The Pandemic and our Place in the World

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An important truism within disaster studies is that all disasters are human-made. What this insight conveys is that how people act – before, during, after – plays a crucial role in shaping how a disaster unfolds, even if the trigger is from nature. Accounts that cast 'nature as the villain' obscure how these events are the 'product of particular social and political environments'.[1] A tsunami might be naturally occurring, but what prevention measures are in place beforehand, whether evacuation occurs promptly and properly, how authorities and communities react, these are all choices people make that help determine how destructive or damaging the tsunami will be. Likewise, the COVID-19 virus itself is beyond human control, but the way the COVID-19 pandemic has evolved has been greatly shaped by the decisions that people have made in response to the virus. From individuals to governments to international organisations, the choices people have made have been determinative in giving shape to the nature and extent of the pandemic. What follows is that understanding how the pandemic has unfolded means considering the social and societal components, how people have interpreted and responded to the virus, and through this, what impact the virus has had on the social world and our place in it.

In Naomi Zack's forthcoming book, *The American Tragedy of COVID-19 Social and Political Crises of 2020* , she describes the pandemic as a social disaster, by which she means that the 'disaster is not simply a natural entity or event, but the whole of that event and how it becomes integrated in human society'.[2] Drawing on E.L. Quarantelli's work,[3] Zack emphasises that the uneven and complex experience with the pandemic, its immediacy, impact, significance, duration and related features are all strongly variable based on who you are, and where you are, both in a geographical sense and in a socio-economic sense. This complicates the task of finding wider societal meaning, as the experience with the pandemic has been so disparate. Between different countries, but also within societies and communities, what the pandemic has meant has varied greatly. For some, it has been literally world shattering, at its most immediate, death, but also serious impairment, and the loss of livelihood or employment; for others, it has been a source of stress and concern, whereas the immediate impact has been more one of discomfort; and for the lucky ones, it has actually been a boon, with day-to-day inconvenience being offset by gains made by the changes triggered by the pandemic. And so, the way each of us have experienced this liminal moment has been markedly different; strongly shaped by who and where we are, physically and socio-economically. One consequence that follows from this is that the way we are making sense and interpreting the pandemic is far from uniform, reflecting these considerable differences.

In considering the ramifications of COVID-19, it is necessary to foreground the immediate cost in terms of loss of life, as the death toll of the pandemic continues to grind towards 2.5 million people. Each death has meaning, and cumulatively these losses pull at the threads of our world. James Boyd White conveys this point beautifully, 'whenever anyone dies … a world of possibility dies with him or her, a web of relationships of caring and concern. A part of the fabric of humanity and human community has been torn to bits.'[4] As the deaths mount up, more possibilities, memories and connections disappear from our world. After the pandemic passes, left in its wake will be the damage it has caused, each death reshapes the lives of those who remain, and collectively these losses reverberate through society. How these deaths are understood, whether responsibility for them is assigned, how they are memorialised; these and other ways the pandemic becomes part of collective memory is an important feature of it as a social disaster.

Viewing the pandemic as a social disaster incorporates more than the lives lost and those sickened by the virus. It

also means coming to terms with the way the disaster has reshaped people's understanding of themselves and their world. As Zack explains, 'this is what it means to say that disaster is socially constructed – certain changes in society should be viewed as part of a disaster and not merely an effect of a disaster.'[5] Disaster can challenge and change people's perspectives on life and the way they engage with each other, and with the world. Indeed, the manner in which a pandemic can do this is captured in a powerful account of the plague presented in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*: 'the spirit is crushed when something so sudden, unexpected and so completely unaccountable comes along'.[6] During more normal periods, we work with linear maps of life; as time marches forward, so do we, with some expectation that we can extrapolate the future from the present and past. For many, this was shaken or broken by COVID-19. It is not just the present that we experience differently, it can lead to questioning and reinterpreting the past, with earlier decisions now looking radically different. It can paint the future in a different light, with plans stalled and uncertainty over what comes next.

Put strongly, it is possible to say that the pandemic has triggered a kind of ontological chaos, in which people's sense of self and their relation with the world has been thrown into turmoil. Many of the key markers that orientate our lives and our places in the world have been impacted. In addition to life and health, COVID-19 has destroyed livelihoods, led to loss of income and employment, separated people from family members and loved ones, altered how we interact with others. Collectively, when the markers by which we orientate ourselves in the world are removed, and the stories we tell about ourselves start to unravel, it can create a sense of disorientation and give rise to difficult questions about meaning, purpose and place in the world.

