Between Georgia and Ohio

Constructing the Covid-19 Disaster in the United States

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This popular meme aptly captures a state of liminality which is not so much imposed by the virus SARS-CoV-2, but rather, is carefully crafted and developed through state-level political interventions (Fig. 1). As Tierney (2007: 512) explains, ‘disasters are occasions that can intensify both social solidarity and social conflict’. Arguably, fear of the latter is amplified during pandemics, given their specific temporality (insofar as the disaster process itself is projected to span months, rather than hours or days). The sudden onset of a hazard, where it intersects with risk-producing social arrangements, can result in a disaster and a concomitant sense of liminality that can be initially devoid of ritual and routine (Thomassen 2016: 94). However, the temporality of the Covid-19 pandemic and its protracted nature have provided an opportunity for governing bodies and officials to tacitly construct the crisis while it is ongoing by overtly dismantling old norms and creating new ones (Jordheim et al. 2020).

As Sun & Faas (2018: 627) note, how people may perceive and act toward disasters is shaped by sociocultural factors, including political forces and institutional discourses. The Covid-19 disease does not shut down infrastructure and disrupt social norms; instead, as the virus continues to spread, people are constructing the disaster to negotiate a sense of liminality that is similar to Schrödinger’s cat. Here, the authors interrogate how state-level actors chose to construct – or not to construct – the disaster and its correlating sense of liminality. Further, it can be seen how this scaffolding influences the scope of liminality and impacts disaster perception, experience, uncertainty, knowledge production and response.

While the historical production and recovery dimensions of this pandemic need continued exploration, we focus here on the intersection of state-driven disaster construction and liminality in the states of Ohio and Georgia during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, we examine the social construction of pandemic social worlds by governing officials and consider the potential public health implications. Methodologically, we observe and analyse state-level decision-making processes, media and social media responses, and draw on autoethnographic experiences and participant-observation in Ohio and Georgia as the coronavirus pandemic unfolded.

There has been a high variability in state responses to and constructions of the pandemic, as each individual state has been tasked with managing the crisis under the auspices of its own governor. There have been diverse internal responses in the US, despite strong evidence from other nations, positive outcomes in other states and data (e.g. that behavioural mobility changes are key in reducing viral transmission) (Warren & Skillman 2020). It is well established that both space and time are instrumental in identifying clusters of transmission for the coronavirus, and this, therefore, has informed public health responses (Desjardins et al. 2020). However, since both the temporal and spatial aspects of liminality are impacted by the pandemic’s social construction, the lived experience of liminality and how it should be navigated is highly variable. Thus, we examine two US states with divergent social constructions of the disaster – Ohio and Georgia.

Both states are led by Republican governors – members of the same political party as current president, Donald Trump. Despite this overlapping political identity, governors DeWine (Ohio) and Kemp (Georgia) have responded to Covid-19 in different ways. Domestic information about Covid-19 is provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia; however, CDC guidelines for social and economic reopening were summarily rejected by the Trump administration (Goodnough & Haberman 2020). States have been left to interpret multiple and divergent information sources – Trump, CDC and state-level data – to inform their responses. Both governors are eligible to run for re-election in 2022. Neither has publicly criticized President Trump’s response to the pandemic, but Kemp appears to implement policies in line with Trump’s statements, while DeWine’s actions have diverged from Oval Office statements.

Constructed disaster and liminality in Ohio

Lauded internationally for his early actions in response to Covid-19, Ohio governor, Mike DeWine, in collaboration with Ohio Department of Health director, Dr Amy Acton, overturned social norms and began re-enculturating the public. Starting on 3 March 2020, DeWine instituted daily press conferences, immediately creating ritual and a centralized source for Covid-19 scientific, social and governmental updates, which has since become colloquially known as ‘Wine with DeWine’, garnering press attention, T-shirts and memes (see Fig. 2).

As the Cleveland News five reported: ‘Each day around 2 p.m. … residents across Ohio are tuning in – not to your regularly scheduled daytime TV, but to Ohio Governor Mike DeWine’s daily coronavirus news conferences, which are not just a source of vital information for Ohioans, but now provide a much-needed source of community for a state asking citizens to distance themselves from each other’ (Cross 2020). In a cascade over the following weeks, universities, primary schools, dine-in restaurants, salons, day care centres and non-essential businesses either began working remotely, or were closed or prohibited.

