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# We Are Boiling: Management Scholars Speaking Out on COVID-19 and Social Justice

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## Abstract

COVID-19 is the most immediate of several crises we face as human beings: crises that expose deeply-rooted matters of social injustice in our societies. Management scholars have not been encouraged to address the role that business, as we conduct it and consider it as scholars, has played in creating the crises and fostering the injustices our crises are laying bare. Contributors to this article draw attention to the way that the pandemic has highlighted long-standing examples of injustice, from inequality to racism, gender, and social discrimination through environmental injustice to migratory workers and modern slaves. They consider the fact that few management scholars have raised their voices in protest, at least partly because of the ideological underpinnings of the discipline, and the fact these need to be challenged.

## Keywords

environment, gender, justice/fairness, sustainability, business & society

## Introduction

*Ana María Peredo*

Like the famous frog in steadily warming water, we have grown used to living in escalating crises. We have known for some time that humanly created climate change is going on at a rate that will make the planet uninhabitable for humans (IPCC, 2013). We are increasingly aware that the poverty and inequality we create with our economic way of life have serious consequences for individuals, businesses, and societies (Bapuji, et al., 2020a; Stiglitz, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Periodic economic meltdowns that wreak havoc, especially on the poor and disadvantaged, are something we now accept as just the way the economy works. We seem to live more or less comfortably with these things, even as they threaten to boil us alive. And then COVID-19 struck. All but a few misguided souls noticed the severity of the rising temperature.

A theme that has run through much of the commentary on COVID-19, scholarly as well as popular, is that despite frequent proclamations that “we are all in this together,” the pandemic has not affected everybody equally. COVID-19 has exposed and deepened inequalities in social arrangements at

global, national, and community levels. COVID-19 not only shows us that the water is getting hotter, but the rate of increase is not the same for everybody.

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Fairness—the matter of how benefits and burdens are distributed among people—is at the heart of the concept of social justice, a critical idea that receives attention when what it represents is seen as absent or lacking. Concerns about fairness and social justice emerge when we believe some person or group suffers a greater share of burdens or enjoys a smaller share of benefits than they should, and the situation cries out for measures to right the wrong. It is important to recognize that “society is stratified (i.e. divided and unequal) in significant and far reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality and ability” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. xx). COVID-19 has turned out to be a magnifying lens on issues of social justice.

Our ways of doing business are seen by many as principal contributors to this hot water. Corporate practices and lobbying have raised and are raising the temperature at an alarming rate (Sell, 2020). Nevertheless, concerns about social justice have not easily found a voice in management studies. Gladwin et al. (1996) were not alone in suggesting that management and organization studies are aligned with an ideology that is not hospitable to concerns with social justice: “To the extent that organizational theory parallels the central tenets of Western capitalism, then it contains little in the way of anthropocentric grounds for obligation (e.g., social justice or duty to others)” (p. 913). The 26 years since Gladwin et al. wrote have seen increased discussion around social justice in the management literature. As a result of corporate scandals and pressures on corporations to behave responsibly, the last two decades have witnessed an upswing in attention to such matters as “Corporate Social Responsibility” (CSR) (Crane et al., 2008). It is easy, however, to see such CSR and the “win-win” motto of “doing well by doing good” as neoliberal adaptation or marketing tools that maintain the primacy of profit and shareholder benefit (Banerjee, 2008; MacKenzie et al., 2007; Schneider, 2020). Too often, they are used as a way to fly the right flag without changing course (Cragg, 2010).

Notwithstanding the uneasiness in management research with work on social justice, there have been voices raised that question taken-for-granted assumptions and practices in management scholarship (e.g. Alvesson, 1987; Banerjee, 2006; Burrell, 1997; Calás & Smircich, 1996; Ghoshal, 2005; Korten, 1995; Levy & Egan, 1998; Prasad & Prasad, 2000; Willmott, 1997). There is an increasing scholarly treatment of topics generally overlooked in management research, such as slavery (e.g., Cooke, 2003; Crane, 2013), race and gender discrimination (e.g. Dar et al., 2020; Nkomo, 1992), inequality (Bapuji & Neville, 2015; Riaz, 2019), and alternative economic organizational forms (e.g., Cheney et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2014; Peredo et al., 2018; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006; Zandoni et al., 2017).

The convergence of multiple, unfolding crises and the uncertainty of post-COVID scenarios obliges management scholars to see components of human well-being not simply as hoped-for positive externalities of business activity but as part of what should be built into organizational aims and scholarly consideration. For some of us, the challenge in both practice and research is how to escape the hegemony of the economic growth imperative and transition toward a new political economy based on human flourishing within nature’s boundaries (Banerjee et al., 2020).

COVID-19 has concentrated the minds of many, including scholars of management and organizations, on issues that affect us as a humanity. That led me to contact a number of colleagues from across research streams and generations in the management field and ask them a question: *What has the pandemic brought most clearly into view for you, as a scholar of business and management, especially when you apply a lens of social justice?* That is the question underlying this piece, and colleagues responded with enthusiasm.

For some, their starting point is the sheer scope and magnitude of injustices brought to light by the pandemic and how they are reinforced by business and organizational practices. Bapuji begins by highlighting the scale and variety of inequality surfaced by COVID-19 and the degree to which these are not only regularized but amplified by standard business practices. Contu echoes this concern, employing the lens of “grievability”—the degree to which death is registered as a loss to a society or community—to highlight the extent of injustice made evident and intensified by COVID-19.

For many of our contributors, the pandemic has brought clearly into view some specific injustice to which our organizational and business life contributes. One of these is environmental injustice. Chertkovskaya and Weber see business activity as a direct cause of environmental injustice and the spark for the COVID crisis. Similarly, Banerjee points out that for all the death and economic damage brought by the pandemic, climate change brought about by the assumptions embodied in our economic life will kill more people and wreak more havoc on economies. For Chertkovskaya and Weber, and Banerjee, the COVID crisis is a vivid alert that the water is getting hotter and quickly, and we had better do something about it.

Chertkovskaya and Weber drive home their point about environmental justice by pointing to the disproportionate impact on Indigenous people. Colbourne and Evans remind us of the history of decimation due to infectious diseases suffered by Indigenous peoples in the process of colonization. They see those echoing in the fallout of injustices for the Indigenous in the wake of COVID-19.

The contributions from Crane, Osorio, and Ozkazanc-Pan address the impact of COVID-19 on labor. Crane sees the

ugly fact of modern slavery deeply implanted in global business, underscored by COVID-19 and inflamed by its effects. In a similar vein, Osorio draws attention to the dependence throughout the world on temporary immigrant workers, whose existing vulnerability and disadvantage is disproportionately magnified by the conditions around the pandemic. Ozkazanc-Pan sees COVID-19 as exposing the racialization and gendering that underlies global labor, partly in the way that those are the basis of differences in the injurious effects of the pandemic, a point echoed by Contu in her discussion of the implications of differential “grievability.”

Many of our contributors emphasize the part played by business and organizational practices in creating and magnifying the injustices brought out by the pandemic. Several, including Chertkovskaya and Weber, Contu, and Banerjee, see a need for fundamental changes in our economic system to deal with the detrimental social and ecological consequences of our current arrangements. Adler concentrates and radicalizes this perspective with his argument that underlying these damaging practices is a political system that supports them with a priority given to capital and profit-making. The fundamental problem, he says, is capitalism, and he calls on management scholars to pay attention to the consequences of capitalism for the matters we study.

