

Opinion – COVID-19's Wider Impact on Mexican Society

Written by Franco Laguna Correa

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FRANCO LAGUNA CORREA, MAY 28 2021

Statistics compiled by The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) suggest that the Americas are the global region with the highest rates of deaths and confirmed cases associated to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), Mexico figures among the top-four countries worldwide in terms of deaths, only behind the U.S., Brazil, and India, in these three nations official sources have admitted that their public healthcare systems have experienced either minor or major collapse (WHO 2021). Coincidentally, of those four countries, Mexico is the only one that has officially refused to admit that their public healthcare system has collapsed or has experienced asymmetrical dependency regarding COVID-19 measures, healthcare infrastructure, and vaccine supply (406,090,985 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine have been secured after strenuous negotiations with the top manufacturers from Europe, China, Russia, and the U.S., however, only 33,309,017 have been received and made officially available for administration among the national population, thus making visible the acute asymmetrical dependency in relation to tackling the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico, a nation-state that could be used as a paradigm of the economic challenges and ethical dilemmas that other emerging economies are facing in relation to COVID-19.

On top of that, the Mexican head of state Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (popularly referred to as AMLO) emphasizes that the COVID-19 pandemic is under control and that soon the entire population will be immunized through the 'herd immunity' rationale (Abdalla 2021). The Mexican vaccination campaign has been scheduled in five stages, based upon priorities set by the Mexican government, which in various forms attempt to mimic European vaccination campaigns: 1) Frontline healthcare workers treating COVID-19 patients on daily basis (from December 2020 to February 2021); 2) The remaining healthcare workers and people 60 and up (from February to April 2021); 3) People between 50-59 (from April to May 2021); 4) People between 40-49 (from May to June 2021); and 5) The remaining social population (from June 2021 to March 2022), although it is unclear who is considered to belong to the 'remaining social population'.

Nevertheless, various sources have put into question the 'success' of this vaccination campaign. From Ciudad Juarez to southeast Mexico, health workers in the public and private sectors are claiming that the federal government is denying them their right to be vaccinated, being Mexico the country with the highest rate of mortality among health workers globally due to COVID. According to the Mexican Federal Government, by April 2021, five vaccines have been the most administered among those vaccinated up to date: Pfizer-BioNTech (American-German), AstraZeneca (British-Swedish), Sputnik V (Russian), Cansino (Chinese), and Sinovac (Chinese). However, other vaccines have been approved for use in Mexico in clinical trials among people under 40, including Novavax (American), CureVac (German), and Janssen-Johnson & Johnson (American).

There are plenty of testimonies (including frontline healthcare workers) that claim the inefficacy and corruption inherent to the vaccination campaign, which ultimately has been used as an attempt to legitimize the populist governing style of the elected president. AMLO came into power under the umbrella of a newly created party, MORENA (National Regeneration Movement, created in 2011), which on the surface uses identity politics maneuvers to bring skin coloration and femininity forward as political weapons. Simultaneously however, feminicides and racism are acquiring new forms of perpetration and public display, without mentioning the lack of resources for

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those members of the population that would benefit from access to quality mental health support.

The unveiled biopolitical agenda of MORENA is advancing politically-sanctioned practices of the highly debated concept of 'reverse racism', which ultimately pretend to displace those social groups who don't identify with Mexican indigenous values nor want to engage in the populist agenda of AMLO and the leaders of his party. It is worth noting that in the most recent national censuses (2010 and 2020), more than 80% of the total population of Mexico identified as indigenous or having indigenous ancestry. It is also worth noting that the 2020 census provided data that suggests that about half of the Mexican population is either illiterate or performs at literacy levels that are under the levels required to undertake Middle School.

An article published in November 2020 in *Public Books* by Alfonso Fierro, entitled 'A Quiet Disaster: Mexico City, Mexico', provides a brief glimpse of the sudden changes that have transformed, if not simply dismantled, the once self-regarded global megalopolis. Fierro, subtly narrates the transformation of one of the most prominent neighborhoods of Mexico City due to its business dynamics and architectural design in the following terms:

The hip and thriving Roma neighborhood, a usual meeting point for both young residents and tourists, suddenly looked like a little provincial town in the middle of nowhere: a car here or there, forsaken gardens in once-crowded plazas, businesses in ruin, all sounds safely sealed behind the walls of its mid-20th century townhouses and apartment buildings. It was a peaceful image, but also, in a way, an apocalyptic one (Fierro 2020).

While Fierro attributes this partly to the failed governments that have ruled the city over the last decades, he firmly condemns COVID-19 and administration failures as the main culprits of the sudden decay that has spread over the entire city, without mentioning that in the countryside things are even worse.

Among the preexisting conditions that Mexico City's future generations will face, it is necessary to highlight: 1) The imminent shortage of clean water that will prevent millions of families from having access to daily hygiene practices and running water; 2) The precarious healthcare public system which remains afloat through an acute system of asymmetrical dependency; 3) The environmental damage to the few green spaces that keep suffering the consequences of the uncontrollable atmospheric pollution; 4) The financial crisis inherent to the sudden rise of unemployment that is leading to more heinous and higher crime rates; 5) The unsuccessful revamping of the basic education public system that has left millions of children without access to any form of formal education since the official beginning of the pandemic (in most households, access to Internet and watching television are considered forms of education); and 6) The increased ethnic, racial, and gender-based objective and symbolic violence that is being fueled from the lower files of the MORENA party.

Finally, considering that in addition to the current 'war' against COVID-19, Mexico has been unsuccessfully running a bloody war on drugs in its own soil since 2006 and has recently launched its own war against Central American immigrants as a bilateral effort with the U.S. to stop the flow of undocumented people into the United States and Mexico. One could only wonder how far and deep the ongoing disaster will go as both MORENA and their followers continue to act as if 'science' was a hoax invented in the so-called 'first world' to force a Western neoliberal worldview in a country where the vast majority of the population still adheres to a heritage that pretends to find the ultimate COVID-19 cure in religious practices such as Santeria, shamanism, and the many churches that have proliferated. Notwithstanding these sociocultural and biopolitical factors, Mexico's present seems to be *amise en abyme* representation of an octopus falling to pieces inside a labyrinthine and never-reaching future, as if time was also a hoax created to irreversibly set the possible and the impossible apart from each other.

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