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Journal of Latin American Geography, Volume 19, Number 3, July 2020,
pp. 167-176 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lag.2020.0076>

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JLAG *Perspectives Forum*

Covid-19 in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

This JLAG Perspectives forum on Covid-19 in Latin America brings together the diverse voices of geographers from different parts of world to better understand the complex and multidimensional implications of Covid-19 in Latin America. While each individual contribution is short and narrowly focused both topically and geographically, together they present a more complete picture of the immensity of the challenges, both present and future, brought on and exposed by Covid-19.

KEYWORDS: *Covid-19, geography, pandemic, Latin America*

LATIN AMERICA IS REELING FROM THE ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Some of the most jarring images from the region include bodies on the streets of Ecuador, mass migrations out of Peru's urban areas (see the cover of this issue), and Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro asking "What do you expect me to do?" when confronted with the second-highest number of Covid-19 cases in the world. The pandemic is exposing and intensifying deep pre-existing and intersecting structures

of inequality across geographical scales, as lesser developed countries and marginalized communities are hardest hit by both the health crisis and the cascading economic crises and will have the most difficult road to recovery in its aftermath.

This JLAG Perspectives forum on Covid-19 in Latin America brings together the diverse voices of geographers from different parts of the world to better understand the complex and multidimensional implications of Covid-

Figure 1. Total number of known Covid-19 infections and country-specific fatality rates in Latin America, through July 11, 2020 (map by authors based on publicly available data from the World Health Organization).

19 across Latin America. While it is not yet possible to grasp the full picture, let alone contend with what the final consequences of Covid-19 will be in Latin America, this forum

aims to trace the geographical contours of the pandemic as it unfolds in real time across the region. Each individual contribution is short—between 1,500 and 3,000 words—

Figure 2. Daily new Covid-19 cases and cumulative total cases in Latin America, March 1 - July 11, 2020 (visualization created by authors based on publicly available data from the World Health Organization).

and narrowly focused both topically and geographically. Together, however, this forum presents a more complete picture of the immensity of the challenges, both present and future, brought on and exposed by Covid-19.

Like all pandemics, the coronavirus pandemic is fundamentally geographic in nature. Writing in *Wired*, David Wolman observes that the pandemic “is redefining our relationship with space.... Hot spots, distance, spread, scale, proximity. In a word: geography. Suddenly, we can’t stop thinking about *where*” (Wolman, 2020, para. 1, emphasis in original). Health and medical geographers have been thinking about the “where” of disease for a long time. Medical geographers traditionally consider health

as a triangle with three axes—population, habitat, and behaviors—resulting in a disease ecology approach (Emch et al., 2017). *Population* considers humans as the biological host for a disease; the susceptibility of a population depends on individuals’ and groups’ nutritional, immunological, and physiological statuses. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified a list of factors that put certain individuals at higher risk for severe illness, including older adults, immunocompromised individuals, and people with asthma, HIV, and liver disease (CDC, 2020). All of these factors are geographical to their core as there are clear spatial patterns to age distribution within and across

Figure 3. Cumulative growth of Covid-19 cases in the ten Latin American countries with the highest number of cases, through July 11, 2020 (visualization created by authors based on publicly available data from the World Health Organization).

societies, and spatial patterns to particular populations that are more susceptible to particular diseases. *Habitat* encompasses all aspects of where a person lives, from housing to transportation, from health care system to economic structures. In the current pandemic, structures of economic inequality have led directly to privileged sectors of society more easily self-isolating and quarantining while taking advantage of the economic precarity and forced mobility of others for essential services (in this issue, see Gorayeb et al.; Santos Almeida; Vecchio & Tiznado-Aitken). Finally, individual *behaviors* stem from cultural norms, economic constraints, and individual psychology. In the coronavirus pandemic we see this playing out in the budding culture wars over mask wearing and adherence to social distancing guidelines (e.g.

in Nicaragua; see Cupples, this issue). The interplay of these axes culminates in a health profile of an area, spotlighting the interconnections of human behavior; natural, cultural, social, and built environments; and structural and individual vulnerability to virus. All of the contributions in this forum highlight how, in a time of global pandemic, health and wellbeing interplay with culture, economics, (geo)politics, biopolitics, mobility, coloniality, history, and public policy.

As of this writing (July 11, 2020), the World Health Organization (WHO) is reporting nearly 3.2 million cases of Covid-19 in Latin America, and over 138,000 fatalities, with major hotspots in Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Chile, and Colombia (WHO, 2020; see Figure 1). And while across much of Asia and Europe, the curve is bending downward, as of this

■ New Daily Cases — Cumulative Total

Figure 4. Daily new cases and cumulative total cases for individual Latin American countries beginning on the date of each country's first reported case through July 11, 2020 (visualization created by authors based on publicly available data from the World Health Organization).

writing daily new cases in Latin America as a whole are on the rise (Figures 2 and 3) and are rising individually in most Latin American countries (Figure 4), leading the WHO to declare in late May 2020 that the Americas are the new epicenter of the global pandemic (Deutsche Welle, 2020).

Beyond these grim numbers, economic, (geo)political, and cultural crises are perpetuated and compounded by colonial legacies (see Lovell, this issue). Unprecedented drop-offs in tourism flows are already decimating national economies throughout the Caribbean (see Gaffney & Eeckels, this issue), and pre-existing crises are further compounded at the U.S.-Mexico border (see Slack & Heyman, this issue), the Colombia-Venezuela borderlands (see Idler & Hochmüller, this issue), and amongst Indigenous populations across the region (see Abizaid et al., this issue), not to mention the deadly trifecta of climate change, neocolonialism, and Covid-19 (see Declet-Barreto, this issue). Governmental responses have varied significantly, from denialism and conspiracy theory (see

Cupples, this issue; Ríos Sierra, this issue), to economic opportunism and disaster capitalism (Vila Benites & Bebbington, this issue; Borja & Buitrón Cañadas, this issue), to international medical solidarity (Huish, this issue), and to coordinated health and political efforts with positive outcomes (see Mederos Anido & Mariño Franco, this issue; Pope, this issue). Religious institutions have also played an important role in some cases by helping to maintain social distancing and quarantine while in other cases undermining these very efforts (see Monteiro de Oliveira, this issue). Finally, our everyday experiences of space and place under quarantine and self-isolation have direct and complex implications for the ongoing production of space in the face of the coronavirus pandemic (see Cabrera-Barona & Carrión, this issue; Flores, this issue; Haesbaert, this issue; Irarrazaval, this issue).

While it seems likely that this is still just the beginning, we hope that this forum provides readers a framework for better understanding and contending with the pandemic.

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