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Intervention – “Disaster Capitalism, COVID-19, and Single-Use Plastic”

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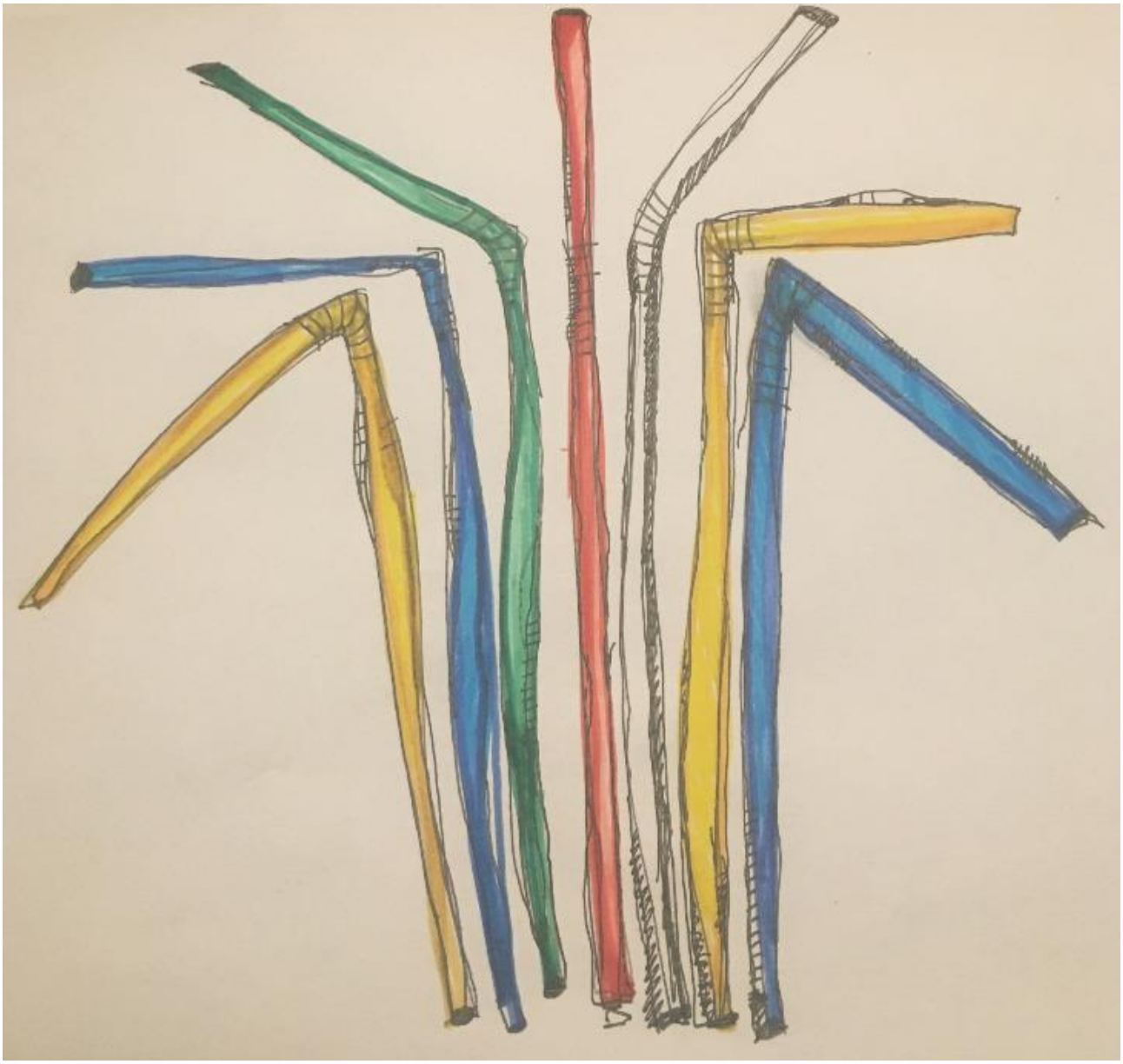

Nils Johansson (Strategic Sustainability Studies, KTH Royal Institute of Technology)

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Introduction

COVID-19 is a disaster. Over two million people have died. And, as noted by Anthony Oliver-Smith (1999), disasters are never merely natural, but also social. There is much debate about how to organize societies to protect citizens from the pandemic, without too much negative impact on citizens, and there are large uncertainties, both in relation to the overall strategies (for example, the level of societal shut-down) and the practical guidelines (Manderson and Levine 2020). Despite the uncertainties, measures to tackle the pandemic are presented to citizens as clear and indisputable. In the space between uncertainty and clarity, there is room for the political, in terms of, for example, lobbyism. Although many things have stopped during the pandemic, politics have not (Hannah et al. 2020). Many of the strategies presented as medically valid are inherently political (Esposito 2020); for example, based on political trade-offs between rich and poor, young and old, white and black, health and the economy (Horton 2020). Or, the political conflict this Intervention will focus on, between health and the environment.

