

COVID-19 FROM THE MARGINS

THEORY
ON
DEMAND
PANDEMIC
INVISIBILITIES, POLICIES
AND RESISTANCE IN THE
DATAFIED SOCIETY

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Theory on Demand #40

COVID-19 from the Margins.

Pandemic Invisibilities, Policies and Resistance in the Datafied Society

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46. COVID-19 IN ARGENTINA: WHEN THE MICRO-PRACTICES OF ACTIVISM FIT IN A WHATSAPP MESSAGE

RAQUEL TARULLO

Circles of friends, members of sports clubs, parent associations, and work colleagues in Argentina have started to provide food and clothing during the pandemic for thousands of families who live in poverty. These groups—neither social movements nor civic associations—use their WhatsApp contacts and network to promote their food drives to prepare meals that they deliver once a week. Parallel to this trend, teachers of schools with vulnerable student bodies find in WhatsApp a channel for communicating with families and accompanying students in what the government has called a “Pedagogical Continuity Plan”—as most students do not have access to the internet or technological devices. Teachers also use this platform for sharing useful information, such as state assistance payment calendars and the WhatsApp direct line for reporting gender or familiar violence, with students’ families.

A Universal Platform

WhatsApp has become Argentina’s best ally for activism since the national government established a severe lockdown on March 20. The platform is used by groups of people to organize themselves to prepare meals for poor families that COVID-19 has impacted. WhatsApp is the only channel that teachers of schools with vulnerable student bodies have, not only for interacting with their students’ families, but also for being a communication bridge between the government and their students’ families. The use of this platform in Argentina is almost universal, and more than 90% of the population use it to stay connected, share statuses, sell goods, and spread news. Currently, it is also used for performing micro repertoires of activism.

More than half of kids and teenagers live below the poverty line in Argentina. According to the last UNICEF report of COVID-19 effects in the country, that percentage will reach 58% by the end of this year. The national government has taken socio-economic measures to keep the situation under control, such as the *Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia* (Emergency Household Income), a state assistance for poor families, and zero interest rate loans for the self-employed with minimum or low income. Despite these efforts, most Argentines have been suffering through crises in recent years that have widened gaps greatly.

Half the country’s workforce are employed in an informal economy, working under the table and surviving on changas—one-day jobs that allow for minimal daily sustenance. *Cartoneros*, who live from the sale of recycled garbage, are part of this vulnerable group. This precarious segment has been the most affected by the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic. Social movements and civil associations have warned that these people from the most vulnerable urban areas will be the most affected by COVID-19. *La Garganta Poderosa*, an NGO that has representation in many countries of Latin America, last week launched a social

media campaign #contagiásolidaridad (“#infectsolidarity”) to promote collective awareness of the situation.

A Diffusional Space for the Urgency

Olla de Mujeres (“Saucepan of women”) is a group formed by five girls, only two of whom knew each other before. They decided to come together after exchanging messages through WhatsApp, and they used this channel to organize themselves. Since April, they have been using this channel to post a flyer in their statuses with information about the goods they need for preparing meals, along with their WhatsApp numbers. As they are very active and social, they use many WhatsApp groups to share this information. The members of these groups replicate their messages, building an informal network of solidarity. “*Olla de Mujeres* receive messages” from unknown people, offering supplies and help. As they have a special permit issued by the authorities and are required to drive around during lockdown, they collect donations all around the city. An NGO lends them its kitchen facilities for cooking. Every Saturday, they distribute the meals to a hundred families.

Fernando is 22 years old and has many friends through WhatsApp. He uses these contacts for food drives. He creates WhatsApp broadcast lists and his parents do the same, helping him to promote his campaign of food donations. Fernando and his lifelong friends cook every Saturday in the kitchen of the club where he plays volleyball. Last Saturday, they distributed more than 200 meals to people who went to a *merendero*—a food bank for low-income residents.

Schools and WhatsApp

School teachers have a fundamental place in this network for diffusions and emergencies. Schools are one of the institutions that have deeply transformed themselves to adapt to the current situation. The majority of schools that are settled in popular and deprived areas of the country offer breakfast, lunch, and afternoon snacks to their students. However, since on-site classes were suspended, teachers are now in charge of delivering a bag of food every other week—a measure that the national government has introduced to replace school meals and increase social assistance to these families. Along with the food provisions, teachers distribute school booklets for students to continue with their education, in order to guarantee the Pedagogical Continuity Plan. Formal class instruction also benefits from communication on WhatsApp. “Far from other schools that can work via Google Classroom, Zoom or other platforms, our unique way of communication with families and students is via WhatsApp. In our community, families do not have neither internet access nor computers. We give them these booklets, and then we try to continue communication using WhatsApp,” says Jéssica, head of a school in the province of Buenos Aires.

