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# Economy and society in COVID times

Paul Langley

## Abstract

The Editorial Board of *Economy and Society* has assembled a virtual collection of 12 free access papers to mark a very significant anniversary – Volume 50 of the journal is being published during 2021. This overview explains the rationale for the collection in the context of the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and briefly details why we want to encourage the re-reading of these particular papers. Each paper has the potential to contribute to critical understandings and progressive political engagements with economy and society in COVID times. Read together, the collection also signals the kind of work which is likely to shape the immediate future of the journal. *Economy and Society* has long been a key venue for the publication of social science research into public health, disease and the life sciences, and this is at the core of the collection. But the global pandemic has wrought severe disruptions throughout economy and society, forcing a host of latent tendencies, tensions and divisions to the surface of public consciousness and political debate. Around half of the papers have therefore been selected because they cast a revealing light on some of the wider-ranging dynamics of economy and society that have become all too apparent in COVID times.

Keywords: coronavirus (COVID-19); pandemic; public health; economy; society.

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A virtual collection of 12 free access papers has been assembled by the Editorial Board of *Economy and Society* to mark a very significant anniversary – Volume 50 of the journal is being published during 2021. The papers are free to access from our website throughout the rest of the year. In part, the collection is an expression of our gratitude to the previous Editorial Board members who initiated and fashioned *Economy and Society*. The journal has always been collectively produced, with Board members undertaking much of the reviewing themselves and co-curating the journal's volumes and issues. But the virtual collection is primarily an opportunity to acknowledge and thank all authors who, by publishing their work with *Economy and Society*, contribute to the journal's development and direction. We are extremely fortunate to have such a diverse and rich array of papers to draw from for this collection, although we are also very aware that any selection of 12 papers cannot possibly do justice to the range and depth of the research published over five decades.

The marking of the journal's half century, however, necessarily confronts the profound tragedy of current times. Throughout 2020 and into 2021, the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic cast a very long shadow over Editorial Board planning for the journal's 50th anniversary. Our initial intention was to put together a collection of papers that was more celebratory in tone, but this approach became increasingly incongruous as the pandemic unfolded and the shocking death toll continued to rise. Now is not the moment, then, to showcase the papers which have been particularly influential in the history of the journal, and to produce, so to speak, a greatest hits album from a back catalogue of 'most cited' and 'most read'. It is also certainly not the right time for members of the current Editorial Board to select their own personal favourites, and to put together a mix tape or play list of papers to get the party started.

Drawn from across the previous 49 volumes of the journal, the papers in the virtual collection have been selected by the Editorial Board because of their relevance to the distressing and difficult context of the present-day pandemic. The result is a set of papers that we feel can each contribute to critical understandings and progressive political engagements with COVID times. Read together, the collection also signals the kind of work which is likely to shape the immediate future of the journal. Readers are invited to work with the papers as they wish, to encounter the productive and provocative qualities of each and every paper. We do not want to prescribe how readers can make their own use of the collection, nor to imply there are not many further papers previously published in *Economy and Society* that resonate strongly with the contemporary condition. The papers have been selected because, for us, they appear in various and different ways to speak to our present moment from across previous decades, and to bring insight to the economic, social and political realities of COVID times. In this respect, it is important to note that the collection has both spatial and temporal coordinates. Our selection of papers has been informed by our own experiences of the global pandemic. We are a group of United Kingdom-based academics, and the content of the collection is necessarily shaped by where we have lived and worked during COVID times.

To assemble the collection, we considered the full archive of the journal, including the corners and recesses which are typically less well visited by readers. That said, *Economy and Society* has long been a key venue for the publication of social science research into public health, disease and the life sciences, and this work provides the core of the collection. We want to encourage the re-reading of these papers because we find that they variously, critically and directly point to so many of the issues that animate COVID times. But the global pandemic has wrought severe disruptions throughout economy and society, forcing a host of latent tendencies, tensions and divisions to the surface of public consciousness and political debate. By design, therefore, roughly half of the free access papers included in the collection do not explicitly address the government and political economy of disease and public health. We want to foster the re-reading of these papers because we feel that, in different ways, they cast a sharp and revealing light on some (but certainly not all) of the wider-ranging dynamics of economy and society which have become all too apparent in COVID times.

