ESSAY

COVID-19 as a Mass Death Event

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COVID-19 has killed over two million people worldwide.[1] Though efforts to curb the transmission of the virus have resulted in dramatic economic costs and changes to everyday life, the central fact of the virus itself is death and suffering on a mass transnational scale. When looked at from the perspective of excess mortality (the number of deaths that exceed statistical models of "expected" deaths for a given year, partially based on five-year averages) or secondary effects of the pandemic such as economic deprivation, the death toll is likely to be substantially higher.[2] Even for those fortunate enough to be shielded from the direct effects of the virus, it has been near impossible to escape the global images of struggling intensive care units, overflowing mortuaries, and the construction of mass graves.

We lay out this picture of grief and loss to suggest that, in order to fully understand the politics of COVID-19, we need to stare death in the face. The pandemic is a mass death event, and assessments of the political and normative impact of the pandemic should center their focus on individual and collective experiences of death, loss, and grief. By foregrounding death in theorizing the pandemic, we argue, we will be better able to understand the ways in which the pandemic is reordering the world than if we were to look at formal politics or economic contractions alone. Crucially, centering the impact on experiences of death and grief may help us more clearly formulate the normative questions necessary to imagine better post-pandemic futures. Ultimately, conceptualizing the pandemic as an experience of death on a mass scale is to ask the question: How will, and should, politics value human lives in the post-pandemic world?

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The essay begins by demonstrating a notable silence around death in the emerging scholarly debate on the politics of COVID-19, which has been framed primarily as a matter of either (a) state-based multilateralism or (b) a complication of other pre-existing politico-economic concerns. We then reflect upon other instances of mass death (such as those resulting from human rights atrocities or complex emergencies) to conceptualize COVID-19 as a mass death event and elaborate on the kind of analytical and theoretical insights offered by this approach. We conclude by briefly outlining a future research agenda that interrogates the politics and ethics of the COVID-19 pandemic as a transnational experience of ambiguous loss.

Writing about the COVID-19 pandemic as it is happening presents a particular set of emotional and personal challenges, as we along with everyone else are experiencing it, affected by it, and cannot easily abstract from it. This is a fresh and often uncomfortable experience for us, and many other relatively privileged scholars. This is not, however, a novel situation; these are the conditions—and stakes—of knowledge production for scholars who research, write, and advocate within situations of conflict (or its immediate aftermath), environmental degradation, mass displacement, and/or ongoing racialized and (settler) colonial violence.[3] Contemporary discussions of COVID-19—in theory and practice—have often been suggestive of a sense of detachment from the immediacy, scale, uncertainty, and grief associated with the crisis. In this context, we want to acknowledge our positionality—particularly the relative safety within which we experience the pandemic—as we call for greater scholarly and affective engagement with the politics of death.

The Word Not Spoken

It is too early to fully assess the literature on COVID-19. The scholarly conversation within political science and international relations thus far, however, has been curiously silent on the politics produced by death, and the surrounding experiences of grief and loss. Although the human cost of the pandemic has been noted, for example, in the acknowledgment that while COVID-19 "is no world war . . . its casualties are heavy and growing,"[4] the specific experience of death is considered politically significant only in a limited manner. This is not dissimilar to the narratives and distancing strategies used by various political leaders around the world that aim to shift the focus to the mitigation of, or "recovery" from, the pandemic.[5]

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This omission is the result of two interrelated trends in the literature. First, as efforts to curb COVID-19 have been driven by government policies, evaluations of the political impact of the pandemic have centered on the form and function of state government. A *Foreign Policy* roundtable, for instance, asks whether the experience of COVID-19 will "permanently expand government powers" across the world,[6] while other commentators have considered whether autocratic or democratic forms of government are better suited to effectively deal with viral outbreaks.[7] Assessments of COVID-19's international political effects are similarly state-centric, examining the effects of the pandemic on cooperation between states in an anarchic system, the authority of international organizations over state behavior, and shifts in the balance of power between states, particularly powerful ones such as the United States and China.[8] From this perspective, pandemic fatalities only matter if the *magnitude* is great enough to upend the absolute and/or relative power of a state. For some,[9] the current pandemic has not been deadly enough to be politically significant at the international level.[10]