Abdelnour and Hirsch offer two searching observations on the role of management scholarship in social justice. Abdelnour invites management scholars to forego what he sees as an unfortunate tendency to treat crises such as the pandemic as apolitical, ahistorical, and disembedded. Using the refugee crisis as an example, Abdelnour urges us to dig deeper in search of underlying causes and organizational dynamics that shape prevailing assumptions and practices. Hirsch urges journal editors and reviewers to consider articles outlining the failure of public policy to protect human life adequately in the face of the pandemic and the political forces behind the denial of that failure. There are calls from several of our authors for attention in management studies to specific injustices and problematic conditions that strike them most forcibly, such as slavery, inequality, temporary immigrant workers, Indigenous issues, and violence. There is a considerable comment that management scholarship understates and often remains silent on issues of social and environmental justice.

Calás and Smircich, among other contributors, go beyond calling for attention to particular issues. In their view, the field of management studies continues to discourage serious attention to social justice issues, even when highlighted by crises. In asking about what to do about the B-School, they look to forces that inhibit criticism of standard economic and ideological assumptions underlying much management scholarship. These forces, they maintain, make management scholars not only unduly tolerant but complicit in allowing, even furthering, the ill effects of our embeddedness within hegemonic economic and ideological assumptions.

What emerges from this constellation of responses to our question? First, our contributors demonstrate that considerations

of social justice should be entirely at home in management studies; indeed, management scholarship is irresponsible without them. The relevance of the intersection of management research and social justice concerns will only increase in a world not dominated by COVID-19. The pandemic is not our only crisis.

A second point emerges immediately from the first: recognizing the linkages between crises and business assumptions and practices should lead management scholars to stand back from the economic and ideological underpinnings generally taken for granted in management circles and subject them to critical inquiry. This echoes voices that have been raised before, but less heeded than we might have hoped. Our authors see the COVID-19 crisis as making this a clarion call.

This leads to a third position made explicit in several of the contributions to this article: business schools cannot maintain uncritical adherence to what they have long taken for granted about economic and organization concepts and practices, nor can they ignore the sociopolitical implications of those suppositions (Parker, 2021). Contrary to what we have been led to believe, these matters are not value-free, and there is no avoiding the consideration of the values fallout from what we advocate explicitly or by assumption in our scholarship and our teaching. The convergence of multiple, unfolding crises and the uncertainty of post-COVID scenarios obliges management scholars to see components of human well-being not just as hoped-for positive externalities of business activity but as part of what should be built into organizational aims and scholarly consideration. This calls for a close reflection on what business schools foster and reward in terms of scholarship. As several of our contributors point out, this requires a look at what goes on in our classrooms as well. A study reported in 2014 revealed a fundamental disconnect between the social justice conceptions held by faculty members and their ability to relate those to content in their business courses (Toubiana, 2014). Profit-driven ideologies underlying pedagogy, the dominance of quantitative research, and the particular demands of MBA education all play into this disjunction (Fotaki & Prasad, 2014).

Finally, what emerges is a clear summons for editors, reviewers, and participants in scholarly debates conducted at conferences and faculty seminars to encourage contributions that challenge standing assumptions. Some will find this not just unsettling but an attack on what they see as the foundations of areas of management scholarship. Gatekeepers in those areas will need courage and a willingness to strike out in unfamiliar directions and open doors to the uninhibited critical enquiry our contributors call for. The editors and reviewers of *Journal of Management Inquiry* are to be congratulated for welcoming this collaborative piece to the journal and contributing to its development. Their encouragement is an example of what we think our

contributors are calling for. We call on our readers to weigh up what these authors are arguing and join in the discussion.

## COVID-19 and Social Inequality

*Hari Bapuji*

COVID-19 has exposed societal economic inequalities by backgrounding the economic aspect (due to lockdowns and other curtailing of economic activity) and foregrounding the social dimension (due to attention to public health and human suffering). At a macro level, the pandemic revealed the many ways in which our societies, even if characterized by vast inequalities, are interconnected whether those interconnections are visible to us or not. These interconnections, reflected in the speeds at which the virus traveled and supply chain shortages, also show that our mere participation in the global economic system enables inequalities—a role that we rarely notice.

At a micro-level, COVID-19 has revealed the longstanding inequalities that are normalized and reinforced via organizational practices, such as CSR, work design, hiring, and compensation (Bapuji et al., 2020b). More broadly, societal economic inequalities are created by disparities in value distribution by organizations, guided predominantly by the principle of shareholder wealth maximization (Bapuji et al., 2020a). It is such policies that enabled the 10 richest people to double their wealth during the pandemic, while 99% of humanity is worse off (Ahmed et al., 2022).

In addition to exposing the inequalities, COVID-19 may have potentially exacerbated these inequalities as organizations responded to the pandemic. This is because the same biases and preferences that affect organizational practices during normal times would also affect organizational responses during COVID-19. For example, the individuals with demographic privilege (i.e., privilege arising out of ethnicity, gender, skin color, age, class, caste, and religion, among others) who receive preference in hiring during normal times are also likely to retain their jobs while those with demographic disadvantage are likely to lose their jobs or hours and work under risky conditions. The rising phenomenon of remote working created conditions that are favorable to the privileged who own digital infrastructure at home, while posing challenges to others who lack access to digital infrastructure. Further, the cost-cutting measures of organizations (e.g., reduction in wages, withdrawal of benefits, passing the costs of working from home to employees) are likely to have adversely affected the employees in low-paying and/or insecure jobs.

Societal inequalities have also worsened as governments around the world responded to the ongoing health crisis through lockdowns, restrictions, and border closures. For example, as business activity was hampered, millions of

migrant workers in the informal sector headed to their homes, with little to no help from the governments. Although it might be easier to dismiss this problem as belonging to the informal sector, it should be noted that these workers and the organizations they work for actually feed into the formal sector that management scholars focus on. Similarly, as educational institutions turned to online teaching, students from poor and remote parts of the world suffered due to a lack of digital tools and internet connectivity. At the same time, the lockdowns and remote working gave rise to an increased “gig” work to deliver the supplies to those working from home.

The costs of inequality to societies are substantial and well-documented (Ahmed et al., 2022). It is necessary to recognize that societal inequalities can also be costly to corporations, for example, societal economic inequality affects employee work centrality, burnout, absenteeism, health behaviors, deviant behaviors, bullying, participation, and turnover (Bapuji et al., 2020b). More broadly, inequalities affect employee cognition, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions (Bapuji, 2015; Leana & Meuris, 2015). In short, organizations not only contribute to societal inequalities but are also negatively affected by them.

Despite the central role of organizations in creating and maintaining inequalities, as amply made evident by COVID-19, management scholarship has only recently begun to attend to societal economic inequality. In particular, management education makes little effort to bring inequalities into classroom teaching and business schools (Dar et al., 2020; Fotaki & Prasad, 2015). By avoiding issues of inequality, management scholars avoid politicization of the discussions on efficiency, globalization, and merit, and thus indirectly contribute to reproducing inequalities in organizations and societies (Amis et al., 2020). In other words, our silence on issues of inequality makes us complicit in reinforcing the systems of inequality that unfairly limit the opportunities of the vast majority of the world population to freely participate in value creation, appropriation, and distribution (Chrispal et al., 2021). The pandemic calls on us to shed light on societal economic inequalities and develop organizational mechanisms to alleviate them.

