

What was once unthinkable becomes thinkable

April 15 2020, by Professor Nicholas Agar



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Lockdown has been an experience of self-discovery for many Kiwis. A

line I've heard from a couple of academics is that they were surprised how well their solitary scholarly habits had prepared them for self-isolation. They expressed guilt about loving the "lockdown lifestyle" when others falling back on cocktails of alcohol and Netflix are doing it hard.

I'm surprised how much I'm enjoying a Wellington without traffic. On my first post-lockdown expedition to the supermarket the city seemed eerie and post-apocalyptic. I half-expected hordes of looters swarming through shattered New World windows. Then I noticed there were still people about and they were going out of their way to be friendly, to emphasize the difference between physical isolation and social isolation. Now I'm really enjoying sitting outside on a sunny morning sipping a coffee and writing on what should have been a hectic morning rush hour.

There's currently lots of talk about a COVID reset. A Harvard professor tells us COVID-19 "has just reset the [global economy](#)." The British Conservative Party politician Iain Duncan Smith suggests the [coronavirus](#) calls for a reset of relations between the UK and China. Those are just two selections from the first page of a Google search of "reset" and "COVID."

Global economic and political arrangements really do need some resetting. But I think the most important resets should be in our heads. In an imaginative reset what was once unthinkable becomes thinkable. And what was once just accepted can become something we believe we can change.

I well remember when the idea of a pub without clouds of cigarette smoke was simply unthinkable. Banning smoking in pubs would mean instant bankruptcy—surely punters would just stay at home to enjoy their two favorite addictions. But the Smoke-free Environments Act came into effect in 2004 bringing an imaginative reset. Pubs prospered.

Now walking into a pub and lighting up a fag would be about as affronting as unsheathing a machete.

Now we've experienced a world in which the air in our cities is cleaner and carbon emissions are lower we can think about these as genuine possibilities in ways we couldn't before. An imaginative reset has affected me as a university professor. I've always loved the face-to-face aspect to teaching, experiencing the sceptical expressions of students when I hit them with an unexpected idea. Now I'm learning to make the most of the video-conferencing features of Zoom, putting to one side concerns about its lax security. Many of us are exploring ways to be productive with much less commuting.

To make the most of these imaginative resets we must resist lazy binary thinking. We aren't choosing between no commuting to work and no Caribbean cruises and exactly the same levels of these things before COVID-19. Thankfully we won't get a global green dictatorship that enforces the lockdown for all until the climate crisis is totally fixed. Rush hour will return to Wellington. People will take holidays in Fiji. People will go on cruises, presumably on spotlessly clean ships with bucket-loads of hand sanitizer and rigorously policed buffets. But now we have a sense of some of the benefits from a world with less traffic and no cruises, we can think about bringing these things back at lower levels.

I imagine the captains of many temporarily shuttered industries will be using the lockdown to explore ways to derive the maximum financial return from a pent-up demand for denied pleasures. Expect lots of bargain-basement cruises and unbelievably cheap opportunities to party in Las Vegas.

But now we've glimpsed a different world, we should feel empowered to take a different approach. Let's strive to avoid the [pattern of bounce](#)

[back exhibited by some European populations](#) subjected to conditions of starvation in World War 2. There, the experience of starvation seems to have led to two generations of increased obesity.

So yes, let's go on cruises and commute to work again. But as we emerge from COVID-19 let's not go back to cruising and commuting with a vengeance.

Provided by Victoria University of Wellington

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