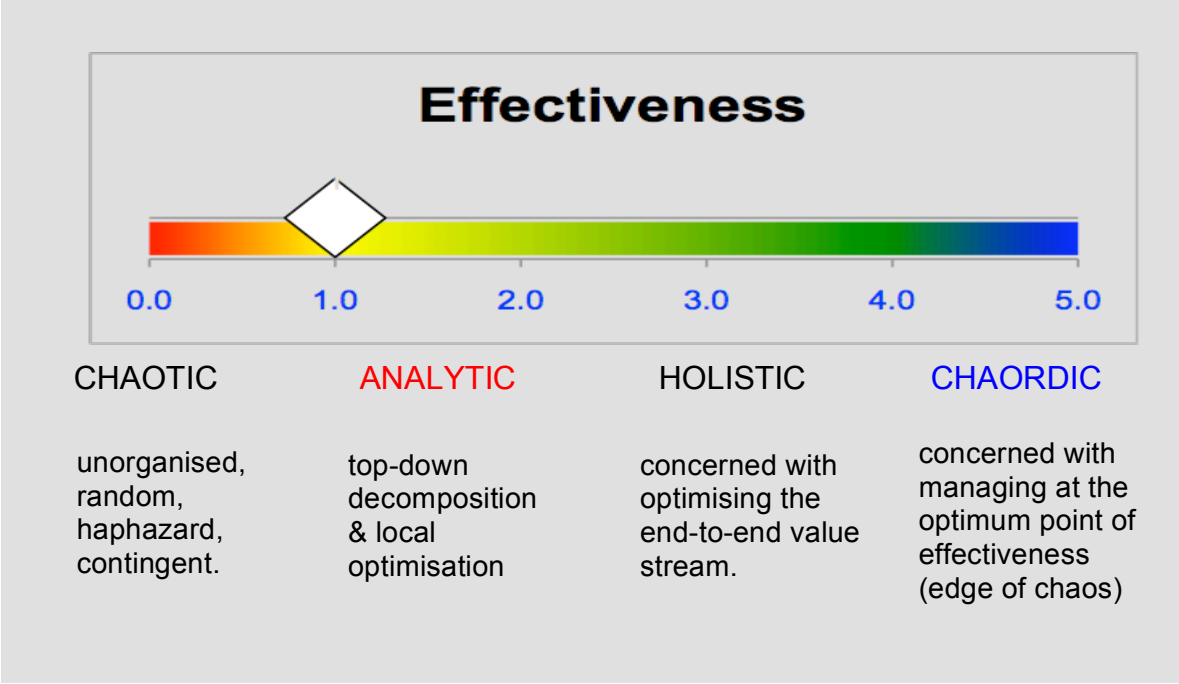
A group of people living in geographic proximity to each other but each exclusively pursuing their own individual interests and ambitions does not make a community. These people are just neighbours.

A community celebrates together, mourns together, solves problems and creates value (social, economic, creative, intellectual and natural) together. It has organisation and infrastructure that allows the individuals in the community to share skills, knowledge, time and labour to make a collective impact on the well-being of the community as a whole, and co-ordinate a coherent and timely response to emergency situations.

What we are seeing spring up all around the world are groups of neighbours coming together to help each other out at a time of crisis. If we are to capture and build on this heart-warming manifestation of social capital in action, we need to start building organisation and infrastructure into our local communities.

Some of it is already there. In the UK ‘community life’ has, during my lifetime, really focussed around leisure and family activities. It’s been about fetes and festivals, clubs and activities, food and drink and family fun – everything from running the village hall to organising the kids’ football team. These things require organisation and co-operation, and just like the Archers, there is nearly always a small nucleus of “the usual suspects” who organise everything. It’s organic and somewhat random – where you get a concentration of “usual suspects” lots of community stuff happens, where there are none, nothing happens.

If we were to apply an organisational diagnostic to the organisation of social capital in Britain, it would be labelled “chaotic” – unorganised, random, haphazard, contingent.