Second, death is presented in relation to other goals and political values, such as economic prosperity and material wellbeing, or civil liberties and human rights. For example, discussions of the pandemic's global economic impact often refer primarily to the costs imposed by policies designed to reduce death rates on global trade and immigration[11] or domestic productivity.[12] Others have considered whether policy interventions designed to reduce fatality rates result in diminished enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. These analyses express concerns related to privacy, for instance, as greater surveillance measures designed to curb transmission may accelerate democratic backsliding,[13] further oppress minoritized groups,[14] and intensify militarized border controls.[15] In thinking about pandemic responses designed to reduce transmission—and thus fatalities—these discussions implicitly conceptualize death as a target of future *mitigation*. Death as an already-existing and ongoing phenomenon within society remains underexplored. How are societies processing these experiences of death, and what politics do they produce?

State-centric, mitigation-focused contributions are not unwarranted. States are important actors in the response to the pandemic; in a context of limited political and material resources, policymakers face difficult choices in preserving lives at the expense of other referents of value under "normal" circumstances.[16] What the evaluations of these choices—academically and in practice—are missing,

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however, is direct discussion and theorization of the occurrence and experience of death itself.

The inability to directly talk about mass death in our theorizing is not limited to the study of pandemics but is a general problem in the empirical study of political phenomena. International relations and political science scholarship rarely consider death directly as an analytical category. Instead, it is frequently posited as the implicit reason for politics;[17] the risk of death justifies and underwrites the notion of the state. Jessica Auchter, for instance, argues that the overarching focus on survival in the study of security means that death is only discussed in relation to the failure of the system, in the form of statistics or images that prompt action to further interventions for mitigation.[18] Actual death, however, is typically treated either instrumentally—as in military lives that are considered legitimately risked for the state—or, more indirectly, as a problem for social order and post-conflict or post-disaster "recovery."

Though international relations and political science are certainly concerned with the study of human rights violations and mass atrocity crimes, they tend to work and write around death itself, focusing on the causes and prevention of death rather than the ongoing social and political consequences of the dying that is presently occurring, and of the now-missing dead. Himadeep Muppidi observes that international relations frequently translates death into a colonial, racialized "numerical gaze," through the language of statistics, military strategy, and the law, making death less scandalous, particularly with regards to events that happen in the Global South.[19] Death and, particularly, grief are then posited as private, cultural, and social matters that are implicitly or explicitly presented as occurring "elsewhere."[20] Though tragic, death itself does not directly implicate politics or power; violence does—and death is the apolitical aftermath. Consequently, mass death that occurs as a result of seemingly natural events like hurricanes, in which power relations are not obvious, or that has occurred in "powerful" states that are not accustomed to attending to mass death[21]—both of which are conditions that characterize death in the age of COVID-19—is even harder to conceptualize.[22]

Critical international relations scholarship,[23] however, informed by the insights of anthropology and sociology,[24] finds that death is not "merely" a private affair, but a deeply political experience that can threaten or transform social order.[25] State institutions and elites have long played significant roles in managing both the material aspects of death and the collective processes of grief and mourning,[26]

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creating an intersection of the formal political realm with the private and societal practices through which individuals, families, and communities process loss.[27]

Facing Death in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Centering the focus on death in our accounts of the current COVID-19 pandemic, as well as in the analyses of past pandemics and postpandemic futures, therefore offers an opportunity to expand our analytical horizon. Using the *experience* of death and its sociopolitical implications rather than the *causes* of death as the comparative foci, we are able to put the current COVID-19 crisis in dialogue with scholarship pertaining to other experiences of mass death that may not be obviously similar to a viral pandemic.

