

A Personal Reflection on COVID-19 and Its Historical Significance

Andrew Kuhn

Class: Junior – Major: History

HIST 129A: Social History of Spain and Portugal

May 18, 2020

My first remote encounter with the novel coronavirus occurred in January, during the early weeks of the winter quarter. I was enrolled in a course on political geography, tasked with a final project to create a research question related to the field and to construct the framework of data collection and analysis that could address this proposal. At the time, protests in Hong Kong over the extradition bill to mainland China had reached a crescendo in the news, so this seemed like the perfect topic to cover my bases with the “political” and the “geographical” pillars of the class. I decided to take it one step further. I can’t pinpoint when I first learned about COVID-19 – probably from random scouring of the news – but I was somewhat aware of its existence as the deadline to submit our topics approached. I thought it would be intriguing to connect the steady rise of the virus to its impact on the protests in Hong Kong, from the perspective of public health measures and the ongoing conflict between protestors and government officials and law enforcement. It was simply a clinical analysis of some conflict in some country with some variable like a virus thrown in to make for an interesting topic. Like the majority of research projects I had completed, I expected it to collect dust in my computer after the quarter ended and have little impact on my life outside of school. The scary reality of my research was that, unbeknownst at the time, I was watching a global pandemic unfold in real-time.

During my preliminary research, I encountered a multitude of sources on the SARS outbreak in 2002. This seemed like the ideal pandemic to contrast with the early outbreak of COVID-19 since the first cases both arose in China and they are similar strains of the same coronavirus. Because I was in elementary school at the time, my firsthand knowledge of the SARS outbreak is limited, considering the lack of impact it had in my life and in the majority of Western countries. Despite the criticism the People’s Republic of China faced from the global community for its unreliable reporting and handling of the SARS outbreak, the consequences

appeared exclusive to certain regions even though the death rate vastly exceeded the current pandemic. When observing the fallout of this relatively controlled coronavirus pandemic from my childhood, I fully expected COVID-19 would peak as an annoyingly persistent respiratory pathogen that would phase out within a year or two like its predecessor. While the death rate then and now has not exceeded the levels reached from SARS cases in the early 2000s, the ramifications on my personal life have significantly altered my views on society.

The transition into lockdown and quarantine measures felt instantaneous, abrupt, and unexpected at the time. It was the week before finals for the winter quarter, and I was in the process of concluding my project. While the coronavirus had already reached the mainstream news at this point, I was still going to class and felt disconnected from the impact of the virus I had been researching for months. At most, I had a heightened sense of awareness for others' coughing and sneezing that gave me a minor sense of germaphobia, which probably existed before the pandemic. Over the course of two weeks in mid-March, my academic, personal, and professional lives were simultaneously uprooted and replaced with self-quarantine. Any sense of normalcy was replaced with a phobia for people and public spaces. My daily commute to UCLA and job as a tutor became a repetitive series of impersonal Zoom sessions. I was suddenly burdened with an overwhelming sense of obligation to my family and to my community to avoid contracting and spreading this disease. As a non-traditional student at UCLA, I have felt well-equipped at handling the adversity of this pandemic, as I spent multiple years after high school entering the adult world instead of college. In the process of adapting to the new rules and regulations in my life – the harshest of which are self-imposed to protect my family – I have developed a much greater appreciation for the teamwork and planning that my family and I have carried out to get through this crisis. Because this pandemic is an immediate potential threat to

those with pre-existing conditions in my family, I am fortunate enough to be surrounded by a sister and two parents who share my concerns for each other and for our neighbors.

Unfortunately, in reflecting on the broader implications to society, I find it troubling how the handling of the pandemic has been politicized and protested around the country.

Given that 2020 is a presidential election year in the United States, it was inevitable that the response and coordinated effort to a global pandemic would be manipulated in some fashion. I have seen numerous similarities in the federal response to this crisis that mirrored the criticized efforts of Chinese officials in 2002 to downplay the severity and handling of the SARS outbreak. I feel fortunate that I live in a state like California which has taken a greater initiative than other states to flatten the curve for new COVID-19 cases. Around the first month or so after lockdown measures were unilaterally implemented, I felt a sense of camaraderie and solidarity with people in my community because this was an anxious and uneasy situation for everyone. As an athlete and avid sports fan I was disappointed when the entire sports world was put on hold due to the pandemic. However, there was a sense of comfort in knowing that everyone else was dealing with similar issues and trepidations about the future. From a political perspective, I have relied on Gov. Gavin Newsom and Mayor Eric Garcetti to fill the vacuum of leadership left in the wake of an unreliable and distraught federal response to the pandemic. I fear that the politicization and downplaying of the pandemic's severity due to negligence by the current administration will exacerbate the factional divide in this country. The manifestation of protests in Michigan or the unrest in states like Florida and Texas to reopen too soon is dissolving the sense of unity and togetherness that I hoped would continue throughout and after the pandemic.

My greatest concern regarding the COVID-19 pandemic is the world that will exist after we have resolved this crisis. Through the lens of the nation, there are certain events in history

that create marked and irreversible paradigm shifts in a society. In my lifetime, I consider the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center to be such an event in the United States, in which one could describe living in a “pre-9/11” and “post-9/11” world due to the reverberating effects on international relations, foreign policy, the economy, and public sentiment. From the perspective of historical pandemics and epidemics, I am not afraid of the lasting public health risks of COVID-19 compared to the dire and overwhelming circumstances surrounding the Spanish flu in the early twentieth century, or the mass casualties of the indigenous populations from smallpox in Latin American history. I am confident in the advancement of science and the medical field to progress beyond this disease and provide an eventual vaccine, even though we are tragically losing many lives in the process.

The biggest concerns for myself and for society at large as we shift towards a post-pandemic world are the economic consequences of COVID-19. Because of the global nature of this virus, the global economy has ground to a halt as the world entered lockdown to prevent further spreading. Because this pandemic is unprecedented in our lifetimes, the response has been varied and disjointed in how to stimulate and maintain domestic and global economies. Beyond the casualties suffered from historical pandemics like smallpox and the Spanish flu, these periods were notorious for the economic fallout that followed. The Great Depression that accompanied the Spanish flu informed the economic policies through the present day. The Spanish conquest by Cortés was enabled by the smallpox epidemic within the Aztec population and decimated the Aztec empire as a result. It is still too early to determine the trajectory of the economy both globally and domestically as a result of the pandemic, but I worry for myself and my peers that are entering the workforce during a time of great uncertainty. Mass unemployment and hiring freezes give me pause about job prospects after graduation.

I believe other countries in the global community are currently setting a proper example for what is achievable under the social contract. Many Western nations have begun to plateau and mitigate the increasing rate of new COVID-19 cases and have begun the early phases of reopening. While much of this phenomenon can be attributed to stable leadership in other countries, I think the role of American exceptionalism cannot be understated in the urgent calls to reopen in the United States. The ongoing protests in various states against lockdown policies demonstrate a sad reality that the social contract by which we abide is currently in shambles. Rugged individualism has been exposed as the primary motivating factor for many in this country, as these protests to reopen are usually in opposition to science and research that informs this legislation. Until the last few weeks, I felt a glimmer of hope that we could come out of this as a society that increasingly looked out for each other, especially in a heavily factionalized social and political climate. I still hold on to that hope for the world after COVID-19, in which this becomes a story I tell future generations that I lived through. While people continue to lose patience due to the longevity of this pandemic, I continue to look to strong leadership that supports the science of this situation and not the politics of it. As has been demonstrated numerous times in Spanish history, in American history, and during global crises, unity through communities and through leadership can persuade people to stay calm and respect each other as part of the social contract.