

# COVID-19 and the Metaphors of War

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### Introduction

The menacing COVID-19 pandemic is often described using war metaphors. Both domestic and foreign politicians have stressed that they are in the middle of a “COVID-19 war.” However, if the metaphor of war spreads, people will only see politicians as reliable saviors because of their fear of COVID-19.

In the media, Japan’s intensive care units and emergency rooms have been called “war zones” with doctors and nurses as “front-line soldiers” battling to save lives. Although explaining medical emergencies through war metaphors is common, doing so is often problematic.<sup>1</sup> Besides ignoring

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Lawn et al., “Examining the Use of Metaphors to Understand the Experience of Community Treatment Orders for Patients and Mental Health Workers,” *BMC Psychiatry* 16, no. 1 (March 2016): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-016-0791-z>.

and belittling the horrors and dangers of actual war, such metaphors often disregard practical medical preventative measures and overemphasize abstract social control. Unlike enemy combatants, the virus has no conscious will to kill people.<sup>2</sup>

Let us stop humanizing the virus with imprecise metaphors. Ultimately, we need to regard COVID-19 as a serious disease that can infect anyone.

Wearing masks and social distancing are encouraged to prevent the spread of infection. Doing so with a “war” metaphor becomes a means of “self-defense” against others to protect oneself from the infectious “attack.” However, since we may be infected asymptotically, we should wear masks and practice social distancing out of compassion and solidarity to prevent the spread of our infection to others.

Responding to the situation, people took the time to make their own reusable face masks when these were difficult to obtain. Some even made their own disinfectant or alcohol instead of purchasing these in groceries or drugstores. When we disregard COVID-19 war metaphors, we can see how people in the crisis of a pandemic are adjusting their daily lives through ingenuity and patience. Through this perspective, we accept the fact that we are all in the “With-Corona” age for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>2</sup> Xu Qian et al., “Fighting against the Common Enemy of COVID-19: A Practice of Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind,” *Infectious Diseases of Poverty* 9, no. 1 (April 2020): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40249-020-00650-1>.

## Public Health and Social Control

In describing diseases through metaphors, it suggests that the suppression of individual rights may be unavoidable under the pretext of winning a war. It could even be said that restricting individuals to stay indoors to prevent the spread of COVID-19 serves as a de facto quarantine. French Philosopher Michel Foucault states in his *Birth of the Clinic*, “Public health is a sophisticated form of segregation.” Furthermore, “Public health contains an aspect of social control.”<sup>3</sup> Once an infectious disease breaks out a supervised “military model” is adopted. Cities are divided into districts and sub-districts with all data meticulously analyzed and all outbreaks constantly recorded.

According to WHO guidelines,<sup>4</sup> public health is defined by Sir Donald Acheson as “the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organized efforts of society.” It has also been written that health-related efforts will be protected by society as a whole; however, such health-related efforts could also justify intensified social control.<sup>5</sup> Under the guise of “warfare,”

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Naissance de La Clinique: Une Archéologie Du Regard Médical*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Marks, David J. Hunter, and Richard Alderslade, “Strengthening Public Health Capacity and Services in Europe: A Concept Paper” (Denmark: World Health Organization, 2011), 13, [https://www.euro.who.int/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/152683/e95877.pdf](https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/152683/e95877.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization, “Public Health Services,” 2012, <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/Health-systems/public-health-services/public-health-services>.

social control is especially intensified. This has been practiced in countries where curfews have been issued and police have cracked down on violators. During the declaration of a state of emergency in Japan, it was reported that special “self-restraint police” (*Jishuku Keisatsu*), merely ordinary watchful citizens, attached notices to shops demanding their immediate closure.<sup>6</sup>

### Doing away with Glorified Metaphors

American author Susan Sontag wrote in the beginning of her book, *Illness as a Metaphor*: “Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship.<sup>7</sup> Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick.” When people embellish their illnesses in the kingdom of the sick with exaggerated metaphors, they often start embracing fantasies that people started to believe cancer totally covers all their lives. For Sontag, cancer is wrapped in war metaphors. It is a disease that “invades” the body and sets up “colonies” in separate areas; the goal of treatment is to “beat” it into “submission.”

Siddhartha Mukherjee, an American doctor born in India, wrote in *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* that by dressing cancer in a “war” metaphor, a large amount of

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<sup>6</sup> Hajime Ota, “‘A Sense of Justice’ that Creates a Self-Restraint Police,” *Nikkei Newspaper*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO61027170R00C20A7CR8000/>.

