Real-world and theoretical failures of business and politics as usual ---

climate change, disruption, and replacing “lose-lose” arrangements.

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Presented at Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting

3/11/2022

Introduction

As I have noted in some previous papers, I often ask my students on the first day of class if they would prefer more or less carbon emissions next year, and if they are hoping for more or less water or air pollution next year, and then follow up with the question whether they think there will, in fact, be more emissions or pollution next year. Needless to say the first question about preferences has not had many students (actually none) who have said they would like more emissions next year, while the number who see improvement or decline is slightly harder to predict (presumably because opinions about trends seem to be more subjective, and based on personality as well as recent information and mood swings), but the first question generally frames the second, and most students get the contrast between what they want and what they expect to get. No one wants more environmental insult, but almost everyone expects more in years ahead.

The (perhaps too) obvious question that comes from that contrast is the timeless political one: why can’t we get what we want? To address one puzzling aspect of that disconnect, a story about a recent experience can serve as a useful starting point.

UPS

The other morning, I was driving near the local UPS processing center, and it was apparently the time when most of the regular delivery trucks leave the depot on their daily routes. Surprisingly they created fairly large backups at both local stop signs and traffic signal red lights, where lines of the trucks would be delayed by each other. I remark on this because the traffic which was causing fairly significant delays in the trucks’ ability to go their separate ways was primarily other trucks; the UPS trucks were, by design, impeding each other’s progress.

This is actually a familiar challenge in the Lehigh Valley where I live because it is a significant transportation center for not just parcel services like UPS and FedEx but also an enormous truck transfer complex of large warehouses dedicated to larger over-the-road truck transportation, that serve as origins and destinations for road vehicles (18-wheelers) bringing cargo to and from this regional cluster of warehouses. The area now serves much of the more congested and highly populated parts of the Northeast Coastal corridor, east of the less congested (and less expensive) Lehigh Valley. [Though the truck traffic, with its accompanying traffic (and, of course, air pollution and climate impacts), is both a substantive and local political issue, that regional challenge is not the lesson of the story.]

The issue that the chain of UPS trucks slowing each other down and creeping up, one at a time, in 10-deep lines, seems puzzling, because it appears to be a curious self-inflicted wound. That is to say, this is a company that prides itself on its capacity to quickly and efficiently deliver goods to almost any address anywhere. One would presume that the company’s managers and designers build entire delivery systems to save time and money, and to improve the productivity of every one of its drivers at almost every opportunity. Yet, at the time and place where I saw the traffic jams, UPS routed its drivers in patterns impeding each other’s progress on their individual routes—in effect creating their own traffic congestion.

Whether this was a one-time anomaly or a daily workday occurrence is not the real question for today, because it serves its purpose as an illustration. Whatever the underlying cause, the transportation company was inhibiting transport efficiency. The reason the illustration is useful in the context of environmental political theory and environmental politics is that it is not only an inefficient economic or technological phenomenon, but it is also an example of environmental and climate harm that is created by productively inefficient activity. The trucks getting in each other’s way create extra greenhouse gases and hazardous air pollution while standing still, which is of course not their productive goal—for the company or the environment.

The irony of delivery trucks standing still (with their engines idling) by design would be amusing, if it weren’t such a costly problem. The focus, however, is not entertainment, but rather, the environment. The point of the illustration is clear: it is a thought-provoking demonstration of what’s best known as the “lose-lose” problem. In simplest terms, it is a plan or practice that is both economically and environmentally costly, but, almost paradoxically, continues in the face of those costs. It is of course the direct opposite of the often celebrated “win-win” plans or activities or policies, which are both economically and environmentally beneficial.

