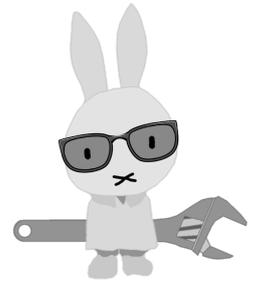


# What was your '2020 Vision'?

In the endless picking-over of the events of 2020, now and in the future, how many will care to inspect their past tendency to always project a rosy future irrespective of its demonstrable flaws?

Paul Mobbs, *The 'Meta-Blog'*, issue no.11, 30<sup>th</sup> December 2020



**It's fairly obvious now, for many different reasons, that 'the system' is knackered and needs an overhaul. Various groups are lobbying for different ways of, and visions for achieving that. If 2020 has been so dire, though, might it be worth considering why present-day realities failed to measure-up to our past grand plans for change? – before we once more repeat the same mistakes in our 'future visions'?**

A bit over 20 years ago, about half of my work was with large campaign groups. At the time, the strictures of 'management theory' were taking them over – in my view, 'deradicalising' them by putting bureaucratic obstacles in the way of spontaneous action. It was a 'taxing' period in [my past work](#), and one particular day sticks out in my mind.

I was sat in on a session discussing '[Agenda 21](#)'. It was one of my specialisms in the 1990s. The person leading the session, from one of the large campaign groups (it doesn't matter which one – *they all did the same thing around then*), explained '[SWOT analysis](#)'; then asked the people in the room to split into smaller groups to consider the 'strengths', 'opportunities', and 'weaknesses' of '[Local Agenda 21](#)' (LA21).

Of course, most people wanted to be in the 'strengths' group, but only about a dozen could fit in. Those who couldn't fit in that group ended up in the 'opportunities' group. I, along with just one other person, ended up in the least popular 'weaknesses' group.

After 20 minutes or so the three small groups got back together: The 'strengths' group of a dozen or so people had one side of A2 flipchart paper covered with observations and ideas – mostly applauding the ideas contained in Agenda 21. The 'opportunities' group had about half a side of A2, mostly on areas where LA21 could be used as a reason to pressure other agencies to change their policies.

Then I stepped up. The two of us has come-up with *three sides* of A2 paper with lots of reasons why most aspects of LA21 couldn't be implemented in England and Wales – along with legal references illustrating why it would be unlawful, or why the local council or environmental regulators had no power to enforce or implement such measures.

You could say a bit of a chill descended on the room at that point. When the session ended the London office staffer asked me to stop behind. After everyone left they unloaded on me; *at volume*.

The purpose of the day had been to develop the '[2020 Vision Strategy](#)' for the organisation. Many such organisations were preparing these at the time as part of their response to [Agenda 21](#).

This person's job description was '[Agenda 21 Officer](#)', and their main task was to develop that strategy. In their view I had just trashed their entire job, and a few months of work, by explaining in legalistic detail why LA21 was seemingly pointless.

In my view, which I explained in reply, their job should be to create a strategy which clearly explained this massive disconnect – between what the government and local councils promised versus what their policies and the law actually enabled – to focus on why 'business as usual' was failing and needed to change radically.

That was not the job this person had been employed for, though. Their job was to make [Agenda 21](#) work within the confines of '*business as usual*', as by the late 1990s the mainstream campaign groups had abandoned 'radical' visions for change.

Of course the idea that societal change must work within mainstream principles defies logic and – from [Plutarch](#), to [Machiavelli](#), to [von Clausewitz](#), to [Alinsky](#) – many lessons from 'strategic' history.

If [Agenda 21](#) failed, and its successor, '[Agenda 2030](#)', sank into oblivion, that's not simply the opposition from right-wing lobbyists. It's because [green groups capitulated](#) to a set of targets and a form of implementation which was bound to fail.

'2020 Vision' strategies were a big thing in politics and ['the third sector'](#) back in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. But they were nothing more than a fashionable form of virtue signalling: Simplistic analyses of where the group was; where they wanted to be in two decades (2020); and the options for action toward their organisational goals.

Most strategies failed before the noughties had even finished, in the fall-out from the [2008 Crash](#).

Two decades on we seem to be going through that same loop – of people 'visioning' grand schemes without any detailed, critical analysis as to whether the vision or the measures are physically, legally or economically viable. And just like those past strategies, they will be equally doomed for their failure to critically reflect on the veracity of their vision measured against such present-day realities.

## The 'roaring 2020s' versus 'post-scarcity anarchism'

Any form of future projection based upon finite or limited assumptions is fraught with danger. Full stop; end of story. Even though this is clearly demonstrable, most ignore this in order that their prognostications fit within the quasi-religious political or economic dogmas that dominate society.

Right now pundits are predicting we are about to enter the ["roaring 2020s"](#): Post-Covid, they believe that the economy will boom and initiate a decade of growth and technological innovation, just as the 1920s boomed off the back of the last great flu pandemic. To me this represents an awe-inspiring lack of critical analysis and historical study.

