

Webinar

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Politics and Economy of the Coronavirus Pandemic in Historical Perspective: A Webinar with Vinay Lal

Abstract

In this webinar Vinay Lal discusses the coronavirus pandemic from a historical perspective. He argues that although there have always been pandemics the present one is historically unprecedented with respect to the massive scope of state intervention. He further discusses how modern states with their advanced healthcare systems could not deal with the viral disease. He also sheds some light on how technology and globalization are related to the pandemic.

Key words: Coronavirus, colonialism, globalization, nationalism, technology.

Syed Sami Raza: How do states and governments take or assume more powers when a country is hit by disasters, natural or manmade calamities? How would you analyze this since you have been working on a history of pandemics?

Vinay Lal: The subject matter of the pandemic is already very vast and I can't think of anything that has generated such a huge literature in the course of just three months. A lot of people will be unemployed but a lot of PhD students no longer need be in search of a subject on which to research and write. There are

Vinay Lal, Professor of History at UCLA, was the key speaker of the webinar. It was moderated by Syed Sami Raza, Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Peshawar. The event was sponsored by the Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar. The webinar was transcribed by Shehzad Ali, Irfan Uddin, Uzair Salman, and Tabbasum Mushtaq who are MPhil candidates in the same department. The event was organized on July 28, 2020.

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innumerable aspects of the subject including long-term historical trajectories; the interventions made by each country sometimes vary significantly, despite the fact that there are uniform protocols that have been advocated by the WHO about social distancing and shutting down things. Some countries have reopened and seem to have been reasonably successful if you compare them with what is happening in Brazil, India, Mexico, or the US. But even those countries are changing their guidelines day by day if necessary. Belgium has re-imposed regulations that you can't meet more than five different people within a period of two weeks. That is very interesting. Not more than five people. Five excludes family members. Sometimes these regulations vary in minute detail from one country to another.

A country's response has something to do with the history of that particular country, with the nature of the political system and the disposition of the state, but it also has something to do with the nature of memory: for example, why is it that Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Vietnam and South Korea have done better taken as a collectivity than other nations? One reason among many is that they have some historical memory of SARS in 2003. If you spoke to an American about SARS on January first this year, I think you would get a blank look from them and they have no idea about that. They have no idea of most things that are going on in the world. Herein lies the story of American insularity. But even in Europe they have very little memory of SARS. In that part of the world, in China and Southeast Asia, they had the historical memory of SARS which had some part to play at least in how they thought about the present set of circumstances, but then there are countries which have no historical memory of SARS or a similar epidemic but which have nonetheless done quite well in some ways. I mean Greece has done quite well. What I have found is that any theory that you might have about why one country has done better than others in containing the spread of the virus has its own flaws. Some people have turned to structural explanations to see how countries have responded, and others have argued that the social welfare states in Europe have done better. But let's not forget Italy lost 45,000 people, Spain lost

35,000 to 40,000 people, and the United Kingdom has lost 40,000. These are what you may call social welfare states to a greater or lesser degree but proportionate to their population they have frankly not done well. Then there are countries that have a free market system, the US being of course the predominant example, but it has done very badly. We also have the example of countries like Vietnam, which is a communist state. Vietnam has no deaths at all, zero deaths.

I don't think we are going to be able to use one theory to advance an understanding of why one country has fared better than others. You can say that there are a set of protocols that have been issued that all countries are being enjoined to follow, but once you are past that, then you say that to some extent a country's history, the place of memory, the particular disposition of that culture—all of that may have something to do with the course of the pandemic. In India, for example, when the prime minister issued the lockdown order the whole world was witness to this phenomenon whereby within days of the lockdown you had tens of millions of migrant workers on the move. Now somehow the government never thought of that. Why didn't they think of it? This is very curious. I repeat, why didn't they think of it? The easy answer is that they all are a bunch of illiterates or semi-literates in the government. Most of them haven't read a book in their whole life, which is probably true if I may be cynical. In 1994 there was a plague in Surat. That's the last really known case of some magnitude. There are small instances of plague here and there and then they never spread. There have been a good number of cases of plague all over the world in recent years but the last plague I think in India was in Surat and within days half the city had been evacuated of its population. There is a long history in that part of the world of people fleeing a place when plague strikes or, to use a modern expression, voting with their feet in times of distress. In Mughal India the most common way in which you evaded heavy taxation was that the whole village would empty out. This is one way in which people in that part of the world have responded to certain crisis. That's what I mean by a certain kind of history or sometimes a memory or a certain kind

of cultural disposition that you may find which may have some bearing on how people in a certain country respond. This takes us beyond the normative framework that has been handed out to the entire world now—that people should observe masking, they should observe social distancing.

I have lots of issues with that phrase, ‘social distancing’, and some people in India have also pointed that out. Particularly in places such as India and South Asia on the whole we have to be very careful about using such phrases such as social distancing, but I mean even in the US where you have a pandemic of loneliness now we are discovering other pandemics in addition to this one. Take, for instance, the pandemic of racism. When did you hear that phrase before this moment? Now everyone is talking about that here in America. There is also the pandemic of loneliness. I wrote a blog essay¹ two years ago on it when I first read that Britain had appointed a minister of loneliness; it is really quite astonishing that they actually have a ministerial position for this. It would suggest that you have an epidemic on your hands. I think many societies do have this epidemic on their hands.

This is again another set of questions: why does this pandemic get all the attention it does when there are hundreds of other pandemics, which obviously have killed and will continue to kill millions. There are diseases endemic in some parts of the world that kill millions every year as well. Nonetheless this particular moment we are going through is unprecedented—I would say in world history, not only within the lifetime of anyone living at this moment. No one at this moment has ever seen anything like it, indeed I don’t think anyone in history has ever seen anything like it because we don’t know of any instance which called for the global suspension of economic activities. That’s what absolutely unprecedented. Historians hate the word unprecedented because if they take it seriously then they are out of a job. Historians never like to use the word unprecedented to describe anything, there is always some precedence and you know it if you have read enough, or cast your net wide enough. But I say as someone who teaches in a history department that

actually this is without precedence even though there are pandemics where the fatality rate has been far higher, and the number of people killed is astronomically high, higher by orders of magnitude. If this pandemic goes on for some months or longer, I doubt that we are still going to hit a few million dead, if we hit that many. The Black Death, on the other hand, wiped out a third of Europe's population.

