

HIST129A Second Paper

A Personal Reflection on the COVID-19 Pandemic

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My name is Laura Gong and I am currently a second year attending University of California, Los Angeles as a Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology major with a minor in History. The following essay is a personal reflection regarding the global pandemic known as SARS-CoV-19 or COVID-19. From the Black Death in the 13th century to the decimation of Indigenous populations in the Americas by smallpox to the 1918 misnamed Spanish flu, epidemics and pandemics have long been part of human history and have played pivotal roles in shaping history (Ruiz, *Spain's Centuries of Crisis* 42-51). Here, I reflect on how COVID-19 has accentuated problems entrenched in American society and revealed both positive and negative qualities of humanity while speculating on how it may impact the future.

I'd like to start off by acknowledging and thanking all of the doctors, nurses, healthcare providers, and essential workers who have continued to work through this period of hardship and uncertainty. I realize that I am fortunate to be staying at home with my family in a financially stable household and that my parents have occupations that allow them to work from home. The sacrifices I have made since the implementation of shelter-in-place orders (seeing friends in person, going out to restaurants, hiking around local parks, and the like) and the academic burdens I face as a student pale in comparison to those of essential workers. During these trying times, COVID-19 has undoubtedly affected millions of people worldwide. As widespread coverage of the pandemic continues to saturate the media, America's response to this virus, in particular, has made me wonder about the social, economic, and political ramifications of dealing with this pandemic and reflect on the current state of the U.S. Despite being the "leader of the free world" and the richest country, the U.S. has led one of the most uncoordinated responses against COVID-19. Not only does the U.S. continue to lack a coherent public healthcare system,

its leaders have also failed to listen to, follow, or enforce the advice of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Center of Disease Control (CDC), two of the most recognized scientific institutions in the world, prioritizing the health of the economy over the health of its citizens. More importantly, the rise in nationalist rhetoric correlated with increased incidences of racially driven crimes against Asian Americans internationally and in the United States has made me contemplate the human tendency to discriminate against those who are different from us.

Funny enough, the division of power between the states and the federal government to which freedom-loving liberty-seeking Americans pride themselves on has contributed to one of the worst responses against COVID-19 by a developed nation. Fragmented and divided along party lines, state governors have had to compete against each other for resources, plead with the public for donations and personal protection equipment (PPE), institute individual social distancing measures and develop reopening plans independently from the White House. I am reminded of how the decentralized constitution of the Spanish territories undermined royal authority and weakened military undertakings as Spanish resources were spread thinly across Europe. As a composite kingdom, realms functioned separately from one another—each containing its own customs, laws and languages, so even as Spain expanded its imperial presence outside Europe and the Iberian Peninsula under King Charles I and Philip II, other kingdoms rarely provided additional military and monetary support (Ruiz, Lecture 3/30 & 5/4). To be specific, the refusal of kingdoms such as the Crown of Aragon to contribute taxes and men to fighting numerous religious wars during the reign of King Philip II led Castile into bankruptcy three times (Ruiz, Lecture 5/11). However, unlike the Spanish monarchy, in that Castile bore the brunt of financial and administrative disasters, the President of the United States has openly forsaken his responsibilities as the leader of this country, dismantling the Coronavirus Task

Force, actively blaming everyone but himself, ignorantly encouraging the premature reopening of the economy, and (still) attempting to appeal the Affordable Care Act—the US’s slightest semblance of healthcare reform in the midst of a global pandemic where health care services are VITAL. Besides, the hostile and inefficient nature of American politics has delayed the passing of several bills intended to provide financial relief to the millions of newly unemployed citizens. In my opinion, there is something fundamentally wrong with how this country dedicates billions of dollars toward defense. Similar to how Spain’s entrenchment in religious conflicts quickly depleted the tremendous amounts of gold and silver arriving from the New World (and thus kept Spanish society from reaping the benefits), it seems that only a small percentage of American taxes are actually utilized to fund welfare programs, assist small businesses, and invest in direly needed health care infrastructure (Ruiz, Lecture 5/9). In the future, I hope that this unique experience will inspire the next generation of policymakers to reconsider the needs of this country and enact legislation that will help everyone, not just the most affluent Americans.

Furthermore, while the virus does not care about who it infects, it is clear that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected people of color, immigrants, and those living in the lower socioeconomic strata of society. Without mass testing and tracing procedures in place, a majority of these people have continued to work through the pandemic risking their health and safety by performing essential services in our hospitals, grocery stores, restaurants, and factories, just to name a few. Not to mention, many working class Americans cannot afford to take a leave of absence because it would potentially endanger their employment and source of income. I would especially like to discuss those who work in the food and agriculture sector of the US who mostly comprise of immigrants and undocumented workers living at or under the poverty line. Besides toiling under dangerous conditions and low wages, they form the crucial labor force that