### **Representations and rhetoric in COVID times**

Two papers in the virtual collection invite critical consideration of the prevailing languages, representations and rhetoric that are making COVID times intelligible. Both papers suggest that metaphors are always of more than merely metaphorical importance. With particular reference to the emergency response to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in Hong Kong in 2003, Peter Baehr's (2006) analysis of the use of military language in modern epidemics opens a way for thinking through why the contemporary pandemic is so consistently represented as a war being fought 'on the front line', wherein government seeks to 'contain' and 'defeat' a viral enemy through the 'gearing up', 'ramping up' and 'rolling out' of responses. Paying particular attention to Susan Sontag's essays on cancer, TB and AIDS, Baehr highlights the analytical and political limitations of simply rejecting and opposing 'disease-as-war language'. While these representations are abhorrent and abominable, his main argument is that they also reveal a great deal about the relations between social life and 'the state's most basic rationale: the protection of citizens from each other and from foreign "invaders"' (p. 43).

Robert Peckham's (2013) paper, meanwhile, highlights how the discourse and concepts of epidemiology have become constitutive, more broadly, of governmental framings of destabilizing global processes which are certainly not limited to the cross-border spread of communicable diseases. The interconnections between the global financial crisis that began in 2007 and the 2009 swine-origin influenza A (H1N1) outbreak provide Peckham's focus. He details how representation of the financial crisis as a 'contagion' emanating from US subprime mortgage markets was a result of theoretical models and technical languages travelling from the domain of epidemiology and public health into

economics and financial theory, a migration that began amidst the ‘emerging markets’ crisis of the late 1990s. Re-read amidst the public discourse of ‘super-spreader events’, ‘vectors’ and ‘hot spots’ in COVID times, Peckham’s paper highlights the wider governmental prominence and power of ecosystems thinking and the complex-systems paradigm.

### **Public health and medical science in COVID times**

Two further papers in the collection draw critical attention to the roles of public health regimes and medical science in the contemporary global pandemic. Concentrating on the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak, Andrew Lakoff (2015) builds on the later writings of Michel Foucault to distinguish between two mechanisms that seek to secure life in the face of infectious diseases: actuarial devices which attempt to map disease over time and across populations in order to gauge and mitigate risk; and, sentinel devices that seek to anticipate and prepare for uncertain and unprecedented diseases which cannot be mapped over time. For Lakoff, the government of the uncertainties of public health has become more prominent since the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, and especially in response to the global circulation of emergent and potentially catastrophic diseases. Such uncertainties challenge existing modes of jurisdiction (responsible experts and agencies) and veridiction (‘the problem of how to know that a potentially catastrophic outbreak is imminent’) within public health regimes (p. 41). While there is a great deal to be gained from re-reading Lakoff’s (2015) paper in COVID times, considerable insights follow from foregrounding the tensions that he highlights between these two security mechanisms and their governmental assemblages. One is an apparatus that imposes strict quarantines, closes borders, traces individual cases and restricts circulations of all kinds in order to manage risks. But this apparatus competes and coalesces with ‘security mechanisms’ that ‘allow disease to circulate but minimize its damage through collective interventions such as mass vaccination’ (p. 42). Such tensions within public health regimes would seem to be at the heart of the schisms and confusions of contemporary pandemic governance.

Annemarie Mol’s (1998) paper is taken from a double special issue that commemorated the work of the French philosopher and historian of science, Georges Canguilhem (1904–1995). In her contribution, Mol explores Canguilhem’s normative insistence that the lived reality of a disease should be more significant to diagnosis than the laboratory study of a disease. For Mol, this is a provocation to analyse the relations between the clinic and the lab within contemporary medicine wherein ‘detection and diagnosis depend on the initiative of lay people in seeking out medical help’ (p. 267). Re-reading Mol’s analysis opens up some interesting and significant questions about the role of the medical sciences in COVID times. For example, in the United Kingdom at present, those who believe they are experiencing COVID symptoms are

required to bypass the clinic and, so to speak, go direct to the lab to be diagnosed through the binary of a test. This displacement of clinical expertise has featured in other ways during COVID times, not least when 'lay people' have shared experiences on social media platforms of their complex health complications following infection, and formed support groups and successfully campaigned for the condition of 'Long COVID' to be diagnosed and treated.