A controlled collapse of infrastructure influences the spatial dimensions of liminality. For instance, while individuals are encouraged to maintain physical distancing and limit travel, in reality, this can be highly variable, depending on socio-economic status and which industries are deemed ‘essential’ by state-specific shelter-in-place orders (see Cresswell 2020). For example, low-wage workers in ‘essential’ industries, such as food service or grocery stores, must still travel to work and have contact with the public; they simultaneously have limited access.
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– 2020b. Kemp, Toomey, Carden, Bryson give COVID-19 update. 1 April. https://gov.georgia.gov/press-releases.

– 2020c. Executive Order 04.02.20.01. 2 April.

– 2020d. Executive Order 04.03.20.01. 3 April.

– 2020e. Executive Order 04.03.20.02. 3 April.

– 2020f. Kemp, Duncan, Ralston announce plans to extend public health state of emergency. 8 April. https://gov.georgia.gov/press-releases.

Ohio Department of Health n.d.. COVID-19. https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/ (accessed 5 April 2020).

Fig. 3. Empty playground in northwest Ohio.

to affordable healthcare and are often not provided with personal protective equipment, such as masks or gloves. However, even essential businesses do not run without disruption. For instance, in Ohio, ‘essential’ businesses must maintain social distancing. This translates into manufacturing lines having to physically slow their pace, decrease production and lay off employees. By order of the governor, grocery stores must make some provision for those waiting to enter their businesses, since the number of customers in the store is limited, impacting sales and staffing. While these changes to norms could create panic, the executive branch of the state openly discusses any changes at ‘Wine with DeWine’ and encourages individuals to anticipate and abide by them. Government leaders continually reinforce new norms, using language that bolsters social solidarity. For example, on 6 April, Dr. Acton encouraged the masses: ‘It is no small thing that we are doing together. It is so incredibly hard to shut down our lives the way we have. I am absolutely certain you will look back and know you helped save each other in this state. The impact is profound’.

Specifically framing the disaster serves diverse purposes. It establishes the foundation for new norms and centralizes knowledge production through the governor’s office in order to mitigate misinformation, confusion and uncertainty as people attempt to make sense of political and scientific information while existing in a liminal space. Accompanying information about shutdowns, Covid-19 death tolls, economic relief plans and goals for flattening the curve, DeWine and Acton frequently frame new norms, either directly or through the advice of other governmental figures. Clear guidelines regarding shutdowns have been provided and emphasis has been placed on supporting local businesses, caring for the elderly and going outside to exercise, while most importantly, maintaining social distancing. While at a local park, one author observed clusters – presumably households – walking dogs, riding hoverboards or riding bikes. Occasionally, individuals walking in step – but six feet apart – could be seen. The children’s playgrounds remained barren as locals observed the governor’s directive to avoid playground equipment (see Fig. 3).

As another example, on 31 March 2020, during Governor DeWine’s daily press conference, Lori Criss, the director of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services was invited to speak. She advised: ‘If you have a neighbour that lives alone, older adults for sure, but neighbours of any age, please reach out to them as well. Leave a kind and cheerful note, offer to run an errand, just give them a call to say hello. I want to emphasize checking on friends and family and neighbours who live alone is really important right now’. As such, instead of going out to lunch, people now order food in. Mutual aid networks formed by local communities have sprung up across Ohio to ensure the elderly and those struggling can get resources, like groceries (Namigadde 2020).

