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HIST 129A

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Covid Reflection

I am a junior history major at UCLA. Due to the pandemic of Covid 19, or coronavirus, I have returned home to live with my family in Orange County, California. As of the 18th of May I have been in quarantine for a little over 2 months. I am not sure what the continuing effects of this outbreak will be, either in my personal life, or on a national and international scale, but I believe that the coronavirus outbreak of 2020 will leave its mark on history. Going back at least until January 2020, we at UCLA had been hearing news of a sickness in China, but there were not many details as to how bad the disease was, or how widely it had spread. Within the next month or so, we would discover that there were many infections in the city of Wuhan, and that the disease was most likely spread from a wet market, through a bat or a pangolin, although even at this point we do not know exactly what the source of the virus was.

The first impact on my life came soon after. While many sicknesses and conflicts occur throughout the world, in California I had been fortunate enough to avoid any direct contact with catastrophe. When I learned that many Americans in China had been recalled to California, even if they may have been sick, I started to think about how this spreading virus could have an impact on the United States, and how the officials of our government were handling the situation. Almost as soon as the news came in that Americans were being infected, I heard discussion and criticism of how President Donald Trump was handling this situation. It is now

known, after the fact, that Trump cut funding to pandemic prevention and response organizations, and I find it hard to imagine how badly the blundering bureaucrats and politicians managed the American response. Many leaders, including the American president and vice-president, significantly downplayed the coronavirus, even as deaths in Italy began to peak. The Fox News network went so far as to call the virus a hoax. The official word of UCLA, arbiters of my educational pursuits, but also my living facility, was that Covid had not come to the school, and that we were well equipped to deal with any issues. We were instructed to stay 6 feet away from another, which was nigh impossible when we were crammed into lecture halls like sardines in a can. My stress began to mount as I was tasked with keeping up with academic responsibilities, while also hearing news and rumors of the spread of Covid into LA county, as well as to my home county of Orange.

There was an increasing sense of distrust both from myself, as well as from my fellow students, towards the administration of the University of California. We felt that they would wait until the last possible minute to considering changing our course of action to take Covid into account. This may as well have been the case, as students were being tested, and even our chancellor, Gene Block, had gone into self-isolation. As we entered March, the effects of this virus on our lives were becoming clearer. Sports teams, both professional and university, were shifting first to no crowds, and then to outright cancellation. Names of famous American celebrities who had been infected or killed by coronavirus were beginning to appear. The first universities started postponing their terms, either for weeks or months, though at this time UCLA was still in full session, and finals were on the horizon.

In mid-March it was finally announced that UCLA's term would be suspended, first for a month, and soon after upgraded to the rest of the academic year. My unfortunate issue is that

were still tasked with taking finals in this uncertain and tumultuous time, and there was no clear, official policy on how these exams should be administered or graded. Some of my finals began right after it was announced that term was suspended, at a time when I was not even sure if I was going home, or remaining on lockdown in my dorm. My professors were not consistent the manner of test and grades, with some professors keeping their exam the same, while others made it slightly easier, and others still had me keep my pre-final grade. To my great envy, some students had professors who gave all their students an automatic pass on their final exams. While it could have been much worse, I do feel that UCLA administration should have been consistent with academic basis of these finals, as I received the worst grades in my entire college experience that quarter, when I had A's in my classes prior to the outbreak.

I was certainly not prepared to deal with a pandemic, and by this point the World Health Organization had classified it as thus, and my finals at the same time, but I gave it my all regardless, and I suppose some were worse off than I was at that time. Finally, I returned home, with no clear sense of what I would do, or where the world was heading. While it was a relaxing escape from my intense academic endeavors at first, lockdown soon became a mind-numbing experience. While depression might not be the right word to describe it, an agonizing and melancholic boredom has plagued my last few months. I am lost in time and space. Although I know exactly how I have been quarantined in terms of days, weeks, and months, I do not feel any sense of passage. The time has gone by so quickly, and yet it drags on endlessly. I am not sure if I am more shock that it has already been two months, or that it has only been two months since I have experienced the world.