The easiest way to explain that focus on “lose-lose” is with a homely typology, that, even if it conceals or oversimplifies more that it reveals or clarifies, still provides a good initial categorization of environmental and particularly climate change challenges, that helps clarify how to address them.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **TABLE OF INTERACTIONS**  ECONOMIC (Individual)  and  ENVIRONMENTAL (Social) | | ENVIRONMENTAL | |
| WIN (+)  Positive  Environmental  Impact | LOSE (–)  Negative  Environmental  Impact |
| ECONOMIC | WIN (+)  Beneficial to Individual Decision-Maker | Win-Win  *e.g. vaccine efficiency*  *innovation* | Win-Lose  *Tr Of Commons*  *external cost*  *climate change* |
| LOSE (–)  Costly to  Individual Decision-Maker | Lose-Win  *Parenting*  *Charity, Altruism*  *Carbon tax* | Lose-Lose  *Null set?*  *Inefficiency*  *Prejudice, Habit* |

There is, of course, a bit of a puzzle in the idea of a lose-lose policy or decision or pattern– choices (individual) and policies (group) continuing to produce impacts that are NEITHER economically NOR environmentally beneficial –in effect harming oneself and others.

In some ways, a win-win possibility that is ignored, or fails to be adopted, is also an anomaly or difficult to explain, or at the very least, curious. (Put another way, if we include the economists’ concept of opportunity cost, which accounts for better or foregone options, lose-lose can simply be any unadopted win-win option). Whatever language is preferred, the current outcomes are inferior, and display two kinds of costs that could be avoided. The capacity of the individual choice or decision would (in both cases, either active or passive responses) seem to prevent the optimal or beneficial option from being missed, but, of course, the perception of the choice might be different from the reality of the choice. Decisions can simply be mistakes or inaccurate predictions.

While the simple categorization in the typology has clear distinctions, it’s necessary to acknowledge the complex reality that might not fit tidily into the classifications. First and foremost – It is important to recognize that very few, if any, instances of climate disruption that are deliberate—i.e., for that explicit purpose –altering the climate (except perhaps for some geoengineering and easy to imagine speculative bets on climate instability).

The most obvious point from the table (or from the label itself), would be how and why would anyone choose a “lose-lose” option. The name itself tells the story. What would lead me or my community or my country or any decision maker to choose an economically and environmentally costly option? In our everyday lives however, such choices are routine.

This is at the same time heartening and disheartening, because in a lose-lose situation there are two possible reasons, environmental costs and economic costs, that could change the lose-lose responses. Of course that just begs the question, beyond the idea of incomplete information because the presumption is that people would seldom choose, with no better information, the economically more costly choice, unless they had either a misunderstanding or a lack of accurate information.

Amory Lovins’ work on energy efficiency and design argues, however, that a great many of the major climate change challenges are actually opportunities for new technologies and new designs. Efficiency can be understood as both climate and economically beneficial. Some of the most prevalent illustrations of the economically advantageous climate change technological innovations typically demonstrate that, for example, renewable energy technology has reached economic parity if not superiority over traditional fuels. Most fossil fuels now cost more than renewable alternatives-- not necessarily all fuels in all locations but certainly most of the market. These “disruptions” of energy systems and the fossil fuel companies’ business models offer both economic and environmental improvements over traditional energy use with its undeniable climate impacts.

Realizing this potential gain is however, a political more than an economic challenge; the economic information is not necessarily distributed. Indeed there’s a mismatch in terms of publicity, and certainly marketing, between the obsolete but wealthy incumbent climate change industries and getting the word out about the new innovative alternatives. Unfortunately, the political system, which could be serving to both organize and distribute superior information and technology, and thereby realize that economic and environmental saving, is also dominated by the same incumbent industries who strongly shape information, and via their election and campaign finance influence, limit or prevent any political efforts to challenge their dominance of outdated but still influential industries and practices that cause environmental and climate harm.

Other similar innovative practices that illustrate the widespread phenomena of lose-lose arrangements are enlightening for two reasons: first is that these seemingly inefficient and costly and wrongheaded activities are everywhere, and secondly that they offer significant opportunities for quick and potentially politically acceptable changes to respond to a wide range of problems. In effect, egregious lose-lose inefficiency is potentially a boon, both for its technicolor illustration of conspicuous waste of money and resources, and as an opportunity for politically and economically viable as well as lucrative or rewarding responses.

