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Paper II: COVID-19 Reflection

HIST 129A: Social History of Spain and Portugal, 1479-1789

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Introductory Note

I am a fourth-year history student and will be graduating in Spring 2020 with the highest of Latin Honors in UCLA's colleges of letters and sciences. I specialized in Native American history under the tutelage of Dr. Benjamin Madley in my time at UCLA. I am originally from Amador County, a quaint rural community in northern California.

I left my apartment off Veteran Avenue in Westwood the night before Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti announced the city-wide shutdown order on March 19, 2020, arriving at my home in rural northern California in the early hours of the morning. For the majority of the pandemic, I would stay in Amador County, a sparsely populated winemaking region situated in the Motherlode between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe, with my mother, sister, and two Labrador Retrievers from March 19 to the present day, May 18, 2020. The population of Amador County, the place where I spent the majority of my childhood and return to in times of crises, is predominantly conservative in thought. Conservative in the aspect that Amador County residents will not stand for their rights to be taken away, which as a result of California Governor Gavin Newsom's (D) stay-at-home orders, happened. Not many Amador County residents tolerate their freedoms being spat upon. COVID-19 presented an unforeseen challenge for a County that was relatively untouched by the disease. There are nine cases of COVID-19 in Amador, and those who were diagnosed were not County citizens, but outsiders visiting to possibly escape disease epicenters such as Los Angeles – exactly what I did. This essay will be an analysis of how I as well as how Amador County struggled with the COVID-19 pandemic and how we handled the CDC and state government's guidelines to go on lockdown.

My key to excelling in my studies was finding a certain rhythm in my daily life to help realize how I needed to balance scholarship, work, and play. I found regularity in past quarters walking down Bruin Walk and then past UCLA's two hallmarks Powell Library and Royce Hall to get to class. I would take my books and change into my gym clothes in the John Wooden Center and clear my mind with an hour dedicated to fitness. To end the day, I'd retreat back to my dorm room or apartment to begin studying. With COVID-19, my successful routine was thrown out the window. I find it more difficult to sit down and read thirty pages in one sitting and somehow find more distractions listening to Professor Teo Ruiz's recorded lectures. What makes studying during the pandemic so difficult is that all of the markers that have previously been set throughout your day,

whether it be walking the dog or making an in-between class meal at this *specific* time, are missing. And being confined in your home, with no outlet for physical exertion besides an Instagram live video recorded by UCLA Recreation's yoga instructor, prevented me from finding that routine.

I lost two jobs as a result of the coronavirus shutdown. The first was a good-paying host-busser position at Napa Valley Grille at the corner of Glendon and Lindbrook. Ironically, for a larger number of college students, unemployment benefits surmount what they would have been paid anyways from their job. Such was the case with my job. The second position I lost was much more heartbreaking. As a sportswriter for the *Daily Bruin*, I had the honor of covering the reigning UCLA National Champion softball team. The Bruins were on pace to repeat as national champions and I was going to procure some much-needed journalist experience, travelling with the team all the way to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. But UCLA's chances were cut short, and my hopes of covering a winning program that might propel me to an internship were dashed. As a result of the pandemic and government shutdown, mine and everybody's post-graduation plans were derailed. I lost job opportunities to pay off a cumulative of \$50,000 of student loans. Those payments begin six months after graduation. Many other students lost job opportunities which were the next step in finding a career that would provide for their future families.

I felt the COVID-19 emotionally more than anything else. I refuse to get into horoscopes, but I readily identify with my Cancer traits. I wear my heart on my sleeve and crave affection, and the quarantine has been a thorn in my side in this aspect. I remember, beginning at eight-years-old until my senior year of high school, pondering what my life would look like when I reached 21-years-old, just about to graduate from college and enter the "adult world." Suffice to say I did not expect to be sitting inside my mother's house for the majority of two months as a result of a deadly pandemic. In that view, the pandemic and shutdown has been an unnatural twist in my life plans that has left me questioning how successful I have been in setting myself up for a healthy and financially secure life.

“Was spending all this money to go to UCLA worth it?” being the most common of the questions. In the opening weeks of the shutdown I was limited to my professor’s office hours and my mother and sister as my lone sources of interpersonal communication. If COVID-19 was good for something, it was that it brought my family closer. As humans we are inclined to make and maintain relationships through constant contact, and quarantine disregards this fundamental trait that is so intrinsic to all of us.

