

Connections During Coronavirus: From Cuba to Brazil

CLAUDIA FONSECA

It hit us with unexpected suddenness, just as it did most other people. José and I had been taking the public buses all that week of the Medical Anthropology conference in Cuba. We'd chosen to stay in our private hostel, located in a working-class district near the center of Havana instead of going to the convention center's hotel, and the cost of the ten-mile taxi ride out to the congress would have been prohibitive. Hence, three days in a row, we'd allowed ourselves to be packed into a public bus by the pony-tailed matron in uniform posted at the *parada* precisely to shove in the final passengers so that the vehicle's doors could be shut. In retrospect, I'm horrified. What better circumstances for the coronavirus to proliferate? But our last ride was on Thursday, March 12th, and no one in Cuba was yet worried about community dissemination of the virus.

By the following Monday, things had changed drastically. Scared away from our first side trip destination, Trinidad, from where Cuba's first reports of coronavirus were coming in, we'd spent a leisurely weekend in the Vinhales valley enjoying the luxuries of this tourist haven. We'd made the three-hour journey in a shared taxi – a 1952 Chevy with a Hyundai motor – in the company of a Cuban couple and an Italian we'd met at the bus station and who, like us, had been unable to get tickets. The latter assured us – to everyone's relief -- that he'd been living in Madrid for the past few years and, because of the virus outbreak in Italy, had cancelled all plans for a visit home. No one yet realized that Spain, and in fact all Europe, was already in the grips of the pandemic. Vinhales had suspended a number of public festivities (no dancing on the town square, and the only cinema would not allow more than ten clients in at a time),



but still the city was alive with mostly European tourists who went about their recreational activities (generally in groups), showing no obvious signs of distress. And locals still attended their early-morning gymnastics classes in the town park.

The penny dropped, so to speak, when, Monday night, back in Havana, we found out that Peru had closed its borders and our flight back to Brazil (scheduled for Thursday night, via Lima) had been cancelled. After an infinite number of vain attempts to phone the airline (made even more difficult by the only-intermittent internet signal we could pick up at the hotspots on public squares), we decided it was time to take action. Alongside hundreds of other stranded foreigners, five hours in a crowded line at Copa Airlines panned out; we took the only seats left on a next-day flight and made it home to Porto Alegre by Wednesday midnight.

Our last night in Cuba, we ate at our favorite Chinese restaurant. We were their only clients that evening; our other favorite eating joint, where normally you have to wait in line to get a table, was completely empty. Our landlady -- who pays the equivalent of US\$50 a month in taxes for each of the four rooms she rents out -- was talking about shutting down. With our departure, she had no more clients; all reservations had been cancelled. And, even at the park, where Havana's citizens congregate at night to tune into internet, we realized there were no more of those blond, blue-eyed back-packers. As though with a snap of fingers, the tourists had left. The American blockade had already caused great hardship, but the Cubans had been able to hold their own, thanks principally to their well-organized tourist industry. How was this economy now to survive? And how were the city's workers to avoid contamination if they continued to ride those buses?

On March 20th, the day we were originally scheduled to leave, Cuba closed its borders to incoming foreigners. As of March 20, the island nation had registered ten cases of coronavirus (and one death)-- all foreigners -- and still no sign of transmission by locals.

Brazil, where we are now undergoing a self-regulated quarantine of 14 days, is another story. Until just a few days ago, president Bolsonaro's consistent denial of the pandemic's gravity, had convinced a few die-hards that things were being blown out of proportion. Although 18 of his cabinet members tested positive after a recent visit to the United States, the president continued to make public appearances, shaking hands extended by fans in the crowd. His most recent pearl: "After surviving a knife attack [suffered during the presidential campaign], a little flu won't kill me". Repeatedly criticizing the "hysteria" that reigned in the media, he assured the population there was no need to take drastic precautions, and openly frowned upon the "overly hasty" measures decreed by many of the country's state governors. Even after all public universities and most state and municipal schools had suspended classes, and



contradicting orientations from the Ministry of Health, the Minister of Education, in his usual you-tube style, convoked teachers and students of the medical sciences to return to their classrooms, since they might be needed in the near future. Fortunately, Bolsonaro's low popularity appears to be sinking still lower as more and more people ignore his and many of his cabinet members' remarks and, instead, adhere to the Ministry of Health's exhortations to maintain "social isolation".

Many have serious doubts about the ability of the country's under-funded public health system to deal with a pandemic of this dimension. Ever since Bolsonaro expelled thousands of Cuban doctors contracted by the previous Worker's Party government to alleviate the critical shortage of medical personnel in lower-income neighborhoods, public health posts have been routinely understaffed. Aside from the usual worries about the number of doctors, available hospital beds, protective masks, gowns, and ventilators, federal authorities have now admitted they don't have enough kits to test more than the most advanced cases of coronavirus. The first reported death in Rio de Janeiro (March 17) was that of a 63-year-old domestic worker who caught the virus from her employer, recently returned from a trip abroad. The disease was well-advanced by the time the woman was hospitalized, and the results of the laboratory test came only after her death. Her family members have yet to be tested. In other words, whether or not Brazil follows on the heels of Italy and Spain depends, above all, on "social isolation" – which, observers suggest, represents a particular challenge for dwellers of the crowded, working-class neighborhoods. In my own middle-class neighborhood, all but the supermarkets have closed; and, aside from a few dog-walking stragglers, there are practically no pedestrians around. Furthermore, although we've been home three days now, all welcome-home hugs from family and friends have been given through whatsapp and zoom. It would seem that, in our present circumstance, interconnection takes on new meanings and may produce unexpected repercussions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Claudia Fonesca is a Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Social Sciences at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.