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Thesis II

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COVID-19 and Complacency

The pandemic that is currently tightening its grip on the U.S. has become an issue in a lot of different ways. It is finding itself, not only in the physical world, but in the world of politics, economics, and societal structures. It cannot be mentioned without recognizing that it is more than just a virus. COVID-19 has, in a way, brought a lot of the U.S. 's own structures to its knees. It has shown us our fragile systems and how separated workers and the elite truly are. It has shown us a lot of truth through the cracks it's created.

My thesis directly reflects on the problems that are being exposed during this pandemic. I use the power of fiction and dialogue in order to dive deeper into the manifestations of willful ignorance, self-deception, and complacency. It's important to understand how day-to-day conversations can expose a lot of societal problems that often go overlooked. I touch on topics such as the immigration crisis, the housing crisis, domestic violence, ritualism, and apathy. Now, I think it is the perfect time to apply the ideas I've portrayed in my piece to the crisis that is taking over all of our lives.

Let's turn to the acts of complacency that have taken place in the U.S. over the past few months. Complacency is defined as "an instance of usually unaware or uninformed

self-satisfaction”¹. In terms of the pandemic, this can be applied to a few things; namely the action perpetuated and consequences endured by our working class, financial elite, and government.

Let’s start with average people. Average citizens and the working-class community are being hit the hardest compared to everyone else in the country. These are the people that can’t afford to call out of work, are the last to get tested², have to forgo rent and mortgage payments, and are forced to rely on the government for aid. The service industry, specifically, is one area where people are hit with job loss, are at risk because of constant contact with others, have lack of healthcare, and get no hazard pay if they do work. Millions of Americans were already living paycheck to paycheck before the pandemic. According to a study done by NORC at the University of Chicago, 31% of workers would have to dip into their savings if they missed a single paycheck³. The working-class is put into a position that forces them into something I’d like to call a “non-choice”. I’d describe it as a set of choices given that are virtually the same. As a worker you can either choose to continue to work and put your health at risk for minimum wage in order to put food on the table, or you can choose to stay at home and try to figure out how to put food on the table with no money. Ultimately, both of these decisions will have negative outcomes that will force the individual to choose something that’s just as terrible as the next option.

This is not to say that these people are completely faultless when it comes to the spread of COVID-19 and its effects. One way the average person can become complacent in a lot of the

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/complacency>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/coronavirus-testing-elite.html>

³

issues that are happening is by simply going out for non-work or essential needs. It is evident that some people are *still* continuing to travel for these reasons, including visiting friends and loved ones outside of their quarantine circles. By exposing themselves to others, they are putting themselves and the rest of the world at risk by potentially spreading the virus. For someone to make the decision to go out for recreational purposes, there must be one of two things at play: *self-deception* or *willful ignorance*. I consider both of these concepts indicative of a greater threat: complacency in a time of global crisis. Mark Alicke explains in his article titled “Willful ignorance and Self-Deception”⁴ the difference between the two. He describes *willful ignorance* as something that happens when someone realizes that their beliefs are probably false, or when someone refuses to confront information that would falsify their beliefs. He then goes on to describe *self-deception* as something that happens when someone believes in false things with utter conviction. It is vital to understand the meaning behind these concepts in order to understand the different ways greater societal complacency can manifest as a result of the decisions of an average person. There are people-like these guys that partied in Florida over spring break⁵-that choose to ignore the fact that they are much more susceptible to the virus when they go out. These are the people that understand the virus and what it is, but simply disregard the weight of the situation in order to enjoy activities with others. On the other side of this, there are people who completely deny the seriousness of the situation and disagree with lockdowns; for example, those that protest the state and government’s decisions to put the country on lockdown and close non-essential businesses. These people are arguing that the sanctions are a violation of their freedom. This would be considered a form of self-deception,

⁴ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/why-we-blame/201709/willful-ignorance-and-self-deception>

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/03/19/coronavirus-spring-break-party/>

where they truly believe that the virus isn't a good enough reason to quarantine and close public business.

Now, when it comes to talking about complacency in regards to the financial elite and the government, they sort of go hand-in-hand. This is because the financial elite and large corporations have huge influences on legislation in our country.

Right now, the government has had plenty of opportunities to combat this problem and prevent the amount of deaths caused by lack of action.

So far, federal and state authorities have made decisions that have caused people to continue to suffer in the name of saving the economy, instead of supporting public health; which seems to satisfy the desires of the financial elite.

I'm going to use the CARES Act (AKA stimulus bill) as an example. The government gave huge loans to large corporations and one-time cash payments to individuals. It is important to note that not everyone in need is eligible for the money. If they are eligible and they do receive the highest possible amount (\$1,200 for people making under \$75,000), it is still barely enough to truly help a suffering individual.

To give you some perspective, the average American in 2019 made about \$48,672 per year⁶. \$1,200 is only 2% of the average salary.

This would likely cover a month or two of expenses for people with the *cheapest* rent.

I'd also like to mention that public services, like hospitals and food banks, *collectively* received about a third of what large corporations received. The government has chosen to try and mend

⁶ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/wkyeng.pdf>

the holes made in the economy and put cash into the hands of CEOs instead of giving aid to hospitals and its own citizens.

The U.S. chose to take money away from emergency funding instead of properly preparing for a crisis of this magnitude.

The U.S. still chooses to keep people working without PPE or hazard pay.

Other countries seem to be doing a much better job.

Canada has passed a bill that gives their citizens affected by the virus in some way \$2,000 a month for up to 4 months⁷; including essential workers.

Germany is paying workers up to $\frac{2}{3}$ of their normal salary, lowered hours, and guaranteed job security⁸.

France is covering up to 84% of workers' salary.

Italy has banned companies from laying off their workers for 90 days.

The U.S. is completely capable of following the path that every other first-world country chose.

And because of that, the state and federal government is complacent in the prolonging of the pandemic and the prolonging of the country's suffering. They satisfied the wants of the financial elite instead of the needs of their own people.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_coronavirus_pandemic_in_Canada#Government_response

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/how-europe-manages-to-keep-a-lid-on-coronavirus-unemployment-while-it-spikes-in-the-us/2020/04/11/29b23c90-7b4f-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html

So what can we do while our government continues to display its priorities and fail us as a people? I think we need to recognize that as individuals, we have a lot more power than we realize. We are fully capable of making the situation worse, and we are also fully capable of changing the way our government is making decisions; but just as we are responsible for quarantining at home to make sure our families and friends can't get sick: the financial elite and the government, I believe, are responsible for supporting the country that runs on the backs of the working-class.

The themes I've written about in my thesis are very real, very close to home, very rampant, and yield very dangerous consequences.

It's time that our country is held responsible and that we take a stand together, as working people.

Play a part in helping change what is fundamentally flawed in our country by voting, signing petitions, sending complaints, protesting (with social distancing, of course), even tweeting!

Anything to get your voice heard because as you know, every single person plays a role whether they choose to do something or not.