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COVID-19 AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: AN ANALYSIS FROM SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

Abstract: In this article we describe and analyze several impacts that coronavirus has produced over some aboriginal population from America and Argentina, taking into consideration; their responses, understandings and developed strategies, related to state policies. Likewise, we develop an analytical description of possibilities that the ethnographic method, belonging to the anthropological sciences, offers, for a multidimensional approach. This method also makes it possible to advise, evaluate and monitor certain public policies. When it comes to the information obtained, it was acquired using several secondary sources of data and interviews posted on the Internet.

Keywords: COVID-19, INDIGENUOS PEOPLES, AMERICA, ARGENTINA, ANTHROPOLOGY.

"As a cosequence of the (bad) relationship between the species who inhabit the big house, our planet, the pandemic was announced by the eleders (...)

May be, the day has come."

(José Quidel Lincoleo, mapuche intellectual)

Introduction

In this article we make a description, systematization and analysis of the pandemic context generated by Covid-19 over indigenous peoples of America in general, taking into account just a few examples, and in particular, the case of our country, Argentina.

Initially, we raised the role that anthropological science can play in the pandemic context, using secondary data sources mainly, due to the situation of "mandatory isolation" officially imposed by national authorities. Also we carried out interviews and diverse exchanges, obtained by communication in the internet space, with different social actors, through various platforms and programs from March 2020 to mid-2021. Although the pandemic has obviously hindered traditional ethnographic research, it did not prevent the collection of information (secondary data sources), and the communicative exchange with different interlocutors.

The Role of Social Anthropology in the Pandemic Emergency

Next, we are going to describe how anthropological science can collaborate in a catastrophic process such as that of the Covid-19 pandemic, in which humanity finds itself at the moment. Through grounded ethnographic fieldwork, anthropologists, with their disciplinary methodological tools, can produce a key approach to understanding and unraveling the complexities of an event of enormous magnitude and impact such as the Covid-19 pandemic. With these tools, professionals of this discipline can offer knowledge, recommendations and evaluations of public policies in an event of such severity.

While we can hope that contributions of anthropologists can be positive, facing such public health crises, at the same time we must recognize that recommendations can be difficult to implement and that anthropological engagement in such a context is not free of challenges and criticisms.

First of all, we must ask ourselves: what kind of contribution could anthropology

make during a pandemic, and what are the specific roles that anthropologists can play, both in the field and in the academic context. Another question is what analytical frameworks can be crafted from the practical recommendations made by anthropologists, to broader actors involved in health promotion, community development, patient treatment, and survivor support? In other words; what is the role of a social discipline in a global emergency, and what combination of theory, critical vision and professional practices are necessary for it to be successful?

In the face of the coronavirus pandemic, we believe that social anthropologists; cannot only offer their conceptual tools and knowledge to support responses, within the confusing limits of an emergency, but in addition, they can discover an extremely dense object of study, with sociocultural and political meanings of great complexity, in a very particular field of study.

In some cases, anthropologists debate between the desire to delve into a line of research rich in ethnographic potential and, at the same time, having to meet the practical and immediate requirements of providing a concrete response to an unprecedented pandemic. Such requirements are developing health promotion messages, or helping community mobilization in terms of protection and understanding of actions carried out by several state agencies.

Likewise, the deepening of concepts such as health and disease, reformulated and updated; community participation, development of health promotion, as well as a better understanding of culture and social practices and representations, and their interaction with health policies and systems, are essential to understand the current emergency.

In short, anthropologists, along with other professionals working in the fields of health and community development, explore and attempt to strengthen links between communities and organizational actors through in-depth situational analysis in the ground.

Undoubtedly, epidemics constitute an important object of study in the field of medical anthropology, as crucibles of various levels of analysis (Dry and Leach, 2010), ranging from the impact of official medicine, and the clashes or encounters of local medicine with the biomedical approach, to the production of subjective identities through the form of biopolitics. Evidently, Foucault's points of view are found in the background of this relationship between anthropology, history and a genealogy of power (Foucault, 1979).

This approach reminds us that every event or crisis permanently activates forms of power that cannot be ignored. An example may be resistance displayed by various social and political sectors in different countries, during the isolation measures and health controls established by governments to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Also, the political economy of epidemics constitutes a factor at macro levels that, incorporated into the ordinary life of various social groups, conditions behaviors, decisions, and cultural strategies.

