

COVID-19 Forum: Introduction

2020-03-06 12:49:07

By

Since its emergence in December 2019, COVID-19 has led to a global pandemic, in everything but name. To date, over 100,000 people have been infected across the globe, with the vast majority of burden of the infection and of the 3,400 deaths so far being borne by China, where the disease originally emerged. There the epidemic has led to the adoption of quarantine and isolation measures at a historically unprecedented scale, as well as to the controversial employment of smartphone apps and other digital technologies in community containment. At the moment, with the disease having made significant in-ways in South Korea, Japan, Iran, and Italy, we are still no wiser as to the zoonotic origins of the disease, whereas information about its modes of transmission, basic reproduction number, incubation period, asymptomatic transmission (or not) and other key clinical and epidemiological aspects are constantly being debated and revised, leading to an environment of epistemic uncertainty and flux. At the same time, as scientists have been racing to provide real-time information on the epidemic, the social media have once again proved to be the insidious breeding grounds of fake-news, conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation about the virus, thus contributing to a broader environment of xenophobia, fear, and panic about the disease.

Somatosphere's COVID-19 Forum brings together seventeen anthropologists and historians in an effort to share ideas, analytical frameworks and concerns about the ongoing epidemic from interdisciplinary perspectives. Unlike the recent Ebola epidemic in West Africa, where anthropological intervention on the ground and direct engagement with affected communities and response teams flourished between 2014 and 2016, in the case of COVID-19, such activities remain virtually a political and practical impossibility, at least as far as China is concerned. However, an analytical and critical engagement with the epidemic, both in China and across the globe, is still pertinent, not only so that ethnographic and historical context can be provided (and such context is indeed urgently needed in many cases), but also so that the wider social impact of the epidemic and of epidemic containment measures is understood, and critical tools are developed for engaging with the epidemic crisis in its complex social reality. The contributions to this Forum thus aim to examine the epidemic in itself, but also in comparison to other epidemics and epidemic-control processes. It is hoped that the Forum will

foster interdisciplinary discussion and collaboration in response to the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic, and that it will inspire new critical and analytical approaches to the ways in which the new coronavirus epidemic is conceptualised, discussed, experienced and contained.

The COVID-19 Forum was edited by:

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Contributions:

[From Chain Reaction to Grid Reaction: Mobilities and Restrictions During the Epidemics of SARS and COVID-19](#)

[Biao Xiang](#)

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[Echoes of Ebola: Social and Political Warnings for the COVID-19 Response in African Settings](#)

[Melissa Leach](#)

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[Novelty and Uncertainty: Social Science Contributions to a Response to COVID-19](#)

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[Border Promiscuity, Illicit Intimacies, and Origin Stories: Or what Contagion's Bookends Tell us About New Infectious Diseases and a Racialized Geography of Blame](#)

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[Counting coronavirus: delivering diagnostic certainty in a global emergency](#)

[Alice Street](#) and [Ann H. Kelly](#)

University of Edinburgh; King's College London

AMA citation

. COVID-19 Forum: Introduction. *Somatosphere*. . Available at: . Accessed June 8, 2020.

APA citation

. (). *COVID-19 Forum: Introduction*. Retrieved June 8, 2020, from Somatosphere Web site:

Chicago citation

. . COVID-19 Forum: Introduction. *Somatosphere*. (accessed June 8,

2020).

Harvard citation

, *COVID-19 Forum: Introduction*, Somatosphere. Retrieved June 8, 2020, from <>

MLA citation

. "COVID-19 Forum: Introduction." . Somatosphere. Accessed 8 Jun. 2020.<>