However, the content of these booklets has received much criticism. The Mapuche’s Confederation—the NGO that congregates native people settled in the south of the country—reported that they were described using discriminatory language as a vanished community. The National Ministry of Education then publicly apologized to the community.

Even though browsing the governmental site *educ.ar*—where students and/or their parents can download these booklets—is free of charge and contents can be downloaded without consuming mobile data, access is almost impossible for families with many kids and only one mobile phone per household. “Besides, most of these parents haven’t finished their primary studies. Even if they had mobiles or computers, they wouldn’t have the digital skills for accessing to these sites and downloading the pedagogical material,” says Valeria, a social worker who uses WhatsApp to help women of impoverished communities by sending them information about State health assistance for them and their kids.

Nevertheless, communication over WhatsApp largely exceeds pedagogical goals. “At the beginning, it was for school purposes, but currently we use it to share useful information that runs in other social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, which families of our school may not have access to,” explains Jéssica. In this group formed by teachers and families, schools share information about where they can get free food during the weekends, state assistance payment calendars, and dates food bags will be delivered. For instance, news of a WhatsApp direct line for reporting gender and domestic violence that was launched recently by the government were shared by teachers using WhatsApp groups. The pandemic in Argentina has revealed repertoires, dynamics and resistances of a “backstage activism” that uses WhatsApp for creating networks, organizing solidarities, helping kids with their education, spreading information, and asking for help. All of these micro practices are part of an activism that has become more vital during COVID-19.

47. UNDER OTHER SKIES: ASTRONOMY AS A TOOL TO FACE COVID-19-INDUCED ISOLATION IN THE INDIGENOUS VILLAGE OF ALDEIA VERDE, BRAZIL

ARIANNA CORTESI, CLAUDIA MAGNANI, ROBERTO ROMERO, PAULA C.P. SILVA, SUELI MAXAKALI, ISRAEL MAXAKALI, ANA MARIA R. GOMES

Other Skies, a project funded by the International Astronomical Union (IAU) and the Office of Astronomy for Development (OAD), tackles these questions by collecting native narratives, chants, and myths about the sky that have never been written down and recorded before, in collaboration with researchers of the Indigenous Village Aldeia Verde in Brazil.¹ Soon after the project started, all Universities and the majority of services in Brazil shut down due to the rapid diffusion of the pandemic to all the federal states. To protect the indigenous people, the federal government declared the lockdown of the communities.² Even so, the first cases of COVID-19 appeared in many indigenous areas of the country, some of which, due to the absence of internet and phone connection, faced severe isolation. Aldeia Nova is one of the indigenous villages of the Maxakali people that suffered this destiny. To overcome the difficulties of communication, Other Skies was modified to grant internet connection to the village, support the independent recording and production of material on indigenous astronomy, and start a virtual gallery for sharing astronomical Maxakali knowledge and their perspective of the world.

Under Other Skies: Dialogues of Different Cosmological Paradigms

The project “Other Skies” focuses on ethno-astronomy, particularly the astronomical knowledge of the Maxakali people, an indigenous population of Brazil. The *Tikmũ’ün* people, better known as Maxakali, live in one of the smallest indigenous lands in the State of Minas Gerais, Southeast Brazil, which has been completely devastated by the late colonization of the area. Despite the loss of their territory and the increasing contact with the National Society, the richness of the symbolic and ritual dimensions of their world has attracted great ethnographic interest in the last century. A deep look at the Maxakali experience in everyday life, such as in ritual sphere, immediately shows us the complexity of the Maxakali sociality and cosmology. All their knowledge and practices are made by performing shamanic rituals through which they interact with non-human agencies (the *yãmijxop spirits*) that inhabit their territory, sharing feasts, chants, food, and other many practices with them. From the Maxakali perspective, we can see that there are no clear boundaries between knowledge and practice, between the ancient past and the present, or between everyday life and ritual life. Everything in their

1 Office of Astronomy for Development, <http://www.astro4dev.org/>.

2 Fundação Nacional do Índio, Boletim de Serviço da Funai--Número Edição Extra, 17 March 2020, <http://www.funai.gov.br/arquivos/conteudo/cogedi/pdf/Boletim%20de%20Servicos/2020/Boletim%20Edicao%20Extra%20de%2017.03.2020.pdf>.

experience, even astronomical knowledge, is inserted in a space-time continuum, which is activated by the constant power of memory and through the relationship with the multiple non-human subjectivities that inhabit it.

