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**PROTESTS AND CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN THE AGE OF COVID-19**

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2020 will forever be synonymous with a new type of 'normal'. The emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its COVID-19 disease forced nations to collectively embark on a global public health experiment (Kampmark 1). It is one defined by restrictions. In seeking to perturb the *inevitable* waves of an airborne disease, governments have enacted various laws which have empowered police at the expense of rescinding civic freedoms.

Deemed as necessary, the directives have ranged from 'stay at home' orders, to implementing social isolation and distancing protocols, and mandating personal protective wear for *all* public and social gatherings (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 'How to Protect Yourself and Others'). Those who breach these new – and often ambiguous laws – are threatened with excessive infringement fines or the possibility of incarceration. The latter is particularly disturbing given that social distancing is impossible in prisons and creates "the perfect breeding ground for COVID-19" (Human Rights Law Centre 'Explainer: Prisons and COVID-19').

As we are marketed a positive spin on the pandemic – a narrative which thanks and tells audiences to relish our 'staycations' – it becomes easier to binge the latest Netflix series and divorce ourselves from an uncomfortable reality. However, this process of compartmentalizing is not a privilege afforded to all. Much of the punitive emergency measures that have been introduced to mitigate COVID-19 have harmed "human rights and the space for [a] civil society" (CIVICUS 2). This is not to say that some of the restrictions are not justified.

There are ongoing international campaigns that have legitimized conspiracy theories and dis/misinformation to justify an overt disobedience against COVID regulations (Imhoff and Lamberty 5; Orso et al. 1). However, the robustness of international human rights law recognizes that certain liberties may be revoked during public emergencies, such as the current pandemic (Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission 'Explainer: Protest Rights in the COVID-10 Pandemic')

Instead, this article places significance on the repressive actions of some nations, specifically in their responses to large-scale movements about systemic racism. By citing healthcare concerns, excessive pandemic restrictions have disproportionately targeted and criminalized already disadvantaged minority groups

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(Cheng and Conca-Cheng 2). This is a type of inequality that signposts a long legacy of state-sanctioned, discriminative treatment.

It should be made clear that "racism during global emergencies is not altogether new, as previous pandemics have shown throughout history" (Elias et al. 2). Given the disclaimer, there should be no illusions held: COVID-19 has illuminated and exacerbated structural discrimination and social inequalities. Those who are most negatively affected by the current pandemic already exist at the intersections of multiples disparities (Bonilla-Silva 2-4; Devakumar et al. 1194).

Whether these inequities are along the lines of socioeconomic positions, occupational status, access to adequate housing, educational and healthcare providers, they are invariably intertwined with one's racial and ethnic background, sexual orientation, caste and/or migrant status (Paremoer et al. 1). These are inescapable socio-cultural detriments. Donning a mask cannot simply conceal them as they form the basis of one's identity. Yet, in trying to suppress COVID-19 transmission, the result of unvetted police powers and haphazard coronavirus decrees has worked to repress the autonomy of minority groups (Paremoer et al. 3).

It is because of the "wave of authoritarian governance [which] has swept the globe with profound, worldwide implications for democracy" (Thomson and Ip 4) that individuals have continued to protest during the novel coronavirus pandemic.

PROTESTING DURING A PANDEMIC

Protests, in their nature, are inherently diverse. The same diversity is reflected in the participants whose campaign efforts seek to enact a kind of hegemonic change. Where freedom of expression is under threat and restrictive laws have been passed with ease, democracy must prevail. As such, protestors have invoked a core democratic value to organize collective action that advocates change against national disparities in social, economic, and health inequalities.

Furthermore, the nature of protests during the current pandemic goes beyond the simple objective of raising awareness. Though it is true that this a subsidiary aim of an energized movement, in many cases, protests are about demanding accountability. The various demonstrations that have arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic have signalled to decision-makers that there is a shared willingness to cause significant disruption.

Despite the limitations of physical movement, activists continue to demonstrate resilience. Forming "perfect geometric patterns" (Sydney Morning Herald 'Perfect Geometric Patterns: Protesting In The Age of Social Distance'), masked activists complied with social distancing regulations by standing six feet apart in designated areas. Other examples of socially distanced protests allowed residents to show support from the security of their balconies.

As neighborhoods collectively banged their kitchenware, individuals expressed their anger at suppression of democracy and the relative failures of their government's responses to the pandemic (BBC 'Coronavirus Protest in Brazil Sees Millions Bang Pots From Balconies'). Climate change activists left shoes in place of their physical presence outside institutions to represent pollution-related deaths (BBC 'Coventry Climate Change Protests Features 168 Pairs of Shoes').

These innovative movements are symbolic of living within a crisis: political, health, and humanitarian challenges do not disappear when we close the doors to our homes. It is because of the alternative and creative forms of protest that render it practically impossible for elected officials and powerful elites to ignore the visibility and demands of the loud movement.

Nowhere is this more evident than the 2020 resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. As a direct result of racial profiling and egregious abuses of police power, the untimely death of George Floyd has



galvanized one of the most cohesive civil rights movements in the world (Plummer 'Civil Rights Has Always Been A Global Movement'). This global campaign resonates with many diasporas and disadvantaged groups.