This new catastrophic situation, in turn, has created new lines of study, such as

the identity of survivors, different humanitarian responses to the pandemic, risk perception and the study of governance of global public health. Thus, the Covid-19 crisis highlighted the need for anthropologists to offer their ethnographic expertise through online platforms and the global exchange of experiences, and the compelling need to work in an urgent context. In this way, they are able to provide guidance for practical actions that can promote humanitarian strategies and health care policies, in a similar situation in the future.

García Acosta, from his perspective, proposes starting from an historical and anthropological approach, with essential questions to enrich the understanding and management of future pandemics. She wonders about conceptual issues such as “can we apply premises similar to those of the historical/anthropological study of disasters to the Covid-19 pandemic? Are concepts used along this apprenticeship useful to understand disasters, relevant to this case?” (García Acosta, 2021:42). Obviously, the answers will be given by future research in the dynamic present day situation.

In this sense, anthropologists strive to recombine disciplinary subdivisions such as medical, social and political anthropology in a holistic approach, useful to support humanitarian work, developing practical ideas, in order to collaborate during the emergency in a medically and socially effective way.

Finally, in this mutual engagement of theories and practices, disciplines, diverse methods, and concrete solutions, we believe that there is a need for critically engaged anthropology, despite the ethical, political, and methodological challenges that arise.

Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic on Indigenous Peoples

The Region of the Americas is characterized by its rich multi-ethnic and multicultural heritage; this includes 54.8 million indigenous people in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 7.6 million in North America (Panamerican Health Organization, 2020:4).

According to this organization

“The indigenous population of the Region of the Americas tops 60 million and presents huge ethnic and cultural diversity, with more than 800 indigenous peoples having been identified in Latin America alone” (Panamerican Health Organization, 2020: 8).

Also, american history is a testimonial source of the biotic compulsions suffered by native populations since the conquest of the continent by the Europeans.

Currently, in the vast Amazonian region, especially in the Brazilian sector, the threat of Covid-19 is present in different areas and with great intensity.

Several organizations expressed their alert, regarding the precarious situation in which indigenous communities found themselves, trying to achieve their protection to avoid massive contagion. To this end, they requested urgent measures from State agencies; because respiratory viruses have acted as vectors of indigenous genocide several times in the country's history. Diseases exported from Europe during the colonial period, such as typhoid fever, various flu, measles, whooping cough, etc., were unknown in America until then and because of that Aborigines had not developed any biological defensive mechanism. The populations decimated due to non-existent organic resistance against such diseases. In the case of Mexico, its original population in 1520 oscillated around 25 million inhabitants. That population diminished to just over a million in the early 17th century. One of the factors that contributed to such a strong depopulation was the aforementioned diseases, in addition to colonial violence in different forms. The following testimony is eloquent in explaining the disaster:

"In addition to the military conquest, there were biotic compulsions, plagues and epidemics, as well as famines, which together produced one of the most devastating processes of depopulation that human history has ever recorded. (...) This situation led to the irruption of chaos, not only in individual and collective life, but also at the level of the very experience of reality that had been built by the society as a whole" (Bartolomé, 1997:131).

The well-known Brazilian politician and anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, in his different research works from the second half of the last century, illustrated the consequences suffered by native peoples of Brazil, due to biotic compulsions such as those indicated.

"The history of relationship between Indians and whites in Brazil, shows us that weapons of conquest were ambitions and ideas, a more effective team of action on nature, but above all bacilli and viruses" (Ribeiro, 1971:118).

These data are reaffirmed by Bengoa who points out that

"(...) Modern studies show that there could have no been such a conquest and subjugation of the so-called American "Indians", if there had not been a bacterio/virological attack of unprecedented violence. Microorganisms allied themselves in an unexpected way in the campaign of domination that ended the indigenous resistance and later with their societies" (Bengoa, 2020:1).

Returning to present times, in May 2020, in San Carlos de Río Negro, Venezuela,

indigenous organizations of the Amazon basin of that country, reported the presence of members of the Yeral people, from San Gabriel Cachoeira, Brazil, with symptoms of coronavirus. In spite of this situation, indigenous organizations pointed out that there was a real possibility of the spreading of pandemic throughout the wide border between Venezuela, Brazil and Colombia. Indeed, throughout this triple border area, there was great mobility, both through legal checkpoints and through uncontrolled entries, a fact that exposed the lives of the many indigenous communities in the region, mainly ethnic groups such as Arawak (Baré, Baniwa, Piapoco, Warekena y Kurripako), Uwottüja, Hiwi, Puinave, Mako Yeral, but also the Yanomami, that inhabit the Casiquiare branch, in the Siapa River, and the Upper Orinoco, as well as the Ye'kwana people (ORPIA-COICA, 2020).