In 1918 the so-called Spanish influenza—there is a politics of names—killed fifty to one hundred million people according to all recent demographic studies. By the way, at the end of World War I, twenty two million dead from the epidemic was the lowest count at that time, and then when census figures for different countries began to be revealed that showed the extent of loss. So the reason we know why in India the minimum is twelve million is because the 1921 census showed an enormous drop of population in comparison to the 1911 census—you know the census used to be held every 10 years in India, and I believe the same is true for Pakistan. But, nonetheless, this is unprecedented precisely because we don't have in the past a kind of coordinated global suspension of economic and allied activity as we have had with this one.

There are two pandemics which are almost entirely forgotten. One of them took place after I was born but I never heard of either of them while growing up or even in my college years. One dates to 1957 and the other to 1968 and those were not insignificant and if we study those we may be able to discern what make this present pandemic quite different. People are comparing this to the 1918-20 influenza but no one is comparing it to the 1957 and 1968 pandemics which fell out of the history books altogether and why that happened is itself an interesting question. So, the 1957 pandemic is called the Asian flu. It is estimated to have killed about a million to 1.1 million people. And in 1968 we have what is called the Hong Kong Flu. You would notice that it was still common at that time to attach an epidemic to a place. But the WHO much later issued instructions that you cannot do so. India objected very vigorously when a drug-resistant superbug designated as NDM-1 was named after New

Delhi in 2011 and the prestigious British medical journal, *The Lancet*, agreed to stop using that designation. Trump and his fellow Republicans called the virus the “China virus” and “Wuhan virus” and even the “Kung flu”, they have all kinds of names for it. The Hong Kong flu in 1968 had killed one million people at a minimum and up to three to four million people possibly.

Now, the interesting question is that one million is not a small number. At this point in the coronavirus pandemic we are still talking about 600,000 deaths globally, or something in that neighborhood. The virus is all that anyone is able to talk about for the last 3-4 months and yet we still have fewer deaths than those caused by the 1957 and 1968 epidemics. The Hong Kong flu killed over a million, the Asian flu killed over a million, and you would not find either even mentioned in the history books. It is not an insignificant number so the question is what happened—why did they disappear? Why are they erased from human memory? I recently read a piece just published a few days ago after I submitted my book manuscript² on the coronavirus to Pan Macmillan by my colleague in the history department, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who said that well part of the reason for their erasure is that the state did not intervene as it has in this pandemic, and that the state didn’t have the kind of resources then as it has now. I am not convinced by that at all. The reason I’m not convinced is that you do not need superior digital technology as you have now to shutdown schools. What you need to shut down the schools is only an order from the state; that doesn’t require much by the way of state resources. There is no evidence that there was any order of that kind passed in any country in 1957 or in 1968. In 1968 there is a small suggestion that school closures may had happened in Ireland but for very short period of time. But no major country passed any order to shutdown schools, businesses, shopping malls, cinemas—and that has nothing to do with the state’s resources.

Now there is another argument which he makes which is more credible and I would add something different to it, which is that there was a certain kind of fatigue with the idea of death, with (putting it somewhat oddly) death itself. The 1957 and 1968

pandemics are in the aftermath of World War II. After World War II it is not as if people took a ten year vacation from killing during which they could stop thinking about war, because if there are human beings involved then you know that somehow they will find a way to go to war for one reason or the other, so after World War II you get the Korean War, and the Korean War was again massive and it killed several million people. Actually there were several countries involved in that war in different ways, not just Korea and the Chinese obviously and the Americans of course. India sent a peace keeping force later on. Then of course you still had a war of attrition going on in Vietnam which would then mutate into a full-fledged war, certainly by the 60s, but what is important is that there was also the shadow of nuclear death. That's very important. The late 50s and 60s was the time when nuclear annihilation seemed imminent to many people; when you have that hanging over your head then even a million casualties is something that you might just possibly overlook.

I was really very surprised when I read an article³ by three researchers on the Hong Kong flu which I cite in my book—what astonished me is that these three researchers say that the information that they gave about the alleged origin of this flu comes from one article because there is only one article they could find that addressed the question. One article! Now there are ten thousand articles on the coronavirus every day. So 1957 and 1968 provide a very interesting contrast because nothing was shut down. It was an epidemic because you have a million deaths and it is not a common cold you are talking about, it was not the ordinary strain of the flu. The 1957 epidemic is intricately related also to the 1968 epidemic because it is the same virus which undergoes an antigen shift and mutates into the virus that caused the 1968 epidemic. It is the same epidemic, in a manner of speaking. It is a continuum from 1957 to 1968, what you are really speaking of is about two to four million people who died. Possibly even more but a minimum of two million between 1957 and 1968 and yet there was absolutely no response from the state on the scale that we have seen now. So what is remarkable here with our virus is the level of state intervention and there are all

kinds of puzzles for the political philosophers I think as well. They are puzzles for everyone but even authoritarian states which might not think anything about sending tens of thousands of people to dungeons somehow in this matter became very attentive, and wanted to ensure that their populations would get protected. You have to then think about how we assess the political systems.

I think this pandemic is actually going to overturn a lot of established theory about lots of things. I think that if I have to write one more book on the virus then this is what I think that book would have to be about. I think this really turns everything around in ways that we cannot really have anticipated and I think a lot of speculations about the differences in political systems—not speculations alone, I would rather say social science work which very firmly believes that political systems are different in such and such ways—well, not all of that work indeed very little of it seems to be vindicated or validated by what is happening now. There are all kinds of interesting twists and turns and you, Sami, pointed my attention to some things when you sent me two articles⁴—things I had been aware of, though I didn't know those articles. I saw for example something in the *Los Angeles Times* about Indonesia, and people were demanding that bodies be turned over to them and in some cases actually were digging up corpses, because of the whole idea that there is a certain kind of manner in which the dead are to be treated—the fact that there is some dignity at that moment that needs to be observed, and of course one of the things that has happened in this particular pandemic is that it has been very difficult to observe the dignity of the dead in most places in the world. Anyhow, these are just a couple of random thoughts really apropos of what you have said.

Syed Sami Raza: In the current pandemic I was wondering what is going to happen with globalization? Globalization has been hit really hard by this pandemic and also all the technologies that are very much involved with this pandemic. We see that technology has become a kind of carrier of the virus through airplanes, trains, and trams. It is also possible why it spread in the United States more for example than in Pakistan or South Asia is because they

have more elevators there, they have more air-conditioned trains, subways, and buildings. So more the technology more the virus. One thing is this. Another thing I was thinking, because you are a historian and you have lot more knowledge about history, I was thinking about its relationship with the state since the time of the rise of this welfare concept and welfare states in 17th and 19th century. The states have taken on this task of regulating health care and everything else like Foucault would tell us. What was happening before this western model of welfare state in India or in the Global-South? How were governments or states dealing with pandemics? There have always been pandemics, there have been pandemics in Holy Books mentioned, there have been pandemics mentioned in poetry and novels and so on.

