

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CORONAVIRUS: A CONFLUENCE OF TWO EMERGENCIES AS LEARNING AND TEACHING CHALLENGE

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Abstract: This article offers readers a select list of articles on the interface between the coronavirus and climate change emergencies. It is preceded by a commentary that draws out some of the challenges and opportunities the confluence of emergencies raises. The commentary closes with some brief reflections on implications for climate change learning and teaching.

Key words: Climate Change; Coronavirus; COVID-19; Neoliberalism; Planetary Health; Personal, Abrupt, Immoral, Now (PAIN).

Commentary

Twenty nineteen was the year of climate emergency declarations. Hundreds of governments and thousands of municipalities around the world declared states of emergency in response to a rapidly changing and increasingly volatile global climate so that, today, 800 million people, i.e. one in ten people on the planet, live in places covered by emergency decrees (Calma, 2019). Twenty-twenty has brought us the COVID-19 emergency. First reported from Wuhan, China on 31 December 2019 and declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020, COVID-19 has spread rapidly around the world with devastating effect on human life, life patterns, livelihoods, everyday expectations and public health systems. The global economy has been brought to its knees.

In these dark days, we can easily forget that not so long ago WHO described climate change as the ‘greatest threat to global health in the 21st century’ (WHO, 2015). Recalling that pronouncement, the recent editorial in *Lancet Planetary Health* (2020) compares ‘lacklustre and even obstructive’ decision-making over climate policy with the ‘rapid and robust’ COVID-19 response given the ultimately larger and longer-term threat that climate change

presents. The disjunction is understandable. The Corona emergency is more devastatingly immediate and horribly concrete in its impact; there has been no room for stretched-out denial, debate and obfuscation; climate change is slower and more stealthy in its onset; while there have been horrifying examples of disasters amplified by climate change such as the recent Australian bush fires, there remain many parts of the world where climate change seems ‘out there’ whereas COVID-19 could come knocking at anyone’s door at any time. ‘The problem,’ writes Nick Clark (2020), ‘is that the dangers presented by the climate crisis seem too distant to matter to most, especially politicians. But if we think COVID-19 is bad, we ain’t seen nothing yet: the effects of the climate emergency will be far worse down the line’ (Ibid).

Renowned United Kingdom (UK) environmental and climate change campaigners David Attenborough and Chris Packham have both warned that the coronavirus pandemic could divert attention from climate change and seriously set back alleviative efforts (Gilliver, 2020a and b). Swedish climate change activist Greta Thunberg, on the other hand, calls for combined action to tackle the ‘two crises at once’ (O’Sullivan, 2020). A strong case for conflating understandings of the two crises is made in a number of the articles surveyed. In the first place both crises are perceived by several writers as outcomes of human violation of the natural world. Encroachment upon the natural world in the name of development is seen as both escalating climate change as well as opening the way to a succession of diseases that threaten to take on pandemic proportions.

Activities such as mining, logging and slash-and-burn agriculture degrade natural habitats and undermine biodiversity while forcing animals to live in evermore crowded, stressed and ecologically unbalanced conditions that are in ever closer proximity to human communities. Channels are thereby created for transmission of new pathogens from wildlife. Those same activities intensify carbon release and reduce carbon sinks while rising global surface temperatures continue to erode the resilience and health of the natural world. Exacerbating the resultant danger of zoonotic pandemic is the continued

international trade in wildlife and the ‘wet market’ trade in wild meat, a factor of poverty and food insecurity but also, in many cases, of long-standing food acculturation. (Carrington, 2020; Clark, 2020; Kolinjivadi, 2020; Price, 2020; Vidal, 2020). It is from a Wuhan wet market that the coronavirus is believed to have emerged.

The two emergencies are also widely identified as inevitable outcroppings of the prevailing global economic growth model. ‘Both COVID-19 and climate change are rooted in the same abusive economic behaviour and both have proven to be deadly for humans’, comments Vijay Kolinjivadi (2020). Continued prioritisation of economic growth means an ever more rapacious culling of natural resources for the production of consumables for the global marketplace, a process propelled primarily by the burning of fossil fuels. The process depletes the innate ability of the environment to balance itself, disrupts ecological cycles, pollutes land and air, and fuels global heating while the intrusion into natural habitats in the name of sustaining growth and turning a profit carries the ever-present potential to release unknown pathogens. (Chang, 2020; Kolinjivadi, 2020).