Also, according to the same source

“(...) mobility of different actors on the border, and in indigenous territories, which includes illegal miners, external armed groups, participants in legal and illegal trade (smuggling), the military, and immigrants from other countries, is one of the issues representing a great risk of spreading Covid-19 in Amazonas State. If preventive measures are not taken in time by the competent authorities, there could be an advance in infections in these large territories, which could lead to an imminent genocide due to high contagion capacity of the virus and its potential lethality among indigenous communities, which, as already mentioned, have a greater immune sensitivity to respiratory conditions” (ORPIA-COICA, 2020).

Manaus, capital of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, with the population of approximately 2 million inhabitants, with a high proportion of the indigenous, had more than 4,000 infections and 620 deaths from coronavirus in May 2020, according to the mayor of that city, a fact that caused the collapse of the health care system of the main Brazilian Amazonian city.

On the other hand, living conditions of populations that inhabit the Amazon region of Peru, Colombia and Venezuela are similar, and as stated by the organizations

“People circulate along the Amazon River from Manaus, city with the most reported cases. It is also close to Iquitos, Peru, with more than 1,000 cases at the same time. The aforementioned not only reflects the influence of the river, but also the importance of increasing its control. Population movements, and the spread of the virus, are marked by the lack of border controls and even real divisions on the ground” (ORPIA-COICA, 2020).

Finally, in spite of the serious situation described, indigenous organizations asked the State for the development of a protocol for prevention, containment and control of Covid-19, designed with the leading participation of native peoples, through their community network, a fact that would allow temporary community isolation, and a plan to control the entry of external agents into indigenous territories, in order to

prevent the spread of the pandemic. These demands received few responses from governments.

President of Brazil, Jair Mesías Bolsonaro (2019-2022), has frequently expressed his phobias and contempt against indigenous peoples of his country. Next, we quote some of their testimonies and certain responses expressed by aboriginal leaders.

"The Indian changed, he has evolved... More and more Indian is a human being just like us" (Pagina 12, 01/25/2020).

The Association of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) announced that they will file a criminal complaint against the president related to his discriminatory speech.

"Once again, he brokes the National Constitution, denying our existence as human beings. That pervert needs to be stopped!" Sonia Guajajara. She added "We, indigenous peoples, aboriginals from this land, demand respect!" (Pagina 12, 01/25/2020).

Brasilian President also spoke about freeing indigenous lands and environmental reserves for mining, agriculture and energy exploitation. On December 2020, he received at the Alvorada Palace in Brasilia, many associations of "garimpeiros", groups of people who extract gold in the Amazonian rivers, not always legally. He promised them new legislation so that they can act freely all over the territories and indigenous reserves (Pagina 12, 01/25/2020).

There is no doubt that the racist administration of Brazil is openly launching an unprecedented attack against indigenous peoples with the aim of destroying them as native peoples, assimilating them by force and plundering their territories.

Another example involves the Mura ethnic group, also from the Amazon, who, given the difficult health care situation, decided to face the pandemic by adopting social self-isolation, restricting the departure of people from the communities on fishing trips, a main source of food. This situation had an outstanding impact over different communities, in account of the shortage of essential foods (Baines, Castro Pereira and dos Santos, 2021).

In the Brazilian state of Roraima, indigenous peoples were the most vulnerable group, affected by Covid-19, with high mortality rates, especially among the oldest population, repositories of collective memory and traditional knowledge. Until September 2020, the Association of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB), estimated that 833 indigenous inhabitants had died from coronavirus, and 33,935 were infected, among a total of 158 ethnic groups (Baines, Castro Pereira and dos Santos, 2021).

In Ecuador, Gina Watson, the representative of The World Health Organization (WHO) in that country, warned "(...) there are no epidemiological surveillance

protocols in the country to prevent the spread of coronavirus in towns and indigenous communities, (...)” (El Universo, 04/1/2020). Likewise, the international official committed to the Ecuadorian legislators to develop a protocol plan for such vulnerable sector of the country. In his presentation, he also warned that it is fundamental that social food programs, had to reach these communities and the rural sector, and fundamentally that prevention campaigns must be carried out in native languages (El Universo, 04/1/2020).

