

## REFLECTION ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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History 129A: Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain

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May 18th 2020

The current COVID-19 pandemic has changed life as we know it. With little care for our busy schedules, summer vacation plans, gym bodies, or need for Starbucks coffee, microbes have brought our ever spinning lives to a halt. In this brief moment of pause, it is apt to consider the place of this pandemic in history, as well as its effect on our individual lives, our society, and our world.

Since the dawn of humankind, epidemics have swept across boundaries and borders, infecting humans from one region to another. However the actual globalization of disease, defined by Giovanni Berlinguer as “the spreading of the same clinical entities throughout the world,” dates back to the relatively recent 1492 (582). In that year, Christopher Columbus and his crew voyaged to the “undiscovered” Americas from Palos, Spain, in search of spices and gold. Not only did the voyage prove to be rather fruitless, but the Europeans unwittingly unleashed smallpox upon the natives of the Caribbean as a consequence of the “Columbian exchange,” the exchange of plants, animals, culture, population, and disease between the Old and New World. While smallpox had circulated Europe for centuries, and thus allowed for European populations to build up natural immunity to the disease, the Caribbean natives had never before experienced the virus. Thus, the disease had a devastating impact upon this novel, unprotected population (Ruiz, 2018).

The infection of the Caribbean natives with smallpox marked a watershed moment in history. Prior to 1492, variation in environmental conditions, nutrition, and population density and dispersal had given rise to markedly dissimilar epidemiological trends in the Old and New Worlds (Berlinguer, 582). However, Columbus’ voyage to the Americas marked a new age of transcontinental exchange of disease, or the “microbial unification” of the globe (Berlinguer,

582). Despite incredible scientific and epidemiological advances since the age of Columbus, humans remain vulnerable to the impacts of this microbial unification of our earth. And while modern medicine is far better equipped to combat novel diseases than ever before, readily available and high-speed modes of transcontinental transport have resulted in an unprecedented level of exchange and intermingling between populations. Thus, today a virus that sprung up only months ago in a market in Wuhan, China has rapidly traversed the globe and evolved into a pandemic that has had momentous consequences.

As in the case of the billions of others who I share this planet with, my life has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic both economically and socially. I am a self-supporting student, and while I am fortunate enough to receive financial aid, I have to work in order to afford to live in the expensive city of Los Angeles. Since I was eighteen years old, I have worked (legally and illegally) in nightclubs and underground nightlife in San Francisco and Los Angeles. I have been employed as a barback, a bartender, a dancer, a K-Town karaoke hostess, an illegal-poker game waitress, and a bottle service girl. All of these jobs involve working in incredibly close proximity to customers and, typically, in very high-volume venues. Since COVID-19 began to infect the population of California, and Governor Newsom issued stay-at-home orders that closed most businesses, I have been out of a job. The nightclub where I was previously employed has been boarded up, and even illegal venues, such as the secret locations that compose Los Angeles' underground poker circuit, have closed their doors, with game-runners sending vague texts promising a reopening of games "when things calm back down again."

This complete, overnight collapse of all nightlife has had a significant economic impact on me and my fellow nightlife workers, with particular detriment to those who are

undocumented immigrants. After being laid off by my former employers, with no underground jobs to turn toward, I was very concerned about my financial situation. I had only just begun the process of applying for unemployment benefits, along with millions of others, and had no idea when or how much I would end up receiving in the way of relief. I had no income to pay my rent, and while Governor Newsom's eviction moratorium delayed the consequences of this prospect, it did little to solve them. Yet, I am fortunate in that while the majority of my family is in Europe, my mother lives nearby in Petaluma, Northern California. I managed to find someone to take over my lease in Los Angeles, and severed my rental agreement after paying a sizable termination fee. I packed up all of my things, and drove to my mother's house, where I am now lucky enough to live rent-free.

Many of my friends who work in nightlife have not been so fortunate. I know a number of individuals who are receiving benefits yet are still unable to fathom how they will be able to pay their rent once the eviction moratorium lifts. Others are undocumented workers, who comprise a large portion of those employed by underground nightlife community, which has always held a place for immigrants lacking papers. A few of my former nightlife coworkers have turned to exploitative sites such as *OnlyFans.com*, where they share sexual photographs and videos with often aggressively demanding subscribers. And many dancers, who once worked in either legal or underground strip clubs, have been risking their health and safety to go to the homes of customers and perform private dances. To do so is tremendously risky, as without security guards and CCTV cameras these women are horribly vulnerable. The female nightlife workers of San Francisco and Los Angeles only make up one very small segment of society who have been affected. Undoubtedly, there are countless others across the globe who are also

shouldering heavy financial strain and who are, or will be, forced to take on work that is demeaning or unsafe.

