



UTS
ePRESS

PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary
International Studies

Vol. 17, No. 1/2
Jan 2021



© 2021 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Citation: Grewal, K. 2021. Privilege, Precarity and the Epistemic and Political Challenge of COVID-19. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 17:1/2, 7–13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v17i1-2.7527>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal>

ESSAY

Privilege, Precarity and the Epistemic and Political Challenge of COVID-19

Kiran Grewal

Corresponding author: Kiran Grewal, Reader, Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. k.grewal@gold.ac.uk

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v17i1-2.7527>

Article History: Received 20/11/2020; Accepted 30/11/2020; Published 28/01/2021

Abstract

Reflecting on the loss of my privilege as a transnational scholar during the London lockdown, in this essay I explore whether the COVID-19 pandemic may provide an important moment to return to questions of solidarity, resistance and progressive politics. Comparing my own experiences with those of people in my research fieldsite of Sri Lanka, I ask: do we have the necessary skills, tools and imagination to respond to this time of crisis? I suggest that the COVID-19 crisis has opened up possibilities of self-reflexivity that allow for the emergence of new epistemic and political practices that are not only more ethical but also more productive, radical and disruptive of the existing order.

Keywords

COVID-19; Subalternity; Privilege; Critical theory; Radical politics

Introduction

This is, I confess now, a self-indulgent piece. It runs the risk of sounding patronizing and may make the reader dislike me quite intensely for the pompous, puffed up academic that I am. The argument also runs fast and loose. It contradicts itself, begins ideas that are then left unexplored and introduces literature and concepts out of nowhere without justification or explanation. I say this up front not by way of excuse. What follows is a set of personal reflections that track some of my thoughts over the last nine months and I take full responsibility for them. I provide this preface to explain that this piece serves to illustrate the rather basic point I want to make in response to this weird COVID-19 world (buried

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

somewhere in a whole lot of words): I don't know what to think or say! I am confused, shaken, lost and reeling. This disorientation makes me incapable of polish and shine, but I hope it provides me an important and humbling lesson that will shape my future political and intellectual life. So with this disclaimer I begin.

My initial shock at lockdown was the result of a loss of privilege. As a middle class professional working mother and transnational scholar, I have constructed a life based on movement and freedom. Yes, I have ties that bind me: I am a single parent and a recent migrant to London, so my support network is somewhat limited. But with money I have been able to secure childcare and my career has allowed me to live simultaneously across three countries on three continents. So suddenly being locked in a small flat in London with restricted movement and full-time work and caring responsibilities was unsurprisingly [a traumatic experience](#).

As the weeks turned into months, it became clear to me that I was mourning the illusion of constantly 'moving forward': of not being able to escape, feel a sense of momentum and freedom, see a horizon of possibility. At the same time, as the world began to slowly reopen, I became conscious of how being 'locked down' had been a privilege in itself. Not everyone had that luxury. Both in my local setting of south east London and in my research 'field site' of Sri Lanka, many had not been able to secure themselves at home—ordering food (and anything else they desired!) delivered to their door, avoiding all forms of public transport, working from home, doing home renovation, YouTube workouts, taking up new hobbies.

Reflecting on the question of privilege from these two angles, I wonder how the COVID-19 pandemic may provide an important moment to return to questions of solidarity, resistance and progressive politics. Many of us elites see ourselves as the vanguard of struggles for social change and social justice. Yet our impatience with the present (let alone the past!), reliance (conscious or not) on ideas of progress and experience of constant movement make us ill-equipped to sit in an uncomfortable present and uncertain future. Do we have the necessary skills, tools and imagination to respond to this time? Meanwhile the realities of extremely disadvantaged and marginalized people are that they have never had the luxury of relying on a social, political and economic system to support them. As a result, while they have often been terribly affected they have not been shocked by the idea that they would be affected. Instead they have found (sometimes subversive) ways to survive and organize, have developed informal networks of support and creative forms of resilience.

How might we rethink, then, which agents and whose knowledge might be most valuable in this moment when trying to articulate responsive and transformative politics and practices? How might this allow for a richer understanding of not only the experience but also the possible responses to the precarity that has become a dominant contemporary reality? And how might new epistemic and political practices emerge that are not only more ethical but also more productive, radical and disruptive of the existing order?

Grinding to a Halt

I vividly remember the week before lockdown in the UK. My friend and I hit all the local supermarkets in Peckham (South London) both laughing at the panic and making our own small attempts at stockpiling (not pasta and toilet paper but olives, harissa paste, red wine). When an incident caused the local budget chemist Superdrug to evacuate us, I joked that it was like a scene from *Shaun of the Dead*—the cult zombie spoof set in London that was also repeatedly aired on TV at the time – and I was just waiting for us all to start bleeding from our eyes.

