Lucas Justino

COVID-19: notes from a town in Southeastern Brazil.

Brazil, Santa Fé do Sul, 26 March – 8 May 2020

Hi, my name is Lucas Justino. I used to live in São Paulo, Brazil, where I'm enrolled in a master's degree program in social anthropology. Since in-person courses have been canceled due to coronavirus pandemic, I decided to spend quarantine in Santa Fé do Sul, a calmer town where I grow up in the countryside. Here, I'm staying at home with my parents, my younger sister and our dog. As a measure of anonymization, I refer to people generally as "neighbors", but since their location have been changed here, it doesn't mean that they live immediately around me.

THURSDAY, MARCH 26, 2020

Santa Fé does not have any confirmed case of Covid-19 until today. Suspected cases totaled 8. City administration decided implement a controlled lockdown: entrances and exits of highways are now being monitored and anyone who wants to get in has to answer interview questions about their own health. It also ordered all non-essential services to shut down – a measure adopted by the state Governor. As my father does food distribution work, he still keeps riding around, so I like to think of him as a kind of interlocutor (despite fearing immensely for his health). According to him, the city chamber of commerce has had a meeting. And this because a total lack of cohesion in ideas about how to counter the virus: while local administration has been recommending social distancing, President Bolsonaro, two days ago, encouraged Brazilian people to get back to work. Here, they say different types of store might be reopening within one week. Meanwhile, 862 cases have been confirmed all over São Paulo state. The once missing car-noise is now each day

returning to normal. The virus's potential spread are being underestimated.

FRIDAY, MARCH 27, 2020

Today I was awake at half past eight, but It took me more than twenty minutes to get up. Every morning it is the shortest possible time I spend in bed reading the latest news about the pandemic. I really wanted to cry knowing three state governors' plan of resume economic activity in their respective states next week.

After breakfast, my mother started to deep-clean our house with a combination of water, soap and alcohol solution. I think that at the end of it the virus and any other living being will not be able to remain here. Before that, she went quickly to our neighbor's house to feed her dog. This retired lady who lives near us has left city to spend a time at her daughter's ranch. I've never known what she worked with previously her retirement. Since I can remember she receives home a lot of people interested in her benzimento. It is a kind of blessing which she gives shaking repeatedly a bunch of leaves towards the patient set on her sofa. At the same time, she whispers a prayer asking her spirit guides for help with the problem because of which she was looked for. It could be an illness, family fighting or unemployment. Last week the lady stopped offering benzimentos. When she came home to left her keys, said that will keep praying for us at distance.

SATURDAY, MARCH 28, 2020

Today I woke up not feeling hungry. Yesterday, we had pizza for dinner. A neighbor told to my father that the restaurant they work at only had received six orders last night. I sincerely hope this drop in sales change their mind about our current situation. They keep seeing their friends. On the other hand, I think how much

difficult a confinement might be for those who live by themselves as this neighbor.

Yesterday, I heard my mother talking to another neighbor who also lives alone. I never stopped to think that our neighborhood has a lot of people living by themselves. My grandmother is one of them. Even though I don't show any symptoms, I have preferred don't see her for a while, so we keep in touch trough video call. My parents help her with shopping.

But as I was saying, this neighbor who lives alone complained to my mother feeling anxious during last nights. She has argued with her family through text messages. Apparently, as they live far away from here, she is accustomed talking to them by this way. The neighbor revealed to my mother that her family is against the need of shut down non-essential services – it was the reason for the fight, since this neighbor believes in social isolation as counter-virus strategy. They has left Whatsapp family group and it aggravated they anxiety disorder. Internet-based communication not always unites people separated by distance.

MONDAY, MARCH 30, 2020

I haven't feeling well all day. I feel dizzy and a little nauseated. As if the risk of contracting the new coronavirus was not enough, we also have to deal with an increase in dengue rates during summer. According to my mother, a neighbor has been recovering from the disease – and I think they really got better.

Yesterday, our neighbor again hosted a backyard barbecue for their friends. My father heard one of them say she had been stopped at the entrance to the city for an interview about her health, which she considered senseless. "What they could do? Send me back when I was already here?". The party started before lunch and kept on its way until one in the morning.

Today, I woke up early and had breakfast with my family. I spend the morning reading a classmate's research project. Our master's programs in anthropology has decided we must take online classes, at least who is enrolled in mandatory courses. It has been hard to pay attention to anything other than the pandemic.

Now I just stopped writing to answer a call. "Hello...". On the other end of the line, an automated message offered to me discounts for a pre-paid funeral plan.

FRIDAY, APRIL 03, 2020

Earlier today my mom was angry towards one of ours neighbors, because they keep partying almost every night. Sometimes I think social isolation only will be completely respected if any case of COVID-19 is confirmed in the city, so I hope their parties (irresponsible as they are) keep happening as a good signal.