Vinay Lal: You have pointed to a number of key considerations here. Broadly speaking, I think your remarks fall into three sections or there are three questions that demand our attention: globalization, technology, and the state. And the third one has a subset and that has to do with a phrase that you have not used and in using that phrase I am implicitly answering your question but I will get to that later—it has to do with the forms of moral economy before the advent of the modern administrative state. Now we are thinking about social welfare states and how they are intervening in the pandemic, but what was the response in pre-colonial times and even in Europe what was the response before the advent of the social welfare state? Because after all what was the responsibility of the state in the late 18th century and the early 19th century? And you find not very much, though this is a very broad generalization. Does it mean that people were left to fend for themselves which is effectively what is happening in many counties especially with regards to the poor? What is the problem in Brazil? In Brazil you actually do have universal health coverage. A friend of mine said that Brazil could be classed along India and the US in being among those states that don't have universal health coverage but that is actually incorrect. Brazil does have it in principle. It's a constitutional right embodied in the changes to the constitution in the 1990s and the 1998 constitution does guarantee that and actually *the Lancet* has a

long article⁵ by three researchers which was published last year before the coronavirus pandemic broke out which is on Brazil's health care coverage and it pointed out that it was actually quite good but also added that there are sectors of the populations which are not able to avail themselves of those health services. And you would not be surprised to hear that those people who were not able to avail of the universal health care are those who are dark-skinned or poor in Brazil. Most people don't realize Brazil imported more slaves than any other country in the world including the United States during the period of slavery. Brazil had much higher rates of manumission but that was not the only reason why it imported more slaves. And, Brazil's way of handling color was quite different in many ways so you have the processes of whitening as it was called which were quite important.

So, to go to the question of how societies dealt with epidemic disease, for example when there wasn't a strong social welfare state, we have to look at the social structure of each of these societies and broadly look at whether there was some conception of the moral economy there. The phrase is used by E.P. Thompson in his very famous book on "making of the English working class."⁶ Let me first go back to your first question about globalization. I mean in some ways I agree with you, of course, but we have to begin with irony because what is the position you taken here, it's a comment that others have made as well, the position you have taken here is that it would seem *prima facie* that globalization has taken a huge hit. Now I know there have been critiques of globalization for a long period of time. I mean once you had the fall of the Soviet Union, and then you had countries like China and India adopting neo-liberalization policies, it seemed that there was only one game in town. And that game in town was that you joined the market economy—you 'open up your country', and that was the only game in town, and that is when people like Fukuyama and others were able to proclaim the End of History, and the triumph of globalization was proclaimed. But for people like Fukuyama and his ilk it was not just the opening of the borders and removing tariffs and all of that because that would be a narrow reading of globalization, rather of

course it was the claim that certain ideas which were allegedly only western then had become universalized—ideas of individual freedom, freedom of expression, the idea of liberty, the dignity of the individual, etc. Globalization never had to do with only the economic angle. One must think of the globalization of culture icons, so that no matter where in the world you went—I remember travelling in the late 1990s and early 2000s quite extensively in a number of countries, and they said where are you from? I said, I live in Los Angeles. And they said, Oh Lakers! Lakers! And many of the street kids was wearing the t-shirt that Kobe Bryant used to wear, I think it bore the number 24, so that was globalization, too.

But let us not be too hasty in pronouncing the end of globalization. The first irony we must allow to sink in is that the virus itself has globalized. There is no more successful illustration of globalization of the world today than the globalization of the pandemic, of the coronavirus, the fact that it has hit every island that you can think of is just truly remarkable, and the reason for that in part is because of aircraft. The airline industry is the driver beyond anything else of this virus. This brings us into play with the second idea—you had mentioned technology because, look, you could be in one place your whole life and yet live in and be part of a globalized world. What if I was sitting in a little town in India or Pakistan, or I was sitting on the outskirts of Karachi somewhere, and I hadn't traveled anywhere else but spent all my time listening to Madonna or Taylor Swift, you know eating McDonald Burgers, you know I mean I would be part of the globalized world, wouldn't I? But I would never have to travel anywhere whatsoever! But notwithstanding that, I think it is critically important that the aircraft and the airline industry have been the drivers of globalization, particularly if you are thinking of the virus. Because it's really not possible to think of the transmission of the virus in this fashion without thinking of the airline industry. How did people get it in Brazil and how did they get it in India? It's very interesting because in Brazil, I think there is almost no doubt that it was people working as domestic staff in the homes of the wealthy who actually picked up the virus from

their host families, because these are the families that had gone on vacations in Spain, Italy and in France and then they came back to Brazil in February and were the carriers of infection.

That's why the timeline here is important, it is not important because I teach in a history department and I am sworn to the idea of history, not at all—it is important because we would have to understand how the virus actually spread and when it actually started transmitting, from what we know so far. Two months from now the evidence may suggest something very different. I think that in many such countries this is how it really spread: it was the rich who brought it. This is an important point in itself because one of our problems in modern society everywhere in the world is that we like to hold the poor responsible for everything, including this. And that's not the case here at all. Why it is that Narendra Modi got so worried and he imposed a lockdown—he imposed the lockdown because he was worried about the poor impacting the rich. When you impose a lockdown you locked the poor who work as maids, housekeepers, cooks, drivers, and caretakers out of the homes of the rich. That part of the story people haven't understood; there is a different politics to the imposition of that lockdown as well. This is in many ways part of the story I would say in Brazil and I would wager to say in Pakistan without having the kind of detail that I have about this with regards to India. I have read a fair number of articles, but nothing comparable to what I have read on India of course, or on the US or Brazil or UK. I would also wager to say that you are not going to find too much difference between Pakistan and India. I would think without really knowing about it in detail that in Pakistan also you had the collapse, post-1947 going into the 50s, 60s and beyond, of a public health care system—which has completely collapsed in India. Unless you are a government employee, or you are working with an employer who has an employer health care plan—if you don't fall under any of those two categories, you are not covered and that's basically eighty per cent of the population in India, and I am quite certain that in Pakistan it will be a somewhat similar situation. If you are among the reasonably affluent in Karachi and Islamabad, then there are

all kind of ways to find health care; there is a big boom in private hospitals in India over the last thirty years.