My flippancy soon ended when, drinking red wine as our kids played, my friends and I watched the Prime Minister's emergency address to the nation announcing that, like Europe, we too would be going into lockdown. Shocked—I had uncritically reproduced the discourse of 'never in England!' when my friends on the Continent began needing permits to leave the house—I remained buoyant. Even when schools closed

we came up with our own homeschooling plan, bought extra craft supplies and set up a makeshift obstacle course on the Common across the road.

Then reality hit. On Monday evening, end of our first day of homeschooling, it was announced that starting first thing the next morning we would be going into a full national lockdown. Everyone was to remain within their own household. My world shrank and I reeled. Up until then I had been blasé about getting COVID-19, saying to my friends that I almost wished I would get it and get it over and done with. In lockdown I suddenly felt very vulnerable. If I got sick, who would care for my child? It was only the two of us in the flat with no family anywhere close by and all our friends in states of panic, holed up in their own homes. Over Zoom drinks a few friends and I decided to develop a [blog series](#) to critically respond to the narratives of ‘home’ and ‘household’ that formed the basis of government discourse and policy.

The intense self-pity receded as I sought to entertain myself and my five-year-old with online workouts (thanks Joe Wicks), books, puzzles and games (ordered through Amazon until I heard that Bezos had become a trillionaire and at the same time cut overtime pay) and yoga. Our basic needs were never an issue. My job was one that could easily shift online and was flexible even as, along with many other female academics, I worried about ‘falling behind’ in research output. I could order groceries and more importantly wine online. I upgraded my internet and kept in touch with friends around the world via Zoom parties.

There was something almost relaxing about the experience. The slowing down, the time to rest and do nothing was, I told myself, good for me. I had spent most of the last decade (at least) on the move: living between Australia, South Asia and Europe in different configurations and travelling on an almost monthly basis. I was tired.

But I had created a life for myself that prized freedom and movement above everything. So as the weeks turned into months my sense of self started to suffer. The transnational activist scholar identity I had cultivated gave way to a stagnant over-privileged middle class mum doing workouts in the park. This, I reasoned, was why when I was asked to reflect on the future in relation to rights and politics for an MA event at my university, I could not think of anything useful to say. When no end seemed in sight I succumbed to unmanageable rage and despair: pacing my apartment and going nowhere, trying to practice mindfulness and stay in the present, but feeling anxious at my inability to see a future of any sort.

Living when the Future is Cancelled

One image kept coming to mind during my pacing: of women I had met in Sri Lanka. They had been maintaining roadside protests in various towns in the North and East, demanding the return of their disappeared loved ones or the return of their lands. When I first met them in mid-2017 they had already been sitting in the road for many months. In total some of them spent up to two years protesting, living in makeshift shelters with minimal supplies and nothing but straw mats and a couple of plastic chairs.

At the time I am pretty sure I felt pity for them. The only explanation for their inertia was desperation. There was nothing else they could do. I didn’t mean to be patronizing but I was. As were so many of the human rights activists I met. We all assumed that as victims they were passive objects. We were the potential agents of their salvation, debating which mechanism of justice, which forms of memorial, which political strategies and tradeoffs would provide a solution.

Now, suddenly, I saw those women differently. They seemed to have a strength that I did not have. A silent, sustained ability to sit in the present and refuse to let go. While I constantly wanted to run towards something else, they remained committed to an unresolved and most likely unresolvable past.

I don’t romanticize their suffering: it is very real. And I know many of them would not see their actions as conscious heroism but the result of having no other choice. But I wish to pay tribute to their courage and their ability to do something I cannot. In that process of sitting they have not only sustained themselves,

they have built new communities and they have remained a thorn in the side of an otherwise impervious State and society. This form of everyday embodied politics is a far cry from the grand gestures of political theory. It is perhaps more radical.

The women, by not buying into the myths of progress—even if simply because they cannot—and by remaining stubbornly rooted in the past and present, pose a challenge to all of us. This includes those of us who consider ourselves ‘progressives’ (a hint of the problem is in the name) rendering our own investments in ‘progress’ both visible and problematic. Even though many of us are critical of the Western imperial and enlightenment undertones of ‘progress,’ we are still driven towards an idea of moving forward, towards chasing ‘the new.’ This is an idea as tied to imperial violence, the artist and theorist Ariella Azoulay (2019) argues, as extraction and exploitation in the ways it condemns others’ lives and practices to extinction.

