Place and pandemics – reflections on the role of geography

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Editorial commentary and invitation to contribute

COVID-19 has demonstrated the significance of and evolving nature of place. It has revealed how our local worlds revolve around the axis of the global one, and that when global flows stop, so do we. How do we construct ourselves now? Are there possibilities for reinvention? What do we do now that a crisis is not an abstract concept occurring 'somewhere else', but is now in our backyards?

Geographical practices and thought are integral to how we answer these questions, and to how we articulate visions for our future post COVID. Geography's pre-occupation with the relationship between people, space, scale, and place matters now more than ever. Geographers use these terms constantly – the scale of the pandemic, the places it is located, the importance of proximity and space between each other. Our awareness of geographical space is acute as we navigate supermarket aisles - or invade and then transform our child's play rooms into our own home offices. At regional scales we watch businesses go into hibernation or collapse as their own spatial reach diminishes. At a global scale we watch whole countries mapped with corona deaths, survivals, its spatial reach clawing out in colourful cartographic disarray into hundreds of places at planetary scale.

The geographies of globalisation have been upended, with trade routes, tourism, and migration halted in their tracks. Geographical and cultural identity has been sharpened – 'Australians' who are now naturalised citizens living in other countries have returned home to Australia – even after decades living elsewhere. The return of Adam Hills from the UK to run the *Last Leg* via zoom TV is an interesting example of this in action. Geo-political lines are being drawn and re drawn, citizens watch and, in some cases, participate, in the global blame game being played out and politicians scrabble to be the leaders they need to be but too often don't know how to be in practice; many never have been tested in such a dramatic way before.

Social distancing has also shocked us into an experiential realisation of how we manage our personal space, where and how we are undertaking our everyday practices and with whom. Our homes have now become a palimpsest of locales, layered with personal memories and business combined, with different generations and genders making space for each other. Even the dogs have stopped howling during the day, overjoyed that their owners remain at home with them. In some households, relations have been renewed, but in others, as Australian statistics show, (since the lockdown in March), domestic and family violence victims seeking urgent assistance has risen by 10 per cent.

The social justice issues that bedevil the resolution of any wicked problem have intensified. In particular, the poor, the elderly, Indigenous, black and minority groups are suffering: disproportionate numbers are dying of the disease. The loss of Indigenous Elders is especially traumatic as it also sees the loss of tradition and knowledge to COVID-19. The UN Rapporteur for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples José Francisco Cali Tzay states he gets daily reports that show that over and above health issues that Indigenous peoples are being exposed to ongoing invasions and destruction of their lands by business interests, while in some cases, environmental impact assessments are being accelerated to force grant approvals for megaprojects (relating to agribusiness, mining, dams, and infrastructure) – but without the usual consultation with Indigenous peoples. In Australia, June Oscar, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, notes that COVID-19 has exposed the decades long systematic underinvestment in the critical infrastructure of Indigenous communities.

The homeless across the wold are also disproportionately exposed to the virus, are not being tested, and are often not eligible or able to access health care. Australia, which had 116,427 homeless at the last Census (2016) has closed support services like food kitchens and mobile laundries due to social-distancing rules; depriving the homeless not only of vital services but also valued social interaction. The sudden unemployment experienced by literally millions

of people across the globe will inflict a cumulative scar on local to global economies never seen before: the landscapes of leisure that charted our economic stability now giving way to mortgage stress, lack of cash flow, and depression. Being unable to continue these practices has been a socio-cultural shock as much as an economic one.

The pandemic has thus revealed what drives and influences the multiple connections between people and place. It has highlighted and reinforced the inextricable link between societal impact and planetary health. It has revealed the tragedy of poor health systems, the results of staggering social and racial in-equalities, and reinforced the divides between those who have and those who have not.

The collective shock to the global system of this pandemic has also revealed the ways in which the wheels of life now turn on the axes of consumption. In the Western world, a collective narcissism has been nurtured over the last 20 years and is writ large in the success of Facebook, reality TV and our inherent obsession with the self-help industry. This collective self-obsession has meant our everyday practices have become normalised into forms of everyday practice that require giving attention to and daily choosing amongst hundreds of claims for our attention and consumption – whether via Netflix, adverts, TV, or online shopping. Our attention per se has become a finite resource; we suffer from an attention deficit; attention has been commodified (like

Social distancing measures in Bunning (below) and Coles (above). All photos: Melissa Nursey-Bray

so much else) in purely economic terms (Citton, 2017). We do not have the wherewithal to additionally pay attention to everyday practices that are perhaps more simple, organic, and sustainable. Further, our modes of consumption have entrenched a severing between people and the environment – habitats continue to be cleared to make way for urban development, and climate change is still, too often, treated as Cassandra's joke. Experience of and connection to nature, especially for children has sharply declined – we also suffer from a nature deficit disorder (Louv, 2005). While the pandemic has (literally) cleared the air to reveal the environment to us in more clarity, it has also exposed how fundamentally disconnected we are from it.

