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Pandemic for Geographers in/of Latin America

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Editorial: Institutional Implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic for Geographers in/of Latin America

In this third and final editorial in our series on the impacts of Covid-19 on geographers in and of Latin America, we focus our attention on the institutional implications of the pandemic and how they threaten to impact, and are already impacting, the professional lives of geographers.

The pre-existing neoliberal push toward a more “efficient” university in Europe, North America, and Latin America alike make it hard for us to not be reminded of Naomi Klein’s Shock Doctrine and the exploitation of political, economic, and environmental crises—Covid-19 is all of these things—toward neoliberal political and economic ends. In other words, for an increasingly neoliberalized university system, Covid-19 represents a “good crisis” that many university leaders will be reluctant to let go to waste.

It is important to consider that the university sector in Latin America, North America, and Europe (and far beyond) has *already* been subject to deep-rooted and far-reaching “reforms” long before the emergence of Covid-19. This has manifested itself in several ways, not least the devaluation of departments and programs in the humanities and social sciences—disciplines where scholars of Latin America tend to have their institutional homes. Extensive program closures across the University of Wisconsin system in the U.S. and the planned closure of the archaeology department at the University of

Sheffield in the UK are paradigmatic examples. Within departments and programs, we are also witnessing increasing precarity of individual faculty members, reflected in a generalized shift away from the tenure system, an increase in fixed-term lectureships as opposed to permanent posts, and an expansion of teaching-focused positions as opposed to combined teaching-research posts.

It should really not come as a surprise that Covid-19 has accelerated these pre-existing and very troubling patterns. The financial impacts of the pandemic on institutional futures have been widely publicized, from the loss of revenue due to lower intakes of tuition- and fee-paying students (including international students who have been less able and/or willing to travel) to public-sector budget cuts that directly impact universities. Brazil’s federal universities, which have suffered progressive cuts since 2014, are now facing 18 percent budget cuts from the country’s Ministry of Education. Although Brazilian universities have been instrumental in producing materials and services for the country’s Covid-19 response—from manufacturing hand gel, to undertaking vaccine research, to providing care for Covid-19 patients in university hospitals—these cuts have been justified on the basis that universities have been teaching online for the last year and thus have “saved” resources. At the

time of writing, some Brazilian universities have declared that they only have three months of operating funds remaining, after which they will be forced to withdraw some activities, including teaching, or shut down completely. These cuts threaten not only the viability of the universities but also the ability of lowest-income students to study, whose *bolsas* (i.e. scholarships) are sometimes the only stable income that they and their households have.

These kinds of institutional impacts unfolding across the Americas and around the world are only exacerbated by reductions made to international programs. For instance, the UK is making deep cuts to its overseas development budget, which, in turn, has resulted in the severe curtailment or complete cancellation of funded research projects under the country's "Global Challenges Research Fund" (GCRF) program. Dr. Adam Baird, of Coventry University, was quoted in *The Guardian* (19 March 2021) as being tasked with relaying to his project partners in Latin America that their collaborative project on violent crime could no longer proceed: "They were flabbergasted. A partner in Brazil said, 'Adam, this is the sort of thing we expect to happen in Brazil, but not in Britain.'"

These processes will continue to ripple out, increasing impacts on geographers in and of Latin America, many of whom rely heavily on field-based and collaborative research and instruction, and on mobility more generally, to progress their careers. For North- and South-based geographers alike, the pandemic has significantly curtailed field research for over a year, with little prospect of resuming

imminently. This will have cascading impacts on research productivity and profound implications for employment opportunities, tenure, and post-tenure reviews and promotion. Perhaps the most immediately affected of all are early career scholars. On the one hand, they comprise those Ph.D. students who have been forced to forego some or even all of their planned fieldwork, which will have an immediate impact on their ability to write their Ph.D. dissertations as well as the knock-on effect of potentially compromising their capacity to generate journal articles that are so important at this stage of their careers. On the other hand, they also include newly minted Ph.D.s, who are facing a tighter job market, including Latin Americans who have studied beyond the region and plan, or are obliged by funding conditions, to return to the region. The reverse also holds: those Latin American institutions in positions to hire, especially if they have hopes to attract international staff, may also be in a weaker position to recruit competitively if their national health and education infrastructures are under-resourced.

In light of these institutional impacts of Covid-19 on geographers in and of Latin America, where do we go from here? This is a hard question. Each of our last two editorials closed on an optimistic note: that we need not return to the overriding colonial model of "Latin Americanist" research; that Covid-19 has provided an opportunity to more carefully reflect on our research practices more broadly; and that the pandemic has sparked timely and sometimes surprising pedagogical innovations. However, in this case, in assessing the institutional impacts of the

Covid-19 pandemic, we must contend with the reality of our limited individual agency in these broader institutional contexts. While we can individually shift our research behaviors, imagine and enact new forms of transcontinental collaborations, and make use of innovative pedagogical approaches, it is much harder for any individual to affect institutional change in the face of such a multifaceted crisis. As academics, we will need to develop strategies to fight against Covid-19 becoming a useful crisis (from the point of view of the neoliberal university). We will need to simultaneously keep focus on what's happening at our own institutions *and* what's happening at the institutions where we maintain international/transcontinental

research and pedagogical collaborations, just as we will need to remember that how we confront and contend with our institutional challenges at home (wherever that home is) will both directly and indirectly impact our colleagues and partners across the regions where we work.

After the pandemic subsides and its institutional aftermath comes into focus, we invite contributions of research articles and JLAG Perspectives essays and commentaries that explore not only the ever-changing geographies of the region vis-à-vis the pandemic but also the ever-changing institutional landscapes in which our common scholarly pursuits take place.

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