



Social Justice in a time of Social Distancing

By Kenneth Bailey and Lori Lobenstine

The advised precautions for dealing with the coronavirus ask us to focus on ourselves. Wash your hands. Cover your mouth. Don't host or attend large gatherings. The precautions make us turn inward to focus on the virus's impact on our individual health and the interruption of our daily lives. As much as we have to take these precautions, we must also understand that they are doing something to us. They are arranging us in ways that produce effects.

At DS4SI, we believe that *ideas are embedded in social arrangements, which in turn produce effects*. Some of the effects we're worried about here will locate themselves in what we call affective remainder: residual intensities that linger on past an event or episode in life. In this case, we imagine these will exacerbate fear and aversion of the other, those who are always already-blamed. (Think of the racist targeting of black "looters" after Hurricane Katrina, the xenophobic blaming of Asian and African nations for viruses, and the homophobic blaming of queer communities when HIV/AIDS emerged.)

At another scale, we worry that the affective remainder will congeal into a fear of coming together, limiting our desire to gather in celebration, mourning, anger or prayer. This effect of self-contained lives will certainly exacerbate our current levels of loneliness, lack of touch, and social anxiety, but it will also weaken our collective ability to take on the larger arrangements (and ideas) that the coronavirus is thriving on.

We assert that now is a critical time to focus our collective attention on the global and local arrangements implicated in the management of the coronavirus. We want folks who care about social justice—from immigrant rights, to climate justice, voter registration, etc.—to seize this opportunity to explore and challenge what COVID19 shows us about the hidden (and not-so-hidden) arrangements of our lives.

The current arrangements of individuality

Our lives are individually wrapped these days. Like "fun size" candy bars or lunch-size yogurts, we are each a tidy container. We are individuals! When we're going out somewhere we don't want a bus—we want our own car or ride. When a young person is killed by gun violence, we want to hold up their individuality—look at his grades! Her athletics! His dreams!—to protest the loss. When a candidate runs for office we are told to decide if we find them personally

likeable, not to assess their policies on Syria, Israel or fracking. The American Dream is an individuality project, and it is killing us collectively.

As long as we function as individuals, our ability to solve complex social problems will fail us. With the coronavirus spreading across the globe, we literally have a social emergency that makes us want to wrap ourselves safely away from others. These so-called solutions—wearing masks, working from home, canceling travel—make sense to us at one level, because our lives and daily habits are already arranged this way. The habits of individual and personal solutions precede us. However, at a deeper level we feel the distance between the growing and more intense social emergency and the organizations of our daily lives. Individual solutions feel incommensurate and isolating.

Local and global social arrangements as cloaked actors

If the current story of the coronavirus would have us think that our attention should be on the sneezers, the mask-hoarders, and the cruise-takers, we are making the case to look at what the coronavirus is telling us about the larger arrangements that shape our lives. As Ed Yong wrote in The Atlantic, “We see a time when scientific research and the demand for news, the spread of misinformation and the spread of a virus, all happen at a relentless, blistering pace. The new crisis is very much the kind of epidemic we should expect, given the state of the world in 2020.”

How can we use this moment to question our lack of universal health care, or how the Trump administration’s xenophobic “public charge rule” (which enables federal officials to deny green cards to immigrants who use social safety net programs) might make all of us less safe? What might COVID19 be telling us about the colluding arrangements that have perpetuated globalization, fake news, next-day delivery and mass incarceration? To find out, we suggest folks turn outwards—instead of inwards—to come up with new arrangements that are not just healthier, but also more just and more social.

What can we do?

1) *Make the arrangements public.*

COVID19 becoming a pandemic is an effect of numerous overlapping social arrangements including global logistics, nation states and their image management, different national health care systems, etc. How do we bring these arrangements into focus?

With a call to surface the arrangements at play, we could benefit from the knowledge and experiences of activists in other parts of the world and across multiple issue-areas, as well as from other types of problem-solvers, ranging from artists to healers, athletes, architects, cultural workers and more.

Truly turning outward and finding ways to move these conversations into the broader public would mean we could also learn from those who have insights gained from their own

experiences with the larger social emergency. We could hear from immigrants and refugees who understand the cross-national movement of humans and goods, from queer youth who can teach us about powerful social networks that have kept them safe, and from the neighborhoods and towns who have faced school and factory closings that were much more permanent than what we are currently facing.

2) *Deepen and prolong this time shift.*

One opportunity we have with COVID19 is to build our capacity to jump out of our everyday routines when faced with crisis. Although this temporal shift is happening to us vertically (being imposed on us by our government, jobs, schools, or larger logistical operations like airlines, trains and the like), it is shifting us out of our daily routines. Now we have the opportunity to horizontally—collectively—decide to stop living as if everything is okay, when it isn't. We have been advocating for this stepping out of ordinary time since Ferguson, when we came out with a short piece called [A Case for Social Emergency Procedures](#).

Beyond the coronavirus, there are so many reasons we need to horizontally stop and address the arrangements of our current social order. What if instead of going back to our lives when COVID19 wanes, we decide to sit out our daily lives until we get serious traction on climate, state sanctioned violence, stealing indigenous lands, immigrant detention centers and the like? What if we acted like we are actually in the global crisis we find ourselves within? Maybe this pause caused by COVID19 can be continued in ways that force society to look at the entirety of the social emergency.

3) *Imagine ways to rebuild publics when the time is right.*

When the spread of the coronavirus finally wanes, we anticipate that we will be left as a population that is even more individually wrapped and isolated than before. Some of us will be yearning to get back into contact with others, while many will be suspicious of others or anxious about public spaces. How do we rebuild a vibrant public? What is at stake if we don't?

Instead of letting the coronavirus amplify and solidify our impulses to individuate, isolate and hunker down into our daily lives, we are making a call for the opposite. We are making the case that as soon as possible, activists turn our attention to rebuilding the public, along with our partners who create collective spaces in schools, mosques, libraries, museums, etc.

Activating public spaces to bring people together will break our habits of isolation and individuation and help us lean into collective healing, sense-making and problem-solving. It will give us chances to see each other, to acknowledge our humanity but also to say, "How *do* we take on these arrangements?" Can we step far enough out of our individually wrapped solutions to create new, more effective, just and collective ones?