

“Consciously Quarantined: A COVID-19 response from the Social Sciences”

Introduction to Series

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The past term has been tumultuous, to say the least.

Industrial action across UK Universities meant that classes and research were disrupted for a month whilst striking members of staff were absent (for the second time this academic year), resulting in a time of uncertainty and frustration for many. However, even this could not have prepared us for the momentous explosion of the coronavirus pandemic across the globe, and the mounting effects that this would have (and will continue to have) on our lives here in the UK.

I (Rebecca) had been in Rome the week that COVID-19 became a public health concern in the north of Italy. At this time I could never have guessed the devastating consequences that the virus would bring to the country, and I soon lamented the lack of caution and non-existent social distancing that I had practiced during that trip, before this practice came into common parlance or we really knew anything about coronavirus' arrival to Europe. Shuffling through the halls of the Vatican, mask-less and wantonly touching everything (not the art, mind)– this was the reality when COVID-19 was already in Italy. Foresight always affords us clarity when it is too late, unfortunately.

Watching COVID-19 sweep through the UK has been equally as shocking, and the rate at which this has developed into a public health emergency is unprecedented in our lifetime. Yet, as people are being advised across the world, now is the time in which we are encouraged to avoid panic and instead approach this pandemic consciously: self-isolation and quarantine for those of us who feel unwell, social distancing in totality, and frequent, 'deep' hand-washing.

In many ways, self-isolation could be seen as an academic's bread and butter – how else do we get papers written and assessments marked if not through shutting ourselves away with the computer for extended periods? However, despite our familiarity with quarantining at home, this is not an extended break from university attendance and the romanticizing of isolation may overlook the very real consequences of this, not just for scholars but for *everyone*. This is an anxious time, and we can be sensitive to that. That said, this also necessitates a need to think critically and contemplate the pandemic, pooling our mental resources and offering support and reflection to each other from afar.

This blog series will attempt to offer that platform upon which to do so.

Unlike 'traditional' series that have a definitive start and end, this endeavour will be different by necessity. Posts will be released frequently and work will be ongoing and, for now, *indefinite*. We hope that you will follow these posts along with us, and contribute your own comments, reflections, and pieces to the blog.

On a final note before signing off and beginning the series, let us return again briefly to the strikes, as they deeply apply to not only university life, but to the COVID-19 realities of many. Firstly, let us keep in mind *why* industrial

action was sought in the first place, and remember those colleagues and friends who struggled to survive on zero-hour contracts, insecure working conditions, and inability to meet financial needs. Stock-piling food and medicine in a secure home environment is a privilege not afforded to all, even those working in the university, and the strikes only served to highlight this harsh reality in a fateful run-up to the global pandemic.

Secondly, the experiences and concerns of students across the UK must be remembered. As classes switch to online teaching and a gargantuan, applaudable effort is made by teachers to do so, we can also remember that many students will have already missed out on lectures and tutorials for weeks prior to the pandemic.

Whilst some of us work from home with our educational gains already met and salaries secure, we can be urged to remember those close to us in the UK university system, and indeed those marginalised and vulnerable the world over, who will have a very different experience of COVID-19. This series will bring the diversity of these experiences into a forum that offers a space and a resource for collective sharing and discussion. We look forward to your contributions.

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