Amory Lovins, of course, has made a career in promoting the efficiency resource and the potential value of redesign. Lessons and case studies that he presents are almost always food for thought and clues that suggest additional areas hold similar opportunities.

Lessons from COVID-19

One key lesson and source of previously unseen revelations has been the experience with the COVID-19 virus. Developments to deal with the contagiousness of the COVID virus have changed many widely accepted standard operating procedures and business as usual practices that became simply untenable in the face of the virus threat. As a result, serious reconsideration of those practices became necessary. That necessary adaptation generated the recognition of a number of enormous efficiency gains with significant reductions in both plans and expectations about a typical workday and how it would be designed. The typical commute to the office, with attendant transportation costs, to attend a meeting in person behind a mask or, even worse, to join a zoom meeting from a desk down the hall, that could be attended from halfway around the world almost as easily, made the whole question of the office building and the commute-to-the-office a subject for real critical analysis and review, rather than an inescapable structure and routine. With the opportunity for telecommuting or working from home and the limited additional functionality of office space along with the costs of maintaining two sets of enclosed conditioned space (one of which would always be unused, i.e., different separate dedicated places for home and work, located a commuter trip apart), the traditional models of office work began to seem like a luxury or extravagance, or wasteful and antiquated ways to share and compare information, and costly and frustrating ones at that. So, when either the zoom meeting or the commute can link the worker to the office space, the time and money costs of the commute, and the other secondary costly effects of “changing places” seem to have little remaining warrant. The obvious take away from that stark inefficiency, which no longer has a constituency (except “forward to the past—because we’ve always done it this way”), is a remarkable potential money and environmental pollution savings (never mind simply the saner world for the former commuter), like the fabled $100 bill laying on the floor waiting to be picked up.

The social potential of avoiding the commute to the office and working from home also can be realized not only in avoiding costly, environmentally damaging and mind-numbing commuting, but also in the additional advantages of being where you want to be. If schools, daycare and kids’ play dates are the social interactions that we don’t want to replace with online communication, we should recognize the variations that might emerge. Maybe telecommuting and zoom meetings, from home rather than from some office you daily relocate to and from, will free up hours of commuting and then possibly allow those work hours to be reconfigured to different hours of the week—with 3 day weeks, or flexitime, or 5-6 hour on-call days with some homework if necessary (like a student rather than a wage slave), and provide a chance to be home when your kids get out of school. Despite the COVID-induced yearning to “get back to normal”—there are some “normals” that need to be left in the past and replaced with more human and environmentally friendly and efficient alternatives.

The most reasonable explanation of most of our environmental inefficiencies, e.g., pollution, destructive land use and other resource overuse and waste, are the familiar commons problems and external costs and benefits that are not counted, very often because someone is making a profit off of the lack of counting. The issues here, however, are not explained by misplaced incentives but rather by force of habit, or lack of perspective, or mindless routine, and as such, are best understood as comics-page character Pogo’s old “insurmountable opportunities”; these are the possible win-win conversions of current lose-lose practices, that cost us dearly both as individuals and in common.

It is arguable that these innovative possibilities should be the focus of the efforts to address climate change and most environmental problems, not just because they would likely be more effective necessarily, but also because they are more likely to be politically implementable. Unlike the challenging attempts to charge individuals or penalize individuals for environmental or climate harms, using carbon taxes, fossil fuel depletion quotas, commuting or traffic congestion tolls, or other fees or fines for economically or environmentally costly practices (which almost inevitably generate resistance from people who have planned their lives and practices around those fee-free subsidies). (See, e.g., France’s yellow vests, San Diego County, never mind the general absence of carbon taxes in the US).

The capacity for successfully imposing costs—like gas or carbon taxes, commuting fees, pollution charges on the polluters carry lots of pushback possibilities—so win-lose struggles, good for the individual but bad for the society, seldom are politically addressable with economists’ quite reasonable recommendation for their inclusion in the calculus to “internalize the collective or external costs.” If COVID mask compliance couldn’t be bought or vaccinations sought when both measures reduced individual (never mind social) costs/risks and were publicly supplied, the possibility that such monetizing of social costs will be implementable is at least uncertain.

