

Learning from Distinctions: Climate Change and COVID 19

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A Pandemic is a Clearly Visible, Immediate Threat

How we act when confronted with a death-threatening situation reveals our deepest feelings and thinking; the very reflections this series calls for. We must also become better observers of our own behaviors, such as those common social behaviors learned and assimilated through our endurance of thousands of years of survival threats. Without any doubt, social cooperation and solidarity together with female care made possible the development of humankind, bringing us to our present modern society. Since we have all inherited some common responses to lethal threats, what then accounts for why

we are acting differently under the threat of the COVID 19 virus than we have been under the threat of climate change?

COVID 19, that we now understand as an immediate threat, is a discrete, nano-scale, small virus with a high potential to infect everybody, but there are differences in its lethality to individuals, as there are other differences among us. Poor basic health conditions, especially those due to poverty, age (over 60 years) and chronic illnesses (obesity, diabetes, cardio-vascular disease, previous strokes) could cause it to be deadly in just a few days. The chances of survival depend on multiple factors: the state of preparation of the existing sanitation and health care personnel and systems (doctors, nurses, ambulances, burial systems), hospital equipment (intensive therapies, ventilators, therapeutic medicines) and the existing health services (both public and private). All these systemic factors help to explain the higher rate of deaths among the infected in the USA, Italy and Spain, than the rate in Germany for instance, where there is an excellent public health system, and the best equipped hospitals, likely

accounting for a lower death rate. So we have some basic ideas of what constitutes effective systemic response, seemingly more evident than in the case of climate change, and we are aware of mitigation procedures and behaviors to increase the defenses of individuals against infection.

Behavioral Repertoires for Dealing with an Immediate, Perceivable Threat

The immediacy of and publicity given to this pandemic has, in this case, changed both perception of risk and our behavior in dealing with this lethal threat. We have particular practices to avoid infection.

When highly exposed, there are some simple measures that can be taken by everybody: hourly hand washing, disinfecting shoes and metal surfaces, sneezing and coughing into our elbows, wearing masks when we have to go out, and keeping a distance of at least 2 m from every other person. Measures of preventive hygiene provide a behavioral repertoire to call upon in our efforts to safeguard against

the threat. More challenging issues are revealed in visible system failures, evidence of short sighted and unjust policies now being widely called to public attention. Why then, in the case of climate change, are so few engaged in a similar active citizen response?

Complexity and Long Range Factors Obscure the Requisite Comprehensive View of Climate Change

Climate change, ever more evident, in raging storms, fires and floods over recent years, is a much more complex issue, calling for a more complex and longer term response. It comprises multiple elements, including natural resources (air, seas, glaciers, water, soil, biota, temperature, extreme events). It calls for a more complex repertoire of human behaviors, at all levels of human experience, including and beyond mitigation, adaption, resilience and forced migration, behaviors to be taken at the personal level. At the social level, responses relate to struggles over land, conflicts due to disasters, drought, loss of natural fertility of soils, erosion, pollution, and loss

of environmental services, which provide, support, regulate and provide cultural goods (water, pollination, food, clean air, reduction of extreme events, physical wellbeing). At the governmental/state level responses to climate threats might include: massive preventive evacuation, early alerts on coming crises, disaster recovery after the loss of life and livelihood; and most urgently, fulfilling the official obligations of states party to the Paris Climate Accords, in particular the Nationally Determined Commitments (NDC) to reduce greenhouse gases (GHG).

COVID 19, as noted, is one virus with a potential of high infection, thousands of individual deaths, and extensive but finite, social and economic consequences, while climate change is a complex and interrelated process, fully planetary in scope, long term and affecting all societies. The two threats have different etiologies. COVID 19 is probably a disease of animal origin, but climate change is arguably exacerbated, and likely induced by humanly designed development processes, involving the massive emission of greenhouse gases, land

use change, gigantic deforestation, and extensive waste generation. Since WWII, humans have impelled the course of Earth history from the Holocene era, thousands of post glacial years of natural environmental evolution, during which human civilizations evolved, exploiting the natural world - culminating in the fossil fuels dependent industrial age - toward the Anthropocene, an era in which environmental changes are human-initiated.