It is this myth of progress that COVID-19 has perhaps most brutally exploded. In a rather strange book about mushroom pickers written a few years before the current crisis, the anthropologist Anna Tsing suggests that perhaps the matsutake mushroom—that flourishes in unlikely places and often as result of decay—might be a useful metaphor for the world we are now forced to confront (2015: 2). While the less fortunate, she points out, have long had to live with precarity and lack of certainty, growing environmental disaster is forcing more and more of us to confront the reality that the ‘handrails’ of progress have been removed (2015: 2).

If climate change had made this observation pertinent before, COVID-19 has smacked us in the face with it. Suddenly even the most economically secure, comfortable and socially upwardly mobile among us have been thrown into chaos, forced to reinterpret life as one of inertia rather than constant movement. How do we even start to find the resources necessary to survive, respond, imagine again? We certainly cannot look to so-called intellectual elites like me for inspiration.

Everyday Life as Resistance

The severity of lockdown eventually eased and some limited movement became possible. I headed back into Peckham, tentatively grasping for some sort of return into the world, a little shell shocked as if emerging from a bunker (I really had watched too many dystopian science fiction films). I was not really prepared for what I found. While my life felt like it had ground to a halt, life teemed in the street and market. Indeed it was almost possible to forget that we were even in the midst of a pandemic. Sure, people were wearing masks, many shops were shuttered and there were long queues outside the supermarkets. But one could be forgiven for assuming that this was just the further degradation of an area and community that had long been ravaged by poverty and deprivation. The idea that we were all ‘staying home, staying safe’ was countered by elderly men and women hobbling into shops and onto buses dragging heavy shopping trolleys and bags.

While some (particularly right wing commentators) will present this as evidence of the ignorance and recklessness of people, it was necessity that made it impossible for many of these people to stay home. Supermarkets’ online shopping pages had queues of up to 40,000 waiting to place orders and even I baulked at the amount of money required to make use of gourmet home delivery services. And if you have no car, how else are you going to get from A to B?

Given that the statistics in the UK (clumsy and incomplete as they are), reported that those from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, along with those suffering socio-economic disadvantage have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19—both in terms of contracting and in terms of dying from it (Public Health England 2020)—I couldn’t help but wonder who the lockdown was protecting and how. Were we in fact just protecting middle class peoples’ health? Those who could effectively isolate, who have space and living conditions that make it possible not to encounter the outside world, who can work from home, afford luxury online food deliveries and who have cars to transport them when they do want or need to move around? And if so, was this form of lockdown really the most effective way of managing the

risk or was it just the easiest strategy in a world that always already privileges the experiences and views of this group? I have no answers to these questions. I raise them to highlight my own ongoing confusion and inability to make sense of, never mind respond to, the current pandemic.

How, I asked the men working on the fruit and vegetable stalls along Rye Lane, had they coped with lockdown? I made sympathetic faces and noises saying I could imagine it had been hard. They simply laughed and shrugged. Life had gone on for them and they managed with stoicism and resilience. Many are from Afghanistan. They have lived and seen a lot. The experience of precarity, uncertainty and insecurity is not new. Thus while I felt like I had been run over and was trying to gather up the tatters of my life, it was clear that it was my privilege that made me inflexible and vulnerable. Not only was my saviour delusion shattered—I could do nothing to help anyone—I found myself unable to even look after myself.

The Fragility of Privilege

I spoke about this with friends in Sri Lanka. Many had been involved in relief efforts for desperate day labourers who without work were literally starving. This took an emotional toll for obvious reasons. But often it was the feeling of helplessness and frustration at all the ways in which the system failed those who were most marginalized and vulnerable that seemed to feed despair.

At the same time, as a couple of friends from Eastern Sri Lanka observed, rural communities in the villages close to where they lived were finding ways of surviving and supporting each other. These communities were largely unmoved by the new situation. As a few people wryly commented, this was not the first time they had had to live in bunkers (invoking their wartime experiences). And some of the Veddah¹ communities had always existed on the margins of the State, relying only on themselves. They were therefore surprised when my friend called to ask them how they were managing and if they needed any help.

Again, I want to be careful here. This is not an argument to say subaltern communities have not suffered or that because they are used to suffering it is no big deal. Nor is it to romanticize and mythologize their lives and practices in the genre of the ‘Noble Savage.’ Rather what I am trying to think through is whether there is some lesson to be learnt out of this pandemic for those of us used to imagining ourselves as the agents—through thought and/or practice—of salvation.

