

**Special Issue: Covid-19: The cultural constructions of a global crisis**

Issue Editors: Myria Georgiou (LSE) and Paul Frosh (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

What is the meaning of the coronavirus pandemic as a global crisis? Or, to unpack this somewhat naïve question: what does such a crisis feel, look like and signify to those living through it? How are its legibility, coherence and significance *as* a ‘crisis’ constructed and performed across highly variable cultural and social contexts? How does its occurrence maintain, amplify or transform cultural practices, representational repertoires, solidarities and power relations? And how can inquiry into something as vast, multifarious and pervasive as the pandemic generate new theory about the cultural construction of ‘crisis’ in our time - particularly since, at the moment of writing, it is still going on? In short, how might we address both the intensely particular manifestations of Covid-19 in different locations, times and populations, and yet grasp its totality as a global phenomenon?

Calling the pandemic a ‘crisis’ draws it firmly into the orbit of cultural studies in three primary ways, which can be summarized through three interconnected questions: how is Covid-19 constructed *as* a crisis? what it is a crisis *of*? and *through* what cultural agencies is it produced and reproduced?

**How is Covid-19 constructed *as* a crisis?** At least one tradition of cultural studies, associated with the work of Stuart Hall, placed notions of ‘crisis’ and ‘the conjuncture’ at the centre of its concerns. A key question here is how to theorize and investigate Covid-19 in relation to these terms. In particular, if modernity as such is understood as a period in which crisis is endemic and ongoing, as a permanent state of affairs where catastrophe and transformation are immanent and always *about to* occur, what then distinguishes a crisis like Covid-19 as a distinctive irruptive *event*? If, as Janet Roitman has suggested, the term ‘crisis’ has been inflated to the point of ubiquity in writings about a range of conditions (economic crisis, environmental crisis, political crisis, humanitarian crisis, social crisis, etc.), and ‘is mobilized as the defining category of historical situations, past and present’ (2014:3), then what – compared to all of these other crises - makes Covid-19 distinctively, and exceptionally, *critical*? And how is such an event experienced, performed, and represented in its exceptional character to the billions of people caught up in it?

**What is Covid-19 a crisis *of*?** For many people, Covid-19 is a personal crisis of life and death, debilitating illness, and bereavement. For many others, it is a social calamity and source of collective trauma in their communities and cities. And for most, it is a deeply destabilizing condition of work and livelihood insecurity at present and for years to come. Thus, Covid-19 is far more than a large-scale public health emergency. It has exposed the usually unnoticed structures, hierarchies and norms of everyday lifeworlds and socio-political formations at multiple and intersecting scales, from the individual body (which becomes subject to increasingly intensive monitoring), to the social and political body (which becomes subjected to deepening collective surveillance), while also generating new and renewed solidarities across local, national and global spaces. Moreover, Covid-19 appears to constitute a *meta-crisis* which enables the widespread visibility of *other crises* and conflicts which were already endemic in different parts of the world: crises of wealth and welfare inequality, scientific expertise, knowledge and truth (the ‘infodemic’), political leadership, racial discrimination, mediation and civility, migration and borders, religious conflict and environmental disaster. It

is a crisis of the universality of risk, its inequitable distribution across populations and places, and of our (in)capacity to develop a politics capable of addressing it. It is experienced by and represented to billions of people as a time of immense danger, disruption and potential change, both for their individual lives and for their collective ways of life. Perhaps the question to be addressed is, then: of what is Covid-19 *not* a crisis?

**Through what cultural agencies is the crisis produced and reproduced?** The catalyzing and transformative potential of pandemics for societies is not historically new. What *does* appear to be novel about Covid-19 is its combined pervasiveness and extensiveness. Covid-19 is *pervasive* in that its influence plays out at virtually all scales of life, from individual physical interactions and personal mobility, to relations within and between social and cultural groups, states, national economies, the activities of transnational entities such as corporations and international organizations, as well as through observable shifts in the environmental impact of human behaviour. The crisis is *extensive* not only in that it is experienced, performed and represented as a variable *local* phenomenon in virtually every humanly inhabited part of the world, but is also widely depicted in these places *as global*, as something affecting everyone, no matter where they live, at this very time. *Media* are central to this simultaneous pervasiveness and extensiveness, not only because they represent the crisis to large audiences around the world, but also because contemporary media technologies are profoundly and almost ubiquitously embedded into the social world at small and large scales, from the intimate everyday lives of individuals to global infrastructures (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). Covid-19 visibly demonstrates the existential stakes of this media pervasiveness and extensiveness, particularly during ‘lockdowns’, through the sudden substitution of physical co-presence with mediated interaction and digital intimacy and solidarity via digital screens. Hence part of the pandemic’s cultural significance is as a widely shared and represented experience of mediated relations *in extremis*: of technologized ‘intimacy at a distance’ and digitized ‘solidarity in proximity’ becoming paradoxically obligatory conditions for much social life and cultural activity (especially across cities of the Global North). The crisis, then, generates a historically contingent but powerful affinity between the pandemic, on the one hand, and the primary mechanisms of its cultural mediation.

These questions and their elaboration only really begin to set the scene for thinking about Covid-19 as a *global crisis*. In this special issue we invite substantial contributions (5,000-7,000 words) that engage with ‘the crisis’ from perspectives connected to cultural studies, broadly speaking, and that take transnational relations and dynamics as their principal frames of reference. Particular topics of possible interest include, but are not limited to:

- the representation of Covid-19
- race, gender, sexuality, class, age, disability and Covid-19
- Covid-19, migration and (im)mobility
- Covid-19 as a biopolitical crisis
- Covid-19, nationalism and transnationalism
- data appropriation, surveillance and Covid-19
- celebrity, consumer culture and Covid-19
- media and cultural industries and Covid-19
- Covid-19 and historical transformation
- cultural memory and Covid-19
- urban and rural crisis experience and solidarity
- Covid-19, mediation and mediatization
- live performance culture (live music, theatres etc.) in crisis

- Covid-19 and art

Please submit abstracts (300 words max.) to: [paul.frosh@mail.huji.ac.il](mailto:paul.frosh@mail.huji.ac.il) and [m.a.georgiou@lse.ac.uk](mailto:m.a.georgiou@lse.ac.uk)

Deadline: Abstracts: March 10 2021; Papers: 31 July 2021