Ethical Issues Raised by Interactions of Humans with Nature

How then is climate change affected by interactions between nature and humans? First, temperature, in the sea and in the troposphere has warmed, due to greater emissions of GHG, producing evaporation and extreme precipitation. Much of the heat is captured by GHG molecules such as carbon dioxide, methane, and water among others that produce a greenhouse effect and the global warming of Earth. Warmer temperature melt glaciers, snow and permafrost, produce sea level rise and coastal areas and cities are flooded (see scheme). Heat waves

in summers, and cold spills in winters, affect the environment and thus human health. Today scientists speak about the six massive planetary extinctions of animals and plants. In the Global South, higher temperatures in the seas also reinforce trade winds and produce stronger and more frequent cyclones, hurricanes or typhoons. These are only some of the key complexities of climate change interactions between nature and human-induced alteration of the physical-chemical composition of air.



There is not one, sole person or enterprise accountable for climate change impacts. All humans together are responsible. We are responsible, because all of us (perhaps with the exception of some

indigenous people) are involved in the generation of greenhouse gases, as we use fossil-fuel dependent transportation and electricity, in our daily lives, our industries, and in the conduct of continuous warfare. All of this contributes the generation of a growing amount of waste (some of it toxic) with fewer and few possibilities for environmentally safe disposal.

These are issues that have profound ethical implications - questions of human choice - related to climate change, and how we live with Earth and with each other. Thus, for the first time in human history, we are not only the victims of our irrational use of fossil fuels, but, at the same time, we are also victims of our own behavior. These ethical and behavioral issues, that some have argued arose from “progress,” i.e. seeking a more secure and comfortable way of life, obligate us to challenge many common understandings, among them, the military and political understanding of “security” and “peace” in all its multiple dimensions. Like climate change itself, these ethical challenges are complex. They demand far more of us than the

mitigating behaviors used to avoid COVID 19 infections, including calling ourselves and others to responsibility.

How do we call to responsibility the five North American oil corporations that made a trillion-dollar profit during the last decade, and through lobbying the US Congress avoided changes in their seriously polluting practices? What of the G-20 countries, responsible for 78% of all current GHG emitted globally, and account for even more of the historical emissions? The Global South with billions of people, more seriously affected by the climate change impacts, is only marginally responsible for the environmental alterations and the unanticipated effects of climate change. The ethical dilemma is that these mostly highly indebted countries are unable to protect their people from climate disasters, as they are increasingly more impacted and impoverished.

Consequently, after each extreme event, the existing social vulnerability increases. Lack of preventive actions and capacity for adaptation, converts each event into a disaster with high numbers of

deaths among the poor and a massive loss of their few and fragile belongings. Thus, climate change impacts increase poverty, inequality, social vulnerability, while the industrialized countries, responsible for the GHG emissions, refuse to pay for the loss and damage. On the contrary, they cash in the precarious finances of poor countries by increasing their debt service payments, which in turn reduces existing budgets for education, health, food support, agricultural development and urban management. Thus, there is no money for adaptation and disaster risk reduction, and daily 24,000 children die from hunger, all avoidable deaths.

The COVID 19 pandemic also has impacted the poor and marginalized more severely over its immediate term and aftermath. Here, too, lack of adequate preparation produced avoidable deaths and suffering. More disturbing in the case of climate change is that its lethal effects, impact the whole human species and are longer lasting. Both issues raise similar ethical challenges, that while of different dimensions, demand the responsible engagement of citizens.

Security and Peace Challenges Posed by Climate Change and COVID 19

In relation to the security and peace challenges, emerging from climate change and pandemics, wherein we humans are both perpetrators and victims, we need to take a more comprehensive and holistic approach to human security, along with an epistemological shift. From the dominant narrow, male and individualist perspective in the social sciences, peace research and environmental studies, and in education and pedagogy, our thinking should shift to a transdisciplinary and transformative holistic approach. Such shift is exemplified by a new *human, gender and environmental* (or HUGE) security and peace paradigm with multiple functions:

- as a tool of *scientific analysis*, for the global problems referred to above, and for setting of goals for policy-making;

- as a *guideline for action* for humanitarian organisations active in poverty eradication, food relief, disaster management, forced migrants and refugees;
- as a *comprehensive conceptual framework* for peace education inquiries into security issues.

