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The COVID-19 Lockdowns as an Inadvertent, Real-World Experiment in Geoengineering

by

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Date: October 27, 2025 (Monday)
Time: 2:30 - 3:15 p.m.
Place: Rm. G25, Science Centre North Block, CUHK

ALL INTERESTED ARE WELCOME
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Abstract

Based on the provided research, the COVID-19 lockdowns served as an unprecedented, real-world experiment in geoengineering, offering critical insights into the complex interplay between human activity, air pollution, and climate. The main lessons learned can be summarized in three key areas: the nonlinearity of pollution response, the unmasking of secondary aerosol formation, and the implications for future climate and clean energy policies.

First, the lockdowns demonstrated that drastic reductions in primary emissions - particularly from transportation - do not lead to a straightforward, proportional improvement in air quality. The study by Le et al. (2020) revealed this starkly. While nitrogen dioxide (NO_x) levels plummeted with the decline in vehicle traffic, particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$) pollution remained persistently high. This disconnect highlighted that air quality is governed by nonlinear atmospheric chemistry, not just by the volume of emissions. The extreme reduction in NO_x, a key player in atmospheric oxidation, altered the chemical pathways, in some cases increasing the production of secondary aerosols (a major component of $PM_{2.5}$) and ground-level ozone. This shows that simplistic emission control strategies can have unintended consequences.

Second, the "cleaner air" period unmasked the growing significance of non-traffic emission sources. With the dominant source of urban NO_x suddenly muted, the relative contribution of other sectors, such as industrial and residential fuel combustion, became more apparent. The research by Laughner

et al. (2021) synthesizes this finding on a global scale, noting that the lockdowns revealed large-scale complexities and feedbacks. For instance, in many regions, the reduction in particulate pollution, which has a cooling effect by scattering sunlight, may have slightly amplified the warming influence of greenhouse gases like CO_2 during the lockdown period. This underscores that not all air pollution reductions are beneficial for climate in the short term, revealing a difficult trade-off between human health and near-term warming.

Finally, the pandemic provided a unique natural experiment to validate models and inform future policies, particularly the transition to electric vehicles (EVs). The study by Yang et al. (2021) used a machine-learning model trained on the dramatic traffic changes during COVID-19 to predict air quality outcomes under future electrification scenarios. Their crucial finding was that replacing internal combustion engines with EVs only delivers maximal air quality benefits if the power grid is also decarbonized. If electricity is generated from fossil fuels, the pollution is merely relocated from tailpipes to power plants, offering limited overall improvement. This provides a powerful, data-driven mandate for integrated policies that combine electrification with a clean energy grid.

In conclusion, the inadvertent geoengineering experiment of COVID-19 taught us that the atmosphere responds to emission changes in complex, nonlinear ways. It shattered the myth that simply turning off traffic is a silver bullet for pollution, revealed the persistent challenge of secondary aerosols and non-traffic sources, and highlighted the delicate balance between air quality and climate change. Most importantly, it provided an empirical foundation for crafting smarter, more effective environmental policies for a post-pandemic, electrified future.

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