## COVID-19 and Grievability

*Alessia Contu*

COVID-19 has centered death in ways that shatter liberal myopia framing our management theories and practices. Certainly, meritocracy with American capitalism has long been questioned but beyond the obvious “individual” and “social” inequalities, the pandemic shows a deeper inequality structuring our societies: an unequal grievability. For Judith Butler, this is the difference in ways some lives are registered

as a loss, worthy of grief. Others less so. “The reasons for this are many” (Butler, 2020, p. 28). Achille Mbembe plunged into these reasons dissecting the history of modernity with its complex dynamics of values, economies, spaces, and knowledges reproducing lives that are more disposable than others, calling it “necropolitics” (2019).

COVID-19 is the prism that has broken down the necropolitical light of neoliberal capitalism projecting the patterned differences of grievability governing our lives and showing its classist, gendered, and racialized features. Unequal grievability is the background where Black Lives Matter makes sense as a lament and as a dictum that the United States and more broadly goes far beyond the calls against police brutality. The index of our differential grievability is in fact powerfully exemplified in healthcare. Blacks and Latinx are dying disproportionately more than Whites because of healthcare’s discrimination and racism that values Blacks and Latinx lives less than Whites since Blacks and Latinx communities have systematically less access to and are treated with less care, attention, and resources than Whites (CDC, 2020). The political economy of this differential grievability that benefits/reinstates Whiteness should not be lost. Black and Latinx are in the majority occupied in jobs that are less valuable; low-wages jobs in healthcare facilities, farms, factories, grocery stores, and public transportation (CDC, 2020). These “essential workers” have an increased risk of virus exposure and are a substantial part of the army of workers that have kept our collective way of life going. In the United States, these jobs are precarious, with low protections and dire working conditions. These factors in turn limit opportunities to access good healthcare, housing, schooling, and Insurance, institutions that in themselves are institutionally racist and therefore predicated on necropolitical whiteness that make Black lives more disposable than White lives (see Halley, 2020).

In summary, those in the United States bearing the brunt of COVID19 are poorer, lower middle classes, working people, in the majority Black and Latinx communities, and women. Those suffering less, even benefitting from the pandemic are, unsurprisingly, the super-rich who in the majority in the United States are white and male. In such post-truth COVID times, when necropolitics is naked, our management/organizational scholarship and teaching need to traverse the fantasy of “business as usual.” From agency theory, trickle-down economics, shareholder value-maximization to the whitewashing of stakeholder management and CSR the business curriculum is blind to the patterned differential grievability embedded in our collective way of life. Since the evidence is overwhelming—these models are morally questionable, unrealistic, and unsustainable—it is time to come clean and support realistic, sustainable management theories and practices that fully admit global and local interdependencies, their checkered history

of differential grievability intersecting race, class and gender, and commit to safeguarding the flourishing of all life—human and nonhuman.

Pronouncements, also by many management scholars, are going in this direction. For example, thousands called for the democratization of firms and work processes and structures, the decommodification of work, the creation of a general basic income, and environmental remediations (Ferrerias et al., 2020). These recenter and affirm the value of life, of workers’ lives: their autonomy, power, and creativity proposing a collective imaginary for a way of life where workers flourishing is societal flourishing. Mbembe (2019, p. 40) recognizes this daring moment of the present as thinking through democracy beyond the ideology of integration and inclusion. Instead, this is a reimagining and reorganizing of the “in-common” which presupposes “relations of co-belonging and sharing” and “for which the demand for justice and reparation is inescapable.” This recentering and reimagining must intersect with reckoning and dismantling of the gendered and racialized patterns of differential grievability for management scholarship to research, teach and support organized forms of value creations, distribution, and consumption that deliver a justice-oriented world of communal luxury for all individuals, against the paradoxical *mors tua vita mea* that neoliberal necropolitics, too often with our unquestioning help, is reproducing.

## COVID-19 and Environmental Justice

*Ekaterina Chertkovskaya and Gabriel Weber*

Environmental justice (EJ) is a global movement of locally embedded struggles where people are defending spaces they care for from unwanted land uses, such as extractivism, land grabbing, and pollution (see Martínez-Alier et al., 2016). The term originated in the late 1970s in the United States, to denote urban struggles of working-class and African-American communities against toxic chemicals and waste dumping (Anguelovski, 2015; Martínez-Alier, 2019; Weber et al., 2019). Documented in the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice (ejatlas.org), today these struggles are most widespread in the Global South, often caused by unwanted development. Many EJ activists are Indigenous people, small-scale farmers, and neighborhood groups. Often, they are fighting against some of the world’s most powerful corporations who frequently join hands with governments to push for economic growth by all means.

The pandemic sparked by COVID-19 is an EJ issue in at least four ways. First, industrial agriculture and commodification of wildlife destroy biodiversity and make pandemics more likely. Deforestation, cultivation of monocultures, and keeping livestock or wild animals in small contained spaces, all create fertile soil for viruses. These processes

are shaped by global circuits of capital and unequal (ecological) exchange inherent to them, driven by the actions of multinational organizations supplying the global markets (Wallace et al., 2020). Second, unsustainable consumption practices have helped COVID-19 to spread. Buying bats, pangolins, or minks, whether for food, medicine, clothes, or as pets, is a luxury and opportunity for conspicuous consumption available to few. Frequent air travel and mass tourism, in turn, together with global value chains, have helped the virus to spread extremely fast. Third, the coronavirus has hit different social groups unequally, with the less privileged suffering from it more, whether due to higher exposure to the virus, prior health conditions, or limited access to healthcare (Cole et al., 2020). For example, mortality has been higher among black and Hispanic communities in the US (Power et al., 2020). Fourth, COVID-19 is marked by environmental injustice between rich and poor countries. It has progressively transmuted into a hunger crisis in the Global South. Although at the start of the pandemic, the international community had agreed to distribute available vaccines fairly worldwide, little remains of this promise and initiatives that aimed to deliver this, principally COVAX, are progressing too slowly. If livelihoods and countries are to bounce back then vaccine justice and a commoning of vaccines by (at least temporarily) suspending patents for COVID-19 vaccines for countries of the Global South will be critical. Especially as these regions are home to millions of Indigenous people, who have been severely affected by the pandemic (e.g., Córdoba et al., 2021).

One case is the Venezuelan *Warao* Indigenous People. They were forced to immigrate to Brazil because of health problems—malnutrition, parasitosis, tuberculosis, and HIV—some of which are directly related to the contamination and diversion of their native Orinoco River delta (Torelly et al., 2020). The *Warao* have never benefited from extractive activities or industrial agriculture pushing into the previously undisturbed ecosystems they inhabited. Apart from related contamination, the “commodity frontier” expansion impacted local, regional, and global ecologies and has facilitated the increasing number of zoonotic diseases such as HIV and now COVID-19 (Everard et al., 2020). Together, they threaten the very survival of the *Warao* due to poor conditions in their refugee camps, heat, poverty, and weakened immune systems.

