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HIST 129A: Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain

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COVID-19

I was born and raised in Southern California, and have wondered since I was a child what it would look like if this busy state and its bustling cities, crowded highways, and consumerist society were to suddenly slow down or be abandoned. How would the landscape of the Golden State change, especially in the great urban hubs? I never considered, however, that this was any more than a simple thought experiment or a wild fantasy, but I have come to glimpse a hint of that proposed reality, at the cost of normalcy, traditions, and many lives. Through this brief essay, I will summarize a personal account of the 2019 novel coronavirus, known by its many monikers including Coronavirus (note the capitalization), Wuhan Virus (presidentially and controversially), and as I will refer to it, COVID-19. This time in my life would have been a particularly turbulent one without the virus, but given its lack of consideration for my plan, it has further derailed what was already to be a time of change and progress.

My life has been altered greatly by the pandemic, especially in the social and personal sphere. I directly experienced relocation and rent deferment, was isolated from much of the social interaction I experienced daily, and, most significant to me, I proposed to my girlfriend at the beginning of the quarantine. As the country responded to the eruption of confirmed cases, and events such as the music festival we had tickets for, were cancelled or distantly postponed, students at UCLA rapidly received a confirmation of continued functions by the university staff, then a warning that concerns had been received, and within a few days, confirmation that the school would be moving to remote learning. I couldn't stand the idea of being cooped inside of my grubby apartment in Westwood, unable to see friends, when I had my own room back home. I moved out entirely, but the bills continued, and my family was forced to apply for rent deferment: I'll discuss this more later. A week after returning from UCLA, the quarantine began

to intensify, which conflicted directly with multiple plans I had arranged for my proposal. I settled on taking her to a resort, with the intent of a scenic restaurant, and dropping to my knee in a public gesture at the last opportunity that we had to do so, but upon check-in, we were informed that the hotel was shutting down the next day. Our four day vacation had been minimized, but with some improvisation and some much appreciated understanding, we were happily engaged. This peaceful reprieve was regrettably short lived.

Our return from the joyous occasion coincided with a transition in the economic landscape of the entire globe, let alone the state. My family felt the repercussions heavily, my step-mother being furloughed for two months, my father receiving reduced hours, and my mother having her employment entirely terminated. I myself felt the effects at my place of business, transferring stores but being unable to work for an entire month, as a member of my household was directly exposed to the virus. Thankfully, she did not contract nor spread it, but it nonetheless led to missed pay and a suddenly more visceral quarantine. Upon return to my job at the fast food restaurant, I was greeted not by a drop in sales and reduced workload, but a massive spike in orders, resulting in tension within the workplace as we sprinted around for entire shifts with little to no break from the laundry list of mobile orders. Masks are required at all times, in all workplaces, including my father's industrial job, manned with its skeleton crew. The sudden flux in the economy has battered our steady situation, my loved ones utilizing government assistance for the first time in my life, and the people that I considered successful suddenly shaken by their livelihood being swept out from beneath them by what the President dubbed the "invisible enemy."

I find myself in a unique position among the tens of thousands of students at UCLA, however, in that this quarantine has affected a separate commitment that I have involving the school: I am a midshipman with the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps, and our training has been put on hold. We usually report to the unit approximately three times a week for training, including professional development, interactions with military and otherwise related guest speakers, meetings of the internal Warfighting Society, as well as obligatory physical training. Further, we receive academic and practical training, in the form of formal Naval Science courses held on campus, and fleet-hosted summer trainings and schools. As far as I am aware, for the first time since our unit was attacked during the Vietnam War era, nearly all of these evolutions are being cancelled or otherwise performed far less effectively. We are not allowed to convene in person, so we participate in Zoom video calls, which are inherently less effective and engaging, we don't wear or inspect uniforms because some midshipmen were encouraged to leave without retrieving their uniforms, unit exercise isn't possible, and worst of all, our summer trainings have been cancelled. The Navy has experienced its fair amount of trauma throughout this plague: hospital and warships alike being utilized to converted into direct support for land-based medical care, the quarantine of the entire super aircraft carrier USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT, and Acting Secretary of the Navy Modley stepping down in the midst of the crisis. Personally, I believe the response has been a great effort to the country's credit, albeit somewhat late. While current servicemembers are feeling the effects of the mobilization profoundly, the training corps has maintained its function while protecting its students to the best of its ability, and for that I am grateful. These people are my people, and I hope desperately that history remembers the heroic efforts of the United States sailors.