It fails to consider that the boom after World War I was inextricably tied to the [technological advances](#) of electrification and the combustion engine – and we have no similar technological step-change on the horizon right now. Also, that boom directly led to the [Crash of 1929](#) because its break-neck, debt-fuelled nature was driven by a lack of critical thinking over the 'sustainability' of what was being funded.

More importantly, the 1920s boom only benefited the affluent consumers of a few nations on Earth – and even in those few nations many did not see the benefits of it in their everyday lives.

Of course, much of this depends upon the observer and what they choose to see; or – more pointedly from the critical evaluation of ['optimism bias'](#) – the unwelcome matters they choose to ig-

nore or exclude (which, by identifying them, I've used in the past as a productive route for agitation).

During lockdown I've taken the time to revisit some of the 'foundational texts' that my work is based around – primarily to decide if I should chuck them away to make some room on the shelves.

One of the texts I re-read was [Murray Bookchin's, 'Post-Scarcity Anarchism'](#). It's an anarcho-libertarian view of how movements can advocate for radical change, to devolve power in societies being transformed by affluence and technology.

*Why do I have this book?* It's because, [even though published in 1971](#), it contains quotes like:

*It can be argued on very sound theoretical grounds that this growing blanket of carbon dioxide, by intercepting heat radiated from the earth, will lead to more destructive storm patterns and eventually to melting of the polar ice caps, rising sea levels, and the inundation of vast land areas. Far removed as such a deluge may be, the changing proportion of carbon dioxide to other atmospheric gases is a warning about the impact man is having on the balance of nature.*

How do people like Bookchin 'get' such big future trends in society so early? It's because they observe everything, and rather than excluding problematic ideas they try to include them in their vision.

In contrast, all those '2020 Visions', instead of trying to evaluate all seemingly critical trends, followed the tendency of mainstream political or economic strategies to reject anything that challenged today's dominant lifestyle values – even though that lifestyle is demonstrably unsustainable.

In a report [published last month](#) by the IMF, they accepted this failure within strategies after the [2008 Crash](#), and warned that we risk replicating those same 'optimism biases' in post-Covid plans:

*Overall, our results show the tendency for optimism has persisted even in the period after the [Global Financial Crash]. Moreover, the strong correlation between the magnitude of the optimism and expected fiscal consolidation provides a cautionary signal for post-COVID IMF projections in member countries as they embark on a path of fiscal adjustment.*

In the end, I decided not to chuck Bookchin's book; if only because it's a vision of, irrespective of its politics, how having a broad view of the world can allow you to make far better predictions.

## 'The Great Reset'

Speaking of books, I watched an economist being interviewed on the news the other day, via Zoom. Prominently on the shelf behind him, in its gaudy yellow hardback cover, was [Daniel Yergin's, 'The Quest'](#). It was the ultimate in savvy virtue signalling: "Even though I'm talking about climate change I'm a mainstream markets guy... trust me", it shouted. Though, of course, you would only know that if you understood the etiquette of that 'tribe'.

Yergin – in his [minimal climate](#) action, [pro-fracking](#), [big corporate](#) structures way of thinking – represents the reasons why climate action is failing. Yet I wonder how many climate activists 'got' that reference if they saw the interview, and tempered the interpretation of the words spoken accordingly.

In many ways, the antithesis of the nice, bureaucratic, management-friendly 'strategy document' are the 'soft' political influences of how people present arguments or ideas in the media: The political right excels at it; the liberal 'extreme centre' only shout about it; and the left still don't really get it, *if only because so few people read the books they read, and in any case they don't get asked for interviews!*

The perfect example of the way the mainstream of neoliberal thinking produces strategies today is the work by [Klaus Schwab, 'The Great Reset'](#). It's not a strategy document as such, [it's a book](#); but centre-right and right neoliberals are using the book to hype a post-Covid strategy vision for a new consumer utopia – *which it objectively isn't*.

Problem is the objective, research-based responses to 'The Great Reset' are being drowned out by the 'conspiratorial view' being blast around social media – where the 'fake Covid virus' is part of an elite strategy for world domination. In that environment it's not possible to get a consensus on opposition, as all opposition must first get past the 'absurdities' being said about the book generally.

In a more 'conspiratorial' frame of mind though, perhaps that's the point: 'The Great Reset' is in fact 'The Great Distraction' – which people are suckered into following rather than focussing on the reality of what is proposed, and how to counter it.

Strangely, there is another parallel to this. Practically the mechanisms of 'The Great Reset' are identical to those of the ['Green New Deal'](#) (GND): A centrally devised strategy allegedly to tackle climate change and social inequality; implemented from the

top down via economic and fiscal measures; dependent upon an expanded resources and manufacturing sector driving the use of new technologies; but whose primary focus is on the perpetuation of Western [consumer affluence](#) rather than 'sustainability' measured [from a baseline](#) of [ecological limits](#).

The 'conspiratorial world view' rails, paradoxically, against the 'socialism' of the GND and the big corporations behind it. In reality, having co-opted the environment groups (*remember them?; the people who used to have their own visions?*), it is the 'corporate vision' of [neoliberal finance](#) that is pushing the GND despite plenty of evidence that it [cannot have](#) the [outcomes promised](#).