The pandemic brought most clearly into our view as scholars that there should be no going back to “normal” as the current economic system is the problem. A new post-capitalist economy needs to be based on social and environmental justice instead of economic growth and operate within the planetary boundaries. Struggles for EJ point to different ways of being and organizing, with an emphasis on commoning, sufficiency, and living with nature (Singh, 2019). Indigenous food practices and agroecology, for instance,

offer a viable alternative to destructive industrial agriculture (Altieri & Nicholls, 2020; Coté, 2016). To contribute to building this new world, organization and management studies should engage with EJ movements, Indigenous worldviews, and other radical alternatives such as degrowth, feminist, and labor movements.

In organizing for post-pandemic futures, it is crucial not to reproduce environmental injustices and the coloniality of western knowledge. There is a risk that the livelihoods of Indigenous and marginalized communities would become “green sacrifice zones”, where extractive and unjust practices like mining enable decarbonization and sustainability for the more privileged (Zografos & Robbins, 2020). This could be justified by the rhetoric of resource efficiency, economic growth, development, and technological modernization, presenting western knowledge as the only capable to address the problems of our time. What is needed, instead, is the decolonization of knowledge and learning from Indigenous communities, peasants, and others striving for environmental justice (Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019). Thus, apart from researching alternatives, scholarship in management and organization studies needs to scrutinize the knowledge systems they are shaped by and decolonize knowledge itself (Dar et al., 2020).

## Inequality, Climate Change, and COVID-19

*Bobby Banerjee*

One might reasonably ask the question: can we really afford to worry about climate change given the global pandemic crisis we are currently facing, with at least six million deaths globally and millions of people out of work because of COVID-19? The sad fact is that climate change will kill more people and cause even more damage to the economy. A study released by the National Bureau of Economic Research reported that in a high emissions scenario, which is the business-as-usual scenario, the death toll from climate change will match the current death toll from all infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, HIV/Aids, malaria, dengue, and yellow fever combined.

The world is waiting for the pandemic to pass so the economy can grow again and life can resume as normal. But what if normal was the problem in the first place? What if this artificial halt in the global economy is permanent? What would that mean for the future of work, jobs, and growth? Can the pandemic crisis allow us to imagine a just and more sustainable world? What lessons can we learn from the pandemic to address the serious problems posed by climate change? Both COVID-19 and climate emergencies are not unfortunate accidents but a result of decisions humans have taken.

The pandemic has exposed the stark inequalities and injustices of our society. Both the lockdown and the



maintenance of essential services during the lockdown have adversely affected the poor, people of color, and other marginalized groups who are dying in disproportionate numbers. Both the virus and the policing of coronavirus lockdown have highlighted the systematic and structural racism that exists in Europe. Minority groups have been disproportionately fined amid the policing of lockdowns in the United Kingdom (Dearden, 2021). In London, there has been a significant increase in the stopping and searching of black people (Grierson, 2020). A report by Amnesty International, examining the enforcement of physical distancing measures in 12 European countries, concludes that the pandemic has led to greater “marginalisation, stigmatisation and violence,” echoing the long-standing concerns aired by the Black Lives Matter movement (Amnesty International, 2020). The coronavirus does not discriminate but exposes and reinforces existing racial and social inequalities. Essential workers have become expendable workers in many cases because the burden of keeping the economy going during the pandemic falls disproportionately on the shoulders of marginalized groups.

The consequences of climate change reflect similar inequalities: those that have contributed the least to the problem will suffer the most. Although climate change did not cause the pandemic, human activity is responsible in both cases: our fossil-fuelled economy of production and consumption has led to the climate emergency along with habitat and biodiversity loss that created the conditions for spreading diseases by reducing the natural barriers between humans and virus-carrying animals.

Rebuilding economies based on the exploitation of people and nature, which was the normal state of affairs, will not solve the COVID-19 or climate crisis. The world we rebuild post-coronavirus needs to be founded in well-being, and so needs to bail out people and the planet, not corporations. If there is one lesson that we need to learn from the pandemic, it is that there is something more important than the “economy,” which is people and the planet. We don’t need to sacrifice lives to save the economy. The economy does not need to be saved. It needs to be changed. A return to business “as usual” is not possible or desirable. We can use the crisis to decide what is useful and what is not. Who is important, who is not important? Which jobs are required, and which jobs are not?

Our economies need profound restructuring: from economies of competition to economies of cooperation, from economies of accumulation to economies of distribution, from economies of extraction to economies of restoration (Banerjee et al., 2020). No one is immune to the coronavirus or to climate change—while we now have several vaccines for COVID-19, there will never be a vaccine for climate change. Both require a collectivist response and a different kind of politics based on solidarity and an ethics of care.

Perhaps insights from the emerging degrowth movement can help us imagine these alternatives.

1. Put life at the center of our economic systems.
2. Radically reevaluate how much and what work is necessary for a good life for all.
3. Organize society around the provision of essential goods and services.
4. Democratize society.
5. Base political and economic systems on the principle of solidarity. <https://www.degrowth.info/en/open-letter/>

## COVID-19 and Indigenous Social Justice

*Rick Colbourne, Michelle Evans and Ana María Peredo*

Pandemics have a sharp and violent history for us and Indigenous relations the world over. COVID-19 exposes how the legacy of colonialism, systemic inequity, and violence exposes our peoples and our communities to severe health risks (cf. Cali-Tzay, 2020; Crooks et al., 2018; De Dios, 2020; Lakhani, 2020). The pandemic has awakened in us, as Indigenous people, memories of being exposed, sometimes deliberately, to infectious diseases such as measles, cholera, typhoid, and smallpox. COVID-19 has triggered defences in Indigenous communities to protect our Elders, youth, and other immune-compromised community members who hold the embodied knowledges, language, and traditions of our cultures. More practically, the pandemic has disrupted the practice of collective cultural ceremonies and gatherings (Power et al., 2020). We have demonstrated a greater historical awareness of the effects of pandemics and have acted to protect our communities, ranging from self-imposed lockdowns and quarantines, to shutting down roads and blocking waterways (Lakhani, 2020). Any loss, especially great loss of life, destroys social and kinship connections and emanates sadness and grief in already vulnerable peoples.

“I can’t be any blunter... if COVID-19 gets into our communities, we are gone.” Pat Turner, Chief Executive, National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organization, Australia (Coletta & Traiano, 2020).

Although the reverberations of history ring loud in the reality of Indigenous lives and livelihoods, we ask what does the pandemic tell us about Indigenous realities that we didn’t know before? The critical focus on health and survival also highlights issues of food insecurity, access to essential services, and adequate housing. Entrenched inequality is further exacerbated by the curtailing of the free flow of families, and the halt of the informal economy and associated income. As Pat Turner’s quote plainly states, the need to lockdown communities and shut out the world from

communities is a powerful protection mechanism, and a proactive response employed by Indigenous leadership in remote communities around the globe. Indigenous-led responses to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the establishment of checkpoints into communities as a protective response to the virus are an exercise in sovereignty. In Canada, Leonard (2020, p. 165) highlights that “Indigenous restrictions” to travel on tribal land have experienced resistance by “the urban elite exodus to their second homes.” Similarly in Aotearoa, Iwi-led checkpoints are evidence of community leadership and sovereignty that “challenge the hegemonic formations of colonial-capitalist state structures” (Dutta et al., 2020, p. 10).

