



## **COVID-19 – Affluence and Scarcity**

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One of the first effects COVID-19 produced in this country (and the first to affect me, and probably everybody else, directly) was panic-buying and the scarcity it induced. It started soon after fear of the pandemic hit, but before there were significant infections or even restrictions in Australia. First, it was loo paper. Hundreds of people flooded the supermarkets and bought all that was on the shelf. Soon, toilet paper supply was non-existent in every supermarket in the cities. What supplies did arrive disappeared at an accelerating rate, headed for the checkouts before they were placed on the shelves.



I witnessed it myself: staff unloading 24-packs of toilet paper straight into customers' hands as temporary security guards, hired to keep the peace and prevent fights over this scarce product, held the crowds back.

Other scarcities followed, fuelled perhaps by panicked posts on social media. Flour disappeared from shelves, signalling perhaps that people who had not cooked in twenty years were planning to learn how to bake. Tinned food evaporated, even spam and tinned corned beef that many people had surely not consumed since the great depression, followed by minced meat which was first of the animal proteins, and then the remainder of the other meats.

In the end, scarcity itself and the fear of scarcity were driving panic-buying. People were buying things in the fear that Australia, one of the most affluent countries on Earth, would run out of staples. Whether or not social media started it, social media kept it rolling: photos of empty shelves flooded the net, terrifying people into believing this is the apocalypse. A strange, savage sort of greed joined in, driven by the fear of staples running out, where it was not about having everything but rather about a desire to be the only person who still had enough bog rolls, and wanting to fill the spare room with rare commodities.

Soon, racist accusations flowed from our social media feeds, our mainstream media, and our government. Claims were made that Asian immigrants were buying all the toilet paper and sending it overseas; claims



that were never substantiated. Claims were made that busloads of “Asians” were travelling to small towns to buy all the toilet paper, hand sanitiser and paracetamol; claims that were denied by the supermarkets in those same small towns. As was established by The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/21/are-busloads-of-shoppers-really-stripping-australias-regional-supermarkets-bare>, there were rumours of this occurring but mysteriously no photographic proof even in these days of ubiquitous phone cameras. It never happened. In reality, it was the local people, almost certainly the more affluent local people, who were stripping the shelves. The unsubstantiated rumours were so pervasive that Peter Dutton announced his department is investigating.

Mainstream Australia was panic-buying and hoarding, and looking for someone other than themselves and their own in-group to blame. My social media feed was filled with Boomers blaming Asians, Millennials blaming Boomers, everybody blaming everybody except their own group for the scarcities.

Nobody, however, blamed the poor and the Indigenous and they were right: it was never the poor, nor the Indigenous.

In times of scarcity, there is really only one buffer against hardship, one way a person or family can obtain everything they want: wealth and relative income privilege. In times of scarcity, the wealthy don't suffer as much as the destitute, the wealthy can afford to pay the sort of prices that profiteers charge, and the wealthy are the people who can afford to stock up and hoard. Let us neither forget nor minimise that it is the relatively affluent who can afford to travel from supermarket to supermarket searching for scarce goods; and, it is the relatively affluent who can afford to pay extra when scarcity forces prices up. It is almost certainly the relatively affluent who caused the problem because only the relatively affluent have the disposable income to buy extra, to stock up, to hoard.

That is the main reason, besides observation, for why I am convinced that the people panic-buying and hoarding were the middle-class.

It is the affluent who started a problem they were not inconvenienced by. They have the spare money in their bank accounts and on their credit cards, and have the space to stock up with six months' worth of toilet paper. Nobody was collecting statistics on who was panic-buying but when I witnessed it in the supermarkets, it was everybody with one exception: very few people I saw stocking up appeared poor, but nearly everybody I saw panic-buying appeared middle-class.



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The affluent in Australia are generally non-Indigenous; the Indigenous middle-class is tiny.

Things are worse in remote areas and particularly in Aboriginal communities. Smaller, more remote places have always experienced problems with the logistics of grocery delivery. For some places, food insecurity is so dire that even a small amount of panic-buying can wipe them out. After a single day of panic-buying in the relatively remote community of Barunga in the Northern Territory, the entire stock of toilet paper and food in the community store was wiped out.

As I established in my last essay for Koorie Heritage Trust (COVID and Colonialism), it is the affluent who bear the brunt of the blame for the transmission of this terrible disease and the poor who suffer from it the most. Now, it's clear to see: it is the affluent who were hoarding resources and it is the poor who suffered from it.

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*Claire is a Noongar woman whose family have belonged to the south coast of Western Australia since long before history started being recorded. Born in Perth, Claire has lived most of her life in Victoria, and most of that in and around Melbourne. Claire writes fiction, essays and poetry. Claire has won a Black&Write! Indigenous Writing Fellowship for her novel Terra Nullius.*