<sup>7</sup> Sontag, Susan, *Illness as a Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 3.

money was procured with the pretext of winning the war.<sup>8</sup> On reinspection, this enhanced the morale of medical researchers and led to the development of medical treatments. While this result was desirable, there could be a hidden message within the metaphor: use all available means to fight the deadly enemies. This leads to the ironic notion that the cancer was cured, but the patient died. As Sontag writes, “nearly any damage to the body is justified if it saves the patient’s life.”<sup>9</sup>

The negative consequences of war-like metaphors can be easily overlooked. Moreover, epidemics often give rise to social prejudice and stigmas. In Japan, reports abound of medical staff and their families suffering discrimination. For example, several cases are reported that children of medical staff refused to attend nursery school because they are suspected of being COVID-19 positive. Physician and nursing associations have been pleading to redress this injustice.

Another movement that criticizes those who “disrespect the health rules of society” for not wearing masks or practicing social distancing has been growing. Transgressors are accused and chastised for shirking “wartime” rules by not wearing masks. Whatever the stigma, it distracts public opinion from the original goal of preventing viral infections and results in discrimination. According to Sontag, “the most truthful way

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<sup>8</sup> Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* (New York: Scribner, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*, 65.

of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking.” The healthiest version of becoming sick requires sweeping away the metaphorical view of illness.<sup>10</sup> For the COVID-19 pandemic, we should do the same and remove the war metaphors to avoid every possible stigma.<sup>11</sup>

### Protecting Others

In severing war metaphors from the COVID-19 pandemic, our preliminary mindset must be to protect others from ourselves to reduce the infection rate. Instead of forcing others to control themselves, we willingly take on the call to protect each other from infection through the simple act of wearing masks and physical distancing or the more trying decision to stay home.

We often wear a mask after catching a cold to prevent passing viruses to others. Wearing masks also protects us from allergens that cause hay fever. In the case of COVID-19, it is said that even after catching the virus many people are asymptomatic.<sup>12</sup> With this uncertainty, wearing masks in public is mainly a precaution to protect the people around us.

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<sup>10</sup> Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

<sup>12</sup> Darryl Macer, “Wearing Masks in COVID-19 Pandemic, the Precautionary Principle, and the Relationships between Individual Responsibility and Group Solidarity,” *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics EJAIB* 30, no. 4 (May 2020): 129–32.

Until proven otherwise, it is believed that children have milder symptoms. In Japan, most of the schools began to close in early March. In other countries, children were also told to stay home.<sup>13</sup> Being asked to stay home was not only because the children themselves were at risk, but because of the possibility that they may infect elderly relatives in high-risk categories. We need to recognize and understand the great sacrifices of children in forcing them to stay home for the protection of the elderly.

The wearing of a mask and self-quarantining are moral thoughtful acts. Wearing a mask reduces the fear of strangers and shows recognition of social etiquette as well as this consideration for others. Additionally, self-quarantining is not only to protect oneself from “enemies” on the street but also to prevent infecting others.

### **Compassion in a “With-Corona” Society**

Public health is conflicted, pitting social responsibility against individual rights. However, in our “With-Corona” society, we must find a balance between the two. Not only should we wear masks and practice physical distancing, but we as a whole society should also avoid the risk of viral transmission. Rather than view this as an infringement upon our individual rights, we should regard the wearing of masks and social distancing as our voluntary consideration for others.

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<sup>13</sup> UNESCO, “Education: From Disruption to Recovery,” n.d., <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

Society is not just made of separate individuals and neither should we fear each other. Instead, it is a means to connect with each other through trust and compassion.<sup>14</sup> If we take this stance when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, we can ameliorate the combative attitudes we have toward others and ignite feelings of mutual solidarity as well as mutual care.<sup>15</sup>

A pandemic is a public opportunity to raise the awareness of many citizens. In our “With-Corona” society, each person needs to cooperate and contribute actively while considering the health of others.

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<sup>14</sup> Bill Gates, “Responding to Covid-19 — A Once-in-a-Century Pandemic?” *New England Journal of Medicine* 382, no. 18 (April 2020): 1677–79, <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2003762>.

<sup>15</sup> World Emergency COVID19 Pandemic Ethics (WeCope) Committee, “Statement on Individual Autonomy and Social Responsibility within a Public Health Emergency,” July 18, 2020, [https://www.eubios.info/yahoo\\_site\\_admin/assets/docs/WeCopeStatementAutonomyandResponsibility.199134724.pdf](https://www.eubios.info/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/WeCopeStatementAutonomyandResponsibility.199134724.pdf).

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