

When Will We Return to Normal? The Pandemic, Normalcy, and the Practice of History

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*The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.*¹

Walter Benjamin (1942)

*I have heard and you have heard and we have all heard directly from friends, loved ones, Canadians in general, how eager everyone is to get through this, get back to normal, get to a better summer, end this pandemic once and for all.*²

Justin Trudeau (2021)

A striking feature of the COVID-19 pandemic is that, since its start, it arrived with the promise of a “return to normal.” This commonplace assertion contains an important question revolving around the nature of COVID-19 as crisis. To what extent will the post-pandemic world resemble the one we left behind more than a year ago? These are questions with an historical character. This crisis has always been bracketed by the assumption of its essential ephemerality, of the way in which it represents only a brief but painful interruption to normal life. This normal has been built into the experience of the pandemic all along; while we await the return of the old normal, we live in the “new normal.” At this juncture, then, it is worth asking some important questions about what “normal” should look like in a post-pandemic world. Ultimately, the pandemic affords no return to the imagined paradise of 2019—instead, along with the other events of the past year, COVID-19 has made clear that the real crisis *is* the old normal. In order to reckon with these ghosts, the emerging post-pandemic world needs history more than ever.

The pandemic has been most devastating to those communities already made vulnerable by the old normal. A long and ongoing history of the unequal distribution of resources, care, and power has meant that decisive factors in shaping infection rates and outcomes are socio-economic and racial.³ In Canada, the most racially diverse neighbourhoods have seen mortality rates more than double those of majority white neighbourhoods—women in majority minority communities reporting mortality rates nearly three times higher than in predominately white areas.⁴ Violent colonial practices continue to create precarious conditions for Indigenous peoples, including housing shortages, overcrowding, water shortages, and other infrastructure

¹ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, accessed January 6, 2021, <https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html>.

² Justin P.J. Trudeau, “Canada COVID-19 Press Conference May 4th” (Press Briefing, Ottawa, May 4th, 2021), Rev Speech-to-Text Services, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/justin-trudeau-canada-covid-19-press-conference-transcript-may-4>

³ Sze, Shirley, et al. “Ethnicity and Clinical Outcomes in COVID-19: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.” *EClinicalMedicine* 29-30 (November, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2020.100630>; Yaya, Sanni, Helena Yeboah, Carlo Handy Charles, Akaninyene Otu, and Ronald Labonte. “Ethnic and Racial Disparities in COVID-19-Related Deaths: Counting the Trees, Hiding the Forest.” *BMJ Global Health* 5, no. 6 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-002913>.

⁴ John Paul Tasker, “More racially diverse areas reported much higher numbers of COVID-19 deaths: StatsCan.” *CBC News*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/racial-minorities-covid-19-hard-hit-1.5943878>.

gaps, such as those in health care.⁵ As of January 2021, this inequality has manifested in a 40 per cent higher rate of COVID-19 infection among Indigenous communities than among the general Canadian population.⁶ Throughout the pandemic, the ongoing opioid crisis has intensified. Tragically, the number of opioid-related overdose deaths in Ontario doubled among unhoused people.⁷

The “shock” of the pandemic, then, is not at all shocking. Decades (and longer) of systemic injustice is the root cause of the appallingly unequal tragedies resulting from the pandemic. Considering only the narrow realm of health care, a report published by the Ontario Hospital Association just before COVID-19 reached Canada, in December 2019, warned that decades of cuts to provincial healthcare had stretched the system to its limit. The province’s failure to expand its number of hospital beds since 1999—a 20-year period during which Ontario’s population grew by 27 per cent—is particularly chilling in the context of Ontario’s third wave, where a shortage of ICU beds brought the prospect of rationed health care close to home.⁸ Reports that the province underspent its planned health budget by over \$450 million in the lead-up to the pandemic speaks to just one piece of a much larger pattern.⁹ The magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis, then, is the symptom of a much greater, and longer, crisis of inaction and defunding that cannot be separated from another upshot of the violent structures of the old normal: the social justice movements gathered broadly under the banner of Black Lives Matter.