While the economic impact of the novel coronavirus has been sweepingly detrimental for the majority, the social impact has differed across the board. This is apparent when I consider the differences in the spectrum of my personal experiences of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was in Los Angeles during the first three weeks of the statewide shelter-at-home order, and it was during this time that societal greed had raised its ugly head and the supermarkets were filled with people stockpiling essential supplies and “panic buying.” The city had been swept up into a state of anxiety and aside from the lines outside of food shops, the streets were eerily empty and quiet. Living in Los Angeles in the first few weeks of “lockdown” felt claustrophobic and lonely, and an almost apocalyptic mood had descended upon the city.

However, since the initial panic surrounding the lockdown has subsided, and since I have moved in with my mother, I have begun to experience life during a pandemic far differently. Walking around the beautiful town of Petaluma, I see families sitting together on their porches, playing music and talking and laughing together. With gyms closed, many people are now walking around neighborhoods, and they smile and nod at one another as they pass. At sunset every night, the whole town makes howling noises out of their windows in a funny display of solidarity with one another and of gratitude toward our healthcare workers. I have also increasingly heard stories of acts of kindness during this difficult time. A good friend of my mother is donating all of the relief payments that he is receiving to food banks for the homeless; groups have been going grocery shopping for the elderly; and price-gouging stockpilers of masks and sanitizer have been donating these essential supplies to medical facilities.

Thus while panic and greed will always be rife during times of crisis, it has been heartwarming to witness acts of altruism and to see society coming together, whether for one's family or for a stranger. It appears that this is the case not only in my small community, but across the globe. My older sister lives in London, where at 8pm every evening, her neighbors bang pots and pans together in applause for the NHS (National Health Service), and my twin sister lives in Den Haag in the Netherlands, where an Argentinian roommate of hers makes empanadas for seven people every day to bring their house together for a cheerful dinnertime in the face of global fear and uncertainty. Acts such as banging pots and pans together, or making food for a family style meal with one's roommates may seem small or inconsequential, but to me they reveal the very best elements of humanity. Forced to take a pause in our busy lives, and faced with a threat to the health of our loved ones, we are recognizing the importance of supporting those who risk themselves for others, of solidarity, and of laughing and sharing meals with one another.

It is important that we hold onto these sentiments of unity as we look forward and consider what the COVID-19 pandemic will mean for the future of our world. While our society has already been moving toward social disengagement, largely due to technology and mass media, global orders for social isolation have advanced this trend. As all kinds of social gatherings and meetings move toward convenient, at-home video-communication platforms, it may be apt to wonder, is this the future after COVID-19? Already, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey has announced that company employees may work from home permanently, even after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. And a prominent dance studio that I used to work for in San Francisco, RAE Studios, is heavily considering continuing to offer livestream dance classes after

they are allowed to reopen their doors once more. While there is something to be said for these developments, such as convenience and reduction of transport emissions, we should consider the potentially detrimental social impact. Indeed, a report by the *National Institute on Aging*, “Social isolation, loneliness in older people pose health risks,” states that social isolation leads to higher risks of anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, Alzheimer’s disease, and even high blood pressure and heart disease.

This isolationist trend is not only occurring on a societal level, but also on the international stage. The president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, has been pursuing a concerning self-centered, suspicious, and isolationist foreign policy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The president has termed the novel coronavirus the “Chinese virus,” sowing international discord and fuelling American anti-Asian racism. Indeed, UC Berkeley reported last month that violent hate crimes against Asian Americans have surged across the United States as a result of this top-down xenophobia (Natividad). The president has placed a hold on U.S. funding to the World Health Organization, on the basis of “mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic” (The White House, Dept. of Health), and President Trump has framed the international response to the pandemic as a global competition rather than a collective effort.

I believe that President Trump’s approach, which sows disunity and discord, is quite the opposite of what is needed by the United States at this time. As the most powerful country in the world, the United States needs to set an example and to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in a manner that encourages international harmony and cohesion. In the face of a globe that has been unified by microbes, with complete disregard for borders and boundaries, we need to respond united as citizens of the earth rather than of individual nations.

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