So when we go back to this question of globalization, I think that we will have to consider it with some nuance and we will have to look at some of these ironies that are being played out. Now there are other sets of questions that arise from the short remark you made about globalization—what happens to the global economy, what happens to the political economy in general. I am not sure, by the way, that in the very long run that the patterns we are used to, that we would not return to them. Think of consumption. One would have hoped that one of the big things we would get out of this would be that people would say that you not need to be hopping on a plane for a vacation whenever one pleased and staying in five-stars hotels. You know you do not need a \$500 pedicure or a \$1,000 haircut with some fancy guy in New York.

Today I read a long article⁷ published in the *New York Times* on July 23. Our habits of consumption, and our habits of making class distinctions, are so ingrained, that all of this is coming with a vengeance, so now instead of going to the pedicurist to get a pedicure and manicure, that person comes to you while you are masked and in the safety zone of your home, which they have been doing in India for donkey's years. You can get almost anything done at your home and I am sure it is the same in Pakistan. You don't have to go the barber's, they will cut your hair at home, you can get a fancy haircut in your own home. They will do everything in your home, they will even give you a spa treatment, but now in the US also that's what happening because you can't go to the spa rather the spa come to you except they hike up the price three times, and if you are wealthy you can do it. So what the virus and the pandemic are in fact doing is aggravating these class differences, even more; that is to say it's not that the class differences are being aggravated only in the way in which we have heard about, namely that the poor and the minorities and the racial minorities or the religious minorities, whatever the case may be depending on the country, are suffering more, yes, that is the case but the well-to-dob will always finds

ways to get out of this hole and they are finding ways to get all their comforts and privileges and I suspect that it's going to get worse in that sense.

So, I think all of that will have to be taken in under the purview of this whole question of globalization, because what's effectively happening is that there are too many circuits if I may use that phrase by which you can circumvent the kind of shortcomings in the system if you have the means to do so; and unfortunately we are at that stage where the class differences and the economic inequities are so sharp that there are a substantial number of people who are able to use different circuits of consumption, different circuits of capital, to get on with their lives. That's one way I would look at it.

Now to turn again to the technology question. You mentioned ventilation. We have to always remember one thing about technology, the one thing that people working in technology pride themselves on. Is there any problem created by technology that cannot be resolved by technology? That's not my view, that is their view, and I think that is a fundamental philosophical problem for the modern world. It has been for some time. This is a kind of what Ashis Nandy⁸ and some others called technicism⁹, this view that you don't have to move outside that framework, if that framework created the problem, that framework has the solutions to the problem as well. The view is that technology can resolve all the problems technology itself has generated. In that sense ventilation is not, I would submit, a good illustration because it's like aircraft, they actually have very sophisticated ventilation systems, whereby they can actually filter out almost everything and reduce the chances of infection. Even if you are sitting in a plane for ten hours, they can reduce the chances of infection to almost an infinitesimally small percentage. I don't think that that's actually going to be that important. Clearly if you have ever lived in Singapore or Indonesia or Thailand or South Korea, these are countries where air conditioning systems are often running 24 hours a day. You know in Malaysia the humidity levels are so high. I have been to Malaysia eight times. I lived in Indonesia for two years, I mean the people who can afford it have

the air conditioners running 24 hours a day because it hot and humid and there is no winter there. It's just one long season of hot and humid weather pretty much the whole year and of course it rains, but that how it is. We have to remember that in some of these countries like Vietnam there are a very low number of cases and as I said no deaths at all, and South Korea which is heavily air conditioned has very low rates of infection comparatively, so I don't think ventilation is an issue here.

I think technology in a wider sense is the issue. What you and I are doing right now, this class you're teaching, and this is something that we would have to think about –this whole idea of remote learning. What is the politics of remote learning, and I think we need to read the word “remote” in all of its registers, because does it perhaps make us remote from others, and of course we have to think about that because what are all of these digital technologies like Facebook, making friends and so on. I have always thought there should be an app for making enemies rather than finding friends because you have to be much more careful about choosing your enemies than your friends. But you know Apple's ads about “only connect”, what is this nonsense, I mean it's complete humbug, with these apps you connect with nothing at all. The minister of loneliness in Britain—it should obviously be the first charge of this minister to think about all of these digital technologies, and whether they are actually connecting or alienating, creating forms of distancing, forms of loneliness. I think all of that really would have to be investigated very seriously.

I did write a kind of a long blog essay¹⁰ on this, it could be much longer, all the politics of remote learning, and here we are not confined to the US. I think for example of the new and upcoming private universities in India—I can talk with some degree of assurance about them, if I take five of the good private universities of the last ten years, and when I say good here I don't mean that I approve of them but in the normal sense of the term they would be viewed as good. I refer to Ashoka University in Sonapat, FLAME in Pune, Jindal also in the Delhi region, these are the kind of institutions I am talking about, all of them have done

exactly what all the American Universities did, which is in mid-March they all transitioned to remote learning. And, of course I think all of you already know this and I don't need to really spell this out, and I am sure in Pakistan this is exactly the situation. But there obviously are people going to the lesser known state universities. I mean what remote learning are they going to do? There are questions of access—who can access this technology, who cannot, what kind of bandwidth, you have students who have no computers. I mean frankly in a state like Bihar there is no learning going on anyhow most of the time, forget about remote or otherwise, and I am sure that is the case all over South Asia—in most state schools and universities in our part of the world. So all this noise about remote learning really affects a small number of people who can actually avail themselves of the technology, know how to use it, and will perhaps do something constructive. And then within that there are certain epistemological questions that still remain: How does one learn? What is the nature of learning? What does the screen do? We would have to assess all of that.

And finally the question about the social welfare state. What about the time when we didn't have social welfare states? Let me begin with India, let me begin with the 19th century when Pakistan was part of undivided India. Now 1918, the so-called Spanish flu, is estimated today to have killed eighteen to twenty million people in India, the most that were killed in any part of the world. The worldwide casualty toll is estimated to be between fifty to one hundred million today. But everyone agrees that India took the greatest hit and what is astonishing is that there is almost no record of that. I mean there is almost no record of it. I reiterate that because you know at that time it was very common for the British to appoint a commission of inquiry. Whenever you had a riot which killed only twenty people you would immediately have a commission of inquiry. This was a favored form of British governmentality. I won't get in to the detail of that. I wrote nearly a thousand pages long PhD dissertation in 1992 on commissions of inquiry. It was a favored way for the British to investigate an issue. Now eighty to twenty million people died in

