Life under lockdown
Notes on Covid-19 in Silicon Valley

1. For an ethnographic overview of Silicon Valley’s socioeconomic inequities, see Jegathesan & Anderson (2019); Zolniski (2006).
2. Naomi Klein’s notion of disaster capitalism (2005) is insightful, but it’s easy to forget that by its very nature, corporate capitalism has a marked tendency to foment crisis and disaster.
3. Laura Nader first developed the course ‘Controlling processes’ at the University of California, Berkeley during the 1980s, and taught it for more than three decades.
4. The mayor of Wuhan reportedly declared that up to five million people had fled the city before Chinese authorities imposed the travel ban. See Knets (2020).
5. The walking dead might be stoking mass paranoia. Abramowitz, S. 2017. Epidemics (especially Ebola). Annual Review of Anthropology 46: 421-445.
6. We cannot help but wonder whether post-apocalyptic TV programmes like The Walking Dead might be stoking mass paranoia. From our vantage point, the contradictions of Covid-19 are on full display. The present crisis has not only exposed Silicon Valley’s stark inequalities, it has amplified the dialectical opposition between the region’s utopian image and its grim economic realities.5 The outbreak has magnified these disparities: mass unemployment has suddenly gripped the area, as it has through much of the country, yet in spite of the pandemic – or perhaps because of it – some corporations are thriving. Among the many spectres haunting America in recent days is the spectre of corporate capitalism, in which a handful of high-tech firms are amassing huge returns from large-scale catastrophe.6

Price gouging is illegal in California, but as in the rest of the US, there are no laws against turning handsome profits during states of emergency – in fact, the business press often encourages such behaviour. For example, in the wake of last year’s deadly wildfires, Entrepreneur magazine published an article headlined ‘Natural disasters are on the rise – that’s a big business opportunity’. Over the past decade, Forbes has declared that ‘every disaster is an opportunity you must seize’, while The Wall Street Journal columnists have given tips on ‘profiting from disaster’ by buying the right stocks. Today’s crisis provides investors with enticing possibilities. US News & World Report reports that ‘even as fear spreads’, there are ways for ‘savvy investors’ to capitalize by picking ‘stocks poised to profit from coronavirus’. After all, ‘in the wild thores of shaken markets, opportunity lurks’ (see Altucher 2010; Diermeier 2011; Marcus 2019; Reeth 2020).

In the US, the corporations benefiting the most from the current crisis are biotech and pharmaceutical firms racing to develop a vaccine or therapeutic treatments (for example, Gilead Sciences, located in Foster City, north of San José), conglomerates producing medical supplies and cleaning products (such as Oakland-based Clorox) and dozens of Silicon Valley Internet corpora-
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Harris, B. & A. Schipani 2020. When Bolsonaro sparks political feud over coronavirus lockdowns. Financial Times, 8 April.

Hebdon, C. 2013. Activating consciousness – in both cross-cultural and historical terms – is needed now more than ever, and anthropology can be an essential tool for achieving a broader level of awareness.

The notion of controlling processes – the analysis of power and its shifting, dynamic components – has informed this article. For more than a decade, we have taught a popular undergraduate course at our university on this topic, modelled after Laura Nader’s innovative anthropological and theoretical approaches (Hebdon 2013). This experience has helped us to sharpen our understandings of ‘the mechanisms by which ideas take hold and become institutional in relation to power … ethnography gets to the heart of control and why it is so difficult to perceive and to study’ (Nader 1997: 711). The concept of controlling processes provides a useful starting point for analyzing the unfolding crisis because it recognizes the multifaceted, incremental and seemingly consensual nature of power, often embedded in the everyday routines and habits of those being controlled.

To help elucidate the current moment, we have also attempted to apply a version of ‘situational analysis’ – in which an important event, typically a crisis or breaking point, is examined in detail, and then projected outward to better understand the dynamics of large-scale political and economic institutions (Gluckman 1940; Kapferer 2005). This method, initially proposed by Max Gluckman, seems particularly appropriate for analyzing a public health emergency with economic, social and psychological dimensions. Global crises expose the pent-up contradictions and inequalities of the social order, but they can also trigger massive disruptions – and, therefore, are extraordinary opportunities for sweeping, radical change. Anthropologists are well positioned to help overturn ossified political and economic structures – and push forward new human-centred possibilities.