This Intervention focuses on the political side of how society was once again thrown back into single-use plastics during the COVID-19 pandemic. The political dimension of the reintroduction of plastics during the pandemic has previously been highlighted online in magazines, on podcasts and in videos (Dey and Michael 2020; Heiges and O'Neill 2020; Krigier 2020; Sonali 2020). However, these texts seem to have primarily uncovered the plastic lobbyism during the pandemic, rather than taking an interest in the political discourse as such and how the conflict between environmental and medical concerns have been debated in relation to reusables and disposables during the pandemic. The empirical material I present here is extracted from English-language media during 2020. It will be analysed based on Naomi Klein's (2007) notion of "disaster capitalism". According to Klein, the government typically exploits uncertainties and disorder during a disaster to implement corporate-friendly agendas that would otherwise meet opposition. In this way, the unthinkable may during a crises become possible.

Single-Use Plastic and COVID-19

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, our dependence of disposable plastics was in focus. For example, the European Union launched a strategy for sustainable plastic management and a directive to regulate single-use plastics. Nearly 150 countries, including, for example, China, India, the UK, Sweden, Kenya, South Africa and several states in the US have implemented bans or taxes to phase out disposable plastic with a focus on plastic bags (da Costa et al. 2020). Social entrepreneurs developed and opened up to alternatives to disposable plastics. Norms and habits deeply rooted in our consumer culture were changing. Plastic started to become shameful (The Guardian 2019), at least among the middle class in the global North.

However, during COVID-19, the use of disposable items and in particular of disposable plastics has increased (Adyel 2020; Parashar and Hait 2021; Silva et al. 2020a; Vanapalli et

al. 2020). This is clearest in the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks and gloves. However, the use of disposable items has increased throughout society. Home

deliveries have increased, which brings additional protective materials. Food is not primarily eaten in restaurants, but taken home in disposable materials. In grocery stores, sales of packaged food have increased, which is increasingly carried home in plastic bags.

The single-use items, such as PPE, are largely made of plastic and are too easily lost to the environment (see Figure 1). Most plastics are not broken down, but broken apart into smaller parts. Microplastics are now found everywhere, although mass production has only been ongoing for 70 years (Geyer et al. 2017).

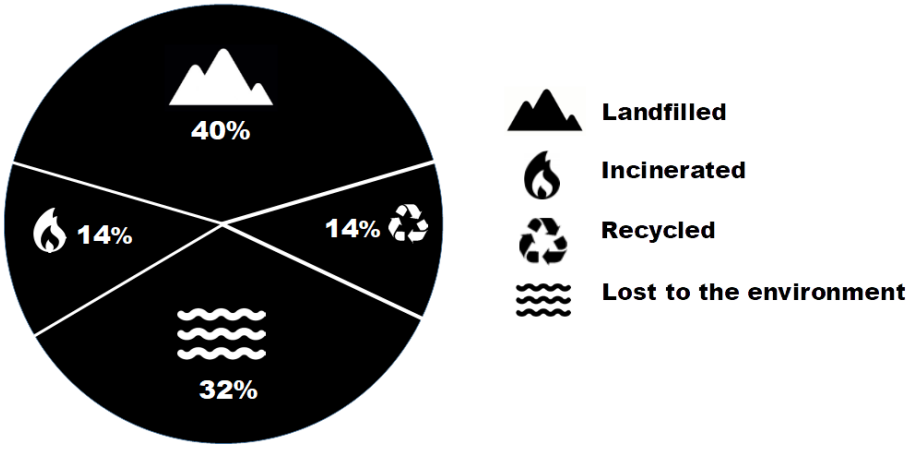

Figure 1: Overview of the global (mis)management of plastic packages (World Economic Forum 2016)

However, the use and discarding of single-use items differs between regions, not least under COVID-19. For example, in Italy, the use of facemasks is estimated at one billion per month, while it is significantly lower in more populated countries such as the UK (Parashar and Hait 2021), possibly due to the British advice on reusable masks (e.g. Greater London Authority 2020). There are also major differences in the handling of disposables during the pandemic. For example, in South Africa, littering has decreased due to curfews (Ryan et al. 2020), but seems to have increased in other places such as the UK (BBC News 2020a) and Canada (Ammendolia et al. 2021), due to increased socializing in public places.