The idea of a dialog between scientific and indigenous knowledge about the sky was born from an encounter between one of the astronomers and two indigenous researchers and sciamans (leaders) of the community. The project will be conducted in Aldeia Nova, a Maxakali Village in Minas Gerais, and involves indigenous researchers, shamans, and elders of the village collaborating with anthropologists and educators of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), and astronomers and educators of the University of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The main objective is to collect and translate native narratives, chants and myths about the sky narrated by some of the elders that have never been written down and recorded before.³

IAU Office of Astronomy for Development

The project was funded by the Office of Astronomy for Development⁴, a joint project of the International Astronomical Union⁵ and the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) with the support of the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI). Its mission is to use astronomy to make the world a better place, reminding us that we earthlings⁶ live in a pale blue dot orbiting one of the millions of billions of stars of this amazing and expanding universe.⁷ Every year, the OAD funds several astronomy-related projects that promote sustainable development through astronomy.

The Potential Risk we Could not Imagine

One of the questions of the OAD selection form is “Describe potential risks and how you will address these?” The words we wrote to answer this question describe several obstacles, without one mention of the world pandemic. The Other Skies project was based on the idea of a dialogue, developed in workshops, meetings, encounters at the margins, that eventually never took place; neither seemed plausible in the nearest future. Yet, we couldn’t give up! So we decided to restructure the entire project. To face this situation we altered the project schedule and budget, including the acquisition of an internet radio connection for Aldeia Nova, purchases of computers and material to record and produce films and audio in the Aldeia. We also planned to create a virtual gallery, following the example of the exhibition *Mundos Indigenas* at Espaço do Conhecimento of the Federal University of Minas Gerais, in Belo Horizonte. These encounters left space for independence, and the audience became global.

3 ‘2020, Latin America + Caribbean, Under other skies: dialogues of different cosmological paradigms. Overview’, *Office of Astronomy for Development*, 13 November 2019, <http://www.astro4dev.org/blog/2019/11/13/overview-32/>.

4 Office of Astronomy for Development, <http://www.astro4dev.org/>.

5 International Astronomical Union, <https://www.iau.org>.

6 ‘Exclusive interview with TED Prize-winner Jill Tarter of SETI’, *TEDx*, 20 February 2009, https://blog.ted.com/an_interview_wi/.

7 Wikipedia contributors, ‘Pale Blue Dot’, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pale_Blue_Dot, accessed 27 October 2020.

The Virtual Gallery and the Space of Knowledge

The “Espaço do Conhecimento” (Space of knowledge) of UFMG launched the exhibition *Mundos Indígenas* in December 2019, where the public was presented with ways of living, knowing, and taking care from Maxakali, Pataxóop, Xakriabá, Yanomami and Ye'kwana peoples. It showed that “the history of Brazilian indigenous people is not only one.” With the closure of museums in late March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, visits to the exhibition were suspended. The exhibition schedule was extended until July 2021, which expanded the possibility of visitation, after the reopening of the museums will be authorized. Meanwhile, Espaço do Conhecimento UFMG prepared a series of new videos to provide the public with the experience of a virtual visit to the exhibition through YouTube videos, launched on September 21. The six videos of the Virtual Visit to the *Mundos Indígenas* Exhibition are available to the public on the Espaço do Conhecimento UFMG channel on YouTube, alongside messages from indigenous curators and a video on the teheys of Dona Liça Pataxóop.⁸

A Virtual Re-birth

The project Other Skies, supported and inspired by the virtual exhibition *Mundos Indígenas*, will also create a virtual gallery to present Maxakali astronomy. The gallery will also include images taken from the Southern Photometric Local universe Survey collaboration (S-PLUS),⁹ a Spanish-Brazilian collaboration, to map the southern sky in twelve colours. The virtual exhibition will exemplify the heterogeneity of astronomical knowledge. Through an intercultural approach, it will promote an understanding of the different astronomical paradigms, and push back against a superficial approach to science and social biodiversity. An example is the story *Star Women*¹⁰, already available in the exhibition *Mundos Indígenas*. Although COVID-19 marginalized even more Indigenous communities, it created the grounding for the diffusion of their knowledge worldwide. One day we will grab our telescopes and travel up north to the silent dark skies of the Aldeia Nova, to look with different eyes at the same infinite spaces.

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