This ontological chaos is paired with epistemological chaos, as people struggle to know what is true, what they can believe. This is partly due to the pandemic itself, during which reality has constantly gone beyond the bounds of what was previously considered likely or possible. Shoshana Zuboff uses the idea of 'epistemic chaos' specifically to describe the consequences of what she terms 'surveillance capitalism' interacting with the pandemic.[7] She argues that big tech through 'profit-driven algorithmic amplification, dissemination and microtargeting of corrupt information' have fractured our ability to understand and interpret the world. The consequences have been to 'splinter shared reality, poison social discourse, paralyze democratic politics and sometimes instigate violence and death'. Zuboff is correct to point to the distinctive and pernicious role played by social media, but the epistemic chaos unleashed by the pandemic is a broader phenomenon. Many authorities and institutions shifted in pronouncements and policies, science and knowledge about COVID-19 has advanced in an incomplete and haphazard manner, risk communication has been radically uneven in terms of accuracy and quality. When all of these things are combined with the forces Zuboff identifies, the result is growing uncertainty about what is true. Writing in the context of the American experience with COVID, Rusty Ginn suggests that, 'what about the stories we tell about our global institutions, our shared values, and our own orthodoxies and authorities? Those stories are dying. They are dying because the institutions built on those stories failed us all, and all at once.'[8] Combined, these experiences generate a sense of confusion and unease, with the discovery that in certain ways, reality is more malleable, and conditions more changeable, than we had tended to think.

The kind of issues being discussed here, especially the ontological and epistemological chaos let loose by the pandemic, undoubtedly impacts us all as individuals. We are not immune from the fears and the confusion, the persistent sense of uncertainty and unease, nor are we necessarily protected from the many impacts it has had on daily life. In addition, we must consider how to incorporate and respond to the pandemic in our roles as scholars and teachers of world politics. The pandemic truly connects to most facets of life, and thus most fields of knowledge. From security to ethics, statecraft to diplomacy, trade to finance, the pandemic has had far-reaching ramifications for the parts of world politics we study. Coming to grips with the more immediate consequences, while identifying and working through the many second and third order effects will be necessary in the years ahead. We are certainly living in interesting times, as the saying goes, and the manner in which the pandemic has worked to speed up and clarify existing issues and dynamics suggests that the world is likely to only get more interesting.

Returning to the idea of COVID-19 as a social disaster, the pandemic is a disaster that is one of our making, the way it has developed is a reflection of the choices that have been made: individually, collectively, and by those charged with running and administering our societies. By understanding such events as purely natural phenomena, human agency is ignored, both in reference to creating and preventing vulnerabilities. The shape and direction of the

pandemic is greatly influenced by our individual and collective choices. A particularly acute example of this is how vaccines are now being rolled out. According to the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines has been 'wildly uneven and unfair', noting that 10 countries have administered 75% of all vaccinations, and that 130 countries have yet to receive any vaccine doses.[9] What this means is that when and how this pandemic will end will differ greatly based on who and where you are in the world. This is emblematic of the more general point about COVID-19 being a social disaster, a perspective that reminds us of the role of human behaviours and decisions continue to play in the direction and nature of the pandemic, and how it will continue to develop going forward.

The social world feels like a snow globe that has been shaken, and as the snowflakes slowly settle, it will be easier for us to recognise that contained reality. For now, though, it is difficult to see clearly. While recognising this, it remains important and necessary that we try to come to grips with this ontological and epistemological chaos through our research and teaching, to look for ways to make sense of what the pandemic means for us and our world. Writing in 1975, Hannah Arendt suggested that 'we may very well stand at one of those decisive turning points of history which separate whole eras from each other. For contemporaries entangled, as we are, in the inexorable demands of daily life, the dividing lines between eras may be hardly visible when they are crossed; only after people stumble over them do the lines grow into walls which irretrievably shut off the past.'[10]

Across history there certainly have been many false starts and incomplete transitions, such as when Arendt made this observation. Nonetheless, the general point holds, and there are many signs that the pandemic may truly be one such turning point. We will not know until Minerva's owl has taken flight, but as those shades of grey become more pronounced in the evening sky, it is worthwhile reflecting on what this all might mean, and what part we can play in responding to the ontological and epistemological turmoil the pandemic has let loose on the world.

1Ted Steinberg, *Acts of god: the unnatural history of natural disaster in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118.

2Naomi Zack, *The American Tragedy of COVID-19 Social and Political Crises of 2020* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, forthcoming 2021).

3E. L. Quarantelli, 'What Is Disaster? The Need for Clarification in Definition and Conceptualization in Research,' University of Delaware Disaster Research Center, Article #177, 1985, pp. 41-73.

4James Boyd White, *Living Speech: Resisting the Empire of Force* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3.

5Zack, *The American Tragedy of COVID-19 Social and Political Crises of 2020*.

6Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, book 2.

7Shoshana Zuboff, The Coup We Are Not Talking About, *New York Times*, 29 January 2021: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/opinion/sunday/facebook-surveillance-society-technology.html.

8Rusty Ginn, 'First the People', *Epsilon Theory*, 14 April 2020: https://www.epsilontheory.com/first-the-people/.

9'"Wildly unfair": UN says 130 countries have not received a single Covid vaccine dose', *The Guardian*, 18 February 2021: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/18/wildly-unfair-un-says-130-countries-have-not-received-a-single-covid-vaccine-dose.

10Hannah Arendt, 'Home to Roost' in *Responsibility and Judgement* (New York: Shocken Books, 2003), 259.

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