CMC

Catching our breath: Reading the pandemic through crime, media and culture

SAGE

Sarah Armstrong
University of Glasgow, UK

Katherine Biber
University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Travis Linnemann
Kansas State University, USA

This symposium was rapidly assembled to mark the present moment, in which a novel coronavirus has unleashed a global pandemic. This moment is itself marked by rapid change, and this collection records knowledge and experiences that may soon be eclipsed by newer emergent urgencies. We invited this group of contributors from Australia, Colombia, Hong Kong, New Zealand, the Philippines and the United States to provide a reflection on the pandemic from their position, on any aspect that would be important for thinking through the intersections of crime, media and culture. The resulting collection, produced in little more than a month, powerfully achieves more than we could have hoped, mapping COVID-19 as a global phenomenon, but one which is read and experienced quite differently across contexts. The symposium was conceived in May 2020, contributions were completed during June, and we wrote this introduction in late July. Over just these three months, the world has changed again, and again.

We cannot yet make sense of the situation we are in. For now, our aim has been to capture a diverse set of perspectives at a moment which almost certainly is only the beginning. Some contributors ask us to bear witness to atrocity taking place while attention is deflected onto COVID-19, while others give us a glimpse of potentially transformative, even hopeful, responses. Some remind us of previous times and pandemics, others dwell in the present noticing as the strange becomes familiar and mundane.

The Black Death has so far been the deadliest pandemic in human history. Its impact on human existence entailed profound changes, not least in the organisation and legal regulation of population. Vagrancy laws, and the formation of police powers to enforce them, date to this catastrophe.

Corresponding author:
Sarah Armstrong, University of Glasgow, G12 8QQ, UK.
Email: Sarah.Armstrong@glasgow.ac.uk

William Chambliss, used this example to urge more 'analyses of the relationship between particular laws and the social setting in which these laws emerged, are interpreted and take form' (Chambliss, 1964: 67).

As a double entendre, the Black Death points us towards Black death in our own times. COVID-19 has entailed disproportionate numbers of deaths among Black people, Indigenous people and among people who are less rich and less institutionally powerful than those controlling the response to this crisis. It is important therefore to mark the distinct patterns of lethality of the current disease and its management. The present pandemic has revealed and intensified the fractures of race, gender and class, even before it collided with the brutal, televised police suffocation of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020. Police violence and pandemic lockdown now have converged, activating the largest uprising in American history, the cry that Black Lives Matter reverberating well beyond the US. Populism was cynically leveraged to empower authoritarian leaders in places like the Philippines, Brazil, the US, Russia, China and Hungary, and now it coalesces rage at suppressive, chaotic and mendacious reactions of states around the world.

Michelle Brown opens this symposium by directly connecting plague, racialised injustice and insurrection. She alights on the figure of the Crow, a neglected character in Foucault's account of plague, 'who can be left to die' signifying the 'people of little substance who carry the sick, bury the dead, clean and do many vile and abject offices'. In a reflection that is both lyrical and activist the reader is guided between Foucault's text and the present field in which racial capitalism has produced a social order dependent on disposable 'essential' workers. Her offering amounts to a political call to arms, and she includes a set of resources to educate and guide thoughtful action. Tatiana Sanchez Parra exposes the state violence happening under cover of COVID-19 in rural Colombia. A list of social leaders assassinated between March and June 2020, mostly Indigenous or Afro-Colombian people, concludes her contribution, epitomising not only the lack of help organised by the state, but its active campaign of murder against those who have been part of community-led mutual aid efforts to face the epidemic.

In Hong Kong, Milan Ismangil and Maggy Lee explore the political uses of COVID-19, where authorities invoked public health powers to contain dissent. They share images of protest walls and examples of creative resistance – with pro-democracy activists making use of the video game Animal Crossing to mount virtual protests – illustrating the vibrant spirit of activism around them. They write just as a China-imposed security law took force in Hong Kong on 30 June 2020, and as the coronavirus resurges there, promising new but unpredictable entanglements of disease and political suppression.

In her visual and textual contribution, Alison Young walks through the city of Melbourne during its first phase of pandemic response. Young's contributions to criminology have transformed our understanding of public space, urban and street life and the atmospheres of crime and public order; her piece vividly captures an early moment in the semiotics of pandemic control, when we first encountered social isolation, lockdown, distancing and the wearing of masks. Also in a visual and textual piece, Stefano Bloch has archived the street art responding to the virus, much of which captures the themes explored in this collection, but which also points to the conspiracy theories, ambiguities, humour and irony in the flourishing expression of street artists responding to the pandemic.

Many contributions demonstrate how the pandemic has been deployed as a stalking-horse for other repressive measures. In the Philippines, as described by Jeremiah Joven Joaquin and Hazel Biana, emergency legislation has been used to suppress free speech, resistance and protest, and the public health measures have become tethered to 'anti-terror' laws. Meanwhile, people in

immigration detention have been subjected to intensified carceral control measures under the guise of public health. Anthea Vogl and colleagues provide a thorough account of the hardship imposed on migrants and asylum seekers in Australia, where existing rigid border control measures have been further weaponised by the pandemic. Their contribution also reveals the ongoing collaboration between corporations and government, in which enormous profits are generated from the ongoing detention of those seeking asylum and refuge. It also points to playful acts of creative resistance, where activists provide one-star TripAdvisor reviews of economy motels being used for immigration detention.

In their contribution from New Zealand, Elizabeth Stanley and Trevor Bradley offer a powerful counterpoint to the dominant discourse about that country's successful pandemic response. Setting out the racialised impact of intensified police powers, they illuminate the over-representation of Māori. Importantly, they also show that a large part of the successful response to the pandemic arose from Māori-established Iwi (tribal) roadside checkpoints, an autonomous community safety response.

This collection concludes with Jeff Ferrell's account of scrounging in a trash bin while cycling during the lockdown. He finds a cache of discarded postcards, sent just before another world changing moment – World War I and the 1918 flu pandemic. These trigger his quiet and devastating reflection on civic landmarks, government authority and state violence.

The contributions in this symposium represent a small slice of the global experience of COVID-19. However, they demonstrate that the pandemic is entangled with local forces, movements and vulnerabilities, past and present. In a future we cannot yet imagine, we hope that scholars and activists will continue to generate powerful responses to this moment, untangling the threads of crime, media and culture implicated in the world's response to a global health challenge.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

Reference
Chambliss W (1964) A sociological analysis of the law of vagrancy. *Social Problems* 12(1): 67–77.

Author biographies
Sarah Armstrong is Professor in Sociology, University of Glasgow.

Katherine Biber is Professor of Law at the University of Technology Sydney.

Travis Linnemann is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Kansas State University.