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An Cumann Tíreolaíochta na hÉireann

## Editorial: Geography and the Covid-19 Crisis in Ireland

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In the few short months since the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world had paid more daily attention to maps, charts, rates and locations than ever before; the function and value of a wider geographical imagination, research and education has never been more apparent. Geography and its concerns with place, locations, networks, mobilities and impacts are central to critical reporting on the management, analysis and potential future impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the leading journal for geographers it would be remiss for *Irish Geography* not to identify and promote the different ways in which geographers, both in Ireland and globally, inform, shape and reflect on the current global pandemic. For contemporary geographers, understanding and tackling spatial inequality is effectively a mission statement. In the current crisis, a relational geographical understanding of how we tackle inequalities and how relations; social, spatial and political, work themselves unequally in and between places, are central. In this short editorial, I focus on several sub-themes; medical/health, urban, social & cultural, online and environmental geographies to suggest ways in which ongoing and future work by geographers will matter. A short analytical report on publicly available spatial data has already been made available<sup>1</sup>; a longer piece with invited first wave responses (under the 'Contemporary Critical Geographies' banner) is planned for the next issue of this journal.

My own subject specialism is *medical/health geography*. As central concerns of breaking news include epidemiology, disease diffusion and health care planning, the daily bulletins from both the HSE<sup>2</sup> and the global mapping of Johns Hopkins dashboard<sup>3</sup> represent updated geographies of mortality and morbidity from the pandemic that help medics, politicians and the public make sense of its spread. They also record daily changes in the number of deaths and new cases and evidence on comparative and absolute rates both within and between countries. Irish geographers are working closely with central government in developing these data dashboards, using geospatial data visualised for public audiences within online GIS platforms.<sup>4</sup> Other innovative mapping used the data from RIP.ie as a marker of the spatial distribution of excess mortality.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the daily reporting reflects geographical research on health care planning, with a particular focus on spatial dimensions

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of accessibility and utilisation; monitoring closely ICU bed availability, projected demand and the modelling of supply to meet that demand. Finally, a beneficial side-effect of the pandemic has been to focus on the importance of green and blue spaces as health-enabling resources for citizens within their new 2k buffer zones; leading to a greater awareness of the importance and value of nearby nature and trees for health and wellbeing as well as climate change.<sup>6</sup> Research that shows the distribution of health-enabling resources as spatially unjust is important; tracking the lingering effects and outcomes on physical and mental health over time will be as crucial.

The pandemic is having a profound effect on *urban geographical research*. With visible impacts on levels of traffic and commuting patterns, cities have become more silent and desolate; the impacts are both mixed and unequally distributed. From a positive side the levels of car traffic have been substantially reduced with less workplaces open. The crucial corollary is that more workplaces are shut, leading to a massive spike in urban unemployment and a disproportionate effect on lower social classes and precarious workers; and on the parts of the city in which those populations live. This extends to the housing mix in cities, with marked contrasts in the experience of the virus between inner-city apartment and leafy suburban dwellers. The roles of gardens, allotments, public parks, playgrounds, trees and sports facilities as community assets are made ever clearer; ongoing EPA-funded research on Mapping Green Dublin uncovers the ways in people use and work in inner urban settings within our new spatial constraints.<sup>7</sup> As another dimension, the effect of the pandemic on critical debates on housing and homelessness are clear. Positive examples include rent freezes and reductions and a potential significant increase in the availability of long-term rental housing.<sup>8</sup> Other future research may explore a collapse in the ways in which global capital and the 'AirBnB effect' have shaped affordability in profoundly unequal ways.<sup>9</sup>

The pandemic focuses attention also on the wide-ranging scope and potential of *social and cultural geographies*. There is a politics underpinning both the treatment of the disease as well as how its impacts are managed. Many jurisdictions are struggling with balancing between science and economics, with important and hard decisions needing to be made around the employment, education, welfare and children's and families geographies. The spatial impacts of those decisions made during the outbreak will only really emerge years down the line. The immediate response to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as temporary payments and furloughs, have felt both humane and necessary. Yet a return to anything like full employment seems unlikely in the short-term; with a second-wave of austerity around the corner and the unmasking of the 'gig' economy as a meaningful platform on which to rebuild. Equally, the hard choices involved in choosing health over economy, currently accepted by the bulk of the population, will emerge in complex and uncertain ways over the next decade. What is immediately clear is a spatial justice effect; with differential and more negative impacts on certain groups in society, primarily in marginalised neighbourhoods. From prisons and direct provisions centres to people with disabilities and chronic conditions, that vulnerability and exposure is linked directly to where and how people live.