The BLM protests of this past summer in the United States were most immediately sparked by specific instances of police violence. While the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery (among countless others) deserve in themselves the kinds of responses (and more) that we saw over the past year, it is clear that the protests are rooted in long-standing and ongoing systemic oppression of BIPOC folks in the USA, Canada, and elsewhere. What both crises discussed here show, then, is the striking revelation of *what was already here*: the crises that confronted the world in 2020 are just more visible statements of the normal state of affairs. In the same way that BLM has confirmed the injustices of our everyday life, the pandemic has brought into stark relief the real crisis of 2020-21: the ongoing failure of our society to afford everyone an equal chance at a flourishing life. The current crisis has made it

⁵ Lisa Richardson and Allison Crawford, “COVID-19 and the Decolonization of Indigenous Public Health,” *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 192, no. 38 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.200852>; Jorge Barrera, “First Nations back-to-school COVID-19 funding falls far short, says AFN regional chief,” *CBC News*, August 26, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/first-nations-school-funding-covid19-1.5701135>

⁶ Christy Somos. “A year later, Indigenous communities are fighting twin crises: COVID-19 and inequality.” *CTV News*, January 25, 2021. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/a-year-later-indigenous-communities-are-fighting-twin-crises-covid-19-and-inequality-1.5280843>

⁷ Muriel Draaisma and Jasmin Seputis, “Ontario’s opioid-related death toll surged to 2,050 during pandemic in 2020, new report finds.” *CBC News*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/report-opioid-related-deaths-ontario-covid-19-pandemic-1.6031845>.

⁸ Zach Dubinsky, *et al.* “As ICUs fill up, doctors confront grim choice of who gets life-saving care.” *CBC News*, April 19, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/covid-ontario-icu-triage-1.5992188>. Colin Butler, “With nothing left to cut, report warns Ontario healthcare could face an ugly future.” *CBC News*, December 24, 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/ontario-hospitals-efficiency-healthcare-reform-1.5406753>

⁹ Colin D’Mello, “Ontario Spent \$466M Less on Healthcare than Planned Ahead of COVID-19 Pandemic,” *CTV News*, July 28, 2020, <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/ontario-spent-466m-less-on-healthcare-than-planned-ahead-of-covid-19-pandemic-1.5042104>.

impossible to ignore that there can be no return to normal because we have never left the normal. The task of the post-pandemic world is to come to grips with this reality and seek to change it.

What does this all mean for those who study history? First, we should begin to understand the pandemic as a break in the historical narrative. Rather than seeking to return to the old normal, to bracket away the pandemic as just a brief interruption to the celebrated “End of History,”¹⁰ we must use our understanding of the past to cast forge a future anew. Second, , this understanding of crisis makes clear that the present is an historical object. Today’s crises blur the line between past and present, giving visible demonstration to the ways in which the past continues to shape and haunt the present. The traumatic events of the past year did not happen in a vacuum: they are all products of much longer processes which must be approached with an historical lens. In the same way that crisis reveals the truth of the reality in which we have always been living, the solution to crisis must look first to the past in order to understand the present and strive towards a better future.

Finally, our ongoing crises point to another conclusion, to the ways in these critical events remind us of our *responsibilities* to the past. The past is not simply something to overcome, to solve and cast aside. Walter Benjamin argues in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* that we owe our “weak Messianic power” to redeem the struggle of past generations.¹¹ For Benjamin, the claim the past exerts on us “cannot be settled cheaply.” Benjamin’s famous “Angel of History” sees in the past “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” In this way, “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”¹² In short, history is a story of oppression where the sad ending of each chapter is already known. The present has a duty to acknowledge this past and to seek to redeem its sacrifices through work in the present.

The BLM movement and the coronavirus pandemic are pressing reminders of Benjamin’s injunction to the present. Through their activism on behalf of the oppressed in the present and past, BLM and related movements engage directly with our responsibility to redeem the struggles of our past.

We have a duty to rescue the past from the present. If we are to emerge from today’s crises, we must deepen our ability to recognize the uses and responsibilities of reaching into the past. Only with this kind of historical sensibility can we begin to address the structural problems of which these crises are merely visible expressions. More than ever, we are called to use history for the here and now, to use the hard truths of the COVID-19 pandemic to break with the old normal. We must “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”¹³—it is time to cast off from the past precisely *because* we owe something to it.

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989).

¹¹ Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*.

¹² Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*.

¹³ Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*.

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