A tale of two valleys

Although we have not conducted ethnographic interviews in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak, one of us (Marlovits) has spent several years researching homelessness, and both of us have closely monitored developments in the region since early February 2020, when health officials identified the first Covid-19 case in California. ‘Culture at a distance’ takes on renewed meaning when fieldwork is limited to phone calls with friends and relatives, loud conversations with neighbours, teleconferences with students and observations of street life made from within the relative safety of a parked car.

San José State University proudly advertises itself to the world with a corporate-friendly slogan: ‘Powering Silicon Valley’. From our perspective of living, working and coming together in this region, it is sometimes hard to see how the future might dream of emulating this model. Homelessness, megacommutes, unaffordable housing, gentrification, displacement and extreme wealth disparities are signal features of contemporary Bay Area life. Despite this, Silicon Valley still keeps a hold on the local and national utopian imagination. But what exactly lies behind this fantasy?

Silicon Valley’s mythology and claim to public consent is the image of the heroic, practical engineer-genius, steeped in nerdy masculinity, whose technological know-how will secure a utopian future. Although such images might seem like familiar tropes or even caricatures, they are symptomatic of the income inequality plaguing our region. In times of crisis, media outlets magically transform the engineer-genius into a messiah – Tesla’s Elon Musk promises free ventilators to hospitals; Jeff Bezos’ company Amazon oversees the shipment of everything from toilet paper to face shields with a guaranteed two-day delivery; and Zoom’s Eric Yuan provides cloud-based video conferencing to anyone who wants it (see Dutton 2020; Waterston 2020; Dutton & Waterston 2020).

What isn’t foregrounded is that the so-called ‘disruptions’ caused by these tech platforms are based on the gradual capture and privatization of pre-existing public infrastructures and logistical networks, which have helped turn a pandemic crisis into a windfall for corporate shareholders. Heading into a future of widely expected global instability and climate emergency, these companies have presciently developed methods for extracting profit from disasters and crises, while at the same time providing services and functions that rely upon the Internet – a crucial infrastructure that was made possible by US taxpayers through government-funded research.

To illustrate this, consider San José-based Zoom Video Communications, founded in 2011. For those with high-speed Internet access, Zoom video conferences have quickly become a national and international sensation with skyrocketing uptake – and at our university, a vital tool for maintaining some semblance of campus life. When Bay Area officials declared a ‘shelter in place’ order on 16 March, Zoom moved classroom and social functions from physical classrooms to typi-
struggling mightily to realize a version of the American dream. Many students hold either part-time or full-time jobs, mostly in the feminized and insecure service sector, and now find themselves suddenly unemployed in one of the most expensive regions of the country. By our estimates, somewhere between 15 to 30 per cent of our students aren’t able to make the switch to online learning because of lost jobs, childcare responsibilities, inadequate access to technology or lack of a quiet space to listen to Zoom lectures uninterrupted.

Technology infrastructures are, in other words, thin and unevenly distributed—and for many, more spectacle than real. Despite the celebratory rhetoric of tech executives, and the widely held perception that our students are digital ‘natives’ with easy access to technology, the ‘digital divide’ has never disappeared in Silicon Valley, much less the rest of America.

These issues highlight problems related to the commodification of user data in a tech economy that even now is only lightly regulated in the US. Convenient Internet-based communication platforms often prioritize information profitability rather than democracy, science or the public interest. Operating in a historical context in which the privatization of public airways has been naturalized, tech executives frequently claim that they are the guardians of free speech and democratic debate, while failing to fully acknowledge the social implications of commodified flows of access, information and personal data.

The corporate capture of information systems can lead to situations resembling post-colonial authoritarian societies—states characterized by paranoia, rumour, distrust, millenarian and apocalyptic sensibilities, elite plunder, cronyism, and official dissembling—shaping an impenetrable, confusing ‘epistemic murk’ (Taussig 1992). For marketized media purveyors, crisis is a growth opportunity—particularly when the crisis can only be mitigated by keeping people physically apart from one another.

From one perspective, social distancing might be seen as a public health approach in response to the outbreak of Covid-19—but to some degree, it fits comfortably alongside the normalization of a class-based distribution of risk and an individualistic ‘bunker mentality’, shaped by Silicon Valley’s utopian fantasies and American cold war militarization. It is to these topics that we now turn.

**Lockdown**

By late March, over a billion people around the world were under ‘lockdown’, but what that meant varied from place to place. In China, it took the form of a cordon sanitaire around Wuhan and other urban centres throughout Hubei province. For more than two months, health officials directed infected people to mass quarantine centres and the military enforced a strict travel ban, closing roads, train stations and airports—though by the time these restrictions were imposed, many people had reportedly fled the region.