In theoretical terms, the human security concept has slowly evolved toward five pillars, which have extended the positive understanding of peace. The five comprise: ‘freedom from fear’ (military approach); ‘freedom from want’ (structural peace); ‘freedom from the hazard impacts of climate change events’ (environmental peace); ‘freedom to live in dignity’ (liberal peace); and ‘freedom to live in cultural diversity’ (cultural peace). A gender perspective on security widened the theoretical scope with the inclusion of environmental, societal and economic implications and deepened understanding of the security and peace concept to include all levels from the individual to the global. In most countries a narrow military approach still prevails, a Hobbesian, state-centred concept, limited to geopolitical factors, excluding the essential dimensions of HUGE. But, when we ourselves

are simultaneously, the aggressors and the victims, how can a war-oriented military security system protect all human beings, especially the most vulnerable, still innocent of our environmental aggression, those of the global South?

What COVID-19 and climate change have most in common is that both are fundamental threats to the survival of humanity that now impact most heavily on the most vulnerable. The present pandemic is mobilizing the world population, locking down billions of people inside their homes. Everybody hopes that the danger will soon be over, so we can continue with business-as-usual. Such continuation would mean that the positive effects of the present reduction in air and water pollution would be soon eliminated. We need to think beyond “business-as-usual,” especially with regard to climate change. It is not only a highly more complex issue. It is a middle-term and long-term problem, which challenges the very marrow of survival, not just today, but over the next 30 to 50 years.

Awakening to the Urgencies of the Civilizational Problems Revealed by COVID 19 and Climate Change

In spite of so much knowledge, based on sound scientific data, sounding alarms of impending disasters, most national leaders and policy makers are not thinking of a truly “renewed world.” With the old world firmly fixed in their minds, they combat both threats, not with an alternative to the worldview that has brought us to the brink of destruction, but with technological fixes. For this virus, with little or no thought to future pandemics, they seek first efficient medicines and then a vaccine, to make us immune to this particular disease. For climate change, with little or no thought to alternatives to energy-intensive economies, they engage in threat mitigation processes, energy efficiency, renewable energies for electricity generation, and electric transportation substitutes for fossil oil, while only 0.3% of energy supply is related to renewables. There are, as well, even more dangerous geo-engineering proposals, such as removing CO₂ from the air, or limiting the amount of sunlight reaching the planet's surface to

reduce the greenhouse effect, or reducing by chemical means the acidification of the oceans. All these short and middle term geo-engineering proposals are unproven and could create global harm to the whole planet, and so continue to be rejected by critical scientists and some politicians. We are urgently in need of a long term, ecologically sound, transformative view of both crises.

If there is no easy tech-fix for climate change, then we need to change our civilization from business-as-usual, based historically on a patriarchal and violent world view that strives to dominate, exploit and, thus, ultimately to destroy the planet and humankind. This deep cultural change implies new behaviors to bring about a de-carbonized and less materialistic society, where marginalized social groups, indigenous people, women, peasants and ecologists are actively involved in the required change.

Will we have the time within three or five decades to change our civilization of exploitation and abuse toward one of sustainable care of all ten billion humans, and the crucial 24 ecosystem services,

intended to maintain the multiple essential subsystems, comprising the biosphere? Can we change profit-hungry corporations' behaviors through new laws to achieve an energy democracy infused the values and perspective of the HUGE peace and security framework? Is the mismanagement of the COVID19 pandemic with 2.3 million people infected in 193 countries and at least 170,000 deaths as of the 19th of April, 2020, finally waking us to a deeper understanding of the real danger posed by the structures of the present neoliberal model of maximization of private profits at the cost of humankind and nature? What are each of us doing to help awaken ourselves and our societies to consider these questions?

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