

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

2020

Which COVID-19? Whose Crisis?

Gerry Canavan

Marquette University, gerard.canavan@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Canavan, Gerry, "Which COVID-19? Whose Crisis?" (2020). *English Faculty Research and Publications*. 564.

https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac/564

Which COVID-19? Whose Crisis? The emergence of the novel coronavirus onto the world stage since December 2019 and the consequent dissolution of the ordinary conditions of twenty-first-century capitalism has simultaneously produced a suffering universally felt (the *pan-* in *pandemic*) and intensely specific, highly differentiated, and hyperlocal, almost individualized categories of human misery. The virus has produced its own vocabulary—*essential workers, virtual learning, social distancing, economic impact payment*—that has quickly become ubiquitous and which has already become a site of contestation

and struggle. Does *essential* mean *vital*, *necessary*, or does it mean *disposable*? Does *virtual* mean *online*, or does it mean *not*? Can social distancing be mandatory, and under what sorts of conditions, and for how long? *Whose* economic impact, and which one? And do you really think that a one-time \$1200 check is going to cover the whole thing?

If COVID-19 feels apocalyptic in its violent power to disrupt the cultural and economic ties on which our sociality depends, grinding most commerce and interpersonal exchange of any kind to a halt within just a few weeks in the face of steadily rising case numbers, it is also apocalyptic in the original Greek sense of being an unveiling, a revelation. The virus has made visible capitalism's hidden fault lines:

- the divide between a managerial class that can be shifted to work from home and a worker class, low-paid, without significant savings, and (in the US) even lacking health-care benefits that must nonetheless put itself at daily risk of infection;
- the intergenerational poverty, dating back to the slave trade, that has left Black bodies significantly more at risk than white ones both for initial infection and for the development of serious complications;
- the irregular distribution of quality health care that has made some regions and some populations especially vulnerable to coronavirus, particularly a nursing home population that has in some regions in the US been literally decimated;
- the yawning gulf between the billion-dollar corporations for whom no level of bailout is too costly and the small businesses that have been left simply to wither on the vine without material support; and
- the differential impact of the lockdowns on households with and without children—with new psychic costs for being alone *and* new psychic costs for being together—and, within those households, on the uneven shares of the new domestic labor disproportionately falling on women's shoulders.

Like climate change, the Great Recession, and the rise of the zombies, the ostensibly universal scope of COVID-19 only reveals to us the things that have always been true about our society: that it considers certain types of lives more valuable than others, more worthy of protection and care; and that certain types of suffering are a social emergency demanding an immediate response. Other people, meanwhile, are simply collateral damage in the inexorable workings of automatic and remorseless laws of nature—a regrettable state of affairs, perhaps, but not something you could ever actually *do* anything about.

Little wonder then that the coronavirus has struck hardest in right-wing-led countries such as Brazil, Russia, the UK, and the US, whose ideological refusals both within the government and among the populace to accept the severity of the virus and the need for a suspension of the ordinary operation of capitalism for the duration of the pandemic have led to wildfire outbreaks that will now be impossible to suppress and that have put the entire national population at risk. The haunting spectacle of the US stock market rising and rising against a steady drumbeat of hospitalizations and deaths (as well as historically unprecedented leaps in unemployment unseen even during the Great Depression), with

Congress simply out of session for weeks in the midst of the worst global crisis since World War II, is a marker of late-period imperial decadence, registering the absolute callousness of our elites and the total inability of neoliberalism meaningfully to respond to this or any crisis. If COVID-19 can't make us think in a different way about the relationship between capitalism and human thriving—if it can't force us to see the utter toxicity of our existing social and economic relationality—what could? Instead, the very idea of wearing a mask at all has now become a political hot potato within the US, a question of allegiance to one political party or the other, rather than a minimal, commonsense public-health measure.

And yet there are strong indications that outside the Fox News bubble, and outside a political class that has plainly elected to send the global economy into a decade-long economic depression rather than admit that the market can't be the final arbiter of every problem, coronavirus seems indeed to have been an unveiling of truths too long left unacknowledged. The mass protests against police brutality in the US have been genuinely enormous both in their size and in their widespread popularity, and they have led, in very short order, to concessions and reforms previously unimaginable (if still vastly insufficient to the true scale of American racism). The tragic synchronicity between the coronavirus and Black Lives Matter has already been remarked upon by so many—that both the murder of George Floyd and the plight of those suffering from coronavirus are characterized by the inability to breathe—and unexpectedly seems to offer up for us the utopian glimmer that out of this unhappy time a world might yet be built that refuses to normalize pain. If science fiction and science-fiction studies are to be good for anything in this era of unfolding and overlapping material catastrophes, let us rededicate ourselves and our powers of imagination to the ruthless criticism of all that exists, in the service of what still might.—**Gerry Canavan, Marquette University**