

COVID-19 and The International Political Economy of Everyday Life: An Introduction to the Special Section

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a world-historical event whose impact stretches far beyond the realm of health. From the rapid spread of the virus around the world to the new phenomenon of 'lockdown', a range of improvised (and often chaotic) attempts by states and international organisations to manage the pandemic included – inter alia – closing borders and shops, furloughing workers, online learning and encouraging the rise and rise of internet commerce and home delivery. Indeed, the mix of governmental failures and record profits for some 'Big Tech' and pharmaceutical corporations has led many to describe COVID-19 as a specifically 'neoliberal disease', revealing the many limitations and pathologies of the current world order shaped by neoliberal capitalism (Sparke and Williams, 2022). In this sense, the field of International Political Economy (IPE) offers a useful framework through which to understand these limitations and pathologies. Focused on the relationship between economic and political power, and on the question of 'cui bono?' – who benefits? – IPE can help us understand how existing inequalities, injustices and failures of governance came to shape the trajectory of COVID-19 and the range of social and political responses to it.

In critical terms, the failure of apparently well-prepared rich states like the US and the UK to manage the pandemic requires us to look beyond the limitations of particular leaders – important as they may be – to the nature of state capacity under neoliberalism. Decades of austerity and privatisation in the name of balanced budgets left health systems incapable of dealing with even mild outbreaks, lacking key resources like ICU beds, ventilators and nurses. Similarly, the trend towards privatisation and outsourcing in the name of efficiency meant that states lacked the necessary reserves of medicines, tests and masks, while the 'just-in-time' nature of global production chains meant that these were difficult and expensive to source. In this context, governments turned to simple, ad-hoc measures like lockdowns and closed borders in order to buy time for their health systems to get up to scratch. Yet the pathologies of the neoliberal state – from its reliance on private providers to lack of planning capacity – meant that such time was often wasted, and health systems continued to tether on the verge of collapse, extending the pandemic (Chodor and Hameiri, 2023; Jones and Hameiri, 2022).

In social terms, the effects of the pandemic were unequally distributed. While middle-class professionals were able to pivot to working from home (WFH), online shopping and ordering takeaway meals, this was not a universal experience. Indeed, less than half of workers were able to work from home while many continued to work in hospitals and care homes, stacking supermarket shelves, packing online orders or delivering that takeaway food. Yet these 'essential workers' were anything but essential from the perspective of neoliberal capitalism: often precariously employed with no access to leave or sickness benefits, gendered and racialised, with little choice but to continue exposing themselves to the risks of the virus in order to make ends meet (Farris and Bergfeld, 2022; Stevano *et al.*, 2020). As IPE reminds us, this divide was not accidental, but rather the consequence of the stratified nature of neoliberal economies, where skilled middle classes reap all the benefits while a precarious workforce toils away to make these benefits possible. These class inequalities, moreover, intersected with the deeply gendered and racialised divisions – witnessed in the increased burdens of unpaid caring on women in particular, as well as the highly racialised nature of many low-paid jobs. It is perhaps no surprise then that the pandemic coincided with major protests against both racial injustice in the form of Black Lives Matter, and in the case of the UK, gender violence.

Who benefits from global crisis? On some level, the failure of neoliberal governance can also be read as a success for some. During the pandemic, normal politics was suspended in favour of exceptional requirements to support certain sections of the economy, using public funds to subsidise major corporations and furlough large sections of the workforce.

Building from this more hierarchical vision of the global economy, an IPE lens can also draw our attention to the unequal way in which the world is exiting the pandemic. While the rapid production of a vaccine against COVID-19 was impressive, its benefits have not been evenly shared. Instead, the world is characterised by vaccine apartheid, with many developing countries priced out of the purchase of vaccines by rich countries, having little capacity to manufacture their own (Harman *et al.*, 2021). Again, this stems in part from the unequal nature of the global economy, with most developing countries lacking the technology, capital and infrastructure to manufacture the latest biotechnological breakthroughs, which remain monopolised by the Global North. Yet even those that retain such capacity, such as India or South Africa, find themselves blocked from doing so through an intellectual property regime, which protects the interests of Northern pharmaceutical corporations. For all the proclamations of 'we're all in this together', Northern countries united to block and delay attempts to waive vaccine patents in global fora such as the WTO. Thus, much like it does for domestic societies, an IPE lens draws our attention to the unequal power relations that prevail in the global economy, and the corporate interests and institutions that sustain this inequality, even at the cost of everyday lives and livelihoods.