Perhaps the real opportunity for addressing these issues will be the subsidy for the superior alternative rather than the charge for the social cost. Maybe the charging stations and the free buses and subsidies for carpools and zoom work options and flexitime can replace the commons logic and offer a way to escape lose-lose practices.

These same reconsiderations of office space commuter destinations and employees traveling between two locations will actually very likely lead to a major shift of office buildings to other uses, most likely housing, and should also, by allowing formerly expensive office space to be repurposed, create additional housing nearer to work opportunities and potentially reduce not only the commuting but also the distances between housing and many destinations, as well as address some housing shortages.

Other Lose-Lose Responses

One of the most interesting characteristics shared by most of the lose-lose category of climate and environmental challenges is that unlike some of the other types, the lose-lose activities tend to be areas where public intervention actually has a possibility of being both politically palatable and potentially successful. We know that in many of the other categories, individual incentives and distractions can make environmentally sensible policies difficult to implement or make effective.

Efforts to address lose-lose policies face only modest barriers, most of the form that “we’ve always done it this way,” which have them supported mainly by inertia rather than by any identifiable or measurable interest of the user (particularly the purchaser or consumer—not the seller or provider who is likely committed maintaining existing sales). Put simply, UPS really probably doesn’t want its trucks getting in each other’s way (even if the fuel sellers are more than happy to accommodate the wasteful part of the demand for fuel). [Amory Lovins would point out that UPS wants to transport, not buy fuel – just as Thomas Edison once sold lighting, not electricity as the common practice is today—a old measure that would today multiply efficiency gains from LED technology]. This inefficiency may or may not allow for extremely creative or innovative responses, but it may not require such either, and often the real challenge is simply a communication or coordination improvement which should move from lose-lose to win-win.

One possible reaction to the UPS traffic jam would have it, as a symbol or instance of a widespread phenomenon, and that if UPS couldn’t plan around it on traffic jams, what chance do we have that communities and regional planning authorities could plan around much more complex traffic congestion and climate change lose-lose challenges? On the other hand, while UPS might have some more costly problem(s) they are avoiding with their modestly costly truck traffic jam, the more likely scenario is that rescheduling the departures to stagger their efforts over a longer period could get them out of each other’s way.

The possible scenario is that a cheap and easily instituted scheduling system could eliminate the truck traffic jam along with its secondary effects on the environment and climate. Moreover, because there’s typically little cost or pushback to more efficient planning--as something closer to coordination rather than regulation--it would seem that information sharing across all of the major traffic generators sponsored by the local regional planning association could result in widespread and inexpensive coordination that would help both facilitate the driver generators interaction and better manage the overall traffic flow, air pollution, and climate impacts of local transportation. Dispatchers and traffic generators could be more efficient by being familiar with each other’s actions.

All of this should be seen, first and foremost as an empirical question, but at the same time as a likely indicator of low-hanging fruit or low-cost benefits of coordination and planning that shouldn’t require any outright management and, instead, simply rely on clear transmission of information. It would be wise to consider how travel guides built into smart phones afford to users some of the same kinds of information and have become very popular. But more systematic and coordinated advance planning rather than real time experience information would provide the opportunity for governmental or quasi-governmental actors to provide a path out of the lose-lose situation.

We’ve Always Done It This Way

While the transportation coordination possibilities for impacting lose-lose challenges seem fairly straightforward, there is another category of lose-lose practices or traps that requires more than simply a straighter or simpler path to a widely accepted goal. These types of lose-lose challenges are a bit more difficult to address, because the immediate goal tend to obscure the actual or longer-term goal, without the goal-seekers awareness of the gap. Very often these are “we’ve always done it this way” practices, that have somehow become seen as productive or desirable in their own right.

The lawn care story is probably the easiest or clearest version of lose-lose practices to use to illustrate this type. The problem of vehicles that don’t move is pretty straightforward and obvious. But many other individual losses that are also environmental or socialized losses have a bit more potential to be unrecognized or even defended, simply because they are long-standing practices. [Note that this might be an easy explanation also, for other UPS-like self-induced traffic jams.]