In Chile, the indigenous Mapuche people, in permanent conflict with the State, have developed their own tools for interpretation and protection against the pandemic. As their own way of conceptualizing the disease, they created the notion of *koronavñfi*, a neologism in Mapuzungun (the name given to the Mapuche language), to name the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. According to Mapuche scholar Elisa Loncon Antileo:

“The koronavñfi concept, allows us to recognize that coronavirus is a vñfitun, it can kill, harm people, its environment, it puts people who go out to work every day at risk of contagion. (...) From the Mapuche concept of disease, the koronavñfi is also a wigka kuxan, a foreign, non-native disease, (...)” (Loncon Antileo, 2020).

According to the same author,

“(...) koranavñfi crisis is not only biological but systemic, and to face it we not only need to attack Covid-19, we need more community and paradigms that position the value of human being over the economic, more appreciation of nature in reciprocity with the human, more rights to the people, especially the access to clean water, to public health. In this way, the first line of the struggle against pandemic is not in hospitals, it is before reaching the hospital, at the community, in social organization, and in family groups, it is in the knowledge of people regarding care and isolation. to avoid contagion. The response required by the pandemic is humanity and guaranteeing people’s lives above all things” (Loncon Antileo, 2020).

We can see obviously, that management of the pandemic at the communities by themselves, is fundamental as a method of protection and prevention of disease.

In a study conducted by a group of Chilean researchers, they concluded in a preliminary report that

“(...) the data collected points out that dissimilar situations with respect to both the indigenous peoples that live in Chile, as well as the different territories. (...) In most cases, responses have been given from local organizations and from the worldview that made it possible to stop the advance of the pandemic. (...) Related to worldview, traditions and culture, measures based on self-care and respect for nature have been applied from the same peoples, understanding pandemic as a result of the breakdown of balance in the relationship between humans and

the environment, measures which propose, should be corrected. With regard to productive activity, the great impact that pandemic has produced is recognized (...) (and) it has become clear, an element declared by all those interviewed, that there have been no specific public policies directed towards indigenous peoples in all these months (...)" (VVAA, 2020:12).

In the United States, there is an interesting example of self-management of the pandemic by indigenous people, an event that occurred in May 2020. Sioux groups in South Dakota State, refused to remove checkpoints for the spread of the coronavirus, located on the roads that crossed the communities. Due to this, the governor of the state, Kristi Noem, accused the chiefs of several communities of establishing illegal checkpoints. The Sioux, however, believed that the controls were the only way to ensure that the virus did not enter their reservations, adding that due to the limited capacity of health facilities, they could not cope with the emergency. Consequently, only those who had not traveled to the Covid-19 hotspots were allowed to enter in the reserves. The governor, in turn, threatened to sue both, Sioux-Oglala and Cheyenne peoples in federal court, if they did not obey the order to remove checkpoints. In response to the Governor, Cheyenne People's Leader Harold Fraser stated,

"We will not apologize because we are an island of safety in a sea of uncertainty and death," (The Governor) continues to interfere in our efforts to do what the science and facts dictate, seriously undermining our ability to protect everyone on the reservation".

South Dakota, during the pandemic crisis, was one of the few states in the country that did not issue an order to its residents, to compulsorily stay at home (Politika, Belgrade; 5/11/2020).

The Situation of Indigenous Peoples of Argentina Facing the Covid-19 Pandemic

Because of the measures adopted by the national state in the face of the emergency generated by the pandemic, we have appreciated that it affected various sectors of population in a highly unequal manner, based on their socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, gender, age and economic conditions. In the areas of greatest deprivation and social precariousness, the lack of access to health system, food, drinking water and basic services deepened. Among the consequences of the isolation measures, the severe negative impact produced on income of domestic groups must be added, mainly among those who developed informal economic activities dependent on the daily movement of people, which decreased in this

particular context. In addition, we must mention in some cases, serious abuses perpetrated by security forces in certain regions, in the context of the “Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation” (ASPO initials in Spanish), implemented by the national government from March 19th, 2020.

In this context we have registered the exacerbation of historical experiences of racism and ethnic discrimination, gender violence and repressive practices legitimized as “surveillance” towards indigenous peoples in different regions of the country.

Likewise, a report prepared by hundred anthropologists from several universities and research centers all over the country (approximately 30 teams), describes and analyzes a series of problems that affected indigenous peoples during Covid-19 pandemic.

The main objective of this work was to develop a collaboration and exchange anthropological experiences about the situation of Covid-19 in many provinces of the country. Evidently, it was a problem of great complexity, involving multiple aspects such as environmental, sociocultural, economic, and political contexts; and also, discourses and practices produced locally. The main purpose of the report prepared, was to collaborate in the design of public policies in the field of health and prevention during the pandemic context, taking into account the socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural peculiarities of each region, with its characteristics and risk conditions, vulnerability and access to services and resources.