Brazil’s approach has included mandatory closures of schools and businesses imposed by state governors throughout the country, but many are apparently ignoring social distancing orders, perhaps in part due to dismissive statements from President Jair Bolsonaro who, like US president Donald Trump, initially downplayed the dangers of Covid-19, and by mid-April had fired the country’s straight-talking health minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta. Bolsonaro has continued greeting crowds of supporters in the streets. In some of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, drug traffickers are reportedly enforcing curfews in an effort to contain the spread of Covid-19, which is perhaps a sign of the desperate conditions faced in some parts of the country.
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Weise, K. & K. Conger 2020. Gaps in Amazon’s response as virus spread to more than 50 warehouses. The New York Times, 5 April. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/05/technology/coronavirus-amazon-workers.html.

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(Barreto Briso & Phillips 2020; Harris & Schipani 2020).

By early April, the first cases of Covid-19 had struck indigenous people in the country’s Amazonian region, including the Yanomami.

Taiwanese officials have confronted the outbreak with a strikingly different strategy. Instead of regional or national lockdowns, the country has relied upon widespread screening and testing, real-time integration of national health data with travel records and a containment strategy that keeps infected people quarantined. The willingness of citizens to comply with these measures has little to do with ‘Confucian’ values, as suggested by some commentators – instead, the government has been extraordinarily transparent and has kept citizens informed through press conferences, social media and aggressive actions to curb misinformation. A well-functioning democracy – painstakingly born after nearly a half-century of one-party authoritarian rule under the Kuomintang or KMT – has helped health officials rapidly mobilize resources. Despite the fact that Taiwan is among the most densely populated countries on the planet, it has had one of the world’s lowest Covid-19 death rates (Leonard 2020; Wang et al. 2020).

In the US, the idea of lockdown has been largely shaped by lingering cold war fears and anxieties – specifically, a kind of bunker mentality influenced by the lasting effects of a peculiar mid-century fantasy: the underground bomb shelter, promoted heavily in the 1950s and 1960s through official government public information campaigns. The structures, typically designed to protect nuclear families from nuclear fallout, were deeply absorbed into the American consciousness. Joseph Masco notes that the bomb ‘transformed the United States into a special kind of bunker society, fixated on impending nuclear attack while fantasizing about life within both mental and physical fortresses’. He adds, ‘Cold War planners explicitly merged the enterprise with the ideology of American Exceptionalism … they engineered a new kind of militarized society’ (Masco 2009: 13, 16).

Evidence of a militarized response to America’s outbreak is everywhere. President Trump has called the crisis ‘our great war’, while congratulating his administration’s ‘relentless effort to defeat the Chinese virus’ (Bennett & Berenson 2020). A heavily militarized American society has meant long-term increases in Pentagon budgets and simultaneous cuts to the Department of Health and Human Services, which includes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. ‘With the rest of the government so hollowed out, it is no wonder we look to the military to support public health’, wrote Catherine Lutz and Neta Crawford (2020).

There is at least one other parallel between the cold war bunker society and today’s crisis. Masco notes that the bomb shelter was ‘a privatized enterprise, stocked largely with purchased commodities, from generators to playing and working from home never seemed so utopian – at least among those privileged enough to afford it. For those forced to work in Amazon distribution centres or poorly paid jobs now suddenly deemed to be essential services, including those done by agricultural workers in California’s Central Valley – many of whom are undocumented immigrants – ‘distancing’ is simply not an option (Ramírez & Harris 2020).

American carnage – and redemption

Though it is too early to know for sure, it appears possible that California may be spared the full lethal force of Covid-19 experienced in New York, Italy, Spain and many other regions. It seems that the pathogen is spreading more slowly here, for reasons that are not entirely clear. State governor Gavin Newsom’s relatively early stay-at-home order, issued on 19 March, may have had a salutary effect – though public health officials and the governor himself have been reluctant to draw these conclusions prematurely. It is likely that California’s more geographically dispersed population may be serving as a spatial barrier, delaying rapid transmission. Our state has also experienced many disasters, particularly earthquakes and wildfires, which may explain Californians’ general willingness to follow emergency orders from public officials.

