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Clive Spash: Authoritarian regimes use the Coronavirus to further their political power and oppression

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Prof. Clive Spash (2010)

The **COVID-19** pandemic continues to change the lives of people around the world. Following the changes in the lives of consumers, the economy itself is also changing. In different parts of the world, authorities and residents perceive the threat of the pandemic and the economic consequences of prolonged quarantine differently.

Dr. **Clive Spash** — professor at **Vienna University of Economics**, editor-in-chief of the journal *Environmental Values* and an expert in the field of environmental economics — talked with **Wikinews** about his vision of the current economic situation. In an interview with **Roman**

Balabin, professor Spash, as a former lecturer at **Cambridge University** and the science leader of the australian **Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)**, evaluated governments' responses to the epidemic, as well as the economic and environmental consequences of COVID-19.

Roman Balabin: Did you foresee the possibility of such kind of world epidemic? Has your professional community discussed the likelihood of appearance of a new viral infection — and its consequence?

Clive Spash: A global pandemic virus has not been an explicit part of discussions and this specific disaster was not foreseen. However, under climate change scenarios there have been related concerns over the increased spread of a range of diseases, such as malaria being reintroduced to Europe as temperatures increase.

Ecological economics and the environmental movement more generally have long been aware of human health impacts from pollution and the potential for resulting mortality and morbidity increase, as well as the combined effect of poor health due to pollution increasing the death rate when another infection occurs. There have also been concerns over chemicals having similar impacts to a

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pandemic, such as the implications of DDT bioaccumulation going back to the 1960s.

RB: What contribution does the panic make to the current situation? Is the general population responding adequately: healthy and sick people?

CS: Panic reactions have been stimulated by poor governance and distrust in society. Panic does not help anyone but in societies where individualism has been promoted to the highest of values the immediate reaction is for individuals to compete for resources rather than cooperate. Generalising about population reaction is impossible because there are many different contexts in different countries from war zones, countries under sanctions, debt ridden societies, precarious employment, and political systems from totalitarian/authoritarian through to democratic/communitarian.

Where regulations have been implemented with explanation and are bound by democratic limits and there is trust in government institutions the populations have generally remained calm after initial panic buying and obeyed lock-down rules.

Yet the question rather presupposes a legitimate governance structure in society. What would be an adequate response under an authoritarian regime using the Coronavirus to further its political power and oppression or where starvation is the likely outcome of isolation policies?

RB: How do you rate the reaction of world governments to the first cases of infection? How do you see the relationship between the medical, ecological and economical components of the Covid-19 problem?

CS: Governments were generally slow to react and many unprepared when they did react. The daily lies and contradictions of President Donald Trump and his administration in the USA or President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil will appear in higher per capita death rates. Other governments closely allied to corporation and business were reluctant to take action and have been more concerned to funnel money into threatened industries like the airlines than to bolster their health services and support doctors and nurses.

In Austria the outbreak in Tyrol was covered-up and downplayed for a month which resulted in spreading the virus across Europe via the international ski tourists to the region. The gross inequities in society and impacts of politically driven austerity measures are becoming self-evident. The UK is a good example where also the concept of ‘herd immunity’ was recommended policy, which basically means accepting the death of hundreds of thousands if not millions of citizens (in early March the WHO announced average death rates of 3,4 %)^[1]. The decimated National Health Service has been receiving support from public charitable donations.

Initial policy response success can be approximately judged by the per capita death rates with the top ten major countries showing bad performance being, in order: Belgium, Spain, Italy, France, Netherlands, UK, Switzerland, Sweden, Ireland, and the USA (16th April)^[2]. Country policies have had impact here with some liberal conservative governments, such as Netherlands and Sweden, still refusing to take strong action after others had done U-turns.

What has been revealed is the failure of the dominant economic system to be able to pause for a week let alone stop for a month and simply supply what people need, the basic and essentials of life. This links to the social ecological economic critique of the system both as being driven by growth mania and relying on price-making markets for supply. Long supply chains have proven highly susceptible to disruption. Promotion of hedonic pleasure for a minority both materially and via global tourism has created international dependencies but also means for fast transmission of disease. The ecological impact has long been evident from invasive species and spread of diseases including cross species virus transmission (e.g., Myxomatosis).

The complex interactions of the social, ecological and economic system can be seen in operation via the impacts of the virus and the impacts of the policy responses that undermine the operations of the dominant economic system.

RB: Will this crisis influence the human induced climate change?

CS: There is an immediate impact of an economic slow down on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Indeed the only success in controlling the growth of GHG emissions has been due to economic collapse (e.g. end of the USSR, wars, recessions). This is something all governments are concerned to reverse because they prioritise economic growth above all else. The lie of decoupling is once again exposed.

If governments had the political will and vision they might use this as an opportunity to restructure the economy in line with what is necessary to reduce GHGs. Some growth sectors (e.g., airlines), are major sources of GHGs and will be slow to recover because their activities (e.g., flying) are non-essential and they may be associated with behaviours causing virus transmission (e.g., tourism, airplane cabin exposure). They could be phased out. However, this is unlikely. For example, no government is proposing to nationalise failing airlines and start removing their non-essential activities, but are rather offering them billions in direct subsidies and loans.

The temporary collapse in oil price means many operations expanding oil production are now bankrupt enterprises. They should not even have been occurring because the GHGs they will release is way beyond available budgets to meet the Paris Agreement. However, since the signing of the Paris Agreement the world's largest investment banks have funnelled more than \$2.66 trillion into fossil fuels^[3]. This means the response will be more of the same and more public funding of fossil fuel capitalism to rebuild it rather than change the economic system.

The hope is that the impacts of an exponentially growing harm and the need for precaution will be higher on the political agenda, and that populations around the worlds will rethink their commitments to an economic system promising ecological collapse and crises. Science may also have its credibility re-established against the denialists and anti-realists.

RB: Can you guess when this pandemic will end? Will this crisis change current healthcare, economical and/or ecological policies in the world?

CS: The pandemic has not even worked through its first stage of infection and is spreading globally. A vaccine, if possible, is expected to take a year to develop even if many safety precautions for normal drug development are circumvented. Reinfection of populations is expected by epidemiologists.

Comparisons with Spanish flue, the last pandemic on this scale, are worth drawing. This had three phases of infection and the second was the worst, i.e. highest death rates. Currently effective control measures appear to work over a two to three month period from initial exponential growth rates appearing to decline to near zero levels. Reinfection might be expected a month or two after restrictions are relaxed. So this would mean a three phase cycle lasting twelve to eighteen months. The extent to which precautionary measures and changes in behaviour can prevent or minimise the reinfection remains highly uncertain.

The austerity measures that have decimated public health services will come under review. Democratic countries that have responded well, like Germany, will be role models and analysed to explain their success. Health will become a political priority. Countries' like the USA that have shown extreme failure and inequity in provision will have their systems justly criticised. The international competition over medical resources also reveals the failure of globalised market

economies and unilateralism. That the rich and powerful can self-isolate and get preferential treatment will stand in contrast to the millions at the bottom who will be dead at the end of this pandemic due to inadequate provision of basic needs making them vulnerable even before it started.

The ongoing economic crisis will only serve to increase inequities in the short and medium term but it could change the political landscape if those (such as the self-employed middle class) who have been supporting and benefiting from the competitive growth economy start to realise how vulnerable it is to collapse and they are to joining the marginalised underclass.



См. также: **Jonathan Gruber: I don't know how much longer folks will be responding well**

References [править]

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