

letter from the editor

The COVID-19 pandemic has led many ordinary people to reconsider ideas of society we have long taken for granted. While the lockdown and social isolation has limited our usual interaction, it has brought about a sharp increase in community interaction. Neighbours have come to know one another and support each other. Thousands have volunteered to help the NHS and support the work of many charities looking after those in need. Also many businesses, such as the supermarkets, have risen to the occasion and are offering a better and more responsible service to their customers. The need to provide a safe place to shop has lifted the quality of their service and made staff and customers more courteous and friendly.

The pandemic has also brought to light the real merits of the Internet. Friends, families and communities are in touch with each other on video, even creating events online together. Discussion groups have sprung up to explore literature and the arts. There can be no doubt that this has a huge social and psychological benefit, despite the challenges and difficulties of the pandemic. In recent times the Internet has been used for questionable ends, especially misinformation and ideological propaganda. The present situation brings to light its true potential for universal benefit, which was the original intention and which still inspires open source software.

It is amazing how the commonly accepted idea of society as a place of competition and exploitation has been so easily replaced by a spontaneous sense of community. Enlightened self-interest has given way to the more generous sense of the common good. It has been adopted quickly because it is rooted in the natural social order of a society. Mutual benefit is not only morally nobler than individual self-serving, it is more efficient, more stable, more satisfying and more liberating. That is why those performing essential services as well as the thousands of volunteers are more cheerful.

The lockdown has brought to light other benefits. One of the most obvious is the improvement in the environment and the air quality in our cities. The reduction of car and plane travel has cleaned up the air remarkably swiftly and environmentalists have noted how nature quickly begins to restore itself. Insect life is reviving, and many animal species and wild plants are beginning to restore themselves. Nature seeks its own proper balance and creates a healthier world for all to live in. Economics should be in harmony with nature.

Having noted all these positive things we must also take full note of the negative things that brought about the pandemic in the first place. Leading scientists have been warning us for over a decade that modern farming methods and unsafe food production will bring about pandemics, most especially through intensive animal farming. In particular chicken farming where thousands of hens are squeezed into sheds without natural air or light are known to be breeding grounds of viruses. Flies get in and carry the viruses outside and spread them to other species, including humans. Leo Tolstoy, a passionate Georgist, wrote "If our way of farming is in a wrong state, it is a sign that the whole of society is in a wrong state".

He understood that farming and right use of the land for agriculture was foundational to the well-being of society. The modern quest for maximum production at least cost has profoundly distorted farming methods and our proper relation with the land. The intensive methods adopted are known to be harmful and no amount of protection and guarding against likely virus outbreaks can justify what is essentially unnatural in the first place.

Knowledge of these dangers has not been heeded by governments worldwide, and so nations were totally unprepared for this predictable pandemic. They too had been ruled by notions of false efficiencies and had not ensured adequate medical reserves to meet any likely pandemic. Here in the UK protective clothing and other essentials were at a minimum, while production of them had been transferred abroad to save on costs. This calculation was based on the false premise that protection of citizens is a burden on the economy. It is here that we see a common illusion about taxation. We desire the benefits but regard securing them as a loss of wealth. It is a strange contradiction we do not apply to any other economic transaction. If I buy a book I do not regard that as a financial loss. Paying for public services is no different. Taxation represents communal responsibility – the very responsibility we now see and admire in the dedication of the NHS and other common benefits and services.

Years of minimising support for the NHS and failure to prepare for predictable pandemics show irresponsible government, but also irresponsible citizenship in supporting such failures in government. If there is one economic lesson to be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is that serving the communal good is the surest way of protecting the individual good. The lie has been given to the notion that self-interest and cost-cutting will somehow turn out to be mutual interest. Seeing how people from all nations around the world, despite whether they are capitalist or communist, have risen to meet the common good and help in whatever ways they can, shows how acting for mutual benefit is the natural condition of human society. The fact that many companies have joined in that spirit too also shows that the economy could be based on serving the good of all. The notion of self-interest first, as George pointed out, is self-defeating. It is the community that creates the individual, not the other way round. Not only did George and Tolstoy point this out, it has been said down the ages from Plato to Gandhi, as well as in the teachings of the great religions as George himself often observed.

Politicians are now beginning to say that, after we recover from this pandemic, we cannot return to 'business as usual'. There is a recognition in the public conscience that there must be a profound shift in the ethical values that inform government and economic activity.



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