



## When what seemed far away comes very near. Epidemics and care past and present

KARINA INÉS RAMACCIOTTI

*Universidad Nacional de Quilmes–Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Argentina*

karinaramacciotti@gmail.com

The coronavirus pandemic not only changed our habits but also, for those of us who are social scientists, challenged us to revisit the subjects of our research with new questions and interdisciplinary crossovers. As Howard Becker notes in his book *Trucos del Oficio*, these went from being “trivial subjects to relevant social problems”<sup>1</sup> (Becker, 2018, p. 125) that awakened the interest of the media, public opinion, and some political agendas. Suddenly, questions about how states reacted to previous epidemics, the measures that were applied in the past to avoid contagion, the scientific and political processes that were behind the discovery of a given vaccine, campaigns for and resistance to vaccination, and the ways of caring for patients all gained prominence on a public agenda that, like never before, interrogated us as social scientists and gave us a new political positioning within the intellectual field.

Political and social differences deepen during an epidemic and become even more evident when they have to be confronted. Public health solutions, which range from reinforcement of individual responsibility to appeals to collective commitment, divide the waters when it comes to designing social policies. There is no “neutral,” “aseptic,” or “universal” way of considering solutions during a pandemic, given that such considerations are essentially political and dialogue with historical traditions and local particularities. The truth of this observation is clear right now, but history can provide us with related examples that, when considered today, are also relevant.

This essay, reflecting the articles in the present issue of *Apuntes*, has two broad themes. The first is historical. It starts with an article by Patricia Palma analyzing yellow fever and the bubonic plague in Peru between the

---

1 Translation from Spanish by *Apuntes*.

mid-19th century and the early 20th. “A Violent and Harmful Measure’: Quarantines in Peru and the Emergence of a Pan-American Health Policy (1850-1905)” allows us to reflect on how some business sectors resisted the scientific proposals of the medical community. As Palma argues, “discussions about the economic and social costs of the imposition of quarantines have been a constant in the history of health in Peru and Latin America.” At the time, quarantines—such as the complete closedown of ports until the threat of contagion passed—were a common sanitary prevention measure. Dissenting voices against quarantines prompted intense debates that led to other actions such as the establishment of quarantine stations on islands near major ports. Boats that reported potential case of infected individuals were required to remain there. While Palma is primarily interested in how public health policies were implemented in Peru during outbreaks of epidemics, her article provides potential avenues of comparison with other agroexport economies such as Brazil and Argentina. In addition, she demonstrates how the foundations of the Pan-American medical system were laid in this period as conferences began to be held and multilateral agreements signed, leading to the first Pan American Sanitary Code (1905). Her observations lead us to contemplate the present situation. SARS-CoV-2 has burst onto the scene at a time when multilateralism is in crisis, nationalisms have been reborn, bilateral relations are being fomented, and a lack of cooperation and coordination has resulted. When faced with a pandemic, it is desirable that regional cooperation tools be put in place to deal with the challenges to public health and to support productive efforts to revive the economy.

In “The Argentine Vaccine During the ‘Spanish Flu’, 1918-1919. Theoretical Debates and Development of a Therapy on the Periphery of Science,” Adrián Carbonetti focuses on the so-called “Spanish flu” in Argentina in 1918–1919, giving us insights into the scientific and political discussions that tend to transpire when a vaccine is first produced. While Argentina occupied a peripheral position in the scientific world in the first decades of the 20th century, the contributions and networks of scientific sociability promoted by the Czech Rudolf Krauss in the National Bacteriological Institute were important in terms of promoting local scientific debate. Krauss used his institutional position to attract scientists and promote the modernization of discussions on public health and the essential links with scientific discoveries. Carbonetti verifies that this research center, supported by the government, was able to produce a flu vaccine that was tested on volunteers and prisoners. However, the vaccine was not discussed by the local scientific community and was relegated in the bioscientific discussions of the era as well as in the history of local science. The author discusses the

various reasons why this vaccine was forgotten and why, despite being tested, it was neither used nor accepted widely. Carbonetti argues that Krauss being a foreigner and holding what was an important position at the time—head of the Bacteriological Institute—led to a certain disdain on the part of the scientific elite of Buenos Aires. At the same time, this vaccine was based on the belief that the Pfeiffer bacillus caused the flu while internationally, this was a controversial view. Another reason for the limited use of the vaccine, according to the author, were structural and bureaucratic obstacles. The size of Argentina and the logistics necessary to get the vaccine to places far from Buenos Aires was also a factor. In addition, it should be noted that the second wave of the Spanish flu affected the country's northern provinces much more dramatically. These were areas where the health system was much less developed than in Buenos Aires in the 1920s. Socio-economic inequality exacerbates health crises and brings to light the shortcomings of health systems.

The second theme of the articles in this issue relates to the current pandemic and public policies. The studies provide a comparative perspective and concentrate on relations of care, understood in a general sense as a set of indispensable activities to satisfy the basic needs of individuals, whether physical, subjective, or symbolic. The article by Inés Nercesian, Roberto Cassaglia, and Vanessa Morales Castro compares health management in six heterogeneous Latin American countries. Through a study of laws, management, and basic resources, the authors analyze the capacities of each nation to face the second pandemic of the 21st century. On the basis of meticulous examination of quantitative and qualitative sources, they provide an overview of how peripheral countries tried to meet the challenges imposed by the pandemic through public health and socioeconomic measures that took into account specific local characteristics. While no single or ideal solution exists, each strategy implemented varied according to a combination of conjunctural factors such as long-standing traditions, including forms of management, political ideologies of the government in power, the quality of health systems, and economic and social indicators. This dramatic experience should open up the possibility of analyzing existing institutional frameworks, in the areas not only of health and welfare but of public policies in general. It should be noted that this proposal is made in a situation that is still evolving in terms of management of the pandemic, the social responses related to vaccination, and the policies being implemented. Nevertheless, this contribution is a first endeavor to provide a comparative analysis of the first year of the pandemic and to propose a methodology for further study.