But across many other regions of the US, the death toll is already horrific, and likely to get worse. The nightmarish notion of ‘American carnage’– a memorable phrase from President Trump’s 2017 inaugural address – has turned out to be more of a premonition than a metaphor. Less than four months after its first confirmed Covid-19 case, the US had tallied more than 80,000 Covid-19 deaths – twice as many as any other country in the world.
The Covid-19 pandemic, brutal as it is, may be a mere dress rehearsal for the crises likely to come in the decades ahead – if, as forecasted, climate change continues to accelerate and wreak global havoc. Today’s crisis should serve as a wake-up call, alerting us all that the natural world, pathogens and non-human agents can no longer be ignored. Perhaps Covid-19 might even disrupt business as usual in academic worlds, creating opportunities for shared projects across anthropology’s subdisciplines, helping to shape a more democratic future in which cultural and natural history – that is, people and non-human agents – might converge (Haraway 2016; Kirksey & Helmreich 2010; Raffles 2010).

Collective crises can lay bare the intersecting failures of powerful institutions and ideologies: market fundamentalism; fantasies of human dominion over nature; narrow disciplinary silos and one-dimensional thinking; emaciated public health systems. Covid-19 underscores longstanding claims in public health, medical anthropology and the archaeology of epidemics that extreme income inequality and entrenched poverty are not only bad for local health outcomes, but that these conditions can quickly aggravate and accelerate global problems. Critiques of corporate capitalism, studies of the Anthropocene era, multispecies ethnography, indigenous ontologies and biocultural studies are essential components of a broader vision.

Anthropologists have a crucial role to play in recentring a vision of public and planetary health. For example, it is important to remember that the Covid-19 is only partially novel. Anthropologists have made important contributions to a more complete understanding of recent epidemics like AIDS, SARS, Ebola and Zika (Abramowitz 2017; Benton 2015; Diniz 2017; Mason 2016). Historical and archaeological knowledge of pandemics stretches back to the Black Death and earlier. Along with epidemiologists and other public health specialists, medical anthropologists, archaeologists and physical anthropologists have important roles to play in helping to understand how and why communicable diseases emerge, the underlying social and environmental conditions that fuel them and cross-cultural strategies for the effective mitigation of epidemics and pandemics (DeWitte 2016; Mayer 2000; Mitchell 2003).

Our discipline is capable of providing models and analysis, informing the general public about what is at stake, and cultivating political alliances across seemingly disconnected social groups. Anthropologists are well positioned to spell out the broader “situation” that characterizes this moment of crisis, and thereby actively participate in imagining new possibilities. We should not only be critics of poorly organized institutional arrangements, incompetent leaders and unjust policies. We must also take responsibility for imagining, organizing and caring for better ones. What we have learned over the past century and a half is too important to withhold from others, and too important to hide behind bloated or pretentious jargon.

There is a trace of a silver lining to the Covid-19 outbreak. As many of us know from our fieldwork experiences, Homo sapiens everywhere has a remarkable capacity to solve problems by cooperating and providing mutual aid, particularly in times of disaster. Ethnographic evidence overwhelmingly refutes the ideological claims of market fundamentalists who assume that the human species is driven primarily by ‘rational’ self-interest. In the US, acts of extraordinary kindness and generosity are widely visible these days, and for every American bunkerized down, waiting fearfully for Armageddon behind locked doors, there are others who are donating blood to the Red Cross, volunteering to purchase food or medicine for elderly neighbours or preparing meals for the homeless. What is more, the crisis may well lead to a new respect for the many millions of American workers who, under normal circumstances, are either invisible or taken for granted by their fellow citizens. Their occupations are the very antithesis of ‘bullshit jobs’. These men and women often toil late into the night, or during the wee hours of the morning, in faraway places, or on the road. In the best of times, they tend to be woefully underpaid and economically vulnerable: grocery workers, janitors, farm labourers, truck drivers, health workers, rubbish collectors, educators and those who tirelessly care for the youngest and oldest Americans, in day care centres and nursing homes.

Surviving the Covid-19 pandemic depends as much upon the resources, solidarity and mutual aid, particularly in times of disaster. Ethnographic evidence overwhelmingly refutes the ideological claims of market fundamentalists who assume that the human species is driven primarily by ‘rational’ self-interest. In the US, acts of extraordinary kindness and generosity are widely visible these days, and for every American bunkerized down, waiting fearfully for Armageddon behind locked doors, there are others who are donating blood to the Red Cross, volunteering to purchase food or medicine for elderly neighbours or preparing meals for the homeless. What we have learned over the past century and a half is too important to withhold from others, and too important to hide behind bloated or pretentious jargon.