IPE and everyday life

In this special issue of *Reinvention*, the authors will explore the COVID-19 pandemic using the International Political Economy of Everyday Life (I-PEEL) model. This is a pedagogical approach developed by four of the Introduction's co-authors that encourages students to take an object, subject, or practice from everyday life and 'peel back' the surrounding layers to reveal the political and economic processes that inform it (see Brassett *et al.*, 2022). In terms of the pandemic, we might, for instance, foreground an everyday object like a mask, a human subject like a care worker or a practice like 'WFH' in order to reflect on the social relations that inform their place in the global economy. In this way, the model seeks to put the 'I' into the study of IPE, licensing students to bring their own experiences to bear on what might otherwise seem like distant and abstract topics.

The I-PEEL model has its origins in the growing attention that scholars in IPE have paid to ‘the everyday’ from the 2000s onwards (Elias and Rethel, 2016; Hobson and Seabrooke, 2007). A core proposition of this literature is that research in IPE has tended to focus on elite actors like heads of state, abstract structures like global governance and dramatic moments of high politics like currency crises. As a result, this so-called systemic or regulatory IPE has had less to say about the constitution, legitimation and contestation of economic activity from below. What the everyday has signalled in this context, then, is a commitment to studying the people, practices and places normally considered as politically inconsequential to the global economy. Be it through the agency of non-elites, the role of popular culture, the sites of routine behaviour or the stuff of mass consumption, everyday IPE has sought to show that the economy does not just exist ‘out there’ but is continually remade in – and through – our daily lives.

In the I-PEEL textbook and open-access website (<http://i-peel.org>) this approach to IPE is undertaken through the use of ‘tiles’. These are short pieces of writing organised around a specific aspect of everyday life, each of which provides an entry point into broader themes in the field – be it international trade, debt markets or globalisation. When taken together, the tiles provide a rich picture of the various ways in which people are enmeshed within state and market structures, and how those can be differentially experienced depending on social relations of class, gender, race, nationality and more.

Two key features of the I-PEEL model influence the research process and can be seen in the contributions that follow. First, by starting with an aspect of everyday life rather than a particular theory or debate, a wide range of actors and intellectual approaches are considered. The term ‘actors’ in this sense refers to participants in a process, and everyday IPE has been particularly keen to recognise the diverse groups of people who (re)produce the global economy. This often involves interrogating the intellectual boundary separating the economic sphere from the non-economic sphere, which has tended to include certain subjects such as ‘consumers’ and ‘financiers’ as appropriate for IPE analysis but excluded others such as ‘parents’ and ‘migrants’ on the presumption that these roles are largely irrelevant to the creation and distribution of wealth. It also invites authors to take an interdisciplinary approach to IPE, mobilising insights from different scholarly fields such as International Relations and Sociology in the discussion.

Second, thinking about everyday life and its productive tension of conformity and contravention encourages ethical self-reflection. This recognises the complex and frequently compromised roles that we as individuals play in the economy, presenting us with normative questions about whether we ought to conduct ourselves differently or demand political alternatives. Adopting a position that sees economic and political outcomes not as natural but socially constructed in – and through – everyday life compels us to consider how those outcomes might be changed.

I-PEEL as a global groupwork project

Putting the I-PEEL model into operation has been the focus of a series of meetings and workshops that underpin the collection of student papers in this special issue. The academic impulse for this project was developed by a group of academic educators based at Monash University and the University of Warwick. We sought to bring together students across our institutions to develop collaborative work using the I-PEEL approach to reflect on the politics of COVID-19. Rather than begin with a monological perspective on the relationship between COVID-19 and IPE, we asked students to reflect on how they experienced the pandemic, individually and socially, how their experiences differed across countries and cultural contexts, and whether questions of inequality or injustice could help to understand or frame a critical perspective on the crisis.

Our project involved empowering teams of Warwick and Monash students to work as independent research collaborators exploring the everyday political economy of COVID-19. As well as sharing their personal experiences, we asked them to frame their projects in terms of questions. For example, what does the growth of social media usage during lockdown tell us about the changing experience(s) of consumerism, activism and disinformation? How might temporary job security schemes trialled during the lockdowns inform wider discussions of the growth of the gig economy, futures of work and financialised government practices that contribute to job insecurity (Dickins and Zhang)? In keeping with the I-PEEL model, the aim was to focus attention on the links between apparently mundane and everyday practices and objects of the pandemic – for example, fashion, coffins, TikTok, as well as wider political economies of production, deforestation and platform capitalism.

