

Personal and Societal Impacts of Coronavirus in 2020

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As a student of History I have learned about a number of pandemics throughout the ages and have studied their catastrophic effects on entire populations. During my studies of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and European expansion into the New World, I have learned about the devastation caused by the spread of smallpox, resulting in the loss of millions of lives. I have also studied the Spanish Flu, which ravaged the world and caused millions of fatalities in 1918. Even with knowledge of repeated historical events of mass destruction caused by the spread of illness, the thought of a global pandemic seemed like a threat of the past. With major advances in medicine occurring on a daily basis, I never imagined that the rapid spread of a new strain of virus would be an issue that would affect modern society on a global scale. However, as I write this today I am quarantined within my home, with orders not to leave unless necessary and not without the protection of a face mask. The outbreak of the novel Coronavirus, also known as Covid-19, has grown with such intensity that the World Health Organization has declared it a pandemic and we are now living in a state of emergency. My life has been personally affected in a multitude of ways, but I am very lucky that I have not been infected. Large sums of people have become very sick and many have died, causing pain and suffering for thousands in the United States and millions around the world. The devastating effects of the novel Coronavirus have reached every aspect of society and drastic measures have been taken to help combat it; however, a swift return to normalcy may prove to be a tough goal to reach and the image of what the world will look like moving forward is clouded with uncertainty.

The outbreak of the Coronavirus has impacted my life greatly. I am a non-traditional student at UCLA and am raising a nine year old daughter. A few weeks before the end of the winter quarter it was announced that UCLA would suspend in-person classes due to the increasing risk of the Coronavirus. Suddenly, the virus transformed from a headline in the

news to a very real problem that was affecting my own community. I had followed the progression of the virus since it was first discovered in Wuhan, China but I am ashamed to admit that I did not take it seriously until it had reached my own backyard. Actors Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson announced they had contracted the virus and a few NBA players had tested positive as well. The NBA then decided to suspend the current basketball season and other major American organizations and institutions quickly followed suit. The threat of the virus felt very real within an instant. Soon more notable figures confirmed they had been infected and when more cases popped up in the Los Angeles area, UCLA announced its decision to close the campus. My daughter's school closed a few days later. The virus had touched down on American soil and emotions went from mild concern to all out panic.

I was not sure how worried I should be and the friends and family I spoke to felt the same way. Everyone shared the obvious concern over the danger of the virus itself. The thought of a highly contagious, potentially fatal virus that doctors and scientists have no control over is not to be taken lightly. What was especially troubling, however, was the concern over the unknown. How do we handle something like this? In an age in which information is readily accessible to nearly anyone at any given point in time, not having answers as to how to fix this problem seemed just as scary as the problem itself. All we could do was obey the orders of the government officials, and even they did not seem confident in their knowledge of the situation. With the exception of the attacks that took place on 9/11, I do not remember a point in my lifetime in which society as a whole has been blindsided in such a way.

It would be unfair to compare the current pandemic to the spread of disease that ravaged the Indigenous population in the Americas during the age of European conquest. Historians have argued that upwards of 20 million lives were lost in the areas near the valley

of Mexico due mostly to the spread of disease after Spanish contact.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that both the smallpox pandemic during the age of European conquest and the current Coronavirus pandemic have taken place in dramatically different historical contexts. The Indigenous population was in no way prepared to manage the new diseases brought to the Americas through initial European contact in the fifteenth century and the damage was catastrophic. If any parallels can be drawn, however, perhaps it may be in the universal fear of the unknown as it pertains to an uncontrollable illness. People have died all over the world at a rapid pace due to Coronavirus complications and there is great fear in not knowing how to control it.

With in-person classes canceled for both my daughter and myself and a “stay at home” order in place, life felt like it came to a stand still. We did not know what to do with ourselves and at first it felt like a forced vacation, a time to hunker down and relax. I soon realized that we needed to establish a routine after officials determined that the quarantine was going to last much longer than anyone anticipated. After two months at home, it is safe to say that establishing order has been quite a challenge. Normalcy is difficult to maintain during such confusing times, and children are very much affected by all the change happening around them. In the midst of all the chaos, parents may forget that children also have difficulties processing the gravity of current events. I have made a conscious effort to explain to my daughter what is happening in a way that is authentic but also easy for her to understand. The magnitude of the circumstances has overwhelmed me at times, and my daughter has been witness to it. I have since become more aware of the information that my daughter absorbs, and have done my best to filter the intensity.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruiz, Teofilo. Lecture, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, April 25, 2018.