Indigenous realities during this pandemic era face serious concerns that go beyond the health effects on Indigenous peoples, with governments and corporations taking advantage of the state of emergency laws (Cali-Tzay, 2020). In Colombia, *Emberá* Indigenous leaders Omar and Ernesto Guasiruma were murdered in their homes while observing a government-imposed quarantine (Greenfield & Watts, 2020) and the United States Department of the Interior ordered the Mashpee Wampanoag reservation to be disestablished and their land taken out of trust (Cromwell Qaqemasq (Running Bear), 2020). In Brazil, under cover of the pandemic, President Bolsonaro submitted Bill 191 to legalize mineral, oil, and gas exploration and extraction and large-scale infrastructure projects such as roads and hydroelectric dams in protected forests and Indigenous Territories (Phillips, 2020). In Canada, Coastal GasLink resumed building its pipeline in Wet’suwet’en territory countering hereditary chiefs working to protect their communities. In Australia, Rio Tinto destroyed a 46,000-year-old Aboriginal rock shelter of great cultural significance in the Juukan Gorge in West Australia, and the subsequent parliamentary inquiries into this devastating act have been on hold due to the travel restrictions relating to COVID-19.

The global pandemic creates confounding and conflicting realities for Indigenous peoples around the globe. In affording space to enact sovereignty through border control and public health leadership, it has also created a veil for the worst kind of behavior by governments and corporations who employ tactics to achieve their ends, whatever the means. What the COVID-19 era has shown us is that colonial efforts are obdurate and Indigenous communities resilient as they redouble their efforts in the face of the unfair struggle to act on our inherent rights.

## COVID-19 and Modern Slavery

*Andrew Crane*

Modern slavery was already deeply embedded in global business; COVID-19 has not only made that situation worse, but

it has revealed just how empty many of the promises made to address the problem really were.

Modern slavery is embodied in coercive labor practices such as indentured labor, debt bondage, forced labor, servitude, and human trafficking where people are exploited and “cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power” (International Labour Organization, 2017, p. 9). The pandemic has intensified these problems, through its detrimental effect on prevalence, health outcomes, and detection of modern slavery practices (Anti-Slavery International, 2020; Chandra et al., 2020; Smith & Cockayne, 2020; Trautrimis et al., 2020). Underlying these effects have been four main shifts wrought by the pandemic.

First, COVID-19 has created a context of major upheaval, where unemployment, poverty, hunger, and economic hardship have been accentuated, and where states have prevented the free movement of people across national and international borders. This has generated a perfect storm of extreme vulnerability coupled with restricted mobility for disadvantaged workers. The results from research on the impacts of the pandemic on extreme exploitation are grim, including “a surge in vulnerability to forced labor,” rapid escalation in indebtedness, and “increasing pressure on children to participate in the commercial sex industry,” (GFEMS Media, 2021; LeBaron et al., 2021; Robertson, 2021).

Second, the pandemic and its associated responses have also created dramatic surges in demand for certain products such as medical equipment, foodstuffs, and personal products. These surges have exacerbated conditions that lead to modern slavery as factories processing urgent orders have imposed forced overtime on workers, underpaid wages, and restricted workers’ freedom of movement to meet tight deadlines and low-cost margins. For instance, the production of personal protective equipment (PPE) during the pandemic has seen ample evidence of extreme exploitation, most notably in Chinese factories using North Korean forced laborers to produce PPE overalls (Pattison et al., 2020) and in Malaysian surgical glove factories (Feinmann, 2020).

Third, those in highly exploitative working conditions also have had an elevated risk of infection because of a lack of inadequate health protection in the workplace and insufficient social distancing in factories and dorms. For example, workers in UK factories supplying the online fashion retailer Boohoo during the pandemic were put at elevated risk of catching COVID-19 with coworkers allegedly being forced to work even after testing positive for the virus (Nilsson, 2020).

Finally, lockdowns and the need to downsize due to financial constraints meant that detection of slavery and protection of victims was downgraded with experts in NGOs and government inspectorates furloughed and brands scaling back in-country auditing. As one report put it, “Travel restrictions

and other measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 have left the ability of companies to carry out audits to ensure ethical working practices in their supply chains in disarray” (Leonard, 2020).

The escalation of modern slavery, however, was to some extent avoidable. Governments, companies, and law enforcement agencies could have prioritized the protection and well-being of those most at risk of modern slavery. Consumers and concerned citizens could have focused their attention on those far away, deep in the layers of supply chains providing them with all the things necessary to survive lockdown. But they did not, and we did not. Instead, attention focused mainly on the nearby, the visible, those most closely connected such as direct employees, local residents, or regular customers. The well-meaning intentions to eradicate modern slavery by 2030 went on the backburner as more immediate concerns took over.

This is hardly surprising, but it does tell us something about modern slavery that perhaps we didn’t quite realize, or at least acknowledge, before. Modern slavery is largely viewed as a problem of other people in other places. In challenging times it demands more of our attention not less, because those who are most disadvantaged become even more vulnerable to the very worst forms of exploitation. But challenging times, like the global pandemic we are all going through, pushes us to hunker down and to protect our own. The scope of our compassion seems to narrow or at least concentrate. Tackling modern slavery is simply not the priority many promised it was.

The pandemic has also shown us—or perhaps for some confirmed—that modern slavery is not simply an aberration of contemporary capitalism; it is in many ways a natural outcome. And as the effects of COVID-19 pushed companies and governments to make choices about who and what was really important to them, it became clear that, for many, the very worst exploited by capitalism were, and are, simply not a priority.

## **Immigrant Workers in the Times of COVID-19: Their Labor Is “Essential,” They Are Not**

*Arturo E. Osorio*

“Temporary immigrant workers” (TIWs) refer to individuals who cross an international border with the intent of living and working for a limited period in a country that does not recognize them as its citizens or natives. Their transitory condition is determined by their “migratory precarity” (Anderson, 2010). As temporary immigrants, TIWs are subject to control conditions of entry (only if/as authorized), of behavior (follow tacit and explicit social rules, only engage in pre-approved activities, only work at pre-approved jobs), and of

exit (leave the country as regulated/mandated) (Anderson, 2010). If not entering or behaving as dictated or exiting as commanded, the TIWs’ local presence is deemed unlawful (not authorized by law) or illegal (forbidden by law), thus becoming subject to deportation orders. This is done to prevent (minimize) disruptions in the local access to products and services and preserve local social stability. The resulting TIWs’ work and living conditions often embodied the coercive labor practices of modern slavery, such as debt bondage, forced labor, servitude, and human trafficking (ILO, 2017).

Through the COVID-19 pandemic, TIWs have been confirmed to be critical for the well-being of communities. TIWs supply labor and knowledge on-demand (Azlor et al., 2020). They are a resource when the local workforce is unavailable, insufficient, or inadequate (Anderson, 2010; ILO, 2020; World Bank, 2020). TIWs are likely to continue working even when residents are asked to stay home. Thus, governments have reduced administrative burdens for employers by hiring additional TIWs to help secure food supply chains, health services, and other essential tasks during the pandemic. Yet TIWs remain vulnerable because of societal conditions, business practices, and traditional immigration policies. TIWs’ labor is “essential,” they are not.

