

Ian Price

Teofilo Ruiz, Rebeca Martinez (TA)

History 129A Social History of Spain and Portugal

18 May 2020

Reflections on Coronavirus

In my study of Russian history, the area I hope one day to specialize in, I once read a quote attributed to Vladimir Lenin. “There are decades where weeks happen and weeks where decades happen.” It certainly feels like we are in the latter, where each and every day we receive a week’s worth of news. When it first became apparent to me that I was experiencing a moment of history that is likely to be a paradigm shift, that this moment would be talked about not only by the survivors, but would be studied by history students like me forty or fifty years from now, I was terrified. If there is anything I have learned in my years as a student, it is that these types of moments have a habit of being awful for the people who live through them, especially when plagues and diseases are involved. However, the historian in me was also excited to see what it was like, to examine it from the viewpoint of someone living in a historic moment. Now that we are in our second month of quarantine, I am tired. I want things to go back to normal. I want to have a beer with my friends, travel, go camping, anything other than be in my house. The problem is: our *societal* normal was not good enough. This moment is only laying bare what we already knew, that our society is not only broken now, but has been so for almost my entire life. We knew it in 2001 when the United States used the War on Terror as an excuse to spy on its citizens. We knew it in 2008 when we elected a president who promised hope and change and gave us the status quo. We knew in the summer of 2016 when the UK voted to leave the EU and

again later that year when the US elected Donald Trump to be president. Thus — to examine the effects of Coronavirus and its impacts on the current social, economic, and political landscape of the globe and what those effects will lead to in the near future — we must keep in mind that primarily this virus is exacerbating problems that already existed.

So what have been the consequences of coronavirus? Now entering our tenth week of lockdown, the biggest macro-effect of the virus is the global economy. Since the Great Recession of 2008, the world saw ten years of uninterrupted economic growth.¹ However, most of the benefit of that profit went to the very rich.² Most Americans before 2020 continued to live paycheck to paycheck.³ The result of the economic crash on the American population, most of whom could not afford an unexpected \$500 expense, has been the largest spike in unemployment since the Great Depression in the 1930's.⁴ It now seems likely that official unemployment is now around 20%.⁵ This is my senior year. The class of 2020, myself included, will now have to look for jobs in the worst economy since the Great Depression. I have already started my applications, but I am not optimistic about my chances of securing financial independence in the near future and I know from conversations with my peers that I am not alone in my lack of optimism.

Of course I would be remiss in my observations and analysis of Coronavirus if I did not mention toilet paper. The shortage of toilet paper is something we have all had to deal with. One can only get it first thing in the morning if one can get it at all. It has become so bad that I have

¹ Peter Coy. "U.S. Economy Celebrates 10 Years of Growth, But No One's Partying." Bloomberg.com. Bloomberg, June 6, 2019.

² Kyla Scanlon. "The Other 80%: Why No One Cares About The Stock Market." Seeking Alpha. Seeking Alpha, October 3, 2018.

³ Katie Brockman. "Most Americans Are Living Paycheck to Paycheck, Survey Shows." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, August 14, 2019.

⁴ Aimee Picchi. "A \$500 Surprise Expense Would Put Most Americans into Debt." CBS News. CBS Interactive, January 12, 2017.

⁵ United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. The Employment Situation — April 2020. Raw data. Accessed May 17, 2020. Washington, DC.

had to rely on my good friend and neighbor who works at a grocery store to hide away some toilet paper when he does an opening shift. He has to hide them in boxes of frozen bagels lest the customers see the toilet paper and take it. That is to say nothing of the price hikes on necessities like toilet paper. It is hardly the only thing in high demand either. I remember I went to the grocery store in Westwood around the time the lockdown was declared. The shelves were empty. Perishables, non-perishables, toilet paper, beer. All of it was gone or near-gone. Anything I could get was the most expensive, least desirable type of food. I remember getting a box of pasta for eight dollars, it was the last one on the shelf that was not lasagne (there was plenty of that).⁶

While the economic effects of the virus lends itself to comparison with the Great Depression, the plague itself could be compared to the introduction of European diseases like smallpox to the Americas. The anxiety, the terror, and the fear that these diseases brought to the indigionus communities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have become more than just academics to our world. We all can taste that fear. I am scared not only of getting sick myself, but spreading it to my friends and loved ones. After having conversations with my friends I know that I am not alone in this sentiment. Although, it should be noted that the death tolls are very different for these two events. In many ways we should consider ourselves fortunate. The Worldometer Coronavirus counter reports that as of May 18, 2020, Coronavirus has claimed over 300,000 lives around the world.⁷ While it may not be the most reliable source, it is certainly one we have all grown accustomed to checking, and until the Virus is over we may not get a better understanding of how many lives the Virus will claim. Quoting this statistic is not meant

⁶ For anyone reading this in the future, as I have been told it might be, eight dollars for pasta is a lot. As for why there was an abundance of lasagne noodles, my guess is people are still too lazy to make lasagne even in a pandemic.

