The COVID bonus? – a dissenting note

A Green House Gas by John Foster
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Green House has now published two 'Gases', one by John Barry and one by Reinhard Loske, on the relation between the current COVID-19 pandemic and our prospects in face of the climate crisis. These papers, while differing in emphasis, have a common theme, namely that the broad public acceptability of stringent restrictions on mobility (with significant knock-on effects on patterns of consumption) as a government-imposed and science-driven public health response to the COVID emergency may carry over, once that emergency is defeated or at least contained, into a readiness to accept the comparable restrictions necessary to hit zero emissions targets. Recognising that driving less, shopping locally, working from home and developing or intensifying community solidarity have worked in helping to stem COVID-19, it is suggested, people may then be readier to bring these and similar lifestyle changes to bear in the service of addressing the climate emergency.

My objection to this is not that it is pretty speculative, although I think it is – we may well find out when the COVID lockdown eases just how powerfully many people have missed driving and Metrocentres, how much more exacting they have found working at home (especially with family around) compared with escaping to the office, and how actively they have disliked depending on the sporadic benevolence of their neighbours. Which of these sets of expectations you entertain perhaps turns on how optimistic, or maybe starry-eyed, you are about human nature. The real difficulty with these two papers, in my view, is the way they obscure the radical difference between the COVID and climate emergencies, and thus hinder our ability to learn from the way the COVID experience should have flagged that difference up.

The radical difference is that COVID-19 kills indiscriminately and is doing so in the full glare of media attention – so that everyone is likely to be scared, to a greater or lesser extent, by the immediate possibility that they or their loved ones will die of it. In many cases too, of course, people are also more altruistically scared by the prospect of widespread illness and death accompanied by the collapse of key public services on which everyone relies. The upshot of this general fear and concern has been widespread acceptance, at least temporarily, of lockdown and related public health measures. But the climate emergency and its implications only scare a minority of people – those who couple honesty and courage with the intelligence to understand and heed the science, the imagination to bring the predicted impacts of global overheating vividly before their minds and the reflectiveness to realise that trying to shrug these prospects off and concentrate on one's present life robs the latter of any meaning or point. And (regrettably, but undeniably) this is actually quite a small minority at the moment. So, in the immediate future at any rate, there will only be

'climate-driven disasters', testifying to the existence of a frightening climate emergency, for that minority. Majority readiness to confront them as such is not to be expected, and nor therefore is any general readiness to accept the restrictions and rearrangements that go with an actually recognised emergency.

Now of course, the boundary between the insightful minority and the rest is not fixed. The COVID-19 experience may be found to have helped strengthen understanding in those where it had been only potential – in particular, by highlighting the benefits of attention to the consensus of relevant experts. It may have enriched imagination through encounter with the hitherto unimaginable; and it may have prompted the kind of reflectiveness about life-meaning in the face of existential threat, openness to which just goes with being human. Similarly, the collective response to the pandemic may be found to have promoted the rediscovery of various forms of community solidarity and the revitalising, strengthening or in some cases creation of infrastructures of local resilience – from local food supply chains, through community businesses and projects of various kinds all the way to informally organised neighbourhood support schemes. This renewed social capital for the eco-state may well also be carried forward as further dangerous events unroll.

The key point, however, is that what both these forms of 'disaster bonus' depend on is deliberate strategic activity on the part of the vanguard minority to whom the climate emergency is real. Any kind of social learning from disaster as we go forward is going to involve acceptance by that conscious minority that they must now be proactive without waiting on widespread popular consent. They must insist relentlessly on the climate connections of each successive flood, storm, wildfire or similar event; they must constantly reinforce the discourse of emergency and hammer away at the slogans of transformative response. (They can certainly emphasise that implementing these slogans would involve arrangements much less restrictive to the individual, and in sum less economically disruptive, than the COVID lockdown has been.) But they must also make moves and preparations now which, before there is widespread public consent, will be understood as revolutionary – trusting that sufficient consent or at least acquiescence will follow in due course.

I am arguing, in other words, that the broad acceptability of COVID-19 lockdown measures should not be taken as a template for how the population at large might thereafter respond to climate emergency, but is on the contrary very different from anything we might expect at least in the near future as such a response. And what should follow from that, in turn, is much clearer recognition of the fact that, given the predictably catastrophic outcomes of climate chaos, we simply cannot wait for evidence of any popular disposition to welcome restriction and lifestyle change along COVID-like lines before we – that is, those of us who do recognise that the climate emergency is already upon us – start taking every active step we can to avert it. The proffering of comfortingly false analogies between the COVID-19 and

climate situations, to the extent that it blinds us to this recognition, is a positively dangerous process.

By the same token, if enhanced social capital for localisation is to survive the defeat of the pandemic, and not be abandoned to desuetude in a vast gasp of collective relief once we can all get back in our cars, it will now need to be consciously fostered, co-ordinated and politically articulated by deliberate strategic activity on the part of the vanguard minority to whom the climate emergency is real, and for whom the importance of these potential sinews of a shadow eco-state is paramount.

Waiting until the climate emergency is as widely perceived as the COVID-19 danger – until, say, it is headline news in the Daily Mail – before starting the revolution would be to leave things helplessly too late. But recognition just may come in time for acceptance of a revolution already substantively in train. This is at any rate not wholly implausible – and the domain of the not wholly implausible is where we are at best for any human future. It is part of our plight, as the pandemic should actually have helped to remind us, that we must now invest whatever hope we have against very heavy odds, as our only hope of changing the odds.

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