Irons (2020) uses the term ‘Quarantine’ to describe experiences of time under the Covid-19 ‘stay at home’ and ‘shelter-in-place’ orders issued in many localities around the world. In this particular disaster, the collapse of infrastructure is by design – a ‘Quarantined’ liminality constructed by governmental leadership to impose intentional social and economic impacts for an undefined amount of time as individuals live in a simultaneous state of infected and healthy. More specifically, for many people, it refers to a departure from normalized routines, such as the five-day work week/weekend pattern (Irons 2020). In Ohio, rather than weeks and weekends being governed by t-ball games, date nights and music lessons, the week ebbs and flows around the daily update, readying the masses for more change. Anticipated end dates for remote learning occur in 3 to 4-week increments, and as officials attempt to project when the death tolls will peak, those deadlines get extended, gradually extending liminality and easing anxiety and fear driven by uncertainty. The tension between social conflict and social solidarity is delicately balanced as Ohio unemployment rates have spiked, with 104,000 more claims filed as of 2 April than there were in all of 2019 (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services 2020). At the same time, as of this writing, the Covid-19 death rate hovers around 3.9 per cent of an identified 6,881 confirmed cases.

Haphazard liminality in Georgia

Although Ohio officials framed liminality and Quarantine to manage uncertainty and regulate knowledge production in routinized and ritualized ways, the Georgia officials’ response has been less intentional. Georgia governor Brian Kemp’s first comments and executive orders (EOs) about Covid-19 emerged on 28 February, when he created the Coronavirus Task Force, described as a ‘coalition of subject-matter experts’ (Office of the Governor 2020a). In that press release, Department of Public Health director Dr Kathleen Toomey stated: ‘We are taking action now – ahead of any confirmed cases – to make sure that we are ready for any scenario’ (ibid.).

By mid-March, officials declared a public health state of emergency and issued partial shelter-in-place orders – specifically for publicly-funded K-12 schools and the assisted living population. On 1 April, Governor Kemp highlighted how Georgians were making ‘personal choices’ to ‘listen to the guidance provided’ to ‘fight against COVID-19’ (Office of the Governor 2020b). During this press conference, Governor Kemp indicated that he was, up until then, unaware that asymptomatic individuals could carry and transmit the virus. As a result of this ‘new’ information, he announced all K-12 school closures and a forthcoming state-wide shelter-in-place order. Unlike Governor DeWine, Governor Kemp revealed few details of when the EO for shelter-in-place would be available or what activities would be restricted, who had authority to enforce them, and for how long, fuelling uncertainty.

Since the beginning of the state’s response, Governor Kemp’s press conferences and releases have been sporadic rather than regular and ritualized. Unlike other states, such as Ohio, press conferences have not been regularly scheduled and few details are provided in press materials about the content of forthcoming EOs. Thus, social norms are disrupted in unprecedented ways without any effort to reshape them or scaffold them as part of a ritualized bureaucratic response, and the language of social solidarity is, by comparison, relatively absent.

On 2 April, Governor Kemp’s shelter-in-place EO for all non-essential activities was revealed. ‘Essential’ included

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UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

PHOTO BY DOUG BROWN

ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY VOL 36 NO 4, AUGUST 2020
Ohio Department of Job and Family Services 2020. Ohio jobless claims soar to 468,414. The Highland County Press. https://highlandcountrypress.com (accessed 5 April 2020).

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Fig. 4. Meme depicts Governor Kemp during an April press conference. The text reads ‘I just found out the north won the war’. Fig. 5. Sign posted in a Cobb County, GA grocery store stating ‘Due to high demand and to support all customers, we will be limiting the number of Sanitization, Cold and Flu related products to 5 each per customer. Thank you for shopping with us’.

Fig. 6. Georgia Department of Public Health COVID-19 Confirmed Case Rate per 100,000 persons by County of Residence Map as of 12 April 2020.

grocery stores, restaurants, medical facilities and pharmacies, along with other businesses, such as gun stores and ranges (Office of the Governor 2020e). This EO was followed by another on 3 April that allowed law enforcement to ‘enforce the closure of businesses, establishments, corporations, non-profit corporations, or organizations’ (Office of the Governor 2020d); a third EO was released on that same day as ‘some persons have sought clarifying guidance on the provisions’ of the shelter-in-place EO (Office of the Governor 2020e). This third EO states that: ‘The Office of the Governor may continue to issue guidance on the scope of “Essential Services” as needed through communication media, including social media, without need for further Executive Orders’ (ibid.). The lack of clarity from Governor Kemp’s office resulted in the cascading of multiple EOs and the final determination that ‘Essential Services’ could be defined again at any time via any communication method.