If the neoliberal growth model has fuelled the two crises, it has also been found wanting as a means of coping with their impacts. Its shrunken-state, market-led paradigm has in the COVID-19 crisis rapidly been supplanted by state interventionism. ‘Neoliberalism is dead. ...The state is back’, declares Neal Ascherson (2020), as he reviews responses to the coronavirus. For Dae-oup Chang (2020): “‘Business as usual’ is no longer feasible anywhere on earth. The current crisis has showed that the free market ideology is nonsense’. The coronavirus crisis, he writes, is the continuum of the 2007-08 crisis of global capitalism when capitalism was bailed out by state injections of funding before continuing to expand by wreaking further growth-focussed havoc on the environment (Ibid.). The question is whether, post-coronavirus, there will be any fundamental rethinking of what development entails or, alternatively, a headlong rush to bail out capitalism again and so restore ‘normal’ at whatever cost to health and the environment. (Ascherson, 2020; Chang, 2020; McKenna, 2020). More on ‘normal’ later...

Pierfilippo Natta and Adam Weinstein (2020) see the COVID-19 experience as a ‘forewarning for how the world might cope with mass migration as a result of climate change’. ‘The world’s failure to effectively react to a rapidly spreading virus’, they add, ‘offers a grim outlook for its ability to collectively prepare for climate migration’. Their call is for a revival of stagnant national security agendas away from military and counterterrorism preoccupations and towards prioritising how best to deal with epidemics and pandemics, irreversible climate change and resultant mass migrations. George Monbiot (2020a) likewise calls for a ‘complete reassessment of what security means’ in the light of the two crises and for a non-adversarial confronting of ‘genuine threats to humanity and the rest of life on Earth’ in which military considerations are but a chapter in a much larger story. As we write (25 April), refugee and asylum camps stand on the threshold of potential coronavirus catastrophe, their contained spaces not allowing for the globally recommended social distancing (Subbaraman, 2020), and we learn (Beaumont, 2020) that the COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate global hunger even further so that some 265 million people are likely to be pushed into extreme food insecurity during 2020. All this screams for global reconceptualisation of both security and justice that is both radical and holistic in its sweep.

Many of the articles listed below recognise that the confluence of the two emergencies presents the global community with a potentially fecund moment. While authors anticipate that once the coronavirus crisis has somewhat abated there will be tremendous pressure to get life back to ‘normal’, they also discern a window of opportunity for transformative change. The problem with bouncing back to ‘normal’ is that ‘normal’ got us into very hot water in the first place; it is a ‘normal’ that has proved brittle and, on that account, vulnerable. It has failed to meet the needs of people and protect the integrity of the environment in multiple ways. As Sara Pantuliano (2020), echoing a Twittersphere message asserts: ‘we won’t get back to normal because normal was the problem’. Rather, she holds that the COVID-19 crisis offers the opportunity to seize a different type of ‘normal’, a new order ‘to set the world on a more sustainable and equal path’ (Ibid). ‘What we thought was

“normal” before the pandemic,’ writes Vijay Kolinjivadi (2020), ‘was already a crisis and so returning to it cannot be an option.’

The pandemic crisis is clearly giving people glimpses of a different world; glimpses that those calling for fundamental change can work with and advocate from. ‘Right now’, writes Nick Clarke (2020), ‘an unintentional but illuminating, large-scale experiment is under way on global emissions’ with the shutdown of industrial activity, huge declines in flight numbers, significant reductions in road traffic and hence exhaust fumes, slashed air pollution over cities and noticeably bluer skies. ‘Amid tragedy, we have had a sniff of a cleaner, safer future’, he continues (Ibid). ‘Once this pandemic is over, never will there be a better moment to put our shoulder to the renewable energy wheel’ (Ibid). Alternatively, ‘we will sleepwalk into another global crisis more malevolent by far than the coronavirus’ (Ibid). For Jonathan Watts (2020) the reduced human footprint on the earth has given us a ‘glimpse of what the world would look like without fossil fuels’. He cautions: ‘hopes that humanity could emerge from this horror into a healthier, cleaner world will depend not on the short-term impacts of the virus, but on long-term political decisions made about what follows ... it remains to be seen whether home isolation of half the world’s population affects the appetite for consumer goods’ (Ibid).

