

Editorial

COVID-19 as a Collective Trauma in Global Politics: Disruption, Destruction and Resilience

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There is expanding awareness in the IR (International Relations) literature that collective trauma is a common denominator in major events in global politics [1,2]. This can be said about the bloody Thirty Years war that led to the Treaty of Westphalia, which is still considered to be the “beginning” of the Westphalian state system, the world wars, the transatlantic slave trade, genocides, and numerous other events that could be regarded as “critical situations” in international relations. Indeed, collective traumatic experiences such as war and genocide affect the ways in which states and non-state actors construct biographical narratives about themselves and engage in meaningful relations with the other actors in international politics. They become the backbones of stories about mass suffering and resistance, and thus provide a sense of collective identity. Simultaneously, these traumatic events are primarily ruptures in national meaning-making, and are capable of shattering the routines and expectations of nationally bounded communities. Such events transform collectivities and state identities, alter discourses, and force state leaders to rethink their relations with other states. They are often accompanied by mass violence: when all certainties are shaken up, it becomes difficult (next to impossible) to maintain daily routines and the established lines between “us” and “them”.

Surprisingly, pandemics, such as the Spanish flu or COVID-19, despite the millions of lives that they have claimed, have not yet received sufficient attention among those who study trauma in IR. Indeed, many questions remain to be asked: If, on the one hand, there is no lack of studies on COVID-19 as it relates to individual traumatic experiences, populism, nationalism, or internal divisions and increased discrimination related to this experience ([3–6], etc.), how does the COVID-19 pandemic compare to the other collective traumas studied in depth in IR, such as war or genocide? If, undoubtedly, the pandemic has been both destructive and disruptive for billions of people, was it qualitatively distinct from other national collective traumas, such as war or genocide? Was the pandemic capable of creating a true, global collective trauma? Was it a major critical juncture, and a critical situation that fundamentally redefined the identities of states and societies? What will we remember about this experience in the future? How will we integrate it into the growing body of literature on trauma and memory in IR?

This Special Issue is an attempt to determine whether COVID-19, as a collective traumatic experience, was qualitatively distinct from other traumas, such as war and genocide. Drawing on the expanding body of literature related to trauma and memory in IR, this Special Issue aims to explore COVID-19 as a global trauma in international politics. It promises to focus on various dimensions of this global traumatic experience: political (How does this traumatic experience correlate with previous traumas? How have communities responded to its global, traumatic effect?), cultural (How has COVID-19 generated new discourses? How are new collective remembrance practices created?), socio-economic (How have developments in international economics associated with COVID-19 affected the collective experiences of trauma?), emotional (How have feelings of uncertainty, fear and anguish affected political behavior in dealing with the pandemic?), and intersectionality



Citation: Budrytė, D.; Resende, E. COVID-19 as a Collective Trauma in Global Politics: Disruption, Destruction and Resilience. *Societies* **2023**, *13*, 106. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13050106>

Received: 19 April 2023

Revised: 20 April 2023

Accepted: 21 April 2023

Published: 24 April 2023



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(How has COVID-19 as a trauma diversely affected the Global South, minorities, women, people of color, people with disabilities and indigenous people?).

As we, the editors, were considering the articles submitted to this issue, the trajectory of the pandemic itself altered. As soon as the major outbreaks of COVID-19 began to dwindle in 2022 as a result of mass—albeit globally uneven—vaccination, Russia initiated its aggressive war against Ukraine. Many IR scholars began to focus on this new collective traumatic experience, which to some represented an inflection point in the international system. It appears that suddenly, COVID-19 became a thing of the past, to be forgotten as the traumas of Bucha and Irpin began to occupy the attention of international mass media. However, the COVID-19 pandemic did claim millions of lives and cause mass suffering globally, and as such, will function as yet another important junction in global politics.

The five articles published in this Special Issue propose that COVID-19 ought to be treated as a collective trauma in the IR literature. Identical to other collective traumas, such as wars or genocides, it was extraordinarily disruptive. It forced societies and individuals to rethink their routines and challenged their perception of time. As outlined in Raffaella Puggioni's contribution, COVID-19 had a distinct impact on the everyday lives of individuals, as people in many countries started to reinvent their everyday lives [7]. They developed a variety of "creative mechanisms" to cope with insecurity and anxiety, and realized novel ways to express themselves. We hope that Puggioni's article will inspire those who study trauma in global politics to pay greater attention to everyday life and analyze the coping mechanisms that people develop in order to deal with collective trauma. Very often, studies of collective trauma focus on its enormity and unspeakability; however, COVID-19 evidently demonstrated that individuals are capable of developing their own "small" mechanisms in order to cope with trauma in their everyday experiences.

Merve Genç's and Mark Howard's contributions highlight the criticality of the economic dimensions of collective traumas. Often, studies that focus on the experience of mass violence as collective trauma in IR "forget" their economic dimensions. Both contributions reveal one crucial characteristic of COVID-19 that made it qualitatively distinct from other traumas in global politics—the tension between health and the economy. Genç's contribution reveals the power of social media, particularly Twitter, which became a "go-to" news source during COVID-19, and illustrates a peculiar development that occurred during COVID-19—an online social development (which she describes as "populist") without a leader figure [8]. Many individuals were extremely passionate and argued their case against the opening of the US economy in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Howard's article on the necropolice economy raises an important question: Who were these "expendable" populations that the state was willing to sacrifice under the conditions of COVID-19? Howard's article is a scathing critique of "neoliberal capitalism", describing it as a "sacrificial order", an engine of unnecessary deaths [9]. The reactions of neoliberal capitalist orders to COVID-19 resulted in multiple other traumas, both economic and non-economic, especially for vulnerable populations.

The contribution by Erica Resende and Sybille Reinke de Buitrago highlights the precarious impact of COVID-19 on existing political divisions and polarization. Their contribution reveals how populist forces in two very distinct societies (Germany and Brazil) attempted to deepen the divisions between the people and the elite in order to strengthen their own political positions [10]. Theoretically, Resende and Reinke de Buitrago's contribution brings the literature on trauma in IR closer to the literature on crisis. In both cases, we observe how trauma and crisis can become engines of new discourses; they introduce elements of suddenness and unpredictability as well as unspeakability. Resende and Reinke de Buitrago demonstrate how populist forces in Germany and Brazil succeeded in "performing" the pandemic into crisis, and exploiting it for their own political gain.

Finally, Florentina Andreescu's contribution reveals another crucial dimension of COVID-19 as a collective trauma—its similarity to the mass experience of a mental illness. Drawing on the literature in psychiatry and IR, Andreescu reveals how COVID-19 led to the "abnegation of embodied presence" by many individuals, when bodies became security

threats [11]. She proposes that the experience of COVID-19 resembled the experience of schizophrenia, with “hyper-reflexivity, diminished self-presence and disturbed grip on the world” (ibid.) Her examination of COVID-19 suggests that societies experienced unprecedented transformation, and that it will take years to fully grasp the implications of these transformations.

In sum, we believe that this Special Issue is merely the foundation of an attempt to recognize the complexity of the global traumatic experiences related to COVID-19. We can only hope that our attempts to conceptualize COVID-19 as a collective trauma in IR, with our call to focus more on everyday practices and the economic dimensions of trauma, will contribute to the recent “trauma turn” in IR that scholars such as Adam B. Lerner have propounded in their recent work ([1], p. 217).

Author Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to the conceptualization and writing of this article. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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