

Is Life Only about a Virus? COVID-19 and Its Impacts on Food Security

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On March 18, I went to São Paulo, Brazil, to participate in a radio program about hunger and human rights. My university in Campinas had already canceled all activities until April 14 and I was in a self-imposed quarantine. Even though it was a short trip between Campinas and São Paulo, I was uneasy about it, mainly because the capital had registered the largest amount of confirmed COVID-19 cases. After learning that the interview was going to happen regardless, I prepared to travel without getting close to anyone, except for those few inevitable cases.

When I arrived there, however, I realized that life in the city was almost the same as usual. People were working, water and food were being sold at traffic lights, bars and restaurants were functioning normally, and the buses were almost as crowded as usual.

I decided to take an Uber to the radio station building, mainly because I thought using public transportation would be “too risky.” On the way to my appointment, the driver remarked: “I believe we won’t die because of the virus, but if I stop working, me and my entire family will die because of hunger.” That utterance kept hammering in my head as I tried to return to my “ordinary” life. It was the first time I had heard that sentiment, one that soon became popular on the news as the pandemic spread in the country.

I have always believed that “the study of food and eating is important both for its own sake since food is utterly essential to human existence (and often insufficiently available) and because the subfield has proved valuable for debating and advancing anthropological theory and research methods” (Mintz and Du Bois 2002: 99). Indeed, in the midst of this pandemic, we must comprehend that access to food is a core subject mainly because the costs of the disease itself cannot be measured without taking into consideration those who will perish from hunger.

This disease, let us recall, traces its origins to specific food habits. Its consequences—imposed quarantine and social

distancing for huge swathes of the world’s population—which prevents millions from the work and pay that affords access to basic human needs such as food, housing, and health care, cannot be discussed without shedding light to this essential topic. Therefore, access to food and the means of acquiring it might be a good starting point for this discussion.

In 1948, with the creation of the United Nations prompted by the devastating global cataclysm of World War II, the countries signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in which Article 25 states:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (UN General Assembly 1948).


This declaration aimed to prevent the world from a catastrophic situation. Nevertheless, with the COVID-19 pandemic, we may question whether those rights were ever truly guaranteed, at least to part of the world’s population. My Uber driver’s concerns that morning, the workers in myriad occupations on strike, and even the scientists, researchers, and artists advocating for a minimum wage during this crisis—all reveal the precarity of those rights. The promise of a guarantee of livelihood security has not been upheld.

What this pandemic might be “teaching” us resides precisely in the effects of this virus on the idea of life or subsistence itself. Food, a subject usually relegated to the private sector of our lives—the household—and separated from politics, might be defining, now more than ever, who lives and who dies. But mainly, it might be defining what is actually understood as economy and its importance to the making of the state (Lima 2012). According to Luiz Mandetta, Brazil’s health minister, “Life is not just about a virus.” Is it possible to agree with him, but also to question, “What is life about, then?” What are the vital minimums that must be met in order to define something as life?

On March 23 President Jair Bolsonaro adopted a provisory measure that sought to present solutions regarding the economy and the protection of businesses during the pandemic. Aiming to prevent a collapse in the economy, the president approved a measure that the opposition called “the hunger law.” Amid other provisions, it authorized companies to cut the salaries of their employees for four months, if they assured that their contracts would be met during this period. This specific article was soon removed following pressure from social groups. The government, however, while hesitant to enact new kinds of cash-transfer policies to citizens, demonstrated its concern for business elites’ interests through its propaganda against social distancing protocols. If laborers stay home for their safety, after all, this could “break the economy.”

How can we think then about the guarantee of an adequate standard of living for all human beings if the government is compelling them to leave the safety of their homes? This pandemic is more than just a virus. It motivates us to rethink the opposition between the realm of politics and the realm of the economy. Thus, it is by analyzing access to food that the most material aspect of this dualism can be brought to light.

If “human societies are brought to the starvation point by cultural rather than natural forces” (De Castro 1952: 24), this pandemic is providing the means to return to the original

meaning of economy—the management of the household. Understanding it as the maintenance of life—an instrument of production and reproduction of the material conditions necessary for a dignified human existence—completely reframes the opposition between the economy and politics. However, if the need for food is not understood as foundational to governance and societal development, the idea of life itself will remain solely associated with its barest form. 

Acknowledgments

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