Furthermore, there have been reports during the pandemic from less economically developed countries of increased waste disposal in open dumps (Parashar and Hait 2021; Urban and Nakada 2020). The input of recycled plastic in disposables has also decreased, due to falling oil prices during the pandemic closures (Adyel 2020). In addition, disposable facemasks are difficult to recycle due to the mixture of different types of materials. This means that even if the disposables are handled correctly, there is a risk of adding to global warming through waste incineration.

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Disaster Lobbyism

Despite regional differences, the use and acceptance of disposables has generally increased during the pandemic (Adyel 2020; Parashar and Hait 2021; Silva et al. 2020a; Vanapalli et al. 2020). This change can be traced to the return of a mid-20th century anxiety at the beginning of the pandemic, based on reusables as unhygienic and risky (Laitala and Klepp 2018). Disposable materials, especially plastics, were on the other hand represented as the responsible, clean and hygienic choice (Dey and Michael 2020).

These ideas can be seen in articles (e.g. Britschgi 2020; The Wall Street Journal 2020; Tierney 2020; Witt and Gurkov, 2020) in early 2020 from conservative opinion leaders and what the *Guardian* calls "rightwing thinktanks" (McVeigh 2020) such as the Manhattan Institute. These articles were based on studies that in various ways demonstrated an increased spread of infection from reusable products. One of the most cited studies in these articles (Klick and Wright 2012) showed that the number of reported illnesses and deaths related to foodborne bacteria increased in San Francisco County relative to other places after it introduced a ban on plastic bags.

These ideas were broadly picked up by the media, business, lobbyists, the public, trade unions and policy-makers. In the US, the Plastics Industry Association (2020a, 2020b) called in March for authorities to (re)classify plastics as an essential industry during the pandemic and "stop the rush to ban" plastic bags. Proclaiming single-use plastics as not just the safest choice during the pandemic, but "literally … the difference between life and death". Likewise, in the UK, the British Plastic Federation (2020) asked members of parliament to recognise "key parts of the plastics sector as critical infrastructure" during the pandemic. Furthermore, at the EU-level, the trade association European Plastics Converters (2020) proposed to the European Commission that the implementation of the single-use plastics directive should be postponed. The reason was that "this 'political' piece of legislation … only reflected on littering aspects" and did not take into account "the hygienic consequences".

As a result, the attitude towards single-use plastics seems to have increased and the public support for banning disposable plastic decreased in, for example, Canada (AAL 2020) and Poland (Grodzińska-Jurczak et al. 2020). A retail workers' union in Chicago protested against "the disease-transmitting bag tax" (Flaccus 2020), while America's largest food and retail union encouraged shoppers to "use store-provided plastic bags" (UFCW 2020). Large chains such as Starbucks (Evans 2020), McDonald's (Wilkie and Smith 2020) and Hy-Vee (Silverstein 2020) refused in some regions to accept reusable items such as coffee cups and shopping bags. In both the global North and South, bans and taxes on disposable plastics were postponed or paused. For example, in Senegal, the ban on sachets intended to be used for packaging water and other beverages was suspended (Ngounou 2020). In several US states, reusable bags for shopping were banned (Silva et al. 2020a). In Scotland, the implementation of a deposit refund system for plastic bottles was delayed (BBC News 2020b).

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The Fight Back

Greenpeace USA (2020) launched a research brief in late March 2020,[1] which highlighted the propaganda behind the reintroduction of disposable plastics in the United States. The intertwined networks of plastic producers, consultants, opinion leaders, lobbyists and researchers were uncovered. Greenpeace showed also that many of the referenced studies were based on analysis of bacteria rather than viruses from the corona families. The validity of these studies for the COVID-19 pandemic was further elaborated and criticized in scientific journals. For example, Hale and Song (2020) argued that the referenced studies were "of questionable applicability" to support the argument against reusable bags. Not only due to the focus on bacteria, but also since samples were taken from the inside of the bags.

To turn the debate, Greenpeace International (2020) initiated a petition signed by health experts around the world, stating that reusable products, including bags, do not increase the spread of the virus, if they are handled correctly. The virus can be easily inactivated on surfaces with household disinfectants (Kampf et al. 2020). Furthermore, it became clear that "sterile" single-use plastics could be contaminated; for example, one of the world's largest manufacturers of protective gloves closed after an internal outbreak of COVID-19 (Muthiah 2020). Even more importantly, an increasing number of studies showed that the virus spreads not primarily on materials such as food or bags but via respiratory droplets in the air.

The uncovering of the plastics lobby as well as updated studies on the spread of COVID-19 were widely picked up and circulated by the media, researchers, and decision-makers. The request to postpone the directive on disposable plastics was rejected by the European Commission (Schaart 2020). Several companies as well as US states have, once again, allowed reusable products in stores (Mace 2020). Many US states have also reintroduced plastic bag bans, often according to their original plans.

