



# Capitalism and the economy of life



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# St Mark's Review

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# Editorial

Today I am writing from home on Boonwurrung Country. Not far from here is a large bay and the remnants of a once sizeable and life-giving swamp. This day in early May is damp and the usual birds (wattlebirds, rainbow lorikeets, little ravens, and spotted turtledoves, among others) are somewhat muted. Sounds of machinery ebb and flow as cars pass in nearby roads; closer is the steady whirr of the computer fan. As I compose this editorial preface, with my surrounds holding me and touching my senses, I want to allow three questions to stand before the reader: How might these essays call forth respect for and attentiveness to Country? Where are the interests of other creatures, especially those on the brink of extinction, given credence? What reparative connections can be made between ourselves (the writers and readers of these essays) and those (human and otherkind) on whom our relative privilege relies?<sup>1</sup>

These eight essays from members of the University of Divinity's network for Religion and Social Policy (RASP) are set against three interlocking contexts: the Covid-19 pandemic; the now long-known crisis of climate, commonly referred to as climate change; and the growing inequality between humans, between an exceedingly rich minority and their majority siblings, both locally and more particularly internationally. As the writers grapple with these hefty issues and contexts, a shared critique of late capitalism and neoliberalism emerges. Beside this shared critique are three key and sometimes intersecting ethics: more-than-human wellbeing; justice for workers; and ethics in business.<sup>2</sup>

On Thursday 4 May 2023, the Director-General of the World Health Organisation determined that "COVID-19 is now an established and ongoing health issue which no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)."<sup>3</sup> But the effects of the pandemic—social, economic, and personal—are still with us, as is the virus itself. In South Eastern Australia, there seemed to be little time to breathe between the devastating fires of the 2019–2020 Spring and Summer and the onset of serial pandemic waves and lockdowns from March 2020

until October 2021, especially in Melbourne, with some hard-won periods of respite. Before masks became a necessity in the pandemic, many of us were sourcing masks to deal with the extreme air pollution visited across regional and urban areas during the bushfires. The early onset of the fire season and the ferocity of the fires brought the reality of climate change close to home. For many, at the turn of 2019–2020, the apocalyptic imagery of thousands huddled on Mallacoota beach with a red/charcoal sky behind them, intersected with the onset of the coronavirus “plague” to confront us on multiple levels. From watching far-off lockdown measures in China and mass burials in Italy and the USA, the virus challenged us especially in mid-2020 when Covid-19 swept through Victorian private aged care facilities inadequately resourced for this eventuality, with devastating effects for residents, their relatives, and friends. As Stephen Duckett points out in his essay, Covid-19 and the neoliberal response to the pandemic showed up and heightened inequalities between people. For example, locally, workers in casual and frontline positions were at a disadvantage both economically and in terms of health outcomes; internationally, the ability to physically distance was limited by crowded housing conditions; and access to vaccines once they became available was very uneven. For Deborah Guess, the limits on movement imposed in response to the pandemic, especially for those privileged enough to be able to work from home, showed us in practice, and not only in theory, that we could live with less.

This latter observation is good news in relation to climate change, which, as Deborah Guess, Mick Pope, and Bruce Duncan concur, remains a pressing concern with impacts not only on human populations but on otherkind. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2023 Summary Report for Policy Makers opens with the following claim made with “high confidence”:

Human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming, with global surface temperature reaching 1.1°C above 1850–1900 in 2011–2020. Global greenhouse gas emissions have continued to increase, with unequal historical and ongoing

contributions arising from unsustainable energy use, land use and land-use change, lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production across regions, between and within countries, and among individuals.<sup>4</sup>

For Duncan, this inequality is an inescapable fact of the climate emergency and one that places a moral call on us, as Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* attests. This inequality on a human level is multiplied when we think of otherkind, especially the hunger and homelessness associated with habitat loss due to climate change. Even at the optimistic target of keeping global warming to 1.5°C below pre-industrial levels, the Climate Council reported in 2019 that likely eight per cent of plants and six per cent of insects will lose half their habitable area, there will be a further 70–90 per cent decline in coral reefs (an increase of 2°C would see this an almost one hundred per cent decline), and fourteen per cent of the world's human population will be exposed to extreme heat every "one in five years." A rise of 2°C would be significantly more damaging in each case.<sup>5</sup> A business-as-usual approach, however, will not work to limit warming to 1.5°C below pre-industrial levels.<sup>6</sup>

This issue of business-as-usual is at the heart of these essays. Mick Pope writes of the inevitable advent of the Anthropocene attendant on the imperial colonising reliance on "cheap nature" and, as several of the other contributors attest, "cheap labour." Late capitalism, especially in the guise of neoliberalism and its idol of "the market," are for Stephen Duckett, Joseph Camilleri, and John Bottomley at the core of the global crisis. Bruce Duncan, quoting from *Laudato Si'*, diagnoses a "savage" form of capitalism.

Both John Bottomley and Stephen Ames explore the experience of work under this damaging neoliberal dispensation. A skewed economics of growth without bounds neglects workers' wellbeing, except where such is needed for increased productivity. Moreover, this neglect extends beyond human wellbeing to that of Earth itself. The idolatry of late capitalism creates newer inequalities and entrenches older inequalities across race, class, gender, ethnic, generational, geographic, and national differences. As Richard Wilson's analysis of capital market investments shows, this

reliance on embedded inequalities entails “moral compromises” on the part of businesses and their investors, at the same time forcing “rotten compromises” on vulnerable others whose lives and labours are used to maintain the economic status quo.

