The option that I chose: News article analysis

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Contemporary Context II  
16 May 2023

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a sense of fear and alarm was prevalent in the society confronting the unknown virus. In such times of emergency, people started to form “coronavirus vigilantes,” and particularly in Japan, a type of vigilantism called *jishuku* *keisatsu* (self-restraint police) caused a lot of problems. People with excessive vigilance attacked people who had reportedly violated the pandemic regulation on social media or physically on their properties. Although this problem of vigilantism happened around the world during the pandemic, the one in Japan had many negative impacts on many people in society. Throughout this essay, I mention an article from Japan Times, “Japan’s‘ virus vigilantes’ take on rule-breakers and invaders,” published on May 13, 2020.

A similar sort of watchful system existed during the pandemic in the past; in his fictional writing about the plague pandemic in seventeenth-century England, Defoe mentions government-assigned guards who kept an eye on houses that were shut down because of plague infection. He writes, “A watchman, it seems, had been employed to keep his post at the door of a house which was infected, or said to be infected, and was shut up” (Defoe 8). The watchman system is similar to the COVID-19 pandemic vigilantism in that they both keep an eye on anyone who breaks the regulation to suppress the spread of the virus. However, the vigilantes we experienced in the past few years are much harsher than the past pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic vigilantism is more severe against rule-breakers than the plague pandemic watchman system regarding its scale and intensity. During the plague pandemic in England in the seventeenth century, each shut-up house had watchmen who were responsible for ensuring no one left or came into the infected house. They were employed by the government, and they took turns depending on the time of the day (Defoe 8). There were, at most, one or two watchmen at a time. However, vigilantism during the pandemic is different in scale; the number of people who can join a vigilant activity is almost infinite. This is partly because of social media, where anyone can access anyone’s information. It also allows vigilantes to post any comment anonymously, which resulted in excessively harsh criticism and identification of the personal information of the person who broke the rule. The article from Japan Times includes a case of a woman who traveled from Yamanashi, a prefecture west of Tokyo, to Tokyo even though she had tested positive for COVID-19. People criticized her irresponsible action on social media, such as Twitter, and some people even allegedly identified her personal account and photos, branding her as a “corona-spreading terrorist” (Osaki 2). This vigilantism is more intense than the watchman system during the plague pandemic, and we live in a society where one action might result in thousands of aggressive and criticizing comments.

Now, what is the cause of these excessive reactions of people during the pandemic? It can be argued that it is natural that people desire to protect themselves from the virus and those who might spread the virus by breaking the regulations because it is inherent nature as a creature to keep away from external threats. However, does it explain all the verbal attacks, vandalism, and aggression directed against people who failed to abide by the regulation?

In the article from Japan Times, a social psychology professor who answered the newspaper’s interview says of vigilantes, “They are truly convinced what they are doing is right, and that they’re bringing justice where the police and the law cannot be relied upon” (Osaki 3). In other words, a sense of justice motivated people to fill in the government’s inadequate measures and punish others who did not follow the regulations. This reasoning about people’s excessive vigilantism reminded me of Hobbes’ argument on why humans need governments. In his famous writing *Leviathan*, he wrote that since humans are in the condition of “every man against every man” in the natural state, they need “LEVIATHAN,” which overpowers everyone to maintain peace inside the community (Hobbes 2, 22). In short, according to Hobbes, a human society without the supervision of a government has a constant war where everyone is against everyone. In the case of Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic, what happened is that people appointed themselves as part of this “LEVIATHAN” regime. They formed their own sense of justice in punishing rule-breakers and removing a “genuine threat to society” (Osaki 3). This tendency is propelled by the fact that people can access abundant information online about the virus and effective precautions, and it allows them to form their views on what people should/should not do in times of such crisis as the pandemic. At the end of the day, this phenomenon showed that how the government works to maintain peace is the same as how one individual achieves their internal satisfaction—by overpowering others and preventing others from causing harm to themselves.

In addition, the culture of collectivism and peer pressure in Japanese society helped make people’s vigilance harsh. In Japan, there is an atmosphere that ‘Why can’t you stay at home like everyone else does? Why can’t you follow rules?” (Osaki 3). This unspoken rule is not something the government mandates on citizens but the way of thinking that Japanese people have attained over time since their childhood, being told to act as others do at school or home. This is similar to what Fei wrote in his writing *A Rule of Ritual*, in which he writes, "Rituals are publicly recognized behavioral norms. If one behaves according to the rituals, then one’s behavior is correct and proper” (Fei 96). In the case of Japan during the pandemic, it will be “correct” and aligned with the “ritual” if one stays at home and take necessary precautions as other people do. Fei further writes that “People conform to rituals on their own initiative” (Fei 99). This statement clarifies that rituals are created, applied, and maintained entirely by individuals in society but not by the authorities or states. The “self-restraint police” of Japan was carried out by individuals, who saw the violation of the ritual by those who failed to align with the pandemic regulations and thus became disrespectful to those who abide by the ritual. In Fei’s eyes, it was exactly how rituals work, even in a society that has a government and authorities like Japan.

Although the pandemic revealed and emphasized a negative aspect of humans and society, it is still true that many people followed the rules that the government set to protect people’s lives and cooperated with each other to overcome societal and global difficulties. In the case of Japan, the ‘sense of justice’ and the culture of ‘collectivism and peer pressure’ both helped the nation to go through the pandemic without causing as many infection cases as other countries. Human nature is complex, and it can either become a cause of not being able to deal with problems well and a cause of cooperating with each other to overcome obstacles. It is important to minimize the former and amplify the latter aspect of human nature, particularly at the time of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Works Cited

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