The TIWs’ key role during the COVID-19 pandemic has exacted a high price from them. The TIWs’ situation highlights their regular economic exploitation and human trafficking problems (Castelier, 2020). Regular conditions put TIWs at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 and, when contracted, with worse outcomes than non-immigrants (ILO, 2020, World Bank, 2020). The conditions fostering the TIWs’ vulnerability exist in four interrelated areas: (1) societal space, (2) living and working environments, (3) health care access, and (4) policy and regulations.

*Societal space.* TIWs regularly face societal challenges and hardships (ILO, 2020). TIWs live at the fringes of societies, often presented as the “other” (Roberto et al., 2020). TIWs’ conditions illustrate how low-wage workers are exploited for their economic value yet disregarded as individuals. When speaking up about their vulnerability in the societal space, living and working environments, healthcare access, and policy and regulations, TIWs are frequently condemned, suspended, fired, and often deported (Anderson, 2010). During the COVID-19 public health crisis, social stigmatization and xenophobia framed TIWs as the source and/or carrier of COVID-19, resulting in their social alienation and/or making them targets of hate crimes (Roberto et al., 2020).

*Living and working environments.* TIWs living conditions exacerbate their health vulnerability. TIWs are likely to live in crowded conditions where they lack privacy and personal space (ILO, 2020, World Bank, 2020). Their living quarters often hinder regular sanitation practices and preclude basic

disease prevention measures (ILO, 2020), such as those needed for COVID-19 (e.g., social distance, self-isolation). The workplace typically includes conditions increasing the TIWs' rates of disease and occupational injuries beyond those of their non-migrant peers (Gammarano, 2020). If sick, TIWs rarely qualify for paid time off or sick leave; thus, they are forced to choose between working while ill (spreading the disease and/or aggravating their condition) or losing their livelihoods and risking deportation (ILO, 2020). In the agro-industry, levels of COVID-19 among TIWs have been called "a crisis within a crisis" (Martin, 2020). In the healthcare industry, where the dominant labor force is female TIWs, the situation has been referred to as a "gender crisis" (Foley & Piper, 2020).

*Health care access.* COVID-19 has increased the disease-related mortality rates of TIWs (e.g., Foley & Piper, 2020; Martin, 2020). TIWs have constrained access to healthcare services (World Bank, 2020). Financial costs, communication barriers, discrimination, bigotry, limited paid time off, and inadequate sick leave policies prevent TIWs from accessing medical services. If accessed, the medical services available to TIWs might not be equivalent to those available to citizens. Further, if TIWs indicate they are not healthy, they risk deportation as they cannot continue working, thus breaking the terms and conditions of their approved stay.

*Policy and regulations.* Socioeconomic conditions and legislations have been set to facilitate on-demand access to cheap TIWs' labor (For examples, see Marino et al., 2017; Russo, 2018). Once in the country, TIWs are required to learn and adapt to laws and regulations to perform their jobs and interact in public spaces (Anderson, 2010). Further, TIWs are also systematically subject to controlled and/or monitored mobility, limited employment options, circumscribed educational opportunities, and restricted access to quality local healthcare services (World Bank, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in hard-to-track local changes of immediate impact on TIWs. Through these changes, TIWs are seldom included in government assistance programs yet are deemed "essential" and mandated to work, often under deportation penalties if failing to comply. If their industry faces hardships, TIWs are likely to be dismissed first and expelled from the country (ILO, 2020). If fired, few TIWs have fallback funds given their low wages, contractual absence of severance payments, exclusion from unemployment insurance, and the absence of social and safety nets.

As management scholars, the workplace and societal conditions of TIWs throughout the pandemic and beyond are an opportunity to explore the normalized business practices perpetuating the exploitation of workers as an acceptable societal response to the crisis (e.g., extreme weather conditions, social disruptions). For scholars who practice *engaged scholarship* (Ellison & Eatman, 2018), TIWs experiences are an

opportunity to develop research-based interventions that break cycles of labor exploitation and promote abuse as normalized business practices.

## Transnational Feminist Observations on the Pandemic

### *Banu Ozkazanc-Pan*

What the pandemic has shown us on a global scale is that the workers whose lives are being impacted the most in terms of taking on health risks in already precarious labor arrangements are often Black, brown or Asian, and in most cases, female. From nannies to immigrant nurses to day laborers and expatriate tradespeople, the global economy relies on gendered and racialized inequalities for the benefit of the wealthy, both in terms of nations and in terms of individuals. These dynamics have long supported, albeit in an invisible fashion to most management scholars, the purported success of multinationals, industrialized nations, and economies despite being rooted in inequality for workers in terms of wages, governance, and rights.

Any and all recovery efforts must adopt a framework that recognizes the way gender and race/ethnicity are organizing principles of our societies and economies—continuing to be gender and race-blind in our theories about work, organizations and global economic value systems will result in skewed policies and recommendations that replicate inequality (Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2021). As scholars, we have a responsibility to engage in these conversations, learning new theories if needed to understand the complexity of the phenomenon we aim to understand. In this spirit, transnational feminist traditions (Moghadam, 2005) can provide insights about the gendered, racialized, and globally interconnected institutions (Mohanty, 2013) across societies and economies that impact the organization and division of work.

For the management and organization studies field, these observations arriving from transnational feminist frameworks provide insights into (re)thinking our very focus and research agendas. First, they require a "zooming" out from the managerial lens that often dominates the theorizing and writing in the field—research questions should not be formulated with only the manager in mind but rather, a diversity of stakeholders whose gendered and racialized lives and livelihoods are impacted through organizational actions, strategies, and processes in a global context. Doing so leads to an epistemological reconsideration of the subject of our research, who is often thought of in a disembodied manner despite the fact that the relations of gender and race impact the everyday experiences of individuals in organizations and the opportunity structures in which they are embedded. Lastly, a transnational feminist approach requires a commitment to understanding how the very theories and concepts we adopt in our research may

end up replicating and normalizing inequities as we continue to value certain economic models and organizational practices over others (Ozkazanc-Pan & Pullen, 2020).

Analyzed through a transnational feminist perspective, the ongoing pandemic has laid bare systems of labor that are racialized and gendered globally. This should come as no surprise to scholars working in critical and feminist traditions as for centuries, social provisioning, caregiving/taking, and emotional labor have been gendered practices (Collins et al., 2020; Ozkazanc-Pan & Pullen, 2020) whose value chains often span transnational spaces. Yet as we emerge from the pandemic, policies supporting such workers at the level of supranational organizations and at the level of local governments continue to take a gender-blind or neutral approach. Only in recent years has gender-disaggregated data on labor and occupations only recently become normalized practice.

As management and organization studies scholars, we stand to inform such policymaking but first must do a better job of understanding the ways in which gendered and racialized organizational practices can continue to replicate unequal power relations in an interconnected, globalized world economy. We must make an ethico-political commitment to make visible those inequities so often considered beyond the purview of management research. Then and only then, might we as a community of business scholars have a chance of informing policies and practices to end inequalities within organizations and beyond.

## The COVID Verdict: Capitalism Kills

*Paul S. Adler*

COVID has worked like an x-ray to reveal a stark fact about capitalism. In any capitalist society, the vast majority of people are reliant on wage income—and in the face of a pandemic, this has put them in an impossible dilemma of either going to work under conditions that threaten their lives or going hungry. There's a word to describe a system that forces its citizens to work in conditions that threaten their lives: murderous.