Yesterday I videocalled my grandma. She looks fine even without being able to leave her house. Retired from her formal job a time ago, my grandma still keeps offering laundry service as a way to earn extra money. She told me that one of her customers has been sending to her just tablecloths and any other clothes that wasn't worn outside home. Other customer is hardly talking to her. There was one who even asked her if they are allowed to talk to her. She told me all this laughing. It seems that people are taking at least the minimal care for the elderly with whom they keep in touch. It is interesting to note how some people, these who pay due attention at the tragedy caused by the invisible agency of a virus, show themselves aware of how their own lifestyle (so to speak) has direct implications on other people's lives. Will we thereafter be able to draw attention to other "invisible agencies"? I personally think they should think about why not do their own laundry and still keep paying my grandma.

My grandma also told me that she stays in touch with her church community

through a Whatsapp group chat. They send each other messages at the same time a service would be happening if life wasn't that mess. Her messages to wish someone good day and good night are now a mixture of the usual religious theme and recent events related to the pandemic. One of them was an image containing a phrase that I could try translate for something like "Everybody insides your own house, God inside everyone's".

TUESDAY, APRIL 07, 2020

Saturday I left home for the first time in almost three weeks to go shopping. I went to a small grocery store not far from home. It was good to be outdoors again, even though seeing a lot of neighbors disrespecting self isolation scared me. Some of them are a family that lives not so far from my grandma's house. Yesterday, on the way there, my father stopped to talk to them. According to him, despite the family is not facing any financial problem due to social isolation, they all agree with President Bolsonaro's anti-quarantine attitude to coronavirus. My father, who is friend with the father of this family, told us that he believes COVID-19 is nothing more than a flue – a false statement that has been made by our President. Italy death rate was mentioned by my father to convince them of the dangerousness of the coronavirus, but, as he reported to us, they really believe Brazil's tropical climate will prevent that the virus spreads all over the country.

I think we, social scientist, always had to deal with the fact that our theories coexist with interpretations of people who not necessarily devoted considerable time of their lives to study social reality as a "scientific object". Most of time these interpretations are even our matter of debate. But I wonder how lay people in biology are comfortable to make firm statements about virus behavior in the middle of a pandemic. Is it enough to them accept their candidate's anti-quarantine position that is completely out of line with medical authorities' recommendations?

Under what conditions a(n unprepared) politician's interpretation about the dynamic of an infectious disease could be placed above the sparse but in-progress scientific knowledge towards the same object? Do people choose which to follow based on an earnest comparison between these opposite recommendations – and I really would like to know how it works – or they get informed only by pro-Bolsonaro media?

MONDAY, APRIL 13, 2020

Yesterday I had to quickly visit my grandma. I was in self-isolating for more than three weeks, so I thought it would be safe to go there (that means, go to the next house). Besides that, as far as I could know from the local news, there is not even a suspect case of COVID-19 in the city anymore. I don't know If I was being too harsh on people in this diary and, contrary to what I thought, most of the people are really taking all the steps to avoid getting sick, or if the firsts confirmed cases are a matter of time. It is hard to have my point of view restricted to my father's reports or to what I can hear from our neighbor's parties (besides that only time I went shopping and could see the neighborhood). But I still do have the impression that people circulate more than recommended. I can hear right now, 5:28pm, a lot of car noise.

As I was saying, I visited my grandma to take dinner to her. We sat quite far from each other. She told me about the newest way the church she is committed to has found to provide spiritual support for the community. Now the church is open every Sunday morning for those who want to pray there. The two pastors who run the place seem to have adopted the safety protocols followed by drugstores: only one person is allowed to enter at a time. Are we really safe as it looks like?

SATURDAY, APRIL 18, 2020

Today my mom went out for shopping some medicines. Here, commerce is concentrated in certain streets of the city center. As she reported to me, several shops were receiving customers, even though state Governor's recommendation didn't change. As I say in "MARCH 26", his pro-quarantine position led him to heated debates with President Bolsonaro, who has been attempted to undermine quarantine efforts. Thursday, he fired the health minister, who has been standing out in the media as a defender of social-distancing measures (even though this minister was criticized due to Ministry's delayed response to the crisis).

This week, the pastors of the church that my grandma is committed to decided to reopen the place completely. First service since these two or three weeks of quarantine was yesterday. My grandma said to me that the pastors advised against older people's participation, but of course they are allow to join in. I know the place and I can say that it is impossible for one be there minimally safe. No way they could stay two meters apart from each other in that small place. What criteria do people use to choose which measure they follow? Why they think that isolating older people is effective against the spread of the virus?