While offering a glimpse of an alternative future of clean air, easier breathing, quiet lives, community support and, for many, time to appreciate the ‘world in a grain of sand’, the current crisis is also revealing the art of the possible. For a long time, climate change mitigation advocates and activists have been met with a ‘business as usual’ response that their proposals were unrealistic and, at best, only viable in pared-down form. The alacrity with which radical transformation has been effected by government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic gives the lie to such rebuttals. The *Lancet Planetary Health* (2020) editorial puts it this way: ‘Just as climate impacts are far more far reaching than the COVID-19 outbreak, climate policy is also more logistically taxing and requires a degree of collective action that has rarely been demonstrated. However, this is not the time to bemoan past failures but rather to try to harness the window of opportunity that the COVID-19 response

is opening. The strength of response measures is forcing us to question the conventionally unquestionable as we see actions that for climate policy would have been thought politically infeasible. ‘The outbreak has shown that governments can take radical and urgent action to tackle a clear and present danger’, Clarke (2020) observes. It has demonstrated that ‘what was previously deemed impossible seems attainable’, declares Pantuliano (2020). ‘Last year governments around the world declared a “climate emergency” and then did pretty much nothing to act as if it is one’, writes David Powell (2020). ‘Now here’s COVID-19, and *this* is what an emergency response looks like’. Neal Ascherson (2020) urges that when we awake from ‘this shared time of pestilence’, we use the ‘few months of creative confusion’ available to us to reinvent the world. ‘There is plenty to do, but we have to do it fast’. The winding down of the COVID-19 threat will likely present the window of opportunity for turning the largely symbolic governmental and municipal declarations of climate emergency described in the opening paragraph of this commentary into a hard-nosed, bold, hard-driven and coordinated response to the even-more-deadly long-term threat that is climate change.

How can the formal and non-formal education best avail of the window of opportunity? Well, there are themes and topics that have so far garnered less than fulsome curriculum attention. The time has come perhaps in these days of rapidly advancing climate change allied with the pandemic catastrophe for an emerging academic discipline, Planetary Health, to find a place in the curriculum. Planetary Health focuses on the increasingly visible connections between the wellbeing of humans, other-than humans and entire ecosystems (Vidal, 2020). There is a case, too, for giving greater cross-curricular attention to resilience as it relates to both epidemics/pandemics and climate change (Künzel and Schäfer, 2020). A climate justice dimension to the curriculum is also an essential, allied to which should be a new strand of anti-racist education focussing on the stories of climate migrants and questions surrounding the receptivity of host country populations. In their activist role students might campaign for an international convention on climate migration, a gap in present international law. More broadly, the confluence of the two

crises speaks urgently to curricula that nimbly intersect the human/nature divide.

In his article David Powell (2020) works with the concept of entelechy, which he defines as the ‘force that makes a person or a group of people work in the distinct way that it does’. He discerns entelechy in the way the UK population has in the main gone along with the COVID-19 lockdown. Why, he wonders, has this not happened in the case of the climate change emergency? Following psychologist Daniel Gilbert, he suggests that climate change has fallen short of meeting four criteria that lead people to take an emergency seriously. The four criteria fall under the acronym PAIN. The threat has to be perceived as **P**ersonal, i.e. something directly linked to the individual or group. It has to be **A**brupt, i.e. calling for a sudden change away from ‘business as usual’ around which people can rally. It has to address the **I**mmoral, i.e., it is something to which people can respond with moral concern and conviction, even moral indignation and outrage, overlain with a profound sense of social responsibility. It has to be of the **N**ow, i.e. something that connects to their everyday lives as of this moment. The PAIN model offers a helpful but challenging framework for climate change learning and teaching. Bringing a sense of urgency and immediacy, of relevance and ethical concern to formal and non-formal learning spaces where pain, loss and grief are also worked through will leave learners best placed to avail of the climate mitigation action opportunities presented by a receding coronavirus emergency.

Select list of articles

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