In dialogue with Nercesian et al., the article by Juliana Martínez Franzoni and Cristina González Hidalgo, “Child Support and Social Protection during the Pandemic in Latin America in 2020: Opportunities to Overcome Marginalization” discusses modifications to social protection and child support policies in the region. The SARS-CoV-2 crisis increased pre-existing economic inequalities and had an asymmetric impact on informal workers, especially women and youth who lost their jobs and income. This situation hit single-parent households especially hard, as women had to take on additional household and caregiving duties. Unemployment, the suspension of in-person classes, and difficulties accessing technology and connectivity highlighted, as never before, the responsibilities that states should take on to resolve the problems of children and young people. As the authors point out, during “normal” times much of the material wellbeing of minors depends on their parents’ income, which enables access to food, clothing, housing, and basic services, but this situation was compromised by the pandemic; in this context, the challenge is to ameliorate the lack of social protection in its varying degrees by way of social assistance and development while keeping in mind family law. In line with the ideas expressed by Nercesian et al., this proposal stresses the profound inequality of the social structure in socioeconomic and gender terms and underlines the importance of achieving improved and more inclusive social protection, given that amid the present crisis parental obligations cannot always satisfy basic needs in terms of food and social protection.

The article by María Teresa Martín Palomo and María Venturiello and that of Mora Vinokur and Verónica Giordano alert us to responsibilities of care and how these dimensions became more relevant through the contributions of the care economy. This feminist current demonstrates that capitalist societies function on the basis of women’s unpaid labor in the management and sustenance of daily life. The pandemic revealed the most dramatic and unequal aspects of this phenomenon because the lockdown measures implemented by governments resulted in changes to domestic life, including excessive numbers of tasks and the consequent mental burden, the virtualization of work, and the effects of unemployment.

In “Rethinking Care from the Perspective of the Community and Vulnerable Populations: Buenos Aires and Madrid during the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic,” Martín Palomo and Venturiello discuss how community experiences were resignified during the pandemic according to the characteristics of each city. The authors describe some differences between the two cities using barrios and vulnerable communities as their object of analysis. In the popular-sector barrios of Buenos Aires, pre-existing social and political

groups played an important role as mediators with authorities in relation to concrete community needs as well as possible coverage by social programs. Long-established territorial organizations were an important link in mitigating the effects of unemployment, poverty, lack of food, and prevention, testing, quarantine, and vaccination strategies. Madrid does not have territorial safety nets and there is widespread distrust of the established organizations but nonetheless the pandemic led to spontaneous acts by civil society and activities on social networks, which motivated a depoliticized volunteerism, in dialogue with the charitable tradition. These initiatives stimulated care and mutual help experiences. The cases of both cities provide evidence of the importance of constructing community and solidarity networks to cushion the consequences of social inequality. The distribution of care challenges us as a society to leave behind individualistic logics, and rethink solidarity and territorial forms of care that are not employed as empty political formulas. During the pandemic there was an overabundance of political messages based on appeals to individual care as a way of achieving collective care. It was hoped that this would reduce coronavirus transmission and promote a return to “normality.” It is clear that the present and the future demands firm and sustained actions over time that enable the mobilization of material, social, and community capacities to reduce inequality gaps when planning and implementing care.

“Towards a Comprehensive Care System in Latin America. Legislative Processes in Capital Cities and at the National Level in Argentina and Mexico (2018-2020)” proposes the need to design comprehensive care systems that recognize the right of those who give and receive care, and, at the same time, allow the reparation of gender violence. The authors understand that care work brings with it a particular form of economic violence, given that, historically, such tasks were the responsibility of women: that is, the asymmetric distribution of care among women is an inequality factor. As a result, multiple activities that are essential for living in a society are not paid; and if they are, they are undervalued and have little or no social prestige. Vinokur and Giordano, through a comparison of legislative initiatives in Argentina and Mexico, show that such initiatives are halted or advanced depending on the political culture of the parties involved and the dialogues established with women’s and feminist movements. As argued by three of the articles related to the second theme of this issue, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic makes it clear that care depends on the work of women and that this form of organization urgently requires transformation. For this reason, it is imperative to provide the state with more resources and power to apply policies in different regions of the countries of Latin America.

In summary, this issue helps us to reflect on how the social sciences can contribute to systematizing information and formulating critical proposals for solutions to guide the implementation of public policies. The relationships between social movements and the contributions of the social sciences are instrumental in changing the agenda of public administrations, balancing the social organization of care, and strengthening the social protection of vulnerable sectors. An example of this are the initiatives, in response to the public health emergency, of Argentina's Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MinCyt) to promote studies into the financing of science and technology innovation in business. At the same time, a call went out to the social and human sciences in order to promote the production of knowledge related to the pandemic's impact on Argentine society: its transformation, its difficulties, and collective solutions. The projects underway are creating a social and political commitment between social sciences and society that could point the way to resolving the existing crisis in a collective and interdisciplinary manner (MinCyT, 2020).

### **Referencias**

- Becker, H. (2018). *Trucos del Oficio*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI.
- Ministerio de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación. (2020). *Las Ciencias Sociales y Humanas en la Crisis COVID-19*. Retrieved from <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/ciencia/agencial/acciones-sobre-covid-19/agencia-csyh/pautas>