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129A: Social History of Spain and Portugal

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Covid-19 Paper

Introduction: My name is Mary Murphy. I am a third year transfer student at UCLA, majoring in History. In this paper, I will recount my personal experience of the Coronavirus pandemic, draw parallels with previous pandemics and address some of the broader issues raised by this event.

In late January of 2020, I saw a breaking news headline that the city of Wuhan, China had been locked down, quarantining its' 11 million plus residents. While I had heard mentions of the emerging coronavirus in passing, it was then that it really came onto my radar. Later that week, I listened to the New York Times podcast *The Daily's* episode covering the virus and examining the Chinese government's response to it. At this point in time, the virus was already understood to be deadly and highly contagious. The reporters expressed their concern for the Chinese government's lack of transparency, drawing comparisons to the SARS outbreak in 2002. SARS was contained before it became a pandemic, but health experts have described it as "the bullet that went whistling past humanity's ear."¹ After learning of the seriousness of the virus, I became more concerned and tuned in with developments. But despite the warnings of experts and flurry of tweets surrounding coronavirus, my daily life went on unaltered for over a month.

¹ Quammen, David. "The Warnings" *The New Yorker* May 11, 2020: p 16, (Print).

The week of March 2nd (or Week Nine on the UCLA academic calendar), I walked to my lectures from my on-campus room at UCLA, prepared for my approaching finals and had plans to visit my family in Santa Cruz, California the next weekend. The school's administration had sent out emails encouraging staff and students to practice good hygiene to avoid contracting the virus. In the course of that week, I began seeing a few students wearing face masks, and new hand sanitizing stations appeared throughout campus. My professors remained confident that our finals would be held in person.

On Monday, March 9th, the entire country of Italy was shut down. This extreme measure once again drew my attention towards the virus. Tuesday March 10th, my fellow students and I received an email from UCLA's Chancellor Gene D. Block informing us that UCLA would suspend in person classes and activities through April 10th. The same day, my boyfriend Oliver was ordered to fully evacuate his campus at Brandeis University in Massachusetts by the 25th of March. Through many, many frantic phone calls we attempted to make plans. Oliver insisted that it was only a matter of time before UCLA decided to hold the rest of the year online, as his school had done. I already had plans to visit Santa Cruz, but I began preparing to move home more permanently. After conferring with my mother, I decided to skip my flight and wait for her and my brother to drive to Los Angeles and pick me up, along with the entire contents of my room.

Thursday afternoon, March 12th, I moved out of my campus room. It was a rare rainy day in LA, which felt fitting. As my brother Brody and I carried out my things, I was struck by how normal the campus still felt. Apart from a few students catching Ubers, suitcases in tow, no one else seemed to be moving out or even concerned. This made me self-conscious- was I

overreacting? Would we really be back by mid-April? Most of my friends on campus felt positive that Spring quarter would be held in-person. While I hoped this would be the case, it seemed wise to prepare for the worst. We left LA, and were home in Santa Cruz later that night. In Boston, my boyfriend Oliver booked a flight home for Sunday the 15th. On his campus, rumors had circulated that domestic air travel would be suspended- which, as of May 2020, has not happened. This exemplifies the early days of the pandemic in my experience. The situation was changing so quickly, and was being treated so seriously, that it felt impossible to rule out any extreme eventualities.

In the first few days of being home, UCLA announced it would be limited to remote instruction at least until the end of Spring quarter 2020. The school's housing department contacted us soon after detailing the process of breaking our housing contracts. Housing payments had been causing my family financial strain, so the unexpected suspension of those fees was an unforeseen benefit. This being said, my family home is small and filled with people, which can be a challenging environment for online learning. As of today, I have almost completed a full academic quarter online and will share my thoughts on the experience in brief. I am amongst the majority of students in that I would much prefer to have in-person instruction. In the first few weeks, an average of twenty minutes of class time was inadvertently dedicated to figuring out Zoom. This caused lectures to go overtime, conflicting with other classes. By the seventh week, all of my professors have opted for pre-recorded lectures, while still holding office hours over Zoom. I miss interacting with my fellow students and professors, as well as the general academic environment.

