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Hist 129A Reflections on the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introductory Note: My name is Timothy David Schaeffer, and I am currently a graduating senior at UCLA. I am majoring in history and I am planning to apply to medical school this upcoming year.

Personal Reflections:

I see the Los Angeles Memorial Cemetery every time I walk back from school to my apartment on Kelton Avenue. I had never seen it as a negative or unsettling feature of the landscape, and that is if I ever happened to take conscious note of it at all. It holds about 90,000 gravesites. At the time of final edits for this reflection, the total United States death toll for the COVID-19 outbreak has just passed 89,000 citizens. It is a number that is hard to concretely picture in one's head until you see it sprawled in gravestones on an expansive field right across the street. Nowadays I find it difficult not to notice the cemetery.

One thing that has become clear to me over the course of this crisis is how easily the pandemic can create a speculative labyrinth of fears and anxieties that fall on a wide spectrum of severity. The most acute of these fears are those that surround the precarious health situations of my family. I personally do not fear for my life, given my young age and the extreme unlikelihood of hospitalization that accompanies it. The possibility of me spreading the virus to my family, however, does concern me. My father of age 55 was diagnosed with stage 3 colon cancer in February of this year and he began chemotherapy in March, just as the virus was experiencing extreme acceleration in the United States. He is scheduled for twelve rounds of therapy that will

last a total of six months. He was forced to face the difficult decision between electively exposing himself to dangerous contagious environments in the hospital or letting his cancer continue untreated, with the looming threat of metastatic spread. He chose to continue with treatment. I know this was a wise choice, but I am frequently occupied with worries about his future, especially in relation to the course of action that our country has taken in response to COVID. A complete and sustained lockdown ensures the safety of people like my father, but the economic and political turmoil brought about by this strategy has been deemed too costly by the federal government and many state governments as well. Similar concerns revolve around my grandmother. She just turned 81 and my grandfather, to whom she was married for 64 years, passed away last summer. She has been in extreme grief for several months and simply has not been taking care of herself. I worry about how incredibly ill-suited she would be to fight off an infection of any sort. The initiative to 're-open' the country that has taken shape over the past couple weeks does not seem to make the environment much safer for people like my father and grandmother. The lockdown has slowed the spread of the virus and has likely saved Los Angeles hospitals from ever being overwhelmed. However, the lockdown has lasted just long enough to cause serious economic harm, and the slowing of the spread tempts a fate in which my father contracts the virus when he is much further along in his chemotherapy treatment and his immune system is at a critical low point. When faced with imagining practical alternatives that avoid needless loss of life and economic devastation simultaneously, I find myself confused and rather hopeless. The inability of this nation's federal government to openly discuss and present alternate courses of action certainly contributes to my frustration in this regard.

There are those anxieties and frustrations, however, that are less serious. To me, the pandemic means the loss of a college graduation ceremony and the loss of an opportunity to

remain with good friends to finish off my undergraduate experience. For my sister, who is a senior in high school, it means the loss of prom, graduation, and possibly the chance to move away to college for freshman year. It means a likely pause in my extracurricular involvement, which is a crucial part of my medical school application. Until effective treatment or a vaccine is made readily available, my hopes of picking up a job as an emergency medical technician or being able to volunteer are slim. Restrictions to curb the spread of the pandemic will likely initiate a general pause in major activity in my life until the disease is controlled. If it takes a year before people can once again resume a wide range of work activities, then for me that will mean an extra year living at home in Long Beach with no major items on the agenda. The pandemic has also meant a decrease in my motivation to study as I try to make the jarring transition of turning my home environment into one where I can be productive. Several of my friends have adjusted poorly to this transition towards living and working at home. My best friend, who has preexistent mental health issues, was hospitalized after the stress of home isolation caused a severe breakdown. In addition to everything, simple joys like sitting down at a restaurant or going to the movies on the weekend are removed from daily life and may never fully come back the same way again.

