Will COVID-19 help us tackle climate change?

A Green House Gas by Anne Chapman
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On first glance the answer to this question appears to be yes. The unprecedented falls in economic activity, particularly in transport, have cut emissions and projections by the International Energy Agency at the end of April suggest they will be 8% down on 2019.[1] As fossil fuel consumption has declined so has air pollution, and perhaps people in major urban areas will want to keep their clean air and blue skies. However this is the sort of cut we need to sustain every year, and emissions are likely to go back up as economic activity resumes after lockdowns, as they did after the financial crash in 2008. Recessions may mean lower green house gas emissions in the short term but can be bad in the long term for the transition to zero carbon: they reduce investment so when economic activity picks up so does consumption of fossil fuels.

Of more lasting impact may be changes that this experience of living through a pandemic and the measures brought in to tackle it bring about to our mindsets and ways of thinking. Below I discuss three of these possible changes, two of which may be positive for tackling the climate crisis and one negative, before going on to outline some similarities and differences between climate change and COVID-19.

One species

Firstly, the pandemic has brought home to us that we are all one biological species, part of the earth and its biota, which includes pathogens such as ever-evolving viruses. We are not disembodied minds who can exist without nature. People everywhere are susceptible to the virus, though as is normally the case in populations, there are variations in that susceptibility: the old are more likely to be killed by the virus than the young, men more than women, and it may be that some ethnic groups are more susceptible than others. Overlying our biological differences is differing vulnerability from our position in society. Have we been able to work at home during the lockdown, or do our jobs involve us continuing to go out and interact with others, particularly those who are sick? How many people do we live with? Is effective 'social distancing' possible for us? Then there are the very different economic impacts: some have secure incomes and enforced lower spending (not being able to go out to cafes, restaurants, theatres *etc.*), so will have money to spare, others have lost all their income and are struggling to pay their bills and feed themselves. During the lockdown some have enjoyed a slower pace of life, getting their garden in order and discovering local patches of nature, while others have been stuck in overcrowded flats with little access to green space.

While it is important to highlight and address inequalities, the recognition of ourselves as all one species, part of ecosystems with other species is something we need to hold on to if we are, together, going to tackle the climate crisis.

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[1] https://www.iea.org/news/global-energy-demand-to-plunge-this-year-as-a-result-of-the-biggest-shock-since-the-second-world-war

Expansion of the possible

Way back in February I remember a conversation we had in Green House about how the climate emergency perhaps requires us to stop and pause to think about what we really need. I said that that seemed to be what was happening in China as a result of the new coronavirus, but I could not imagine that sort of lockdown happening here – but here we are two months in to a similar, though less draconian lockdown that has high levels of public support. I am sure it was not just me with a restricted imagination. The failure of the UK government to act sooner, something that in hindsight it seems would have saved many thousands of lives, can be attributed to a failure of imagination as to the impacts of the virus and to what the UK population would accept as restrictions on their liberty.

Climate change is a similar challenge to our imagination: it is difficult to really imagine what its impacts are going to be, nor what we need to do to stop emissions and adapt to a changing climate. Many in the green movement, of course, have spent years trying to imagine these things and as a consequence have been motivated to become climate change campaigners, but an understanding of what is to come is still not sufficiently widespread, particularly amongst those in positions of power. And no doubt our imaginations are limited and things will not turn out as we expect. However, the speed with which changes have been made in response to COVID-19 should embolden us to ask for more rapid and far reaching changes to stop fossil fuel production and use than currently envisioned.

Fear of being with others

The third change to our way of thinking is less positive for action on climate change: how long will it be before we are comfortable being in physical proximity to people we do not live with? The 'social distancing' message has been effectively hammered home so that people now move apart when they pass each other in the street. Since the lockdown there have been far fewer cars on the road, as well as planes in the air. Everyone expects that air travel will not go back to where it was anytime soon (this would be a good opportunity to curb it for good!) but road transport is a bigger carbon emitter than air travel and use of private cars could increase as people shift away from public transport, unless measures to increase walking and cycling and a long term increase in working from home can compensate. There is a danger that this will be the death knell for public transport outside major urban areas, which has already been cut by years of austerity. This will make a transition to zero-carbon more difficult, as well as curtailing opportunities for those unable to drive or who cannot afford a car.