As a history student, the content of my courses has the capacity to serve as escapism from the anxieties of the present. Conversely, contemporary issues do not exist in a vacuum. Epidemics, pandemics, and plagues have happened throughout history; and examining the process and repercussions of those events can be very insightful. For example, indigenous populations in the Americas were practically wiped out from exposure to infectious disease brought by Spanish explorers in the 15th century. Amongst other impacts, high death tolls contributed to the extinction of native languages and culture. The modern coronavirus is deadliest for older populations. I am concerned that losing the world's elders will result in the loss of important cultural knowledge.

When I arrived in Santa Cruz, there was not yet mandatory quarantine. I had hoped to be able to see my friends at home, but we all decided it was too risky to see each other. On Monday the 16th, my brother Brody was laid off from his job at a tiling company. The company he works for only has five employees, and the owner assured Brody he would be rehired if and when the business reopens. Brody quickly filed for unemployment, joining 36 million Americans who have done the same within the last two months². This leads me to a larger issue which concerns me. Unemployment caused by Covid-19 has disproportionately affected those working in the service industry and those making less than \$40,000 dollars per year³, which already put them below the US poverty line. Many of those who have received unemployment checks are making more money than their former paychecks⁴, which clearly indicates the need for higher minimum

² Cohen, Patricia and Tiffany Hsu. "'Rolling Shock' as Job Losses Mount Even With Reopening" *The New York Times* May 14, 2020 (Digital).

³ Ibid.,

⁴ Koeze, Ella. "The \$600 Unemployment Booster Shot, State by State" *The New York Times* April 23, 2020 (Digital).

wages across the country. As the country begins to reopen, the unemployed must decide if they are willing to risk their health in order to return to work. In states like South Carolina and Nebraska, those who do not return to work risk disqualification from unemployment benefits. This puts millions of Americans in a position where they must decide between their (and their community's) health and the income essential to their survival. Fortunately, my mother and sister both work for the government (at a public library and a local courthouse) and were not laid off, making our personal situation less precarious.

The decision of when to reopen is daunting, and not just for Americans. On Mother's Day, my family video called two close family friends in Italy. Leila and Tiziana live in Bergamo, the province of Italy with the highest number of cases and deaths by Covid-19. Leila is traumatized by her experience, and refuses to go outside despite loosening restrictions. Tiziana's sadness has turned to frustration and anxiety. Tiziana repeatedly stated how crucial it was for the economy to reopen. Italy's economy was fragile even before the virus, and completely dependent on tourism. Travel restrictions and general anxiety practically eliminate tourism for at least a year. The Italian government had sent citizens a one time stimulus check of 600 euros, which Tiziana argued was insufficient to last the length of their lockdown. Leila, despite her fear, agreed that the country must reopen in some capacity, saying: "If we can't start making money, we will not die from the virus, we will die from starvation."

The citizens of Santa Cruz have far less dire concerns than the majority of the country and world. As of May 17th, 2020 Santa Cruz County has had 159 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and only 2 deaths. Residents have followed the shelter in place mandate with little complaint until very recently. On Friday May 15th, a group of 30 to 40 residents staged a sit-in protest at

Cowell's beach, resisting county-wide beach closures. Organizers claimed the event was an act of "peaceful civil disobedience"⁵. Beach closures have been the impetus for protest throughout California. While protecting the right to sunbathe seems frivolous, I believe that these protests show that many Americans have become tired of complying with the government issued mandates.

I feel extremely fortunate to be home with my family during this frightening time. I also recognize how privileged my experience has been. None of my family or close friends (even those in Italy) have contracted the virus. Only one member of my family has been laid off, and we are able to support one another collectively. My community has barely been touched by the virus, and has the luxury of protesting closed beaches rather than fighting for their lives in a hospital bed. These privileges allow me to worry about the long term consequences rather than my own immediate safety. I am concerned by how this virus is disproportionately affecting the members of our global community who were already struggling. I am also concerned with how the virus will impact our interactions with each other and the world. I hope that this experience can unite us as global citizens, and that we can see beyond our own desires and do what is best for the world.

⁵ York, Jessica. "Beachgoers stage civil disobedience" *The Santa Cruz Sentinel*, May 15, 2020 (Digital).

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