The first step in this analytical reorientation is understanding the particular nature of pandemic death. We argue that COVID-19 death has been and continues to be marked by *ambiguity*, not only in terms of private losses but also as a collective experience of sociopolitical meaning. While ambiguity does not inherently produce negative effects on the individuals and societies experiencing it, we contend that the ambiguity surrounding the experience of death in the present pandemic nevertheless has the potential to result in broader long-term consequences. On one hand, COVID-19 deaths present the hallmarks of what medical and sociological literatures refer to as "bad" deaths, or "poor quality deaths marked by physical discomfort, difficulty breathing, psychological distress, lack of preparation, being treated without respect or dignity, and the receipt of unwanted medical interventions or being deprived of treatments one desires."[28] The virus causes a highly contagious respiratory disease that results in many patients dying in isolation, particularly as many hospitals and care homes prevent patients from having visitors.[29] Overwhelmed and overcrowded medical and mortuary services have meant that at times bodies have not been treated with the dignity they would normally receive.[30] The physical and material process and conditions of dying from COVID-19 are different from those of other forms of "natural" disease-related deaths. This disruption and difference—even suffering—is partially how deaths become socially and politically relevant. The deaths are (at least potentially) "bad" for the person dying, but also traumatic for their loved ones, community, and, often, the medical personnel attempting to care for them. As a consequence, bad death has a legacy that can extend trauma and social dislocation forward in time.[31]

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Compounding this condition of bad deaths is the ambiguity of information associated with the virus. As a novel virus, the public understanding of the progression and suffering caused by COVID-19 remains opaque. This makes it more difficult, privately and collectively, for the public to read COVID-19 deaths into existing social scripts or, alternatively, to create new rituals to produce "good" deaths. Furthermore, in countries where testing and medical facilities were (or currently are) overwhelmed, it is not always made clear for the families and loved ones of the deceased whether the individual had succumbed to COVID-19 or another similar respiratory illness. For example, in April 2020 when the U.K. was under a nationwide lockdown, eighteen thousand more care home residents died than the previous monthly average, but only eight thousand of these deaths were directly attributed to COVID-19 on death certificates, raising questions about the other ten thousand.[32] For family members of U.K. care home residents who were told that their loved one died of a "horrible chest infection," ambiguity persists about how and why their family member died.[33] This, in turn, raises questions regarding health inequalities, access to care, and, ultimately, accountability.

Moreover, "normal" processes of grieving—through which individuals and collectives make sense of the death—are being dramatically interrupted during the pandemic. "Bad" deaths generally are difficult to grieve; they challenge notions of idealized death that are painless and dignified, preclude family members from having meaningful conversations to say goodbye, and create a sense that the death was unjust and preventable.[34] Grieving processes during the COVID-19 pandemic face particular challenges due to various policies put in place by governments to prevent the further transmission of the virus and to relieve the stress on overburdened medical facilities. In our cross-country comparison of COVID-19 death management policies (covering funereal and mortuary practices and commemorative efforts) among the U.K., Germany, Italy, and South Korea, we found that all four governments had put in place stringent restrictions related to burials and funeral practices that substantially altered prevalent grieving practices in their respective communities, such as mandating cremation in place of burials.[35] Across the globe, scenes emerged that starkly departed from the norm of rituals surrounding death as authorities struggled to respond to rapidly increasing numbers of fatalities and to prevent further transmissions. In New York, drone footage found mass graves being dug on Hart Island;[36] in Guayaquil, Ecuador, bodies were left in homes and by the streets

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for days until city officials could collect them for burial.[37] Bad deaths thus are not only a natural product of the virus but a direct consequence of state intervention; they are political.

Such interruption of grieving processes—particularly by forceful state interventions—creates ambiguity in the social understanding of COVID-19 deaths. While all deaths to some degree potentially disrupt social order by exposing the limitations on the ability of state institutions and political elites to provide security for societal members, this is particularly true for deaths that do not follow widely accepted social scripts. In contrast to the deaths of soldiers, for instance, who die in a "just" or popularly supported war, which may be characterized as acceptable or unavoidable, if tragic, consequences of state actions, COVID-19 is a mass death event that defies existing narratives.[38] Depending on the context, the state is posited as either culpable for COVID-19 fatalities or—perhaps in a manner ineffably worse—powerless or irrelevant in the face of the pandemic. COVID-19 not only exposes our interdependent vulnerabilities to transnational disease but also threatens to reveal the political fiction that is the modern state's ability to produce security.[39] Ambiguous deaths thus have a long tail in terms of not only trauma, as noted earlier, but also the potential for both unacknowledged or unrecognized trauma to unsettle the social order and conventional mode of political authority.

