

COVID-19 and the Political Cultures of the Public Sphere

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The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the underlying political cultures that shape the different responses to this global crisis. Due to the unbalanced social arrangements between the rich and the poor in Philippine society, for example, the less privileged were crowded out from testing queues by the so-called “VIPs” (Very Important Persons) who prioritized themselves by being tested at their own convenience. We also saw how health protocols were violated with impunity by those who are in power while those who belong to the vulnerable sectors of society were severely punished for committing minor infractions.

To alleviate the additional burdens that are being brought to bear on the poor by public policies such as community quarantines and economic shutdowns, non-governmental organizations reactivated themselves to provide immediate, although merely palliative, assistance to those who were gravely affected by unemployment, hunger, and anomie. Health workers, security officers, delivery men and women,

and other so-called front-liners, exerted heroic deeds to compensate for the delayed and inadequate responses of public institutions.

The essays in this issue unveil the hidden cultural dimensions of the collective attempts to address the problems posed by this pandemic. They shed light on the cunning “wisdom of the crowds”¹ lurking behind the deeply entrenched political and economic mechanisms that were caught flat-footed by this contagion. They further show that ignoring the cultural dimension of public crises, such as this pandemic, leads to unintended adverse consequences that eventually affect the stability of political and economic institutions. The most vulnerable sectors of society, unwittingly, unnecessarily, and unfortunately, are the first victims to be trampled upon during these adversities.

The first article, Peter Murphy’s account of COVID-19 as a social disease, highlights the cultural practices that magnify or mitigate the effects of the pandemic. His analysis of data from all over the world shows that high-contact cultures are more likely to be affected than those that already practice some form of “physical distancing” amongst themselves. He then cautions us against hysterical and knee-jerk reactions to address this crisis by becoming more careful in crafting public policies and protocols.

¹ James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Randombooks, 2004), p. xiii. According to Surowiecki, “under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them.”

The second article, Federico Lagdameo’s “Normalizing the Population: the Biopolitics of the New Normal,” describes the displacement of public and commercial transactions from the physical world into the virtual infosphere wherein humans are treated as mere “inforgs”: entities that are no different from the data churned in and processed by information technologies. Actual interactions beyond the virtual public spaces are mediated by layers of social distancing such as masks, face shields, and personal protection equipment. Xenophobic attitudes are heightened as foreigners are suspected of harbouring the dreaded virus.

In the third article, “Disease and Disparities: Structural Violence in the Time of our Covidized Lives,” Aurelio Agcaoili illustrates how the pandemic accentuated the social inequalities within Philippine society. The structural imbalances between the privileged classes and the poorest of the poor are made more pronounced in the way the health care system paid special attention to the needs of the rich while marginalizing the poor with less accommodating services.

Jaqueline J. Tolentino’s Research Note, “Relational Egalitarianism and the COVID-19 Pandemic,” takes Agcaoili’s structural analysis a step further by emphasizing the synergistic and complex inequalities beyond the usual problems generated by society’s unequal distribution of wealth and resources. By employing the framework of

relational egalitarianism to disclose the adverse impact of government policies among different social classes especially for the poor and marginalized sectors of society, she proposes a “non-ideal theory” that can offer guidance for justice-oriented decisions on the basis of actual and current problems.

For our Feature Articles, we have chosen two reports by Southeast Asian scholars whose countries both successfully contained the initial wave of the pandemic by prioritizing the health of their people over the state’s economic concerns. They harnessed their collective wisdom to protect themselves from the virus.

The first report by Ngo Thi Tuyen shows how in spite of their population of almost 100 million and their limited medical and economic resources, Vietnam did not suffer any casualty during the first wave of the pandemic. They spent only two percent of their Gross Domestic Product to address this crisis. She attributes their success to the transparency of their government’s reports, the prioritization of health over economic issues, and their “synergistic system” of cooperation. They organized themselves as if “each citizen is a soldier, each family a fighting team, and each district is a solid fortress.” Moreover, their epidemiologists took over the leading role in steering the direction of their containment policies.

In Thailand, Soraj Hongladarom reports that although Thailand was the first country outside China to have contracted the virus, it relatively succeeded in containing

COVID-19's transmission. According to him, this was due to the solidarity of the Thai people themselves. They promoted their belief that the well-being of individuals depends on everyone else. Medical professionals and public health authorities demanded adherence to health protocols from their government instead of using the pandemic to control dissent. Village health volunteers mobilized themselves to disseminate public health concerns among the population and social pressure was exerted on those who did not wear face masks. When social restrictions were lifted, their political resistance against their militaristic government was reenergized by the vibrant protest movements led by their youth.

In her Book Review, Rowena Azada-Palacios emphasizes the public and systemic character of this pandemic. As examples of the complexity and interrelatedness of politically-charged issues, she alludes to the challenges that must be met by educational institutions that now require social distancing in their practices, the insidious manipulation of information and communication technologies, and the emergence of populism as a form of governance, among others.

Our problematic situation reminds us to become more agile, albeit cautious, in dealing with the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) of our contemporary world. Our next issue will articulate some of the valuable lessons learned from this pandemic in terms of food security, peace-building, and ecological justice.