I can’t help but wonder if one of the greatest weaknesses of ‘progressive’ elites is our constant shock that the systems do not work. I have written about this in relation to human rights: the vitriolic deconstruction of human rights’ false promises only really makes sense if you ever believed in these promises in the first place ([Grewal 2016](#)). Many of the most marginal in the world are not and never have been under the illusion that institutions and law will work for them. They survive not through blind faith—needing the critical theorist to cure them of their false consciousness—but through strategic, contingent, often compromised, sometimes subversive acts of self-preservation and resistance.

I am constantly reminded of the conclusion of Rohinton Mistry’s devastatingly beautiful novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995). While the two subaltern characters—the Dalit uncle and nephew who escape the misery of their village to be subjected to further violence by the Emergency Era Indian state—somehow find the capacity to continue, it is the more privileged, middle class student Manek who ultimately finds the despair overwhelming and commits suicide. This sensitivity could be read as his more heightened consciousness versus the brute experience of sensation so often ascribed to the world’s oppressed (see [Ranci re 2009](#)). But I suggest that he might encapsulate the very fragility of privilege: a fragility that in fact makes us ill-equipped to imagine or lead any truly radical political project in dark and difficult times.

1 Indigenous hunter gatherer communities.

Learning to see the Fireflies: The Politics of Survival

In 1975 the Italian filmmaker and social critic Pier Paolo Pasolini declared in a public letter that the fireflies of his youth were dead. He meant this both literally and metaphorically, invoking a nihilistic picture of a Europe that, post-World War II, had completely succumbed to a form of consumerist totalitarianism. The argument is complicated but it is the response of art theorist Georges Didi-Huberman² (who introduces this letter in his evocatively titled book *Survival of the Fireflies* (2018) that I wish to focus on here. Have the fireflies really disappeared, Didi-Huberman asks, and if so, how? Isn't it rather the case that: "They disappear from the viewer's sight because the viewer remains in place, which is no longer the right place to see fireflies" (Didi-Huberman 2018: 22)? If fireflies represent survival, desire and hope that continue to flicker even in the darkest of moments—however momentary, fragile and banal they may be—then is the grounded activist scholar (me) a contemporary Pasolini, declaring death to something she can just no longer see?

That luxury—of declaring the hopelessness of the current situation, deconstructing it with cool intellectual rigour, of engaging in endless critique—is not available to many. And not because they lack the intellectual capacity. Rather because they are too busy surviving in the here and now. The casualized precarious contractors, daily wage labourers, the agricultural and factory workers, the rural villagers that make up so much of the world's population have had to find ways to survive and continue. This is in spite of the horrendous hardship and suffering that not only the virus but also government and social responses to the virus have unleashed upon them. They don't have the luxury of waiting for the future to deliver salvation. They have suffered and continue to suffer and that suffering requires acknowledgment, redress, outrage. But their survival also requires acknowledgment and perhaps some humble self-reflection.

How might looking at the survival strategies and techniques employed by the worlds' subalterns shine a light on both the depths of injustice that this seemingly indiscriminate virus renders more extreme *and* the possible sites for imagining appropriate intellectual and political practices in response? Practices that are embodied, contextual, avoid abstraction and generalization, that are affective, heterogenous and defy attempts at essentialization and reduction to institutional logics? Recognizing and learning from such practices is not only needed to assist with the process of desubalternization. It might also assist in our own process of critical self-reflexivity that will allow us to save ourselves. If before the challenge to learn to see and listen differently was an ethical one (Spivak 2004; Dhawan 2013) now it seems epistemically, politically and practically, an urgent one.

References

- Azoulay, A. 2019, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. Verso, London and Brooklyn NY.
- Dhawan, N. 2013, 'Coercive Cosmopolitanism and Impossible Solidarities,' *Qui Parle*, vol. 22, no. 1: 139–166. <https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.22.1.0139>
- Didi-Huberman, G. 2018, *Survival of the Fireflies*, trans. L.S. Mitchell. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv4rfqxs>
- Grewal, K. 2016, *The Socio-Political Practice of Human Rights: Between the Universal and the Particular*. Routledge, London and New York. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315552620>
- Mistry, R. 1995, *A Fine Balance*. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto.
- Public Health England. 2020, Disparities in the Risk and Outcomes of COVID-19. Online, available: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf [Accessed 4 December 2020].

2 I want to thank my dear friend Magdalena Zolkos for introducing me to Didi-Huberman's work and thought.



-
- Rancière, J. 2009, 'The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge,' *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 36: 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1086/606120>
- Spivak, G. C. 2004, 'Righting Wrongs,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 103, no. 2/3: 523–581. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-103-2-3-523>
- Tsing, A.L. 2015, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77bcc>