### **Expertise and responsibility in COVID times**

Papers by Nikolas Rose (1993), Linsey McGoey (2007) and Melanie White (2005) serve to connect our virtual collection with a more sweeping set of public and political debates over professional scientific expertise and personal responsibility that have animated the COVID pandemic. As Rose (1993) makes clear, multiple forms of expertise have been core to liberal modes of governing individual and collective conduct since the nineteenth century. But relations between expertise and the formal political apparatus are dynamic and have changed over time, and this would seem especially pertinent to critical understandings and engagements with COVID times. For Rose, the 'machinery of rule' in mid-twentieth century liberal welfare states was 'transcribed from the views of experts', but 'advanced liberal' logics of rule now subject these 'positive knowledges of human conduct' to constant assault from 'calculative regimes of accounting and financial management' (p. 295). Oft-repeated claims that governance in COVID times is 'guided by' or 'follows the science' can thus be understood as but one face of a 'specific dialectic of hope and suspicion' that is 'today attached to experts and their truth' (p. 295). Relations between science and the political apparatus are in a constant state of flux in contemporary liberal government.

Linsey McGoey (2007), meanwhile, provides for a contrasting perspective on the place of expertise in pandemic governance. The focus for McGoey's paper is scientific and governmental debates in the United Kingdom over the safety of antidepressants such as Prozac and Seroxat. In our virtual collection, the paper serves to raise serious and significant questions about the validity and cogency of claims that governmental decisions in the pandemic 'follow the science'. Considered from the vantage point of McGoey's paper, such claims sit far too comfortably with problematic assumptions about the rationality, functionality and efficiency of regulators and bureaucracies. The relations between scientists, scientific expertise and government agents are far more complex. The latter will likely not only select, conceal and obfuscate scientific knowledge and data in public circulation, but will also strategically feign ignorance of knowledge and data in order to defend their role and legitimacy in the face of public scrutiny.

Debates over the role and rule of experts in the governance of the COVID pandemic have often gone hand in hand with discussions and disputes over personal responsibility and freedoms. Here a re-reading of Melanie White's

(2005) paper would seem very apt indeed. White's paper is a response to the concern with 'character' and its formation in liberal politics on both sides of the Atlantic around the turn of the millennium. White identifies a form of 'ethological governance' in which character serves as the normative standard and scale by which the responsible exercise of personal freedoms is judged. Turning to White in COVID times – when liberal government 'at a distance' has typically entailed explicit restrictions on the freedoms of movement, association and so on – illuminates why the disposition of 'common sense' has typically been invoked as an index of how one should conduct one's obligations to oneself and to others. Consider, for example, the media spectacle of the May 2020 press conference in the garden of Downing Street, given by Dominic Cummings, then chief advisor to British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. In this trial by media, it was not Cummings' actions that were on trial, as he largely admitted that he had breached the government's lockdown rules a month or so earlier. Instead, Cummings' defence, in essence, rested on his apparent character and virtue as an ethical actor who had chosen to break the rules because he was seeking to care for himself, his wife and family.

### **Economic lives in COVID times**

The virtual collection includes three papers that have been selected to provoke explicit consideration of the wider-ranging economic dynamics and complications of COVID times. In different ways, each paper centres attention on how diverse and differentiated lived experiences of the pandemic have been grounded in intensifying socio-economic inequalities. Focused on the purchase of housing 'off plan' in Russia, Caroline Humphrey's (2020) paper serves to foreground the speculative logics and distributions of asset wealth that have become of even greater significance to economic life in COVID times. Humphrey's relational conception of speculation as a 'social form' draws particular attention to its capacity to hold together multiple and dynamic interests and aspirations, including those of contractors, estate agents, bankers, lenders and purchasers. Framed in this way, economic governance during the pandemic – especially the quantitative easing (QE) and purchase programmes of central banks that have enabled the huge spike in sovereign borrowing and boost the value of assets of all kinds – can be understood as interventions in a financialized social and political order centred on and around speculation. That the object of speculation in Humphrey's paper is housing is particularly insightful, moreover, not least because it is patterns of real estate ownership which for several decades have been the key driver of the uneven distribution of compounding wealth throughout society. Home has, of course, come to feature in innumerable ways as a space of intensely gendered social reproduction, work and security during COVID times. But the place of housing in today's

speculative orderings has also ensured that home has been a crucial contributing and determining factor in the intensification of economic precarity and insecurities.