Although not requiring the physical presence of others, the fear of the virus being on surfaces that others have touched may also impact peoples' willingness to use things such as cars that are shared with others. This applies to car clubs as well as hire cars, encouraging people who have relied on these shared cars to buy their own. Perhaps the selling or giving away of second hand goods will also be affected: for example, where I live in Lancaster, an email list called 'swapshop' where people offer and ask for goods and services has ceased during the lockdown.

Another possible effect of our fear of being with others is on political action: how long will it be before meetings, protests and other actions that involve physical presence are allowed, and perhaps more importantly, people feel safe taking part in them. On-line activism is, I think, a poor substitute

for the availability and visibility to all of people physically meeting face to face and being out on the streets. Can the momentum in favour of action on climate change gained over the past year by the climate strike and Extinction Rebellion movements be maintained in these circumstances?

I should emphasise that this fear of being with others is not a fear of others. Disaster movies of pandemics would probably have featured looting and armed gangs or individuals protecting their own, not thousands volunteering for the NHS, neighbours forming What's App groups to help each other out, or drug gangs in South Africa re-purposing their supply lines to deliver food to the vulnerable.[2] We should remember this when we think about climate disasters to come: crises generally (though not universally) bring out the best in human nature and what we need to survive them are strong local communities.[3] What drives us apart is propaganda that puts the blame for our problems on others: Donald Trump insisting using the term 'China virus', or the *Mail on Sunday* suggesting that Boris Johnson caught COVID-19 from the EU's chief Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, as some sort of revenge for Brexit.[4]

Similarities

Like COVID-19, **scientific expertise** is critical when it comes to understanding and addressing climate change. What COVID-19 has illustrated is the importance of **clear communication** of that science and its implications by the powers that be, so that people understand and accept the changes they are being asked to make. A good illustration is the press conferences of Governor Cuomo of New York State, with their graphs and clear factual information, which was compulsive viewing for many Americans during the peak of infections in New York, compared with the shambolic ramblings of President Trump with his musings about treating COVID-19 with disinfectant. Could we not have Governor Cuomo – style press conferences from governments on our progress in the transition to a zero-carbon economy? Perhaps not every day, but every month?

With COVID-19 the **risks** from any one personal encounter that you will transmit or be infected with the virus are very small. But together, in a population of millions, those small risks can up to tens of thousands of cases and then deaths. Hence what people do cannot be a matter of personal choice, of each weighing up the risks for themselves, but rules have had to be imposed on us. Similarly, with climate change, our individual contributions to greenhouse gas emissions are insignificant, but together our impact is substantial. Change is not going to be achieved by people making individual decisions about what they want to do, we are going to have to be told.

As with action on COVID-19, **timing is critical** when it comes to action on climate change. With COVID-19 it seems likely that countries that locked down early or were vigorous in suppressing the virus by testing, contact tracing and isolating from the start, are likely to suffer less in terms of the impact on their economy as well as the death toll, than those, such as the UK, that delayed action.

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[2] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/south-africa-coronavirus-lockdown-gangs-cape-town-a9474101.html
[3] See my chapter on 'Dealing with Extreme Weather', and that by Rupert Read and Kirsten Steele 'Making the most of Climate Disaster: on the need for a localised and localising response' in *Facing up to Climate Reality, Honesty, Disaster and Hope,* edited by John Foster, (Green House 2019).
[4] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8163427/Did-Michel-Barnier-infect-PM-EUs-Brexit-negotiator-Downing-Streets-Patient-Zero.html

Similarly, with climate change, the sooner greenhouse gas emissions are reduced the less the impact will be in the long term. Unfortunately though, 'sooner' was really 30 years ago.

