

What the Covid-19 pandemic should teach us about governance

Abstract

Reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic from a governance perspective: when society faces a real crisis that needs strong coordinated action, it looks to the state and scientific/medical experts, along with cooperation amongst civil society backed up by police enforcement. The private sector plays an important role in various ways, such as ensuring food supplies in the face of selfish freeriding panic buyers, but many private sector companies look to the state for loans and bailouts. Some libertarians complain that it's all an excuse for state control of our lives, but few take this seriously as we face a real crisis that gravely threatens societal wellbeing. We also recognise the need for cooperation amongst countries to provide for coordinated international action. Looking back, we can see that the state could have done more to proactively restrict 'wet markets', as these appear to be the source of this zoonotic virus, and to ensure there is resilience and capacity in social and health care. Looking forward we can see that state intervention is likely to be as crucial to promoting economic recovery following this pandemic as it was after the 1929 economic depression. When things return to 'normal' and calls resume to shrink the state, ignore 'so called experts', revert to selfish national isolationism, recognise 'that there is no such thing as society', rely on dynamism of private sector, etc., remember what we relied on to address this crisis. Also, remember these times when we again start to hear arguments that climate change is best addressed through private sector action, that experts can't be trusted, that the state should not interfere in trying to steer society, that societal behaviour can't be changed overnight, etc., i.e. it isn't neoliberal free markets, but state intervention guided by experts, which is likely to save us.

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Reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic from a governance perspective, it is clear that when society faces a real crisis that needs strong coordinated action, it looks to the state and to scientific and medical experts for effective measures, along with cooperation amongst people in civil society backed up, if necessary, by police enforcement and military support with food deliveries and other societal needs in such a crisis. This is all recognised as necessary in order to achieve the common good of managing the rate of new infections in this severe pandemic, as well as related priorities, such as keeping people supplied with food and medication. The private sector plays an important role in various ways, such as ensuring food supplies in the face of selfish freeriding panic buyers and reconfiguring companies to produce ventilators and other medical needs, but many private sector companies are forced to look to the state for a rescue package of loans, bailouts [Jack 2020] or even, in the case of the UK's train operators, what in effect amounts to re-nationalisation [Gov.UK 2020]. Some libertarians complain about this all being an excuse for state control of our lives, but few take this seriously, as we are facing a real crisis that gravely threatens societal wellbeing. We also recognise the need for cooperation amongst countries to provide for coordinated international action to reduce the spread of the pandemic, along with related international cooperation, such as the sharing of Covid-19 epidemiological and research data. Whilst the UK government is argued to be trying to offload blame onto ordinary people, particularly the selfish ones that panic buy and breach isolation guidelines, for the state's failures to address the pandemic [Ramsay 2020], the majority of people are looking to governments and the experts that advise them to address this crisis.

Looking back over our shoulders, it is becoming clear that one of the reasons that Covid-19 is leading to such severe and even fatal respiratory symptoms is that it is a zoonotic virus, the genetic signature of which is unknown to our immune systems, delaying our ability to develop antibodies that can fight the infection. It seems increasingly likely that it is the illegal trade in endangered animals such as bats and pangolins through inhumane 'wet markets' in China and Southeast Asia that is the vector for such transmissions between species and for ultimately crossing over to infect humans. The extremely high risks of such zoonotic virus outbreaks were indicated by previous outbreaks, such as highly pathogenic avian influenza related to the HN51 virus in 1996. The related extreme risks posed by the wildlife trade for a future coronavirus outbreak, particularly associated with wet markets in southern China, were warned of as a "time-bomb" over ten years ago [Cheng et al 2007], this being seen by many as a facet of global threats to ecosystems and biodiversity [UNEP 2020]. The Chinese government banned all such wet markets and related wildlife trades after the initial outbreak [Woodward 2020], but given official recognition of the cultural and economic importance of the wild animal trade in many rural communities, the Chinese government has already stated that the initial ban will be relaxed in the future, as it was after the 2002-2003 SARS outbreak [Wittmyer 2020]. There are also concerns that a continued ban could drive this illegal wildlife trade underground, where much related trade is already conducted. A better approach would have been to heed these zoonotic virus warnings from experts and take a strategic approach to reducing this trade through proactive measures, such as promoting cultural change, along with gradual regulatory restrictions. At this stage, the emphasis should be on ensuring a commitment to a long-term ban on the wildlife trade by the governments of China and other southeast Asian countries through a coordinated and strategic approach, especially given the global impacts on many rare species of growing demand to feed the wildlife trade.