What we are beginning to see in Scotland is a shift to an “Analytic” system. Supported by a Scottish Government which has signed up to the ethos of Wellbeing Economics, Councils and other planning authorities (such as Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park) are starting to think about the value of communities, and how to optimise the effectiveness of community efforts. They are taking the initiative in setting up and managing community enterprises of various types. These are frequently focussed on economic regeneration, but there are also initiatives on mental health and wellbeing, and arts and culture. Environmental sustainability underpins the whole narrative.

I would like to see pressure being applied to roll out this fairly basic and intuitive transition across the UK. Community is about more than our leisure time. Resilient communities have facilities for capturing and sharing knowledge – schools, colleges, libraries, museums. They have localised social care facilities and easy access to good healthcare. Crucially, they have a concept of local economy that goes beyond “the high street”. A ‘local economy’ is the means by which a community accesses the essentials of life: food, energy, water, healthcare and social care. It’s about how money flows around the community. We need to open a new

conversation between the supermarkets and the communities they serve – what lessons can we learn from the coronavirus crisis about responsible shopping, about responsible supply chain management, about supporting local producers? We need to work towards making the whole business of food shopping a circular economy, dealing with the environmental impact (packaging, food waste); the social issues (fair trade – for both foreign and domestic producers; inequality – food banks, food distribution) and the associated business issues. Consumers blame the supermarket chains for the way they treat suppliers or their environmental attitudes, but the supermarkets respond to consumer demand. If people demand cheap food, the supermarkets will provide cheap food – which, as there is no such thing as “cheap food”, means passing the cost down to the producer, or raiding natural capital to subsidise it. Demand for out of season fruit and veg drives up the carbon footprint of the supermarket; variability of demand and the pressure to provide huge choice leads to food waste, and impacts profitability. At times of crisis, just-in-time stocking systems designed to generate sustainable profit margins coupled with stock-piling, sometimes selfish, creates artificial shortages and exposes shop staff to threats and abuse. Change is a shared responsibility. Not a blame game.

Similarly, communities need to start thinking about energy both in terms of consumption and generation. Widen the focus from the profitability of a single commercial company to the sustainability of a specific community, and the value of community-owned renewable energy schemes rises to the surface – the community itself can control the carbon footprint of their energy needs, it does not need to rely on a central body to do it for them.

Other services, such as water supplies, sewage disposal, health care and transport infrastructure may be better managed at national level; but this is where the mindset cultivated by local community-building might start to influence national government. If we discuss the relationship between public interest and private enterprise with supermarkets, a similar conversation should be held around the supply of utilities, health care and transport. These things are essential to public life, to a civilised society; the value of them must be measured in terms of the public good, not in financial terms. That means the representatives of the people – our Members of Parliament – must ultimately take responsibility for the service levels they deliver to the public. Whatever relationship those MPs broker with private business, the buck stops at Westminster.

How we hold our elected representatives to account for delivering those public services opens up a whole new can of worms about how democracy needs to evolve in the Information Age, which is the subject of another paper.

In the meantime, we can work with those who already deliver value in the other capital flows – charities, social and community enterprises, local businesses - to improve the value they are able to deliver. We can talk to our friends and neighbours and work colleagues and try to influence the story they tell themselves about politics and value.

By fostering a national culture of “Mutual Aid”, we appropriate populism and redirect it towards what people *really* want – a healthy and prosperous society capable of growth and regeneration. Not what they *say* they want in response to propaganda from the wealthy and powerful. We start to build a wellbeing economy one community at a time.

Pandemics bring out the best and the worst in human nature, and news media being news media, the worst receives far more publicity than the best, and it feeds our natural negative bias. We see the death toll, not the numbers of survivors. We see the crass, tragic mismanagement of the government, not the extraordinarily socialist nature of emergency measures put in place by a hard-right (but populist) Tory government. We see the single fight

outside a shopping centre, not the orderly queues outside supermarkets up and down the country. But we also see that despite the underfunding, despite the unnecessarily high risk government bungling has exposed them to, the NHS responds. Our hearts break for their pain and despair at not being able to respond as effectively as they know they could have responded. Delivery drivers, shop staff, and community volunteers respond. Businesses remember that they employ people, not robots – even if some have to be shamed into recognising it. Time and time again, it is the best in human nature that wins through in the end and comes to dominate the narrative. That is the faith those of us seeking to be part of the solution and not part of the problem must keep.