maintains the backbone of the food supply chain, which has been placed in a precarious position since the COVID-19 pandemic. Without their work, food shortages threaten to plague the country. Once again, I cannot help but be reminded of how the Muslim population played a critical role cultivating the land in the kingdom of Valencia throughout the 14th and 17th century. Moors composed a large portion of the poor, peasant class in Valencia and their knowledge of the region's husbandry made them valuable assets to the Spanish nobility (Ruiz, Lecture 4/1). In any case, the subsequent expulsion of Moriscos in 1609 under King Philip III marked the economic demise of the Spanish Monarchy as the agricultural sector collapsed and population numbers plummeted throughout Spain (Ruiz, Lecture 5/11). Additionally, the coercive removal of Moriscos after the Alpujarra rebellion (1568-1571) also led to the eventual ruin of a once thriving silk-producing industry as new settlers lacked the skills necessary for nurturing the native mulberry trees (Ruiz, *Spanish Society* 205, Lecture 5/9). Anyhow, even though we know that this marginalized demographic of agricultural workers performs an indispensable function in our economy, our failure to protect them and other essential employees may lead to our downfall during this public health crisis.

Moreover, in recent weeks, I have read numerous news articles and heard of several anecdotes about the growing number of hate crimes committed against Asian Americans in the U.S. and around the world. Videos of people vandalizing small businesses owned by Asians, harassing mask wearing strangers, committing terrorizing acts against elderly Asian community members, and refusing service to Chinese customers have circulated widely across the internet since COVID-19 presented itself as a "global threat." In fact, it is obvious that the actions of those in power have exacerbated the issue. As Trump and other right-wing politicians have flagrantly referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" and propagated wild conspiracy theories

like that the Chinese government purposefully released the novel coronavirus into the world, it appears that people have felt justified, even empowered, to express racist and prejudiced sentiments publicly. Needless to say, growing up as an Asian American myself, it greatly angers and saddens me to see my community being targeted. Hearing stories of strangers muttering the phrase: “Go back to where you came from” under their breath or yelling it brazenly across the street has made me consider the rationale behind discriminating against others. Early on in this course, Professor Ruiz also explored the idea of “othering” whilst examining the widespread persecution of Jews, Muslims and later Conversos and Moriscos by Catholic officials. (Ruiz, Lecture 4/1). In his book, *Spanish Society*, Ruiz describes a number of violent acts committed against Moriscos by Luperico Latrás and his men in Sástago and Pina, detailing the killing of Moors and pillaging and burning of Morisco homes (195). Even after proselytizing, the Inquisition specifically targeted and punished Conversos who continued to practice Jewish traditions and Moriscos who chose not to assimilate and retained parts of their cultural identity through language, dress, and food, basically sentencing them to life as second-class citizens (Ruiz, *Spanish Society* 105). Excerpts from the “Inquisitorial Trials of Inés López” illustrated how Spanish Christians utilized the Inquisition to mark accused heretics by forcing López to don a sanbenito in public, a robe not only worn to display penance, but also to identify her as “other,” as part of her auto de fe sentence. The numerous edicts banishing the Jewish (1492), Muslim (1502), and Morisco populations (1609) which also included oppressive and mandatory conversions to Christianity, have further demonstrated attempts by the Crown and Catholic Church to homogenize Spanish society (Ruiz, *Spanish Society* 165). Personally, I believe that “othering” has stemmed from a prehistoric and antagonistic response to those who are different from “us,” whether those differences are manifested in our appearance, religion, language, or

history. This biologically driven response which used to protect us has been incorporated and ingrained into the framework of modern civilizations, exhibited as systemic racism and endemic xenophobia. Coupled with the desire of preserving purity and the fact that countries have been literally infected— “tainted”— by this virus, one can start to make sense of the chauvinism and racial injustices that pervade the U.S. and the world.

Although the pandemic has created and presented innumerable obstacles to humankind, I remain hopeful that we will rise up to these challenges and use this experience to unite against COVID-19. In spite of our inclination to turn inwards and focus only on ourselves, I am encouraged and heartened by community efforts that have helped organize food bank donations, deliver groceries for vulnerable seniors, sew cloth masks to limit the spread of the virus, and crowdsource PPE for hospital use. In an age of rapid advancements in science, technology, and medicine, I am confident that scientists, clinical researchers, epidemiologists, engineers, and doctors worldwide will continue working together to develop better tests, therapies, and a potential vaccine for COVID-19. As an aspiring scientist and undergraduate research assistant studying immunology, this pandemic has actually reawakened my passion for STEM, and I hope that the current projects and studies dedicated to solving the pandemic will inspire a new cohort of young scientists. Though I cannot definitively delineate what the world will look like in the aftermath of this virus, I am certain that there will be fundamental changes to society. It will be interesting to see the lasting social, cultural, political, and economic repercussions COVID-19 will leave behind, and I wonder how we will look back and remember these tumultuous times. By cooperating with one another, practicing greater empathy for one another, and treating each other with greater kindness, I am optimistic that mankind will be able to persevere through this crisis as it has overcome countless adversities in the past.

Works Cited

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