Indeed, it is the lived experiences of those who have been unable to escape their usual formal workplaces to 'work from home' during the pandemic that the virtual collection seeks to bring into view through Stephan Feuchtwang's (1982) paper. With reference to labour market laws and regulations, Feuchtwang's (1982) core argument is that the racial division of labour is figured through employment practices. Racial discrimination elsewhere and throughout society does not merely register in labour markets, but is made through the workings and operations of these markets. The racial division of labour and what Feuchtwang terms 'occupational ghettos' have been variously brought into sharp relief in the course of the pandemic. For example, during the summer of 2020 in the United Kingdom, exploitations of race, gender and class were front page news as a COVID outbreak was linked with employment practices in Leicester's garment factories. Many factories were fulfilling supply chain contracts for Boohoo, an online-only fast fashion company that was growing rapidly as lockdown restrictions furthered the ongoing problems of high-street retailers. The same period in the United Kingdom saw an outbreak on a Hereford farm that employed several hundred vegetable pickers. Many had travelled from Eastern Europe to take up seasonal work at the farm, and the virus spread rapidly through their cramped and temporary living conditions on the site.

William Walters' (1995) paper provides a somewhat different vantage point for critical consideration of formal work and labour markets in COVID times. Walters outlines the emergence of 'unemployment' as an object of liberal government at the start of the twentieth century, and traces how this turned the absence of employment into an explicitly economic problem of the labour market to be governed by the state (rather than a moral and cultural problem to be governed through households, families, civic associations, and so on). Revisited in the context of the contemporary governmental interventions of liberal states – most notably, how furlough schemes have sought to ward off the problem of mass unemployment – Walters' paper offers some intriguing insights. In effect, he highlights the spatial and temporal specificity of this emergency mode of governing unemployment, how it is far from the norm throughout the world, and how, once in place, it remains an uncertain arrangement that will likely become increasingly challenged as the pandemic continues to cast a long shadow over economic lives. As Walters notes, despite the emergence of unemployment as a collective economic problem of liberal government, state interventions are constantly questioned through contrasting cultural norms that promote personal responsibility for deprivation and poverty.

## The end of COVID times?

Two free access papers in the virtual collection serve to turn the attention of readers to the potential denouement of COVID times, and the vaccine programmes that have begun to gather pace during 2021. Ann H. Kelly's (2018) paper details the accelerated development, testing and licensure of vaccines in the context of the West African Ebola outbreak of 2013–2016. Underpinning vaccine development was a struggle to know and map the future uncertainties of the disease, but Kelly's key critical point is that these analytical endeavours and outcomes were affectively charged with anxiety and fear. She focuses, in particular, on the evidentiary charisma of the 'hockey stick' graph of the exponential growth of the Ebola outbreak that, despite proving to be wildly inaccurate, nonetheless acted to give great impetus to vaccine development. The parallels with the mediation work of charts, graphs and slides in the context of the contemporary coronavirus pandemic are striking, as these visual representations of the future course of COVID times have again been crucial to the 'moral and affective architecture of experimental vaccine research' (p. 138).

Javier Lezaun (2018), meanwhile, explores the changing political economy of malaria drug discovery by tracing the 50-year career of a single molecule, tafenoquine. Lezaun is interested, in particular, in the articulation of competing visions of the disease around the capabilities (and limitations) of particular molecules. As he details, the potential of tafenoquine was crucial to the collaboration between the pharmaceutical industry and not-for-profit and philanthropic organizations which produced a new malaria drug filled with the humanitarian promise of global eradication. Re-reading Lezaun's paper in the current moment sharpens critical appreciation of the way that vaccination is presently held out as the solution to COVID times, and how this promissory position is differently articulated in both the biopolitical economy of global health and strategic competition between national political economies. Will vaccination programmes keep up with the continually mutating coronavirus and usher in the promised 'return to normal' across the globe, and how will intersections and disjunctions between philanthropic-pharma and new configurations of state-pharma complexes shape the uneven and unequal socio-spatial geographies of these developments?

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