

COVID-19: The Struggles and Sensibilities of a Senior

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Introduction

To any reader of my work, I thank you for your time. As a history major, I have learned about pandemics from the bubonic plague to the wave of smallpox and measles brought by Europeans during the Columbian Exchange. However, I never anticipated to live through a historical event as life-altering as the novel coronavirus in the year of 2020. As I type, I am only a few weeks away from completing a bachelor's degree in history and becoming a member of the graduating class of 2020 from the University of California Los Angeles. My status as a senior means I will not be granted the opportunity to walk across the stage and receive my diploma on the previously scheduled date. It also means a question mark in the next chapter of my life. I hope this essay provides a brief insight into my personal experience throughout the current pandemic as well an estimate on what the future may hold. Thank you.

Humans often establish a superiority complex that they belong at the top of the food chain and therefore can overcome any hurdle in life, including disease. However, this misconception is far from the truth as history has consistently reminded humans that illness is their greatest enemy. From the bubonic plague in Europe to smallpox in the Americas, disease is one foe that cannot quickly end via legislation or medical treatment. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has revealed the true standards of society especially in weighing the value of a human life against the value of a dollar.

Throughout the shelter in place order, two responses seem most prevalent: relief to work from home and have time to relax or fear of financial stability and a growing concern of one's health and wellness. My experiences cause me to fall between the two. In March of 2020, I lost an internship that took months of interviews to land and therefore had no more income. However, as a dependent, I still had my family to rely upon for financial support. But as weeks have turned into months and my graduation grows closer, I will be entering into one of the worst global economies with one of the highest unemployment rates in history. Like many other undergraduate students preparing to enter the world and start working toward a career, any plan I had for myself has been washed away as quickly as I had dreamt of it. The fear of the future has turned from an economic concern to one of health as several of my peer's loved ones have passed away after contracting COVID-19. Upon learning of the death of those I have personally met I am now more anxious to venture to the grocery store or move out of my apartment as I cannot have control over the actions of those around me. With some wearing gloves and masks in public to prevent the spread of the virus and others who feel their freedom is stifled by the mandates, there appears to be a growing divide. Facebook has been the

platform of choice for individuals to express their beliefs; however, some have chosen paths that severely limit the extent of the virus. A member of my church posted that the response to COVID-19 by the government was similar to the Third Reich during the Holocaust by deceiving people to follow federal laws under the false pretense of helping citizens. Not only was the post vastly anti-Semitic, but it lacked historical accuracy. Although I am rarely one to share my opinion on social media platforms, I was compelled to comment to notify the individual of not only the blatant racism and incorrectness of the post, but to inform that a genocide is not equivalent to staying at home. To compare the mass murder of European Jewry to several weeks of recommended isolation revealed that contemporary media must always be questioned as the source in which one obtains information can make or break an argument. While those who have kept their jobs and stable income have the ability to protest or advocate on social media that they desire to go back to their normal lives, others are living in fear that they may lose their place to live or bury a family member before properly saying goodbye. However one perceives the pandemic, as a hoax or a life-changing event, it is clear that this virus has shown both the best and worst in humanity.

The future is unknown, yet these past several weeks of isolation have provided a glimpse into the new norms for one's social, economic, and political life. The phrase "social distancing" has been used to encourage people to stay six feet apart from others in order to protect their health and safety. As a resident of Los Angeles, the city is a hub for entertainment in the form of sporting events, concerts, theme parks, and more. However, venues, such as the Staples Center, may incorporate social distancing when events are held again as priorities shift from packing in as many individuals as possible to ensuring people can keep an adequate

amount of space between themselves and others. Due to the pushback of those in the United States to wear masks, I anticipate that many will continue to wear protective gear regardless of requirement in order to have peace of mind. Additionally, the rise in unemployment and the need for financial assistance has grown at an exponential rate while those who are essential workers often have a lower pay and risk contracting the virus themselves. The CARES Act was likely the first step of several in providing aid to American families and small businesses. While some may choose to continue collecting unemployment if the payment received is higher than a job, my concern as a soon-to-be college graduate is finding employment to support myself in the next chapter of my life. I expect pandemic response teams forming and becoming of great importance at local, state, and federal levels. Furthermore, healthcare accessibility will be revolutionized as herd immunity through the availability of a vaccination will be critical to prevent or minimize a second outbreak. In order to stop the spread of the virus, members of society must be able to afford a vaccine as well as have it obtainable to them regardless of the affluence of their neighborhood; therefore, federal funding and legislation will likely be enacted to stop the spread. Though it is impossible to predict what may happen in the next year or decade, the manner in which humans interact will not be the same and the economic and political sector will see various modifications to prevent any future discourse as a result of disease.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic by individuals and public figures has shown a plethora of discouraging aspects of humanity. Unfortunately, many believe that they are superior to disease and have decided to not comply with the advice to shelter at home. It is with great disappointment that many of my own family members believed that seeing their