Looking forward, one consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic is looking increasingly likely to be a deep and prolonged economic recession and it seems likely that a return to Keynesian state intervention in markets, including the rebuilding of the welfare state and a new spirit of international cooperation through the United Nations, World Trade Organisation, etc. will be as necessary to rebuild our economies and societies as it was after the 1929 crash following the first world war [Elliott 2020]. More recently, a lack of state regulation of markets was widely accepted as a key cause of the 2008 economic crash [The Economist 2008] but it seems that it could take this major international pandemic crisis to really seal recognition of the importance of the state and of international cooperation in achieving a stable economy and our societal well-being. Indeed, there have been optimistic calls to seize this opportunity to rebuild our relationship with nature and put climate change and biodiversity at the top of the agenda through cooperation amongst the international community of United Nations, i.e. "to rise to the challenge to emerge from this emergency with a global economic reset" [Rodriguez 2020].

There are less optimistic assessments of potential post-pandemic scenarios, with arguments such as (1) that the collective action amongst citizens and nations for shut-downs and isolation to address the pandemic achieved through cooperation and, if necessary, enforcement on freeriding citizens, will not be effectively followed-through to collective action on climate change, with no institution with the enforcement powers to require freeriding nations to comply; (2) that the high degree and extent of public and international acceptance of the risks of Covid-19 will not follow-through to acceptance of the risks of climate change, particularly given the over-riding priority of economic recovery; and (3) that the demonstrated link between economic contraction and carbon emission reductions witnessed during this and other recessions will reinforce recognition of the link between economic development and carbon emission increases, especially as many countries will have to prioritise steep economic recovery trajectories from the recession or even depression that could follow, leading to rapid carbon emission increases even if recent trends to increasingly de-couple economic growth and carbon emissions continue. Worse still, given the depth of the post-pandemic

depression that some fear, the reactive emphasis could be on rapid and steep 'rebound' economic recovery trajectories that will rapidly increase carbon emissions, despite some increased de-coupling efficiencies [Bordoff 2020]. It could be counter-argued that this is a very US-centric neoliberal analysis of despair, but there is clearly not a consensus that this moment in history represents an opportunity to better address environmental crises in the light of lessons learned from the pandemic.

While the shutdown of many sectors of the economy will have environmental benefits in terms of carbon emissions and biodiversity loss, few would argue that the socio-economic cost can be justified. As such, solutions to move forward through appropriate economic recovery after the crisis are crucial. It is clear that key workers, such as those in healthcare and food production and distribution, were undervalued in not being previously considered to be 'skilled workers' and that their importance to society needs to be recognised in immigration policies and pay decisions. The concept of community has also resurfaced in much of western society, and community level decisions, collaborative and local governance, alongside government policies to support smaller, local businesses could provide a much more targeted economic stimulus than pursuit of economic growth, as well as enabling climate and biodiversity friendly plans to emerge.

Whether you adopt an optimistic or less optimistic outlook, there are still some key lessons that could be remembered. When things return to 'normal' and calls resume to shrink the state, ignore 'so called experts', revert to selfish national isolationism, recognise 'that there is no such thing as society', rely on the dynamism of the private sector, etc., remember what we relied on to address this crisis. The UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has apparently already taken one of these lessons on board, given his pronouncement from isolation that the public response, particularly amongst and in support of National Health System workers, shows that 'there is such a thing as society' [The Guardian 2020], this being all the more significant given his admiration for his Conservative predecessor, Margaret Thatcher, who famously pronounced the opposite as an indication of her faith in neoliberal free-market ideology. Also, remember these times when we again start to hear arguments such as that climate change is best addressed through private sector action, that experts can't be trusted, that the state should not interfere in trying to steer society and that societal behaviour can't be changed overnight. In the Marvel movie *Iron Man 3*, Tony Stark triumphantly claims "I did you a favour: I have successfully privatised world peace." One of the many lessons from this pandemic is that when we really face a crisis, it is the state we look to for concerted action and the people and civil society that we look to for cooperation and mutual support. Given related long-term challenges and the potential for even bigger systemic crises related to threats such as climate change and biodiversity loss, we should see this crisis as a major lesson from which we can learn to avoid or mitigate future such crises, i.e. it isn't a corporate Iron Man that is likely to save us.