⁷ "Coronavirus Cases:" Worldometer. Accessed May 18, 2020.

to diminish the hurt and pain that the families of the dead now feel, or the fear that we may have of contracting the disease, but we should place that in the context of a world with seven billion people. Although a controversial author, Jared Diamond claims that the Native Americans lost as many as 90% of their pre-contact population.⁸ In today's terms that would be over six billion people. Of course population loss in the Americas did not happen in a matter of months, rather it took centuries, and as stated, Diamond is not without criticism so his numbers may not be entirely accurate. However, if true, losing 90% of a population could certainly be considered an apocalyptic event. While our world has certainly changed, it has hardly ended. Yet.

I have recently lost someone very close to me, my grandmother, not to the disease itself, but likely to the secondary effects that it has had on our healthcare system. Likewise, I have three friends already who, although they have stayed healthy, have lost their jobs due to the economic downturn that Coronavirus has caused. They are not alone. Future students will look in history books and read "X amount of people died due to the inadequacies of the US healthcare system," or "COVID-19 caused unemployment to reach its highest levels in the US since the Great Depression." My grandmother, my friends, have become statistics. Perhaps that is what bothers me most about living through this, that when this time period is examined and reexamined through historical debate and by students in the classroom, we will all just be statistics to buttress an argument. God knows that in my own writing I have quoted statistics to write a paper or make an argument. I have done so in this paper. Statistics are an important part of the historical process, but living through it has made me appreciate more that behind every statistic there is a real person. A human life that was important not only to themselves, but to those around them. I

⁸ Jared M Diamond. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies*. New York: Norton, 2005. 78.

think that history teachers and students often forget, or choose not, to emphasize this because so much of what we read and talk about is tragedy. The fourteenth century plague in Spain, the decimation of Native Americans, the World Wars, the Holocaust. When we study these things we have to detach ourselves lest we fall into despair for every life destroyed. Coronavirus has reinforced for me that when approaching history we must not forget the everyday people of a society.

Perhaps the question on everyone's mind right now is, what will the consequences of Coronavirus be? Of course no one knows, but, the political, social, and economic trends that are happening right now will certainly be key in understanding what happens next. I have previously stated how I was terrified when I realized that we are in a transitional moment in history. To expand on that, the reason I was so scared was because it is in these moments of history where great change can happen. Change can be good. The Depression, while difficult to live through, brought the US Social Security and greater bargaining power for unions. In essence it was the beginning of building a proper welfare state. However, in Germany, the same event, the 1929 stock market crash, brought the rise of the Nazis. They took advantage of a population who was scared, and hurt economically. The US in the twenty-first century is not early twentieth century Germany. We have different political, social, and economic factors at work here. We have different institutions. And yet, we have a population who is scared, and who is hurt economically. And like Germany, I think there is a general lack of trust in our institutions. Anti-establishment candidates would not have done so well with my generation, Bernie Sanders in particular, if we thought the criminal justice system worked fine, or if our meritocracy was genuine, or if we were happy with the state of healthcare in America. Coronavirus has

exacerbated these problems, particularly the US health system. It has made people hurt more, it has increased people's fear. And our governments' confused, delayed, and ineffectual response to the crises only deepens the distrust of the government. It has certainly deepened my own distrust.

As much as I wish I could put myself at ease, I do not know what the future holds. I remain hopeful that we will use this terrible event to enact positive change on our society. That we will create a society that can not only weather a storm such as this in the future, but also be generous in more “normal” times. A more compassionate society built on solidarity not greed. A society where universal necessities like healthcare, housing, food and water are all non-negotiable basics that are available to everyone. There are reasons to give me hope. Already there are strikes all across the country by working people demanding an expansion of worker rights and protections. In conversations I have had with people from university and with neighbors, there is a growing sentiment that our society needs to be more fair. However, having said all that I must admit that, while I remain hopeful for change, I also remain pessimistic about our chances for peaceful change. Change is never easy and it seems to me that the US electoral process is designed to deny meaningful change, a suspicion made worse by this year's Democratic Primary. The Coronavirus will go away some day. If not this year then I suspect next year, but the problems that existed before COVID-19 and were exacerbated by the virus, those problems may not be solved for decades, and they may not be solved peacefully.

Works Cited

- Brockman, Katie. "Most Americans Are Living Paycheck to Paycheck, Survey Shows." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, August 14, 2019.
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/08/14/paycheck-to-paycheck-most-americans-struggle-financially-survey-says/39940123/>.
- "Coronavirus Cases:" Worldometer. Accessed May 19, 2020.
<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.
- Coy, Peter. "U.S. Economy Celebrates 10 Years of Growth, But No One's Party." Bloomberg.com. Bloomberg, June 6, 2019.
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-06/u-s-economy-celebrates-10-years-of-growth-but-no-one-s-partying>.
- Diamond, Jared M. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies*. New York: Norton, 2005.
- Picchi, Aimee. "A \$500 Surprise Expense Would Put Most Americans into Debt." CBS News. CBS Interactive, January 12, 2017.
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/most-americans-cant-afford-a-500-emergency-expense/>.
- Scanlon, Kyla. "The Other 80%: Why No One Cares About The Stock Market." Seeking Alpha. Seeking Alpha, October 3, 2018.
<https://seekingalpha.com/article/4209468-80-why-no-one-cares-stock-market>.
- United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. The Employment Situation — April 2020. Raw data. Accessed May 17, 2020. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empstat.pdf>, Washington, DC.