Introduction to A Research Agenda for COVID-19 and Society

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COVID-19’s impacts are felt at all scales, from micron to the world itself. The pandemic seemingly marks all activities, from intimate interpersonal relations (no more kissing or hand shaking) to global commerce (including unprecedented interruptions to international trade). People have been redeployed as essential workers, found themselves suddenly working from home, been furloughed or made permanently unemployed. Parents have become their children’s primary teachers. Shopping – like much work, education and entertainment – is also now increasingly online. Lockdowns have altered our sense of our place in the world and our relationship to others. Multiple boundaries have blurred, including the distinction between physical space and digital space, between home and work, between leisure time and professional time, between economy and society (it turns out that a highly interventionist state is a possibility even in a neoliberal era) and sometimes between individual days as well. As someone put it, every day is ‘Blursday’.

Various commentators have noted the novelty of our situation. ‘A pandemic such as Covid-19 was widely predicted’, wrote Ziauddin Sardar (2021, p. 19):

But no one imagined that a virus, that most biologists do not even consider as a viable form of life, would stop the twenty-first century, high technology, world in its tracks: stop travel, stop physical contact, stop economic activities, stop growth, stop progress – indeed, stop time itself. Covid-19 demonstrated that it is only when we find ourselves in an unthought future, that we are forced to confront its full implication.

Or, as one of the contributors to this collection (McDonagh) puts it: ‘The COVID-19 pandemic has turbocharged world history while ravaging global populations. From digital transformations of work and education, to the development, clinical testing and distribution of new vaccines in unprecedented timeframes, adapting to the virus has driven structural shifts at breakneck
speed viewed historically’. Has history stopped or accelerated? It rather
depends upon what one is looking at. But at the very least we can agree that the
COVID-19 pandemic is historic.

Confronted by this frightening and disorienting reality and the need to
understand it, COVID-19 is much discussed, but only partly understood.
This volume is designed to add to our comprehension. Like other threatening
viruses before it, COVID-19 has precipitated an ‘epidemic of signification’
(Treichler, 1987). Amongst the weightier meanings generated, COVID-19
is taken to be a signifier of end times, a punishment from God (Dein et al.,
2020), a portal between this world and the next (Roy, 2020), an opportunity for
international medical cooperation (Buss & Tobar, 2020), an opportunity for
fascism to flourish (Davis, 2020, p. 44) and an opportunity for communism to
flourish (Žižek, 2020).

The primary vehicle through which the pandemic is apprehended is our
language, that core component of consciousness and communication, and
consequently of how we think and connect. Quotidian conversation adopted
public health discourse. People spoke of bubbles, contact tracing, deep cleans,
flattening the curve, achieving herd immunity, lockdown, long haulers, PPE,
the R number, self-isolation, social distancing and super-spreaders. New words
were coined to describe social practices within our new reality: anti-maskers,
the ’rona, coronaskeptics, covidiots, coviddivorces, coronapocalypse, doom-
scrollers, essential workers, the infodemic, quarintinis, WFH (working from
home) and Zoom (Roig–Marín, 2020). The latter becoming ‘the default modality
for remote engagement, rapidly morphing from brand name to eponymous
generic—a verb and a place and mode of being all at once’ (Architexturez
Research, 2021). Fashion, itself a mode of symbolic communication, has also
responded to COVID-19 with dress styles expressing anxiety, frustration and
resistance. Hatewear encompasses ensembles that are constantly worn in lock-
down despite being neither stylish nor comfortable, while sadwear celebrates
clothing that is worn to lift lockdown spirits (Elan, 2021).

Doubtless lives will be parsed into pre-COVID-19 and post-pandemic times.
Unique in spatial and temporal terms, this virus affects all people. COVID-19
is everywhere at the same time, and – due to global news networks, ubiquitous
social media and near real-time tallies of fatality rates courtesy of advances in
digital epidemiology (Ritchie et al., 2021) – we know it. Many of the world’s remotest regions have also been hit, with infections recorded in Greenland,
Montserrat, Rapanui (Easter Island) and even Antarctica (Letzing, 2020; Radio
New Zealand, 2020). As of March 2020, three quarters of the world’s population
were living in countries with stay-at-home commands, over 90 per cent
were residing in countries where schools had closed and workplace shutdowns
applied in nations responsible for 99 per cent of the planet’s Gross Domestic
Product (Chossière et al., 2021).

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In this collection we offer social science takes on the pandemic and insights
into what a research agenda for COVID-19 and society looks like from
different disciplinary perspectives. We do not attempt to offer a single
party line: people, social arrangements and the pandemic’s impacts are far
too variegated and complex for that. Instead, we have sought to provide as
broad a range as possible from a limited number of contributors. There is
a significant disciplinary spread, with authors drawn from: anthropology
(Trnka; Wynn), communications (Goode), disaster studies (Dittmer; Lorenz),
economics (McDonagh), epidemiology (Wallace & Wallace), Indigenous
studies (Lambert), philosophy (Dare; Kingsbury) and sociology (Clark; Craig;
Huppatz; Lupton; Matthewman; Southerton; Watson; Wyver). There is also
a career spread, with the collection’s contributors ranging from early career
researchers to emeritus professors. The combined wisdom in these pages is sig-
nificant. Collectively, they have been publishing from the mid-1970s up to the
present day. Those contributors are located in: Australia, Canada, Germany,
New Zealand and the United States of America. While much of the discussion
has global relevance (Dittmer; Lorenz; Matthewman; Wallace & Wallace), there
is a particular focus on Australia (Clark; Craig; Huppatz; Lupton; Southerton;
Watson; Wynn), Canada (Lambert), China (McDonagh), New Zealand (Dare;
Kingsbury; Trnka), Sweden (Wyver) and the United States (McDonagh), plus
a place none of us have yet been to but all of us have an interest in: the future
(Goode). The theoretical spread of the work that follows includes: critical
disaster studies (Dittmer & Lorenz; Lambert; Matthewman), critical futures
studies (Goode), critical whiteness studies (Wyver), evolutionary political
economy (McDonagh), phenomenology (Wynn & Trnka) and vital material-
ism (Southerton, Clark, Watson & Lupton). And various methods are drawn
upon in the process, such as: qualitative interviews (Wynn & Trnka), auto-
ethnography and ethnography (Wynn & Trnka), case studies (Southerton,
Clark, Watson and Lupton) and digital research methods – including digital
photo diaries, online interviews and surveys, and video ethnographies
(Southerton, Clark, Watson & Lupton; Wynn & Trnka).

Although the disciplinary frames, theories, methods and focus of the respective
chapters may differ, there are many commonalities. The pandemic is discussed
as a profound social problem throughout. There is the threat of the virus itself,
the magnification of already existing inequalities (for example, care burdens
and workloads of women, massive asset gains for the wealthy), the stereotyping of some groups (Asians accused of creating it, immigrants and asylum seekers blamed for spreading it). In addition to the pandemic rightly being seen as a problem, there are senses in which social science research into it also presents opportunities. Questions addressed in this collection include: how do we prevent these happening in the future, how do we change the world for the better and how do we do our own work differently?

References