India from the 1918-20 influenza and you would think they would appoint a commission of inquiry, well, they never did. And not only that you can't find any kind of visual record. I mean there is only one known photograph basically that I have seen and there is no visual archive. Someone I was speaking to told me that probably photography hadn't come to India, of course that is entirely incorrect because we even have photographs of the 1857-1858 rebellion. In 1858 we have photographs, a few from that time, and from the period of the 1896 Bombay bubonic plague, which also killed a huge number of people—10 to 12 million—over some years, we have quite a few photographs. We do have a committee, it is called the "Indian Plague Commission", and the Indian Plague Commission issued five volumes running into three thousand pages. And we have a rich visual archive. So the question is, why don't we have anything like that for 1918-20? This is not something I will discuss in detail at this point, because my lecture on this which is up on my YouTube channel¹¹ which was given as a webinar gets into that in some detail. But I mention all this in connection with the question you have asked and you will see why because I want to suggest to you that what we have is a history of catastrophic death from 1870 to 1920, and my estimation is at least a 100 million excess deaths took place in India at that time. One hundred million, that's massive, and this is from the bubonic plague, from the influenza epidemic of 1918, it's from a number of cholera epidemics, from TB epidemics, from famines, that's why I say excess death. Where was the state when all these tens of millions of people were dying? If you haven't read Mike Davis's book I recommend it very highly. I am not talking about his book on the flu, I am talking about his *Late Victorian Holocausts*.¹² This is a book he wrote twenty years ago where he discusses at some length the famines that struck India in the late 19th century and he discusses the *laissez faire* policies that were followed by the British. One reason he argued the famines were so acute is because the British had a policy of not intervening and not having any state intervention.

You can see how I am coming back slowly to your question. So here we can see clearly that there was no state intervention. Now

I know the picture is somewhat more complicated because during the 1896 Bubonic plague we do have some state intervention, but there the problem was excessive and ill-thought state intervention—such as plague officials barging into people's homes and invading their private sphere, invading the Zenana. This meant not simply Muslim households but even Hindu homes where women persisted with the purdah, or who had the practice of observing purdah. Then you had these search parties which were enabled by the passage of the Indian Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897, passed in February 1897; one of the places where we have some evidence of what happened is Karachi. The plague commission report has quite a bit on that but the important thing is that this is the same act that has now been invoked by the Indian government with modification, so they passed an ordinance which brings the 1897 act back into force. So you know there was some state intervention but on the whole the period of what I am calling catastrophic death, a period of half a century, is one during which where there was very little state intervention at all.

So now I think the interesting question is and this is not apropos of India but apropos of Britain and the continent as well: how did people handle this kind of thing before you had social welfare states? And I think that there are two answers to that. One is that we don't empirically know much about how epidemic disease was dealt with, for example in the 17th and 18th century. We do know something of 17th century England and there is the diary of Samuel Pepys.¹³ Samuel Pepys kept the most well-known diary that anyone has ever kept anywhere running into several volumes. This diary gives us a very good insight to what was happening in Britain at that time. Now you might not have had overt state intervention of the kind that you have today. But it is very clear that there was some degree of state intervention even at that time because under Charles the Second at that time there were ordinances passed which, for example, said very clearly that a house where someone has fallen sick or where someone has died of the plague, that house should be marked with a large cross in red. So it's like a scene out of *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel

Hawthorne's famous novel where the woman who commits adultery or is thought to have committed it has to put the letter A in red on her dress when she appears before the townspeople. So you had to mark the house so that everyone outside could see it and could avoid it. And it is also very clear that there were certain forms of social distancing that were observed even at that time.

But the real answer and that's the second aspect of it—and this is where I think you do have to go to someone like E.P. Thompson. And I know that there is sort of hard-nosed realpolitik critique of that kind of work saying that it's romantic. I don't think so actually. I think what he saying is very sensible and he is not the only person to have said that and there is plenty of evidence for what he is arguing for from other places. What he is saying basically is this: it's not that pre-modern societies were not prone to some degree of acquisition, but they were not acquisitive in the way in which modern societies are acquisitive to use R.H. Tawney's phrase from his book *The Acquisitive society*.¹⁴ E. P. Thompson looks at food riots.¹⁵ Food riots used to take place but he says after the industrial revolution these food riots got much worse. Something changed with the industrial revolution; we get accumulation, acquisition. What he is saying is that there is a collapse of the moral economy.

It's not as if people had no interest in making money before. Let's look at it this way. If there is a famine people will often do what they can do to hoard. People do everywhere, all over the world, tend to hoard in such situations. Here in the US when the pandemic broke out people starting hoarding, the first thing that they started hoarding was toilet paper. I have a little bit of a commentary on that because as I suggest there is something subliminal here and that has to do with anxieties over cleanliness, in the West these anxieties can be seen as far back as in the time of the Old Testament. Who is the leper, he is the one who is dirty and unclean. Read *Leviticus*, it tells you what was happening.

So I think there are things happening at a level that have to do with the historical memory that is embedded in people which they may not even be aware of but let us leave aside that interpretation for the moment. The important thing at the factual

level is that it is certainly the case that even in a very affluent society such as this one [the US] hoarding started the minute it became clear that orders for lockdown were going to be announced. I remember going to the store and not only were all the toilet paper shelves absolutely empty but there was no pasta to be found—perhaps because it is an easy thing to cook—the shelves were completely empty. Not a single packet of pasta or bottle of pasta sauce. Now you know how big American super markets are, you know a whole slum in India can live inside one of these super markets. I am not talking about three feet of space. I am talking about thirty meter of shelves which were had just been emptied out in a jiffy. Why is this hoarding going on? This hoarding instinct has a long history. What is different? What would E. P. Thompson say? When people hoarded in the past, the traders would hike up their prices. When you know an item is going go into short supply, when it is in demand and the demand easily outstrips the supply, that's when price gouging takes place. And some states will pass order saying it's not permitted and of course some people may subvert those orders. Anyhow the point simply is this that in the past there was a sense in which people restrained themselves. It's not as if profit was not sought but nonetheless the idea prevailed that you exercise some restraint on yourself. You hoard some, you overcharge a bit, but you recognize that there is a community of which you are a part. I think the problem now, he is suggesting, is that since the advent of modernity—he wouldn't say modernity, and he would rather speak about the industrial revolution—those kinds of restraints disappeared, and the moral economy collapsed. There was a moral economy, there was some notion of conviviality or understanding—conviviality may be too strong. There doesn't have to be conviviality, but there may be an understanding of self-restraint, that's the phrase I would use. The industrial revolution did not only alter the physical landscape—smoking chimneys, soot, the destruction of forests on a large scale—but also our moral landscape. If I may put it this way, think of this analogy: that there is an understanding of prejudice. You understand that someone has prejudices about you and they understand that you

have some prejudices about them. And this itself creates a kind of ecological balance.