Focusing on the ambiguous nature of death thus allows us to cast the comparative net wider than focusing on the cause of death alone. For example, the experience of enforced disappearances—broadly defined as a state's refusal to acknowledge the occurrence of arrest, detention, abduction, or sometimes extrajudicial killings by state agents or concealment of the fate of the victims[40]—produces similar experiences of traumatic ambiguity. The ability of families and societies to grieve and understand the loss of life is often forestalled by the explicit efforts of powerful state institutions to conceal, underplay, and obfuscate both the true fates of the victims and the role state agents have played in them.[41] Human rights and transitional justice scholarship has understood this ambiguity as a form of continuous harm that goes beyond the individual experience of trauma.[42] This understanding has promoted the recognition of victims' right to truth as distinct from the need for accountability or financial reparations following mass death due to human rights violations.[43]

Political mobilization—such as that of the famous Argentinian group Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), who held a vigil to demand information on their missing and disappeared adult

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children—is thus a response to oppression (and denialism) in the formal political sphere as well as the grief of ambiguous death.[44] This suggests that moves to explicitly minimize or deny the COVID-19 pandemic, as seen in the United States and Brazil,[45] or policies that fail to effectively and transparently communicate, such as those in the United Kingdom,[46] are not only forms of harm but are likely to compound grief through a failure of recognition. From this, it is reasonable to expect that the politics of COVID-19 deaths will soon follow a similar trajectory, involving countermobilization by families and loved ones of decedents who contest broader state narratives of inevitable deaths and dramatic recoveries. In June 2020, for instance, Noi Denunceremo (We Will Denounce You), a group of COVID-19 victims' relatives, filed fifty legal complaints against various Italian political officials to seek justice, answers, and accountability for their loved ones' deaths.[47] Given the transnational nature of the pandemic, it is plausible to expect this mobilization to cross state boundaries and even take on an explicitly global character. By *not* conceptualizing the COVID-19 pandemic as a mass death event, we risk missing the emergence of new forms of political consciousness, organization, and belonging.

Conclusion

Centering the focus on the experience of death and grief when theorizing the politics of the COVID-19 pandemic thus is an exercise of analytic expansion, drawing parallels from a wide array of mass death events—including experiences of similarly ambiguous deaths that have resulted from phenomena more conventionally understood as political, such as mass human rights violations, armed conflicts, and state violence. This analytical move raises areas of further inquiry, such as how public narratives of death are formed, what kinds of state intervention may have exacerbated the condition of "bad" deaths and how they are contested, how the politics of memorialization manifests in the context of COVID-19, and how particular forms of political mobilizations arise as societies grapple with the ambiguous meanings of pandemic deaths.[48]

Most past pandemics—with the possible exception(s) of the bubonic plagues of the fourteenth century[49] and occasionally the mass deaths of indigenous peoples due to diseases introduced by European colonizers[50]—have been disregarded, viewed as politically insignificant events specifically because they were not recognized as mass death events. The stakes of this elision underscore the urgency of