In rich countries, governments have stepped in to mitigate the dilemma with expanded unemployment insurance or subsidized wage payments. But the reluctance to shut down businesses led to many unnecessary deaths, and the rush to reopen led to the resurgence of the virus and death rates in many regions. And in poorer countries, the toll has been catastrophic, in no small measure because corporations are too busy defending their intellectual property rights and their governments are too busy defending these corporations' interests.

Let's be clear: any shortage of household necessities or protective equipment could have been remedied by coordinated action by the government. The vast majority of people could

have been kept safe at home and their needs met by the coordinated efforts of a small number of "essential workers," and these latter too could have been kept safe at the cost of extra workplace protections. Yes, all this would have had real economic costs, both direct costs as well as the opportunity cost in lost output. But when push came to shove, our governments, in thrall to business interests, were willing to increase the cost of human lives to reduce those private economic costs. Some governments were more willing and some less, but everywhere responding to the pandemic was treated as a "difficult balancing act"—at root, balancing between profits and lives, and we have seen how those scales tilted.

Of course, other factors contribute to COVID's toll, and many factors contribute to significant variations in the death rates across countries. All this will provide wonderfully rich puzzles and data for future research on the varieties of capitalism (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Musacchio et al., 2015) and how firms and communities in different regions can respond more effectively to challenges such as those posed by the pandemic.

But let us not lose sight of the forest because of our scholarly fascination with the trees. Beyond the varieties of capitalism lies the common factor of capitalism itself (Adler, 2014; Howell, 2003). We live under the dictatorship of capital and its profit imperative. It's easy for those of us who live in comfort and relative safety to forget that it is such a murderous regime. As management scholars, we fail in our responsibilities if we forget the wider commonalities shared by capitalist organizations and fail to study the causes and consequences of those common features.

There are difficult challenges facing research on capitalism, but they are not insurmountable. The main challenge is that our samples lack variation on that critical dimension (see for example Culpepper [2015] on the resulting difficulties in testing the idea that business enjoys structural power over government in capitalist societies). Comparisons with forms of society that emerged historically prior to capitalism afford some insight—see for example, the rich vein of research inspired by Polanyi ([1944] 1968)—but comparisons with the purportedly more advanced, socialist alternatives are hobbled by terribly limited forms in which socialism has appeared to date.

Marx offers a method that overcomes that challenge—the dialectical method, which focuses on the inner tensions and contradictions that characterize the system and shape its dynamic evolution (Ollman, 2003). Careful analysis of those dynamics can bring into our field of vision the distinctive and debilitating features of capitalism as a form of society. Many management scholars have taken inspiration from that method (to name just a few: Adler, 2007; Adler, 2012; Benson, 1977; Clegg & Cunha, 2017; Mumby, 2005; Seo & Creed, 2002; Stookey, 2010; Vidal et al., 2015), even though many reviewers still express skepticism

toward arguments that fail Popper's "falsifiability" criterion (Burawoy, 1990; Popper, 1963).

With the collapse of the USSR, we saw a wave of enthusiasm for the idea that capitalism represents the "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992), the best of all possible worlds. With the failure to confront effectively the COVID pandemic, and in the background, our failure to confront the climate crisis (Adler, 2015), Fukuyama's phrase acquires a more sinister meaning. It is more urgent than ever that we understand the forces within capitalism that might propel us beyond it.

## Unmasking the Root Causes of Crises

*Samer Abdelnour*

Why did COVID-19 emerge so forcefully? The Chinese collective Chuang (2020) reflects on how the incredible scale of modern industrialized society cannibalizes the natural environment in ways that increase the likelihood of zoonotic transfer and the potency of global pandemics. One must only look to mega-urbanization, megafarms, and unprecedented global movement of goods and people to understand the sheer scale of forces devastating natural systems. This suggests why COVID-19 was so quick to destabilize economic and financial markets, disrupt food production and trade, overwhelm key sectors like healthcare and education, lockdown entire populations, deepen class and racial inequalities, and afflict great harms on those already persecuted at the margins.

COVID-19 has exposed the inadequacy of management and organizational theories for analyzing the underlying causes and societal consequences of complex crises. Popular concepts such as grand challenges, wicked problems, and extreme contexts too often present crises as abstracted, ahistorical, apolitical, and disembedded settings within which some actors undertake work to achieve some outcome or simply cope (Abdelnour & Abu Moghli, 2021). Framing crises as *settings* from which to theorize organizational practices and not as *outcomes* of complex nested systems reduces our capacity to understand crises as organizational phenomena involving the production of vulnerability, risk, and response (Calhoun, 2004). The consequences of doing so include the perpetuation of a convenient ignorance concerning power, culpability, our own complicity, and the responsibility to do no harm.

During a COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown, fires devastated large parts of Moria refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece, where 13,000 mostly war-displaced people live warehoused in exposed, insecure conditions in a temporary settlement designed for 3,000 (BBC, 2020). Investigating this COVID-19 outbreak as a set of overlapping, organizationally engineered outcomes might best be accomplished by centering on the concerns and lived experiences of people at Moria, and from there, work backward through time and outwards

through nested layers of analysis in order to map the organization of multiple vulnerabilities across levels, space and time. Just as Chuang (2020) presses us to examine the macro forces involved with the emergence and global spread of COVID-19, we might do the same to unpack how vulnerabilities in camps are as engineered as the refugee crisis itself. They include but are not limited to: Fortress Europe policies that push desperate people into the sea and slave markets, US-led UK/EU-supported wars on Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Pakistan (Vine et al., 2020), colonialism and sustained underdevelopment (Escobar, 1994; Roy, 1995), and underpinning these, a racist US/EU military-industrial complex that sees Black, Brown and Arab bodies as wretched and expendable (Sa'di, 2021). Of course, this need not be. We can end war. EU policy need not prevent refugees and migrants from traveling by plane, which is by far the safest, most cost-effective, and easily controlled form of travel. Refugees might also live in decentralized housing as opposed to camps. A different world is possible.

Understanding COVID-19 as an *outcome* of organized inequalities requires us to investigate the systems, policies, networks, industries, and actors that—often under the guise of innovation, growth, and profit—commodify and cannibalize our natural environments at a colossal scale (Chuang, 2020). It begs us to look more closely at the global political and market systems we inhabit, and how they simultaneously damage natural systems that sustain our existence and produce immense societal inequality by design. Racial, gender, class, citizenship, and many other forms of inequality permeate our institutions, systems, markets, and mindsets more profoundly than we commonly realize (McNamara & Newman, 2020). To better articulate the organization of inequality, we must also confront the complicity of our beloved corporate actors, business models, and management theories, as well as our own complicity, as citizens, consumers, and meat-eaters. By interrogating our existential relationship to capital, consumption, and growth, we might be better placed to understand how complex nested systems produce immense inequalities that afflict and subjugate billions of invisible Others, and global crises that impact us all, albeit disproportionately. Most importantly, confronting our privileged positions within these systems may give us the courage to imagine and affect ecologically healthier and radically equitable (post-capitalist, post-crises) futures.

## Questions and Resources in the Social Justice Impacts of COVID-19

*Paul M. Hirsch*

American society as a whole has been victimized by the remarkable social injustice of how badly its federal government has (not) responded to the COVID-19 virus. Within it, of

course, some groups have been treated much worse than others. Journal editors and reviewers should be open to publishing articles and sections addressing both how the larger collective, and some of its subgroups have been impacted. Two resources I recommend we learn from are (1) insights provided by colleagues near ground zero on 9/11/2001 on responses to the destruction of New York's World Trade Center, in an earlier issue of this journal (Starbuck, 2002), and (2) literatures on best (and worst) practices for managing disasters.