One of the widely recognized climate change climate problems, that has to do with human activity that reduces natural green spaces with their uptake of greenhouse gases like CO2 and earth cooling absorption of solar energy, is the urban heat island effect and substitution of landscaping for landscape with the enormous sign changing impact of a small but still significant carbon sink turning itself into a carbon source. The entertaining tale of “Saint Francis and God” talking about the suburbanite (see insert next pages) probably puts the phenomenon in the right perspective, but its very existence indicates the strong hold it has on our culture’s understanding of land and land-use and its effect on climate. The upshot of the story is, of course, that we utilize fossil fuels and generate the CO2 that comes with their combustion for controlling and designing open space and land use which, left to their own natural ecological development, would over time become carbon sinks, and, in the process, turn them into faux green spaces managed by costly high intensity landscaping assault teams, armed with a range of fossil fuel powered tools to tame the otherwise unruly green space. These efforts generate noise and smoke pollution along with varieties of chemical warfare on the land, and are part of a cultural pattern for “domesticating” green open space and ecosystems, not producing food or other resources, diminishing lands that might alternatively be used to meet “30 by 30” goals to protect ecosystems and habitat while providing carbon capture.

As Thorstein Veblen acidly reminds us, the primary social purpose of lawns is to provide “display” of “conspicuously unproductive land”— demonstrating for social status and conformity purposes, precisely what should not be done with open space in an era of climate crisis. This is clearly a more complex challenge than avoiding costly traffic jams, but it shares the same lose-lose characteristics-- not so much in terms of a shared goal, but more in a cultural pattern that has enormous economic expense for significant ecosystem replacement with little protection for biodiversity or habitat conservation, that also impacts climate. This is an effect that serves the land use decision makers’ social status and conformity rather than obvious economic self-interest.

Lawn Care Humor

GOD AND ST. FRANCIS DISCUSSING LAWNS

GOD: Francis, you know all about gardens and nature. What in the world is going on down there? What happened to the dandelions, violets, thistle and stuff I started eons ago? I had a perfect, no-maintenance garden plan. Those plants grow in any type of soil, withstand drought and multiply with abandon. The nectar from the long lasting blossoms attracts butterflies, honey bees and flocks of songbirds. I expected to see a vast garden of colors by now. But all I see are these green rectangles.

ST. FRANCIS: It's the tribes that settled there, Lord. The Suburbanites. They started calling your flowers "weeds" and went to great lengths to kill them and replace them with grass.

GOD: Grass? But it's so boring. It's not colorful. It doesn't attract butterflies, birds and bees, only grubs and sod worms. It's temperamental with temperatures. Do these Suburbanites really want all that grass growing there?

ST. FRANCIS: Apparently so, Lord. They go to great pains to grow it and keep it green. They begin each spring by fertilizing grass and poisoning any other plant that crops up in the lawn.

GOD: The spring rains and warm weather probably make grass grow really fast. That must make the Suburbanites happy.

ST. FRANCIS: Apparently not, Lord. As soon as it grows a little, they cut it-sometimes twice a week.

GOD: They cut it? Do they then bale it like hay?

ST. FRANCIS: Not exactly, Lord. Most of them rake it up and put it in bags.

GOD: They bag it? Why? Is it a cash crop? Do they sell it?

ST. FRANCIS: No Sir. Just the opposite. They pay to throw it away.

GOD: Now let me get this straight. They fertilize grass so it will grow. And when it does grow, they cut it off and pay to throw it away?

ST. FRANCIS: Yes, Sir.

GOD: These Suburbanites must be relieved in the summer when we cut back on the rain and turn up the heat. That surely slows the growth and saves them a lot of work.

ST. FRANCIS: You aren't going to believe this Lord. When the grass stops growing so fast, they drag out hoses and pay more money to water it so they can continue to mow it and pay to get rid of it.