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this new research agenda. The influenza pandemic of 1918–1919 (the so-called Spanish flu) had been largely forgotten in both popular discourse and academic scholarship, despite the unsurprising upswing in contemporary interest. Some scholars, such as Dan Drezner, point toward this collective amnesia as evidence of its insignificance as a political event.[51] As Jeremy Youde suggests, however, the "forgetting" of the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic is more likely the result of a contemporaneous inability to understand it as a mass death event. The magnitude of the loss of life due to influenza was obscured by the dominating context of World War I and the poor quality of information on the scale and causes of death both domestically and transnationally.[52] Historians also suggest that since many influenza victims were young, working-class, women, and/or marginalized people lacking in political power and social status, their deaths were considered insufficiently socially visible to compel commemoration.[53] And yet, the "absent bodies" of 1918–1919 left profound societal and political changes in their wake —giving rise to other similar results abroad; for example, as Susan Kingsley Kent suggests, a more parochial and nativist identity of "Englishness" in the United Kingdom;[54] or, as Laura Spinney argues, the strengthening of the independence movement in India and the apartheid system in South Africa.[55] The inability to understand the 1918–1919 influenza epidemic as a mass death event, both then and now, represents a missed opportunity to understand its full impact.

An even more fundamental normative payoff comes from a second avenue of inquiry: Centering our focus on the experience of mass death in our theorization allows us to directly question the basic assumptions of politics more generally. What does death reveal about the politics of how we value life? Michael Barnett, for example, explicitly argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how neoliberal market logics shape our ethical decisions surrounding whose lives are valued and whose deaths are considered necessary sacrifices for progress.[56] Focusing on the nature of ambiguous death by COVID-19 draws attention to the political and normative *discomfort* caused by facing the trade-offs implicit in our current day-to-day politics and the *refusal* to accept its reasoning: economy vs. health; state security vs. individual wellbeing; international state system stability vs. transnational mobilization and transformation.

We hear echoes of these questions in many of the scholarly discussions on COVID-19 that have taken place thus far. There are concerns that the failure of governments to manage the material and affective aspects of the pandemic may accelerate fascist or populist movements; that it may unsettle and expose the

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neoliberal assumptions of trade-offs in politics and economics;[57] and that it may intensify nationalism, xenophobia, and democratic backsliding.[58] All of these concerns highlight the ways COVID-19 is challenging and transforming our world and worldview(s).[59] Analyzing these changes through the narrow lens of state-centric politics and multifaceted mitigation in the pursuit of an immediate return to something called normal—ignoring the multiplicity of injustices, inequities, and inequalities upon which "normal" life is founded and that COVID-19 magnifies—ultimately limits our collective imaginative ability to consider the transformative moment brought about by the pandemic. There is no guarantee that the post–COVID-19 world will be necessarily more ethical or laudable than the present one. Thinking clearly and carefully about the specific experience of mass death brought on by COVID-19, however, seems to be a prerequisite to imagining a more ethically desirable future after the pandemic.

NOTES

[1] This number reflects statistics from the time of this essay's production in early February 2021. "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," World Health Organization, accessed February 7, 2021, covid19.who.int.

[2] "Tracking Covid-19 Excess Deaths across Countries," *Economist*, July 15, 2020, www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/07/15/tracking-covid-19-excess-deaths-across-countries.

[3] See, for instance, Aisha Fofana Ibrahim, "Connecting Testimony, Trauma, and Memory: The Sierra Leone Experience," *Pacific Coast Philology* 44, no. 2 (2009), pp. 249–71; Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis, "Ecological Grief as a Mental Health Response to Climate Change-Related Loss," *Nature Climate Change* 8, no. 4 (April 2018), pp. 275–81; and "Extraction, Expropriation, Erasure? Knowledge Production in International Relations," special issue, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* (forthcoming; based on 2019 Annual Conference).

[4] Stewart M. Patrick, "Could the Coronavirus Pandemic Revive International Cooperation?," *World Politics Review*, June 29, 2020, www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28875/could-the-coronavirus-pandemic-revive-international-cooperation.

[5] Katharine M. Millar, Yuna Han, Martin Bayly, Katharina Kuhn, and Irene Morlino, *Confronting the COVID-19 Pandemic: Grief, Loss, and Social Order* (Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2020), eprints.lse.ac.uk/106739/1/Confronting_the_covid_19_pandemic_grief_loss_and_social_order.pdf.

[6] James Crabtree, Robert D. Kaplan, Robert Muggah, Kumi Naidoo, Shannon K. O'Neil, Adam Posen, Kenneth Roth, Bruce Schneier, Stephen M. Walt, and Alexandra Wrage, "The Future of the State," *Foreign Policy* 237 (Summer 2020), pp. 7–11.