Yet, the pandemic has created windows of opportunity for many people to take stock and re-orient ways of thinking, and especially modes of consumption, reconnection to place, and the environment. In the societal re-orienting of lives while in lock down, the seeds have been planted towards the possibility of an actual re-setting of how we do business as usual, once life starts to return. In particular, we have had the space to collectively pay attention, and heed the call made by Citton (2017) to create an ecology of attention, where we pay attention to and link social, environmental and economic domains rather than just give attention to how to service an attention economy. We have the opportunity to acknowledge our worlds as social-ecological systems, ones that when integrated can build socio-ecological resilience at multiple scales, honour multiple geographies (Folke, 2006).

Spatial entanglements have been revolutionised, most notable in the work space. Multiple modes of working have emerged and been demonstrably effective. The use of Zoom and Teams has revolutionised as well as enabled businesses to continue to operate and for people to continue to socialise, albeit remotely. In Australia, these platforms show that it is possible to work remotely without having to fly to Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra every single time there is a need to attend a 2-hr workshop. Corporate (aero) mobility, which has emerged as such a founding requirement for modern professionalism, has been shown 'another way'. It is after all, possible, to overcome the 'fear of flying' for fear we will compromise our careers (Nursey-Bray et al., 2019). We can change our work practice, and be more sustainable, we can take advantage of diverse forms of technology to do our jobs, stay connected and re-orient our spatial appreciation of how we do business. It has been a baptism of fire for many who up to now have refused to engage with technological modus operandi, yet it has been doable. The wholesale almost instant transition of university courses to online delivery reflects this dynamic in practice.

Connection to place and people, the mainstay of geographical scholarship as well as practice, is being operationalised in multiple other ways. Local street blocks are now the sites of extra-ordinary social engagement. In South Plympton, South Australia, neighbours, who hitherto had never met, come out to listen to a 13-year-old boy play the Last Salute on his trumpet at dawn on ANZAC day; he was but one of hundreds of brass players across the nation who did so. Children spent hours making chalk drawings of eggs on concrete driveways, little Happy Easter offerings that caused a smile and generated good will from those passing by. Lines at trade and craft stores like Bunnings and Spotlight chart the galvanised energy of those who decided it was time to plant vegetables and re-learn age old crafts like knitting and sewing. Loyal customers turned up day after day to get their coffee from the local coffee shop hoping it was just enough to see their favourite barista through to the other side. Worn out adages such as *Think Global, Act Local* have had meaning.

We have been given the opportunity to heed Citton's (2017) call to pay attention and build an ecology of attention to the things that matter and which go to the heart of geographical thought – how we live in our places, our spaces and at what scale. This 'noticing' also brings responsibility – to acknowledge and act upon the uncomfortable insights that have exposed the raw inequalities between peoples, racial divides and in turn differential capacity to adapt and survive a crisis such as this.

Geography can play a key role in assisting us to understand how to do this re-setting, not least because it is a discipline that integrates the physical with the human in its exploration, but is one that facilitates the transition from theory into practice. Every day people use or enact geographic mechanisms to help them understand and interpret the world – from using Google maps, to analysing the differential impacts of the virus on disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. In the navigation of places and spaces, how we travel within them and engage other people, as part of our everyday lives, geography pervades every decision we make. Geography has an innate capacity to join the dots between and acknowledge the influence of gender, race, power, knowledge, age, migration, disability, culture, values, and economy. In so doing across place, space, and scales, it can make strong contributions to how to build socially just and sustainable future policy. Further, in exposing the inter-dependency of systems of privilege and oppression, in turn created by imperialism, racism,

colonisation, homophobia, ableism, and patriarchy, geographers can provide insights into the ways in which different sectors and groups experience life, and how to communicate and get acceptance for policy and new more sustainable ways of doing and being.

COVID-19 is one crisis. It is hugely significant and its impacts should not be downplayed. But moving forward and in re-setting ourselves, we can also regenerate modes of connection and consumption, and seek to address other huge threats to our planet and locales, including climate change, population growth, and biodiversity loss. Because if nothing else, COVID-19 reminds us we are all inextricably connected by our geographies and to each other, and that in a globalised world, we are all responsible, at local levels for our global future. We need to be active and partisan in our future engagement with each other and for the planet.

This is only my personal reflection, and it is the first in a series written by members of our Editorial Committee. However, I would also like now to invite others to contribute their own perspectives on the impact of COVID and what lessons or opportunities geography brings as we move out from under the shadow of this unprecedented pandemic. All contributions are welcome and may include commentaries, academic articles, photo essays, poetry, or any other creative work. They will be published in the journal as we receive them and I look forward to reading them.

References

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