GOD: What nonsense. At least they kept some of the trees. That was a sheer stroke of genius, if I do say so myself. The trees grow leaves in the spring to provide beauty and shade in the summer. In the autumn they fall to the ground and form a natural blanket to keep moisture in the soil and protect the trees and bushes. Plus, as they rot, the leaves form compost to enhance the soil. It's a natural circle of life.

ST. FRANCIS: You better sit down, Lord. The Suburbanites have drawn a new circle. As soon as the leaves fall, they rake them into great piles and pay to have them hauled away.

GOD: No. What do they do to protect the shrub and tree roots in the winter and to keep the soil moist and loose?

ST. FRANCIS: After throwing away the leaves, they go out and buy something which they call mulch. They haul it home and spread it around in place of the leaves.

GOD: And where do they get this mulch?

ST. FRANCIS: They cut down trees and grind them up to make the mulch.

GOD: Enough. I don't want to think about this anymore. St. Catherine, you're in charge of the arts. What movie have they scheduled for us tonight?"

ST. CATHERINE: "Dumb and Dumber", Lord. It's a really stupid movie about.....

GOD: Never mind, I think I just heard the whole story from St. Francis.

Humor Section | Home

Clearly, the impact of suburban expansion on both natural and managed lands is dwarfed by the mass conversion of wild areas to human use for agriculture, grazing lands and industrial silviculture, and the range of challenges regarding what “30 by 30” might look like in terms of political governance await resolution, but the simpler lesson of the displacement of natural systems and the use of fossil fuels for costly landscaping-style management of such spaces would seem to be lose-lose alternatives to open space, gardens, and permaculture, not to mention wild spaces. (See also Natural Lands Trust and conservation easements.)

It should be acknowledged that a great deal of the most egregious misuse of “green space“ (and universities and colleges, with their carefully--chemically and industrially-- landscaped and manicured “country club” modeled “campuses” [listen for noise of leaf blowers] are some of the most visible and traditional practitioners) is more symbolic than significant in terms of general contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions. It’s clear that large scale deforestation, overgrazing, and agriculture and silvicultural activities convert much larger greenhouse gas sinks into sources. Still, regardless of the scale, the perspective reflected in these kinds of practices allows and legitimates both environmentally wrongheaded and economically inefficient, costly practices that reduce environmental resilience, create dependence on and distribution of industrial scale conversion of land, and symbolically remind everyone that the land must be tamed whatever the cost, which is precisely the both costly and climate damaging pattern that we went to escape.

These replacements of green space (with a potential for climate change reduction), by the routine and aggressive assertion of the need for landscaping and fossil fuel power to accomplish it, is a fairly entrenched pattern of land use and somewhat extensive in suburban areas with “office parks!!” and “industrial parks!!” clearly labeled with their contradictions. As we convert to countryside, and recognize that this established cultural and horticultural pattern could be hard to dislodge, there still will be lessons on how much less costly and much more climate friendly we can make our approach to our interactions with the land, that has both educational and cultural impact. The lose-lose part is the obvious spending of the carbon and fossil fuel budget whacking away at natural “carbon capture and sequestration (CCS)” being taken up from the atmosphere, however symbolic the quantity. It will be a tough sell to undercut such an established industry, but, the popularity of organic gardening, of the concepts of permaculture and climate responsive landscaping are persuasive in their own right, and can certainly be supported at very little cost and provide the potential for reducing the lose-lose character of our one-size-fits-all model of suburban industrialized landscaping.

I should, in his memory, pay tribute to my old friend, Jim, who, decades ago, converted his corner suburban lot into what might now be called a permaculture space, with gardens, an orchard, beehives, berries, compost piles, a chicken coop, and other forms of green space, and, of course, a clothesline. He initially met some resistance from neighbors seeking to have a monoculture lawn community, but over time, as the story often goes, the outcast breaking convention became the guide to the future. His space is still beautiful, efficient and productive—truly win-win, and his example helped many others in his community escape their lose-lose land use on their “homesteads.”

We should all recognize those possibilities; the sooner, the better.

Thanks, Jim, for your vision and inspiration,