As "Blacks across all age groups are nearly three times more likely than white people to contact COVID-19...Black people and other marginalized racial groups are shouldering a disproportionate burden in the current pandemic" (Barber 903). Those who protest and march under the banner of Black Lives Matter do so in solidarity by linking it to their struggles with COVID-19, structural inequality, and institutionalized racism within postcolonial states.

A snapshot of glocal variants of Black Lives Matter reveals how the slogan took on the cultural contexts of where it was performed. In Brazil, they were known as the "Vidas Negras Importam" demonstrations, and in India, the protests were reimagined to reflect how "Dalit Lives Matter" in the context of a legacy of caste-based oppression (CIVICUS 3-4; Jha and Rajgopal 1). Similarly, across the United Kingdom, European states and Australasia, the civil rights movement sought to emphasize the policies that target Black and Brown bodies. These minorities are marked as culturally and religiously different communities, allowing draconian measures to surveil and dehumanize their existence (Barrowcliffe 3).

In the age of COVID-19, it continues to be a reoccurring theme for governments to delegitimize their own versions of the Black Lives Matter protests. Citing security concerns and public health issues arising from the pandemic, individuals who partake in the mass-scale protests are stigmatized as selfish and opportunistic (Maqbool 'Black Lives Matter: From Social Media Post To Global Movement').

This article does not downplay the contagiousness of the novel coronavirus. It is an irrefutable fact that the large clustering of groups can potentially increase virus transmission (Manoharan 'Why Protesting Racism During A Pandemic Is Important – An Epidemiologist Explains'). However, Kampmark (4) points to an irony in that "...such criticism often came from quarters initially skeptical about the dangers of COVID-19. Protestors, in response, claimed that such risks could be minimized by following epidemiological advice (such as utilizing face masks, social distancing, and hand washing)."

Additionally, online advocates of Black Lives Matter propelled the movement in the digital realm through creating content and video marketing via social media and gaming platforms. In using engagement strategies – such as 'liking', commenting, or sharing – activists made use of algorithms to popularise and push Black Lives Matter content onto other user's feeds (Anderson et al. '#BlackLivesMatter surges on Twitter after George Floyd's Death'). Social media 'influencers' and activists played a seminal role in posting and sharing events that did not always get media attention.

As Chan (675) explains, marginalized groups often turn to alternative news outlets and social media platforms to emphasize their community's issues. Online communities – who shared a commonality across identity facets and similar emotional reactions to human rights violations – were more likely to use social media to "generate broad support for protest actions during the pandemic motivated by these intense shared emotions" (Grant and Smith 301). Perceiving injustices as a group allowed users to grieve collectively and intensify their campaigns against systemic racism.

Black Lives Matter remains relevant and continues to mobilize supporters. It is an enduring and resilient movement that is essential given the current pandemic and state of affairs. The violent epidemic against minorities at the hands of law enforcement indiscernibly takes lives while making headlines (Morgan 'Protests Erupt in US Cities After Daunte Wright and Adam Toledo Killings – Video').

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In the final days of writing this article, there have been numerous distressing examples of race-related hate crimes arising, either at the hands of disturbed individuals or as a direct result of overt police brutality. Anti-



Asian, anti-Black, and anti-Other discourse is endemic within the current environment. Though this is disheartening, it is, sadly, no surprise. Civil rights activists and academics have long contended that we are experiencing a double pandemic: the COVID-19 pandemic is interconnected with the ongoing pandemic of racism (Bonilla-Silva 5; Rafi 2; Starks 222).

Despite the relative successes of a cohesive civil rights movement in 2020, solidarity in combating racial injustice requires more than sharing a hashtag or posting a superficial photo, before opportunistically moving on to the next popular cause.

All *legitimate* forms of activism matter. A quick glance at a history book reveals how power can be upheld in the quiet revolutions that spur large-scale activist movements. Images of the 'Tank Man' in Tiananmen Square, Rosa Parks, a Tunisian fruit vendor, or the symbolic yellow vest or an umbrella, have been forever etched into our collective consciousness. These influential cultural symbols encapsulate struggles for civil and human rights. They remind us that the selfless actions of one – or even an inanimate object – can serve as significant catalysts in motivating a global movement.

Significant systemic changes will not occur unless we continue to question and highlight the institutions that subjugate individuals based on their gender, race and ethnicity, religious background, sexual orientation, and economic status. To sustain a campaign requires activists to be informed, to think critically, and to voice uncomfortable opinions. If these basic principles cannot be achieved, we risk being complicit in our silence and ignorance.

Succinctly described, the ongoing racially motivated acts against marginalized groups indicate how "the pandemic is exacerbating feelings of being a 'perpetual foreigner'" (Starks 221). While COVID restrictions have come to define a 'new' normal, the overt rise of racism, xenophobia, and scapegoating is *not* 'new' for many. Still, it is ultimately entangled within this new future.

In light of this, future research is needed to address the overt rise of white supremacy and ethno-nationalism due to the current pandemic. It would also be beneficial in comparing the politicized rhetoric of such groups that protest the legitimacy of COVID-19, in contrast to the civil rights movements centered upon achieving racial equity and reformation. Furthermore, a comprehensive future study should look at the rates of virus transmission from the groups that deny the effects of the novel disease, against those movements that practice social distancing protocols.

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