Governor Kemp has garnered criticism for his EOs, slow response and lax restrictions. For example, the governor’s insistence that beaches remain open undermined the slow response and lax restrictions. For example, the governor’s insistence that beaches remain open undermined the north won the war. Kemp’s reopening of beaches as a ‘reckless mandate’ that individual with satirical memes and a public Facebook group dedicated to mocking Governor Kemp (see Fig. 4).

Uncertainty is further compounded by Dr Toomey’s relative silence. Dr Toomey has made relatively few public remarks about Covid-19, despite marshalling a robust digital space with information about the virus and disease. News outlets describe the relationship between the governor and the Department of Public Health as one where ‘the governor’s office often has kept a tight grip on health officials commenting publicly’ which is only just recently beginning to recede, allowing Dr Toomey space to deliver ‘dire messages about the state’s limited coronavirus testing and the scientific imperative for social distancing’ (Hallerman 2020).

The seeming lack of collaboration and communication from key offices to lead the state’s response and set guidelines for social norms during the pandemic has resulted in confused and mixed messages. Uncertainty pervades everyday life, adding to pre-existing stressors (Sopory et al. 2019), with long-term mental and communal health consequences (Afifi et al. 2012). For example, in Cobb County – a populated county north of Atlanta, which was initially one of the most affected areas in the state – home improvement stores remained packed with customers preparing their spring gardens. Cobb grocery stores were similarly busy until the first week of April; the county began keeping a daily updated map with details about product availability in response to higher than usual shopping and resulting shortages (Cobb County 2020).

Unlike Ohio, Georgia has yet to institute a reduced maximum number of customers allowed in the store at one time. Although many customers were not observed wearing masks or gloves in the last weeks of March, April shoppers predominantly wore masks and racers. Grocery store workers in the area do not appear to have been supplied with personal protective equipment, but plastic ‘shields’ were installed between the grocery clerk and customers and ‘wait here’ markers were placed six feet apart to indicate waiting line distances.

Conclusion

Among disaster anthropologists, the social ‘production’ of disaster is frequently used to describe the distal historical, political and economic processes that enable hazards to unfold into disasters; meanwhile, some anthropologists utilize a constructionist approach to highlight the various ways people come to understand and experience disasters through the production of concepts and knowledge (Sun & Faas 2018). In the United States, the current pandemic has unveiled the historically produced social arrangements that have turned the virus into a disaster, such as job and income insecurity and inadequate access to and funding of healthcare and public health systems – all of which are embedded in a history of inequality that produce differential impacts. Understanding the varied social ‘constructions’ of reality in the midst of the pandemic and how they are entangled with systemic forces that (re)produce risk, however, also has important implications for disaster management and risk reduction (ibid.).

The actions of state actors attempting to manage the Covid-19 disaster amid a delayed and relatively minimal federal response, provides us with an opportunity to analyze how state governments and actors reframe social norms and experiences of liminality during Quarantine. The careful social construction of the pandemic in Ohio by public officials has resulted in streamlined knowledge production, expectations of social change and a sense of well-informed communication with leadership – demonstrated, for example, in Facebook fan pages of Dr Acton. However, the official response in Georgia has been met with confusion and uncertainty. Wavering between support for President Trump’s response at the federal level and attempting to implement protections for his state while simultaneously keeping public health officials in the shadows, Governor Kemp has added uncertainty to an already tenuous situation. The ramifications of this are seen in the multiple and somewhat confused executive orders, sociocultural responses by Georgians and tensions between local and state officials about local authority.

Sun and Faas (2018: 630) state that the ‘ways situated actors construct disasters and associated actions may themselves become root causes of future disasters’. As state governments begin experimenting with relaxing and dismantling ‘stay at home’ orders in non-uniform ways across the country, the narratives and knowledge they produce alongside their actions will have implications for how the public responds to and continues to conceptualize the pandemic, as well as what avenues become open or closed for the virus.

Fig. 6. Georgia Department of Public Health COVID-19 Confirmed Case Rate per 100,000 persons by County of Residence Map as of 12 April 2020.