[7] David Stasavage, "Democracy, Autocracy, and Emergency Threats: Lessons for COVID-19 from the Last Thousand Years," supplemental issue, *International Organization* 74, no. S1 (December 2020), pp. E1–E17, www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/democracy-autocracy-and-emergency-threats-lessons-for-covid19-from-the-last-thousand-years/C4A106463606B-E4C0310E56A3A15F5B7; and Sven Biscop, *Coronavirus and Power: The Impact on International Politics*, Security Policy Brief No. 126 (Egmont Institute, March 2020), www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2020/03/SPB126-sven-corona-260320.pdf?type=pdf.

[8] Daniel W. Drezner, "The Song Remains the Same: International Relations after COVID-19" supplemental issue, *International Organization* 74, no. S1 (December 2020), pp. E18–E35, www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/song-remains-the-same-international-relations-after-covid19/C0FAED193AEBF0B09C5ECA551D174525; Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "Europe's Pandemic Politics: How the Virus Has Changed the Public's Worldview," European Council on Foreign Relations (policy brief, June 24, 2020), www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview; Richard Haass, "The Pandemic Will

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Accelerate History Rather than Reshape It: Not Every Crisis Is a Turning Point," *Foreign Affairs*, April 7, 2020, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-07/pandemic-will-accelerate-history-rather-reshape-it; Kevin Rudd, "The Coming Post-COVID Anarchy: The Pandemic Bodes Ill for Both American and Chinese Power—and for the Global Order," *Foreign Affairs*, May 6, 2020, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-05-06/coming-post-covid-anarchy; and Bheki Richard Mngomezulu, "The Politics of the Coronavirus and Its Impact on International Relations," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 14, no. 3 (July–September 2020), pp. 116–25.

[9] Drezner, "The Song Remains the Same."

[10] This is not novel; Catherine Boone and Jake Batsell found in the early 2000s that centering the focus on a disease—even a deadly one such as AIDS that had been on the agenda of the UN Security Council and numerous other international organizations—in political analysis was considered to be "too private, too biological, too microlevel and sociological, too behavioral and too cultural . . ." See Catherine Boone and Jake Batsell, "Politics and AIDS in Africa: Research Agendas in Political Science and International Relations," *Africa Today* 48, no. 2 (June 2001), pp. 3–33, at p. 4.

[11] Philippe Legrain, "Will the Coronavirus Kill Globalization?," *Foreign Policy* 236 (Spring 2020), pp. 23–25.

[12] W. Kip Viscusi, "What Is a Life Worth? COVID-19 and the Economic Value of Protecting Health," *Foreign Affairs*, June 17, 2020, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-17/what-life-worth.

[13] Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Surveillance, Security, and Liberal Democracy in a Post-COVID World," supplemental issue, *International Organization* 74, no. S1 (December 2020), pp. E169–E190, www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/surveillance-security-and-liberal-democracy-in-the-postcovid-world/15CDF2C062ADCAAD6B5D224630F62B1D; and Robert D. Kaplan, in "The Future of the State" *Foreign Policy* 237 (Summer 2020).

[14] Kim Yi Dionne and Fulya Felicity Turkmen, "The Politics of Pandemic Othering: Putting COVID-19 in Global and Historical Context," supplemental issue, *International Organization* 74, no. S1 (December 2020), pp. E213–E230, www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/politics-of-pandemic-othering-putting-covid19-in-global-and-historical-context/5435248FC7AEF1468E4-A8946FA57A92A.

[15] Michael R. Kenwick and Beth A. Simmons, "Pandemic Response as Border Politics," supplemental issue, *International Organization* 74, no. S1 (December 2020), pp. E36–E58, www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/pandemic-response-as-border-politics/0A9FC8629BF379D0CFFADD0661547DA3.

[16] Sara E. Davies and Clare Wenham, "Why the COVID-19 Response Needs International Relations," *International Affairs* 96, no. 5 (September 2020), pp. 1227–51.