So I think the answer to the question that you have raised has these multi-pronged aspects. So, yes, the nature of state intervention has changed; there were certain practices which existed partly on account of the state, partly on account of customary practices, for example this idea of distancing is not just mandated by the state as is the case with the coronavirus but also has origins in a large number of cultural systems around the world. Almost every country as well. Take for example quarantine—forty days is what the period of quarantine is associated with, the prefix in *quarantino* has to do with forty days. Forty days is the period that Jesus is supposed to have fasted. Forty days is also the period where in many cultures including all Latin cultures even today that a woman goes into a kind of quarantine after giving birth, for the protection of herself and her child or her baby—this is very common. So many societies understood all of this even if there was no state order that you had to observe practices of this kind. Therefore you didn't always need an explicit set of state rules or injunctions. That's what I am suggesting.

Shehzad Ali: After the Black Death of 14th century new horizons of economic opportunities were created due to the huge uncultivated land and it was thoroughly utilized by the new middle class, do you see any kind of economic changes in the case of the current pandemic? And another question is about theodicy, as history has witnessed after the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, how people questioned the religion and divine intervention in the West and I can refer to the emergence of a new Epicureanism (in the works of Voltaire for example). Do you see any shift in people's consciousness in this regard as a reaction to the current pandemic?

Prof. Vinay Lal: Okay, so you are referring to the question of theodicy as well as to what happened after the Black Death. Here is one way we may think about these questions. Barbara W. Tuchman wrote a voluminous book¹⁶ on the middle ages where she points out in a chapter on the Black Death what she calls the

“persistence of the normal” and on how people thought about the pandemic. According to her analysis it may be argued that people thought then that it is the end of the world. And she points out that some people started not following the law because following the law was counterproductive, as there would be nobody left to administer the law. Think of the proverb, make hay while the sun shines. One may rob, eat, indulge in sex and so on....there is no one left to administer the law and to inflict punishment, and this is exactly what happened in Athens during the time of the Peloponnesian war...and I would strongly recommend reading Thucydides’s history of the Peloponnesian war. And we also know that there was a plague in Athens and people’s response was the same in both ancient and middle ages.

She recognizes that there is the persistence of the normal but she also remarks that something changed and the Black Death paved the way perhaps for something which we call capitalism and the conception of individual autonomy which is central to capitalism as well. And interestingly, only 50 years after the end of the Black Death you have the first great piece of Renaissance literature in the world known as the “Oration of the dignity of man” by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.¹⁷ This is my example not hers. Of course it was the Italian city-state that shaped thinking about capitalism and later one can witness changes in capitalism—a huge and continuing debate for historians on how capitalism continues to evolve. The Black Death also precipitated new structures and lands reforms in Europe in the late 14th century and at the start of the 15th century and this would in turn lead to a change in property relations. It is also important to notice that now the Church would start to become less important. Now the question is whether one can think of some kind of analogous changes in the aftermath of the end of this coronavirus pandemic and what kind of changes can be predicted at the end of COVID? There is surely an uncertainty about the future, however, some people are arguing that now the state will try to accumulate enormous power and there may be new forms of state power and technologies in the forms of apps are emerging that would make the state more powerful. Even a country like Norway which is

ranked at the top of the freedom index introduced the most oppressive contact tracing app and it was ultimately removed when an international agency objected that the app was very intrusive. I am not sure about what kind of huge structural changes may come about and I think it is too early to be able to say that at this moment. We can have informed speculation but we shall have to look at this some months from now.

At the same time, I think we should shift the frame a little bit toward another question which is the question of climate change. The fundamental problem that we should think about is climate change, this plague does not necessarily have the same drivers as climate change but we may think about some areas of overlap. The real answer to your question would be that if this pandemic made us—people all over the globe—sober enough to think about climate change, then you could say that this pandemic would have brought about a change really phenomenal in scope because without that I do not think we are speaking about a very long future for humankind. I think the direst predictions given by the Club of Rome five decades ago which seemed foolish to so many people are no longer dire predictions. Look at the rate at which people are now burning up fossil fuels. And this is what the coronavirus has brought to us, like look at the last four decades, HIV in the 1980s, SARS in 2003, the Swine Flu in 2009, the Avian Flu, MERS, and so on, all of them including the present coronavirus—all these are basically zoonotic. What is the implication of this? The implication is that human beings are moving into ecological reservoirs and unknown and unpredictable pathogens are escaping from these reservoirs of nature. These ecological places are being invaded by human beings. The further we reach into these ecological reservoirs, the greater the likelihood that we will have these zoonotic diseases. Once you have these highly infectious diseases, and you have airplanes as drivers, you have what you have today—the coronavirus pandemic. There we see the overlap between climate change and the current pandemic.

There is a very interesting book by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, a two volume set of essays called “the Mind and Method of the

Historian";¹⁸ there is an essay in the 2nd volume known as "the unification of the world by a microbe." In this work, he is reviewing the Black Death and then he says that when you move further to the west you will find what is called the Columbian exchange, an idea based on the book written by Alfred W. Crosby. And behind that is the idea that all the diseases of the old world moved to the new world. One can look at the data. Almost 90% of the American Indians were killed by the small pox and epidemic diseases, alongside of course slavery, extermination and genocide, but disease contributed very substantially to their mass extinction. At the same time he argues that what happened is the unification of the globe by a microbe. The coronavirus is a microbe that has unified the globe. I was earlier speaking of globalization. The fact that this kind of unification was however still not complete is indicated by the spread of cholera in the early 19th century. Cholera originates in the warm fecal-infected waters of the Ganga or the Ganges Delta in India, and almost all the cholera epidemics have originated there; but cholera spread to Europe and created a havoc. These microbes have a way of transmission. So the microbe at the time of the Black Death connected Europe and Asia, and there we have one conception of Eurasia, but the Americas were still nowhere in the picture and they enter into the story in the 15th and 16th centuries. Now through the coronavirus the world is again on the brink of a new unification.