FRIDAY, APRIL 24, 2020

Thursday was a hard day. I spent all the time terrified because of the news that the quantity of Intensive Care Units beds is no longer enough in some states of Brazil. It took a muscle relaxer and some calming herbal tea to put me to sleep.

Today I woke up feeling better than when I went to bed. The news took a break from coronavirus pandemic to focus on the feud between President Bolsonaro and his ex-Minister of Justice, Sergio Moro, which this morning resigned in protest after Bolsonaro's interference in the national police team.

Despite noticeable increases in confirmed cases of COVID-19 across the country, my city doesn't have yet any confirmation or even suspected cases. Local businesses are about to reopen its doors, as my parents told me. However, the use of masks inside shops was a condition placed by the mayor, since the reopening depends on his permission (but not just on it). I think the rule will be followed by shop owners and their employees, of course, but when it comes to customers I don't imagine the same.

I can be wrong about the future dynamic started by the mandatory use of mask. My grandma mentioned that one of the pastor who run the church she is committed to visited her. He went there, wearing a mask, to offer the host to her. Now Holy Communion is a ritual performed out of a sacred place by two people only – both of them using masks. As I was saying, I can't predict whether people will or not effectively adhere to wearing masks. Despite that, I have the impression that they will tend to feel free for circulate around the city... That's not the idea.

MONDAY, APRIL 27, 2020

Coming back here so soon was not my plan, but as I can't bear to read a single text for my research, I decided to write about last events. I went shopping for some food Saturday. No one in the streets had masks on – they were worn only after people have reached the entrance of grocery store. All the staff was wearing masks. While I was leaving the place, I came across some people who had forgotten to get any mask. Most of them were ashamed enough to ask if they were allowed to get in, but others did not felt even intimidated. I could heard one of the two cashier (both are owners of the place) saying to a woman "You can come in only If you get quickly what you want". In the afternoon, my mom gave me a news that had been circulating on WhatsApp: the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the city. Only two days after that, we have five people infected by coronavirus and 10 suspected cases.

Sunday was like a Sunday would be if we were not living through this nightmare. Today, on the other hand, has been an atypical day. I woke up 7h30 and had breakfast alone – bread and coffee as usual. Right after that, I was getting ready to start studying, when I got sick. My heart started to beat fast, I lost my breath and ran to the bathroom to throw up. As last month I fainted after a similar crisis, my parents took me to the hospital again. We all went out using masks.

Right at the entrance of the hospital, a nurse took my temperature, measured my blood pressure and blood sugar level. This time, unlike the first, I was not placed in an isolation room for patients with suspected COVID-19 infection. I got a chest X-ray and a blood count test, then spent the morning taking medicine in the vein. Nothing wrong was found on my exams. But I did saw a lot of worrying things around the place, like members of the hospital staff wearing their masks improperly. In the waiting room, all seats are still too close to each other, as well as in the space in which I have taken my medicine. While I was there, I could heard a nurse warn another that they were going to receive a baby who had been been in contact with someone who has tested positive for the coronavirus.

SATURDAY, MAY 02, 2020

Thursday I went see a neurologist. If you were over 18, the medical clinic would not allow anyone accompanying you. Besides that, people were allowed to enter only if wearing face mask. Most of them had cloth masks. As soon I entered the building, I was took by a nurse to a sink, where I ought wash my hands. After that, I could check in. There was two meters between patients' seats and the clinic attendants with whom we have to speak before going to the doctors' offices.

Once free to circulate around the clinic, in no time I receive any instruction about the need of cleaning my hands as a precaution after touching something public.

Despite that, I noticed devices on some walls where one could find alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Throughout the consultation, the door of the doctor's office was open, and from what I could see, it was a protocol followed by other doctors. Monday I have to go back there to an exam. Today, Santa Fé do Sul records nine cases of COVID-19.

FRIDAY, MAY 08, 2020

As the end of the semester approaches, so do final exams. Sadly, I can't keep writing here as often as I would like. Even though professors still don't know how evaluate us under our present condition...

Yesterday, our Secretary of Culture Regina Duarte abruptly ended a TV interview when an actress appeared at a video asking her how she plan help artists dealing with the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. The journalists also brought up to discussion some famous' artists deaths. Duarte accused them of "digging up dead people". I don't feel encouraged to talk about Brazilian politics and I don't have much to say about my daily life.

As I already mentioned, my father works with food distribution. This week he went to see a client who ran a grocery store in nearby city, which is smaller than mine. He told us that the lady has started opening her business half day, as the numbers of customers dropped. The other half of the day she fishes in the river near our cities. She slices the flesh away from the bones of the fishes herself. Now the lady sells fish fillets, too.