To encourage research on the inequalities wrought by the remarkable absence of public health measures to save lives from the COVID-19 pandemic, one suggestion I have is to examine the political organization of its denial. Studies of change and identity emphasize the importance of uncertainty reduction. Individuals "take steps to display their membership status through various "membership-claiming" acts. In the days after the 9–11 attacks, some people used dress to claim membership status by adorning caps, T-shirts, and pins with New York images and logos" (Bartel, 2002, p. 243). To counter massive public disapproval, the Trump campaign actively worked to solidify its adherents' commitment by downgrading masks and adding rallies, taking advantage of how "people who identify strongly with a particular social group often become highly cohesive when their group is threatened [Tajfel & Turner, 1986]" (ibid). By playing to this group, and to hate groups like the Pride Boys, the campaign played farther into the social injustice of denying material support for minorities and communities in greatest need.

A second arena for research on how the lack of response to the pandemic further increased injustice and inequality is the disappearance of jobs and increase in poverty. For those whose employment remains or returns, following Wrzesniewski's findings in her "It's Not Just a Job: Shifting Meanings of Work in the Wake of 9/11," researchers can also survey or look for data about changed attitudes and behavior toward work (2002). Wrzesniewski found "many people reconsidered their commitments to their jobs or careers, and quite a few decided to change occupations."

Finally, additional topics I recommend be researched include: how firms have varied in their treatments of employees; outliers regarding which companies have been the most and least helpful; and variations in how families have handled it, and in access to treatment, costs, and insurance by race, class/income, and age.

## **On Pandemics and Social Justice—What to do About the B-School**

*Marta B. Calás and Linda Smircich*

The dash in our title aims to signify not continuity but a discontinuity between two sides, sometimes appearing to meet but perhaps dangerous when they do. Can organization

scholars do something at the intersections of pandemics and social justice? Under "unprecedented circumstances" we can feel compelled to rush into positive action, but what if the places where we labor encourage us to do what may foster those fundamental harms creating the problems in the first place. Can we really offer something positive in these circumstances without asking reflectively whose notion of "positive" are we talking about? Whose knowledge is the knowledge we marshal? Who is it intended to serve? What worlds does it create? Don't unprecedented circumstances call for unprecedented kinds of knowledge?

Even before we were invited to participate in this forum, we were interested and also uneasy about the possibility the pandemic, its causes, and the inequalities it had surfaced would become an opportunistic research object in our field. We were concerned that much theorizing and research wouldn't be able to escape "the business case" or "business as usual" given the pressures to publish in "highly ranked journals" of the uncritical variety. As we looked around, the Academy of Management had already set up a space on the divisions' "daily digests" linked to "the latest: AOM Research and Resources Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic." And there (without naming names) one would easily find many claims that prior theorizing and research could advance remedies to this situation when applied "properly," from projects raising funding to accelerate innovation, to caring practices organizations implement to support working online, to contributions strategic management and organization theory make in understanding partnering to speed up medications. All these were offered as scholarly contributions to the actual world of practice; and, on its face, some seemed exploitative of employees' good intentions at a time of crisis... Was there anyone thinking reflectively about the extraordinary limitations already embedded in the taken-for-granted of what we call "theory and research"?

Yet, looking a bit further we became hopeful; a recent editorial in a "highly ranked mainstream" journal couldn't have been more explicit about the limits of extant scholarship when addressing the inequalities exposed by the current pandemic. It highlighted how conventional management theories and organizational practices can be in themselves producers and reproducers of such inequalities. To address this dilemma, the authors suggested a turn in management theorizing and research demonstrating better the relationship between business and society. As such, this turn should be interdisciplinary, something they also noted would not be easy to do (Bapuji et al., 2020a). While this is a "must-read" piece we would recommend and cite often, at issue first is, why should one find extraordinary and not easy to do what these authors are suggesting? Why is it that what they are arguing is not already our common sense, noting the harms embedded in what we take for granted? Why isn't it

already obvious that we need different knowledge as we articulate, one more time, the word “unprecedented”?

We wrote those words originally almost a year and a half ago, when we were first invited to participate in this forum. Since then, we have been following the trajectories of COVID-19 as a research object in “highly ranked journals” and what we find fares not much better than our original observations. The Academy of Management continues to bill “the latest Research and Resources Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic” in their “daily digests” but truthfully, there is not much that is new or different from what we found originally, to the point that often it is not too clear what is the relationship with COVID-19 in several articles since most do not even mention it. Outside of the AOM publications, we found a different approach in two high-ranked journals, *Journal of Management Studies* (JMS) and *Journal of Management* (JOM). It seems that having a section on COVID-19 has become “a thing” but don’t get your hopes high. On its homepage, the JOM announces a COVID-19 resources section, but there you find very few articles, all pre-pandemic (from 2011 to very early 2020), with topics about managing teams, crisis management, and working from home, and nothing regarding COVID-19. In contrast, JMS also announces on its homepage a new section on COVID-19 commentaries, and in this case (from fall 2020 to spring 2021) they address COVID-19 explicitly but the focus in most of them is what went wrong that extant organization theories can address or need to change in order to address these major issues happening in organizations today, including in various different nations. Critical commentaries regarding basic premises behind organization theories and practices as implicated in the problems observed, including the taken-for-granted market neoliberalism were few (see Munir, 2021; Piekkari et al., 2021; Zanoni, 2021). What is wrong with this picture? First, all the commentaries are very short pieces, and all of them were invited “insights from leading scholars” according to the editors (Muzio & Doh, 2021). Thus, what is the likelihood that the very few critical commentaries would become exemplars to follow in other “highly ranked journals”? And why does it matter?

Which brings us back to the business school. Critical organization and management scholarship have been documenting for years the increasing neoliberalization of universities the world over, with US universities and business schools often as models (e.g., Fleming, 2020; Olds & Thrift, 2005; Parker, 2018, 2021). While it is evident that business schools’ programs contribute to the financial well-being of universities, what about their roles in fostering neoliberal logics in organization and management scholarship more broadly, leading to delegitimizing critical knowledges we might be needing now? One aspect of this situation, its production and reproduction, are the journal ranking lists used in business schools as signals of desirable knowledge

with high rewards for those who publish in them, the more and the faster the better. None of it is conducive to high-risk activity—that is, thinking out of the norm—and the norm for many years now is to not do critical work. In fact, at this point, few business schools in the United States include critical perspectives in their doctoral seminars and therefore, even if some want to learn how to do it, it is unlikely that their work will be reviewed by someone who will appreciate and understand it. Meanwhile, the “critical journals” often fall off these lists because they are not “high ranking” enough. Thus, who will speak for different knowledge and knowing in unprecedented times? Who will voice coalitions; commons; environmental justice; degrowth; heterodox economic thinking; the more-than-human we all are part of...? In other words, “decolonizing the business school” as some have called for, can no longer wait, starting by displacing through epistemic justice (Anderson, 2012) the western human of liberal political thought supporting neoliberal “knowledge” and beyond. What are we waiting for?


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