I would not be entirely correct, however, to say that I am completely lacking in contact in this isolated period. Thanks to the internet and social media, I find that in some ways, I am more

connected with my friends and acquaintances than I have been in years. Because the limits of physical distance do not apply to virtual interactions, and because everyone I know has been cooped up at home anyway, I am reconnecting with friend I have not talked to in a long time. We share a common solace in our exile, and while me may be stranded in the 3-dimensional world, digital websites, applications, and games allow people to talk at all hours of the day.

I would still much rather prefer to be free again. While I love my family dearly, I need more than just a couple people to interact with in my life. I am also limited to such a space at home, that seeing what the world has to offer is not much of an option when I am endlessly rotating between the bedroom, living room, and kitchen. It is a bittersweet thought that all my old friends have returned to our hometown from the many colleges across the country for the first time in years, and yet we cannot go and see each other. College has brought about much personal growth to my life, and while I am sure this pandemic will also contribute, I am not sure I will see exactly how for years to come.

The effects of prolonged shutdown obviously effect more than just my personal life. These increasingly politically-polarized United States of America now have to experience tension not only due to a global pandemic, but also with a heated presidential election in the coming months. The scale of political maneuvering in the months leading up to November, both about the pandemic, and being obscured by it, may not be truly seen for years, or perhaps ever, but the fraught, divisive attitude of the American people is not doing us any favors in this time of crisis. Even in my home of Orange County large gatherings of people are appearing at the beaches to protest the shutdowns of public spaces and businesses. While I thankfully don't have to deal with them directly, as I have been inside consistently, it is disheartening to think how

much derision there is in a time when American's should be coming together instead of vitriolically squabbling over politics.

The financial state is no better off. The economy has crashed, both in fear of the virus itself, and due to the closing of business and lockdowns. As this initial shift has led to layoffs and fewer customers for most businesses, the global economy is spiraling further into a depression. In relation to my own life, I cannot get a job when I most likely need one, my father has received a pay cut, and my mother's job is so crucial in these hard times that she is working constantly. I also see this as opportunity to make some money with some wise investments, but there is really now way to know if they will be worth it, as there is no way to see what the future holds.

I am apprehensive to decide if I think the coming months will be better or worse. I was supposed to study abroad and attend a wedding in Europe this summer, but both of those plans have been cancelled. At this point, it also seems like university education will be online for the Fall of 2020, but the word from UCLA has not officially come out. Many states are starting to remove or ease their lockdowns, though for all I know at this point, that could start a second wave of Covid, sending us into another lockdown.

There is much fear and uncertainty in America and the rest of the world, and as a student of history, I believe that we must be careful in how we precede. It would be detrimental to the United States if we allow this pandemic to politically destabilize us, as many civilizations, like the Native Americans during the Colombian Exchange, or the Romans in late antiquity, were knocked off their balance by large spreads of disease, not only due to the deaths, but also to the weakening of their political systems. I also believe it is prudent that people do not give into fear. I see protestors comparing pandemic lockdowns to the Holocaust, which is absolutely absurd, and disrespects the memory of all who have been taken by genocide. So too should people avoid

trying to blame people of another group for this spread of disease, as it is illogical and bigoted, and scapegoating leads to hate and violence, as it often did with the blaming of the Jewish people for many societal ills, including plague, in Europe, through the pogroms of the medieval period, through the Spanish Inquisition, and beyond.

I know this will not be the end, and I hope my nation, my culture, and my species will get our act together and power through this, but I do believe that I am going to experience things getting worse before they get better. As a relatively young person with an uncertain future ahead of me, I am excited and scared for the highs and lows that this period of time will have on the government, economy, society, and my life. Either way, a new era is on the rise.