[17] Jef Huysmans, "Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier," *European Journal of International Relations* 4, no. 2 (June 1, 1998), pp. 226–55.

[18] Jessica Auchter, "Paying Attention to Dead Bodies: The Future of Security Studies?," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1, no. 1 (February 2016), pp. 36–50; see also Charlotte Heath-Kelly, *Death and Security: Memory and Mortality at the Bombsite* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

[19] Himadeep Muppidi, *The Colonial Signs of International Relations* (London: Hurst, 2012).

[20] For an analogous argument regarding state failure, see Branwen Gruffydd Jones, "'Good Governance' and 'State Failure': Genealogies of Imperial Discourse," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (March 2013), pp. 49–70.

[21] This is not to say that powerful states do not experience events that cause a large number of fatalities. Even in powerful states, there have been and continues to be structural injustices, oppressive policies, and various forms of internal tensions that result in a large number of people dying, particularly with regard to disempowered or marginalized groups. However, these occurrences are rarely registered explicitly in the public discourse as a mass death event, as, for example, experiences of wars are.

[22] Muppidi, *The Colonial Signs of International Relations*, pp. 43–48 and 149–56; and Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

[23] Katharine Millar, "Gendered Representations of Soldier Deaths in the USA," in Rachel Woodward and Claire Duncanson, eds., *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 543–59; and Maja Zehfuss, "Hierarchies of Grief and the Possibility of War: Remembering UK Fatalities in Iraq," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38, no. 2 (December 1, 2009), pp. 419–40.

[24] John W. Riley Jr., "Dying and the Meanings of Death: Sociological Inquiries," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983), pp. 191–216.

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[25] Please note also that the social and political effects of death are not uniform nor universal. The trauma of uncertainty around death that drives much of the international relations and political science thinking about security politics, for instance, is relatively Western-centric. Death is disruptive and upsetting in all societies, but the specific cosmologies through which it is understood and experienced are crucial to empirically comprehending its political implications and social consequences.

[26] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: New York: Verso Books, 2006).

[27] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1915).

[28] Alicia Krikorian, Camilo Maldonando, and Tania Pastrana, "Patient's Perspectives on the Notion of a Good Death: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 59, no. 1 (January 2020), pp. 152–64.

[29] Deborah Carr, Kathrin Boerner, and Sara Moorman, "Bereavement in the Time of Coronavirus: Unprecedented Challenges Demand Novel Interventions," *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* 32, no. 4–5 (2020), p. 426.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[32] Alison Holt and Ben Butcher, "Coronavirus Deaths: How Big is the Epidemic in Care Homes?," BBC News, May 15, 2020, www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52284281.

[33] Lynsey Addario, "Families of the Dead in the UK Still Wonder: Was It COVID-19?," *National Geographic*, last updated November 5, 2020, www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/science-and-technology/2020/07/families-of-the-dead-in-the-uk-still-wonder-was-it-covid-19.

[34] Carr et al., "Bereavement in the Time of Coronavirus," p. 427.

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[36] "Coronavirus: New York Ramps Up Mass Burials amid Outbreak," BBC News, April 10, 2020, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52241221.

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Abstract: As of the first week of February 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in over two million people dead across the globe. This essay argues that in order to fully understand the politics arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to focus on the individual and collective experiences of death, loss, and grief. While the emerging scholarly discourse on the pandemic, particularly in political science and international relations, typically considers death only in terms of its effects on formal state-level politics and as a policy objective for mitigation, we argue that focusing on the particularities of the experience of death resulting from COVID-19 can help us fully understand the ways in which the pandemic is reordering our worlds. Examining the ambiguous sociopolitical meaning of death by COVID-19 can provide broader analytical comparisons with other mass death events. Ultimately, the essay argues that centering the impact of the pandemic on the experience of death and loss directly poses the question of how politics should value human lives in the post-pandemic world, helping us better formulate the normative questions necessary for a more ethical future.

Keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, death, grief, trauma, mortality, transitional justice, collective memory, commemoration

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