Cross-institutional student pairs were asked to co-author a 2000-word essay in the I-PEEL style. This involved in-person collaboration but also a series of Zoom meetings to workshop ideas, share experiences – and sometimes get confused about time zones! In practical terms, the project was designed as a non-assessed, non-credit bearing exercise, enabling students to build wider skills and international networks. More specifically, its analytical objectives were threefold:

- To further develop student engagement with the academic field of IPE through an appreciation of how their everyday lives connect them to the global political economy.
- To foster a collaborative approach that builds teamwork and generates important international dialogue around pressing international issues.
- To give our students the experience of a global classroom in which they collaborate across disciplines and national borders through innovative technological platforms.

After an initial ‘meet-and-greet’ session, students were paired with a partner from the other institution and given the opportunity to exchange some ideas. They then had to decide on a topic – an everyday object or practice through which the connections between COVID-19 (and responses to it) and global capitalism could be explored. Students then set about the task of co-producing their essays, with feedback from the academic mentors, and choosing the image(s) accompanying their essays. What follows is not a series of research articles (the scope of these essays is too short), but a series of critical interventions, inspired and guided by the I-PEEL approach.

Outline of contributions

How can a focus on our daily experiences of the pandemic advance our understanding of the global political economy? The collection of essays below begins to provide an answer. Drawing on the I-PEEL approach, they identify everyday objects, subjects and practices related to the pandemic that are not commonly considered in the study of IPE to explore their broader political and economic significance. The individual topics are deliberately diverse, reflecting the multi-layered and multi-faceted impact of the pandemic, and they are animated by experiences from more than ten different countries, highlighting the inevitably global context of contemporary market life. While the range of topics and perspectives is too large to be summarised in this introduction, there are a number of shared concerns across the essays that emerged as key themes.

The first of these themes broadly relates to the political and economic significance of pandemic policies. Here, authors focus on vaccine diplomacy (Chen and Jerome), mask wearing (Bastianelli and Gibson), lockdowns (Urquhard and Williams), digital pandemic solutions (Hoskin and Huang), job security (Dickins and Zhang) and military language in public health discourse (Bindley and Earnshaw; Efstathiou and

Rohleder). Drawing on various theoretical frameworks, they show how these topics speak to broader IPE concerns. For example, the global competition to secure vaccines demonstrated the global hierarchy between states of the Global North and the Global South and the geopolitical rivalry between China and the US (Chen and Jerome); COVID measures and their outcomes/effects were shaped by the cultural, political and economic contexts in different countries, and reinforced inequalities along class, gender, race and age groups (Bastianelli and Gibson; Urquhard and Williams; Hoskin and Huang); how policy-responses to the pandemic were symptomatic of financialised capitalism with their focus on 'stocks instead of jobs' as the over-riding concern (Dickins and Zhang) and how public discourses about Covid prefigured public perceptions about how to react to the crisis, what kinds of policies were needed and how market subjects were encouraged to show moral responsibility (Bindley and Earnshaw; Efstathiou and Rohleder).

The second theme broadly examines the intersections between everyday market life, consumerism and corporate power during the pandemic. Here, authors explore the significance of mobile phones (Chin and Kovac), TikTok (Mohammed and Studeny), coffins (Olaajo and Zhu-Maguire), mental health (Larasati and Zundel) and precarity (Hosking and Yáñez Luque) in the global political economy. They analyse how funeral companies marketed high-quality coffins and caskets made of rainforest wood during the pandemic, spurring the growth of unsustainable business practices in the Solomon Islands where the wood was sourced (Olaajo and Zhu-Maguire); how mobile phones, social media influencers and TikTok assumed a central role during the pandemic boost to the digital economy, reinforcing the power of digital tech companies and the logics and inequalities of the platform economy (Chin and Kovac; Mohammed and Studeny); how mental health was targeted by companies as a potential growth market (Larasati and Zundel) and how the pandemic created an atmosphere of vulnerability among workers now exposed to new levels of precarity (Hosking and Yáñez-Luque).

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