significant others or meeting up with friends was of greater importance than staying at home to keep everyone, including themselves, safe. Protests popping up around the United States has revealed the ignorance and incompetence of many in their belief that their freedoms have been stripped, and people continue to fight back against officials whose sole purpose throughout the pandemic is to keep cases as low as possible. Also, as a result of job layoffs, the struggle to pay rent, utilities, and grocery bills continues to worsen with each passing week. Landlords in Westwood, Los Angeles have often refused to freeze rent payments or even lower costs which has forced a great amount of debt on the vast population of college students living within the area. The majority of my roommates moved out prior to the lease ending but are still contractually obligated to pay over one-thousand dollars each month for an empty apartment. Despite the twelve-hundred dollar stimulus check sent out by the federal government, the lack of assistance in the housing sector has proven detrimental to a staggering number of tenants. Finally, the blaming of the republican party or the democratic party has only caused further divide within the United States. Regardless of one's political affiliation, this unprecedented pandemic came as a surprise and no one was properly prepared to respond. No matter what action is taken, criticism remains inevitable. In the end, the entire purpose of sheltering in place or providing financial aid is to help people. In these uncertain times, one cannot proclaim that there is a right or wrong manner of guiding society; however, years from now it will be shown what actions should have or should not have been taken since hindsight is twenty-twenty. No matter one's social status, economic class, or political affiliation, the virus has negatively impacted the vast majority of the global population and an unfortunate amount have chosen to direct their frustration into unproductive and problematic outlets.

Despite the unknown world we are currently living in, the struggles we are enduring have shown up a multitude of times in the past. Humans prefer a scapegoat to blame and have an individual or group to take responsibility for widespread problems. Recently, the Chinese have been victimized and harshly stereotyped due to the concern that the outbreak of COVID-19 started in China's Wuhan province. An entire ethnicity cannot be responsible for a virus; however, the social blaming of the Chinese is much like the antagonism against Jews in Europe when the bubonic plague arose. Logically, the Chinese did not cause COVID-19 and the European Jewry did not cause a plague as both diseases are often spread from animals to humans. However, both groups continue to endure harsh treatment in society as the desire for a definitive answer on who is considered guilty is placed on an entire people group. Moreover, disease was the greatest killer of the indigenous peoples in America following the arrival of Europeans. Smallpox, measles, and the flu decimated the native population as they had not previously encountered germs in this manner. Likewise, contemporary peoples lack immunity to COVID-19 which has allowed it to spread quickly and prove fatal in some cases. Although the current pandemic is not nearly as devastating as what happened to the indigenous in America several hundred years ago, the simplicity of the fatality of disease to those with no prior exposure remains vastly similar. A lack of herd immunity or a vaccine to stop the spread of viruses will continue to pose a serious health risk no matter how well one may seem. As antiquity has shown, there is no benefit to blaming others for societal struggles that are far out of their control. It is evident throughout history and even today that disease is one obstacle that humans cannot overcome quickly, but with collective teamwork and compassion, the ability to find a cure and become a well-functioning society is a possibility.

One can only hope that in ten years society can joke about the ridiculousness of hoarding toilet paper or protesting to get a haircut instead of continuing to struggle financially and socially. The majority of one's life, including contracting COVID-19, is out of his or her control, yet the aspect that one will always have power over is how they choose to react to situations. For some, isolation has given more time for hobbies while others have found great difficulty coping with the new world they are living in. Blaming others does not help. Protesting a virus does not help. Spreading fear through the media does not help. The world works better when its inhabitants work together. I will soon be the proud owner of a bachelor's degree with no guarantee for my future; however, this time of isolation has brought me peace in knowing that while I am in no control over what happens to my health, finances, or social life, I can choose to make the world a better place by staying informed and remaining kind. I encourage anyone has spent time reading this piece to do the same.