*Geographies of care* have been central to a strong societal response with the sterling work of essential health workers and others required to keep the country going, evident and

laudable. It has also emerged in shifting experiences of care at familial levels, as children get to spend more time at home with parents and education has also moved into domestic spaces. Again the twin demands of home care and work remain problematic and have gendered effects; the pressure of enforced closeness has seen a rise in domestic abuse and mental health referrals. The difficulties of combining work and home schooling are evident as well. The specific and lethal impact of the virus on care settings, especially nursing and other care homes has been significant. It brings into stark relief not just the negligent attention to what are spaces of intense vulnerability. More importantly it flags up serious structural problems and imbalances in how Ireland manages its inter-connected health and social care systems; the former immediately and impressively ramped up to manage treatment and cure; the latter unnoticed and neglected until later in the outbreak.

For emergent researchers on *online geographies*, the accelerated shift from the real world life to an online one raises a wide range of questions for cultural geographers around new digital communities and economies, social media, the role of technology and the digital divide. While online visual communication apps have kept families and friends together remotely, they have further blurred lines between work and home. A large proportion of the population, including older people and students at all levels, are not uniformly connected in the same way and geographers are well placed to record those differential experiences across actual and virtual space. Finally, the collapse of access to cultural outlets and sites of entertainment has led to the development of new spaces of creativity and artistic production; though many are looking forward to experiencing again the shared affective and embodied power of a live gig, play or film as well as the presence of a paying audience.

As a last example, the concerns of *environmental geographies* are emerging in interesting ways during the pandemic, many surprisingly positive. All around us we can hear the sound of an active and suddenly more audible nature. Birds are not necessarily singing louder, there's just less competition; but an enhanced attentiveness to the natural environment around us is a beneficial outcome. Likewise, reduced emissions at both a local and global level are contributing to tackling climate change. Immediate impacts are visible on terrestrial and air traffic, industrial and food production; visible literally in remotely sensed satellite images and big data on traffic noise.<sup>10</sup> Improvements in biodiversity and other indicators of enhanced non-human geographies are also beginning to emerge. Research on food geographies suggest a reduction in the purchasing of pre-prepared foods and more home cooking and food preparation leading to better diets; the downside being more consumption of food and alcohol at home. Other ongoing research is exploring food sharing and communal production.<sup>11</sup> While access to the environment more broadly has been considerably reduced, it does feel like the planet has a chance to breathe more easily; ironic when set against a disease that directly affects human respiratory response.

Geographers have many tools, both quantitative and qualitative, to measure and critically assess the wider social, economic and environmental impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. They are well placed to set agendas for a future in which meaningful transformation can take place after the pandemic ends. While the impacts are clearly differential, there are challenging opportunities for critical geographers to assess those impacts. Given the role

of a good critical geographer is to ask questions and challenge assumptions, there is a space to look closely at the current structural underpinnings of society and consider new normals. Examples include considering new understandings of liveability in Covid-19 times<sup>12</sup>, as well as enhanced considerations on how we manage data privacy, surveillance and social benefits.<sup>13</sup> Who might have predicted the temporary subsumption of the private hospital sector into the public health response? While the specifics of how it is being funded and staffed are complex and uncertain, it flags up more clearly than ever arguments for Sláintecare and a single-tier health care system. A rise in and preference for home work will have mixed effects. It will reduce travel costs and commuting pressures, but will significantly affect ancillary employment chains and reshape work/life balance. This editorial has flagged up ways in which Irish geographers will contribute to a renewed society once the worst of the pandemic is over. Whichever way we turn, geography has never felt as relevant and important as it does now in its capacity to shape policy post-Covid. It is up to the Irish geographical community, in this and other journals, to demonstrate that as clearly and as widely as we can over the coming months and years.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.05.13.20101089>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/casesinireland/>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://geohive.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/29dc1fec79164c179d18d8e53df82e96>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0505/1136496-death-notices-ireland-coronavirus/>
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.rte.ie/radio/radioplayer/html5/#/radio1/21768274>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://mappinggreendublin.com/>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/rents-fell-2-in-april-as-number-of-homes-to-let-rose-sharply-says-daft-ie-1.4250566>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/travel/airbnb-bubble-bursts-during-coronavirus-1.4209742>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/benign-impact-of-covid-19-on-air-quality-and-carbon-emissions-1.4213930>
- <sup>11</sup> <https://sharecity.ie/food-sharing-in-the-future-what-has-the-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-shown-us-so-far/?cookie-state-change=1590070598811>
- <sup>12</sup> <https://irelandafternama.wordpress.com/2020/05/08/a-case-for-critical-geography-in-covidtimes-spatialities-liveability-and-new-ordinaries/>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://mooreinstitute.ie/2020/04/24/video-of-the-covid-19-response-webinar-data-ethics-and-the-covid-19-crisis/>