Joseph Camilleri diagnoses growing local and international discontent with a neoliberalism that fails to attend to the wellbeing not only of humans but also, importantly, of Earth and its many constituents. He warns, however, that opposition can take many forms—not all of them helpful—for establishing and preserving a just, peaceful, and ecologically sustainable world. For Camilleri, ethical judgements underlie the “emerging critique of neoliberalism,” including “a desire to repair a dangerously fraying social fabric and a concern to restore a measure of integrity to political institutions,” in the face of the failed moral claim for “freedom” of markets.

Camilleri’s appeal to ethics is echoed across each of the other essays. For Wilson, care for neighbour, based on the Golden Rule and modelled on the parable of the Good Samaritan, is key to his analysis of the failures of, and potential for, truly ethical investment. Duncan highlights the moral call of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and their resonance with the Gospel values underlying *Laudato Si’*.<sup>7</sup> He helpfully traces the history of Pope Francis’s thought, showing the way hope builds through careful analysis combined with theologically integrated moral purpose. Both Bottomley and Ames, in different ways, remind readers of the successes and ongoing need for workers’ movements to ensure wellbeing through workplace safety and balanced lives of work, rest, and social engagement. Duckett emphasises the value of community.

As Wilson’s appeal to care for neighbour affirms, these ethical grounds—for diagnosis, analysis, and response to pressing global inequities for humans and otherkind—can be prompted and supported by deep engagement with the wisdom of religious traditions. While religions have been implicated themselves in violence, abuse, and colonial invasion, they also offer ways of being that are counter to the neoliberal framework of unimpeded growth. Bottomley sees in the biblical prophetic tradition a model for witnessing to and resisting contemporary abuses of power and

the oppressions attendant on the “colonial myth of economic progress” and the “sacralising of labour and nature as ‘resources.’” Pope offers the biblical concept of Sabbath as a practical way to shift from the current exploitation of Earth, including other humans, to a more just economics. Ames appeals to a quality of transcendence—which he locates in deity—that prompts and countersigns our ethics. For Guess, a christological condition of *kenosis*, of voluntary self-limitation, can enable a turn “from the modern imaginary of emancipation, growth and progress.” Such self-limitation is incumbent on those of us privileged by the limitations already imposed on many more-than-human (including human) others.

Despite the gravity of the global issues canvassed in these essays, the contributors offer hope. While the designation Anthropocene highlights human agency in having created conditions destructive of more-than-human wellbeing, human agency applied through Sabbath and Jubilee principles offers another way, writes Pope. Ironically, while this necessitates the kind of self-limitation Guess recommends, Pope argues that it is also reason for enjoyment of the good that is creation. Practically, Guess critiques technical models that rely on current neoliberal market paradigms to respond to climate disruption, offering *kenosis* as a social life pattern, and not simply an individual one. Aware of failures of administration in handling the Covid-19 pandemic, Duckett asks if a theology of administration might open up new models of response. Wilson is optimistic that ethical business models can and will be developed.

At the start of this piece, I posited three criteria against which to view these essays: respect for and attentiveness to Country; the often-neglected interests of otherkind; the need for reparative connections with those on whom our relative privilege relies. First, the contributors in this volume explicitly recognise the links between European colonisation and the global crises they diagnose and analyse. It is a further step to take a lead from Indigenous theologians to foreground Country in our thinking and acting. Locally, to keep Country and its more-than-human networks of kinship and relation in our minds requires a decentring of our settler perspectives, of our own embeddedness in colonial processes of

thought and action. Second, concern for Earth and awareness of climate disruption implicitly recall the impact on other creatures, especially those tragically under threat of extinction, or already lost. It is another step to bring these to the fore and to do so without eliding critical links between human wellbeing and the welfare of the rest of creation. Third, the essays themselves are a small contribution to building reparative connections with those on whom our relative privilege depends, locally and globally. Can we let these contributions challenge us beyond their words to consider ways in which—along with changed economic and social practices—we can offer redress for those our ways of living have harmed, often inadvertently? With work, especially the work of deep and respectful listening, the thinking and hope expressed across this collection may contribute to a decentring of colonial practice and action that opens toward reparative justice and shared wellbeing. RASP welcomes researchers, both in and beyond the academy, who would like to take up the challenges presented here.

Anne Elvey

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## Endnotes

- 1 My thanks to John Bottomley and Richard Wilson for editing this collection of essays and for their invitation to write an editorial introduction to these combined works.
- 2 The term “more than human” denotes both human and other-than-human constituents of Earth and cosmos. Humans do not exist outside of a more-than-human world. See David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 22.
- 3 “Statement on the Fifteenth Meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee Regarding the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic,” World Health Organisation News, 5 May 2023, accessed 8 May 2023, [https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic).
- 4 IPCC, Synthesis Report of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6): Summary for Policymakers, 4, accessed 8 May 2023, [https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_SYR\\_SPM.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf).
- 5 Climate Council, “Infographic: The Difference between 1.5 and 2 Degrees Warming,” Climate Council Resources, accessed 8 May 2023, <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/infographic-the-difference-between-1-5-and-2-degrees-warming/>.
- 6 IPCC, Summary for Policymakers, 10.
- 7 UNDP, “Sustainable Development Goals,” United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), accessed 9 May 2023, <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>.