Let's go back to the other question of theodicy and the discussion among philosophers about God and the will of God and whether one could speak of a just world. I'd like to broaden it out to this kind of question. What kind of religious resources are there to think about the coronavirus pandemic? Now surprisingly there is very little discussion about it that I have seen. And there are a related set of questions about whether there is a framework that would allow us to think about how different religions think of transcendence and whether they can help us think and respond to the whole phenomenon of the current pandemic. One of the reasons for the paucity of religious discourse on the virus is that we are living in a secular world and there are those who in any

case would like to leave everything in the hands of the scientists. Just let your nose follow the science, we are being told. But we must bring religion into this discourse. And that is only possible if we allow the possibility of alternative discourses—and by alternative discourse I do not mean the so-called fake news, or the alternative universe of imagined facts inhabited by Trump, Bolsonaro, and others. I am also referring to what common people are talking about, forms of ‘everyday religiosity’—a discourse wherein people are talking about magical cures. We know what Trump said—drink disinfectant and you will be cured! It’s like a magical potion; there are also magical potions mentioned in the Rig Veda. Drink this and that kind of thing and it will magically cure you. It may be absurd but it is a discourse and it will have to be understood for what it is, as also a different way of imagining healing. Not everyone is going to just settle for a mask and for observing social distancing. And all this has a lot to do with religion and its discourses. To some all of this may be humbug: just wait for a vaccine, they will say. But there is a politics to vaccines, too, and you can be sure that those sitting around in India and Pakistan are scarcely going to be the first ones to get it, or even get it at all. Taking all this into consideration, I am saying that people will call upon all kinds of resources—science, religion, magic, myth, what have you—to negotiate the extraordinary set of circumstances under which they have been placed.

Uzair Salman: The coronavirus seems to have bolstered nationalism and somehow enhanced the nation-state’s control borders and interstate transport, and by coercing leaders into prioritising their own country as to the presence of essential medical supplies, equipment, and so forth. But we mustn’t forget that the retreat to the nation-state can be tantamount to a global catastrophe—in that not only will it make relations among countries strained, but also leave poor, less independent countries on their own, struggling for fundamental needs; and given how, despite the world’s being globalised and connected, there are countries devoid of things we take for granted, the world’s reversion to an old, more congested system seems an

exercise likely to prove awfully grievous. But as much as it is likely to have repercussions for developing, poor countries, developed countries too will have to undergo severe problems: the fact that 97 percent of all the antibiotics used in the US are imported from China should be too evident an example of this.

Vinay Lal: This question has been posited in such a way that it does justice to both sides of the debate, and, although I would like to tackle the debate from a varying angle, it also provides a wonderful context for me to elaborate upon the worldview that I abide by. I haven't been able to hint at the worldview that I come from very much thus far. To summarise, the two arguments that the question includes are: that the present pandemic and set of circumstances seem to weaken the position of those who advocate for the nation-state. Each nation-state will realize its limitations, for example many countries that had been critical of China still had to rely on it for medical supplies and equipment, even the US and this is a fact. You had pointed out that the US depends on China for nearly all its antibiotics—and although one could disagree with the figure, 97 percent, since India too is one of the major exporters of pharmaceutical drugs, that is immaterial because the problem still persists—meaning that India too has to import the raw materials required for making medicines from China. India is a huge player in the global manufacturing of pharmaceuticals but the active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) as they are called come mainly from China. The point here is that one could say that globalization has been weakened but one could also make the argument that the pandemic has shown why globalization is necessary. Let's leave out the pharmaceutical drugs and PPEs, and turn to global supply chains. David Harvey, a British-born Marxist economic geographer, argues that there are over one million suppliers involved in building a single Volvo automobile. Now this sounds implausible but the way he explains it is that there is a first tier of suppliers each one of which is supplied by hundreds of second tier suppliers each one of which, in turn, is supplied by thousands of suppliers belonging to the third tier. But this example needn't be taken literally; we all understand how complicated global supply chains are, making it

almost impossible to accurately tell as to where exactly things are made. The argument, in other words, is that the pandemic has made people aware of the perils of not being part of the globalised world.

And, on the other hand, as you point out, and as I had remarked earlier, the first instinct of every country was that the borders ought to be shut; an instinct in the wake of which the entire EU project seems to have collapsed overnight, so to speak. In what ensued, we saw not only how the EU countries closed their respective borders for non-EU countries but even to one another, and also how neighborhoods within cities shut their borders to other neighborhoods. And this happened in India as well and I'm certain in every other country, too—including India. So there are now borders within borders within borders. Therefore one could therefore argue this from both sides.

But I'd like to make sense of it in a different way. I agree with everything you've said, but let's think of it this way. I recall reading an essay many years ago by the famous anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, where I first heard of the distinction, which is often credited to Charles Darwin, between splitters and lumpers. The advocates of globalization may be called lumpers—we're all one human family, all of that, though of course we all know that we're not one human family because even when borders are open, they are not open to everyone. Try walking into the US if you're a Muslim from a slum in an Indian city! Then there are the splitters, those who advocate for borders within borders and would impose yet more borders. They will even find the poor within the rich in their own fashion! I know someone who lives in one of the wealthiest areas in the US where the split is such that houses may be divided into four categories: homes that are worth below \$10 million, homes priced above \$10 million, and then in the latter category there are those homes that have 20 foot hedges and those hidden by 50 foot hedges. Amid such circumstances, I would suggest that it's about time we thought as to why we are inhabiting the idea of the nation-state at all given how fundamental a disease it is of the modern world. Every nation-state has on its hands immense violence, and the project of

the nation-state is never complete; there will always be reasons to find people one wishes to exclude, unless one makes them one's own. All nation states tend towards homogenization, uniformity, creating a narrative built on exclusion. Take for example Pakistan where the first intellectual project after 1947 was to create a history of the freedom movement in Pakistan. How can one have such a history in the first place? One can speak of a freedom movement in India that led to Pakistan but there was no country called Pakistan in which such a movement took place. But even if we somehow take this project in earnest, it is rather remarkable that it has no mention of Gandhi as though he didn't exist, or was an insignificant figure, and it is this exclusionary attitude that marks all nation-states. Every nation state does the same, every nation state is marked by such processes of homogenization and marginalization. Eugen Weber points out in his *Peasants into Frenchmen*¹⁹ that the majority of people living in France in the nineteenth century weren't French-speaking but had to be cajoled into submission and into becoming proper Frenchmen. And this is 100 years after the French Revolution! This is precisely the project in countries such as Pakistan and India; in the former they are trying to turn everyone into a "true Pakistani" and in the latter into a "true Indian". The fundamental disease, therefore, is the nation-state, and so in this respect we needn't argue about how the ongoing pandemic bolsters it or weakens it.

We also have to critique some aspects of modernity which is where I'd depart from Mike Davis whom I otherwise like very much. He comes from a Marxist background and has also written about the coronavirus but I do have some fundamental issues with the Marxist project. The Marxist critics are usually too quick to pin every social ill on capitalism and they believe that a more far-reaching critique of modernity is a form of wishy washiness. There is a big debate on whether the early Soviets were ecologically minded or not and I cannot get into that right now. I don't personally think that a case can be made for ecological or Green Leninism though some people are talking about it. But let's take out for convenience sake the first several years of the

Bolshevik Revolution. The Soviet Union, post-Lenin, was engaged in a far-reaching project of modernisation and they wrought devastating ecological damage in all the territories under their jurisdiction. That didn't come out of capitalism; it came out of the relentless drive for modernization and modernity's impulse to transform place into space and colonize time. The Marxist critics do not want to admit the intricate links between modernity and capitalism. So, my two-pronged argument would be to take this occasion to rethink aggressively and forcefully about the project of modernity and its relation to capitalism, and secondly to think outside the framework of the nation state.