Outside of the Department of Defense, the disparity of responses has been profound. News outlets have brought forth statistics and disagreements, party lines are still being drawn, and this crisis has been taken advantage of by both parties to drive further divides in an already deeply polarized America. I have chosen to stop checking the news, tired of hearing Anderson Cooper and similar pundits ridicule anything that President Trump does or says and similarly exhausted at conservative commentators praising the White House and demonizing liberals. The conflict is not only internal, as the government of China and the American President have both cast accusations at the other, claiming that the virus was created by the other, the former claiming it was an American weapon released in Wuhan, the latter claiming that the Chinese failed to respond in time and have lied about the true scope of the disease within their nation. Within my household, we did not hold to any quarantine until my stepmother's coworker, with whom she'd had recent contact, found out that her father had COVID-19, and thus it was entirely possible that the coworker was a carrier, and likewise my stepmother. Suddenly, the gallows humor and free movement ceased, and tensions were building steadily. She and my father eventually tested negative, but the levity had been broken, particularly in the wake of the confirmed case succumbing. This response was dramatically different than the response of my soon-to-be in-laws, the mother transitioning to remote work and committing to limit exposure, while the father continued his job involving constant exposure to strangers, convinced that the pandemic response is a totalitarian seizure of power, designed to destroy the second amendment and strip the citizenry of their rights. The safest answer is not necessarily the most practical, and favor seems to shift often between the two, but I must credit the last thought process, as it will make the best dramatized novel.

As I close, it behooves those writing on the current pandemic to compare and contrast COVID-19 to similar events throughout history, as they stand as benchmarks by which we may compare the progress of medical advancement, general understanding of human responsiveness to disease, and the life-saving capabilities of the medical professionals who attempt to stave off the fatalities. H1N1, “Swine Flu,” was an early twenty-first century pandemic, a flu with a low fatality rate that manifested for a little over a year approximately a decade before COVID-19, that had a relatively minor response from the government, largely due to its low fatality rate. I would argue, however, that the ability for governments to have a minor response is a modern construct, as denser societies could not contain disease effectively or practically for much of history, both from lack of widespread knowledge and lack of ability to mass sterilize. Our modern predicament must not be viewed as a singular historical event, as it entirely demeans our scientific evolution, but must rather be viewed in the context of the pandemics of the past. One must understand the scope of death and destruction that has been wrought by plague, such as the Spanish Flu, the Black Plague, or, closer to home, the smallpox pandemic in the Americas with the arrival of the Europeans. In the latter case, the indigenous Americans were repelled and devastated by the invaders, to be sure, but it wasn’t scorched earth that was the primary cause of the Native American genocide; rather, it was the foreign, virulent smallpox that brought the native populations to their knees.

As was the case with many Natives after the smallpox pandemic, I believe the world will recover fully from COVID-19, and be stronger from the strain. Similarly, I predict a generation soon to come that will place heavy focus on disease-related infrastructure and policy, similarly to the generation that grew up as the holes in the ozone layer were being identified and the effects

of pollution were becoming more common knowledge. This is conjecture, to be sure, but I posit that we have only a decade or two until pandemic response and prevention becomes a primary focus of non-pandemic-stricken politics.

Misinformation, ridicule, and failure have been commonly applied attributes for the American theater of the virus, but I aim to demonstrate that while these traits are fairly doled, they should be tempered by optimism. The pain and struggle of the pandemic has cost the American people economic growth, social normalcy, and most importantly, the lives of over a hundred thousand people, as of this writing, but the social and physical destruction has been heavily suppressed by the cooperative effort of a massive portion of Americans. Compassion has flowed from many, contributing to the response, and medical professionals have been driven into the ground risking their lives to treat the affected. Despite the wounds that the country has suffered, let history remember that this crisis could have been dramatically worse.