The transition to remote learning has also proven to be quite a challenge to manage. Not only am I creating a new learning and homework routine for myself, but I have also become my daughter's homeschool teacher as well. I used to attend classes at UCLA during the same hours that my daughter was in school and I used the time that my daughter spent with her father to catch up on homework every week. However, he is a frontline essential worker and for the first six weeks of the lockdown order we decided that our daughter should stay with me full time in an effort to reduce the risk of spreading the virus. It is no longer possible for us both to attend school at the same time independently. The hours I used to have designated for my own education are now dedicated to helping my daughter with hers. Luckily my professors have recorded their lectures and I have the flexibility to study during off hours. My daughter's teacher created a new curriculum that students can learn from home and Zoom meetings are now a daily occurrence. Although establishing new routines and juggling responsibilities has been difficult at times, we are learning to multitask and getting better at it everyday.

The new normal of everyday life is very different from what it was just a short time ago. "Social distancing" is a phrase that I would never have used previously, but now is a rule for any and all social engagements. Consumers spent the first few weeks of the pandemic panic shopping and now toilet paper has become a highly sought after commodity. Grocery stores have enhanced safety protocols, requiring face masks upon entry, sanitizing carts after every use, and installing plexiglass shields at the checkout stands. Staying at home has not only been encouraged, it has been enforced. People have struggled with trying to stay productive during the down time, taking on new hobbies such as baking or trying new at-home workouts. Friends are finding new ways to socialize through Zoom cocktail hours. The world looks very different than it did just a few months ago.

Day-to-day living has drastically changed and most people have experienced inconveniences due to the quarantine. However, my own inconveniences pale in comparison to the struggles endured by those who have been thrust into dire situations due to the virus. People who have contracted Covid-19 are suffering greatly and many are dying within days of showing symptoms. Healthcare employees are working tirelessly and are risking their own health and safety to care for the sick. Personal protective equipment is now difficult to secure and frontline workers have begged for donations in order to safely care for patients. I have watched many interviews with doctors and nurses who say they have never seen such a disaster in all of their careers.

In an effort to slow the spread of the virus, all businesses deemed non-essential have been shut down. Millions of Americans lost their jobs within weeks. Although most people have received a government issued stimulus check to help curb financial troubles, the allotted 1200 dollars makes only a small dent for people who have lost their livelihood. Stress and anxiety is high for many who are struggling to pay bills and feed their families. The restaurant industry has taken an especially hard hit and many businesses have restructured with to-go options in order to accommodate the new normal. The economy has suffered greatly due to Coronavirus and many Americans without financial safety nets are deeply worried.

The country has been in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic for a little over two months and the striking headlines on the news are slowly becoming less of a shock. After weeks of quarantine and self-isolation, Americans have begun wondering when life will go back to normal. While doctors and scientists continue to stress the risks of the virus, many are eager to get back to work and reopen the country. A troubling aspect of this new phase is the politicalization of the pandemic. A sharp divide is developing between those who believe that

the enforcement of rules are in place in order to keep Americans safe and those who believe their individual liberties are being stifled. Protestors have gathered in various areas throughout the country demanding to lift restrictions, while medical experts are begging Americans to continue to take the health risks seriously. Many of the country's leaders seem to have conflicting opinions on how to manage the crisis and in turn have made the pandemic a partisan issue. I am feeling disheartened by the inability for leaders to put politics aside in order to create a plan that both protects and supports Americans during this troubling time.

Although I have studied pandemics of the past, I never imagined I would experience one during my own lifetime. The last few months have been troubling and traumatic for many. The Coronavirus has impacted all aspects of society and our day-to-day living has changed drastically. Those who have fallen ill are suffering greatly, healthcare employees are overwhelmed and overworked, and millions of Americans are in a state of financial peril. The current circumstances leave me feeling skeptical that life will return to the normal we once knew. Questions as to whether we will ever feel safe again often go unanswered and the uncertainty leaves people feeling hopeless. What can be learned from the study of past catastrophes, however, is that humans are not only destructive but are also resilient. Civilizations can evolve, adapt to new changes, and persevere through the toughest of circumstances, just as we have seen in the case of Indigenous populations facing the harsh impacts of European conquest. This reference is made not to compare our current situation with that of the atrocities Indigenous populations suffered through, but rather to convey the power of human resilience. The state of the world is unknown as we move into the future, but we can take solace in knowing that while faced with great adversity, humans have the ability to endure.

## Bibliography

Ruiz, Teofilo. Lecture, UCLA, Los Angeles, 2018.