Tabassum Mushtaq: In Pakistan there are people who are of the opinion that polio vaccine is a tool of the West to cause infertility in the people and therefore resist it. Same is the case with coronavirus as there are people who think that it is a conspiracy against Muslims. So when its vaccine will come along then many Muslim people will show reluctance to its use. What is your take on such conspiracy theories?

Prof. Vinay Lal: I have read it in newspapers and know of the rumours going around during the Polio vaccination drives that there are some in Pakistan who believe that the polio vaccine can render people infertile. Polio is more or less eradicated from nearly every country though there are some strands of it in a few countries in Africa as well as Pakistan. But let us widen the scope of our thinking here as I would like to ensure that we do not think of this only as a third world issue. The tendency to think that this—that is, this purported display of irrationality—happens only in countries such as Pakistan, India, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Sudan etc. is wrong. Do you know that in the United States there is a huge, absolutely huge, anti-vaccination movement? Twenty per cent of Americans have said that they will not take the coronavirus vaccine and I think that this is much larger than any percentage of people in Pakistan who would say that. This anti-vaccination movement has a long history and that history has to do with a general suspicion in the US over state intervention and particularly state control of the body. There is a body of people who believe that vaccines are responsible for autism in children

but at the heart of this movement is the sentiment against state mandated regulations and intrusion into family life. Now I am not in favour of the anti-vaccination movement but on the other hand I think that it is healthy to have some suspicion of the state, at a minimum. One should not view the state as benign. I think it is a fundamental issue and this is again one reason where I have significant difference with Marxists on the role of the state without aligning myself with anything like neo-liberalism or anything of that kind. I only want to reiterate that the anti-coronavirus vaccine impulse stems in good part from a suspicion of state intervention and it has other deep roots in American history as well but it would take too long to get into that.

I also think that the 20 per cent who are saying that they will not take the vaccine will change their minds if this pandemic lingers around. Many of them object more to the vaccination shots for measles, rubella, polio etc that are taken after birth, moving into infancy and adolescence, on a regular basis whereas the coronavirus vaccine would be taken once, perhaps twice or thrice. At the end of the day, if people see hundreds of thousands continuing to die, they will fall into line and their objections will disappear. But in principle the anti-vaccination lobby is very strong in this country, in fact, extremely strong! It also overlaps with people who don't believe in sending their children to school, there is fact a robust home schooling movement—a movement based largely in Christian evangelical groups. There is a complicated sociology to all of this. With respect to what you have mentioned about Pakistan, I would like to know what you think of the politics of the anti-polio vaccine sentiment because the problem is that most people will say that it happens in countries like Pakistan because people are uneducated. No! It is not simply because of that. If so, what about the US which boasts in principle a 99 per cent literacy rate? Why is there such a large anti-vaccination movement in the US? So, it can be based on many different things.

The discussion, for example, among Muslims in Pakistan that the virus came from somewhere else. Well...! The virus is always the other, it comes from the other and it is the other, and it

doesn't matter where you are, sometimes it is as simple as that. After all, why does Trump call it the China virus? And you might say, oh, well, because it is known to have come from China. But why do we call the Spanish flu the Spanish flu—because it came from Spain. No, it did not. In fact the likely origin of the Spanish flu is Kansas, in the US—it is the most likely place where it came from though no one knows for sure. But it most certainly did not come from Spain! It came to be known as the Spanish flu because Spain was neutral in World War I and all the parties to the conflict knew that there was propaganda coming from both sides and the only country from where you would get reliable information was Spain. The information about this flu was coming from Spain and so it got to be known as the Spanish flu. This idea of blaming the other is very interesting. If you read about syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease, you ask the French where did it come from. They will tell you the Germans. You ask the Germans, they will tell you the Italians. You ask the Italians, they will tell you it came from Spanish, the Spanish will say it came from Chinese, and the Chinese will blame Indians for it and so on and so forth.

Sander Gilman has written extensively²⁰ on this whole idea of how one passes the blame to others.²¹ So this is not something new in Pakistan or distinct to Pakistan. In India also the people will tell you that the Muslims brought it. The Muslims in Pakistan will blame India and for all I know some will say that this is part of the biological warfare of Hindus against us. The same is true with the US thinking that China is conducting biological warfare, you know the whole conspiracy theories. We've all heard of the lab in Wuhan that supposedly engineered the virus. So it is not something new, it happened almost everywhere. But one should not make the mistake of the positivist who will argue that this is all humbug and nonsense. To the contrary, this has to be studied—rumors, conspiracy theories, all this is fodder for the cultural historian, this is how one gets a grip on how a society, or some elements of it, think and what animates the people. You don't want to be moved by all this as such but, on the other hand, I wouldn't do what the scientist might insist on in saying that we can only adhere to the facts. Our understanding of the French

Revolution gained immeasurably from the historians who studied the rule of rumors in the French revolution—how rumors were deployed, animated people, even activated a set of circumstances.

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Notes:

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- ¹ Lal, 'Ministering to Loneliness'.
 - ² Lal, *The Fury of the COVID-19*.
 - ³ Cockburn, Delon, and Ferreira, 'Origin and Progress of the 1968-69 Hong Kong Influenza Epidemic'.
 - ⁴ Hastanto, 'Why Do Indonesians Keep Taking Back the Bodies of COVID-19 Patients by Force?'; Suhartono and Aditya, 'Theft of Corpses Adds to Indonesia's Coronavirus Challenges'.
 - ⁵ Castro et al., 'Brazil's Unified Health System'.
 - ⁶ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.
 - ⁷ Kaysen, 'House Calls for Everything!'
 - ⁸ 'Intellectuals'.
 - ⁹ Nandy, *Science, Hegemony and Violence*.
 - ¹⁰ Lal, 'Remote Learning and Social Distancing'.
 - ¹¹ 'Vinay Lal - YouTube'.
 - ¹² Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*.
 - ¹³ 'Samuel Pepys'.
 - ¹⁴ Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society (1920)*.
 - ¹⁵ Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century'.
 - ¹⁶ Cochrane, 'In Time of War and Plague'.
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 - ¹⁹ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*.
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