*'Pro-scarcity anarchism/activism':  
Or, to avoid being part of other people's 'vision' you need to have your own*

Klaus Schwab's 'Great Reset' strategy, along with other grand strategies like the 'Green New Deal', [represent a shift](#) in Western democracy: From a system where many people work to create a vision from the bottom-up; to a system where a few people grandstand their ideas to the media while engineering top-down political deals in the background.

This is not new. Again, it's an iteration of the ancient clashes of Athens and Sparta, or Patrician and Republican Rome, or today's left-versus-right politics – where in fact all mainstream political parties represent the [same economic policies](#), they just want a different décor on the packaging.

[Peter Thiel](#) is an interesting figure – who doesn't get nearly enough critical analysis in the media. A founder of the ['PayPal Mafia'](#), he has since gone on to establish his own privatised intelligence agency through his company [Palantir](#), and is now hiring out his services to nation states – like the UK government in order [to track Covid](#) for the NHS.

Just over a decade ago Thiel [wrote a piece](#) for The Cato Institute – which had, in the context of a 'written strategy' versus 'soft political influence', a very telling opening:

*I remain committed to the faith of my teenage years: to authentic human freedom as a precondition for the highest good... But I must confess that over the last two decades, I have changed radically on the question of how to achieve these goals. Most importantly, I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible.*

Thiel is a (literally) somewhat extreme example, but is representative of the increasing '[oligopoly](#)' within political representation. No longer is politics a principled argument over theoretical economic or political philosophies. It's a primarily a neoliberal economic business plan for how large [special interest lobbies](#) 'sell' packages to the public – and [where politicians are](#) merely the sales and marketing department for those pre-packaged views.

By the way, that's what Boris Johnson's new [style of government](#) is now [ushering in](#) for Britain, primarily to [benefit the people](#) who put him there. And public spending vehicles [like HS2](#), or the [Oxford-Cambridge Expressway](#), being brought into being by the industry-dominated [National Infrastructure Commission](#), are increasingly the mechanism that this new form of politics enacts policy under.

OK. If you don't want to be part of that, what do you do?

Publicly complaining about it, like all the conspiracies around '[The Great Reset](#)', is pointless – because while you're [nihilistically shouting](#) about how bad everything is, you are not creating the alternatives to reform or replace it.

Likewise we are now beyond the point of lobbying or petition signing, because the people those petitions are addressed to are the politicians who have effectively no collective power under this system.

Even when more radical 'mainstream visions' inspired by direct political representation come along – be that [Bernie Sanders](#) or [Jeremy Corbyn](#) – the political infrastructure and lobbyists work together to ensure those people never disrupt their hold on executive power.

To have a 'vision', though, you must first ensure it's realistic. Not just today, but under the trends that have the potential to redefine your future vision.

**At the first Berkeley Peace Rally in 1965, Ken Kesey delivered [a short address](#) that stunned the assembled throng by concluding, “*Just look at it and turn away and say ‘fuck it’*”.**

**In my view, that's where we are today: Party politics, under the influence of oligopolies who want to forge a modern form of feudalism, has failed to represent the public's interest.**

**Quite simply then we don't need to complain, or invent elaborate conspiracies to explain this trend. Its causes and effects are easy to see. Instead we [need to realise](#) the alternatives to it, locally, with those around us, to create and give guarantee to a simpler, less material lifestyle in the future. And where our aims conflict with those of the political elite, then the only response is spontaneous, creative, and mischievous direct action.**

Yes, that's about climate change; but climate change is in fact just [one of a dozen or so](#) ecological trends any one of which has the capacity to up-end today's affluent consumer society – and those dozen or so trends are all falling due between now and 2050 or so, [with the 2030s](#) identified as the pivotal decade when they will start to interact.

Thing is, despite the mainstream political ignorance towards ecological limits, those 'elite'-types are fully aware of this. Once again, with people like Peter Thiel at the forefront of groups [planning for a collapse](#) of present-day society, and seeking a bolt-hole to isolate themselves from that.

Returning to Murray Bookchin, he wrote about 'post-scarcity' in the 1960s when he saw affluence, and the consequent dominance of corporate forces it enabled, as a barrier to change – and so the promotion of anarchist ideas had to change from their historic position of representing of 'the underclass'.

With the fore-knowledge of ecological limits we can see that position pivoting back soon. In fact, as larger sections of society are subject to the changes wrought by [greater automation](#) in the future, we can see economic inequality and destitution having a far more corrosive role in society irrespective of that.

Therefore, developing from the visions of Bookchin and many others, we must talk in terms of '[pro-scarcity anarchism/activism](#)'. Of planning for a [far less material](#) world not because the elite want control of the world's wealth; but because it is consumption that is killing the planet.

Affluence is an illusion – one that tricks people into believing in the economic and political dogmas that [perpetuate both inequality](#) and [planetary destruction](#). Moving beyond that, to simpler, less material lifestyle, is the key to escaping both corporate dominance and ecological breakdown.