The communities of Amador County, namely Sutter Creek and Jackson, largely resented and scoffed at the stay-at-home orders placed by Governor Newsom. Essentially void of disease, family restaurants and small retailers and their respective owners whom are the foundation and identity of the hardworking and “help thy neighbor” ethos of Amador were liquidated, even with government aid. I saw firsthand how these business owners and those who wanted the lockdown lifted reacted. Highway 49 in Jackson – the main thoroughfare in the county seat of Amador – was littered with a handful of mask-less protesters demanding for their “freedom back.” On a Facebook post about this incident was a bevy of comments in support for lifting the lockdown as well as radical claims that the Democratic Party is conspiring against the virtues of the Bill of Rights, imprisoning America’s lawful citizens in their homes. Another example of Amador’s dismissiveness was the opening of Amador County’s locally owned gym, New York Fitness, two weeks ago. New York Fitness is likely the only business of its type to open in all of California. To put it simply, once Amador County residents felt like the pandemic was over, they went back to their regular schedule.

I returned to Westwood after six weeks in Amador and was amazed by how drastically different the spread of COVID-19 and the lockdown was being treated. I felt a moral obligation to my community to wear a mask, walk as far as I could from a passerby on the sidewalk, and exercise plenty other social distancing techniques. Essential businesses such as Target and Ralph’s turned away customers without masks. To be walking the streets without a mask in Los Angeles was taboo,

and frankly, something in Amador that would have been seen as protecting your freedom to assemble. After a week of remaining within a two-hundred-foot radius of my apartment I went back home to stay with my Mom. In hindsight, I am disappointed in my actions violating the quarantine, doing a disservice to my family and community.

I hesitate to say this experience is relatable to the smallpox epidemic in the Americas which ravaged the Indian population in the sixteenth century. Other than the fact that smallpox and COVID-19 are both foreign, originating in the Old World and Wuhan, China, respectively, there are not many similarities. Smallpox was utilized by the Spanish conquistadors as a weapon to kill millions of indigenous peoples. Conquistador and writer of Hernan Cortes' defeat of the Aztecs Bernal Díaz del Castillo stated in his chronicles that "this terrific disease (smallpox). . . Created greater devastation, from the poor Indians."<sup>1</sup> Díaz then cites the Indians' ignorance in treating their wounds with only cold water. Perhaps there was a different type of ignorance United States' leaders showed in addressing the spread of the coronavirus. While the Indians whom faced Cortes' germ warfare were unaware of how to remedy their smallpox rashes, U.S. President Donald Trump was ignorant in that he refused to accept the true dangers COVID-19 held for the American people earlier on in the pandemic. Rather, his attention was concentrated on his re-election campaign against Democratic candidate Joe Biden. The duration and deadliness of smallpox, in terms of death count, far outlasts and outweighs that of COVID-19 – so far. Vaccine testing as well as the safety precautions enforced by the federal, state, and local governments in the following months, or possibly years, and the American citizen's willingness to obey those orders will dictate how long COVID-19 lasts and how many lives it takes.

Adjusting into a post-COVID-19 world will be challenging and will take time. Depending on which report you read, coronavirus will be eliminated anywhere between six months to two years, or

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<sup>1</sup> Bernal Díaz del Castillo (trans. John Ingram Lockhart), *The Conquest of New Spain* (Kindle: Digireads.com), 293.

possibly may never be cured and still be treated during the lifetime of the UCLA students assigned to reviewing these memoirs. The following are a few speculations of how I envision the nature of the United States in twenty to thirty years, dealing with the implications of COVID-19.

Socially, it will remain uncomfortable to be in places of business and around large gatherings for a few years. I do not see myself being unperturbed in crowded places, specifically grocery stores. I believe, more so than any other industry, the restaurant business will suffer most in the post-COVID-19 world. Restaurants, a place where direct and positive communication is essential to running a profitable business, will be seen as harbingers of disease. This was the feeling I felt on my last day at Napa Valley Grille. On my final day of work, a Saturday, typically one of our busiest days, not a single guest walked through our door.

Speaking as a sportswriter and fanatic, if there has been one great reconciliatory of past national grievances, it has been the role of sports in America. For example, the World Series in 2001 helped us unify in a time of turmoil wrought by the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. I foresee sports playing the same role in helping us recover from coronavirus. Personally, I would like to believe that the lockdown will be over across all of the United States and we be fully recovered from COVID-19 between December 2020 and February 2021 – just another arbitrary date on top of the countless others presented by the U.S. Government and CDC officials. Gradually, fans will eek into stadiums to root on their favorite teams and the love of sport will triumph our fears.

Economically, the coronavirus financial aid has skyrocketed our national debt to \$24.95 trillion, as of May 1, 2020. This will be saddled on my generation and likely the generations to read this reflection. And politically, according to the hours of biased media I consume on CNN, MSNBC, and FOX News, we are more politically polarized than ever. I can only hope that by the time you read this that there is less divisiveness, and we have a political body that operates as a cohesive unit, despite partisanship affiliation, to further the social and economic growth of the United States.