The outstanding results of the aforementioned report indicate that pandemic situation aggravated conditions of socioeconomic inequality, irregularity in land tenure of territories in which indigenous peoples live, the historical invisibility, stigmatization, and sometimes, criminalization associated with their ethnic condition.

The report not only addresses the situation presented by the pandemic, but also highlights historical structural problems among indigenous communities, such as the effects caused by the impact of extractivist projects like oil exploitation by the technique of “fracking”, mega-mining, forest exploitation, the foreignization of land ownership and the expansion of the agricultural frontier.

This work also suggests certain recommendations to improve current situation of various communities. Among them, it points out the requirement of “effective compliance with the rights of indigenous peoples” provided by the National Constitution in its article 75, paragraph 17, Convention 169 of the ILO (International Labor Organization), and effective compliance with national and provincial legislation. Also, the report indicates the need for the implementation of the binding right to consultation and Free, Prior and Informed Consent, provided in several regulations, in order to generate mechanisms of leading participation for indigenous organizations.

On the other hand, the research takes up a historical claim of indigenous

organizations: the search for new formats in the historical relationship among the state and indigenous peoples. This implies discussing and adopting a clear position against historiography that systematically denied the very presence of the different peoples and the genocide and ethnocide suffered by the various ethnic groups in the country (VVAA, 2020).

“The responsibility of the state (at different levels) in such a genocide is central, and the consequences of its historical violent actions not only continue, but in the current context of the ASPO, as we have seen, are aggravated. It is key to design a public agenda that implies historical reparation. We understand that a historical reparation fund should be set up for aboriginal peoples”,

states the conclusion of the investigation.

In the case of Chaco province, in Resistencia, the capital city, the pandemic situation in the “Barrio Gran Toba” (Great Toba Slum), where a lot of members of Qom people live, with its peculiarities, we have been able to observe the way in which the illness began and spread; the suffering that it brought about and its consequences of death among the population. Also, we must add the racist and discriminatory expressions and attitudes from non-indigenous groups of society towards the communities (Hass et al, 2021). However, indigenous communities and organizations of this province managed to develop their own strategies to face the pandemic.

Conclusions

The UN Special Rapporteur on indigenous peoples rights, in his report to the General Assembly, stated that

“The impact of Covid-19 on indigenous peoples must be investigated and documented, to guide the responses of states, and ensure that these moments of exceptional circumstances do not exacerbate or justify impunity for violations of indigenous peoples rights. Considering the importance of human cultural diversity and innovation to survive crises, such as pandemics, national and international responses to Covid-19 can also find answers in traditional indigenous knowledge and practices” (OHCHR, 2020).

The Panamerican Health Organization stated that

“COVID-19 poses significant risks and impacts for indigenous peoples, whose health situation is, in many countries, worse than that of the rest of society. This is due, among other factors, to a higher rate of pre-existing health conditions;



to deficient health care access; and to social, economic, and environmental factors that exacerbate these populations' vulnerability" (Panamerican Health Organization, 2021:13).

From our point of view, in this provisional article, written urgently and in response to the emergency, we have attempted to describe and analyze various situations, extremely serious and complex, linked to the multidimensional impacts that the pandemic has produced among indigenous peoples and whose immediate effects cannot be foreseen.

Finally, we can assure that only through future research it will be possible to measure the scope and consequences of the pandemic that has posed enormous challenges and placed the future of humanity at serious risk.



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| 215

КОВИД-19 И АУТОХТОНИ НАРОДИ: АНАЛИЗА ИЗ ПЕРСПЕКТИВЕ СОЦИЈАЛНЕ АНТРОПОЛОГИЈЕ

Апстракт: У овом раду описујемо и анализирамо неколико утицаја које је вирус корона имао на неке староседеоце из Америке и Аргентине, узимајући у обзир њихове одговоре, схватања и стратегије у вези са државном политиком. Исто тако, развијамо аналитички опис могућности које етнографски метод, који припада антрополошким наукама, нуди за вишедимензионални приступ. Овај метод такође омогућава саветовање, процену и праћење одређених јавних политика. С обзиром на добијене информације, до њих се дошло коришћењем неколико секундарних извора података и интервјуа који су објављени на интернету.

Кључне речи: КОВИД-19, АУТОХТОНИ НАРОДИ, АМЕРИКА, АРГЕНТИНА, АНТРОПОЛОГИЈА.