It should be noted that the reintroduction of bans on disposables has been accepted without much protest, despite the continued spread of COVID-19. This indicates that the anxiety around reusables in general and bags in particular has partly diminished. The discussion on the potential of reuse to spread COVID-19 seems thus to have been rebalanced and perhaps even closed. As a council member in a local municipality in Alaska put it, during a vote to reinstate the bag ban, "I think a lot of those [initial] questions have been answered" (quoted in Pacer 2020).

Concluding Remarks

COVID-19 brought issues of infection and hygiene to the top of the political agenda. This offered the plastics lobby an opportunity to argue for disposables from a hygiene perspective rather than an environmental perspective, a fight that had previously been lost.

By exploiting uncertainty during the pandemic, lobby groups, conservative opinion leaders and think tanks succeed in reframing single-use plastics from an environmentally immoral

material, before COVID-19, to a clean and protective material, under COVID-19. The consequences were huge. Several political decisions against disposable plastic bags were rolled back, while a positive attitude toward, and use of, disposables increased in many societies.

Uncertainty during the pandemic was used as a corporate political strategy (Hillman and Hitt 1999) to change attitudes and policies in favour of disposable plastics. In an act of disaster capitalism (Klein 2007), COVID-19 was thus exploited to win back the earlier regulatory and attitude losses. This political ambition was explicitly declared by a news provider for the European plastics industry, Plasteurope (2020): "Due to the virus, some or all of these bans may end up on the rubbish heap of history".

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates, however, that disaster capitalism does meet resistance. In this case, Greenpeace USA (2020) activists who uncovered the lobbyism and enrolled a network of support for reuse initiated the opposition. By signing the on-line petition, researchers and others showed a calming consensus towards reusables and that there was no explicit conflict between environmental and medical considerations during the pandemic.

The example of single-use plastic demonstrates that political systems are vulnerable to lobbying during crises (Klein 2007). Lobby groups and opinion leaders will exploit the political gap that naturally opens up in a disaster – the gap between the inherent uncertainties of how to handle the disaster, on the one side, and the need for clear and indisputable responses for the public, on the other. Therefore, we need to pay attention to peripheral issues during the pandemic that are indirectly affected by the crisis. And, as noted many times before, activists and scholars need to work together. Resources are needed to uncover lobbying as well as enrol large networks to distribute knowledge, reduce uncertainty and, in the end, close the issue.

However, the collective resistance to plastics needs to continue, not primarily in relation to the pandemic, but to look closer at recycling as the contemporary solution to the plastic problem. The normal order of things before the pandemic was definitely not a desirable one. The implemented restrictions on disposable plastic cover only a small share of the total plastic flows. For example, in the US, the category "bags, sacks, and wraps" accounted for 12% of all plastic packages consumed by households in 2015 (EPA 2018). Furthermore, microplastics originate primarily from diffuse sources such as the dissipation from washing machines, car tires, and cosmetics (Padervand et al. 2020).

The overall strategy for big plastic flows is the "circular economy", widely embraced by businesses and policymakers. However, recycling as a strategy may move focus away from the real problems, such as ever-growing consumption. At the same time, only 14% of all plastic packages are recycled (World Economic Forum 2016). The plastic that is recycled can hardly replace the virgin plastic made from oil, since it typically holds a lower quality. Hence,

even if the recycling rate of plastic increases it may only end up on top of the well-functioning production of virgin plastic continuing as before (Johansson and Henriksson 2020).

Solving a problem by targeting waste management is less controversial than addressing production and consumption. Partly, since it shifts the responsibility away from business towards individuals and authorities, who are responsible for the nitty gritty of source separation and waste management, respectively. Indeed, bio-based plastics are discussed as a potential alternative mode of production. However, in practice, its market share is only 2% (Silva et al. 2020b). At the same time, bio-based plastic carries many uncertainness in relation to, for example, the quality of the material, its degradability in marine environments, and its climate impact (Briassoulis et al. 2019; Spierling et al. 2018).

To find a way forward, let's turn to activists again. Since activists are situated outside the conventional, they may question the taken for granted and transform such interventions into alternative practices (Corvellec et al. 2018). For example, practices of care, repair, kindness, exchange, borrowing, sharing, mutual aid, frugality, or reduced consumption. These activities aim not at the material itself, and its composition of recycled or bio-based material, but at transforming the relationship between humans and materials.

Endnote

[1] While others had voiced concerns about the plastics industry's exploitation of COVID-19 (e.g. Kaufman 2020), Greenpeace USA (2020a) published one of the first focused, systematic analyses.

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