Differences

The first critical difference between COVID-19 and climate change is **timescale**. The spread of the virus has been so fast that days have mattered when it came to bringing infections under control. This timescale and urgency has clearly been difficult for some political decision-makers to grasp. However, it has meant that the impacts of their decisions are going to be apparent on their watch – so they can be held responsible for the decisions they made. In contrast, climate change plays out over decades. Whereas with COVID-19 there is a delay of a few weeks to a month or so between infections and deaths, so death rates now are a reflection of infection rates several weeks ago, the timescale for greenhouse gas emissions to impact on our climate is decades if not longer. The climate change we are now experiencing is a result of the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere several decades ago.[5] What the current levels mean in terms of a long-term climate we have yet to find out. In this context political accountability is much more difficult. Rather than being able to hold politicians to account for what they have done to our climate we need to judge them by less tangible measures, such as greenhouse gas emissions. In contrast to climate change, the local air pollution that goes along with fossil fuel burning is immediate, and stopping the burning quickly improves matters (as we have seen). This is one reason why campaigning against air pollution is a good tactic when it comes to climate change.

A second difference is, as my colleague John Foster has pointed out,[6] that COVID-19 is a **direct threat to individual health** so is easier to understand and more frightening to most people than climate chaos, where the impacts on individuals are more indirect. He argues that because of this people's willingness to submit to measures required to halt the spread of the virus cannot be taken as an indication that they would agree to the measures required to adequately reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, **individual behaviour change is not as critical** when it comes to the latter as it is with COVID-19. Stopping the spread of the virus requires a dramatic reduction in human interaction, which cannot be achieved any other way than by us all changing where we go and who we see. In contrast, as the slogan goes, stopping climate change requires system change. Although individual behaviour change has a part to play it can only be effective with concerted government action that changes tax and fiscal policy, our energy and transport infrastructure, retrofits buildings *etc.* This is illustrated by the failure of Canada to meet its target of a 6% reduction in emissions under the Kyoto Protocol by what was primarily a voluntary approach. It issued a 'one tonne challenge' that encouraged Canadians to reduce their individual emissions by various changes to their behaviour. Rather than fall, emissions increased by over 20%.[7] Indeed, one prominent climate scientist, Myles Allen, has argued that the focus on individual action, epitomised by calls for people to not fly or to eat less meat are a distraction and instead we should require fossil fuel companies to ensure that there are net zero emissions from the production and combustion of their products.

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[5] See https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Briefing-note-on-time-lags-in-the-climate-system-Met-Office.pdf
[6] J. Foster, May 2020 *The COVD bonus? – A dissenting note.* A Green House Gas available from www.greenhousethinktank.org/gases.html.
[7] See p.298 of E. Burkard, and G. B. Doern, editors. *Governing the Energy Challenge: Canada and Germany in a Multilevel Regional and Global Context*. University of Toronto Press, 2009.

Just as nuclear power companies have had to abide by strict safety rules (massively increasing the costs of nuclear power) fossil fuel producers should have to take out of the atmosphere an equivalent amount of carbon dioxide to that produced by burning the coal, oil or gas they take out of the ground. [8] This, of course, will increase the costs of fossil fuels, with major ramifications for consumers: public understanding and acceptance will still be critical, as well bold political leadership to introduce such rules.

The long view

As I write we have just marked the 75th anniversary of VE day. The war changed a great many things: the desire for a better Britain post war enabled the Labour government to bring in the welfare state and the NHS; but the post war years also saw the industrialisation of farming and the expansion of industry, including the increased production of new materials such as plastics, whose impacts on the biosphere we have only begun to appreciate in the last few years. In many ways the current climate and ecological crisis can be seen as originating in 'improvements', to industrial processes and agriculture brought in during the era of state intervention that followed the war. It remains to be seen whether the COVID-19 crisis and the economic contraction brought about by the measures to tackle it will be viewed as a similar rupture in our history. If it does will it be seen as the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era and the start of something better, or the final end of international co-operation and a descent into authoritarianism driven by widespread economic insecurity and climate breakdown? Whatever happens is not inevitable: the forces of nationalistic populism are doing what they can to gain from this crisis,[9] we in the green movement need to do the same and do whatever we can to push for a rapid transition to a zero-carbon economy not based on fossil fuels.

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[8] https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000fgcn
[9] http://www.infernalmachine.co.uk/beware-the-lies-of-march/