After all that I have talked about previously, I do not want to give off the impression that my experience during this pandemic has been one of never-ending frustration, depression, fear, and total negativity. It is an experience that I can most truthfully describe as challenging; it entails constant concern, caution, and the growing pains of adaptation to new realities. In some ways, the pandemic has provided strange opportunities that I never would have had before. For example, at no other time in my life have I had the time to properly focus on taking care of myself. I have been cooking every meal from scratch, getting full nights of sleep, and exercising

for more than an hour every day. For those who know me personally, this is an absolute miracle. The complete shutdown of activity at the beginning of the outbreak gave me the silence needed to analyze my own living habits and realize that I did not want to continue living such a stressed, unhealthy existence. Starting lockdown oddly contributed significantly to my development of more mature adult habits. Suddenly I now have the time and silence to focus on the things that I have ignoring subconsciously for the sake of being academically productive. Hopefully, this time away from the frantic hum of competitive American work life has helped other people in a similar way.

Local Community, Country, and the Wider World:

On a state and federal level in the United states, the consequences of the COVID pandemic tells me that the government welfare system is woefully unprepared for a true emergency. In some cases, the state emergency funds for medical supplies and aid for businesses were exhausted in a matter of days. My parents make a comfortable living, but the \$1200 provided by the federal government covers one month of expenses in a world where my father (a real estate appraiser) no longer has any income and there is no indication of economic activity fully recovering for several months. My heart aches for those families who were already living paycheck to paycheck before the pandemic. An extra \$1200 for these families will not be enough on its own to save these families from severe food insecurity or inability to pay basic bills. The pandemic has laid bare several other problems in American society. The dire financial situations faced by hospitals reveal just how much the healthcare system is in need of government support, and just how much hospitals currently rely on elective surgeries to pay the bills, rather than focusing on preventive care. The massively different outcomes of the outbreak in different states

emphasizes the need for federal-state governmental relationships to be streamlined in order to respond to nationwide emergencies.

I cannot help but notice certain similarities between the trends unfolding in real time during the pandemic and some of the historical events I am currently studying in the history of Spain (1300-1550). The most obvious connection in my eyes is the way that catastrophic disease events, both past and present, can lead directly to vicious scapegoating and bigotry against societal minorities. The black plague of 1348 in Spain, which eventually killed the king in 1350, precipitated intense violence against Jews all across Iberia. Spaniards sought a way to assign blame for such a monumental health disaster, and one of the major avenues for this blame was through the longstanding discourses of blood purity and difference that were pervasive in Iberian society and labeled Jews as a threatening other. The upheaval of the COVID pandemic in the United States has resulted in similar scapegoating and othering of Asian-Americans and Asian residents. Especially in the earliest phases of rapid spread (late April and early March) fear stoked on social media resulted in xenophobic bigotry against those of Chinese descent. The ridiculousness of this trend was summarized by a flyer left outside my apartment by a local Chinese restaurant, on which the owners felt obliged to remind customers that they posed no increased risk of coronavirus just because of the cuisine they served and the ancestry of their staff.

The social and political change resulting from this outbreak could be far-reaching. If no fully effective treatment or vaccine is ever developed, then I think the way people meet and socialize may change drastically throughout the world. Simple actions like shaking hands or kissing on the cheek may become obsolete. Large scale concerts, sporting events, and parties may never be able to happen without keen public health surveillance. Politically, the trauma that

this virus caused may force world governments to be more organized with each other in order to better coordinate policies and unilaterally respond to future health, environmental, or humanitarian crises. I envision growing importance given to the WHO and other multinational institutions after this pandemic. The fractured responses of each nation to the COVID situation, and the resultant spread of the virus across the globe, reminds us that world leaders need to adopt the mindset of membership in a global community in order to better address truly global concerns in a unified way. Given the extreme infrequency of global pandemics, I am unsure how long the current elevated focus on public health in politics will last. Despite my doubts, I am certain that the response of the United States to the COVID pandemic and all of the public health, welfare, and healthcare issues tied up in it will be of paramount importance in the politics of the upcoming presidential elections.

In the present moment, the COVID pandemic feels like an incredibly complicated puzzle with no satisfying end on the near horizon. It may change the way social life and the economy function for several years, and I am bound to assume that major policy shifts will follow in its wake on all levels of government. No matter how painful or troublesome the outbreak may seem, it would be foolish not to believe that some solution is within reach, especially if the necessary work and due diligence is carried out.