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CDJ Editorial – What is this Covid-19 Crisis?

When I first started preparing for this issue of the CDJ in February 2020, little did I imagine that the editorial would be written from my kitchen table because Ireland was in lockdown. Stories about the terrible impacts of the Coronavirus on East Asia were circulating in our media, but it still seemed possible to wallow in our own complacency. That illusion, like so many others, has now been shattered. The CDJ readership is diverse and international, but wherever we are physically located we are becoming familiar with a terrifying and, at the time of writing, still unpredictable globalising force - Covid-19. The pace and scale of infection, the lives lost or shortened, the havoc wrought in public health systems, the depth and degree of restriction on movement, each of these consequences is unfolding in its own locally and nationally specific ways. Describing this as the ‘defining health crisis of our time’ the World Health Organization warns that ‘this is a global crisis that requires a global response’ (WHO, 2019). Behind the simple truth of that statement, however, lies a complex and troubling reality: local encounters with this crisis, as with so many others, are being mediated by profound inequalities in power, resources and visibility.

This is an all-encompassing crisis that is infiltrating every aspect our lives, from the most intimate to the most public. Contradictions abound, some of which are novel, others more long-standing. We are now expected to confront the prospect of death without the comfort of familiar funeral rites and practices. Our worries about friends and family members may have to be suffered at a physical remove from them. In the name of social solidarity, we must see ourselves and others as threats, as likely sources of infection. We are rightly entreated to stay safe, stay at home and to wash our hands, all presuming of course, that homes are safe, that we have places to go and a means of washing at our disposal. Maybe we are so ‘vulnerable’ that we will be cocooned and protected or maybe we are too vulnerable, and so risk being deemed expendable by economies that simply must ‘keep calm and carry on’. When death stalks those with ‘underlying conditions’, does that accentuate our deepest fears or bring grim but shameful relief? As we grieve our mundane routines, the public spaces we cannot share, the kin or

comrades we cannot grasp, we still must find the resilience and imagination to believe in better futures - futures that are as yet unwritten.

But even to write this smacks of privilege, of the kind of life where the everyday is not already a constant struggle to conquer dread and negotiate uncertainty. Many of us have been struck by the dawning awareness that it is those doing the most poorly rewarded and precarious jobs that we rely on the most; the cleaners, carers, shop workers, delivery people, agricultural labourers... Even though 'we are all in this together', the consequences of the virus are not shared equally. Illnesses discriminate because societies do. As CDJ readers you are probably already asking what does this mean for refugees and displaced peoples, for prisoners and those in institutions, for those who are homeless or badly housed, for those excluded from health systems, for those who are the poor and 'racialised others, for the victims of war and state violence? Neither are the consequences of lockdowns and collective quarantines borne equally. Homes are hells for many women and children. Some jobs are never coming back. Isolation can be a mental torture. The policing of new restrictions and regulations may licence old prejudices and legitimise constant surveillance. Many who are making the necessary sacrifices for the collective good have never known what it feels like to have their own welfare protected by the state or community.

The consequences for democracy, for the economy, for life as we thought we knew it are still impossible to predict. Some governments seem humbled, tentatively steering populations through the crisis, affirming any and all demonstrations of civic responsibility, drip-feeding and parsing restrictions, sequencing the asks according to urgency and legitimacy. Others are letting their authoritarian impulses off the leash, seizing powers and suspending freedoms for the most tenuous of reasons. Why waste a good crisis, when it's possible to use it to purge and 'purify', to spread racism and communal hatred? And still others lurch from distortion to denial, from platitudes to empty promises, from macho displays of invulnerability to wheedling appeals to nationalist sentiment. Science, expert opinion and mathematical modelling have been stripped of any remaining innocence. This crisis is ideological.

And still there are occasions of hope and traces of utopian possibility. Community development workers and activists weary of begging governments for funding for essential services and welfare nets have learned that in the right/wrong circumstances money can be found. Covid-19 has outed even the most reluctant Keynesians. Performativity targets and indicators are being set aside to allow people to get on with their jobs in the health and social

spheres. Previously disregarded voluntary groups are being called upon for their local knowledge, their abilities to organise and mobilise, for their rapid responses to need. Volunteering and community have become the watchwords of this crisis. Years of neoliberal pillage and austerity mean that states have ceded ground, capacity and legitimacy: now that networks of support must be created or restored, civil society seems to matter again. Activists and social movements are keeping careful watch, to ensure that temporary measures do not become permanent, to speak up for the forgotten ones and the outcasts so that oppressions are not multiplied, to lead by example when governments fail to recognise that economies must service societies and not the other way round.

Covid-19 might break community but it might also recharge it. Perhaps it will do both. It is too early to know for sure and this is no time for easy answers to the non-stop flood of questions. Having been kept at a distance from each other, will we trust again in sociability? Will we long for but still fear the physical proximity of others? Will our minds crack from the weight of anxiety and trauma? Will being indoors make us more self-interested or will it fill us with love for the world beyond us? In this moment of restriction and uncertainty, it is easy to lapse into judgementalism about those ‘irresponsible others’- those who won’t stay far enough away, the toilet paper hoarders, the ones who insist that their lives must continue as normal. But we might take our cues from elsewhere, when worrying about the fate of collective action and fellow feeling. We might think instead of the exhausted Chinese doctors travelling to make-shift field hospitals across the globe to share their learning about the virus; of the grief-stricken neighbourhoods breaking into song because those are the only words left to them; of the unknown online artists and eejits endlessly creating memes and videos to lift our spirits; of the ones who ‘come together while staying apart’ to make sure that care, affection, food and attention are given to those without them. We might think of all those who do these things, not because governments or political leaders exhort them to, but because they know and have always known that humanity must be re-socialised, especially at times of crisis.

Rosie R. Meade,

April 2020

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